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History of Yukon first nations art

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CHAPTER ONE: Cultural & Environmental Background, Art Periods and Comparative Art Styles

In this chapter I will give a short environmental and cultural background which includes some of our spiritual beliefs, our place in this human world and other worlds, and our relationship with animals. I will discuss enough ethnology of the early Yukon peoples for the reader to have a basic understanding of the cultural situation from which our art form developed. I would also like the reader to keep in mind that there are slightly different versions of rituals, stories and lifestyles over the whole area so the following descriptions are intended as a basic overview. There are many good books that provide greater detail about our cultures. One book I can recommend for the southern Yukon is Catharine McClellan's *My Old People Say*.

I will further write about the early images and break down the art into three art 'periods': Geometric, Beaded and Current. I will discuss some of the differences between the Northwest Coast Indian art and early Yukon First Nations art, as well as differences between Coastal Tlingit and early Inland Tlingit art.

I also want to point out that this dissertation is a general overview of the art from the Cordillera region (explanation below) of the western arctic and as such does not focus totally on any particular group. I do of course write about groups within regions and sometimes about the details of a group. Each First Nation will have to create their own publication about their people's unique art but this dissertation can be a good reference to provide an overview and also to locate their art in relation to other First Nations groups.

Brief Background of Yukon First Nations' World

The world of Yukon First Nations falls into different identifying areas. Yukon First Nations people live in the western Sub-arctic which is one of the harshest environments in North America.

. The *Handbook of the American Indian: Volume Six Subarctic* identifies the western Subarctic as the interior of Alaska, the Cordillera and the western Mackenzie District. It is on the art made by people in the western Subarctic that my research is focused. The Yukon itself is fully within Cordillera and the *Handbook of the American Indian: Volume Six Subarctic* identifies Cordillera as: the area includes the northern half of interior British Columbia, the western edge of northern Alberta and the District of Mackenzie, all of Yukon Territory, and much of northwestern interior Alaska. (Helm 1981:372)

As there were no borders before the coming of the white man I sometimes will use these geological terms. As mentioned in the introduction the Yukon is the coldest place in North America and the wildlife is quite sparse. This resulted in the people having to live a semi-nomadic lifestyle. The summers were spent at fish camps where people netted fish and dried them for caching for the winter months. The harvest from hunting and berry picking was also added to those caches. The caching of food was very important since there was a scarcity of resources over the winter and it required about 110 square kilometers of land to support one person. This scarcity of resources allowed only small groups of people to live over a wide area. Generally, there were not more than 30 people in a band. In the early fall, when it was no longer possible to gather berries, the ground was too frozen to dig for roots and, most importantly, it was no longer possible to net fish. At his time, the band would pack up and move to their hunting areas. The fish camp tools and items not needed for the winter were cached at the camp, ready to be used upon return. The people lived a nomadic life, following and hunting the caribou and/or moose. When there was a shortage of food, the people would return to the caches. In this type of small-band lifestyle the leader was the

person who knew best about a particular situation. In this scenario there could be a different leader for all the various situations such as a hunting, trading, war, fish netting and so forth. Generally, the men would be responsible for hunting the big game while the women hunted for smaller animals such as rabbits. Women also tended to manage the day to day affairs at the camp. There was a strong sense of cooperation and there was a general attitude of non-confrontation, preferring to let bothersome or offensive people go rather than confront them.

The band was like a family who you spent most of your time with. Because of the small bands each person was quite important. This individuality had a major effect on the art produced by the Athapaskan people. Adulthood was marked by the first menstruation and completion of the resulting seclusion ritual for girls and the killing of the first large game animal for the boys. There may also have been a spirit guide quest into the wilderness, taken by the boy to obtain a guardian spirit. In this harsh environment a person had more chance of survival when one had a partner, so it was always important to have a spouse. When people reached adulthood they married. Sometimes, a young person married an older person. Often the marriages were arranged and it was not unusual that in the case of a spouse passing away, the next available sibling of the deceased would become the new spouse. Men could have more than one wife and women could have more than one husband. The marriage was always between people from different moieties called clans. There are two clans in the south-central Yukon, the Wolf and Crow clans, while the north-central Yukon has a third 'middle' clan. The clan system played an important part in Yukon First Nations society. When a couple married the husband generally lived with the wife's family for the first year before settling on their own. This allowed the husband to help the father in law hunting and thus learning about that family's area. This increased the husband's knowledge of resources. The clan system also allowed people to have 'relatives' throughout the region and if they were in a new area the clan members there would assist them. In the north-central Yukon, the third clan is for those people who are outsiders, such as a First Nation person from far away with a different or no clan, or more recent, for white people who married into the group. In the case of the southern Yukon a person marrying in from the outside, and not having a clan, would assume the opposite clan to their spouse.

Yukon First Nations trace their family roots through their mothers, taking her clan and tribe. The bond through the clan was stronger than through marriage. An example is the case of Àkhjìyis (Marge Jackson's spelling of Ukjese in her Story of Àkhjìyis in Kwädāy Kwändūr) killing his brother in law. Àkhjìyis' brother in law went hunting on Àkhjìyis' game mountain without permission and before Àkhjìyis himself got up the mountain. So when Àkhjìyis went up hunting on the mountain and discovered his brother in law already there he got very angry and killed him. When Àkhjìyis' son discovered that his father had killed his uncle, the son wanted to kill Àkhjìyis for retribution for killing a member of his clan. As it turns out the son did not kill Àkhjìyis but the Crow Clan confronted Àkhjìyis about the murder he committed and the required retribution. In order to not have to give his life in payment Àkhjìyis gave his game mountain as well as the salmon rich creek of Klukshu to the Crow Clan. At the present time, when a member of the Wolf Clan wants to fish at Klukshu, he must ask permission from the Crow Clan. Any Crow Clan member present can grant permission.

In the Yukon clan system First Nations people can marry their first cousins as long as they are from the opposite clan. That would be their cross cousin. Because of the clan system we cannot marry our parallel cousins. The cross cousins are the children of the mother's brother and the mother's brother's children would be from the clan of his wife. The parallel cousins are children of the mother's sister who would be the same clan because the clan follows the female, in this case the aunt. In this system the male parallel cousins are considered brothers and the female parallel cousins are considered sisters. An example is the

case of well known Elder Annie Ned, my great grandmother who was married to Patty Smith. Patty Smith's mother's sister had a son named Johnny Ned and because he was Patty Smith's parallel cousin, was considered his brother. When Patty Smith passed away, the next available brother became the next spouse for Annie Ned. In this case it was Patty's 'brother' Johnny Ned. Our language reflects these more complex family relationships. There are for instance different words for the aunt or uncle from the mother's side and from the father's side.

