

# The Bear-Mother Theme: Exploring the Narrative in Haida Argillite

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Native American art forms produced for sale to outsiders are frequently burdened with the label "tourist art" and relegated to a secondary role behind traditional, or unacculturated arts. Such has often been the fate of objects in argillite, a soft, slate-like material carved by the Haida people of the Queen Charlotte Islands. However, a closer examination reveals an art form that continued to mirror the native culture while responding to the demands of a Western market. Paralleling the ethnohistorical record, the iconography of these carvings can be used as a barometer to gauge the rapid socio-political changes that occurred in Haida society from the early nineteenth to the twentieth century.

The Grizzlies and the Berry Picker and related Bear-Mother theme carvings are among the most important for illustrating these events. According to a popular Northwest Coast legend, while picking berries a young Haida noblewoman was kidnapped by a bear who had transformed himself into a handsome prince. The Bear-Mother carvings pick up the story at a later point, after the young woman had given birth to half-bear, half-human cubs. If, indeed, these carvings are truly reflective of a society in transition, one would expect societal changes manifested in the art. The Bear-Mother theme may then be interpreted on a number of levels, each explanation having validity although often difficult to prove.

To explore variations of this theme, research was conducted utilizing the collections of the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville. In the early 1960s, the museum acquired the ethnographic collection of Col. Leigh Morgan Pearsall, a northern industrialist who had retired to the nearby community of Melrose. Included in the thousands of Native American artifacts were over 500 argillite carvings. The Pearsall argillite collection, one of the world's largest, has certain limitations. Some four hundred miniature totem poles make up the majority of the collection, and since Pearsall was guided by aesthetics rather than scholarly inquiry, the collection reflects his interests. Moreover, Col. Pearsall stopped collecting argillite in 1925, with the result that later works are entirely lacking.<sup>1</sup> However, the largely unpublished collection contains superb and quite rare examples of this carved black stone.

Argillite is a composition of metamorphosed kaolin clays combined with a highly organic matrix: the organic material accounts for the deep black color.<sup>2</sup> Its geological cousin, catlinite or pipestone, is differentiated by a high concentration of iron, resulting in a reddish hue. Both register 2.5 on the Mohs scale of hardness.<sup>3</sup> The deposit owned by the Haida on Slatechuck Mountain (Figure 1) is one of several sources of argillite on the Northwest coast,<sup>4</sup> although the Slatechuck deposit is unique. From this rugged mountain valley, the Haida quarry argillite of an exceptionally fine grain that takes readily to carving.<sup>5</sup>

As an art form, argillite presents an interesting fusion of traditional Northwest Coast iconography and Western motifs of native interpretation. This blend, combined with the fact that the earliest carvings date to the period of initial European exploration and trade, has resulted in the "tourist art" label. Looking past this bias, what emerges is an art of evolution, and more importantly, an art of adaptation.

The carvings may be grouped into four stylistic phases that coincide with the rapid cultural changes along the Northwest Coast.<sup>6</sup> Phase One, from 1800 to 1835, is called "Haida Non-Sense."<sup>7</sup> It was during this phase that the Northwest Coast was undergoing rapid exploitation from the fur trade. The majority of carvings from this first period are pipes. Iconographically, the early part of Phase One was consistent with traditional Haida imagery. Animal motifs that would have appeared as crest figures on totem poles and supernatural players from Haida cosmology were incorporated, the latter often defying interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Although humans and animals were used as motifs, the carver grouped these elements in a configuration that was meaningless within the Haida cultural context. Therefore, the artist avoided the conflict of using traditionally sacred crest imagery, the use of which was governed by a complex set of rules, on an item intended for sale to a foreigner.

