

Author spotlights northern Tlingit art

by Wally Olson

for the Tundra Times

Art of the Northern Tlingit by Aldona Jonaitis is not just another collection of photographs or illustrations of Tlingit art.

It is an academic attempt to explain the relationship of the art to the social system, beliefs and culture of the Tlingit.

Jonaitis limits her discussion to the northern Tlingit — principally the art from Klukwan. A great deal has been written about the people and art of Klukwan in the past, and so she was able to incorporate these earlier studies into her new text.

What she has to say about this particular area also applies to other Tlingit art in general.

The first 48 pages are photographs of masks, totem poles, blankets and other artifacts, along with several old pictures of people and buildings. She then uses these photographs to illustrate her explanation in the text.

The introduction gives a general background to Northwest Coast art.

The following nine chapters deal with shamanism, social life, crest

animals, secular and sacred art. Because her main interest is in the art, the portion dealing with the social life and general culture of the Tlingits is limited.

The chapter on social life is only 16 pages. I think that the serious reader would need to have more information on Tlingit culture than what is found in these few pages.

The author is an art historian who has written several other articles on Tlingit art. In this particular book, she takes the theories of Levi-Strauss and Victor Turner and applies them to traditional Tlingit artworks.

The reader has to have some understanding of these theories to appreciate what she is trying to do.

Levi-Strauss, for example, says that cultures can be studied in terms of opposite or polar ideas. These basic ideas that underlie a culture are its basic "structures." He divides a culture into its "sacred" and "profane" or "secular" aspects.

These two poles of culture can then be contrasted. He shows how the "secular" is opposed to the "sacred."

This approach explains why Jonaitis' chapters are divided into

"Secular Art"/"Shamanic Art": "Social Life"/"Shamanism": "Crest Animals"/"Shamanic Animals."

The difficulty with this technique is that in reality, there may be some opposition, but there may be a lot of overlap. Dividing things into one aspect or another looks neat and orderly, but many times real, living cultures are not that orderly.

On the positive side, a structural analysis of this sort is thought-provoking. Rather than just setting out a lot of examples of Tlingit art and saying, "Here they are," it provides a way of looking at them in contrast.

She does a good job of explaining her approach and then referring back to the photographs and illustrations to support her conclusions.

I recommend the book for readers who want to do a little more than look at artifacts and say, "Isn't that nice?"

Even if you don't agree with all of her conclusions, and I personally disagree with some things, at least it makes you think about the artworks from a different point of view.

It is good to see that scholars are going beyond the simple presentation of art and asking some provocative questions about the relationship of the art to the culture and ideas.

The book is from the University of Washington Press in Seattle and costs \$30.