Interestingly, clan imagery played a big part in both Tagish and Inland Tlingit art but not so in the rest of Yukon Athapaskan art.

In order to understand any culture's art one has to understand that culture's spirituality and history. Our history comes from our stories since we have an oral tradition. Our belief system is technically described as animism, believing that natural objects have souls. My people believed that everything had a force. Many of us still believe in a Spirit World and in the ancient times we believed in a number of other worlds. A Shaman's spirit guides provided him or her with a connection from this world to the Spirit and Animal Worlds. Shamans were most often males but sometimes females. The Spirit world's day was our world's night.

We believed in reincarnation: after we pass away and enter the Spirit world we can be reborn. This belief is still wide spread today, even though most people have adopted Christianity as their religion. The apparent contradiction of Christianity preaching one life and one soul that is judged on judgment day, and our belief of many lives because of our reincarnations, is not an issue for us. Some people believe they recognize in a child a person who is reborn, especially when they see distinct traits that the previous person had. My Great-grandmother Annie Ned believed I was a reincarnation of her second husband, Johnny Ned. His Indian name was Aaxdzeez (Marge Jackson uses Àkhjìyis, I use Ukjese). As a child Annie Ned watched me and then one day she exclaimed: "That is Johnny Ned, that is Aaxdzeez !" and from then on I was known to my family as Ukjese and have been considered the reincarnation of Johnny Ned.

We believe we are reborn as a human, either male or female. A person could remember parts of their past life only as a young child, until about the age of five or six years old. After that, children lose their memories of that life, but could still retain special skills from their past life. People did not come back as animals or other entities, because those belonged to different worlds. But people could be taken into another world. When a person was taken into the Animal World, she could not tell the difference between her own Human World and the Animal World. One reason was that humans and animals spoke the same language. Because they all understood each other, people were guarded about speaking out loud about certain things, because the animals they were talking about could hear the conversation. For example, one did not say "I am going to hunt moose today!" because the moose would hear the person and the hunt would be unsuccessful. Humans could not enter the Animal World by themselves but were taken there by an animal. Sometimes this happened because the person was disrespectful towards those animals, or sometimes the human followed an attractive person who turned out to be an animal in human form. Those people who followed ended up marrying the animal. These themes occur in many stories and often the return to the Human World resulted in a deeper understanding of the animals. The returned person would teach the people how to behave with those animals. If a person was taken to the Animal World, the only way she could get back to the Human World was through the assistance of those animals the human has taken the form of, or from a shaman. When a person entered the Animal World all her clothes fell off, so upon return to the Human World she was naked. Another consequence was that the person could not stand the smell of people, since we stank very badly to animals. People who returned from the animal world

could not even stand the smell of human's clothing! Either the shaman could fix this situation or the person had to live apart from the group until she slowly got used to the smell of people again.

There was also another world under the water and that is where Crow went to steal the sun and the moon. The world was always dark and Crow heard that a 'High' man owned the sun and moon and he lived under the water. If you could lift up the edge of the water you could walk under it and it was just like our world. This is what Crow did. See Figure # 7 of my sketch of the scene after Crow transforms himself into a spruce needle or piece of dirt and the 'High' man's virgin daughter went down to the stream to get a drink of water. Remember that when a person is in another world, it looks and feels just like our Human World. Therefore, there are streams that people can drink from and even paddle canoes on the water within the Water World. It was here that she drank Crow in the form of the spruce needle or piece of dirt and how Crow was able to get inside her. The daughter then became pregnant and later gave birth to a baby boy who was in fact Crow. Crow knew that grandparents spoil their grandchildren and exploiting this behavior he was able to get the grandfather to let him play with first the moon and later the sun. In this the boy seemingly 'lost' both the sun and moon, but in fact stole them from the 'High' man. Once in his possession Crow took the sun and moon back to the Human World. Crow attached the two to the bottom of the Sky World and the Human World was now able to experience day and night.

The sun and moon did not move in the sky but instead the earth was rotating on a shaft that was held by a female Elder, a view held long before Copernicus! Sometimes demons came and tried to take the staff away and that is when the world shakes, causing our earthquakes.



Figure # 7. The 'High' man's daughter in the underwater world. UvK drawing.

Above was the Sky World. When you looked up at night you could see the light shining through the holes in the ground of the Sky World. The Sky World looked just like our world and that is where the Sky or Star people came from. It is in the Sky World that the two

sisters ended up being married to Star men. There was another world beyond the horizon that we could see and this was generally thought of as the White Winter World. That is where people thought the first white men came from. There was a barrier between the worlds and at one time the animals broke through that barrier which helped to get a balanced climate. Now there was not only winter, but the world had summer also. See figure # 8 for my illustration of the various worlds and their relation to the Human World and figure # 9 for my painting of a scene from “The Girl Who Lived with the Salmon”. This painting depicts the moment she has just been returned to human form by a shaman after being in the Salmon World for at least a year.

