

# Symbolism versus realism

The bold graphics of Northwest Coast Native art is quickly recognized as such by observing the few design elements that are characteristics used often to show the eyes, joints, ears, feathers and claws of the creatures. These are defined by broad black lines that change in width as it flows around. These key elements define the various creatures, even in abstract forms.

Many designs are highly abstracted, especially in early work. The more highly abstract the design by distortion or by filling a given space, the more difficult it is to interpret the design to a specific creature. The key elements for various creatures represented by the accepted symbols provide the clues, but even these are interpreted differently by various native authorities. The recognized symbols are frequently used to fill space, and have no meaning other than to help the design flow.

This stylized art is practiced from Alaska to Oregon along the Pacific Northwest, but the style varies by area, clan, and individual artists. Contemporary artists more frequently have used the characteristic symbols in a silhouette form that depicts the creatures in a more realistic manner. They are rarely totally realistic, but they are recognizable.

## Elements of the Art

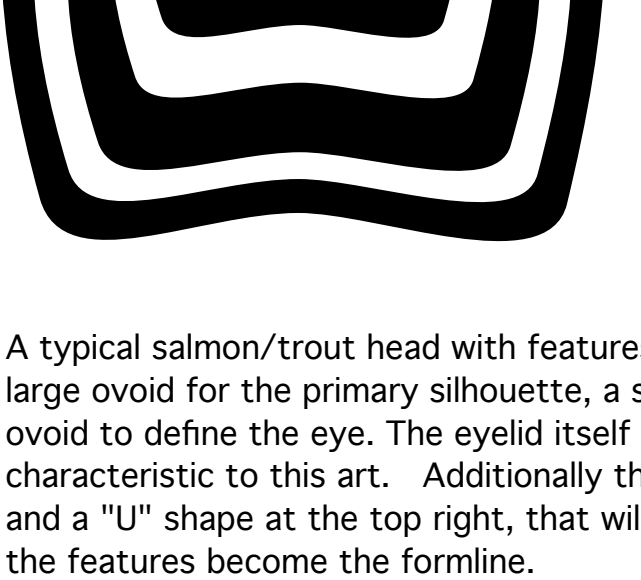
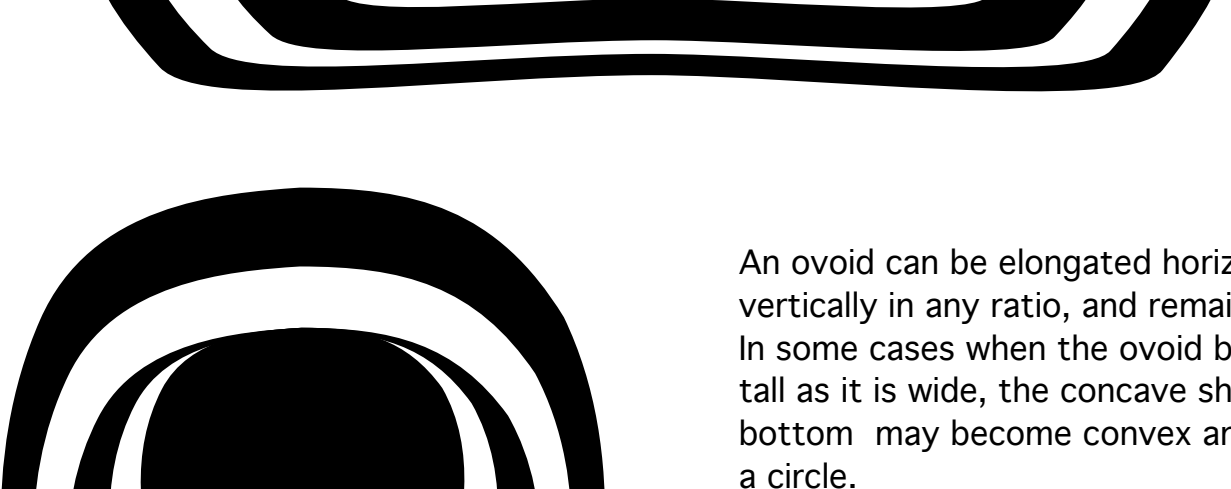
### Formline

The most recognizable feature of NW Coastal native art is known as the "formline" but it really is not a line. The formline is really the spaces between design patterns that have been filled in with color, usually black. These areas typically vary in width as it flows between the patterns. It has been suggested the bark templates were used to draw lines defining various patterns. In any design the formline appears to be a positive definition of a characteristic, when in actuality it is the negative area around the positive feature.

