

NORTHWEST COAST ART IN THE

# Museo

*Spain's well-kept secret*

# de América

■ by Araceli Sanchez Garrido

The history of the Northwest Coast objects housed in Madrid's *Museo de América* is a checkered one. Their path has been circuitous from the time they were collected until their formal presentation in today's museum. The background of this collection, like so many others preserved in Spanish museums, is closely tied to the royal and noble collections formed in centuries past.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE FIRST Europeans in America was the beginning of a virtual avalanche of information, references, and descriptions of the lands that were being encountered for the first time. In this early period, published documentation was centrally important to the Spanish political interests, because it identified Spain as both the discover and colonizer of these lands when the rest of Europe was yet to look westward across the sea.

While colonial interests were unquestionably stimulated by all this material, it is interesting to observe that all of these early texts were illustrated with European-made drawings, which virtually never depicted indigenous works. Some New World objects were known at the time, of course, such as the gifts Columbus brought back to the Catholic kings, or objects sent by the Aztec emperor Montezuma to



*Jefe de la tribu de Juan de Fuca.  
Tetaku.*



**TOP:** José Cardero: *Tetaku*.

A representation of Tetaku, a chief on the Strait of Juan de Fuca near present-day Vancouver.  
262 x 204 mm. Gouache.

The importance of the hat he wears is demonstrated by the frequency with which examples of its type appear in the illustrations and paintings that were produced on early expeditions to the Northwest Coast.

**Whaler's Headdress**  
*Nuu-chab-nulth*.

Last third of the 18th century.  
H: 30 cm. Red cedar fiber.

This headdress is decorated with scenes of a whale hunt, an activity of enormous social prestige. The recognition the hunter received lay less in the act of whaling itself, but instead for the cunning and skill he demonstrated in directing the operation.



**Mask**  
*Nuu-chah-nulth.*

**Last third of the 18th century.**  
**H: 33 cm. Red cedar, black paint,**  
**leather strap.**

This mask represents a human visage with well-defined features. The expressive face appears to grimace in surprise. Between the nose and the upper lip are two holes containing the remains of leather, which may indicate additional decoration. The losses to the upper section occurred before it was collected. The piece is of dual design with both a face and totemic motifs. Both are indications of the mask's specific use or uses, which would have related to the the ancestral line of the animal represented on the forehead. Rituals were frequent among the Nuuchah-nulth. Before organizing a whale hunt, trading, planning wars, or consulting ancestors, ceremonies were held. Masks and rattles (such as the one in fig. 5) were essential elements in these activities.

**ART ON VIEW**

**Headdress. *Tlingit.***

**H: 10 cm. Woven wood fiber, pigment.**

This headdress is characteristically Tlingit. The painted decoration shows two large rectangular eyes closely flanking the nose. Below the jaw line, two smaller eyes appear to emerge from the open mouth. This intricate design, with its rhythmic sense of repetition, represents the whale, a creature of enormous economic and cultural importance. In this case, the headdress was not worn by a whaling leader (cf fig. 2), but was used in rites such as the potlach. The image alludes to a whale ancestor. The fact that it was used in this context is indicative of the profound respect that such a headdress must have been accorded.



**Right: Mask. *Tlingit.***

**18th century. 22 x 18.9 cm. Wood, two-color polychrome, leather, bone.**

The human face of this mask is rendered with particular realism. The articulated lips are manipulated by cords, allowing the bone teeth to be revealed. This object was used by the shaman to represent the spirit of a man. His performance with it was theatrical and included acting, music, and the incorporation of a number of stage props. Such masks moved mysteriously, and the shaman wearing it could disappear or reappear at will during the play, with the help of trap doors and magic chests like those used by European musicians. His skill and the crash of the musical accompaniment created an otherworldly and magical atmosphere.