Phase Two, "White Man's Non-Sense" from 1830 to 1865, is marked by the appearance of Euro-American motifs.<sup>9</sup> By this time, Western influence was a dominant force and the material trappings of white society had been acquired by the Haida. Pipe forms continue, but with sailors in Western dress, architectural details, ship's rigging and decorative floral motifs substituting for traditional animal imagery. Obvious Euro-American influence is clearly demonstrated in two pipes from the Florida Museum of Natural History (Figure 2). On both pipes, the bowls take their inspiration from ships' figureheads. The figure on the right, now headless, is pushing a scuttle decorated with a geometric floral pattern. When represented in argillite, Euro-Americans are sometimes engaged in mercantile or shipboard activities and frequently associated with representations of exotic animals that accompanied the sailors and traders to the Queen Charlotte Islands. During these decades, artists were experimenting with vessel forms and surface decoration. In the 1840s forms based on Euro-American prototypes proliferated: platters, cups and saucers, flutes, a non-native musical instrument, and a host of Western-style personal accessories were produced. Often these were elaborated with decorative inlays of bone, glass, metal and ivory and abalone shell.

Phase Three, "Haida Sense" from 1895 to 1910, was a time of rapid, often devastating, change.<sup>10</sup> A smallpox epidemic of the 1860s reduced the Haida population from an estimated 8,000 to about 300.<sup>11</sup> Thus, with society in a state of decline, missionaries were able to gain a foothold and Christianity was eventually embraced by the Haida. With



the new religion came restrictions; thus missionaries successfully prohibited traditional artistic expression such as the carving of crest imagery on wooden poles, and ritual events like potlatching: elaborate feasts where prestige was attained in equal measure to the amount of goods a host gave away.

Instead of the intended suppression of traditional iconography, however, the effect was one of transference. It is interesting to note that while missionaries viewed traditional art as a corrupting influence, argillite carving was thought to be a "harmless curio trade and productive cottage industry."<sup>12</sup> With the collapse of the Haida social order, the rigid rules governing the use of sacred crest designs that had been in effect in Phase Two were no longer followed: iconography now appearing on argillite once decorated ceremonial feast dishes, bowls, boxes, caskets and poles.<sup>13</sup> Humans, animals, and mythological creatures from Haida cosmology and mythology became fully integrated into the art form.

Figures of shaman in full ceremonial regalia, representations that formerly would have been highly sacred and prohibited on trade items, were carved by artists intent on recording aspects of their vanishing culture (Figure 3). Traditionally these magico-religious specialists were men. Females, especially those of post-menopausal age, did on occasion, assume the role of practitioner.<sup>14</sup> It is possible to identify gender in Figure 3 due to the presence of a labret (Figure 4). Labrets, or lip plugs, were inserted into the pierced lower lips of high status girls upon their reaching puberty. Thus, this accessory was both an indicator of status and female fertility.<sup>15</sup>

Phase Three sculptures are strong, massive, fully three-dimensional works that exhibit a strong narrative focus. This was also the first time that individual Haida carvers were acknowledged by name and reputation.<sup>16</sup> The shift from earlier styles was remarkable. Humorous, often satirical motifs of a foreign culture were replaced with traditional elements by artists concerned with recording their own vanishing traditions.<sup>17</sup>

Phase Four "Haida Sense II" beginning around 1910, and including contemporary artists, witnessed the decline and subsequent revitalization of the art form.<sup>18</sup> Innovators such as Charles Edenshaw and Tom Price died in the early part of the period. Other artists carved only as a side line. Two factors encouraged a renaissance: Marius Barbeau's *Haida Carvers in Argillite* (1957) profiled individual artists in a scholarly manner, encouraging interest by art historians and collectors, and more importantly, serving as a guide for young carvers seeking to emulate the masters of the art form; politically, the pan-Indian movement of the 1960s created a renewed interest by Indians in their cultural heritage, with traditional art forms flourishing as a result of new awareness.

Among the body of works from Phase Three, the Bear-Mother genre was produced in great numbers and is well represented in museum collections. The myth of the "Grizzlies and the Berry Picker" enjoyed tremendous popularity on the Northwest Coast and was, according to Barbeau (1953), imported by the Haida from the neighboring Tsimshian.<sup>19</sup> The story tells of a young woman of high rank who offended, and was kidnapped by a Grizzly.

