The Salish People: People of the Sea
Canada’s First Nations
Our West Coast First Nations
The Salish Peoples
The Georgia Basin
The Fraser River

[Images of the Fraser River and its surroundings, including a map of the river's course and nearby locations.]
Animals of the Rivers
Animals of the Gulf
The Salish People: Creation

- In the First World: The Star Family is created
- In the Second World: The Plant People were created
- In the Third World: Mythological Creatures inhabited the Earth
- In the Fourth World: The Mythical Creatures took off their costumes and the humans emerged
Spiritual Beliefs

- In Northwest Coast culture, their customs, beliefs, and history were passed down orally through stories, songs, and dances.

- They had stories about why certain things occurred, for example, the changes in season. There were also stories about each group and how they first appeared in this world. All of these stories were passed down to subsequent generations.

- The people of the Northwest believed that they were surrounded, at all times, by supernatural beings interfering with the natural world.

- In their culture, spirits were connected to all living things.
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The only link between the spirit world and the natural world was the 'Shamans' or 'Medicine Men'.

It was a Shaman's job to cure the sick, to ensure that there was adequate food, and to influence the weather. The belief was that they had the power to do all those things through an ability to communicate with the spirit world.

Both men and women could have been Shamans, however, they were most often men.

When someone took ill, it was believed to be an intervention by the spirit world, or a loss of the person's soul. Shamans were the only people who communicated directly with the spirits, so they were the only ones who could cure the sick.
The Potlatch

• Potlatch' was the name given to most Northwest Coast celebrations. It comes from the Nuu-chah-nulth word 'pachitle' meaning 'to give'.

• A potlatch was a big celebration that often took more than a year to plan. The ceremony usually corresponded with a person's change in social status, for example, marriage, birth, death, and coming of age. It included a feast, singing and costumed dancers, and some potlatches lasted as long as two to three weeks.

• Most importantly, though, potlatches became a way in which families could show off their wealth to others.

• Each person invited to a Potlatch received gifts related to their social rank. Some examples of gifts: canoes, slaves, carved dishes, and eulachon oil. The more wealth that a family gave away (as gifts), the more prestige was bestowed on them.
Winter Dances were staged performances with masked dancers that created an illusion of death or of direct contact with supernatural powers.

A chief would call people to attend a potlatch to celebrate a birth, or marriage, or to mark the finishing of a new house.

He would honour everyone with gifts, the more lavish the better, to show everyone how successful a leader he was.

A Dignity Potlatch was held if an important person, like a Chief, had an embarrassing moment, like falling out of a canoe. The purpose of this smaller potlatch was to offset any humiliation the person suffered.

In Northwest Coast culture, a person could not be laughed at, or they lost all dignity. Therefore, a potlatch reestablished some dignity.
Transportation

- Very skilled navigators: plied the rivers and lakes of the region and across the Salish Sea
- Built large sea-worthy canoes from the large cedar trees
- The cedar is a very large straight grained tree with few branches
- Very light and strong, the canoes could be up to 50 feet long and 8 feet wide
- They could carry between 2 and 50 people and 5 to 10 thousand pounds of freight
- The canoes were used for fishing, hunting, travelling to potlatches, trade and warfare
- Smaller boats were built for single families
Trade

- Trade took place between families, villages and nations
- The canoe was the main source of transportation and goods were carried long distances
- Trade was done with eulachon oil, dried salmon furs, boxes, baskets
- Family, clan and village relationships were forged through the practice of the Potlatch and trade
Homes

• The Salish people developed permanent residents
• Lived in Long Houses (Big Houses) made from cedar planks
• Houses were up to 150 feet long and 60 feet wide; could be used for several families
• The large strong cedar tree allowed for massive houses to protect the people from the wet climate
  • Frame made out of large cedar logs
  • Overlapping planks attached to the logs by wooden pegs to keep rain out
  • No openings in the long house except a door and a roof vent to let the smoke from the fire out
  • Built with low sloping roof to keep the heat in (many poles used to keep roof up)
Inside the “Big House”

- Interiors of the houses were relatively simple
- Bed lined the outside of the house
- Storage of food and belongings were in small dugouts under the beds
- Each family had their own cooking pit
- Woven cedar mats hung from the roof to separate families. If the house was built for a single family, a man and wife would live there with their children. When their children had their own families, space was found in the house for them.
The Village

- A village could be made up of up to 30 houses with 100 people in total
- Houses were lined up side by side facing the water
- The house fronts were usually painted and the house posts were carved with the family crests
- When a longhouse was built by the village, the Chief was responsible for assigning which families would live in the new house
- If the owner of the longhouse dies, the family burned the house because they believed the spirit of the owner would worry about the family left behind
Clothing

• The weather dictated the amount of clothing worn by the people
• In the warm summers, men wore small coverings made of cedar bark or animal skins, and women wore cedar bark skirts
• The women made the clothing out of softened cedar bark or wood, animal skins, and wool
• Because of the rain, clothing was made as much for blocking the rain as it was for warmth
• Bark capes and spruce hats were worn to keep dry
• Clothing was a sign of status and people dressed accordingly to class
• The wealthy wore fancier clothes and jewelry
• The Chief wore a Chilkat blanket, dance apron, leggings, and moccasins
• The blankets worn were woven from goats wool and cedar bark. They were then painted
The Salish people traditionally were hunters, fishers and gatherers. They lived amongst an abundance of food and resources, and therefore, did not need to develop agricultural practices to feed the people. With extensive access to water, the Salish became very skilled fishermen. The ocean supplied halibut, salmon, crab, shellfish, seaweed, clams, whales, oysters, mussels, sea otters, seals, turtles and much more. Natural oils were supplied by the eulachon.
Food

• Summers were spent hunting elk, deer, mountain goat and bear, and gathering berries, roots and other plant sources
• Foods were largely baked and steamed over heated rocks placed into cedar baskets or wooden bowls
• Women served the food on wooden platters
• Salmon was the most important source of food for the Salish people: some was eaten fresh, but most was dried to preserve for the long winter months
The Art

• Integral part of Coast Salish culture
• Artisans known for basketry, weaving and woodworking
• Hats were a mainstay as the climate was so wet
• The skills were passed down from one generation to the next
• Woodworking: totem poles, canoes, bentwood boxes, sculptures and masks
• Totems were carved into large poles to show family crests or social status (up to 15 metres tall)
• Most poles had animals or human figures carved into them and were raised by the entire village
  • Often painted red, black, and white. Sometimes blue and yellow were used
The art of canoe making was passed from father to son, and nobody except the recognized carver could carve the canoe.

Bentwood boxes were made from a single piece of cedar. They were bent and pegged, and often adorned with family crests to show status.

Masks were also carved from cedar and were painted. They could be adorned with copper to show wealth.

Women were responsible for weaving. They would use softened cedar bark, cat-tails and coloured grasses to create beautiful mats, clothing, and bedding.