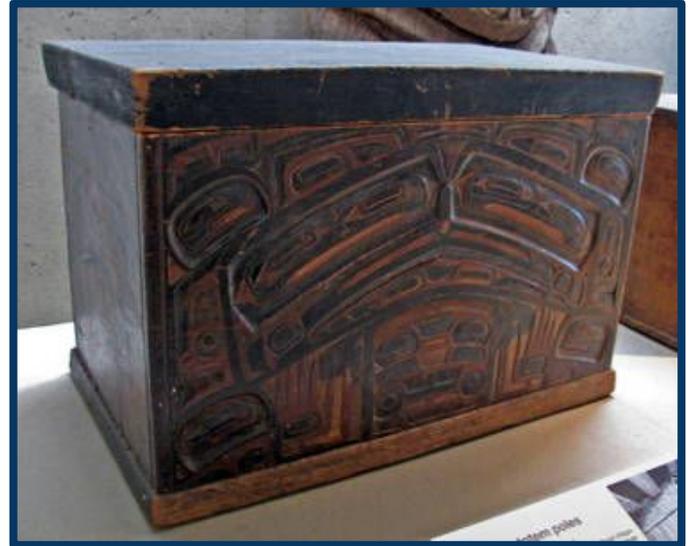


Cedar Bentwood Boxes

Art of the First Nations of the Pacific Northwest Coast

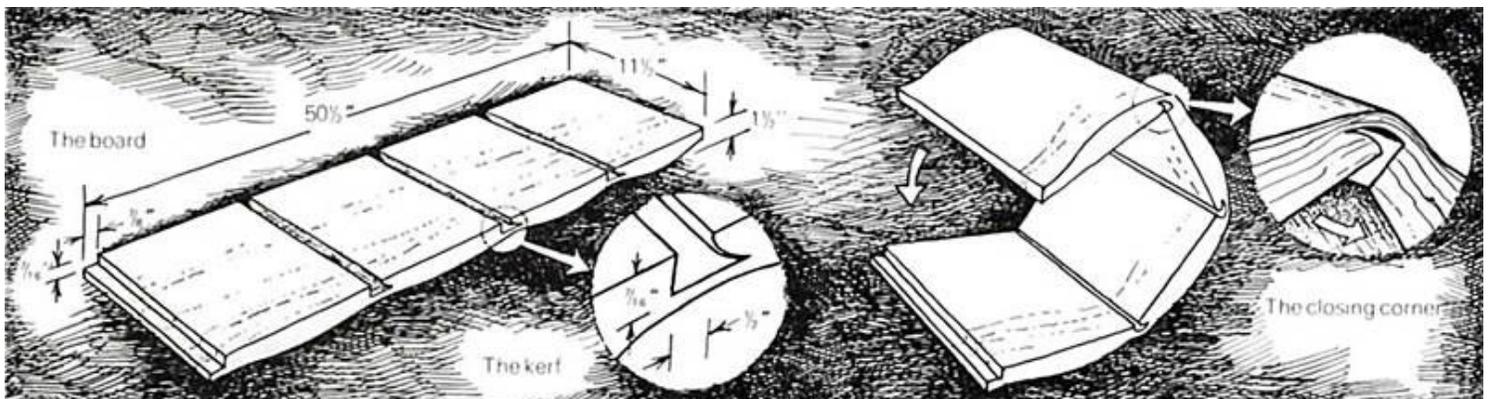
History & Design

Cedar (k^halakwati-stik[•]) was a very valuable resource to the Grand Ronde people. They used cedar to make housing, clothing, canoes, ropes, boxes, and much more. The Chinookan people made a special kind of box (lak^haset), a bentwood box. Henry Thompson, an explorer of the Pacific Northwest from 1813-1814, recorded his discoveries through journal entries. He stated in one entry, "that the Chinook in 1814 had wooden boxes with covers, some of which they made themselves". Bentwood storage chests were the property of high ranking and wealthy individuals, and were used to store valuable masks, rattles and ceremonial clothing. The carvings and designs on the boxes are very stylish and are unique to each box. They often depict images of animals, birds, or sea creatures.



History & Design

For bentwood boxes, western red cedar and yellow cedar were the material of choice. The old way was to burrow two deep holes into the living trunk, one near the ground and the other as high up as the boards would be long. Planks could then be split off using a set of wedges and a stone maul, and the tree would live on. The first plank removed was three finger-widths thick, because it never ran quite parallel to the splitting plane. The following planks ran more parallel and could be as thin as one finger-width - if the cedar was good. Planks of 20 feet and longer were split this way. The wood had to be seasoned, since green wood is liable to shatter when forced into the tight bends necessary for wooden boxes. The next step was most critical - cutting the kerfs where the future corners would be. The wood was then heated in a steam box and slowly bent around the kerfs (as seen in the image below), creating the shell of the box. A top and bottom were then made and fixed to the shell to create a box tight enough to hold water.



Information and Images adapted from [Don Hitchcock, 2020](#) and Davidson, 1980