Rhpsunt, a maiden belonging to the Wolf clan of the up-river country, long ago was gathering huckleberries on the mountain with two other

young women of her tribe. Instead of singing like the others to warn the bears of her presence there, as she should have done, she kept chatting and laughing while gathering the wild fruit. The Bears finally pricked up their ears and listened. "Why does she always babble as if she were mocking someone?" they asked each other. Perhaps she was mocking them. That's why they spied on her in the bush and followed her down the trail when she packed a large basket of fruit for the camp.

One evening all three young women, one after the other, followed the trail, stopping under their loads, which were held on their backs by packstraps from their foreheads. Rhpsunt, the babbler, was the last of the three, a short distance behind the others. Suddenly she slipped, nearly fell down, and looked at her feet. Then bursting with angry laughter, she sneered, "Boo to Naake—bear orphan! Here he has dropped his excrement!" She might just have well have said, "You bastard!" Her packstrap broke, and while she tried to mend it, her sisters went on their way, leaving her far behind. Ill-tempered, she didn't sing as she should have, but only scolded and groaned.

As it grew dark, she heard men's voices in the bush behind her. Then two young men, looking like brothers, came toward her and said, "Sister you are in trouble, with nobody to look after you. Come with us, we'll carry your berries for you."

Following them she noticed that they were wearing bear robes, and they were taking her up the mountain. After dark they came to a large house near a rockslide and entered with her. Around a small fire a number of people sat, looking at her, all of them dressed in bear robes. The white mouse Tseets—Grandmother came to her and pulled at her robe, which was now coated with long grey hair like a bear's. And the mouse squeaked, "Granddaughter, the Bears have taken you to their den; from now on you shall be one of them, bearing children."

As she heard this, she grew frightened, the more so when one of the young Grizzlies approached her and said, "You shall live, if you agree to become my wife; if you refuse, you die."<sup>20</sup>

The episodic nature of the legend is portrayed in a miniature pole (Figure 5). Miniature argillite poles were direct references to their larger, more familiar, wooden counterparts and were a popular vehicle for carvers. Here, the artist took advantage of the narrative aspect of the legend by combining it with an instantly recognizable form, the totem pole. Bear-Husband in his human guise commands the supreme position from the top of the carving. Beneath him sits Raven with a captured frog. Under Raven's protective wings a second bear, perhaps representing the transformation from human to animal, clutches a cub. Finally, Bear-Mother rests on the bottom. Possessing the attributes of both human and bear, she holds her offspring tightly to her chest.

Crowded into a triangular composition in Figure 6, six figures act out the legend. A recumbent bear helps to define



the ground line, which is further emphasized by the plateau upon which the figures rest. Sitting upon his chest and facing him, the Berry Picker clutches her basket. This posture, legs held apart by the bear, eyes closed and head thrown back is somewhat suggestive of a birthing position.<sup>21</sup> The Berry Picker's back is resting on a second bear, straddled over the first, but facing in the opposite direction. The ears of this bear form the apex of the triangle. Beneath the second bear a raven or perhaps a thunderbird (tiny ears are present) extends human arms. One arm shields a cub's eyes, the other holds the second cub in a protective embrace. Indeed, in this version, the Berry Picker may in fact belong to the Raven clan and this protection of the cubs would be an extension of familial responsibility.

A concern with traditional graphic elements as decorative motifs is noted during Phase Three.<sup>22</sup> Formlines are the most apparent. In Northwest Coast art, especially two-dimensional works, formlines designate "design units."<sup>23</sup> For example, primary formlines, always in black, would outline the body of an animal. Secondary and tertiary formlines, executed in red and blue-green, work in concert with primary formlines to produce a composite representation. Along with formlines, stylistic elements, such as ovoids surrounding the eyes, and split U-forms defining the ears, are incorporated into the sculpture. In Figure 6 the bear's coat has been treated schematically. Wide grooves suggest the coarse fur of an adult. Lighter scratches on the bodies of the cubs indicate a softer texture by comparison.

Somewhat problematic is an argillite panel pipe fitted with a bone mouthpiece (Figure 7). As has been noted, the production of pipes dominated Phase One and continued, although to a lesser extent, into Phase Three. Barbeau (1953) claims the figures relate to the kidnapping of the Berry Picker, and offers the following interpretation.