**Left: Forehead Mask. *Tlingit.***

**Last third of the 18th century.**

**16 x 15.3 cm. Wood, leather, polychrome.**

This mask was worn on the forehead, giving the wearer two faces, the real one and that of the mask. The treatment of the lips indicates that it represents a woman. Although this object was used by women and indicates high status, it could also have been used by men in certain dances and rituals to include a feminine association. **FIG. 17**

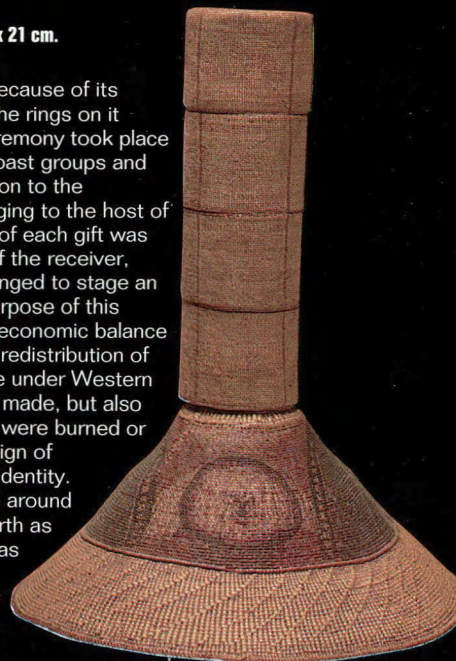


**Headdress. *Arctic area.***

**Chugach Eskimos. 18th century. 15 x 21 cm.**

**Vegetable fiber.**

This headdress is unique because of its cylindrical crown. Each of the rings on it denotes a potlach. This ceremony took place among many Northwest Coast groups and consisted of the presentation to the community of goods belonging to the host of the event. The importance of each gift was determined by the status of the receiver, who, in his turn, was challenged to stage an even richer potlach. The purpose of this ceremony was to maintain economic balance through the circulation and redistribution of wealth. After the area came under Western control, gifts were not only made, but also numerous valuable objects were burned or otherwise destroyed as a sign of defiance and protection of identity. This ceremony was banned around 1880. It extended as far north as the Chugach, to whom it was fundamental to social organization, as were other features adopted from the Northwest Coast.



his Spanish counterpart. Because of different perceptions of aesthetics and the value of certain materials, however, they were considered strange and poorly rendered and most were not retained in the palaces, which housed items considered to be of artistic value. Most ultimately found shelter in other collections, many outside of Spain. Thus, despite the fact that Spain was the first European country to explore the Americas, and to take possession of its lands, its peoples, and their possessions for the Crown, few of the objects dating to the early contact period are preserved in Spanish collections.

Interest in collecting objects from the Americas largely lay dormant until the eighteenth century. Its development was a direct consequence of the emergence of Rationalism, developments in the art of illustration, and early efforts in the field of taxonomy. New attitudes of the ruling elite toward positivism were also an important contributing factor, and resulted in the formation of Spanish institutions such as the *Gabinetes de Antigüedades* (Museum of Antiquities) and the *Cameras Reales* (Royal Collections), as well as expeditions specifically staged for scientific research. The collections formed in this period are the foundations of most important Spanish museums today.

The roots of the earliest collections in the present *Museo de América* lie in this context. Without getting too bogged down in detail, the beginnings of the museum's collection lie in the eighteenth century

with the scientific patronage of Charles VII, then king of Naples. His interests continued after his ascension to the Spanish throne as Charles III upon the death of his half-brother Ferdinand VI in 1759. When Charles arrived in Spain, he brought his scientific collections with him. Additional works were added, and eventually it became one of the greatest collections of the time. A major part of it was assembled in Paris by a single scholar, Pedro Franco Da Vila. In 1771, the *Real Gabinete de Historia Natural* (Royal Cabinet of Natural History) was founded to house this vast collection. Typical of the time, the con-

tents of this museum ranged from specimens from the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms, to Classical antiquities, to curiosities from around the world. The latter category deserves some clarification: "curiosities" in this case has a broad definition encompassing all of the material produced by the native peoples of the New World, whether archaeological, ethnographic, or colonial. None of these objects fell into the category of antiquities, which was reserved solely for materials originating from Mediterranean cultures that formed the basis of Classicism.

