

EUROPEAN WAYS OF TALKING ABOUT THE ART OF THE NORTHWEST COAST FIRST NATIONS

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Abstract / Resume

The ways in which we, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike, view the Aboriginal art of the Northwest Coast, have been profoundly affected by European accounts of the art. For a long time Northwest Coast art was compared to European art and treated as a quaint variant of “real” art. In recent decades we have begun to view this work as art by itself, that is art which is inherently valuable.

Les façons dont nous, les autochtones et les allogènes aussi, voyons l'art autochtone de la côte nord-ouest ont été profondément influencées par les exposés européens sur l'art. On compare, depuis longtemps, l'art de la côte nord-ouest avec l'art européen et considère le premier comme une variante bizarre du “vrai” art. Au cours des dernières décennies, on a commencé à considérer ce travail comme un art en soi, c'est-à-dire comme un art qui est de grande valeur profonde.

In his book, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies*, the Australian Stephen Muecke argued that European ways of talking about Aboriginal people limit ways of knowing what Aborigines might be (1992:20). Canadian and international views, as well as the understandings of Aboriginal peoples themselves, of First Nations art on the Northwest Pacific Coast have been profoundly and similarly colored by value-laden European accounts and definitions. This paper examines some of these accounts and identifies common themes throughout this Eurocentric discourse. It is a tenet of this paper that we, Native and non-Native alike, can only embrace our multicultural futures in North America by acknowledging and understanding the prejudices and limitations of our colonial and monocultural pasts.

One of the early sources consulted in the preparation of this paper was Wilson Duff's *The Impact of the White Man*, part of the British Columbia Provincial Museum's *Indian History of British Columbia* (Duff, 1969). In this text Duff discussed the impact of contact between "Indians" and European explorers, traders, missionaries, administrators, and anthropologists. There are several copies in the University of British Columbia Library. All are much used and had probably been assigned reading for courses in anthropology. Underlining and marginal notations are common. On page 78 of one of the copies, a student from the past had written:

I don't see the point in chronicling the "achievements" of these collectors or anthropologists as their only virtue lies in recognizing the inherent value of the objects. A confusion of the object itself with the viewer. Who and what are we studying? The anthropologists or anthropology?

Although I acknowledge that we are not dealing with "achievements," the student was confused, because relatively few people recognized any *inherent* value in objects from the Northwest Coast, and he/she failed to recognize that more than the "art" that they collected, what explorers, traders, missionaries, administrators, curators, and anthropologists *said* about the art that they studied and collected has continually colored perceptions of British Columbia First Nations art. We have not concentrated enough on the viewers. What did they "see" and what did they say?

I teach art education courses in a large university department of curriculum studies. In curriculum and instruction in art what positions do/should we take *vis-à-vis* this discourse? Like visiting tourists, do students, including Native students, still leave our classrooms thinking of First Nations' art merely as curiosity and souvenir; as ethnological specimen that can never be seen as an equal alternative to the art of the European Great Tradition? Using the hierarchy of this tradition, do students simply admire

Northwest Coast artifacts as good examples of “primitive” craft? Are Christian fundamentalists still viewing some Native image-makers as blind and ignorant, and their work as “abominations of heathenism” (Stephenson, 1925:162)? Just as the “old” art historians of the European Great Tradition deal with “monuments,” and stylistic analysis and iconography become ends in themselves (Phillips, 1989), do we approach Native art *only* through a formal stylistic analysis of great Haida, Kwakiutl, Tlingit and Tsimshian monuments? Or, knowing what has been said, are we prepared to embrace a democratic approach, admit to being outsiders, and acknowledge other experts? As Alfred Young Man stated, after a National Native Indian Artists' Symposium, “we” have a long way to go, but “We are on our way. Let our national institutions of art history and culture reflect the real North American, finally. Why must we live in a derivative culture imported from Europe? Why can't we accept our own” (1988:5)?

