Research Paper: First Nations Art; Literature, Performing Arts and Visual Art.

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First Nations art is and has been one of the most significant and influential form of culture. In most cases, First nations literature, performing arts, and visual art is absent from any form of academic textbook. This document analysis will illustrate the different forms of First Nations Arts in Canada, including literature (both written and oral), performing arts, and visual arts. First Nations groups throughout history have sustained their culture through these methods, which ultimately kept their tradition alive during the contact of Europeans. Many stories, songs and traditional ceremonies helped maintain their culture even during the violent depletion of population due to epidemics such as smallpox.

Literature is one of the most significant form of First Nations art, as it carries the stories and myths that have been passed through generation orally through stories. Story tellers in First Nations tribes were held at a high status because their roles to devolve theses stories held great significance to the growth of the next generation. Many lessons were integrated in these stories, such as hunting methods and views of the land and animals. The literature of First nations, “holds many if not all of the beliefs, philosophies, worldviews of Indigenous people; it holds a history. So I would think that Aboriginal literature really is the heart of Aboriginal beings”[[1]](#footnote-1) Oral tradition and literature can be presented in a variety of ways. These different ways of demonstrating oral literature are mainly introduced by the elders of the tribe or the storytellers. Oral literature encompasses various formats including stories, songs, rituals, prayers, speeches, histories, anecdotes and jokes[[2]](#footnote-2). Each nation developed different ways of expressing their culture, depending on setting of which they settled. For example, the cultural traditions were different on the Northwest coast compares to those of the plains. “Each nation also developed its own values and customs, which were embedded in its literary tradition in the form of multiple narratives that presented the nations understanding of the surrounding world.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Although oral literature held a significant role in story telling and the passing of culture, written culture began to grow during European contact, “Contact with European led to changes in traditional themes”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Spoken literature for First Nations groups was very diverse and developed in many different directions over throughout the many types of First Nations groups in Canada. Many different ethnic groups have a unified language that most, if not all, of the populations speaks the same language (For example people from France primarily speak French). This was not the case for First Nations people through oral language. Along with the diverse language, the oral traditions are also very divergent. Oral traditions such as stories are different through many First Nations groups. For example, First Nations groups on the coast would have dissimilar stories from those of the plains, because of the difference of landscapes. This allowed First Nations groups to pass on their ways of knowing and subsistent strategies on to the next generations which in turn benefited the economies of these communities. Oral traditions in these First Nations communities were very adaptable and constantly evolving. Along with these traditions, language was simultaneously evolving at the same rapid rate and had a great “internal diversity within the broad linguistic categories.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In a period where “Agriculture, horticulture, foraging, hunting, and fishing were key features of the economies”[[6]](#footnote-6), oral traditions and literature were a significant factor to the passing of the strategies to attain and sustain these economic growth strategies. Language was passed through these generations along with songs, stories, and many other teachings that would be significant to the next group of people, that would one day be leaders of the community.

Performing arts for First Nations was a great way to express their feelings and relationship with their land and culture. Display of this performance in North American Indigenous cultures is illustrated in a variety of ways, for example, “dancing, singing, acting, and historical re-enactments.”[[7]](#footnote-7) For many communities, performance allows individuals to voice their opinion or perhaps celebrate a communal accomplishment such as a successful hunt. Music was used to express religion or artistic beliefs but was available to the whole community. Music served many purposes and was, “formally integrated into all aspects of Indigenous cultures and was and important teaching tool.”[[8]](#footnote-8) These performing traditions were a principal component to First Nations arts and were used as ways of passing their culture down to the next generation but was conflicted upon the arrival of Europeans. Through the Indian act, these traditions were challenged, “During the time of first contact, government officials quickly grasped the ceremonial importance of dances and songs. Both were banned.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Because the First Nations were removed from these cultural practices, they had to improvise and find other ways to progress their culture. Many of the songs that are performed hold great power and strength and are performed for a reason. Many songs have a direct correlation to the tradition of a community and songs are performed at certain times. For example, before a war these communities have certain rituals and songs that are performed. Also, these songs are used to identify and upcoming season, for example, a certain song is performed in the spring time in Northern Aboriginal communities during Hobiyee, which means “the oolichans are coming”[[10]](#footnote-10). The Tsimshian were a coastal community that also signified oral traditions. Oral traditions were the main form of passing on traditions. Thus, storytellers were seen as powerful people because they had a spiritual greater connection with the land and sprits. The language of the Tsimshian healer is a “spirit language,” not a written one. This is communicated in curvilinear art, all art forms, every shamanic implement, every household utensil, every home, every boat or spirit vehicle, and article of clothing describes the form of the illusory levels of the different lands of existence.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Because these ceremonial practices such as potlatches and powwows were banned, First Nations turned to visual art as a way of expressing their culture. Though it was already a significant practice in First Nations culture. Native art illustrates First Nations understanding of the land and the importance it has. “Native art reflects the environment even while expressing and illuminating social structures and world views.”[[12]](#footnote-12) First Nations on the Northwest coast were able to grow in terms of visual art because they were for the most part static communities, meaning they stayed in one place which meant they could haul these bigger resources such as cedar to make totem poles, masks, dance rattles, storage boxes, and feasting bowls.[[13]](#footnote-13) Visual art was also a way to demonstrate power among peers, community members, and other communities. Art such as a carved copper shield was a sign of wealth for the First Nations peoples along the Northwest Coast territories. “Copper was widely worked and used in pre-contact North America. On the northwest coast it was fashioned into large and beautifully-finished shields, symbolic of wealth and authority.”[[14]](#footnote-14) May visual artifacts hold great power within a community and have great importance. Totem poles represent what clan has more power in the community. The more visual art an individual has, the more power and wealth he has within the community. For the most part, the chief of the village has the most wealth and therefore can trade these to other leaders to demonstrate power. Although these accessories signified wealth, First Nations people were not necessarily materialistic. Coastal First Nations groups such as the Tsimshian participated in trading but were never materialistic as a society. Traditionally Tsimshians did not objectify the physical world. Physical objects were not considered so separate from self.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Art of First Nations groups holds a strong significance to the passing of First Nations culture throughout Canada. Many practices such as literature (both written and oral), Performing arts, and visual arts took precedence over other forms of passing tradition. These forms of First Nations art enabled the growth of First Nations culture and embedded these traditions in First Nations communities. Even through colonization, these cultural practices endured the struggles of being segregated with great fortitude, and continue to do so in a primarily European way of living. First Nations communities see art as the primary function to the continuation and growth of their culture, one of the strongest cultures in Canadian history. The fact that these rituals, practices, and traditions are passed through generations primarily through oral speakings is almost incomprehensible. A significant amount of the culture is reliant on the these oral passages, which demonstrates a great amount of discipline and strength from these First Nations communities.

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10. This is information that has been passed down to me first hand by my grandfather and also through the participation of a “Hobiyee” ceremony. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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