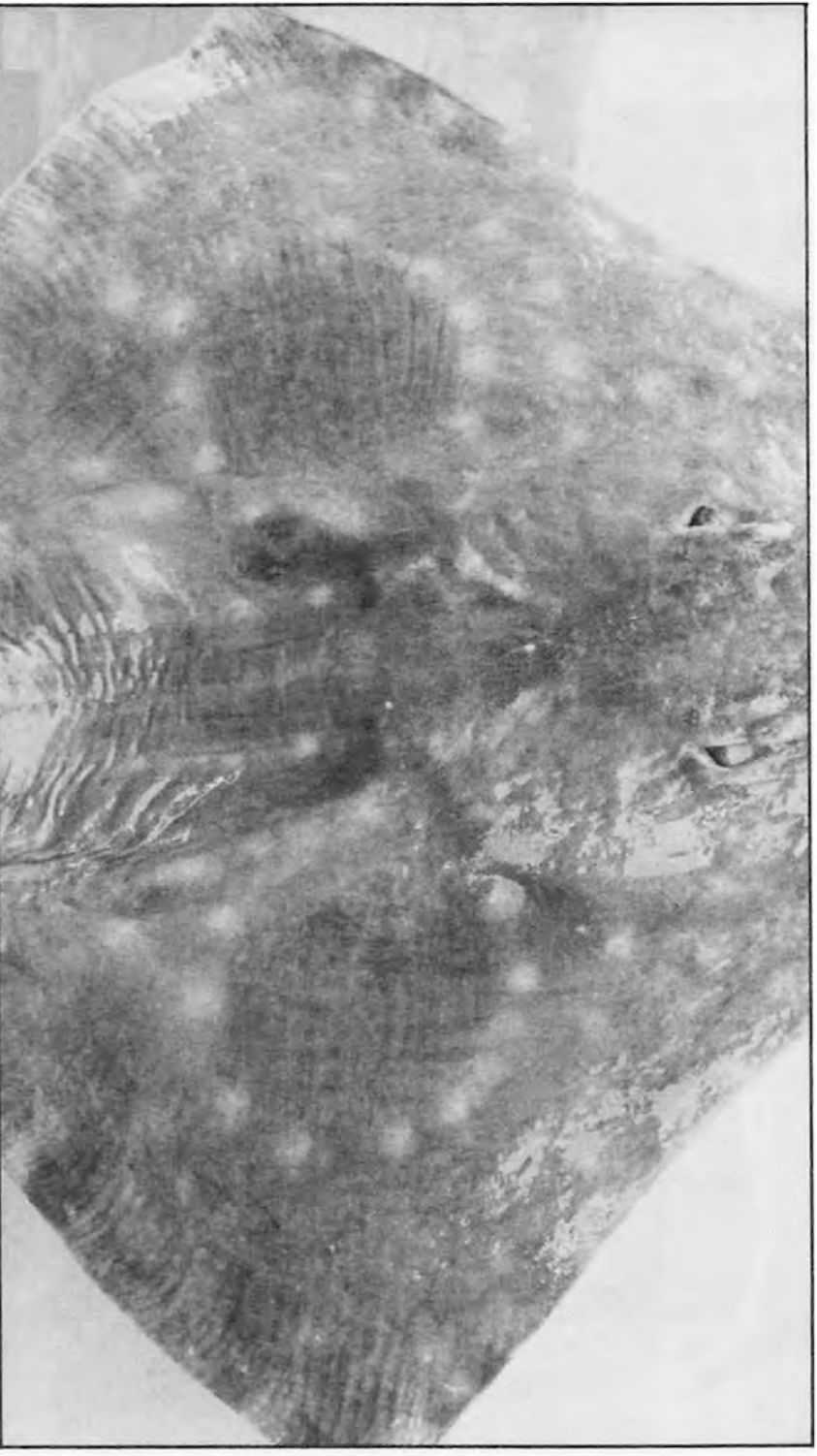


Ovoid

Probably the single most characteristic shape used in this art is the rounded rectangle termed the *ovoid*. A well-made classic northern ovoid seems to be held in tension. The top edge appears sprung upward, as though from inner pressure; the lower edge makes a slight upward bulge that seems to be caused by the taut downward and inward pull of the two lower corners. There is a feeling that if the ovoid “let go,” it would spring back into a rectangle or an oval.

