

Traditional Alaskan Artwork

by Kathy James



If you are seriously interested in learning the geographic variations in design and style, I recommend a book called *Learning by Designing: Pacific Northwest Coast Native Indian Art, Volume 1*, by Jim Gilbert and Karin Clark.

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When my family visited several Alaska towns, we were fascinated with the totem poles and traditional aboriginal art being reproduced. A little research made me realize that the artwork that seems so simple is not at all. The early Alaskan artists had rigid rules, distinct shapes, symbolism, and geographic design differences. This pyrography or drawing project barely touches the surface of what one should know in order to reproduce aboriginal designs. This salmon follows a few of the rules. (In actuality, different parts of Alaska had their own variations.) I've also given you an outline into which you may creatively place the main building blocks, for fun.

Some Guidelines:

(1) The shape of the creature must fit inside an unbroken outline. Inside this outline are design elements representing body parts and decorative elements. These building blocks are usually in specific shapes & are varied and repeated throughout.

(2) Specific elements have specific symbolism. For example, circles or ovoids can be eyeballs, scales, body openings (like whale blowholes, nostrils) or joints. The u-shape, which was sometimes split by a line, was often scales, fins, feathers.

(3) Elements were placed inside of elements—circles in ovoids, s-shapes or curved lines in a rib cage. Some tribal groups often placed entire human forms within part of a creature form or vice versa. For example, the tail of this salmon could have had a human face incorporated into the design. Human eyes were often circles within an almond shape, water creatures usually had round eyes within a circle or ovoid shape.

(4) Many rounded corners, although many rounded shapes have pointed ends. Rarely were shapes squared off.

(5) Color was used by some groups—red and black usually, only occasionally other colors. Colors were bold and solid.

(6) Stylized body elements were used to make a creature recognizable... gills or rib bones on a fish, dorsal fins on a killer whale, strong beak on an eagle, tails, teeth on biting animals, feathers, blowholes. Decoration was added to fill spaces.

(7) Line work varies in thickness; there are wide and narrow parts of some elements. See the u-shapes.

Stacks of human and creature icons (including mythical creatures, like the thunderbird) were often carved out of cedar trunks and placed outside a building or in a village to tell visitors who lived there or what creatures were important to the town. Yes—totem poles!

