

# S'ABADEB THE GIFTS

PACIFIC COAST SALISH ART AND ARTISTS

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Discover the gifts of family, tradition and nature as we explore Coast Salish culture through ancient and contemporary art and artifacts. This four-week series is brought to you by Newspapers In Education and Seattle Art Museum.

## Gifts of Our Ancestors

What did the ancestors leave behind for us to learn from today?

The Coast Salish First Peoples of Washington state and British Columbia live in an area traditionally called the "Salish Sea." The Salish Sea is made up of the major waterways of Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the Strait of Georgia. Before borders between British and United States territories were created in 1846, Coast Salish people moved freely around the region for thousands of years. In fact, evidence of humans living in the Pacific Northwest dates back at least 11,000 years! The water is at the core of Coast Salish culture. Historically, these communities identified themselves by the rivers, creeks and bays that make up their homelands. For example, salmon and other fish and shellfish are staples of the traditional Coast Salish diet and until as recently as the 1930s, canoes were the primary means of travel for Coast Salish people.

For the Coast Salish, knowledge and wisdom are considered gifts that come from living elders and recent ancestors. Knowledge of the past, present and future is handed down from generation to generation through oral traditions like singing songs and telling stories. Traditional art-making skills are passed on to younger artists through oral instruction and observation. Works of art also tell stories. Some are decorated with images that illustrate a significant historical event or a particular family. Other works show the creativity of artist who made them, or the way that those artworks have been used since they were created.

Susan Point is a contemporary Coast Salish artist whose artwork often shows the faces of the Ancient Ones, or beings from the time before humans. Her home is part of the Musqueam First Nation Reserve in Vancouver, Canada. A reserve (in Canada) or a reservation (in the

United States) is a government-established body of land that belongs to a designated group of people. Although the histories of reserves in Canada and reservations in the United States are very different, their definitions are quite similar.

The Musqueam Reserve includes the land of Susan Point's Coast Salish ancestors who lived at the mouth of the Fraser River. Can you see the influence of the river in her carving called "The First People" (see image)? The curved pieces of wood that surround the eight faces in the carving represent the waterways of her homeland. These waterways were and continue to be important sources of salmon and other foods for Coast Salish people.

Much of Susan Point's knowledge of the past comes from songs, stories, dances and speeches told to her by elders from her community. She also studies old works of Coast Salish art collected by explorers and archeologists. Her carving called "The First People," honors the first humans who appeared along the Fraser River.



Musqueam artist Susan Point (b. 1951) in front of "The First People," 2008. Red and yellow cedar, 144 X 108 in., Margaret E. Fuller Purchase Fund, in honor of the 75th Anniversary of the Seattle Art Museum, 2008.31.

## DISCUSS

- ▶ What can we learn from ancient artifacts?
- ▶ Has someone in your family shared a tradition with you? A recipe? A story? A song?
- ▶ What do traditions tell you about who you are? What do they tell you about the world?
- ▶ When you are being creative, where does your inspiration come from? Other artists? Music?

- ▶ Video tape an interview with a family or community member about an event or important moment in history. Edit the video and post it online for others to comment on. How is learning history orally different than reading about it?
- ▶ Create a work of art based on one of the stories you heard in your interview. What were the major points of the story? How can you show those major points in your work of art?
- ▶ Artist's find inspiration in all kinds of sources, including the work of past artists. Can you find examples of contemporary artists like Susan Point who look to older forms of artwork for inspiration? Think about how architects today create buildings that look like they are from Ancient Greece or how singers and musicians sample or remake songs.
- ▶ Explore the idea of storytelling and oral history in greater depth. Start by checking out National Public Radio's StoryCorps Web site: [storycorps.net](http://storycorps.net)

**Teens!** Celebrate fresh perspectives from young stars of local native communities during SAM's ARTattack: Teen Night Out, *Seattle Sound*. ARTattack is about teen voices and visions. Check it out Friday, November 14, 2008 from 6 p.m. – 9 p.m. at SAM downtown. Find out more online at [seattleartmuseum.org](http://seattleartmuseum.org).