In a pipe group: a man struggling with a woman who, her back to him, is being tied with a rope. A sea mammal captured by a man who holds it by the tail. The Bear curled up on his back. The Raven also on his back, his beak half open. All these form a panel-like pipe stem of argillite, with the tip of the stem of whale bone. Most of the figures here, except for the sea mammal, represent the abduction of the berry picker. The Bear passing the rope around her here has assumed a human appearance. The Raven stands for the usual crest, Raven-Frog.<sup>24</sup>

As one would expect of a popular legend, numerous versions exist.<sup>25</sup> Bear-Mother's escape from Bear-Husband is a frequent theme. In Figure 8 Bear-Mother's rescue comes in the form of a magical canoe which transports her back to her natal village. The focus of this sculptural group is the central figure of Bear-Mother, the canoe resting upon her head. The grizzlies, in unmistakable animal form, press in on their victim attempting to block her escape.

This recurring theme of dominance is again demonstrated in a sculptural group of compositional simplicity and emotional power in Figure 9. Using a bilaterally symmetric arrangement, the artist has enclosed the Haida woman by her Grizzly captors. Her tiny hands extend over the bear's feet in a feeble attempt at escape. The quality of

representation of the kidnapped woman is quite remarkable. Northwest Coast art has a strong tradition of ceremonial masquerade, with some representations approaching portraiture. Certainly, the anguished face of Bear-Mother exhibits continuity with this tradition of realistic portraiture.

It has been suggested that the Grizzly and Berry Picker genre is a commentary on the unraveling fabric of Haida society during the late nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> A number of Haida women left their villages in the 1890s to marry whites, or to travel to Victoria, British Columbia, where many of them were engaged in prostitution. Set against this backdrop, the symbolism is clear. The Grizzlies could be interpreted as representative of white society, as foreign to the Haida as the Grizzlies were to the Berry Picker.

Western culture seduced the Haida, just as the young woman was fooled into believing the bear was a handsome prince. The half-bear, half-human cubs, products of both societies, but belonging in neither, are, or course, thinly-veiled references to the children of mixed parentage who returned to the Queen Charlottes with their Haida mothers.

While this interpretation with its undercurrent of commentary on the changing status of Haida women is tantalizing, it is nonetheless difficult to prove. What can be said with certainty, however, is that the Bear-Mother genre represents a radical departure from the canons of Northwest Coast art.<sup>27</sup> Futhermore, Gunther (1956) notes that it is the strong narrative quality, combined with the exploitation of the explicit dramatic aspects of the legend that separate the Bear-Mother theme from other sculptural genres.

The question, of course, is why this legend resulted in such a wealth of sculptural representations. The Bear-Mother theme is not unique to argillite. Indeed, Barbeau (1953) in his chapter devoted to this genre illustrates several wooden totem poles (Haida, Tsimshian and Kwakiutl) identified by this subject matter. George F. McDonald, writing in *Haida Monumental Art*, includes the Bear-Mother theme and its variants as among the most popular thematic subjects for wooden totem poles.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the popularity may be explained by the very nature of myths and legends and their cross-cultural appeal. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Northwest Coast art was the subject of intensive collecting activities on the part of major museums as well as private individuals. Anthropologists conducting investigations into the oral tradition selectively placed importance on myths and legends.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, with this increased attention given to the Haida oral tradition by outsiders, the artist's response was a natural one.

The wealth of representations of the Bear-Mother myth, then, could be due to an economic, rather than a deeply symbolic rationale. Since collectors and traders were interested in aspects of Haida folklore, why not give the customer what he wanted?—in this case—a simple story, with identifiable characters. Luckily, combined with commercial savvy was a dedication to traditional skill and craftsmanship. It is a testament to the Haida that argillite carving, an art form of contact and acculturation, continues to be interpreted and re-evaluated for its contributions to Native American Art.



