

1491: The Untold Story of the Americas Before Columbus

EPISODE 107 – Art & Culture

Intro - Narrator – 00:12

We are the First Peoples of the Americas. We have been here from the beginning. Our ancestors navigated by the wind and stars... ..crossing vast oceans and mountain ranges, searching for new lands. Over thousands of years, our ancestors became astronomers and architects... philosophers and scientists... artists and inventors. We created distinct societies and built the vast trade systems that covered two continents. In 1492, our world was changed forever, but we did not disappear. Today, the languages and teachings of our ancestors remain, and these are the untold stories of the Americas, before Columbus.

The creative spirit is at the heart of every Indigenous culture in the Americas. The artistic genius of our ancestors was evident in every aspect of life, from traditional ceremonies to the creation of everyday objects. Our histories were carefully passed down from generation to generation through stories, songs, and dances. Perhaps the most visible reminders of our past are the works of art that our ancestors left for us. Through ceramic, metal, wood, and woven materials, we've discovered the very essence of our cultures before 1491. While story is at the core of every art form, oral storytelling has preserved the cultural identity of Indigenous Peoples for thousands of years. Stories are the memories of our ancestors, and through them, they ensure that the values, rituals, knowledge, and ways of life are kept alive.

Storytelling – Dr. Greg Cajete - 02:43

Those stories are what are held as being the foundation of, an understanding of where you have come, where you are, and where you may go in the future.

Narrator – 02:52

Every Indigenous culture has a story about their origins as a people. These creation stories tell us how they came to be. In Northwest North America, a Haida creation story tells of a raven discovering First People as they emerged from a clam shell on a beach. The Tsimshian people have a story about the origins of the killer whale. A white wolf longed to tell the history of the world through song. He left the land, and went under sea, where he transformed into a killer whale. Today, he calls out to his wolf family, who still live on the land.

Dr. Greg Cajete – 03:40

There is a journey through a storied landscape, and so as you begin to hear descriptions of this journey, the people will usually say that they stopped in different places.

Narrator – 03:57

The Inuit and their ancestors have lived in the Arctic for thousands of years. A rich storytelling tradition evolved over countless generations through the sharing of legends between elders and children.

Michael Kusugak - 04:16

We have a great camaraderie with all the other Arctic peoples of the world, because, you know, we were nomads. Like, we travelled, you know, to Alaska, Greenland, all over the North, and we all speak the same language with many different dialects. So I can talk to people from Alaska in

Inuktitut, I can talk to people from Greenland, and we can understand each other pretty well. So we had all these stories, these traditional legends, and they were told right across the North. As you listen to these stories, you know, you fall asleep to them every night, and they teach you a lesson, and you dream, you know, about these characters, and they become your heroes.

The most famous person that, you know, I can think of is a man called Kiviuk. My grandmother said Kiviuk was born so long ago, that he was the very first person. The beginning of the Kiviuk story actually talks about a little boy who's also an orphan. He was being bullied by all these kids in the community, and his grandmother made him clothing out of young seal, and she said, "I would like you to go down to the beach, and when you get to the water's edge, I would like you to take the sealskin and pull it over your head, and jump into the water and go for a swim, and come up right in front of all your mean friends who are playing on the beach." And sure enough, all the mean boys were playing on the beach. The little boy took the sealskin. He pulled it over his head so that it fit nicely, and he looked like a little seal, and then he took a deep breath... [inhales] and he jumped into the water, and he came up right in front of all the mean boys who were playing on the beach. They thought he was a little seal. They grabbed their qajaqs, you know, their long, skinny skin-boats, and they started paddling, following the little seal. The little seal would go down underwater, and he would swim a little bit farther out, and then he would come up again, and then he would go down, and he would swim a little bit farther out, and then he would come up again, and when they were way out at sea, when the little seal came up, he would lift up his arm and his leg, and he would sing... [singing] "Where is my wind? I want my wind." People say the weather that was on the day you were born is your very own weather, and this little boy was born on a very, very windy day, and he was calling the weather that was on the day he was born. The wind heard him, and it started to come. It got windier and windier and windier, and before long, there were huge waves in the water, and the qajaqs with all the mean boys were going up and down, up and down in the big waves, and every now and then, a giant wave would come, and it would flip the qajaqs over, and before long, there was only one person left. That person was Kiviuk. Kiviuk landed his qajaq over on the other side of the ocean, and so he started travelling, trying to find his way home, and while he was trying to find his way home, it seems like he travelled through every part of the North, because there's stories about him everywhere. He travelled across this ocean and ended up on the other side, in this very strange place, and he got homesick, so he started travelling, trying to find his way home. What people say about Kiviuk is that he was the first person, but he's still alive today. He is so old, his body is turning to stone, and someday, when his heart turns completely to stone and stops, that will be the end of the universe. In the Finnish language, they have a word which sounds just like Kiviuk, and it means "stone man," so if you go back far enough in Finnish history, you might find stories about this very same person.