### Ovoids

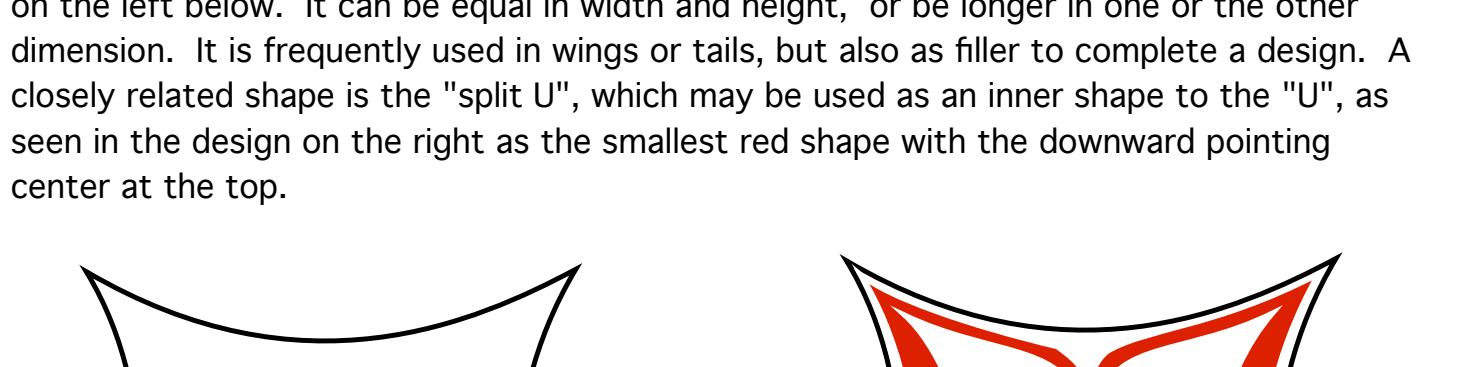
The most characteristic design feature of NW Coastal native art is the ovoid. It generally has the shape of a bean, or a rectangle with rounded corners. It may be tall and narrow, or long and flat. It is generally used to define an eye or joint, but frequently used to fill a space. It is always convex in the upper area and sides, and convex in the lower part. If convex in the upper area it is generally considered to be upside down.

Below on the left you see an outer ovoid with an inner ovoid as they might be traced. On the right you see the space between the two ovoids filled in and witness the varying width of the formline between the two. The second row below shows a third version with an additional ovoid filling in the white of the second ovoid.



