

Jack Davy

So Much More Than Art  
Indigenous Miniatures of the  
Pacific Northwest



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# Introduction

THE NORTHWEST COAST OF North America is where seas of blue meet seas of green, the Pacific Ocean giving way to land where moss grows like a thick carpet from which trees spurt in dense thousands, forming a vast canopy of dark green. To walk into these forests around Indigenous communities on Haida Gwaii, at Alert Bay, Tulalip, or Ozette, or any other place touched by the passage of settler colonialism, you swiftly find yourself trespassing among ruins. For between the thinner new-growth trees are the remains of huge trunks, rising in blurred hummocks and splintered columns. Sometimes stretching above head height before they abruptly splinter, these trunks are overgrown and crumbling, arboreal rubble buried in the detritus of the growing forest so that they are at first hard to make out, but once you notice them you see them everywhere.

These are the remains of cedar groves, stands of huge ancient trees that once covered the hillsides and islands of the region. In a few remote or protected places they can still be found, an arboreal cathedral arching far overhead, but in most places the stumps are all that's left amid the younger, slimmer growth. They offer mute testimony to an ecological disaster that overwhelmed the Northwest Coast in the nineteenth century, following and partially precipitating the deliberate near-destruction of the ceremonial and material culture of the Indigenous inhabitants.

These forests were systematically clear-cut by non-Indigenous logging companies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Marchak 1995). To a casual observer, and there were many of the time, with the trees seemingly

inevitably went the Indigenous communities on the coast, or at least their traditional practices and material culture. Their canoes and their houses fell into disuse and began to dissolve back into the forest, replaced, sometimes forcibly, by non-Indigenous style and technology. With populations and expertise rapidly declining through disease, constantly officially observed and sanctioned, and increasingly lacking ready access to the raw materials needed to build traditional material culture, rich spiritual and social practices came under demographic, ecological, and political pressure to assimilate. It appeared to these casual (non-Native) observers that before long nothing would be left. And yet this impression was deceptive, often deliberately so. The communities resisted and survived such that within a few decades a generation of enterprising and dedicated artists and educators took it upon themselves to rediscover, re-create, and teach their traditions once more. Through their example, and building on their regained knowledge, communities are producing material culture once more, each generation building and rebuilding on the previous one to restore what was lost, amid the gradual rebirth of their ancestral forests.

This book considers, on a technical and emotional level, one of the few carving practices that was sustained through all the years of degradation and loss: miniaturization. Through miniatures found in museum collections and through interviews with carvers who continue to make them today, I explore how investment in the techniques of the small and seemingly insignificant contributed to the survival of the great and existential on the Northwest Coast. In doing so, I will consider the reasons for which miniatures have historically been produced in this region, how they were used in systems of communication, and their importance in the resilience, resistance, and survival of many Northwest Coast practices.

Further, I investigate the creation, distribution, and re-use of miniatures as an essential human strategy of communication on local and global scales. In doing so, I propose a new way of thinking about miniatures, examining them not as mere diminutive relics of a fading past but as deliberate, often satirical, commentary on what survived, and as a form of opposition to the colonial oppression that Indigenous communities and artists faced, and continue to face, in their daily lives. Despite dedicated government persecution, Indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast ensured their own survival in part through a multigenerational and subversive program of artistic resistance that kept traditions alive, and miniaturization was a key technique in this campaign.

## Shaking Objects

A piece of advice circulating among those who work with material culture from the Northwest Coast sums up succinctly why it can be so hard, impossible even, for non-Native researchers, students, and museum visitors to meaningfully understand the objects they see in museum stores and displays. As French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss recounts,

I would like to tell you a story about a very noble American woman anthropologist, a princess among her people, who got her PhD and became curator in a Canadian museum. One of her white colleagues who was studying those marvellous chief's rattles of the North Pacific Coast, beautifully carved and painted with elaborate designs, was puzzled by one specimen. He turned to her and asked: "How do you read this rattle?" and she answered "We don't read them, we shake them." (1985, 5)

The princess is Gloria Cranmer Webster of the Kwakwaka'wakw, a prominent anthropologist and historian who many years later gave a less poetic version of the same story, in which she makes clear her impatience at such questions, working as she does as a "shaker among many readers" (2013, 165).