Once this setting was established,



**Large Mask.** *Nuu-chah-nulth.*

**18th century. 70 x 50 cm. Wood with red and black pigment.**

This extraordinary object reflects the rich past of this area. When the Spanish visited the Northwest Coast for the first time, they did not describe the famous and now quintessential totem poles of the area, simply because they did not exist at the time. Instead, masks such as these were created and displayed in the interiors of distinguished homes. The representation refers to the clan of those who lived in the house, which would have been occupied by a large extended family, all descended from a common ancestor. This ancestor may have been an animal or a mythical being, and the designs with which this mask is decorated define its group identification.

the monarch sought to expand his holdings. Orders were passed on to all viceroys, governors, and religious bodies. Thanks to continuing advances in navigation, scientific expeditions were later included in this effort. These turned out to be an excellent vehicle for increasing the collections of the *Real Gabinete de Historia Natural*, and the various survey-oriented campaigns sponsored by the Crown were also summarized in illustrated encyclopedic projects. The accumulated knowledge these works contained helped form the basis for modern scientific disciplines such as botany, zoology, and astronomy.

The insights resulting from these voyages and the advancement of science cast a new light on the relatively unstructured notes recorded as early as the sixteenth century by chroniclers in the New World. These notes gained new relevance in dealing with the exploration of the distant regions of the empire.

## SPAIN, EUROPE AND THE PACIFIC

Until the eighteenth century, the Pacific Ocean was little navigated, although Spain, empowered by the papal bull of 1493, maintained strict



**Above: Gorget.** *Tlingit.*

**18th century. 13.8 x 27.4 cm. Wood and shell.**

This piece of wooden armor was intended to accompany the helmet illustrated opposite. A warrior's battle dress was usually comprised of a helmet, collar, and chest, back, and leg armor. Though the body was not cushioned under these pieces, they were arranged in such a way that the wearer was protected from both blows and projectiles.

**Headdress.** *Tlingit.*

**Last third of the 18th century. 18.7 x 17.6 cm. Wood, shell, copper, silver, polychrome.**

This headdress is in the shape of a human head with a bird's beak. Underneath, incised lines represent stylized feathers. A second wide mouth is open to reveal teeth. The ears and claws are made of copper, and the pupils of the eyes are of silver. This is a totemic creature, an ancestor and the progenitor of a clan, which transmits strength and other specific qualities to its descendants. The image here appears to be a syncretic representation that includes human, eagle, and whale elements.

**Helmet.** *Tlingit.*

**18th century. 32 x 30 cm. Wood, leather, polychrome.**

This helmet represents a bird. Below the beak a human face with schematic features is painted. This piece was used in war and served as a basic element of battle dress. The engagements fought by the Tlingit were rendered fantastic by the colorful attire of the warriors, which transformed them into supernatural beings having qualities of beavers, bears, foxes, wolves, or other animals. Each of these beasts represented the warrior clan to which each individual fighter belonged.

**Helmet.** *Tlingit.*

**28.5 x 27 cm. Wood, polychrome, shell, copper, and leather.**

The head on this helmet is anthropomorphic. The strongly rendered face emphasizes wide eyebrows, distinctive almond-shaped eyes, and the full nostrils of the nose. The large, half-open mouth reveals the teeth. A crescent-shaped diadem, carved and overlaid with copper, curves above the high-lobed ears. An emblem with a schematic human face is painted on the back of the helmet. The materials used to make this spectacular object give it an additional prestige value. The copper on it was valued in the Northwest Coast as gold was in Europe. Thus the owner of this helmet—or any other object partly or totally fashioned from copper—was an individual of high stature in the community.





**Above: Helmet.** *Tlingit.*

20.5 x 35.5 cm. Wood, shell, horsehair, pigments.

Helmets such as this formed an important part of the warrior's attire.

The animals on them identified the wearer's clan, though in this case the carving provides relatively little information to identify the specific creatures to us.

Certain Northwest Coast groups held ceremonies as part of secret societies in which they celebrated animistic rituals dedicated to a particular creature in an effort to capture its force or "anima."

The wolf, which appears to be an element of this helmet, was one of those animals.