The Haida word for “ovoid” is the same word for the large dark spot on each side of a young skate.



A skate, showing the ovoid-like spots on its sides.

Thunderbird



Thunderbird! The very name of this marvellous creature of myth stirs the imagination. To many North Americans, the name Thunderbird is synonymous with an automobile, but to the West Coast people this great bird, living high in the mountains, was the most powerful of all the spirits—the personification of “chief.” Only the most powerful and prestigious of chiefs has Thunderbird as a crest.

When Thunderbird was hungry he ate whales. On the West Coast, he grasped the two Lightning Snakes which lived under his wings and threw them down onto a surfacing whale. The snakes, striking with their lightning tongues, killed the sea mammal; then Thunderbird swooped down, picked it up in his strong talons and flew with it to the mountains, there to devour it.

Knowing of its skill in striking whales, a whale hunter would paint a Lightning Snake on his canoe, and then paint over the image. Although it was unseen by the whale, the power of its presence on the canoe would aid the hunter to make a strike. The Lightning Snake has the head of a wolf, an animal also revered for its hunting prowess.

To the Kwagiutl people there were several Thunderbirds having different names, and they too were associated with whales. When the chief of a Thunderbird clan died, thunder rolled; when the great bird blinked its eyes, lightning flashed. Even the Haida and the Tlingit in the north have legends of this supernatural whale-eating bird.

On totem poles, as in prints, Thunderbird is always shown with great outstretched wings. Its distinguishing features are the curled appendages on the top of the head (said by some to be power symbols) and the sharply recurved upper beak which is similar to Hawk's beak.



Eagle

A symbol of power and prestige among many nations of the world, the eagle is also important to the Indians of the Northwest Coast, who share their environment with this majestic bird.

Many myths and legends surround Eagle; eagle down, a symbol of peace and friendship, was, and still is, sprinkled before guests in welcome dances and on other ceremonial occasions; eagle feathers were used in rituals and worn on masks and headdresses. Eagle is one of the two main Haida crests, and many families of the coast still own or inherit the right to use it. As a result, portrayals of this powerful bird are to be found painted and carved on many museum items, and it has been a source of inspiration to many of today's native print makers and designers.

Eagle's beak is considerably shorter than that of Raven, and terminates in a strong downward curve; the tongue is generally evident also, as are the U-form "ears" which convey the crestlike look of the bird's head. It would be easy to confuse the Eagle with Thunderbird, except that Eagle never has curled appendages extending from the top of its head, and its beak is not strongly recurved like Thunderbird's.



Raven

Most important of all creatures to the coast Indian peoples was Raven. It was Raven—the Transformer, the cultural hero, the trickster, the Big Man (he took many forms to many peoples)—who created the world. He put the sun, moon and stars into the sky, fish into the sea, salmon into the rivers, and food onto the land; he manoeuvred the tides to assure daily access to beach resources. Raven gave the people fire and water, placed the rivers, lakes and cedar trees over the land, and peopled the earth.

Full of magical, supernatural power, Raven could turn himself into anything at any time. He could dive beneath the sea, ascend into the sky, or make anything happen by willing it. His legendary antics were often motivated by insatiable greed, and he loved to tease, to cheat, to woo, and to trick. But all too often the tables were turned on the hapless Raven.

As well as being deeply embodied in the mythology of the entire Northwest Coast, Raven is also an important totem figure of prestige, and is one of the two main crests of the Haida on the Queen Charlotte Islands.

In the past, Raven was probably portrayed more often, and in more ways, than any other creature of legend. Today, Indian carvers, jewellers and print makers still hold a fondness for the wily Raven, and feature him often in their works of art.

Raven is distinguished by a fairly long, straight beak having a blunt or short turned-down tip, and usually a tongue. A sun disc in the partially open beak is a reminder that Raven flew with it in his beak and tossed it into the sky to bring light to the world. The moon or fire also can be represented by a circle in Raven's beak.