

# Art in the Garden

Parallel Worlds: Art of the Ainu of Hokkaido  
and Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest

Summer 2009



# Parallel Worlds: Art of the Ainu of Hokkaido and Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest

The traditional cultures of the Ainu of Hokkaido, Japan, and Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest have much in common—both have a rich artistic heritage and a deep belief in the spirit that exists in all of nature. With a strong respect for their environment and a determination to live in harmony with it, the indigenous cultures on both sides of the North Pacific also have much to teach the world today.

In June, 2009, the Garden celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the Portland-Sapporo Sister City Association with an exhibition of ceremonial robes which explored the parallels between our two regions that go back to ancient times—to the first people who inhabited these lands on both sides of the North Pacific.

The title of the exhibition, *Parallel Worlds*, refers to the Ainu concept that life consists of two parallel realities—that of the physical world and another unseen, but equally powerful spiritual world.

Just as the Ainu of Hokkaido, Japan, so the Tlingit and other Native peoples of the Pacific Northwest lost much of their traditional culture along with their land with the coming of New World settlers. The efforts of both Ainu and Tlingit artists to carry on their traditions today, developing them in new and vital ways, gives hope that the great beauty of these cultures will continue to thrive for generations to come.



Left: Ainu elder wearing ceremonial robe.  
Right: Native American of the Pacific Northwest ceremonial robe.

Ainu Artist, Sanae Ogawa



### THE AINU OF HOKKAIDO

The Ainu are the indigenous people of Japan who live primarily on the northern island of Hokkaido, a place not unlike the upper reaches of the Pacific Northwest. Until the end of World War II, they inhabited a much broader region, including the Kurile Islands and southern Sakhalin Island (now part of Russia).

Parallel Worlds featured living examples of different types of Ainu ceremonial robes, from the quiet beauty of *Attush* (elm bast fiber) robes to the colorful cotton and silk *Ruunpe*, *Kaparamip* and *Chijiri* garments. Made exclusively by women, as were their North American counterparts, the garments on view represent a way of life that had all but disappeared by the end of the 19th century. The bold patterns and inventive designs of these appliquéd and embroidered robes are unique—and yet they share a similar visual power with the textile art of Native Americans half a hemisphere away.

Today, Ainu women seek to bring back the beauty and power of their traditional culture through their work in researching and recreating authentic Ainu ceremonial robes, such as the ones on view here. The ceremonial robes in this exhibition are the work of four contemporary Ainu textile artists working to revive traditional techniques and motifs: Sanae Ogawa, her sister Machiko Kato, together with Machiko's daughter Satomi Kato and Sanae's late daughter, Junko Ogawa.