Admired, feared, and respected for its strength and ferocity, the elderly were known to abandon their lives to it when they felt they were no longer useful.

control over these waters. During the Enlightenment, however, changes in the European political landscape propelled France, England, Russia, and Holland to pursue overseas holdings. Various accords and treaties, such as that of Utrecht, did little to support Spanish domination of the New World. The true motivation of the scientific expeditions lies in this context. European nations sent expeditions to survey and record precise measurements of distant lands, islands, and archipelagos not purely for knowledge's sake, but with the goal of creating an accurate cartographic record, and, in doing so, to secure those territories which, for strategic or economic reasons, would be useful for their expanding empires. The basis of European interest was no longer gold or silver, spices, or fountains of youth; it was wood for shipbuilding or the domination of key points for the establishment of trade routes.



**Left: Gorget.** *Tlingit.*

Last third of the 18th century.

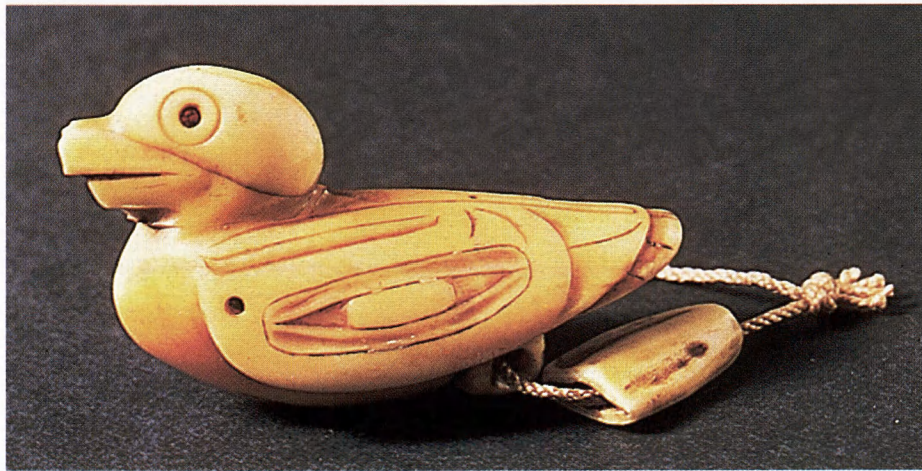
25.5 x 21.5 cm. Wood, polychrome, leather.

Made to accompany the helmet illustrated opposite, this gorget or collar was intended to protect the wearer in battle, more typically conflicts than long-term war. The Tlingit organized skirmishes with the sole purpose of proving their power and capturing booty such as otter skins, slaves, and blankets. Such conflicts were invariably staged from canoes in the sea, and continued on land after disembarkation.

If it is true that political agendas lay hidden behind scientific efforts, it is hardly surprising that Spanish interest in the exploration of the Northwest Coast was sparked by the news that Russia and Britain were establishing a presence in this region. The establishment of a northern frontier to halt these incursions became an important Spanish priority. To this end, a fleet of well-equipped corvettes was dispatched under Juan Pérez, and in 1774 it reached the 55th parallel, just north of Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands). Turning into the Dixon Entrance, the fleet arrived at the Prince of Wales Islands in the Alexander Archipelago. Here Pérez encountered representatives of the indigenous population, and artifacts were exchanged. Notebooks from this

Mourelle de la Ria, two individuals well remembered today for their data-collection efforts. The diaries of these two seafarers are meticulous. Their notes address a wide range of aspects of Tlingit culture. They describe the peoples' characteristics, dwellings, attire and ornamentation, social organization, food, religion, warfare, etc. Their notes also thoroughly explore important aspects of the flora of the area. The information they recorded was translated into English and was used by subsequent English and French expeditions in the area.

In 1779, Bodega y Quadra and Mourelle embarked on another expedition, this one under the command of Ignacio de Arteaga. This voyage was motivated by intelligence of Captain Cook's third voyage, which



**Above: Rattle.** *Nuu-chah-nulth.*

**Last third of the 18th century. 15.5 x 46 cm. Red-painted wood.**

Bird shaped, and with four aligned human faces, this ceremonial rattle was used in association with masks such as that in fig. 4 in rituals that were conducted by either a chief or shaman. The musical instruments of the Northwest Coast are primarily percussion, and rattles in a wide variety of shapes are the most common. Their iconographic range includes allusions to mythological tales, events relating to the mythical origins of clans, or scenes with a obvious totemic associations.