- 1 Leslie Drew and Douglas Wilson, *Argillite: Art of the Haida*. (North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, Hancock House Publishers Ltd., 1980) 275. Pearsall's buyer was Thomas Deasy, the Canadian government's Indian agent on the Queen Charlottes. After 1925, Pearsall turned his attention away from Northwest Coast material.
- 2 Drew and Wilson 43.
- 3 This scale is used to represent the hardness of minerals. Talc is rated 1, diamond 10.
- 4 Drew and Wilson 43.
- 5 Carol Sheehan, *Pipes that Won't Smoke: Coal that Won't Burn* (Calgary, Alberta, Glenbow Museum, 1981) 59.
- 6 A sequence composed of distinct periods was first identified by William Duff and later elaborated upon by Carole Kaufman in an unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation: 'Changes in Haida Argillite Carving, 1820 to 1910' (Los Angeles, University of California, 1969). Sheehan's summary 67-122, will be followed.
- 7 Sheehan 67-80.
- 8 Sheehan 79-80.
- 9 Sheehan 80-94.
- 10 Sheehan 95-99.
- 11 John R. Swanton comments in "Social Organization of the Haida," From: *Indians of the North Pacific Coast*, ed. Tom McFeat (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1966) 49, that this dramatic population decline was due to disease and "immorality."
- 12 Robin K. Wright "The Depiction of Women in Nineteenth Century Haida Argillite Carving," *American Indian Art* Autumn 1986, 43.
- 13 Sheehan 102.
- 14 Margaret B. Blackman, *During My Time* (Seattle and Washington, University of Washington Press, 1982) 29.
- 15 Blackman 27.
- 16 Sheehan 116.
- 17 Sheehan 97-99.
- 18 Sheehan 118-122.
- 19 Marius Barbeau, *Haida Myths Illustrated in Argillite Carvings*, National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 127, Anthropological Series No. 32, (1953) 91.
- 20 Barbeau 88-91.
- 21 Barbeau 94. Barbeau suggests this posture indicates sexual foreplay.
- 22 Sheehan 102.
- 23 Bill Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965) 29. -
- 24 Barbeau 148. Barbeau lists this panel pipe as part of the Thomas Deasy Collection. The pipe is now part of the Pearsall Collection at the Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, Florida.
- 25 A interesting twist to the Bear-Mother tale was recorded by W. J. Hoffman, "Remarks on Aboriginal Art in California and Queen Charlotte Islands." *Davenport Academy of Sciences, Proceedings*, No. 4 (1886) 118-119. In the version collected by Hoffman, an Indian male named Toivats visits the lodge of the King of the Bears. Finding him absent, Toivats makes love to the Bear-King's wife. Eventually, the Bear-King discovered his wife's infidelity and ripped out Toivats' heart.
- 26 Sheehan 110.
- 27 Erna Gunther, "The Social Disorganization of the Haida as Reflected in Their Slate Carving," *Davidson Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 2 (1956) 150.
- 28 George F. McDonald, *Haida Monumental Art* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983) 9.
- 29 Robin K. Wright, Burke Museum, Seattle Washington, Personal Communication, 1988.