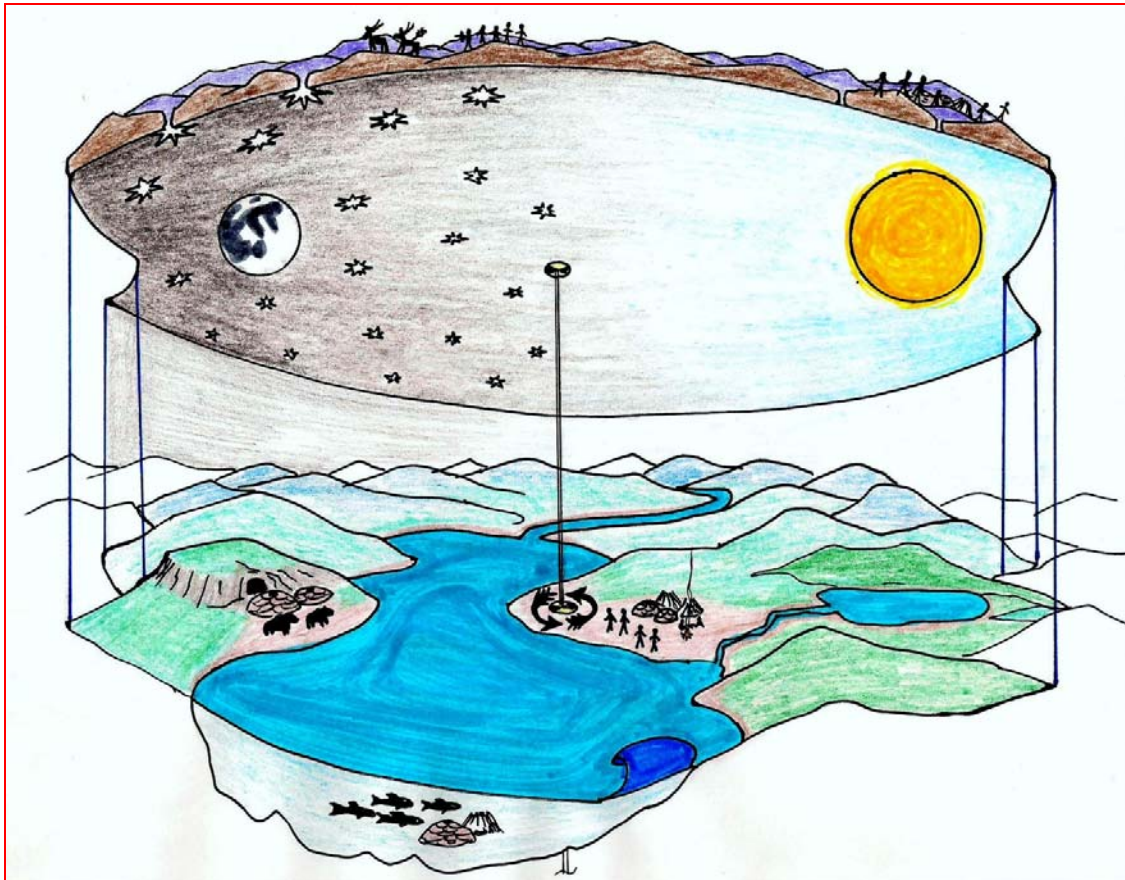


Figure # 8. Various First Nations Worlds. UvK. Drawing.

The above illustration gives you a basic view of our world in relationship to the other worlds that occupy this planet. In the center of the land is the human camp by the lake, in the world we occupy. It is beside the pivot point where the earth rotates. Beyond the horizon is the White Winter World and above is the Sky World. You can see people living there, as well as the holes in the ground of the Sky World. One part of the sky is becoming night and this is the beginning of day for the Spirit World. The Water World also has a camp since when a human is in that world, the fish look, act, and speak just like humans. Across the lake from the Human World is a camp from the Animal World. Note that the sun and moon are attached to the bottom of the sky world. The sun and moon were sometimes thought of as being alive, just like people, but with god- like powers.



Figure # 9. The Girl Who Lived with the Salmon has returned to Human Form. UvK. Painting.

In the above painting you can see the girl who has just been returned to human form. The girl was playing along the water with four (the number four is the most common number used in Yukon First Nations stories) other children the previous summer and suddenly vanished. The other kids, and later the parents, went looking for her in vain. They thought maybe a bear got her. They went to a shaman to find out if that is what happened. The shaman consulted his spirit guides and found out that the Salmon people took their daughter. The shaman said that they had to watch for her in the next year when they were netting salmon. That next year, when the mother was about to cut the head off of a salmon, her knife scraped along a copper necklace. The daughter had been wearing a copper necklace when she vanished and the mother now knew that this fish was her daughter. The parents took the fish to the shaman so he could return her to human form. The shaman put the fish in a pit covered with swan down and started his ritual. After a period of time he saw breathing from the pit and was able to pull the naked child from the swan's down. After she was given some clothes, the shaman cured her of the disgust she had for the smell of humans. The girl was later able to teach the people how the salmon wanted to be treated. This is the basic story, but there are various versions from different areas around the Yukon. Note in the painting the coming of night and thus the Spirit World. The stars are the light shining through the bottom of the Sky World. The sun and moon are attached to the bottom of the Sky World and the water represents the Water World. The two people sitting behind the fire are in fact wolves who have taken human form and represent the Animal World. When animals take human form they always sit on the opposite side of the fire from people.

The world was always here but there was a time when it flooded, and was remade by, for south-central Yukon First Nations people, Crow. Crow was a very powerful deity but with human characteristics. Once Crow remade the world he created men and later created women. Next, Crow (along with Beaverman) had to make the world a safe place for human beings since there were many dangers in the early world. Once done he left and has not been back since. Interestingly enough, historically there have been a series of floods in the southern Yukon, the largest flood ending 9,000 years ago when the present day Whitehorse would have been under at least 70 meters of water! Once the flood happened Crow was trapped over the water with no place to land and was getting concerned until he saw Sea

Woman or Seal Women (depending on the version), sunning herself on a mound of dirt. See figure # 10 of my painting of Crow flying over the flood and figure # 11 of Crow stealing Sea Woman's baby. Crow flew behind Sea Woman and stole her baby. Crow told Sea Woman he would not return her baby until she brought up more earth from the bottom of the water. He had to ask four times. Again, four is an important number and often things have to be tried four times in stories before they will succeed. The fourth he asked Sea Woman did bring up earth and Crow then spread that earth around with his beak to remake the world.



Figure # 10. Crow flying over the flooded World. UvK. Painting.



Figure # 11. Crow steals Seawoman's baby and thus forces her to bring up earth so he can remake the World. UvK. Painting.

For other Athapaskan groups other animals dove down to bring up earth. For example, it was Beaver for the Gwich'in people. The 'earth-diver' story is common throughout northwestern North America. Once the world was remade Game Mother made many of the animals but most of the animals were large and often ate people. There were also cannibals that preyed on people. It was looking as though human beings would become extinct! To prevent this, Game Mother called all the animals to pull out their sharp teeth so they could not eat people anymore. Only some came, the moose, sheep, caribou and so forth. Other animals hid and did not respond to Games Mother's calls. These were the bear, wolf and those animals that still today have sharp teeth. See figure # 12 of my sketch of Game Mother removing the sharp teeth from the animals.



Figure # 12. Game Mother removing the animals' sharp teeth. UvK. Painting.

Once the obeying groups of animals had their teeth removed, the world was a bit safer for humans but there were still many dangers. Because of this, Crow and Beaverman teamed up and travelled around the world, making the giant animals smaller and killing all the cannibals. Crow and Beaverman kept the animals small by killing the parent animals and telling the baby animals not to grow any bigger. See figure # 13 for my painting of Crow and Beaverman killing one of the cannibals.