**Left: Bird Figurine.** *Haida.*

**4.3 x 6.9 cm. Walrus ivory.**

Carved from walrus tusk, this bird is depicted with wings folded and feet gathered. The eyes are indicated with incised circles, and the wings bear totemic symbols. A protuberance on the underside secures a cord from which hangs a perforated tooth. This object was collected in 1774 (with the beak already broken) by Juan Pérez from a woman among the Nuuchah-nulth, who wore it around her neck in a thin straw bag, now lost along with additional teeth that were with it. That this object was made by the Haida but collected among the Nuuchah-nulth implies intriguing possibilities. Was it a trade object; a possession of a Haida captured by the Nootka, who were great slave traders; or possibly an object brought into the region by marriage alliance? Whatever the case, this amulet is of extremely fine manufacture, and is unquestionably one of the artistic masterpieces of this part of the world.

expedition survive that include descriptions of the clothing, physical features, and ornaments of the peoples they encountered. These notes are the earliest European documentation of the Haida and Tlingit cultures. Poor weather conditions on the return journey forced Pérez to take refuge on an island he called San Lorenzo de Nutka, where he also exchanged artifacts with the inhabitants and noted the existence of another island, which they called Yuquot (present-day Kyuquot). This was the first expedition that brought back Northwest Coast artifacts now preserved in the *Museo de América*, and it was also the first European expedition to come in contact with these indigenous cultures.

In 1775, Bruno de Hezeta led another expedition to this region and encountered the Tlingit. On this trip he was accompanied by Francisco de Bodega y Quadra and Francisco



**Left: Two Daggers.** *Tlingit.*

**18th century. 55 x 6 cm/43.5 x 5 cm. Iron and copper.**

These daggers are made of soft iron and are fashioned with two parallel ribs on the front and a slightly concave curvature on the back. The edges are blunt, indicating that they were used for thrusting. The journals of early Spanish navigators contain interesting notes about bartering with the inhabitants of the Northwest Coast. Goods were exchanged value for value, but in dealing with Europeans, the most sought-after items were buttons and other objects made of copper, as well as objects made of iron. Both metals were held in great esteem and were typically obtained from the Chugach to the north, who dug the native metal from the earth and worked it cold. These metals were easily available in Europe, and the explorers were able to obtain remarkable objects in trade.

had included the territories of the Northwest Coast. They reached the Prince of Wales Islands—territory previously visited—and continued on to the waters of Cape St. Elias, the northernmost territory yet visited by the Spanish. Here, they encountered strangely fashioned boats, which the inhabitants called “kayaks.” The Arctic populations they met here were the Chugach, whose culture was greatly influenced by that of their southern neighbors. The data this expedition collected documents cultural and linguistic forms different from those of populations further south.

Several years later, news that Russians had descended as far as Nootka Sound (on present-day Vancouver Island) made Spain realize that the northern borders it had established were seriously compromised, and the decision was made to send another expedition to the Pacific. In 1788, Esteban Martinez and Gonzalo Lopez de Haro sailed there with two frigates and established a presence in Nootka. This occupation continued until 1795, when Spain withdrew in accordance with the Treaty of El Escorial, which had been signed in 1790. The objects collected and sent back to Spain by Martinez during the course of this expedition are preserved in the museum and greatly increased its collection.

The most ambitious journey sponsored by the Crown was the circumnavigation of the globe by Alejandro Malaspina, which lasted from 1789 to 1794. This venture was sponsored by Charles III and his successor, Charles IV. In the spirit of the Enlightenment, it was intended to be both a scientific and political voyage. In a joint document sent to the Ministry of the Navy, Malaspina and Dr. José Bustamanta defined it as a voyage made by Spanish navigators with two precise objectives: the creation of navigational charts for the most remote regions of America, along with the definition of safe shipping lanes for the developing merchant service; and the investigation of the political situation of America, in relation to Spain and other countries. The political focus of this voyage was clear, but the group of experts chosen to take part included specialists in botany, as well as painters and graphic artists skilled



**Ceremonial Axe.** *Tlingit.*

**Last third of the 18th century. Length of blade: 16.5 cm. Length of handle: 11.5 cm. Wood, stone, animal fiber, feather quills, leather.**

