

Revealing Blue on the Northern Northwest Coast [ABSTRACT]

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The distinctive black, red and blue or green designs created by the Haida and Tlingit of the Northwest Coast of North America are iconographic of these cultures and recognized around the world. While almost every other aspect of Haida and Tlingit life has been studied and remarked for the past two hundred years, references to the significance of color, and the materials used to make color, have been rare—and, in the case of the traditional blue paint, consistently incorrect. Mistakenly attributed to copper oxides early in the ethnographic study of the Northwest Coast, subsequent scholars have persisted, without scientific verification, in claiming the traditional blue comes from copper oxides.

As important and informative as the traditions of carving and weaving, if we are to provide a more comprehensive picture of the past, the use of color needs to be integrated with what we already know about the Haida and Tlingit cultures of the NW Coast, including the materials, tools, and methods of making and applying paint. The study of color use, and pigment and paint technology can provide new insights into the complex critical thinking and technical skills of individual artists, as well as the Haida and Tlingit cultures from which they came. The roles these artifacts played within their cultures can be revealed more comprehensively when we understand the significance of specific materials. Investigating the reasons for using specific colors such as blue, and the materials that make those colors, gives us new descriptive and interpretive information about daily life, sociopolitical standards, cultural practices, worldviews, and the cosmologies of the Haida and Tlingit. Identifying specific pigments can provide valuable information relating to provenance and authorship of artifacts and helps us identify sibling artifacts. We are better able to conserve the artifacts we hold according to the materials with which they are made if we have a full understanding of all those materials.

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