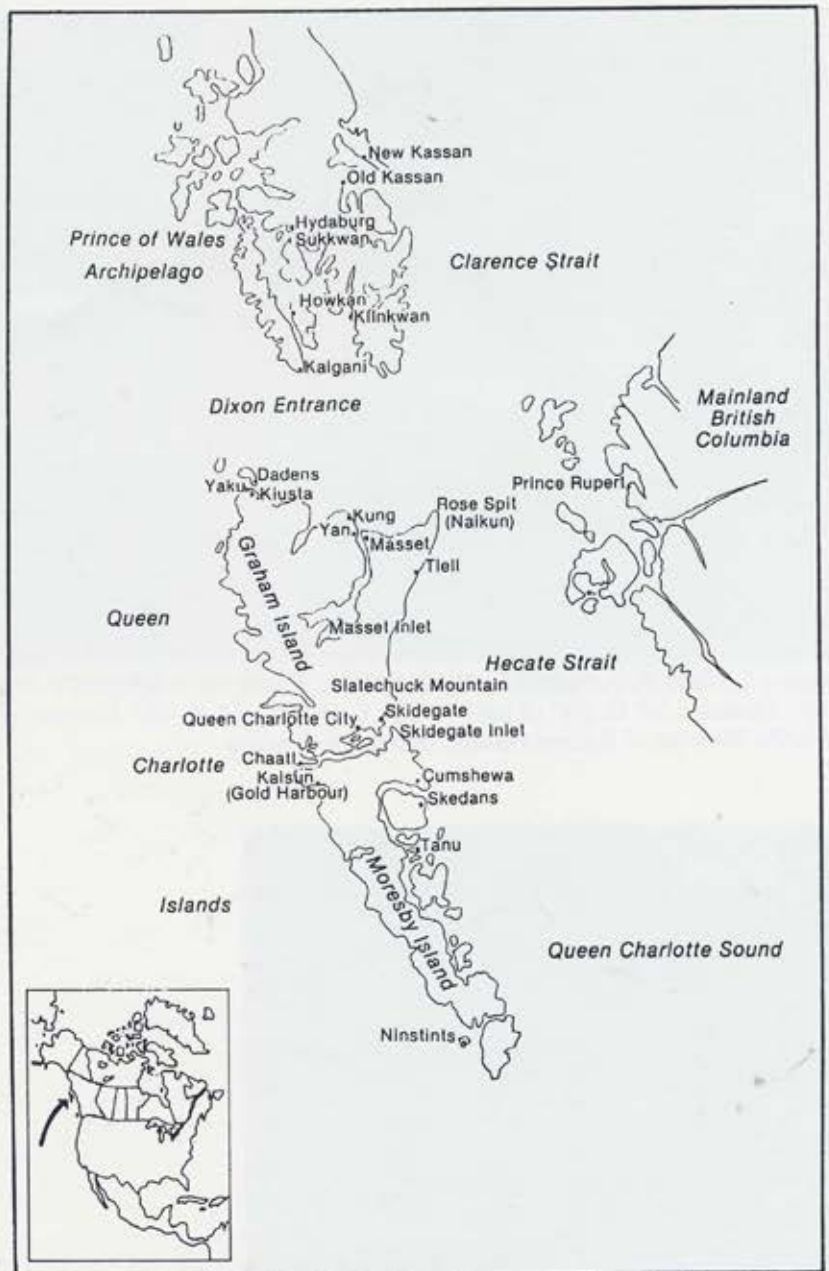


Figure 1. Map of the Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia, Canada. Courtesy of Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta.

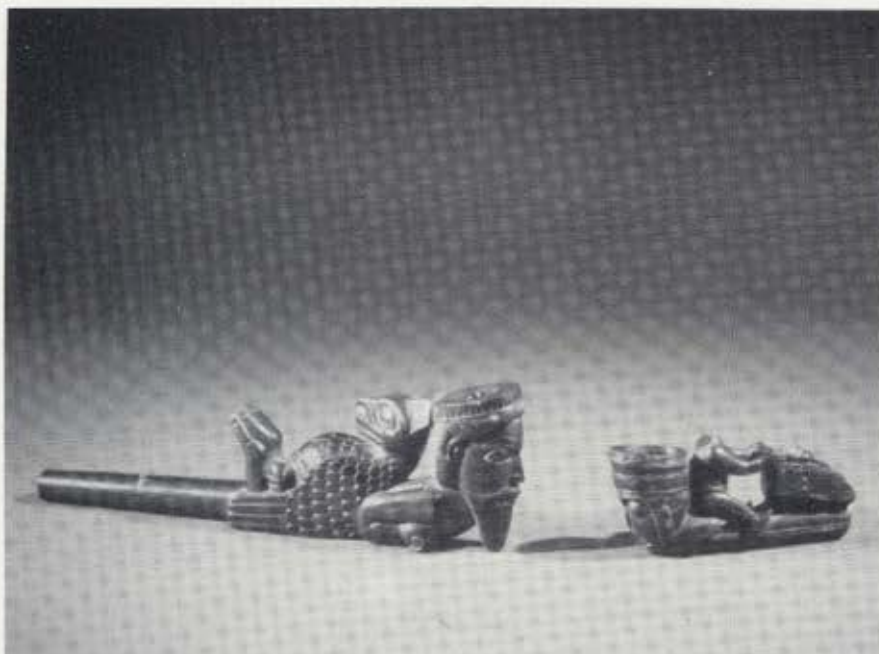


Figure 2. *Phase Two Argillite Pipes*, anonymous, Haida, ca. 1850. (Left) P-1178, L. 10", Thickness  $\frac{1}{4}$ ", H.  $2\frac{1}{2}$ ". (Right) P-1180, L.  $3\frac{1}{2}$ ", W.  $\frac{7}{8}$ ", H.  $1\frac{1}{4}$ ". Courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, Florida.