Cranmer Webster's story problematizes Northwest Coast objects in the museum space by graphically demonstrating that most were never intended to be static, curated objects of public fascination. It is only by interacting with them as they were designed to be used – by one trained and permitted to do so, such as Cranmer Webster – that the objects can be interpreted effectively, and then, as she notes, linguistic and cultural differences make communicating that interpretation difficult. Without this engagement, and within the alien setting of a museum using only the alien systems of analysis to which non-Indigenous curators have subjected them, Indigenous objects cannot be adequately or appropriately understood.

In common with that of other colonized peoples worldwide, Indigenous North American material culture has frequently been deployed in museums in ways that reinforce non-Indigenous ideas of cultural sophistication at the expense of Indigenous intentions. Often objects are simply fetishized as exotic examples of aesthetic delight. This has lingering and highly problematic effects on how the public views such works, with ramifications across public culture and the arts. In 2017, for example, an article in a leading British antiques magazine condescendingly remarked that "tribal material

is seen as modern art ... finely crafted material with aesthetically pleasing shapes [that] can, when mounted in one's home, become conversation pieces at least the equal of contemporary sculptural pieces" (Ryle 2017, 16). In such an environment, any attempt to understand an object via "reading" would be futile.

The rattles that Cranmer Webster addressed are not simply musical instruments but sacred components of ritual practices unique to specific times, places, and people. As a Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonialist, she was able to acknowledge and appreciate them in this specific context, while her museum colleagues could only attempt to read their aesthetic qualities. Their beauty meant that, like so much else, they had been seized and sent to museums as part of the destruction of Northwest Coast cultural networks during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In the museum space, such objects were disassociated from their original purpose and meaning, conspicuously stripped of their original contexts and inserted into non-Indigenous catalogues explicitly alien to those who had originally produced and used them. Thus it is that such collections were "not made according to a deliberate plan to tell a specific story. Instead the objects came from explorers, missionaries and traders, then circulated in a secondary market that deprived them of any provenance information obtained by their initial collectors" (J.C.H. King 2012, 57). This process, which defines so much of the material available to scholars, is consciously violent. As art historian Bill Holm notes, an object is rarely respected for what it actually is but rather "torn out of context and exhibited, along with its kin, as simply the trappings of an unfamiliar culture" (1986, 133).

There was an assumption among curators of the time that by pinning objects side by side like butterflies in a drawer, it might be possible not only to classify material culture, but to classify entire peoples, and in doing so somehow to preserve less tangible cultural property and traditions before they were lost to the march of assimilation. The museum thus becomes almost inadvertently a monument to, almost in some cases a commemoration of, the attempted genocide that filled it. This is the condition in which, in our own time, researchers, the public, and those descended from the original makers find the Indigenous objects museums claim to own.

The retention, interpretation, and display of Northwest Coast collections in the museum space generates an environment known as a contact zone. A concept first posited by Mary Louise Pratt, a contact zone occurs when there is a clash or collaboration between distinct cultures potentially

struggling with what she calls “asymmetrical relations of power” (1991, 34). The idea has led to an ongoing paradigmatic shift in how museums understand their collaborations with Indigenous communities. While a museum can insist that seeking, codifying, and archiving empirical knowledge adds to museum resources and effectively increases an object’s value, Indigenous people generally have a different focus. James Clifford notes in his study of Tlingit museum visitors that for them, “the collected objects are not primarily ‘art’” but rather “*aide-mémoires*, occasions for the telling of stories and the singing of songs” (1999, 435–37). Studies show that in encounters between Indigenous community members and museums, the former find that “consultation is often structured to provide outside support for the maintenance of institutional practices, and source community members are wary of contributing to museum-led consultation exercises which do not lead to change within museums or benefits to their people” (Peers and Brown 2003, 2). They are encouraged to “read” to others, not to use their expertise to “shake” the objects for themselves.

This distorted environment also instils a fear of being ridiculed, which creates an imbalance in expression. Haida master carver Robert Davidson once commented, “When I first came to Vancouver, I met an incredible barrage of anthropologists. I regarded them as people who held the knowledge, and so I was afraid to say anything in front of them for fear of saying the wrong thing. I was intimidated” (Harris [1966] 1992, xiii).

The overwhelming majority of miniatures surviving from the earliest periods under examination are housed in museum collections, and any object-based research is thus conducted almost exclusively within the museum space. It takes place according to each museum’s rules, for example rarely permitting handling of objects in the originally intended manner, for fear of damage. Cranmer Webster’s warning is that under these conditions a museum curator cannot understand the purposes for which the object was made, and even if their institutions did allow them to seize and shake a rattle, the shaking would be meaningless because the person performing it would not be inducted into the associated ceremonies.

