

Northwest Coast Hall



Inside

- About the Hall
- Map of the Hall
- Key Ideas
- Teaching in the Hall
- Come Prepared Checklist
- Correlation to Standards
- Updated Terminology

Online

- Worksheets
- More Resources

About the Hall

Welcome to the Northwest Coast Hall. Reopened in 2022, it is the result of an intensive five-year collaboration between the Museum and ten advisors from the Indigenous cultural groups featured in the hall. This revitalized hall celebrates Indigenous worldview, artistry, cultural persistence, and the distinct practices and histories of the individual Nations along the Northwest Coast.

The **central area** of the hall is devoted to the ten featured Indigenous cultures: Coast Salish, Nuxalk, Tsimshian, Gitksan, Nisga'a, Haida, Tlingit, Haíłzaqv, Kwakwaka'wakw, and Nuuchahnulth. The layout retains the key principle around which the anthropologist Franz Boas organized it when it first opened in 1899—arranged so that each cultural group has its own display area, rather than grouping collection pieces according to general characteristics such as function, material, or age, regardless of origin. New labels and interactive media, developed in consultation with the Indigenous advisors, accompany the displays. **Monumental carvings** from various areas of the Northwest Coast—not necessarily from the cultural groups represented in the cases closest to them in the hall—line the central area and the walls; they range from 3 to 17 feet tall. Overhead hangs the **Great Canoe**. Carved from a single western red cedar tree in the 19th century, this 63-foot-long vessel shows design elements from both the Haida and Haíłzaqv Nations.

Featuring Indigenous-language and English titles, the **display cases** explore aspects of Indigenous history, technology, cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and art. They show cultural treasures, drawn from Indigenous cultures, that are now in the Museum's historic collections. Contemporary stories and photos make connections between modern cultural practice and the cultural treasures in each case, showing how the cultural beliefs and practices continue to be integral parts of these communities.

Exhibits in the **four corners** of the hall further emphasize living cultures with:

- **Introductory Video:** an 11-minute film, "Voices of the Native Northwest Coast," which examines the peoples' histories, persistence, and present concerns
- **Our Voices:** quotes from the hall's Indigenous curators, which discuss past, present, and future life along with issues such as racism and environmental conservation
- **Generation to Generation:** works by indigenous artists, which illustrate new interpretations of traditional forms to inspire future generations
- **Contemporary Gallery:** a changing selection of works

Title of display case in Indigenous language and in English

Cultural treasures along with labels indicating what they are, what they're made of, and who used them



Map showing the geographic area associated with the cultural group represented by the case

Contemporary stories connect cultural treasures on display with past and present life of the cultural group represented

Map of the Hall

The hall features ten of the Indigenous cultures that live along the Pacific Northwest Coast.

Suggested Path

While there are many rewarding ways to explore the hall, we suggest starting at the entrance from the Ellen V. Futter Gallery and following this path:

- 1 Introductory Video
- 2 Our Voices
- 3 Central Area of the Hall
- 4 Generation to Generation
- 5 Contemporary Gallery

KEY

Focus Cases

Highlight important themes, either specific to one cultural group or shared across the region