### NATIVE AMERICANS OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

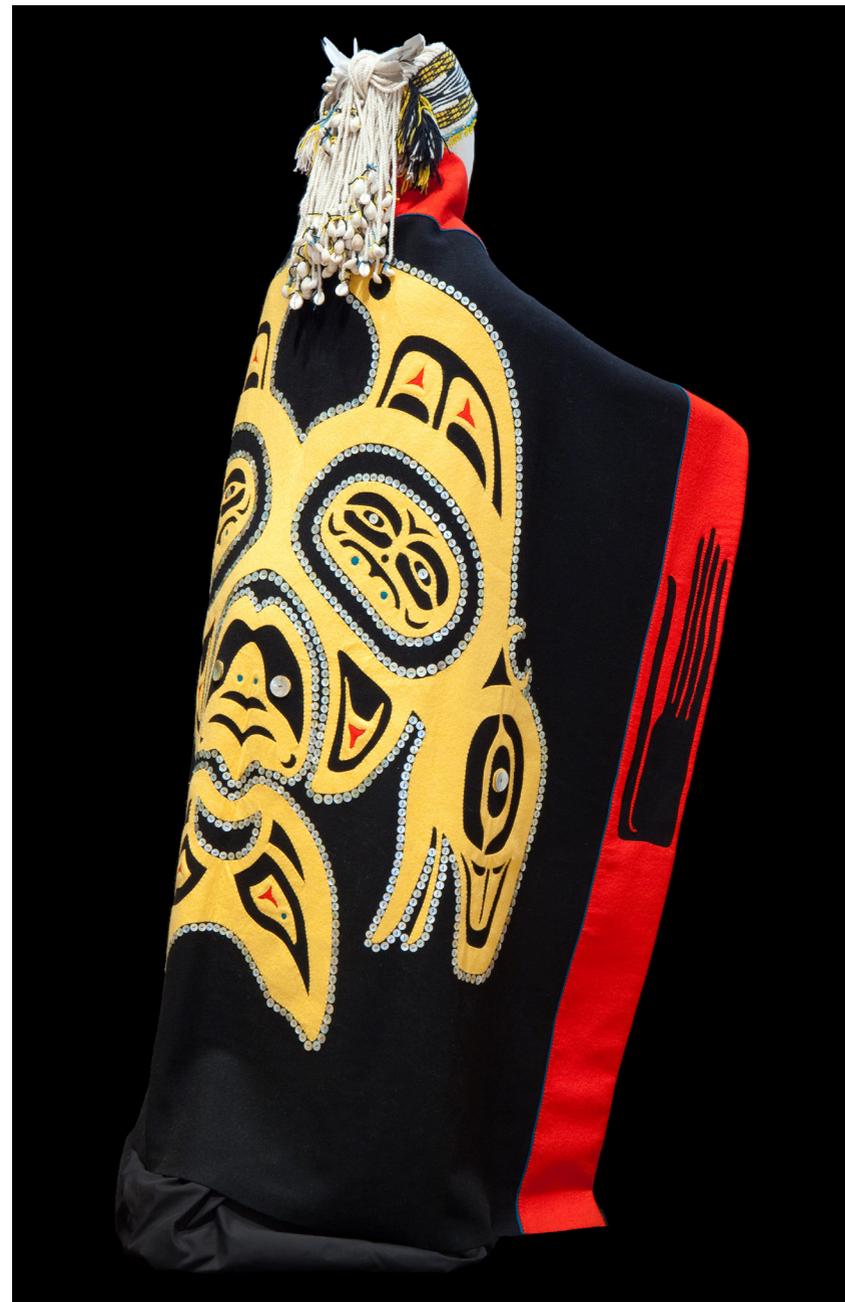
The Northwest Coast ceremonial robes featured in this exhibition were originally created by the Tsimshian and Tlingit people who lived in the northwest coastal region of what is now Alaska and British Columbia. Today more than 5,000 people of Tlingit descent live in the Portland-Vancouver area. The Tlingit were a matrilineal society of hunters and gatherers and, like their Ainu counterparts across the Pacific, salmon was a staple of their diet. The culture was rich with artistic traditions including carving, weaving, storytelling, singing, and dancing. Traditionally, the Tlingit believe that all life has equal value, and plants, birds, fish, animals, and human beings are all to be respected.

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The textile arts of the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest are admired throughout the world for their dynamic designs and intricate weaving techniques. A year or more is required to complete a single robe. Three types of ceremonial robes (or dancing blankets) were featured in this exhibition: *Ravenstail*, *Chilkat*, and Button Blankets. All but one of the exquisitely hand-crafted robes included in this exhibition were created by living artists skilled in these textile traditions of the Northwest Coast. Artists whose work was included in the exhibition include Chloe French, Clarissa Hudson, Lily Hudson, Anne Smith, and John Beard. Highlighting the exhibition was an exquisite 19th-century Chilkat blanket from the John Price Collection.

Tlingit artist, Clarissa Hudson;  
Wood carver, Masamichi Nitani



#### TSIMSHIAN HAAYUUK CEREMONIAL DANCE

Dancers, drummers, and singers of *Tsimshian Haayuuk* bring the ceremonial robes alive when they perform in full regalia. Featuring traditional box drums and handmade button robes, masks, and headpieces that hold family and clan crests.

Through this comparative exhibition of traditional textiles by Ainu and Native American artists, it is our hope to draw attention to the triumph of human determination that has brought these nearly forgotten art forms back to life again and rejoice in the parallel spirit that continues to bring our two worlds together across the Pacific.

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