This essential contact zone problem, this uncomfortable reality, shrouded my research and surrounds everything that follows, creating the risk of presenting what Douglas Cole called a “white history about Indians and their procurable culture” (1985, xi). To mitigate this risk, I spoke to members of the communities from which these objects came, and asked for their help in understanding miniature objects found in the museum collections. Their

words form the basis of my analysis, and I am not revealing new information so much as sharing their insight into things long known and well understood in their communities. These interviews were conducted in 2015 and 2016 and are distinguished in the text with italics. Christopher Evans (2012, 370) notes in his work on Nepalese miniatures that due to the subtle development and essential localized specificity of miniaturization, its study must inevitably be at least partly anecdotal and discursive, and these interviews were both, while remaining crucial to understanding the objects at hand.

## Swinging Clubs

I had not yet heard of Cranmer Webster's story when, as a junior collections assistant at the British Museum in September 2009, I was called to work with a major delegation of Haida people who were visiting the Pitt Rivers Museum's significant historical collections of Haida art, an event extensively documented in the book *This Is Our Life* (Krpmotich and Peers 2013). A professionally trained collection manager but a neophyte in Indigenous North American history and culture in general, and in Haida culture in particular, I was startled on the first morning to see two large, bearded Haida men enter the room, snatch up a pair of 150-year-old fish clubs, and proceed to beat at one another in a playful fashion. In this, they had immediately observed the nature of these objects and reacted naturally and appropriately to "shake" them, even as the museum staff, who hastened to intercede, tried to persuade them to put them down and "read" them instead.

In 1962, Lévi-Strauss used Northwest Coast fish clubs just like those being swung to illustrate that the aesthetic properties of an object are not incorporated merely because, as contemporary Norman Feder put it, "man everywhere seems to enjoy having beautiful things around him" (1971, 8), but because for artists on the Northwest Coast they were integral to the object's function. Lévi-Strauss described a Tlingit fish club, carved to resemble a "sea monster" (actually a seal), and concluded that "everything about this implement – which is also a superb work of art – seems to be a matter of structure: its mythical symbolism as well as its practical function ... seems to be inextricably bound up with each other" (1966, 26). Thus the incorporation of the design of the sea creature into the club, although having no scientifically discernible effect on the utilitarian principles of its production, such as weight, balance, or size, was a vital element of its construction and absolutely required to make it effective. These clubs thus

reflect Alfred Gell's definition of art as "social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency," such that "anything whatsoever could, conceivably, be an art object" (1998, 7–8).

As social agents, objects contain knowledge that is imparted during the process of their creation and use – for the Haida men, swinging the club requires muscle movement and knowledge of technique, as well as an understanding of the purpose of these clubs in fishing. Consequently, aesthetics, movement, and thought can be connected through a single object. Artworks such as the rattles or the clubs are thus performative artifacts in which "art is arrested force, life held in suspension, and though 'paralyzed,' it nevertheless trembles" (Bracken 2002, 343). It was this trembling that led the Haida men to pick up the clubs and swing them.

On that occasion, the men were intercepted by museum staff, the clubs returned to the table, and the party settled down to what the staff, myself included, believed to be the more serious work of the day: sketching, discussing, and explaining the myriad objects laid on tables for the benefit of the strategically positioned graduate students at the edges of the room, poised with pens in hand. Once again, the room resembled a museum space, not an Indigenous one.<sup>1</sup>

That cultural clash, an example of the unequal contact zone environment of heritage exchange in museum spaces, is the scene on which this book opens: the startled experience of a young British man, educated and trained in European museum practice, recoiling from two Indigenous men interacting with Indigenous objects in precisely the way they were meant to be used by their makers. I pursue this idea by considering what happens when the entire idea of shaking an object is turned on its head. I ask what can be done when an object that may *actually have been meant to be read in the first place* appears before a foreign audience, and explore the ways in which such an object, inherently impervious to simplistic analysis and with myriad messages for diverse audiences, can possibly be adequately understood so far from its origin and initial environment.