Narrator - 08:41

Of all the Indigenous forms of art, storytelling remains the most essential to the teaching of culture, our relationships with others, and our connection to the environment.

Michael Kusugak -08:53

We have all these stories, you know, these incredible legends that teach us how to care for the young and to help the more disadvantaged people in our world, and teach us how to live with each other, because, you know, nobody survives if they don't have a structure like that.

Dr. Greg Cajete – 09:23

They came to know something about themselves, something about relationship and responsibility, and they carried that knowledge and that perspective to the next place that they journeyed to. The stories mirror, you know, the deepest longings, the deepest understandings, the most profound

thoughts, if you will, of a people, and they're guiding thoughts. They're the thoughts that guide through generations.

Petroglyphs - Narrator – 10:15

Rock art is one of the oldest art forms in the world. By carving or scraping the surface of rocks with stone or bone tools, Indigenous People in the Americas created visual stories called "petroglyphs." Many of the images carried deep cultural meaning and provide us with a connection to our past.

Dr. Rudy Reimer – 10:41

There are many petroglyph sites that tend to be concentrated at really interesting locations on the landscape. Why the rock art is there is of great interest to archaeologists. However, we cannot fully understand these sites without considering the cultural knowledge associated with them.

Narrator – 11:04

Petroglyphs had many functions-- to mark a trail, record an important event, or tell a story.

Dr. Rudy Reimer - 11:13

For me, as an Indigenous archaeologist, I do use the science aspect of trying to find and locate sites, but we can also look at our oral histories and our place names and our traditions. We can come to understand landscapes from a cultural perspective and a scientific perspective, but when we layer those two together, we only enhance our understanding of the past.

Barnaby Lewis - 11:40

The mountains haven't changed since the days of our ancestors. We see paths of their travels, prehistoric trails that they've taken, and yes, definitely, the petroglyphs, you know, the symbols and designs that remind us of our traditional religious practices, our ceremony, our rituals. All those things are evidence of their presence and their use of this landscape. They're etched in the stone because they wanted them to survive, those messages to survive. They wanted those symbols, designs, to be recognized and utilized by the people. These are messages or reminders to all O'odham people, you know, to continue our way of life.

Pictographs - Narrator - 12:42

Today, we find petroglyphs in every part of the western hemisphere. They offer us a glimpse into the way of life and dream worlds of our ancestors.

On cave walls, cliff faces, and rock overhangs throughout the Americas, Indigenous people painted images that represented the world around them. Pictographs were drawn, painted, or stained on the rock surface, using organic materials like ochre and charcoal. One of the oldest pictograph sites in the Americas is the Cave of Hands site in Argentina. The ancestors to the people of Patagonia covered the ceilings and walls with hundreds of handprints. Artists filled hollow bird bones with pigment, then placed their hand against the wall or ceiling. By blowing the pigment through the tube, the paint left the outline of a hand. Painted over the course of several thousand years, the illustrations on the walls of this site reveal the hunting practices of the people of the region.

Pictographs are also found throughout North America, with the largest concentrations in the Great Lakes Region, the Southwest, and along the West Coast. Like those in South America, most of the pictographs of North America were painted with ochre.

Dr. Rudy Reimer - 14:22

Ochre, being very rich, dark red, really symbolizes life and power, and it provides a way to spiritually connect with your ancestors and, of course, the landscape and the resources that surround you. In Squamish culture, we refer to this as "tumbth," and it translates as "paint."

Narrator – 14:43

The images portrayed in pictographs are more than storyboards of ancient times. The ochre itself offers a valuable insight into the lives of the people who used it as paint.

Dr. Rudy Reimer - 14:56

One of the ways that I've researched tumbth, ochre, is by doing some non-destructive analysis called "x-ray fluorescence." This gives me an elemental signature of the ochre, so I can then go and find natural outcrops of the ochre and try and match the signature from a pictograph to a geological deposit where that material was gathered, and so that gives us a little more understanding on how people used their landscape and the way they associated those paintings with what surrounds those sites.

Narrator – 15:31

One of the mysteries of rock art is its frequent similarity with artistic styles in different regions of the Americas.