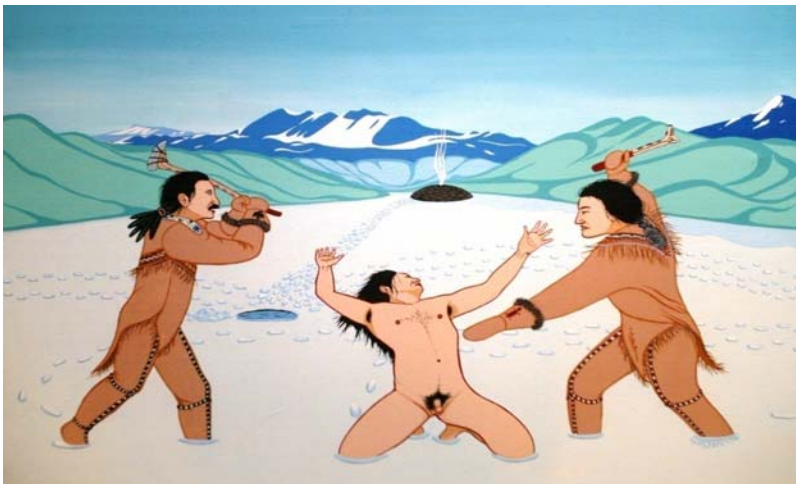


Figure # 13. Crow and Beaverman killing the Cannibal. UvK. Painting.

In the above story Crow and Beaverman trick the cannibal into taking his clothes off so that the cold would weaken him. Once weakened by the cold Crow and Beaverman could easily kill the cannibal and his wife, who was in the skin house in the background.

The story of two brothers or partners travelling around the world fixing things is also common throughout northwestern North America. The stories of Crow and his travels and adventures on earth are commonly referred to as the Crow cycle. Sometime after the world was safe for humans Crow went away and has not come back. These stories are basically how our world was formed and changed into our present world.

Relationships with Animals

Because Athapaskans lived so close to nature it only stands to reason that animals played a large role in the lives of Yukon First Nations people. The relationship was so close that sometimes the differences between animals and humans became blurred, as becomes clear in the stories where people entered the Animal World or animals entered the Human World. People often had animal spirit guides that helped them in many things, especially in hunting. Shamans would have up to eight spiritual guides and while they did not all have to be animal spirits, most were.

I will start off by listing the birds in their order of importance for early Yukon First Nations. Most readers will find that this list is not what they were expecting. I am sure most of you had thought that the eagle is the most important bird for Yukon Athapaskans. This idea has been spread by pan-Indianism and the importance the eagle has for the Plains Indians. While the eagle is significant and even sacred for many First Nations groups in other parts of North America, it simply was not for the Athapaskans in north-western North America. The most important and therefore the most depicted bird is the Raven who is called Crow, although the images of Crow have been at times misidentified as an eagle. The name Crow has caused a bit of confusion for outsiders as there are no crows in the Yukon and yet one of the two moieties is Crow. There is no real explanation to how this came about but I suspect that the first white men in the Yukon called the Ravens crows and the name stuck. Furthermore, the powerful deity who helped make the world right for humans is called Crow. The coastal Tlingits called the Crow clan Raven clan and the equivalent to our Wolf clan is the coastal Tlingit's Eagle Clan. The next important bird is the owl, often the bringer of bad news. When an owl visits you or is around your camp and hoots he is bringing you bad news. In this case, there will be a coming of bad luck, often in the form of a person getting injured, becoming sick or dying. The owl was still a concern for my people at wilderness camps when I was a teenager. I have never seen the owl depicted in any form. The next bird is the most spiritual and its feathers, down, bones, feet and other parts are used by my people in rituals. The down was especially used by shamans and you have read an example of this in the story above. The graceful animal I am referring to is the swan and could be considered as one of the birds most called upon during spiritual practices. Interestingly, I have not come across a single image that has been positively identified as a swan but swan feather fans are used in potlatches. Next is the seagull, a bird symbolizing trade. Seagull feathers are periodically used and I think this bird is sometimes depicted in art. I will discuss the seagull in more detail in the next chapter on Geometric Art images. The next birds also have some importance for Yukon First Nations people for various reasons. Woodpecker feathers were used for dance wanes and grave markers and Canada Jays (Camp Robbers) are considered good luck as they always visit especially when an animal is killed. There are some other birds that are mentioned in stories such as chickadees, eagles, hawks and snipes. Interestingly, one of the most important, traditional uses of the eagle was the fabrication of gopher snares from their feather spines. For the Inland Tlingit the eagle does have a greater importance, since the eagle

(Dakhlawedi) is one of the clans under the Wolf (Yanyedi) moiety. For the Coastal Tlingits, Raven is Eagle's wife, which then means the Coastal Raven is a female. In the Yukon, Raven would be Crow clan and Eagle would be Wolf clan. In the past a few Inland Tlingit groups located closest to the coast sometimes used the terms Eagle and Raven clan instead of Wolf and Crow. For Southern Yukon First Nations the Wolf-Eagle identification issue is not a problem. The Elders simply say: "Wolf claims Eagle" and everything is fine.

One bird I did not mention but also ranks quite high is the thunderbird. The bird is from the ancient times, but since we still have thunder in the Yukon, some Elders may believe that the thunderbird is still around. In McClellan's *My Old People Say* some of her informants report of people they knew that have seen thunderbirds. I have not seen any depictions of thunderbirds, but there is a Yakutat Tlingit Thunderbird crest. The Yakutat are said to be Athapaskans who moved to the coast a long time ago and adopted the Tlingit culture and language but retained Athapaskan stories and other Athapaskan traits. The thunderbird is described in *My Old People Say* on page 175 by various southern Yukon people as: "eyes just flashed and flashed and there was a thunder sound..." This informant described the thunderbird as being about the size of a camp robber (Canada jay). "He had a bill like an eagle. Both the bill and the ends of his wings were golden,...looking like a blue grouse, but having a red chest." Although small the thunderbird is very dangerous. A Tahltan story about the dangers of thunderbird points this out. A Tahltan clan had left their village after a dispute and was travelling down the Teslin River to start a new life. The leader saw a shiny feather on the ground and kicked it. It turned out to be a thunderbird feather and when he kicked it there was an explosion or flash of lightning. The result was that most people in the clan were killed and the few survivors were absorbed into the other local First Nations groups in the area.



