The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian will present the art and culture of the people of the Northwest Coast in a new exhibition, “Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life along the North Pacific Coast,” opening on Feb. 3. The exhibition includes more than 400 ceremonial and everyday objects from Washington state, British Columbia and Alaska, from the 19th and 20th centuries, including vivid ceremonial masks carved from wood, beautiful feast ladles shaped from mountain sheep horn, delicate hats of twined spruce root fiber, intricate robes woven from mountain goat wool and many other historical objects. Throughout the year, the museum will host several exhibition-related public programs to further illustrate the rich artistic traditions of North Pacific Coast peoples. The exhibition is the second to be featured in the Changing Exhibitions Gallery since the museum opened in September 2004. It will close on Jan. 2, 2007.

A team of cultural representatives from 11 Native communities—Coast Salish, Makah, Nuu-chah-nulth, Kwakwaka’wakw, Heiltsuk, Nuxalk, Tsimshian, Gitxsan, Nisga’a, Haida and Tlingit—served as the curatorial team for “Listening to Our Ancestors.”

“‘Listening to Our Ancestors’ reflects the museum’s commitment to working with Native communities and presenting first-person Native voice in exhibitions and public programming,” said museum founding director W. Richard West Jr. (Southern Cheyenne). “By inviting the tribes to help develop the exhibition, an important partnership and dialogue has emerged through which the museum, the communities and visitors can learn about the cultures from the North Pacific Coast.”
Native Communities

In preparation for this exhibition, the National Museum of the American Indian worked with leading Northwest Coast scholars Jay Stewart and Peter Macnair to review the museum’s extensive Northwest Coast collection, determine the communities to be featured and assist with identifying Native museum professionals and cultural authorities in the region who could serve as community curators. Curators from each of these North Pacific Coast communities determined the content and selected the objects from the museum’s collection to be included in the exhibition. They provided important information on the unique cultural context of each object. Through the partnership with the community curators, the National Museum of the American Indian gained a richer understanding of its collection directly from the communities in which the objects originated.

The following communities, and respective locations, are represented in the exhibition. The communities are listed from south to north, or from Washington state to British Columbia and Alaska, which is consistent with the order in which they appear in the gallery.

Washington state

- Coast Salish, Suquamish, Wash.
- Makah, Neah Bay, Wash.

British Columbia, Canada

- Nuu-chah-nulth [Nootkan], Port Alberni, Vancouver Island, B.C., Canada
- Kwakwaka’wakw [Kwakiutl], Alert Bay, Cormorant Island, B.C., Canada
- Heiltsuk [Bella Bella], Bella Bella (Waglisa), Campbell Island, B.C., Canada
- Nuxalk [Bella Coola], Bella Coola, B.C., Canada
- Tsimshian, Prince Rupert, B.C., Canada
- Gitxsan, Hazelton, B.C., Canada
- Nisga’a, New Aiyansh, B.C., Canada
- Haida in three locations: Skidegate, Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands), B.C.; Old Massett, Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands), B.C.; and the Kaigani Haida in Hydaburg, Alaska

Alaska

- Tlingit, Juneau, Alaska
Family Activity Room

“Listening to Our Ancestors” includes a Family Activity Room that provides children, ages 5 through 11, and families with a comfortable contemporary space to further explore themes presented in the exhibition. The Family Activity Room includes a reading area and other materials that focus on the importance of canoes, sea mammals and fish, weaving techniques and graphic design elements of the North Pacific Coast.

Bringing the Exhibition to the Communities

Following the “Listening to Our Ancestors” exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall, each of the community sections is slated to be exhibited in the communities represented; the dates are to be determined.

Catalog

Personal narratives from several of the community curators are included in the exhibition’s catalog, “Listening to Our Ancestors,” which was published in 2005 by the National Museum of the American Indian, in association with National Geographic. The catalog is available through the Bookshop section of the museum’s Web site at www.americanindian.si.edu.

Note to editors: Several of the Native communities listed denote the conventionally used name of the community in brackets; however, the first reference is the name preferred and used by the respective communities.

Background

Established in 1989, through an Act of Congress, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian is an institution of living cultures dedicated to advancing knowledge and understanding of the life, languages, literature, history and arts of the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere. The museum includes the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall; the George Gustav Heye Center, a permanent museum in lower Manhattan; and the Cultural Resources Center, a research and collections facility in Suitland, Md.

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