

Peoples of the Northwest Coast

- The **Peoples of the Northwest Coast** include a number of distinctive tribes that lived on the Northwest Coast stretching from Oregon to Alaska
- Tlingit
- Tsimshian
- Haida
- Nootka
- Kwakiutl
- Salish
- Nuu-chah-nulth



Social Organization

- The Peoples of the Northwest Coast were a very class oriented society
- There were three classes evident:

Chiefs or Nobles

- At the top were the **Chiefs of Nobles**
- They had the right to high-ranking family names
- They controlled wealth through ownership of resource sites e.g. house sites, salmon fishing stations, berry patches, stands of cedar, etc.



Commoners

- The **middle class** comprised the bulk of the Northwest Coast peoples
- They lacked the prestige and privileges of the nobility but shared in group activities
- They provided labor toward tribal wealth



Slaves

- At the bottom of Northwest Coast society were the **slaves**
- They were captured or purchased from other tribes
- They performed menial tasks and could be sold, given away, or even killed



Totem Poles

- Probably the most distinctive symbol of the Northwest Coast peoples are their **totem poles**
- They are carved from single trees of western red cedar and can reach a height of 30 meters
- Totem Poles tell a clan's story – its origins and deeds
- Each clan would have the right to specific images on the totem pole e.g. the Thunderbirds, Bears, Eagles, etc.



Masks

- Also of note are their **masks** which are used in ceremonial dances
- They are made of cedar and are elaborately carved and decorated
- They are worn to represent characters in legends
- Some of them are ingeniously hinged so a dancer can represent the ability of some bird, animal, or mythical being



Canoes

- One of their primary modes of transportation were **canoes**
- They are carved from single cedar logs and are extremely seaworthy
- They are generally about 6 to 8 meters in length but can also be as long as 20 meters (Dragon Boats)
- They were mainly used for short trips but could also be used for long voyages of hundreds of kilometers
- Aside from travel, they were also used for fishing and even whale hunting



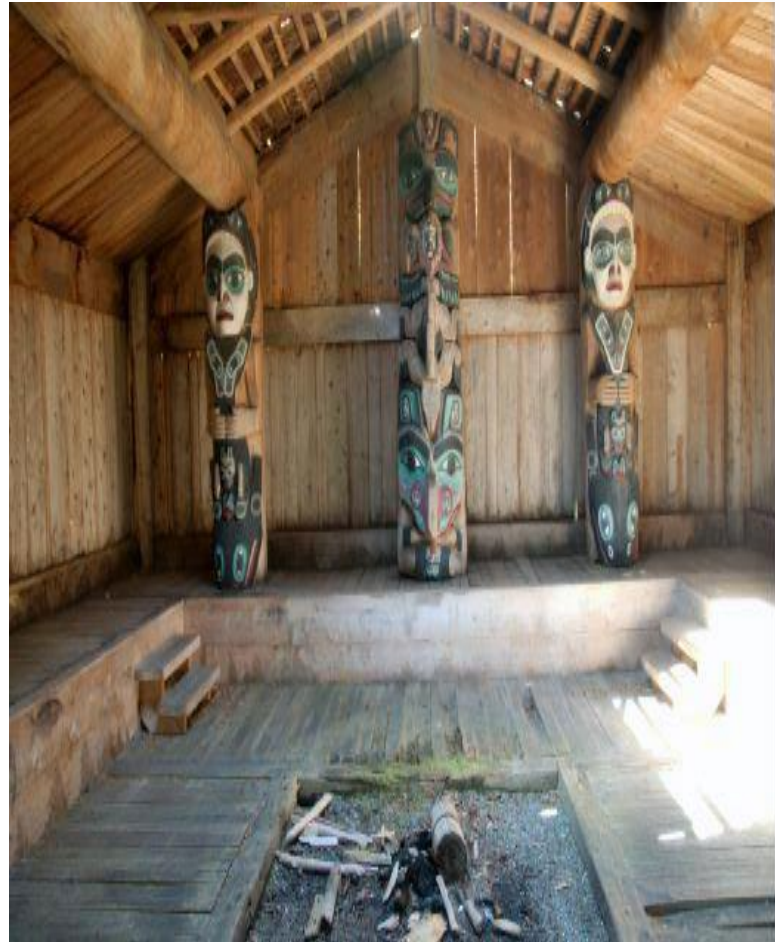
Longhouses

- The Peoples of the Northwest Coast lived in **cedar houses** of considerable size that lasted for years
- Each cedar home would house a **clan** or extended family
- They were built from a frame of cedar logs and then faced with cedar planks
- Support poles would often include carved images
- Entry would often be through a totem pole



