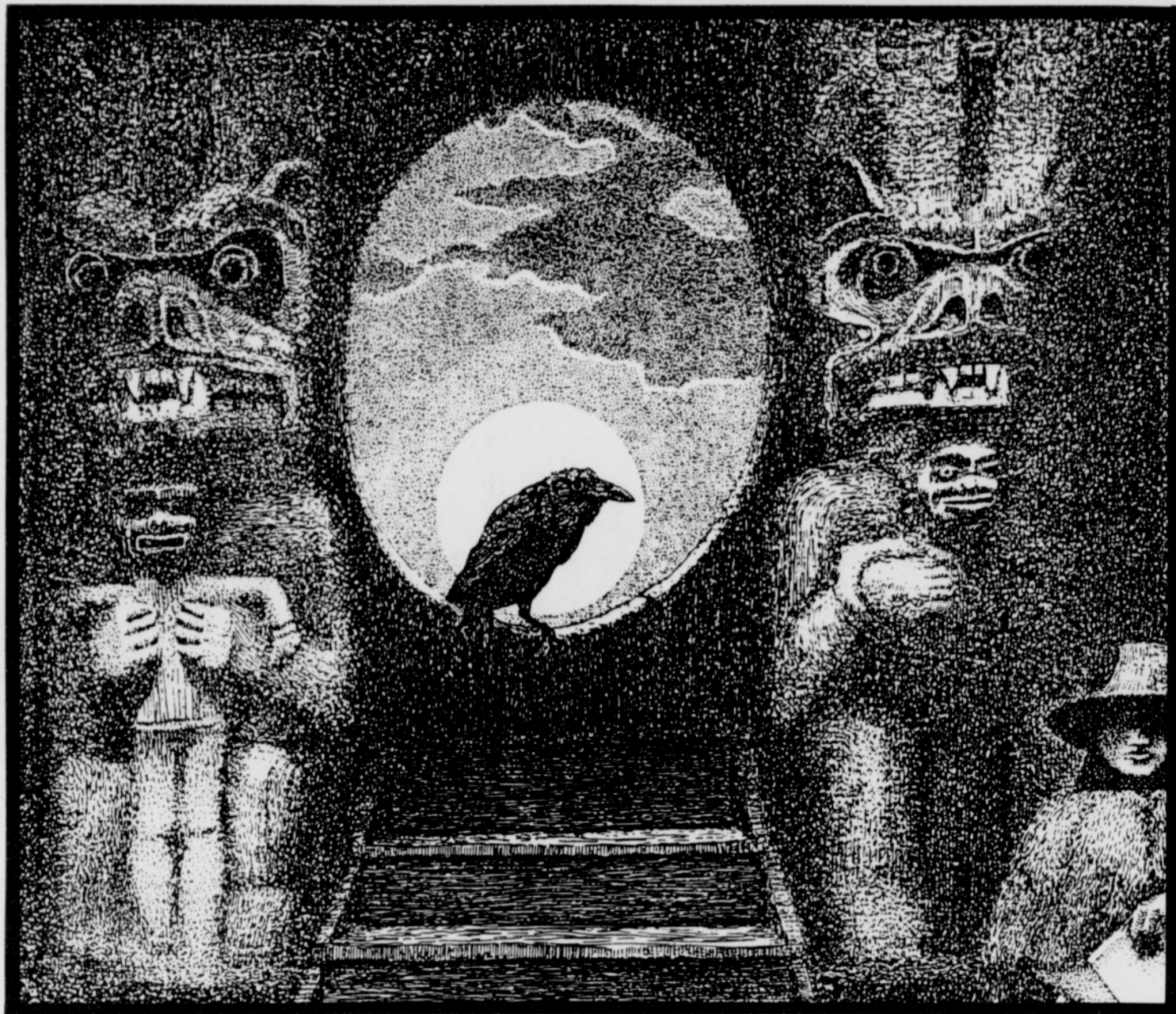


A RARITY OF TOTEMS



JANE HART MEYER

BY W. M. ITTMAN JR.

There is so very little left of those who came before. Who would imagine as they look around today, at the estuary lowlands, the hills beyond, the steep headlands and the beaches, that it was once so very different than it is now. Ours is but a speck of time, a grain of sand on a windswept beach. That's how quickly and how totally change can be affected.

The part of the Oregon coast that we call Clatsop and Tillamook Counties is the southernmost reach of a cultural, social and spiritual pre-European fabric of life that extended all the way north to Alaska and which had its roots in Siberia and Northeast Asia in Neolithic times. This is, technically speaking, the region of the Northwest Coast Indian tribes and that of the Eskimos of the North. Relative to the span of humanity's time on Earth, it is, even in its origins, a fairly recent development. The Indians who lived here were the descendants of the last migrants from Asia. They intermingled with Indian tribes that had come earlier and moved to the coastal regions from the eastern plains and woodlands and the Great Basin area. With this blended heritage they flourished in a veritable Garden of Eden before the Fall, for centuries before the white sails cut their horizon and ultimately their lives.