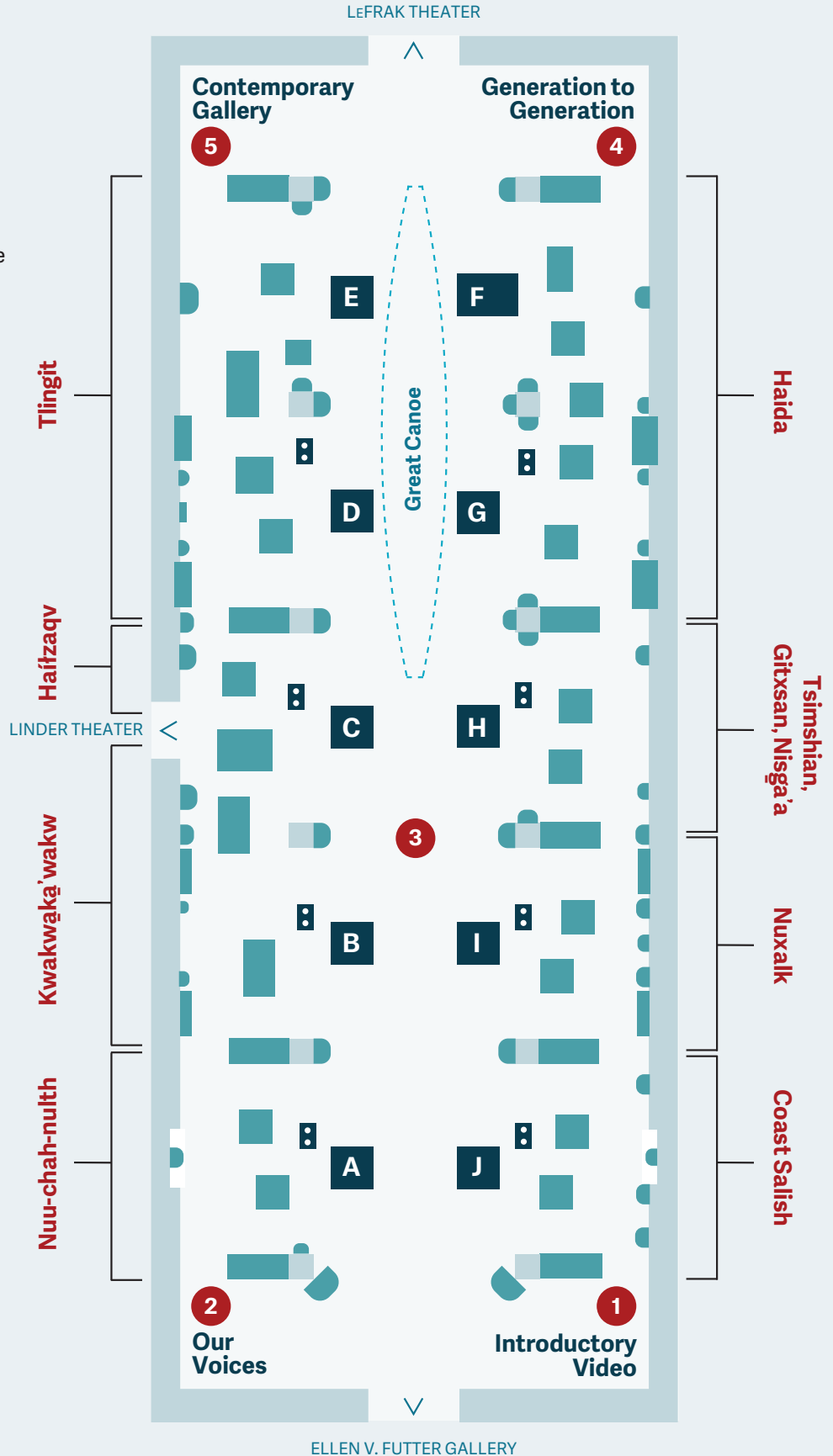
- A. Our Coastal People
- B. Potlatch
- C. Supernatural
- D. Defending the Land
- E. Leadership
- F. Chest of Chief Gidansda
- G. A Good Home
- H. Spirit Power
- I. Origins
- J. Art in the Everyday

Media Stations

Explore Indigenous traditions, music, languages, and histories

Monumental Carvings

Wood carvings, ranging from 3 to 17 feet tall



Key Idea 1

Indigenous people have lived in the Northwest Coast for millennia and continue to thrive in their homelands.

“We have been living here since time immemorial, and we are still here.”

—Daxootsu | Judith Ramos (Tlingit)

“We have always had physicists, astronomers, scientists. Our canoe-makers are engineers, our house-builders are architects. We are scholars with a rich intellectual life. Medicinal and spiritual practitioners and philosophers. We are not some Hollywood version of ‘the savage Indian.’ We have complex concepts of status, rank, wealth, laws, protocols, and privileges. Our people are strong and resilient, both women and men are powerful.”

—Jisgang | Nika Collison (Haida Nation)

“Everything we get in our lives—the air we breathe, the water we drink, the fish we eat, our children, everything we get—comes to us as gifts from the spirit world. We need to humble ourselves, appreciate the things we get in our lives, acknowledge where they come from, and be respectful of that.”

—Haa'yuuqs (Nuu-chah-nulth)

“Our culture is still living, and our children are quite involved. As one of the leaders in my community, that makes me feel good, because I can't change the past—no one can—but I know our culture will still continue after I'm gone.”

