

Enc. Britt. article  
by Saff

Haida (High-da: "people"), the Indians of Queen Charlotte Islands, B. C. and the southern half of Prince of Wales Island, Alaska. The Alaskan branch, called Kaigani, occupy former Tlingit territory, having moved north from Langara Island in the eighteenth century. Following the earliest visits by European and American trading ships in the 1770's and 80's, the number of Haida decreased sharply. A Hudson's Bay Company census about 1841 gave 6600 in thirteen Queen Charlotte villages and 1700 in six Kaigani villages. By 1880 they had declined to 900 and 800 respectively, leaving most villages abandoned. Today the Haida occupy three villages: Skidegate Mission, Masset, and Hydaburg (Kaigani) and are increasing.

Notwithstanding popular speculations of a supposed Polynesian or other exotic origin, the Haida are typical North Pacific Coast Indians in physical type, speech, and culture. Medium-tall compared to other American Indians, they and their neighbours also tend to have lighter skins, more luxuriant hair, heavier trunks, larger and wider faces and heads. Their language is distantly related to Tlingit, spoken on the coast to the north, and to the Athapascan family, spoken over a large part of North America. With their mainland neighbours the Tlingit, Tsimshian and northern Kwakiutl, the Haida shared the highest attainments of the Northwest Coast culture area. Founded on a rich, sea-oriented fishing and hunting economy and a skilful woodworking technology,



their culture produced unique developments in social organization, ceremonialism and art.

Territories, houses and the crests displayed on totem poles were owned by lineages (enlarged families based on the maternal line of descent). The lineages formed two major divisions, Ravens and Eagles, within which intermarriage was prohibited.

Their arts and crafts have brought the Haida their widest acclaim. Even in pre-contact times their decorated wooden boxes and seagoing dugout canoes were sought in trade by other tribes. Their masks and other ceremonial equipment, costumes, household furnishings and other products are prized by museums today. The totem poles in their old villages were more elaborate and numerous than those of any other tribe. Shortly after 1800 they began to carve a local argillite or "black slate" into pipes, dishes, figures, and model totem poles. This new art form found a ready market, and is still being produced.



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