Figure # 14. The Tahltan leader kicks the thunderbird feather. UvK painting.

There was a song about this event that used to be sung by the Tagish people at Carcross.

Besides birds there are other animals such as wolves, bears, otters, and even mice that hold various levels of respect or spiritual values. A good example is the wolf. The wolf is an often shown image because it is one of the two Yukon moieties. Images of wolves have been painted, engraved, carved and beaded. They are still placed on headstones when a person of the Wolf clan passes away. There are stories about wolves taking human form and helping people.

The other important animal is the bear. They are often thought of as relatives and there are many stories of people going with bears and living with them. To repeat, when people enter the Animal World they see everything as if it was the Human World and the animals look and act human. So when the people went with a bear and they were married, and they went to what appeared to be the fish camps, they would have gone to what was in fact the bear's own fishing areas along the creeks and rivers where the salmon spawned. Many groups do not eat bear meat since they are thought of as relatives, but men do go out to kill bears as a sign of bravery and population control. Later I will be discussing carvings of bears.

A powerful animal is the wolverine. Wolverines are always breaking into food caches, stealing all the food and peeing on whatever is left over, so that others can not use it. They are furious and cunning. Once, in ancient times, when a hunter had killed a wolverine, he wondered what kind of brain this animal had that made him so mean. So the hunter split open the wolverine's skull and thus released all the mosquitoes into the world! I have seen no depictions of wolverines.

Besides the predators, there are all the other animals that are needed for survival such as the caribou, moose and sheep. There are a number of these animals shown in hunting scenes, often on arrow quivers. The arrow quivers will be examined closer in chapter seven-Art of the Hunt & War. There are stories of people being taken by caribou and living with them. Many of these stories start off with the human being somehow offending the animal and then the animal takes that person. Once the human being has lived with the animals it allows her to better understand them. She is shown how to respect and treat them, even after her human relatives have killed the animal for food. The Girl (or Boy, depending on the version) who lived with the Salmon story (see above) is a good example of a person learning the salmon's ways. Note that when people are taken by animals to their world, time and space are different. Days in the Animal World may in reality be weeks in the Human World. Also, animals seem to easily travel back and forth between the worlds and adopt human form, but people cannot do the same. And to repeat, when an animal takes a person, only the animals or a human shaman can return the person to human form. Beavers and the double-limbed beavers (also from the ancient times) were important animals and were one of the clans of the Tagish and Inland Tlingit. I will discuss them in more detail in chapter eight-Art of the Potlatch & Death. Frogs were also a crest and there are many stories and images of them. I will discuss frogs in more detail in the Art of the Potlatch chapter. Beavers and frogs were impressive to Yukon First Nations people because they could live in two worlds (water and land). There were other animals with a very dark side besides the wolverines. They were otters and martens. People did not talk about these animals, as they had strong powers and just talking about them could cause problems. Remember that animals can hear and understand what people are talking about. Yet over the years the value of otter furs seems to have reduced the strong fear that existed in the past.

While I have mentioned animals of which there are no images, in the coming chapters I will be focusing only on those animals that are depicted in some way.

Languages, Environment & Inland Tlingits

Yukon First Nations people are made up of two language groups, the Athapaskan and the Inland Tlingit. The Athapaskan people span from the western part of Alaska to Hudson's Bay in the east. The northern limit is the tree line; from there the Inuit occupy the land. In Canada the southern limit is roughly from central British Columbia and the northern part of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The coastal mountains generally mark the western limit from the Pacific Ocean. In the south there are small Athapaskan pockets down the southwestern coast of the United States. These are the Pacific Athapaskans. In the southwestern interior of the United States are the Navahos and the Apaches, the southern Athapaskans. Athapaskans are one of the most widely distributed of all the Indian linguistic families of North America and in terms of territory; you could easily put all of Europe inside the Athapaskan areas! The Inland Tlingit speak the same language as the Tlingits along the Alaskan coast and live in a small area of the southern Yukon and Northern British Columbia.

The northern Athapaskans share a language and an environment which is part of the sub-arctic of North America. Besides the land they also shared a similar lifestyle, spiritual beliefs and art. Because of the shared art styles, and because of the limited inventory of early Yukon First Nations artifacts, I will also refer to Athapaskan groups outside the Yukon to reinforce my ideas. As you can see on the map in figure # 4 in the introduction, the Yukon First Nations people are made up of the Northern and Southern Tutchone, Tagish, Kaska, Han, Gwich'in and some Upper Tanana in the western part of the Yukon. You will also notice that the Tahltan are just south of the Yukon border. I have included Tahltan art as it relates to the early Yukon art; less than 200 years ago they were settled in the southern Yukon until they were displaced by the Inland Tlingit. While not on the map, there is also Mountain Dene in Ross River who originally came from just the other side of the Yukon-Northwest Territory border. Before the Yukon borders were established there was a lot of movement across these present day national and territorial boundaries.

The Inland Tlingits are relatively-speaking newcomers to the Yukon. They moved inland from the Juneau area in coastal Alaska about 200 years ago. Trade is cited as the most likely reason, since the coastal Tlingits traded with the Russian American Company and later with the Hudson's Bay Company and American trading companies. The coastal Tlingits, in turn, traded with the interior Athapaskans. The trade with the interior had been well established by the time the first white people arrived in the area. By moving inland it is assumed that trade was made easier, but at the same time it set off a series of 'raids' back and forth with the Tahltan people. Over a period of time the Tahltan were displaced and those areas are now settled by the Tlingit. In order to survive in the harsher interior environment the Tlingits had to adapt to the interior lifestyle and thus had to take on many aspects of interior culture. This was also facilitated by intermarrying with interior peoples.

There was already a lot of intermarrying between the Tlingits and the Athapaskan people and this simply carried on when the Tlingit moved inland. After the move inland it was not possible for the now Inland Tlingit to work in the coastal style art. It became lost along with the coastal lifestyle because of the different environment they came from. But the Inland Tlingit did retain their language, clan structures and spiritual beliefs. As Julie Cruikshank says in *Through the Eyes of Strangers: A Preliminary Survey of Land Use History in the Yukon During the late Nineteenth Century*:

In order to adapt to their new environment-freshwater fishing, hunting of caribou, moose, small game animals, birds-they had to radically alter their material culture. At the same time they retained their coastal Tlingit language, their social culture and their economic ties with the coast. (Cruikshank 1974: V 32)

The radical change included their art which became less recognizable as coastal Tlingit and more like Athapaskan art. The Inland Tlingits did not exactly copy the Athapaskan art, but developed their own unique art 'style' that had Athapaskan characteristics. I will be discussing this later in the chapter.