—Chief Wígvilba-Wákas | Harvey Humchitt (Hailzaqv)

North America's Northwest Coast has been the homeland of Indigenous people, the first people who lived there, for thousands of years. This coastline, with its rich ocean, mountains, rivers, and forests, provides abundant resources that have shaped their cultures. Spring, summer, and fall are the traditional seasons for the hard work of gathering traditional subsistence foods. Winter is a time for feasting, dancing, storytelling, conducting business, and making sure children understand the governing system and see legends acted out. People traditionally lived with their extended families in large cedar-plank houses. Today, such houses are gathering places for community activities and ceremonies. These cultures survived colonization, cultural suppression, and systemic racism. Indigenous cultures are alive and actively enduring today.

Indigenous cultures are sustained as people learn and speak their languages and adapt and expand traditional practices. Histories are taught through monumental carvings, ceremonies, songs, dances, and regalia such as masks, robes, and blankets. Everyday objects such as a basket or a harvesting tool can also tell a story, can carry a deep, spiritual connection to the land, and can be used to celebrate the history and beliefs of the people who make and use them.



The host family distributes gifts to guests at Kwakwaka'wakw Chief Henry Kódi Nelson's potlatch—a sacred assembly—in 'Yális (Alert Bay, British Columbia, 2014).

TEACHING IN THE HALL

Cultural Treasures: Keep in mind that all the cultural pieces you'll encounter have profound significance to the Indigenous people living along the Northwest Coast today. These treasures, which represent Indigenous philosophies and science, embody the spirits of the ancestors who made them. People continue to use treasures like these in daily and communal life to celebrate their worldview, beliefs, and connection to the land.



Dan Brown wraps a ceremonial robe around Louise Brady during a Tlingit *ku.éex'*, a time for public speaking, singing, dancing, feasting, and distributing gifts (Sitka, Alaska, 2019).

Continuity of Culture: Throughout the hall, look for connections between the cultural pieces, the spiritual beliefs and worldview they embody, and how people continue to use and recreate them today.

Oral Traditions: Be aware that Northwest Coast Indigenous histories are passed on orally, rather than through written texts. The cultural pieces support the transmission of history, beliefs, and traditions. For many



Angela Arbeau, a Nuuchahnulth youth, performs a Sea Serpent Dance at a memorial ceremony (2014).

thousands of years, Indigenous people have used treasures like these, along with songs and dances, to celebrate beliefs and to pass down knowledge from one generation to the next. This is one reason suppression, such as the Potlatch Ban by the Canadian government, was devastating to the continuity of these cultures.

"We are still living and practicing these customs that were once banned, and for which people went to prison."

— Chief Ga'lastawikw | Trevor Isaac (Kwakwaka'wakw)

Suggested Stops

Students can visit these areas to investigate the past and present of one or more cultural groups and the issues important to them today.

Coast Salish

1. **Media station**
2. **"Art in the Everyday" focus case:** showcases a variety of baskets

Nuxalk

3. **Media station**
4. **"Origins" focus case:** tells the origin story of the Nuxalk people

Tsimshian, Gitsxsan, Nisga'a

5. **Media station**
6. **"Spirit Power" focus case:** displays ceremonial clothing and discusses the role of Chiefs

Haida

7. **Media station**
8. **"A Good Home" focus case:** a model house with memorial poles tells stories of the Nation's history

Haíłzaqv

9. **Media station**
10. **"Supernatural" focus case:** tells family origin stories and showcases masks worn at potlatches

Near the entrance from the Ellen V. Futter Gallery

11. **Four monumental carvings along central corridor:** panels explore traditional practices, how they were disrupted by colonists, and the resilience of Indigenous people



Key Idea 2

While Northwest Coast Indigenous Nations are distinct, they have shared histories and ways of life.



Northwest Coast Nations gather every summer for Tribal Canoe Journeys, a celebration of cultural survival after centuries of suppression (Bella Bella, British Columbia, 2014).

“We are many Nations; we are one people”

—Xsim Ganaa’w | Laurel Smith Wilson (Gitksan)

“We are so very much the same, and yet so very different, from our relatives around us. Within the Coast Salish people, we have 16 different languages. Not dialects, languages. To the north of us are cultures with certain similarities and completely different languages. But what’s beautiful is seeing the ways we’re all similar. That’s what holds us together.”

—secəlenəxʷ | Morgan Guerin (Musqueam)

“Our role on this Earth is to be good stewards, to caretake the land that the Creator gifted us. So that way, the puł’alt—those yet to come—can inherit a good place to live and a good way of being. Our people always keep this in mind. Whenever we do something, we always think, ‘How is this going to affect those around us and those to come?’”

