**Items of Prestige…gifts at the Potlatch**

At times of celebration, the wealthiest and most powerful people within the Coast region would hold great ceremonial events, known as potlatches. These occasions could last several days, featuring a series of generous feasts accompanied by dancing, singing and the telling of ancestral stories within the host’s longhouse. Often during the potlatch, open negotiations over hunting territories and trading rights would be conducted, the host demonstrating his power and wealth by flashy demonstrations of disregard for danger.

The anthropologist Franz Boas describes an event that took place among the Kawkwaka’wakw:

*When a person gives a grease feast, a great fire is lighted at the centre of the house. The flames leap up to the roof and the guests are almost scorched by the heat. Still the etiquette demands that they do not stir, else the host’s fire has conquered them. Even when the roof begins to burn and the fire attacks the rafters, they must appear unconcerned. The host alone has the right to send a man up to the roof to put out the fire.*

At the end of the potlatch the host would address his guests in a ceremony centred on the distribution of lavish presents. Most significant of all gifts (an item of prestige) would be large sheets of shield-shaped copper decorated in a variety of clan symbols. These objects are known by various names: tináa to the Tlingit, t’agu to the Haida and collectively in English as ‘coppers’. Often individually named with complex life-histories, coppers carried a nominal value measured in blankets or slaves, but their importance lay primarily in the obligation they placed on the recipients as part of a network of wealth and power distribution.

To the people of the Coast region, copper was an exotic item, originally traded from the north and later with Europeans. It held supernatural properties, and to present a guest with a copper or a piece from a broken copper placed on them a powerful obligation. A host who had received coppers from his guests at their potlatches was compelled to present them with a greater value of coppers than he had previously received and thus obliged his guests to present coppers of even greater value at their next potlatch. The wealthiest people would even smash coppers or throw them into the sea to demonstrate their superiority and strength. A leader who could not afford to make these presents or did not possess coppers could not hold a successful potlatch to celebrate important events and would consequently be considered a man of little importance among his peers.

**The purpose of the potlatch was to announce a significant social event: the birth, marriage or death of a person of high rank, or inheritance and ascension to a title, such as the naming of a new chief. During a potlatch there was an obligation to feed the guests (a feast) and objects of wealth were distributed as well. All members of the family hosting a potlatch would contribute to the wealth that was given away by their chief. The prestige accorded the host chief depended on the amount of wealth he displayed and gave away. In return, the host expected to get back more wealth than he gave away at the next potlatch given by a rival chief.**

**Potlatch guests were important because they acted as witnesses to the event. The ascension of the new chief took place during the memorial potlatch, where coppers and other objects of wealth were prominently displayed. The songs and dances performed during feasts and potlatches celebrated a family's crests and the history of their ancestors. This is where children learned about their family’s history.**