Art Periods

I have divided the art from the Yukon into three periods. These periods could also be applied to other First Nations groups neighboring the Yukon, since their experiences are very similar to what happened in the Yukon Territory. They are the Geometric Period, the Beaded Period (which can be also thought of as the Floral Period because of the near exclusive use of floral designs) and the Current Period. There is a certain amount of overlap in styles and therefore I would like you to realize that these periods do not have set start and end dates. Some parts of an art practice may have continued into the next art period.

Geometric Period

The Geometric Period holds the earliest art style. I indentify this period as the Geometric Period because the art was quite geometric in nature. The earliest example I have seen is from about 7300 years before the present. So, as you can see, this is an old art style. The art is generally much like the early European Paleolithic Art that was done in Europe 10,000 years ago by hunter-gathers. Once the Europeans switched to farming their art changed. Since Yukon First Nations stayed hunter gatherers, farming not being an option here, the hunter-gatherer art style stayed the same until very recently. The art was painted, engraved, embroidered and carved on those items that members of the band possessed such as tools, drums, spoons, quivers, clothing, amulets, etc. While figurative images were created, there were also a lot of non-figurative images/motifs. This art period started its decline with the introduction of beads and other trade items. At first, the beads simply replaced the porcupine embroidery imagery. Starting sometime after the late 1800s, floral bead designs were adopted and there was a rapid decline of creating embroidered art. In addition traded tools replaced hand made tools and designs were not added to these new tools. The Geometric art style was pretty much replaced with the influx of trade items in the late 1800s and early 1900s although a few rare elements of this art style were still made until World War Two, after which point the geometric imagery vanished. In the coming chapters I will be examining various art forms from the Geometric Period in detail. See my illustration of a typical Geometric Period Art man in figure # 15 below.



Figure # 15. Art from the Geometric Period. UvK drawing.

Beaded Period

Beads started making their way into the interior in the early to mid 1800s. As I mentioned earlier the beads simply replaced the embroidery and the art style was still geometric. Once bead use was well established floral designs began to appear. The beadwork was limited to clothing, bags and those hide and cloth articles that beadwork could be done on. I suspect that the floral designs generally arrived from the north via the Hudson Bay Company's trade routes. That route would start from the supply depots in the south of Canada and the trade items, including beads, would be moved north, down the Mackenzie River. Once at the northern end of the Mackenzie River the trade items went overland to the Porcupine River and followed down river towards the west to the junction of the Yukon River and the Hudson Bay trading post of Fort Yukon. When First Nations women saw the beaded floral patterns owned by the Métis helpers and the beaded creations by the wives of Hudson Bay staff, the woman also started to create floral designs.

The more complex Mackenzie style floral designs that reached Fort Yukon in the late 1840s, early 1850s became simpler floral designs that worked their way up the Yukon River toward to south and into the upper Yukon River area. There were also unique Tahltan and Inland Tlingit floral designs, but those came from other sources. The Inland Tlingit adopted the coastal Tlingit floral style and the Tahltan never really left the geometric designs. As you will see in the coming chapter on bead designs, there were regional styles. I discuss the four Yukon regional styles: the Gwich'in, the Upper Yukon River, the Inland Tlingit and the Tahltan. I will describe the beaded animal designs in the chapter on figurative art. The Beaded Period started around the mid-1800s and lasted until World War Two, so a span of almost a 100 years. The tourist trade that came with the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898 started the decline of the Beaded Period. The Beaded Period was pretty well over with the completion of the Alaska Highway in World War Two. After World War Two the regional

styles and fancy beaded designs faded away. This leads us to the next period, the Current Period. See figure # 16 of my illustration of a man from the Beaded Period.



Figure # 16. Art from the Beaded Period. UvK drawing.

The Current Period

The forces that result in the loss of the Yukon First Nations visual culture to the point that we are now creating an art form that was never done in the Yukon, the Northwest coast Indian art style along with some Pan-Indianism styles, starts with the introduction of the white man's trade items. The current Period's art is most often carving in wood, painting in acrylics and prints. The original geometric style production is reduced with trade until it ceases to exist after World War Two. Even the regional beaded styles are gone after World War Two. The building of the Alaskan Highway in World War Two is a major turning point for Yukon First Nations visual culture because it signifies a major chance for Yukon First Nations culture overall. The Alaska Highway opened up the Yukon, to the point where almost all Yukon First Nations children could be taken to the Christian mission schools. The Canadian government's policy of what is commonly known as "Killing the Indian in the child" could therefore be used to a greater extent. The policy was devastatingly successful in the killing of Yukon First Nations culture. A cultural void was created after World War Two. Almost all First Nations children born after 1945 grew up only speaking English. The Yukon First Nations spiritual beliefs were in decline before World War Two and the last shamans passed away in the 1970s. Our spirituality was replaced, or at least heavily absorbed, by Christianity. People furthermore lost their ability to live off the land. While presently some First Nations people hunt and spend time in the bush, very few spend *most* of their time in the wilderness anymore. People are still creating bead designs, but the styles have blended and become simpler. The older fancier regional styles are almost gone. Other than the beadwork there was little else done and the visual culture, the art, was nowhere to be seen. It was as if

Yukon First Nations had no art. This void was to be filled, starting in the mid-1980s, with the Northwest Coast Indian art style. It reached a point where in present day Yukon the northwest Coast Indian art style is generally thought of as being the traditional art style of the Yukon First Nations people!

One of the reasons that Yukon First Nations culture was quite effectively destroyed was a combination of a determined oppressive government (First Nations were not made citizens of Canada until 1956, could not attend public school until 1959 and could not vote in a federal election until 1960!) that totally controlled a group of people that had a small population and was generally non-confrontational. The defensive isolation that protected the original Yukon First Nation culture was largely removed with the Alaska Highway and other roads built in World War Two. When you compare the Yukon First Nations situation to other groups that were taken over, you will see the larger and more aggressive populations are given more respect and power from the dominant culture after the take-over. For instance, the warlike Maoris from New Zealand could not be effectively conquered by the British. Closer to the Yukon was the relationship between the Tlingits and Russians. The Russian America Company established New Archangel (now Sitka) in 1799 but it was wiped out by the Tlingits in 1802 and about 150 Russians and Aleut workers were killed and the remainder enslaved. The Russians returned in 1804 and defeated the Tlingits and restored New Archangel. But from this point on the Russians never dominated the Tlingits and always had to be on guard against attack. The larger population and aggressiveness of the Tlingits limited the power of the Russians during the whole time they occupied Alaska.

