

Mercier shows traditional Chinookan woodcarving in video

By Nicole Montesano

Smoke Signals staff member

First Nations Experience, a national television network devoted to Indigenous content, featured Tribal member Bobby Mercier in a recent episode that looked at several Indigenous artists and craftspeople in Oregon, titled “This is Indian Country 111: Oregon.”

Mercier, a cultural advisor in the Tribe’s Cultural Resources Department, was discussing his Chinookan wood carving. It’s an art form he and the handful of other practicing artists have had to teach themselves because so few examples of Chinookan art have survived.

Chinookan art was relatively rare to begin with.

“It only lives in one place, from the mouth of the Columbia down to about Tillamook and then up to The Dalles, and then to the Willamette Falls,” Mercier said. “That’s the only place that it lives, that it comes from. You know, when people see Pacific Northwest art, they think of Salish art, which is huge; up the West Coast, all through Washington to Alaska, where it changes some but it’s still the same art form.”

Salish art is best known for the iconic totem poles that dot the Pacific Northwest, but Chinookan artists did not make totem poles, Mercier said, and the styles they employed looked very different.

“It’s total night and day; two different art forms,” Mercier said. “You’ll see a lot of triangles, zigzag patterns, more of like the anatomy, with like eye sockets and ribs carved into something, than you would with Salish art, where they just carve the body, they don’t carve the inside of the body.”

Figurines are lone figures, often human, rather than the stacked



Smoke Signals screenshot

First Nations Experience host Ruth-Ann Thorn, left, watches as Tribal member Bobby Mercier demonstrates his carving technique in the First Nations Experience video “This is Indian Country 111: Oregon.”

configuration of totem poles, and have distinctive features – outstanding ribs and characteristic eyes.

Mercier said he learned to carve as an adult.

“We started having some carving classes through our culture department, I don’t even remember when, 2002 maybe, we started,” he said. “I started studying the Chinookan art form and so after that, just started slowly carving stuff. I’ve been doing that and got into doing clothing and little bit of everything from carving to clothing to graphic design, print making, canvas art and metal sculpture.”

Mercier said he and other Chinookan artists had to study the few remaining pieces to learn the style.

“It’s an art form that our family comes from,” he said. “We all have Chinookan blood lines. I have (that) on my mother and my father’s side, so it’s just something that we kind of rediscovered, I guess, and I don’t know that it came easy to us, but

it definitely drew us into it, just having that connection to it, and that connection to the place our bloodline comes from.”

It is difficult even finding pieces to study.

“Most of the stuff, when we were taken from our villages and brought here to the reservation, most of our villages were destroyed; they were burnt,” Mercier said. “So, most of that wood carving stuff is gone. A lot of times when we were being rounded up before being brought to the reservation, it was grab whatever you can pack and carry with you. A lot of times it wasn’t a lot of things. A lot of things were left behind.”

In some villages, he said, Tribes buried the items they had to leave behind, but there wasn’t always the time even for that.

“There’s some at the Portland Art Museum and the Oregon Museum, but it’s just a few pieces that were dug up at a site,” Mercier said. “Other places you see like bone carving pendants, carved horn spoons, maple burl bowls, that’s about it. I guess there’s a handful of stone carvings, not very many, but a good handful of those, where just looking at those and the bone carvings and stuff like that, we learned those unwritten rules of how things should be, how they should be carved. ... the way the eyes are carved, the noses are carved, the heads are carved, and the different styles of mouths, different styles of ribs, the sternums, arms and legs, putting belts on figurines. Just looking at those different things, like the way the cuts go, you can see this is how you’re supposed to do it,

and then adapting to the material you’re carving.”

In 2019, the Tribe reached an agreement with the Natural History Museum in London for a year-long loan of Grand Ronde artifacts. The items were housed at Chachalu Tribal Museum & Cultural Center, where the artifacts were studied to relearn lost skills.

One of the items, Mercier said, was “a bone carved adze blade” that had belonged to his great-great-grandfather “that was sold or bartered for or taken” and wound up in the Natural History Museum.

“Just looking at those kinds of carvings helps us to understand how things were carved,” he said. “We look at them and you can kind of tell, these were made with antler and stone chisels, and then you can tell when metal came into carving, because it gets a little bit more detailed. There’s a little piece of history there.”

Today, Mercier said, “There’s probably maybe 10 of us or maybe a couple more that I don’t know of that actually carve and do this style of work. You can look at them and tell what is whose. Just because of their styles.”


Each artist, he said, adds some personal style to the carvings “just kind of taking those rules and putting our own thoughts into carving, but still keeping those rules.”

Mercier said he and other artists are also teaching the style, hoping to pass it on so that future generations can keep it alive after it was lost for so many years to the practical necessities of adapting to life after colonization.

“I think things were only being carved out of necessity; things like they might need, like spoons or bowls or plates,” Mercier said. “It wasn’t really people sitting around decorating anymore. It was like, ‘Hey, we gotta work to live. We’ve been told we have to live this way,’ in a different kind of house, learning new skills such as farming.”

“Carving became, ‘We’re going to build a house; put up walls and build tables and beds and chairs and things,’” he said. “People were learning to blacksmith. Their art form and the use of their hands and stuff became something else.”

Watch the FNX interview with Mercier and other cultural figures from Oregon’s Indian Country at <https://fnx.lightcast.com/player/57453/731384>. ■



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