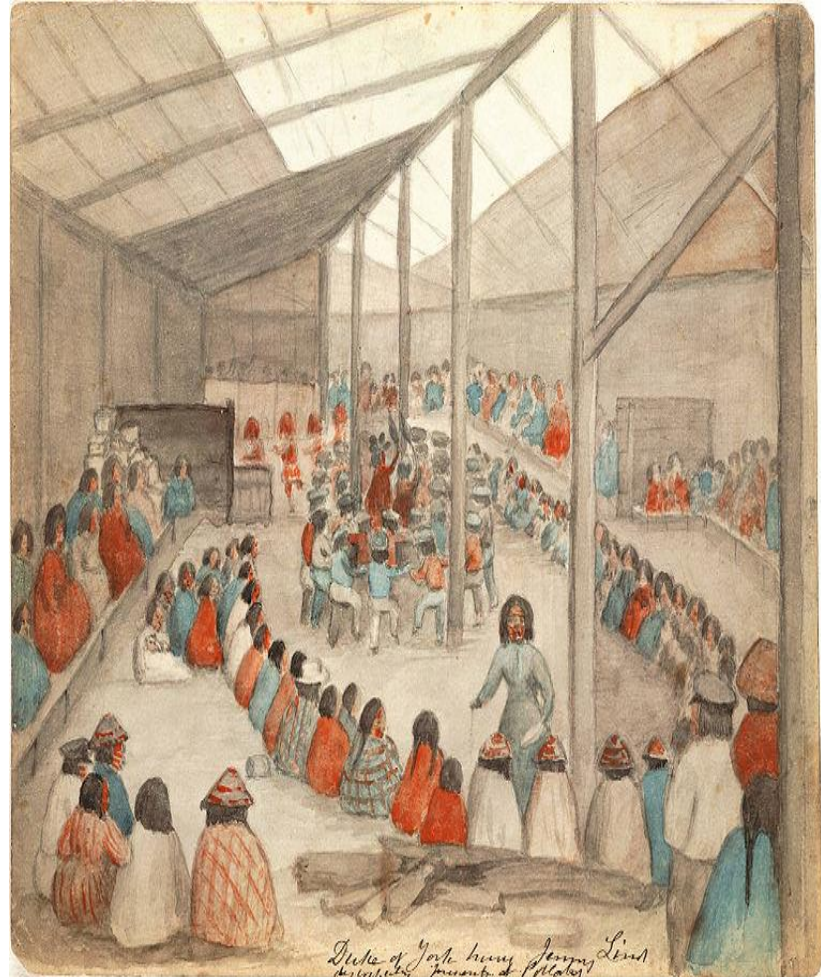
Longhouse Interior

- Inside the Cedar House there would be individual compartments on a raised side deck that housed the nuclear families
- A large communal hearth would be in the center of the floor
- There would be a smoke hole at the top of the Cedar House for the smoke to escape



Potlatch

- One of the most interesting customs of the Northwest Coast Peoples was the **Potlatch** which was a feast, which would last for days
- Potlatches were held by nobles to demonstrate their great wealth
- They celebrated major events such as the birth of an heir, death of a chief, or the raising of new longhouse or a totem pole
- People would be invited from nearby or even distant villages



Potlatch Continued

- All people in attendance would receive gifts
- Seating at a potlatch would reflect a person's status
- High ranking people would be given places of special prominence
- The potlatch involved an elaborate feast, ceremonial dancing, speeches, and plays



Rivalry Potlatches

- Of particular note were **Rivalry Potlatches**
- Here the host would demonstrate his great wealth and status by giving away large amounts of personal possessions - canoes, blankets, food, ceremonial coppers, boxes, and even slaves
- Sometimes the noble would ceremonially destroy property or even kill slaves



Purpose of Rivalry Potlatches

- The main purpose of rivalry potlatches was to recognize a noble's status
- It was also, however, a way of **redistributing wealth and food**
- A great noble might even be made temporarily poor after giving his possessions away, but he could gain much of this wealth back, by attending another potlatch where he would be the guest
- Return invitations to rivalry potlatches were expected to avoid shame

Seasonal Round - Winter

- The Peoples of the Northwest Coast were **seasonally nomadic**
- They engaged in what are referred to as **Seasonal Rounds**
- In the winter, they would live in **permanent villages**
- The largest of these was near the **mouth of the Fraser River**
- Winter was a time of little hunting or gathering
- They lived off the salmon they caught during the Fall
- They spent most of their time making and repairing tools and telling tales



Seasonal Round - Spring

- Near the end of the winter into early spring their supplies would begin to diminish
- Villages would then break up and families would move around in search of food
- One major source of food at this time were shellfish e.g. mussels, clams and oysters
- Today there is evidence of this in the **middens**, or heaps of shells they left behind



Season Round - Summer

- In the summer they would establish camps which were bases for food collection e.g. fish, shellfish, deer, birds, plant food such as salmon berries and huckleberries



Season Round – Fall

- The Fall was their critical season in that it involved the **Salmon Run**
- In the lower mainland, the summer camps were abandoned as people moved up the Fraser River to the canyon to capture fish
- The fish were dried and preserved on huge racks and brought back to winter camps



Back to the Winter Camp

- After the salmon run they would head back to their winter camps veritably laden down with the salmon they had caught
- On the way back they would hunt and once they neared home, they would collect **Indian potatoes** near the mouth of the Fraser River