—Snxakila | Clyde Tallio (Nuxalk Nation)

The long, narrow coastline of the Pacific Northwest, which stretches along southeast Alaska, western British Columbia, and western Washington State, is home to people of many Indigenous Nations. Each is unique and distinct, with its own oral histories and organizational structure. The Nations’ languages are diverse. Common resources and technologies, including canoes, have allowed the individual Nations to develop a huge trade network. Indigenous people from different groups have traveled up and down the coast, sharing in community events, marrying, and trading resources and knowledge. Thus, while the culture of each Nation today is distinct, there are also interconnections and common threads. Examples:

- **Belief Systems:** The sea, the land, the sky, and everything alive are the foundation of the spirituality of the Indigenous people of the Northwest Coast. While each Nation has its own distinct origin stories, many feature Raven, a supernatural being from the beginning of time.
- **Stewards of the Land:** The worldview of these many Nations requires the land to be used sustainably. Ecological knowledge passed from generation to generation and from Nation to Nation helps people understand how much can be taken without damaging the ecosystem. The warming temperatures and extreme weather of climate change, massive overfishing by settler societies, and restrictions on Indigenous ecological management practices are damaging Indigenous homelands, causing deep concern.
- **Technology and Trade:** Some Nations are located farther inland, while others are right along the coast; some are located farther north or south. Each environment provides different resources, which require different strategies and tools to be used sustainably.
- **Artistic Tradition:** Northwest Coast cultures bring ideas to life through wood carving, painting, weaving, and other techniques. Regional styles draw on different design elements, such as the seven shapes characteristic of Formline, a distinctive compositional form among the people of the northern Northwest Coast.
- **Social Structure:** The Indigenous Nations of the northern Northwest Coast are generally matrilineal, passing status, property, and education through the maternal line, while the people of the middle and southern areas practice bilateral kinship systems that emphasize both maternal and paternal lines.

- **Potlatch:** The potlatch is a sacred assembly that serves many functions. It is an essential part of the social, economic, legal, and governance systems of the Indigenous Nations on the Northwest Coast. Feasting, the presentation of family treasures, the sharing of oral history through song and dance, and the giving of gifts are essential components of every potlatch. These feasts are given to celebrate and ratify events such as births, deaths, the giving of names, the passing on of chieftainships, and the raising of monumental poles. Potlatch guests receive gifts as thanks for their crucial role as witnesses. While the potlatch is a shared tradition among all Northwest Coast Nations, it has distinct names and practices in each Nation.
- **Colonialism:** Since the first contact with Europeans, Indigenous people have fought to maintain territorial rights as the first people on the Northwest Coast: the right to live on ancestral lands, to practice sacred ceremonies, to protect the land from pollution, to harvest fish and other natural resources, and to teach children the languages of their ancestors. Indigenous Nations endured attempts by both the United States and Canadian governments to erase Indigenous people and culture, such as the bombarding of villages, the forced relocation to reservations, and the forced enrollment of children in tightly regimented, often abusive boarding schools. Yet despite these atrocities, Indigenous cultures survive and actively endure today.



A protest against overfishing by corporations, which have depleted salmon and other fish stocks that have fed Northwest Coast communities for thousands of years (Alert Bay, British Columbia, 2017).

TEACHING IN THE HALL

Names and Places: As you explore a display case, note the name and homeland of the cultural group represented. At a media station, you can hear someone from that cultural group pronounce the name.

Distinct or Shared: As you read about each display case, see if you can determine whether its theme is unique to just one Nation or is shared by other Northwest Coast Nations.

Suggested Stops

Students can explore how these four themes are evident across different cultural groups:

1. Stewards of the Land

Knowledge and technology enable Indigenous people to use natural resources sustainably.

- “Our Coastal People” focus case (Nuu-chah-nulth)
- “Smart Tools” case (Haida)
- “Basketry” case (Tlingit)

2. Social Structure

Leadership and cultural knowledge are passed down from one generation to the next.

- “Strong Women” case (Haida)
- “Leadership” focus case (Tlingit)