Dr. Rudy Reimer - 15:39

Many researchers have noted that the styles and patterns of certain rock art images are the same, and early on in archaeological research, many people said, well, maybe this was a widespread tradition, or maybe it was a certain group of people who moved around. Really, this is just a reflection of what is in the local environment and, of course, a shared human nature.

Inka Metallurgy - Narrator – 16:05

Storytelling through petroglyphs and pictographs is one of the earliest forms of creative expression. Collectively, rock art stands as a visual library of natural and human history throughout the Americas before 1491.

For thousands of years, Indigenous People have been creating tools and art from gold, silver, copper, and bronze. The technology of metallurgy in the Americas before 1491 was possibly the most advanced in the world. The mining and manufacturing of metals was an established technology in Western South America around 2,000 years ago. Evidence of simple gold beads was discovered near Lake Titicaca that dates back 4,000 years. The Inka are often credited with developing the metallurgy traditions in South America. They were, after all, the dominant society when gold production was at its peak 600 years ago. But the extraction and purification of metals and the creation of metal alloys was practiced by Indigenous cultures in the Andes a thousand years or more before the Inka civilization existed. Gold objects were a status symbol reserved for the Sapa Inka and the elite. Commoners only wore gold during religious and state ceremonies.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez - 18:15

They were the most advanced civilization in the processing of metallurgy in the American continent. They live in an area where the ore was abundant and with techniques that perhaps were superior to the European ones.

Narrator – 18:39

Skilled artisans throughout the Inka Empire were conscripted to produce jewellery and ceremonial objects for the Sapa Inka and his extended family. The artisans were often required to move from their own cities to work in Inka capital of Cusco.

Dr. Ruben Mendoza - 18:57

There was a cosmology, an ideology, identified with the metals. Gold was identified with the sun, and silver was identified with the moon, and the tumbagas, which were mixtures or alloys of gold and silver and copper, were identified with kind of the androgynous being of the metals, such that they represented both the male and female element, the heavens and the earth, and a whole host of other things that were sacred to the people that worked in those metals.

Narrator – 19:27

Inka goldsmiths used a variety of different smelting techniques to produce alloys.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez – 19:31

There is one element, more than gold or silver... there is one element that the Inkas had in abundance... mercury. Why mercury? Because you need mercury to basically remove impurities in the ore and obtain only pure silver and pure gold.

Dr. Ruben Mendoza - 20:09

I've identified over 50 metallurgical traditions from the electro-chemical plating of gold onto less precious metals all the way through to gilding processes and even the production of platinum, which is among the first uses of platinum in the world. These 50 traditions have often been identified with things like Sheffield plating, and last I recall, Sheffield is in England, and yet, we have the earlier precedence for this innovation and technology in Peru.

Inka - Narrator – 20:52

A region as rich in resources and people as the Inka Empire required an efficient road system for transportation. Many of the products used by the ruling family, such as precious stones, woven material, and feathers, were transported along this vast road system. The Inka Empire stretched from Colombia to the southern tip of Chile. Connecting the millions of people living in this region was the Great Inka Road-- a 40,000-kilometre highway that criss-crossed mountains, deserts and forests. The chasquis was a long-distance relay runner, who travelled the Great Road to deliver packages to the rulers and the artisans who created works of art for the Sapa Inka's family.

(The chasquis hands his packages of precious materials to the next runner at a tambos, or resting house.)

The jewellery and other objects that the Inka artisans created from gold and silver were part of a complex cultural dynamic that connected the ruling Sapa Inka and his family to the important

deities, like the Sun God Inti. Although they were highly regarded in society, creating the metal objects for ceremonies. artisans performed their work at the pleasure of the Sapa Inka and the elite class.

Dr. Gerardo Gutiérrez – 24:20

Perhaps we lost many other possible paths that perhaps were better... perhaps were more efficient, perhaps were more beautiful, perhaps were even, like, more sustainable.

Basketry - Narrator - 24:40

At the peak of the Inka civilization, the goldsmiths and artisans were masters of metallurgy techniques and the creation of brilliant works of art.

The art of weaving natural fibres into baskets, clothing, and bedding has been part of Indigenous cultures in the Americas for thousands of years. The techniques used to create these materials vary from Nation to Nation. Iroquoian and Algonquin basket-makers used pounded ash bark and braided sweetgrass for their baskets. The Cherokee made baskets out of bundled pine needles, coiled sumac, and willow. The Anishinaabe and Dene made birch-bark baskets. In Northern California, Maidu women developed basket-weaving to a high art form. Their baskets were so tightly woven, they could be used to carry water and cook food. In many Indigenous cultures, skilled basket-makers blended dyes and a variety of materials to weave their baskets.