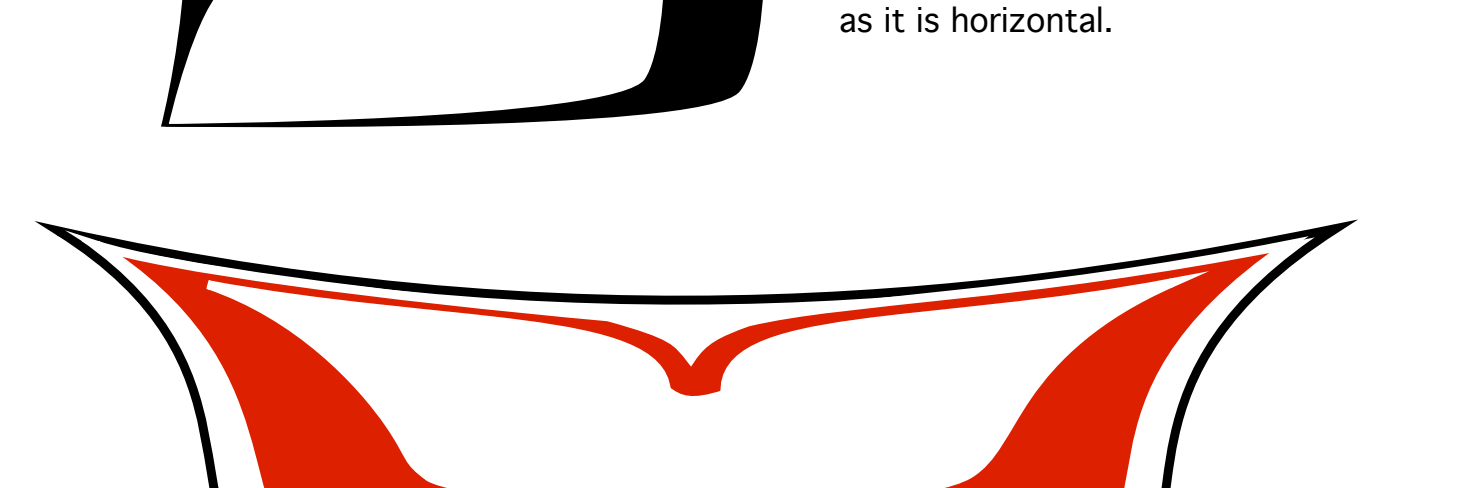
An ovoid can be elongated horizontally or vertically in any ratio, and remains an ovoid. In some cases when the ovoid becomes as tall as it is wide, the concave shape of the bottom may become convex and appear as a circle.

A typical salmon/trout head with features template drawn on the left. Notice the use of a large ovoid for the primary silhouette, a second ovoid to outline the eye socket, and a third ovoid to define the eye. The eyelid itself is a variation of the ovoid with pointed ends, and is characteristic to this art. Additionally there is an "L" shape, horizontally along the bottom, and a "U" shape at the top right, that will be described later. The spaces filled in between the features become the formline.