3. Potlatch

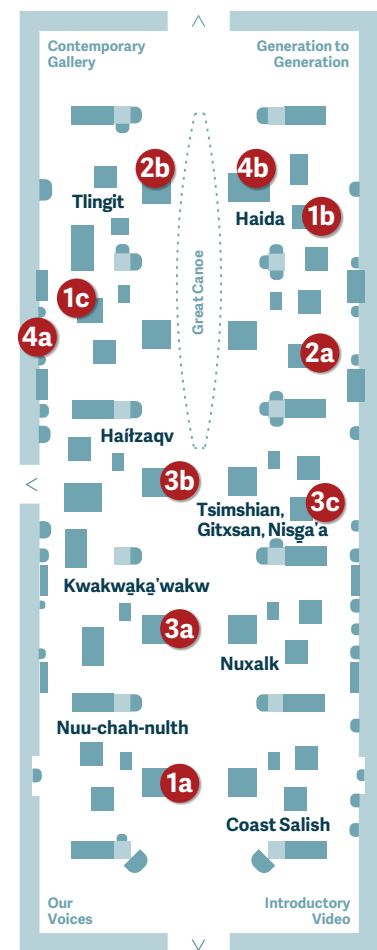
Cultural treasures are used to reinforce relationships and family histories, and to celebrate and ratify significant events.

- “Potlatch” focus case (Kwakwaka'wakw)
- “Supernatural” case (Haízaqv)
- “Ceremonial Life” case (Gitxsan)

4. Colonialism

Stories of repatriation shed light on colonial history in the U.S. and Canada, as well as on the resilience of people today.

- “Beaver Prow” carving (Tlingit in U.S.)
- “Chest of Chief Gidansda” and repatriation label text (Haida in Canada)



Updated Terminology

In consultation with Indigenous communities, the renovated Northwest Coast Hall has corrected names and terminology, including:

Indigenous or **Native communities**, **peoples**, or **Nations** are used to refer to the communities whose histories, cultural practices, and belongings are featured in this hall. In Canada, the term used is **First Nations**.



Travelers paddle long-distance along the Northwest Coast to the host Nation of the 2018 Tribal Canoe Journeys.

Monumental carvings is the name for the large wooden carvings in the hall (once known as totem poles).



The central carving originally stood at the entrance to the house of a Chief who guided Nuxalk people through difficult times.

Belongings, cultural treasures, and **cultural pieces** are terms used to describe what's exhibited in this hall.



People of distinction dance in Chilkat robes like this one during Tlingit ceremonies, and the long fringe sways as they move.

Come Prepared Checklist

- Plan your visit.** For information about reservations, transportation, and lunchrooms, visit amnh.org/field-trips.
- Read the Key Ideas** in this guide to see how themes in the hall connect to your curriculum. Identify the key points that you'd like students to learn.
- Download student worksheets** for use during your visit at amnh.org/northwestcoast-educators.

Get familiar with the Northwest Coast Nations represented in the hall by visiting: amnh.org/northwest-coast

Correlation to Standards

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

Theme 1: Culture – Human beings create, learn, share, and adapt to culture. Cultures are dynamic and change over time.

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change – Studying the past makes it possible for us to understand the human story across time.

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments – The study of people, places, and environments enables us to understand the relationship between human populations and the physical world.

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity – Personal identity is shaped by an individual's culture, by groups, by institutional influences, and by lived experiences shared with people inside and outside the individual's own culture throughout her or his development.

CREDITS

The renovated Northwest Coast Hall was co-curated by Haa'yuuups | Ron Hamilton (Nuu-chah-nulth) and Peter Whiteley, the Museum's curator of North American Ethnology, with consulting curators Daxootsu | Judith Ramos (Tlingit), Chief Ga'lastawikw | Trevor Isaac (Kwakwaka'wakw), Jisgang Nika Collison (Haida), Kaa-hoo-utch | Garfield George (Tlingit), Niis Bupts'aan | David Boxley (Tsimshian), secalenəX™ | Morgan Guerin (Musqueam), Snxakila | Clyde Tallio (Nuxalk), Chief Wigvitba-Wákas | Harvey Humchitt (Haitzaqv), and Xsim Ganaa'w | Laurel Smith Wilson (Gitxsan).

The Northwest Coast Hall Educator's Guide was developed in collaboration with Daxootsu | Judith Ramos (Tlingit) and Xsim Ganaa'w | Laurel Smith Wilson (Gitxsan).

Image Credits

Cover: hall, Denis Finnin/© AMNH; geographic map, © AMNH. **About the Hall:** display case, Matt Shanley/© AMNH. **Key Idea 1:** potlatch, Sharon Grainger; Dan Brown and Louise Brady, Bethany Goodrich; Angela Arbeau, Debora Steel/Ha-Shilth-Sa; monumental carving, Denis Finnin/© AMNH. **Key Idea 2:** canoes, Kris Krug/Tribal Journeys; protest, Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. **Back Cover:** canoe, Julian Brave Noisecat; carving and robe, Denis Finnin/© AMNH.