For among the many objects viewed by the Haida delegation during their time at the British Museum was a selection of canoes. Or perhaps not canoes. I wasn't sure. In the morning I carried these small canoe-shaped objects out of the stores to the viewing rooms, laid them on tables, and watched as the Haida delegates gingerly handled them in their mandatory blue gloves, as they photographed them and, with prompting, talked at length about Haida maritime culture: about fishing and hunting, about trade and war. In the

evening I returned that day's objects to the store and prepared the selection for the following morning. On one evening, as I lowered the not-canoes into their specially made cradles, I was struck with the oddity of the situation. I began to wonder why these canoes could be carried by one person alone, why these canoes – or not-canoes – were so small, for I knew that like the massive example hanging today in the American Museum of History in New York, Haida canoes were supposed to be big.

The question stayed with me far beyond the end of that project. Unlike the fish clubs I had seen so gleefully swung, the not-canoes could not be “shaken.” They were far too small to carry a person, to use for hunting or fishing, or to carry out trade or warfare. The literature was dismissive, describing them as simply “toys for their children and later as curios for white traders” (Roberts and Shackleton 1983, 121) or noting that they “were originally intended as toys for children; it was only in the late 18th century that the making of model boats turned into a souvenir craft activity aimed at Europeans” (Berezkin 2007, 39).

I began to think the problem was that these not-canoes existed in an uncomfortable space, without an obvious function; scholars have guessed that they might be toys or souvenirs, or feast dishes, or apprentice pieces, or shipbuilders' models, but no one appeared to have done any research to establish which, if any, of these explanations was accurate. Ultimately all of these potential answers, for various reasons discussed further in this volume, I found unsatisfactory. Not necessarily inaccurate but unquestionably incomplete. I have termed this discomfort *miniature dissonance*, the idea that the miniature object before you is trying to tell you something your mind is reluctant to acknowledge (Davy 2018b).

There is, however, a consensus that canoes, big canoes, are important objects, as Haida master carver Bill Reid once noted: “Western art starts with the figure; West Coast Indian art starts with the canoe” (B. Reid 2011). His observation accords with the geography of the Northwest Coast; in a region where land routes are impassable, canoes enabled communication, trade, subsistence, and warfare, played a central role in religious and ceremonial life, and were both a source of income and a highly prominent status symbol among the most powerful elite families. Truly, as Kenneth Roberts and Phillip Shackleton wrote, “beyond daily utility, the canoe as an idea and a symbol pervaded their entire life” (1983, 123). Alfred Niblack, an early ethnographer of the region, considered that “the canoe is to the northwest coast what the camel is to the desert. It is to the Indian of this region what

the horse is to the Arab. It is the apple of his eye and the object of his solicitous affection” (1888, 294).

It was obvious that these ostensibly functionless not-canoes bore resemblance to objects of real significance, and so presumably must have not only purpose but, I assumed, some measure of the importance attached to the larger canoes. Franz Boas noted that “all the work of the Indian artists of the [Northwest Coast] region ... serves at the same time a useful end” (1927, 183). If this is the case, and I have seen nothing in the years since first reading those words to suggest that it is not, then these miniature canoes must have had a useful end, and I set out to understand what that end might be.

This book therefore explores the practice and contribution of miniaturization among the various Indigenous peoples of the region of North America dubbed the Pacific Northwest. It does so by presenting case studies drawn from four Indigenous societies on the Northwest Coast, each of which explores a different but intimately connected series of communicative interactions through both the miniaturized objects themselves and the processes by which they are conceived, created, and deployed. The intention is to gain a better understanding not just of the mechanics of making such objects, which is where most existing studies end, but also of the circulating networks within which they are distributed. Toward that end, I have attempted to develop a model by which miniature objects, from wherever they originate, may be better understood as communicative devices, and thus to elucidate obscured narratives from the colonial Northwest Coast.

Miniatures have been produced on the Northwest Coast since at least the sixteenth century. They were a common product of material culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the post-contact period, and artists continue to carve miniatures today. Yet as a type, these ubiquitous objects have never previously been subject to serious analysis, and have often been overlooked in anthropological literature, or worse, dismissed as inauthentic or unrepresentative. By re-examining these objects through a research program that wove together a museum-based study, observational fieldwork, and targeted interviews, I have considered the ways in which miniature objects can reflect and inform intangible human interactions and ideologies.

## **The People of the Coast**

Although my interest in this subject was first piqued by a serendipitous professional encounter, I did not randomly select the Pacific Northwest as

my area of study. The Indigenous communities of this region make a particularly effective environment in which to examine miniaturization as a communicative tool of ideology for four principal reasons.