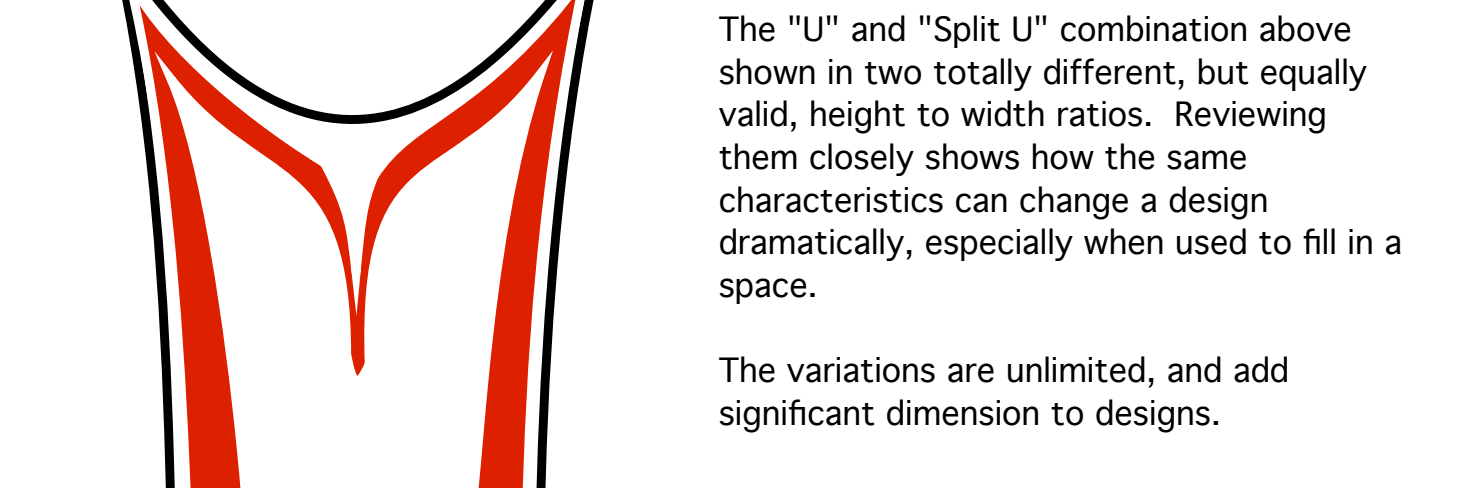


### "U" and "Split U"

Another frequently seen design characteristic is the "U", and in it's simplest form is shown on the left below. It can be equal in width and height, or be longer in one or the other dimension. It is frequently used in wings or tails, but also as filler to complete a design. A closely related shape is the "split U", which may be used as an inner shape to the "U", as seen in the design on the right as the smallest red shape with the downward pointing center at the top.

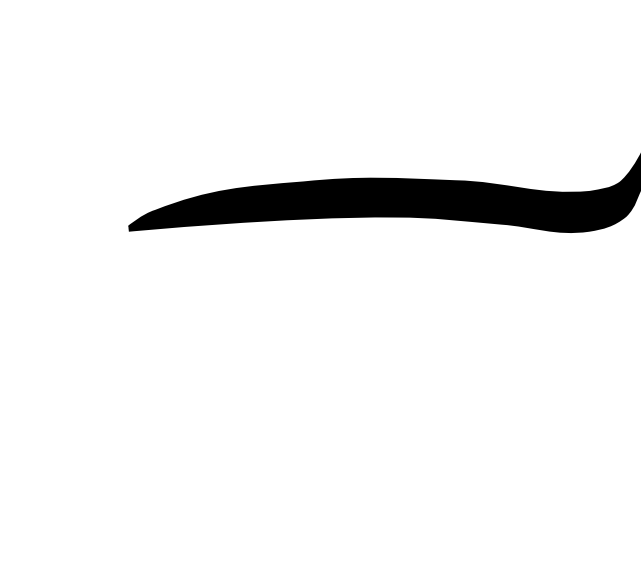


The "U" to the left with an inner "Split U" is very typical of early design shapes. The formline is heavily weighted at the bottom of the "U", in this case the right side, as it is horizontal.



The "U" and "Split U" combination above shown in two totally different, but equally valid, height to width ratios. Reviewing them closely shows how the same characteristics can change a design dramatically, especially when used to fill in a space.

The variations are unlimited, and add significant dimension to designs.



The "L" shape below on the left is another characteristic found in NW Coastal Art. The length to height or width ratio can also vary as with other symbols. This one is taken from the Salmon Trout Head above, and helps define the space of the ovoids and create more formlines. On the right is the same shape, but shorter.