As I mentioned before the defensive isolation protected Yukon First Nations culture but only until the Yukon was 'opened up' to the outside world in World War Two. Examples of other groups where their culture was protected by isolation are the Athapaskan Apaches in the southwestern United States. The United States policy towards Native Americans was one of annihilation and if that was not possible the tribe was to be isolated. As a result of this the Apache culture stayed intact and was still strong. For example they were still wearing traditional hide clothing in the early twentieth century, well after Yukon First Nations had stopped making the traditional hide clothing. In the Yukon the most isolated community is Old Crow; the only way to get there is to fly in. As a result of the isolation the Gwich'in people have retained overall slightly more of their culture (including their language) than the other Yukon First Nations.

Brief Explanation of Yukon First Nations Images

One common aspect of Yukon First Nations art is the artist's desire for individuality. Everybody made their own images for their own reasons. This could be to make something fancy, or to represent their clan, a story, or a historical event or maybe for the purposes of a talisman for successful hunts. There was also art that was created with spiritual intent, such as shaman's art. The art provided a link to other dimension, such as the Spiritual World or Animal World. Lastly, there would have been instances that art was made for art sake, or to make an item fancy. When I looked at early artifacts I did not come across any images or items that were the exact copy of another. If the images were very close in style I believed they were made by the same artist, since that art was often collected from the same area during the same period. However, there are still similarities to be found in the works created within groups. An example is the rendering of painted or beaded bird styles by the Inland Tlingit. These images, while each being unique, still had the same feel collectively, and differed from the bead bird styles from the Tutchone people, even though they are neighbors. I will be showing examples of such art in Chapter Five-Figurative Art. Overall the Inland Tlingit had a larger image vocabulary, including the clan imagery, than Yukon Athapaskans.

The common medium that was used for making art in the Yukon was quill or bead work on hides and incising and/or painting on tools, drums and other items. The art was added to the things people used. Art was not created to be hung on the skin house's walls for the sole aim of enjoyment or esthetics. Instead, a wall pocket that had a purpose would be beautifully beaded and hung on a tent or cabin wall, which could be enjoyed by all.

A Comparison between Coastal Tlingit Art and Yukon First Nations Art

The following are my observations about the early art styles in the Yukon. The first obvious difference with the Coastal Tlingit, as well as most of the Northwest Coast Indian Art tradition, is that the coastal peoples followed a very strict set of rules on the creation and presentation of their art. When an image was 'constructed' it was done with present patterns. Basically, these patterns or shapes are the ovoid, circle, "U" (an ovoid split in half), "L" and "S" shapes that are basically the "U" shape split in half. There are primary shapes or form lines and they are often done in black. They provide the main structure of the image. Secondary shapes are often done in red oxide and fill in the spaces of the main structure. Finally, tertiary shapes fill any remaining smaller spaces. These tertiary shapes are often in blue, green or blue-green colours. See figure # 17 below for a basic breakdown of Northwest Coast Indian art motifs. Once the artist understands the function of the shapes he can follow the rules in the creation of an image. A raven would have a straight beak, an eagle a curved beak so the tip pointed down, a hawk's beak would curve fully back, and so forth. So a raven created by one Tlingit artist would not be too different, if at all, from another Tlingit artist's raven. Only an expert may be able to identify the creator based on maybe the thickness of the ovoid form lines or in other aspects where personal variation can be added without breaking the rules. This approach to the creation of art was in some ways the opposite for early Yukon First Nations artists, in which case every artist's work was unique.

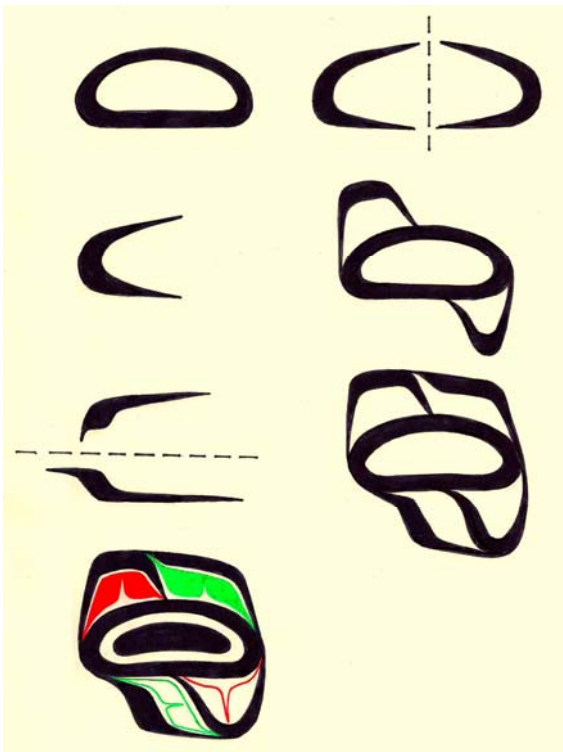


Figure # 17. Basic Northwest Coast Indians art forms. UvK drawing.

Yukon Athapaskans admire individuality and it shows in the art. They were however restricted by the available material and by the fact that they had to be on the move seasonally, something the Tlingits did not have to do. Yukon art was placed on tools, clothing and other items that could be easily transported. The Coastal Tlingit, with the wealth of the ocean on their doorstep, did not have to lead a semi-nomadic lifestyle and therefore had permanent villages. They also had the large cedar wood to work with to create large works of art. They made poles and long houses that were permanent structures and created bentwood boxes that were too heavy to easily carry. Those bentwood boxes were intended to stay in the long houses. The Tlingits also added their art on spoons, canoes, paddles, drums, clothing etc. like the Yukon artists did. Material and environmental limitations resulted in the interior 'style' that once was common throughout the Yukon and neighboring Alaska, Northwest Territories and northern British Columbia. The material and environmental richness along the Pacific coast resulted in the Northwest Coast Indian art style that was common along the whole Northwest coast.