Melissa Peterson-Renault - 27:00

Some things were, uh, decorated with beautiful geometric designs, and you could tell that somebody took the time to make those patterns, to make it beautiful.

Narrator – 27:14

In the Pacific Northwest, cedar bark, roots, and grasses were the materials used to make a wide range of woven products.

Melissa Peterson-Renault – 27:24

There's traditional basketry that goes on all the way from Alaska all the way down the coast, and there are some similarities, and there's, you know, a lot of differences as well, you know, from tribe to tribe.

Ozette - Narrator – 27:40

The Nuu-chah-nulth and Makah nations were among the finest basket-weavers in the Americas. When the 400-year-old Ozette village site was discovered long-buried beneath a mudslide, it gave contemporary weavers a rare look at the traditional forms of weaving of the Makah people.

Melissa Peterson-Renault - 28:02

Underneath the mud was whole houses filled with everything a person needed in those days to survive, and so you could see, you know, how advanced the knowledge was that these folks had in the things that they made.

Narrator – 28:21

For the Makah, as with other Indigenous Peoples, the art of weaving wasn't limited to making baskets.

Melissa Peterson-Renault – 28:29

They had mats that could be folded up and then rolled up and stored... capes to keep you warm... rain hats to keep the rain off, baskets to store your fish and your ceremonial items, and beautifully made, too. They were artfully created. Both men and women in those areas had to make their own items. Some of the turn-downs and weaves are very complicated, and you think, man, how did somebody, you know, come up with how to execute making a knob-top hat and keeping it at a certain pitch... gathering all these different materials and learning how to create a weave to make these things. Who figured it out, how to pull bark from the tree and take the outer bark off, and to pound it, make it really, really soft enough to make a diaper for a baby?

Narrator – 29:39

The materials used in basketry depended on the natural resources available in each territory. For the Nuu-chah-nulth and the Makah of the Northwest, cedar proved to be the ideal material for weaving.

Melissa Peterson-Renault – 29:54

With the cedar tree, there was cedar boughs that were used for making Ka'owitz baskets, which are pack baskets in our language. People would use them to carry heavy loads such as firewood or your clams and things like that, and then the cedar root was used as the tension weavers that go around the basket, and then also, cedar bark, or what we call peet-sup, just the cedar tree alone was utilized for everything.

Pottery - Narrator – 30:35

Basketry, with its many forms, styles, and distinct patterns, provides insight into the resources, cultures, and traditions of Indigenous Peoples throughout the North American continent.

While the earliest pottery was used for cooking, over the centuries, the technology evolved into an art form. The distinct materials, designs and colours used in pottery provide clues to the cultural origins of its maker. The earliest pottery in the Americas was produced in the Lower Amazon Basin about 7,500 years ago. Around 6,000 years ago, pottery emerged in other regions of South America. The people of North America began their own pottery traditions about 4,000 years ago. In the American Southwest, pottery played a utilitarian and spiritual role. The Pueblo developed traditions for molding, firing, and decorating clay. Artists used brushes made from yucca leaves to paint their pottery. They also used tools to create designs on the wet clay. After firing the pottery, smooth stones were rubbed over the surface to create a polished finish. Just as stories were woven into baskets, capes, and blankets, story was part of each piece of pottery.

Dr. Greg Cajete - 32:43

We have representations of buffalo, of deer, of turkeys, of all of the different animals that are part of our landscape, and you see an ecological tapestry. That tapestry of inter-relationship, of connection to plants, to animals, to the natural forces of the world, those things that sustain the people through time, through generations. There's a whole process that parallels the creative process in that every stage of the creation of a pot becomes a way to meditate and to think about some of those ideas,

those primal ideas that are part of our stories... relationship to the land in terms of leaving offerings, and thanking the Earth Mother for her gift of clay, to thinking about the kinds of designs and symbols that one will place on one's pottery... represent, which is another stage of thinking and learning about the story and learning through the story, to the actual, you know, the creation of the pot, the polishing of the pot, the firing of the pot, and then, finally, the gifting of the pot... all of which, in many ways, incorporate Indigenous core values of respect, of responsibility, of relationship. These are the principles, these are the essences of thought that still remain as being the thread that holds us together, the communities, the holder of culture, language, tradition, and so, through time, the community becomes the real vessel that you try to sustain.