Figure 3. *Female Shaman with Bone Rattles and Bear Frontlet Headdress*, anonymous, Haida, ca. 1870. P-753. H.  $12\frac{1}{8}$ ", Base  $2\frac{1}{2}$ " x  $2\frac{1}{2}$ ". Courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, Florida.



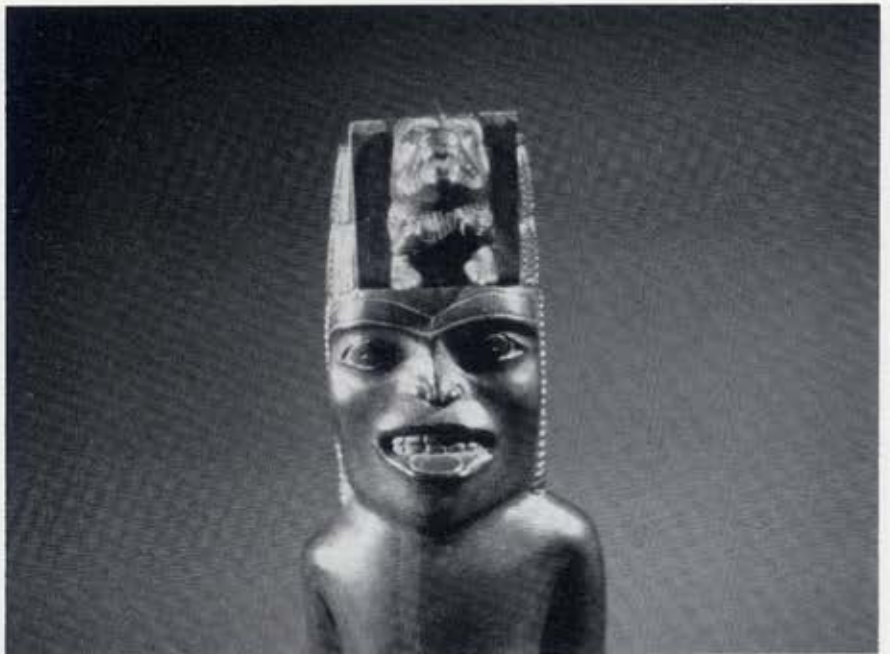


Figure 4. Detail of *Female Shaman* (Figure 3) showing labret, or lip plug.



Figure 5. *Miniature Bear-Mother Totem Pole*, anonymous, Haida, late 19th century. P-1018. H. 21½", Base 4⅞" x 4⅞" x ⅝". Courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, Florida.



Figure 6. *Grizzlies and the Berry Picker Group*, anonymous, Haida, ca. 1880. P-1172. L. 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ " W. 2 $\frac{1}{8}$ " H. 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, Florida.



Figure 7. *Panel Pipe with Bear-Mother Figures and Bone Mouthpiece*, anonymous, Haida, late 19th century. P-1173. L. 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ " W. 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ " H. 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ ". Courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, Florida.





Figure 8. *Bear-Mother Group with Grizzlies and Magical Canoe*, anonymous, Haida, late 19th century. P-1160. L.  $9\frac{3}{16}$ " W.  $1\frac{3}{8}$ " H.  $5\frac{11}{16}$ ". Courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, Florida.



Figure 9. *Bear-Mother Group*, anonymous, Haida, late 19th century. P-1168. L.  $9\frac{3}{16}$ " W.  $3\frac{3}{16}$ " H.  $6\frac{3}{16}$ ". Courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, Florida.