Another difference was the purpose of the art. Along the Northwest Coast the images presented clans, families, people, stories and history. There was of course decorative art done in the Northwest Coast but that seemed to be of a secondary nature. The Athapaskan art, on the other hand, was quite decorative and there were few images when compared to the Tlingits. Athapaskan art was largely to make things 'fancy' as opposed to narrative. Narrative art was made but in limited quantity. Another difference between the interior and the coast was the use of black and red paints. Black paint was made from charcoal and red paint made from red ochre. The coastal artists mainly used black and as a secondary color red. In the interior, red was the most commonly used color and black was only used once in a while, even though obtaining black paint was much easier. Maybe red was more valued because of its restricted availability.

Comparison between Inland Tlingit and Coastal Tlingit Art

When the Coastal Tlingit moved to the interior and became the Inland Tlingit, their art changed. Environment affects the creation of art. Like the art of all Yukon First Nations, Inland Tlingit art was greatly different from the art of the coastal peoples just on the other side of the coastal mountains. The rich resources and lush climate of the coast allowed for the establishment of dedicated artists. That is, these people were able to become specialized in the field. They did not have to spend a great deal of their time seeking food or preparing for winter. This all changed when the first Coastal Tlingits moved inland to become the Inland Tlingit people. They made this change of location in order to trade. When they arrived there may have been a lot of intermarrying with the Athapaskans in order to ease the adjustment to the new environment. Even though they came from the coast originally, the Inland Tlingit did not use the ovoid and "U", "S" and "L" shapes. It is likely that the artists of the Coastal Tlingit did not accompany the Tlingit traders, for obvious reasons. The environment would have changed the role of the artist into a hunter-gatherer. When the rich resources of the coast were left behind the tribe could no longer support a person who only created art work; they would have had to contribute to the group in a more practical way. If the coastal Tlingit artists did move inland, they would have found there was no cedar to work with and the local wood not as agreeable to carve. Those artists would now have to live a semi-nomadic lifestyle and anything they created would have to be either left at the old camp or carried to the next camp by themselves or the new owners. This would have been a very difficult task. Still, one would think that some of the Inland Tlingit traders who moved inland would have produced art in the coastal style. However, I have never seen any examples of this. Whatever the case, the Inland Tlingit very quickly adopted more individual Athapaskan art style. I have

seen one piece of ovoid use from the 1950s which was made by an Inland Tlingit artist. Before this time I have seen no coastal Tlingit art style examples made by Inland Tlingit artists. Any other northwest coast art I did view was traded into the Yukon.

This drum is the only example of the coastal Tlingit style of art I came across and would be the only example of Northwest Coast art made for at least the next 20 years in the Yukon. This is the drum that Jim Fox donated to the MacBride Museum in the 1970s. On top of this, the drum's image was not the original image created on the drum! The coastal style eye ovoids are painted over top of an earlier design. See figure # 18 for this example. The drum was donated, and may have been created, by Jim Fox. Emma Shorty, an Inland Tlingit from Teslin, identified Jim Fox as her uncle. This would make this drum belong to the Inland Tlingit community of Teslin, Yukon. The seven Northwest Coast Indian art style eyes in the centre are loosely painted in a circle close to the center of the drum. These lines are not as fine as lines on the drums of the coastal Tlingits. The old photographs of Coastal Tlingit drums show very finely finished lines. The change in drum design may indicate an intention to sell it to tourists. It appears that the original design was maybe depicting the Crow and whale/fish story and later the design was changed to a Northwest Coast Indian design with 'Whitehorse Y.T.' painted on it. The addition of 'Yukon, Whitehorse' and other such location identifiers was often a sign that the item was intended for the tourist trade. See figure # 18, right, for my sketch of the first intended motif.



Figure # 18, top; NWC style drum. X72.1.56, MacBride Museum. Bottom; UvK drawing.

While some Northwest Coast Indian art was done in the Yukon in the 1970s the strict coastal art style that is now common in the Yukon has only been created since the mid-1980s. This is when Inland Tlingit artists such as Keith Wolf-Smarch went searching for their culture and found no Yukon examples of Native art. They then looked to the Coastal Tlingit art style for inspiration. After all, the coastal Tlingit long house and totem poles were still standing, as were bent-wood boxes covered in Tlingit art. That art filled the artistic First Nations void in the Yukon, especially for the Inland Tlingit. It was easier for the Inland Tlingit to adopt the coastal style because of their connections with their ancestral relatives and art from the coast. Another possible reason for the absence of coastal style art created by the Inland Tlingit before the 1950s is stated by McClellan in *The Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 6. Subarctic*:

Although their ancestors formerly lived along the upper Taku River, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries most of the Inland Tlingit moved permanently across the divide to the headwaters of the Yukon River, perhaps splitting the ancestors of the Athapaskan speaking Tagish from the Athapaskan Tahltan. Some or all of the Inland Tlingit may themselves be descended from Athapaskan-speaking Indians that adopted Tlingit as their chief language owing to extensive trade and intermarriage with coastal Tlingits during the nineteenth century. Specifically, they may be the descendants of the Athapaskans that Dawson (1889:193B) and Emmons (1911:5) called Taku and described as speaking Tahltan or a closely related dialect and in fact the Tlingit they speak diverges somewhat from that of the Coastal Tlingit, who class them as *gunana* 'strangers'. (Helm 1981: 469)

Based on the above statement, at least a certain percentage of the present Inland Tlingit are Athapaskans that adopted the Tlingit language. This is plausible, since in the past many First Nations people were multi-lingual and could speak two or three languages. The people in that area were already fluent in the Tlingit language and over time this became their main language. This would have improved trade and pleased their main trading partners, the coastal Tlingit. With the adoption of the language it seems that absorbing other aspects of the culture would only be logical, such as the more complex clan system and house crest system. Examples of this approach can be seen with the Southern Tutchone, who in the past all could speak fluent Tlingit and adopted simpler versions of the coastal Tlingit clans. Unlike the Inland Tlingit, the Southern Tutchone did not have a formal Eagle clan, but recognize the Eagle clan and place it under the Wolf clan. There is also a Frog House of the Crow clan. Further to the north, the Northern Tutchone do not have such variations to the clan, it is simply Wolf and Crow. If many Athapaskan people adopted the Tlingit language this would explain why the early art of the Inland Tlingit was in the Yukon Athapaskan art style, since some of the creators would have been Tlingit speaking Athapaskans. I believe the combination of a) some coastal Tlingits moving inland, intermarrying with the Athapaskans and adjusting to the environment and b) some Athapaskans adopting the Tlingit language, resulted in the Inland Tlingit art style having its own uniqueness: quite different from the coastal Tlingit art and quite similar to the rest of the Yukon First Nations art styles.