Carved Masks - Narrator – 35:20

Masks have been a part of Indigenous culture in the Americas for thousands of years. Some of the earliest masks were carved in ivory by the Dorset people. Later, Inuit of the Arctic used masks for storytelling and ceremonies. The Hopi and Pueblo cultures used Kachina masks in traditional dance ceremonies. In Northwest North America, artists carved intricate masks from cedar, yew, and alder, using distinct form lines that can be seen on 5,000-year-old petroglyphs. Westcoast nations created masks depicting humans, animals, and supernatural beings for ceremonies called "potlatches." The families who host potlatches bring out their masks, songs and dances to record their family lineage, display wealth, and honour a birth, marriage, or death. Carvers started their training as young boys, often learning from an uncle or grandfather. When the apprenticeship was completed, they would spend their lives carving masks and poles for their family and community.

Andy Everson - 36:34

A mask can be a very powerful thing amongst our people. A mask means so much more than just an art piece for our people, even today, but especially before contact. It means connections to our stories. We don't just make it up and carve any old mask that we want. We have to have that right in order to wear that mask. The masks are created in order to retell origin stories and old stories, and it's a way of bringing those old legends to life in our ceremonies. In the light of a big house, reflective properties are really crucial, and so we like to decorate our masks and frontlets with reflective shell in order to cast light back to the viewer, and for us, light, you know, in the darkness of the winter months, light is so important, and that reflection has a spiritual quality to it.

Narrator – 37:45

Presented together at potlatches, carved masks, dances, and songs told stories owned by the host families.

Andy Everson – 37:56

And we believe that our ancestors were able to take off their animal clothes, and they were human underneath, and so there's a time of transformation when they can go back and forth between being human or animal creature. We create masks in order to tell those stories.

Narrator – 38:21

While potlatches bonded families and communities through ceremony, they also played a central role in establishing relationships with neighbouring nations.

Andy Everson - 38:31

During the wintertime is when we held our most important ceremonies, when we would invite other villages to come to our communities, to witness our dances and listen to the songs that are owned by the host family. We invite other people to witness what we have to show and share, and they validate the ownership of those rights and prerogatives by attending potlatches or winter ceremonials. One of the most important things that we create to this day are items that are used in ceremonial contexts. It reminds us of our role in the community, a role that's continued through countless generations and connects us to the artists that were creating the exact same pieces. It connects us to those same people that did the exact same thing for the exact same reason. When we see one of our masks being used in the big house, or one of our frontlets being danced, it shows that connection to the past and connection to our culture and really gives us, as artists, a reason for being, and it's about that connection to culture and place and our ancestors.

Totem Poles - Narrator – 40:03

Totem poles are wooden monuments created by artists in many nations in the Northwest. They were raised in prominent locations like the entrance to a big house or along the shoreline to a village. Animal crests and supernatural beings carved on the poles represented the stories that belonged to a family.

Andy Everson - 40:28

When we look at totem poles, it's often telling those same stories as well, because you look at them, and you see those same animals, and sometimes, you'll see the human ancestor figure depicted as well, so it's showing that prehistory for our people, the very first histories during the time of transformation. It's about that connection to culture and place and our ancestors.

Narrator - 41:00

Art sculpted from stone, wood, clay and fibre are reminders of the artistic genius of our ancestors. But art was not the only cultural expression of Indigenous Peoples before 1491. Music, dance, and storytelling are a part of every Nation in the Americas. These diverse cultural expressions bring us together through sacred ceremonies and community celebrations. In many ways, art is the expression of Indigenous Peoples' relationship with the natural and spirit worlds. We have come to know our ancestors on a deeper level through their artistic traditions before 1491. Passed down from generation to generation, these traditions continue in our communities to this day.

Dr. Taiaiake Alfred – 42:51

[speaking Mohawk] My name is Dr. Taiaiake Alfred, and I'm the founding director of the Indigenous Governance Program at the University of Victoria and I'm a professor in that program and in the department of Political Science. Having grown up in the community and been surrounded by it all my life, I didn't really think that I would focus on that as an academic study, or a career, or a calling. There wasn't, in my experience, an opportunity to do that anyway in the universities that I went to for my undergrad in Montreal. But once I went to Cornell University in New York, they had a very strong American Indian program. A person in particular, Ron LaFrance Jr., who was a subchief from Akwesasne, another Mohawk. He influenced me very significantly and convinced me I should turn away from the path that I was on academically, which was International Relations, and actually Asian Studies, and focus instead on questions of our own governance and our own history.