Curiosities and Souvenirs

Douglas Cole (1985) suggested that 18th century European visitors to the Northwest Coast first viewed cultural artifacts as artificial curiosities in much the same way that they viewed, and commented upon, natural curiosities, such as flora and fauna, that were drawn and engraved for publication. In the 19th century artificial curiosities became, simply, curios. Many of the objects collected in North America found their way to the cabinets of curiosities of rich and powerful Europeans. For example, a 1762 catalogue of the collection of Franco Davila who was born in Ecuador and was in business in Paris and Madrid, listed “various ornaments of the savages of Canada” (Cabello, 1992:13).

First Nations people themselves even became curios. For example, in 1781 the British public had their first opportunity to see a Native from the Pacific Coast when William Ellis's portrait titled *A Native of King George's Sound* was released as a popular engraving.

Contact led to the development of new art forms and the souvenir trade began. Hawker (1991) and others see the development of Haida argillite carving in the first half of the 19th century as a response to the need of European sailors to find portable curiosities and souvenirs. By 1820 sea otter pelts were scarce and the Haida began to offer potatoes and argillite curios as trade items. By the 1880s cruises to Alaska provided a new market for the curio trade. First Nations' art could not be valuable because curios were expected, and still are expected, to be inexpensive. Rhuamah Skidmore complained that the Native people employed at one salmon cannery “held their things so high that even the most insatiate and abandoned curio-

buyer made no purchases" (1885:27, as cited in Cole, 1982:445). Indeed, even today, in Vancouver and Victoria, in airports and on ferries, the proprietors of curio shops, which are not too different from those found in museums and on some Reserves, still define Indian Art as inexpensive curiosities and souvenirs.

Ethnological Specimens

What were souvenirs and curios to the layperson became ethnological specimens to others. "Objects of ethnological interest" became an increasingly common way for some non-Native people to describe what they collected. For example, the Field Museum's *Annual Report* (1897:187) mentioned "objects of ethnological interest" being collected from the Queen Charlottes (as cited in Cole, 1982:457).

Cole (1985) posited that the scientific spirit and biological conceptualization that infused much of anthropology in the 19th century encouraged Europeans to see artifacts as specimens. He reported that Captain Cook found that British collectors were more interested in scientific specimens than cultural artifacts. Consequently it was museums of natural history, rather than art museums, which first found room for North American Native art collections. These were exhibited with artifacts and other specimens from Africa and Oceania.

Craft

The first recorded encounter with Europeans was in July, 1774, when a Spanish navigator, Juan Perez, met a group of Haida. In return for clothes, beads and knives the Haida traded sea otter furs and a variety of handmade articles including plates, spoons, mats and hats. The Franciscan diarists who accompanied Perez were most impressed with some carved wooden boxes and Chilcat blankets (Fisher, 1977). In terms that are now reserved for the antique sale room, the artifacts were carefully described, by one of the Franciscans, in terms of their craft: "a little blanket... woven in little squares, which make very nice and fine work" and "coverlets of sea otter skins sewn together so well that the best tailor could not sew them better" (Crespi, 1774, cited in Cabello, 1992:14). Another inventory from that voyage included:

a hat woven with a great deal of ability which appears to be of fine basketry; another of the same in a Chinese style and much more beautiful because of its weaving and because it has depicted thereon the canoes that they use...a pouch or bag of

very delicate basketry, very beautifully made (cited in Cabello, 1992:15).

The Geographic Board of Canada (1913) praised Native “craftworkers,” although it is significant that, in adopting a Eurocentric hierarchical distinction between the fine arts and the crafts, it also diminished their status by referring to them as artisans:

The artisans of both sexes were instinct with the aesthetic impulse; in one region they were devoted to quill-work, those of the next area to carving wood and slate; the ones living across the mountains produced whole costumes adorned with beadwork...workers on the Pacific coast made matchless basketry (*Ibid.*:44).

But whereas Indian baskets and blankets could be “delicate” and “beautifully made,” larger art forms with emotionally charged images were seen as “grotesque” and “crude” and reflected the views of England’s Owen Jones, who, in his influential *Grammar of Ornament* (1856), went about as far as any Victorian, in appreciating the form of the art of so-called “savage” peoples when he compared it with the art of children, which the mid-Victorians did not particularly value. He wrote patronizingly:

The pleasure we receive in contemplating the rude attempts at ornament of the most savage tribes arises from our appreciation of a difficulty accomplished; we are at once charmed by the evidence of the intention, and surprised at the simple and ingenious process by which the result is obtained (*Ibid.*:14).