### Color

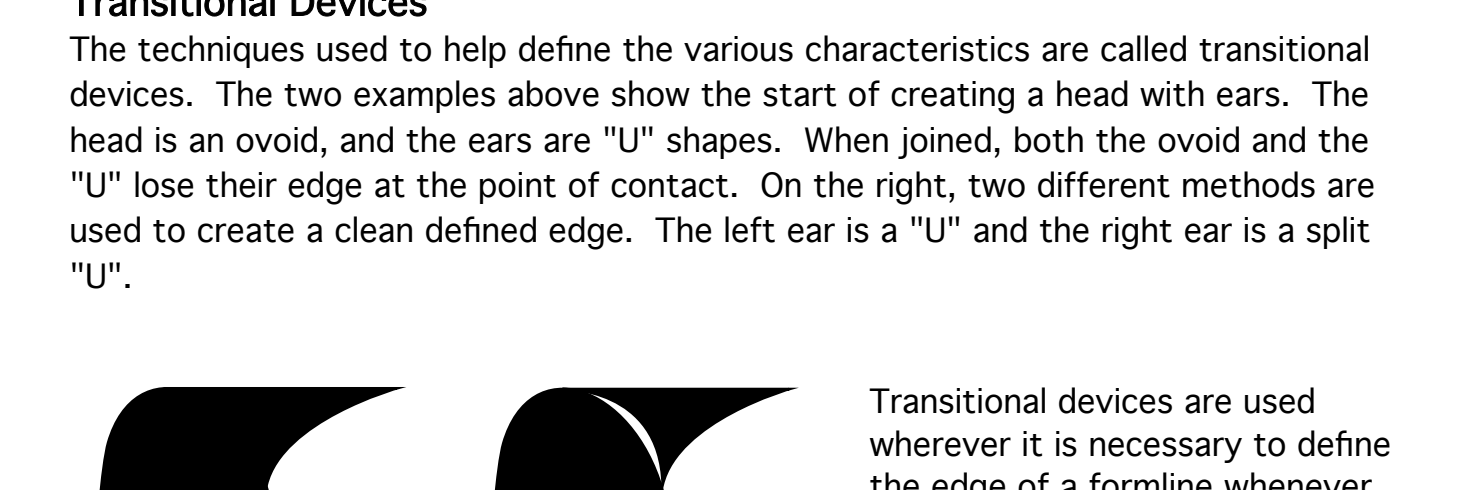
Black is by far the most dominant color in the old traditional designs, and is the primary color for the main formlines in the majority of designs. Red is usually a secondary color, but used occasionally for the main formlines. It is used regularly on formlines of secondary importance and for accents.

A third color of a blue-green nature was used for elements of a lesser importance than a secondary nature. There are many characteristic elements of this third order that is usually in a space enclosed by primary and secondary features. These might be in ears, fins, feathers, and areas between inner and outer ovoids of eye sockets or joint designs.

In modern and contemporary NW Coastal Art, you will find many more colors used as more materials are available than the limited few to the early natives. The primary formline of a design may be found in any color, as long as the feature is bold and has the characteristic swelling and diminishing figure that delineates the design elements.

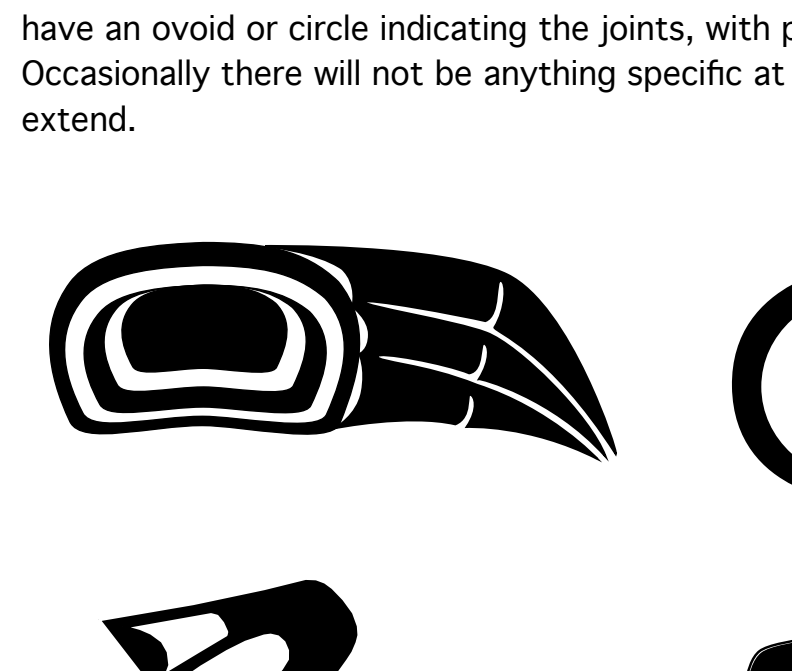
### Lines

The true line is used frequently, and often seen on the inside edge of many "U" forms. It is also used in making the long center portion of a split "U". It is also used to define an eye socket.