Collected by Estaban Martinez or Alejandro Malaspina, the blade of this axe is made out of green stone and is strapped with leather to a handle carved with a zoomorphic head in characteristic Tlingit style. The curved section of the handle is bound with quillwork. As noted in an 18th century inventory, the eyes of this object are set with copper pupils. This remarkable ceremonial axe formed part of the regalia used in dance rituals and was associated with individuals of great power within the community.

in the representation of nature. In the course of their travels, they touched at points in America, Asia, and Oceania, rigorously noting and collecting everything of scientific interest, and illustrating bays, coves, mountains, glaciers, plants, animals, and minerals. Human culture was treated as just another aspect of nature. From the hands of these illustrators and painters came the first images of the American north to be seen in Europe. They painted what they saw and they collected many of the objects they depicted in their works, along with precise notes detailing use and function.

**ARTIFACTS FROM THE SCIENTIFIC VOYAGES**

Despite the remarkable record keeping that accompanied their collection, linking the artifacts that had been gathered on these voyages to their corresponding expeditions has

**Armor.** *Tlingit.*

**Last third of the 18th century. 59 x 110 cm. Wood, leather, vegetal fiber, polychrome.**

This breastplate and backplate are made of wooden laths that are attached together with interwoven strips. The breastplate is shortened on the lower corners for the legs but protected the genitals in front. This armor was intended to protect the wearer against projectiles, but it is also an excellent example of Tlingit art and clearly demonstrates the standardized artistry of the region. The structure of the conventional forms seen here appears on many other types of artifacts. The common aesthetic prevalent throughout the large groups of the Northwest Coast is characterized by a sense of symmetry and rhythm, carving in both high- and low-relief, and a lively but restricted use of color. These combine to bring forth images deeply rooted in tradition, socio-political organization, and symbology.





been a challenge. The enlargement of the *Real Gabinete* gave rise to a negligent bureaucracy. When the explorers returned from their long and hazardous voyages, the crates in which their collections were packed often languished for months on the wharves of Cádiz. When they finally arrived in Madrid, they were dispersed to different departments before eventually being settled in the appropriate collection. The immense lapse of time only complicated matters. The *Jardín Botánico*, the *Real Botica*, the first *Real Gabinete* (later the *Museo de Ciencias Naturales*), and, after its founding in 1867, the *Museo Arqueológico Nacional* all received material from such voyages. Thus, the objects presented here have remained a well-kept secret until the beginning of this century, when researchers began to look into their origins and history.

We are now aware of the importance of these items, with their almost-forgotten historical context of distant cultures visited by the scientific explorers of the eighteenth centu-

ry—a memory almost eradicated by subsequent colonial activity in the Northwest Coast. Today these artifacts have a dual significance. On one hand they serve as tangible historical records, a reminder of how much has been lost by the peoples who created them. On the other, they speak to the rest of the world of a moment when their past was intact, affected only by its natural environment and exchange with neighboring peoples.

It should be noted here that the items acquired by these diligent collectors, though of great cultural value for those who produced them, were traded according to standards defined by the indigenous communities: for copper and iron artifacts, for red ribbon (used by Europeans to bind official documents), for sealing wax, and domestic items. All of these served as mutually agreeable currency of exchange.

The functions of many of the items illustrated here were lost in the nineteenth century. Thanks to the efforts of historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists, some of

this information has been retrieved, even to the extent that facts noted about their use relate to the eighteenth century.

The Northwest Coast collection of the Museo de América includes objects from the southern part of the central coast to the far north of the Northwest Coast culture region. The southern area is represented by the Nuu-chah-nulth culture, which in eighteenth century records, Spanish publications, and elsewhere until recently is referred to as Nootka. Today most of these people live off the central western coast of Vancouver. Most widely represented in the collection is the Tlingit culture, today found primarily in the Alexander Archipelago, now part of Alaska. The northernmost culture represented in the collection is the Chugach, which, though related to the Arctic, has close cultural affiliations with Northwest Coast cultures and shows signs of strong influences from the south.

**Acknowledgments:** *special thanks to Antonio Casanovas for help in the selection process.*