Similarly, George Gustavus Zerffi (1876), who taught art history at the National Art Training School in London, would probably now be labelled a racist bigot. In his influential 19th century art history text, this Victorian imperialist, like the influential Sir Kenneth Clark (1969) in our own recent past, saw civilization as essentially and peculiarly Western. Zerffi called the White Aryan race “the crowning product of the cosmical forces of nature (1878:26) and in true ethnocentric fashion went on to state:

To him exclusively we owe art in its highest sense...He surpasses the other...groups of humanity, not only in technical skills, but especially in inventive and reasoning power, critical discernment, and purity of artistic taste. The white man alone, has produced idealized masterpieces in sculpture and painting (*Ibid.*:26).

Promoting such views, Zerffi became president of the Royal Historical Society.

It is these views which have conditioned European perceptions of the

art of the “other.” Often we have seen First Nations' art acknowledged as crude handicraft, which, if it got condescending recognition at all, was relegated to corridors and dark spaces.

For example, in an address to club women in Ottawa in the 1920s, Mrs. O.J. Jolliffe (1928) egocentrically stated that Paul Kane was the first Canadian artist of any real importance unless you chose to count the crude handicraft of the scattered tribes of Indians. She condescendingly told her audience:

His Totum (sic) poles which may still be seen in some parts of British Columbia are an expression of artistic conscience. Two of these specimens were brought to Ottawa [significantly] by one of our geologists and now stand [again significantly] in the corridors of our Museum and although grotesque in design and crude in execution they show a positive decorative quality (*Ibid.*:163).

Similarly, Simon Fraser patronizingly described Salish mortuary figures, which he saw in Spuzzum, as “beasts and birds carved in a curious but crude manner yet pretty well proportioned” (cited in Woodcock, 1977:142).

Heathen Graven Images

Whether Anglican, Catholic, or Methodist, the early Christian missionary attitude on the Northwest coast was one of extreme cultural imperialism. In working to outlaw the potlach the missionaries removed one of the major impulses for art-making. One Methodist missionary, referring to the Port Simpson district in 1896, stated:

No man, till [sic] he has seen it, can form any idea of the moral, spiritual and intellectual death of the pagan Indians. Oh, what darkness! Oh what blindness! Oh what ignorance! What utter torpor and vacuity of mind! One would say it must take generations of time and toil to lift them anywhere near level of Christian civilization (Rev. Dr. Carman, quoted in Crosby, 1914:58).

Using the metaphors of 19th century evangelism, fellow Methodist W.J. Sipprell described missionary Thomas Crosby's fifty years among the Native people of British Columbia as

Beginning when paganism was rampant and when but little had been done for the heathen Indian, he has seen the work advance and darkness recede before the dawning light (Crosby, 1914:viii).

Similarly, a book on Canadian Methodist missions written especially for

young people was typical in referring to non-Christian Native people as “neglected and degraded” and as “lost sheep in the wilderness” (Sutherland, 1906:237).

For the missionaries, Christianization meant not just accepting the gospel, it meant embracing another set of cultural values. For example, Methodism particularly had little time for graven images of any culture, so it is not surprising that it should turn to music. A case from Port Simpson serves to illustrate. The wife of the medical missionary, Dr. R.W. Large, was acclaimed for her musical education. She taught Native people “simple Gospel melodies...and selections from the oratorios and other music of *recognized standard*” (Stephenson, 1925:206-207, my emphasis). The Larges began bands at Port Simpson and Bella Bella. The Port Simpson band, which even included a set of bagpipes, was something of a curiosity and played on many imperial occasions in other parts of the province. The members of the church choir who were “the children of the men and women who forty years before whooped and yelled” (*Ibid.*:207), and who, according to Stephenson, initially sang only “weird, minor chants” (*Ibid.*:206) were now praised for giving *The Hallelujah Chorus*, *The Gloria*, and *The Heavens are Telling* “credible rendering” (*Ibid.*:207). Sixty years before the apologies of the United Church of Canada, the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Stephenson's book was commended to its readers so that they could “be well informed relative to the work of...the Missionary Society...in laying the foundations of National greatness in this country” (*Ibid.*:vii).