### Transitional Devices

The techniques used to help define the various characteristics are called transitional devices. The two examples above show the start of creating a head with ears. The head is an ovoid, and the ears are "U" shapes. When joined, both the ovoid and the "U" lose their edge at the point of contact. On the right, two different methods are used to create a clean defined edge. The left ear is a "U" and the right ear is a split "U".

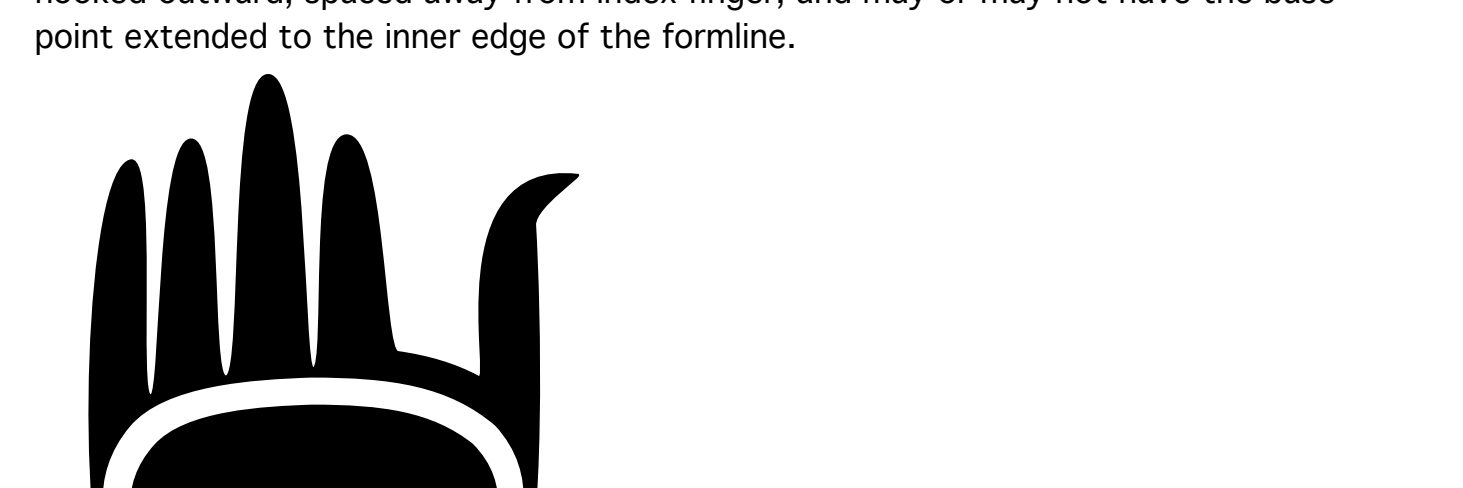


Transitional devices are used wherever it is necessary to define the edge of a formline whenever there is an overlap or touching of two different elements. On the far left there is an extension to a split "U", and to it's right the extension defined by a slit or arc.

Transitional devices may be slits, "T" Shapes, "L" shapes, or circles, depending whether it defines a curved, straight, thick, or thin formline.

### Feet & Claws

Feet and Claws of the various birds and mammals come in a wide assortment. Most have an ovoid or circle indicating the joints, with points extended from there. Occasionally there will not be anything specific at the joint, but fingers or claws will extend.



### Hands

Human Hands typically have an ovoid for the palm, and the outer edges of the thumb and little finger are tangent to the outer perimeter of the primary formline. The fingers are always extended and slightly separated, with their base point almost touching the inner edge of the formline. The exception the the thumb, which is usually hooked outward, spaced away from index finger, and may or may not have the base point extended to the inner edge of the formline.



### Eyebrows

Eyebrows are used in stylized faces whenever the eye sockets are not defined by ovoids formlines. These are somewhat realistic, and easily recognized for what they are by shape and placement over an eye. They are usually a concave arc on the lower side, thick in the middle, and thinner at the ends, with the inner end smaller than the outer. Often there is a pronounced bump in the top at the widest point, and shaped like the top of an ovoid.

