

TSIMSHIAN: ART OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST



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BISIGNANO ART GALLERY
HERITAGE CENTER UNIVERSITY OF DUBUQUE

Essay - Tsimshian: Art of the Pacific Northwest

The origins of the current show, *Tsimshian: Art of the Pacific Northwest*, are complex. Like the art itself. And while the show's about art, surely, in this context at this University, it is about much more. You see, this show is historically tied to a tradition at the University of which most students and faculty are unaware. Under the leadership of Professor Henry Fawcett, the University of Dubuque Seminary actively acknowledged native Alaskan indigenous peoples by training them as pastors here in Dubuque.

If there was to be a dedication of this show, I'd dedicate it to the late Rev. Dr. Henry Fawcett, seminary professor and a relentless advocate for the dignity, self-respect and civil rights of Alaska native and Native American peoples during his entire adult life, both in and outside of the classroom. Himself from Metlakatla, Alaska, Fawcett was a member of the Tsimshian Nation.

If students were aware of our Alaskan heritage, perhaps it was because since 2000, they often walked past a totem pole, prominently placed in the Myers Library. This work was done by David Boxley, Tsimshian artist and Woodward artist-in-residence at UD. Except for temporarily taking up residence in the Bisignano Art Gallery for the length of this show, this carving now normally stands proudly welcoming all to the University in our new Welcome Center. And we're all very thankful to our Maintenance staff for carefully and safely orchestrating this temporary move.

Naively, I never knew people could be both Native American (in this case Tsimshian) and Christian. But in our colleague's 2003 book, *Creating Christian Indians* (her dissertation), Professor Bonnie Sue Lewis points to broad similarities between Christianity and native cultures, such as an emphasis on morality, generosity, and native approaches to spiritual power. Thus, you'll see an amalgam of various animals with prominent crucifixes in their artwork. Lewis' thesis is clear in these images; Christianity is taken seriously in the social and cultural lives of the Tsimshian. Her study and cultural insights have helped me place the show in its proper context.

Like many of you, my focus has been on European art, so this show has been quite the journey. I humbly admit my indebtedness to Viola Garfield's book (no relation) *The Tsimshian: Their Arts and Music* published by the American Ethnological Society in 1951. The book is online, a free offering from Google. See <https://books.google.com/books?id=EJhAAAAMAAJ>.

A third resource I recommend is a most readable ethnographic study by the University of Chicago's Christopher Roth. See Roth, Christopher F. "Goods, Names, and Selves: Rethinking the Tsimshian Potlatch." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2002, pp. 123–50. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3095023>.

Who are the Tsimshian, or "People of the Skeena"

The Tsimshian are a group of linguistically and culturally related people, see the maps on the back flap of this brochure. They can be divided into four sub-language categories:

- the Gitksan, who occupy the Upper Skeena River;
- the Nisga'a (Nishga) along the Nass River;
- the Coast Tsimshian, which the Gitselasu are often grouped with, along both the lower parts of the Skeena River and the nearby coast;
- the Southern Tsimshian, who are found along the coast as well as the southern islands.

While I have never visited the Pacific Northwest (or Alaska), the Tsimshian style has come in a big way and has taken over the Bisignano Art Gallery. It is clearly a bold, beautiful, and intricate art form. Perhaps not surprising, given the sad history of interaction between the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest and Western settlers, at one time Tsimshian art was forbidden. Yet now, it is now experiencing a kind of revitalization – a renaissance of sorts – that can be seen in the study and understanding of a complex design system called 'formline' as well as in the different carving techniques used to create totem poles, masks, rattles, panels, bentwood boxes, and other forms of art.

One such modern master artist is well represented in this show, David Boxley. Boxley is a Tsimshian artist and carver also from Metlakatla, Alaska. While he lives and teaches in Seattle, Boxley's inspiration comes from the ancestors of his Tsimshian Tribe (Northern British Columbia and Southeast Alaska). He has dedicated over 40 years in interpreting and modernizing Tsimshian arts and culture. His grandparents shared with him their hunting, fishing, and gathering cultural practices. As an artist and culture-bearer, Boxley has been deeply involved in the rebuilding and teaching of native art, traditions, and language. His art demonstrates that a culture threatened by extinction can still be alive and thriving. A prolific artist, Boxley has produced thousands of works for patrons around the world. He is also the founder of a performance group that translates his art into song and dance while teaching and sharing Tsimshian oral stories through masks and other carved designs.



Chief Skagwait's house at Fort Simpson, 1879. Photo by O.C. Hastings

The iconography of Tsimshian art is based on the complex organization of clans, secret society performances, and by potlatches (large feasts where name, rank, or hereditary privileges are claimed through dances, speeches and the distribution of property). Most Tsimshian objects and images depict myths, tales, and their associated supernatural beings. Humans, animals, birds, and fish are also portrayed. Crests are represented through carvings and paintings on interior posts, totem poles, house fronts, beams, rafters and ceremonial entrances.

Stylistically, Tsimshian colors include blues, reds, yellows, blue-greens, black and white, where reds and blacks are most prominent. Unique features found on Tsimshian poles include mask-like faces that are usually without a body, and figures of animals or birds (usually carved separately and later attached) on top of poles that appear to be in motion or flight. And as we have said earlier, often Christian symbolism is subtly integrated.



Chief Tsebessa's house post from Kitkatla. Seen here at the then Harvard Peabody Museum, ca. 1915. It is currently in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, a museum now affiliated with Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Acknowledgements:

We are thankful to the anonymous private collector who lent the majority of the works in this show and to the University of Dubuque for the loan of the Boxley totem pole.

Organizing the show has given me the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with Bonnie Sue Lewis, Professor of Mission and World Christianity Emerita. I am grateful for her insights and for her very readable book.

The generosity of our alumni, Bill and Judith Crandall, has made this publication available to a general audience and we are quite indebted.

Finally, there's a kind of internal pride one feels when a former student demonstrates accomplishment of a process. This is exactly the case for this show. As recent Digital Art and Design graduate and now Coordinator of the Bisignano Art Gallery, I am proud to acknowledge the work of Noah Bullock and grateful to him for proposing, designing posters and hanging the exhibit currently in the Gallery.

Alan Garfield, Director



Bill Helin. Eagle Catches String Salmon



David Boxley. Bent Wood Eagle Box



David Boxley. Drum



David Boxley. Na Kal Tsap-u



David Boxley. Potlach Gift Eagle Becomes Wolf



Doug Gates. Copper Eagle



Jack Hudson. Eagle Salmon



Jack Hudson. Killer Whale



Jack Hudson. Raven



Jack Hudson. Tsimshian Eagle



Jack Hudson. Wolf Mother



Leslie Booth. Eagle Paddle