First, the peoples of the Northwest Coast live in communities that exhibit comparable cultural practices and beliefs, along with significant localized differences, within a well-defined geographic region. This permits consideration of broad regional contiguities in the practice of miniaturization as well as detailed study of local specific practices and consideration of the differences in temporal, social and spatial context which may have caused alterations in these practices between communities and over time.

Second, the history of the region was relatively stable over several millennia but has changed drastically in the 250 years since first contact with Europeans. Study across this period can therefore consider alterations and/or continuities in miniaturization as a practice within specific communities in relation to major social, political, or environmental shifts in the societies in the region.

Third, Northwest Coast peoples have historically produced a significant body of miniaturized material culture that has survived in museum collections and is accessible for study. This body of material has never previously been considered collectively as a research resource because of its historical categorization as so-called tourist art. Typically considered a hybridized form of art production, tourist art is generally criticized as inauthentic and unrealistic, and sometimes dismissed as “ethno-kitsch,” resulting in its underutilization as an academic resource (Graburn 1976, 6; see also Poulter 2011).

Paige Raibmon notes that for curators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “Aboriginal people could not be ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘modern’ at the same time. These were mutually exclusive categories” (2005, 201), and tourist art straddled this uncomfortable divide in ways that curatorial and academic scholarship has sometimes found difficult to comprehend. Thus, as Shelly Errington has written, due to this perceived inauthenticity or lack of quality, tourist art has too often been “invisible to normal art-historical scholarship. Or for that matter, anthropological scholarship” (1998, 62). Ruth Phillips also identified this phenomenon, noting that tourist art objects are “walled off, untouchable according to orthodox curatorial and discursive practices. Rarely exhibited or published, excluded from the canon, they have been shrouded in silence” (1995, 100). This erasure and decontextualization of Northwest Coast souvenir art allowed it to be re-dedicated to non-Indigenous purposes, and by extension did the same to Indigenous identity,

which in modern American or European societies has often been incorporated into the mainstream milieu without attribution, acknowledgment, or permission (Townsend-Gault 2004).

Finally, the contemporary inhabitants of these communities exhibit strong contiguities with their forebears in terms of material culture, in particular among those, such as artists, whose role is to maintain traditional practices. As miniaturization continues in the present day as a modified traditional material culture practice, contemporary anthropological fieldwork is a productive avenue of investigation.

It's important to be clear from the start that I will not attempt to uncritically present a picture of miniature use on the Northwest Coast as a unified whole; to do so would risk treating the diverse cultures of the region as homogeneous. Even a cursory examination of the evidence suggests that no single answer could hope to achieve such a result in any case. Neither is this book intended to reveal a theory of miniaturization for which there are no exceptions. Given the inevitable reliance on localized context for understanding, there are bound to be considerable differences in the ways miniatures are conceived in different parts of the world.

Within this framework, I use the phrase *Northwest Coast peoples* to refer to Indigenous communities of the Pacific Coast region with strong, established traditions of wood carving, particularly those with large-scale, highly technical cedar-carving practices such as canoe building. This distinction is not arbitrary, being rooted in the requirement of such peoples to have had sophisticated and coordinated systems of adaptive design, practical technique, and transference of technical knowledge in order to facilitate this profession. In short, it is based on the understanding that among these people, a carver of cedar was a distinct and significant role, invested with skill, training, and intangible specialist knowledge.

With these stipulations in mind, I explore how the peoples of the Northwest Coast have made use of miniaturization as a communicative tool through creative material culture practices rooted in long-standing traditional environments but modified through temporal shocks, and particularly adapted to the circumstances of their colonial situation. I examine the historical and contemporary miniaturization practices of four different Northwest Coast communities: the Makah of the Olympic Peninsula; the Northern peoples, in particular the Haida, who live on the Alaska–British Columbia border; the Kwakwaka'wakw of the central coast region; and the Tsalilip of northern Puget Sound. Each of these communities has pursued

linked but distinct miniaturization traditions and each continues to do so as a traditional and effective means of education, communication, and cultural expression. This research forms the basis of a consideration of the extent to which miniaturization practices are based in culturally informed, individually determined decision making in relation to specific audiences, and the effects that deployment of this strategy can achieve.

Throughout the volume I use object analysis and selections from interviews with contemporary carvers working in the field to demonstrate clearly, and often in their own words, how Indigenous artists of the region use and have used miniaturization as not only an artistic practice but as a hitherto unexamined program of material communication, resistance, and survival in the face of colonialism, colonization, and revitalization.

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