An absence of recorded literature or chronicles, scarcity of archeological data and a very great paucity of artifacts which pre-date the end of the 18th century, leave us very little to go on. What we have learned is legend, myth, oral tradition and the somewhat biased accounts of the earliest white visitors to these shores. There are a scattered few works of art and artifacts from

these earliest contacts, mainly housed in British and European museums today. These material objects are the mute surviving clues that link the richer, later cultural manifestations of the 19th century with the finds from the distant and mysterious middens (inhabited sites) and burial places that seem to indicate shadowy interconnections between the peoples of the coastal rainforests with the sub-Arctic and finally with Siberia and Northern Manchuria. There are also certain stone and bone objects from parts of present-day British Columbia and the Columbia River Gorge that are of considerable age and which have survived due to the nature of their material.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the art of the Indians of the Northwest Coast is the fact that during the century between the visit of Captain James Cook in the 1770s to Nootka Sound in British Columbia, and the late 19th century, there was a dazzling burst of creative and artistic energy along the coastlines of the region between Vancouver Island and the Bering Sea. This is somewhat contrary to the usual pattern. Traditionally a tribal culture does not survive, much less proliferate, prosper and produce upon contact with white European culture. Therefore, to have expressed in visual terms its pride, its beliefs and its heritage in an array of sculpturally magnificent and powerful forms ranging from little shamani charms to huge totem poles, all with the aid of trade goods and tools, is exceptional. The rich and powerful empires of the Aztec and the Inca were swept away in less than a lifetime; and much of the strange and fantastic tribal culture of this hemisphere and the South Pacific was obliterated with a dismaying and rapid thoroughness that boggles the mind. The distance between aesthetic excellence and ethnographic majesty and airport art is painfully short.

For a variety of reasons, the great artists and artisans of the proud tribes of the Tlingit, Tshimshion, Bella Bella, Bella Coola, Haida, Kwakiutl and the Nootka, were able to assimilate trade goods from the white visitors and incorporate them and the new metal tools to such advantage that they produced a progression of works of art that stands comparison with the art of any culture in the history of humanity on Earth. Eventually, white European diseases, religion, education and law took their inevitable toll. By the time the noted photographer, Edward S. Curtis came to record the art and life of the peoples of the Northwest Coast and Alaska, he had to stage the majority of photographs because so few of the old Indians and their old ways were still in evidence. English-speaking Christian Indians from the canneries and paved streets of Canadian fishing villages were dressed in the garments and masks of their grandfathers to perform for Curtis' camera the then-outlawed rites of the potlatch and the nearly forgotten winter dances that had once been the glory of their culture. So even the record left us by Curtis has much to do with our own stubborn early 20th century popularization of the old Indian way of life.

Closer to this region and our own time, there is a collection of works of art and artifacts that is of extraordinary richness and quality formed by Alex Rasmussen, a Norwegian-American who lived in Alaska in the 1920s and '30s. It is now housed in a fairly nonchalant manner in the Portland Art Museum in dirty and dusty cases which mute the piercing forms, the stylized shapes and the rich textures. Much of the collection is in storage and some of it has been dispersed. The politics and policies of the misshapen Portland Art Museum are best left in Pandora's box, and are not at issue here. The part of the Rasmussen Collection on display is fantastic. Though diminished by the butterfly-under-glass syndrome, and ignored and forgotten by too many of the people who live in this region, the collection contains a considerable number of perfectly beautiful artifacts that speak volumes in their incomprehensible tongues of the way things once were. Much of the collection is published in an excellent little book by the noted anthropologist, Dr. Edna Gunther. However, faced with a new and phenomenal flood-tide of public interest in the life and art of the native American Indian peoples, the museum has done little to enhance public awareness of what is ironically the only "world-class" portion of their permanent collection.

Unfortunately, no such treasure-trove of works of art exists for the art of the Indians of this Southern-most portion of the region. The majority of the pieces in Portland come from Vancouver Island north to Alaska. It must be remembered that the tribes of this area along with the Washington and Oregon coasts were far fewer in numbers and far less active, and they evolved in ways that were not conducive to the production of an elaborate and sophisticated visual art. Also, for the most part, the coastal tribes of this area were all but extinguished by disease and expropriation soon after arrival of the coastal pioneers. They were nonetheless distant cousins to their virtuoso neighbors to the north and shared a markedly similar mythological, social and racial heritage. There was some degree of trade in smaller goods along the coast and on the Columbia River well before the arrival of white settlers, so that remarkably similar trinkets of shell, bone and tradebeads are found up and down the coast in old village sites, regardless of their former tribal occupation.

The recorded early contacts between the Lewis and Clark party with the local Indians and the occasional subsequent interminglings between the two cultures in the early days seem far away now. The few artifacts that come from this region are scattered about in local museums and private collections; and they offer only the slimmest clues of what was here before. But it needn't be so far away. They left names and foot trails scattered across our maps. The elk and deer still walk the dunes and what is left of the forest at night. A hawk and an eagle can still be seen with patience, and when one sees a cloven footprint on the sand at dawn, it makes sandcastles and internal combustion engine traffic on the beach seem nothing more than chaff in the wind.

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