Missionaries, of course, had plans for the conversion of Native people to Christianity. They were often responsible for education in Indian residential schools. As art educator Richard Carline (1968) and others have pointed out, Christian missionaries were particularly loath to encourage or include the Indigenous arts in education because that art was so inevitably connected to the beliefs and values which they opposed. Many of the ethnographic collections now in European museums were begun by missionaries. It is instructive to see how these 19th century Christians viewed the art that they stole or otherwise acquired from conquered peoples. For example, the London Missionary Society which was particularly active in the South Pacific, established its own museum in London. There, in the 1840s according to the *Illustrated London News* (May 20, 1843)

after their meetings, the friends of the Mission are want to repair, to revive their sympathies by an actual inspection of those idol gods which it is the first aim of the Society `utterly to abolish' ” (*Ibid.*:342).

“Utterly to abolish,” such art could therefore never be valued for its *content* and it was consequently labelled primitive or “savage”; unfortunate terms that are still used by some Western art educators.

Using One's Own Standards to Judge Art of Others

In the sixth edition of a best-selling book originally published in 1932 by the National Museum of Canada, the author negatively analyzed Native art according to the dominant culture's formalist aesthetic:

We may admire the artists' control of their technique, the excellence of many of their carvings, and the splendidly decorative effect of some of the paintings. The huge totem-poles and house-posts will impress us by their savage dignity; silver bracelets and slate dishes delight us by the delicacy of their engravings. But the grotesqueness of the figures, unredeemed, as in the art of the New Zealand Maoris, by exquisite scrollwork or other softening features, soon wearies us; and the conventionalization is too involved, the symbolism too obscure and too far removed from our trends of thought for us to assimilate this exotic style of art, which, however attractive in certain respects, fails to blend with our traditional styles (Jenness, 1963:211-212).

This old art history tried to relate everything on the Pacific Coast to European style and to aesthetic notions that the “best” art was imaginative and revolutionary, for example:

Haida art could be described as baroque (highly ornamented, with many curved lines) or classical (in the sense of being typical of old north-west culture as it was before the Tsimshian and the Tlingit began to deviate from it with more imaginative and revolutionary designs) (Brown, 1977:47).

We have been taught that First Nations art got better because of the introduction of European tools. A number of writers have called the pre-missionary period of European contact the “golden age” of Native art (Surtees, 1971:27). Totem poles, we are told, were *developed* greatly in this period. We need to question such assumptions.

Hawker (1991) has demonstrated how Native art is still selected and exhibited in ways that relate primarily to the interests of the Euro-Canadian cultural elite. The work of male artists is valued more than the work of female artists. There is a European notion of the proper expected look that has discriminated against the arts of women and objects produced by some southern groups. Non-Native Canadians still prefer Native art to have the

stylistic characteristics of Haida art prior to the 1880s.

Producing images to meet the expectations of tourists and the White marketplace has been a major impetus for art production for more than a century. "Indian" art should look like "Indian" art. Non-Native people have not allowed Native art to change. In 1885 a tourist complained that a Native silversmith was making bangles "adapted from models in an illustrated jeweller's catalogue that someone has sent him" (from Skidmore as cited in Cole, 1985:98). Shephard (1889) wrote of a time before argillite carvers and silversmiths realized that "native" imagery sold better: "American flags, E Pluribus Unum eagles, clasped hands, and other borrowed atrocities. They might as well come from New Jersey" (cited in Cole, 1985:99).

Haida Is Best

There has been a tendency, in the literature and in museum exhibits, to lump all Northwest Coast art together. One writer noted, for example:

This extraordinary style of art varies slightly from tribe to tribe along the coast so that we can usually distinguish without difficulty the productions of the southern peoples, the Coast Salish and the Kwakiutl, from those of the Haida and Tsimshian in the north. *The differences, however, are of a somewhat minor character and need not detain us here* (Jenness, 1963:211, my emphasis).

The art of the upper Northwest Coast has been viewed by both Euro-Canadians and First Nations people as somehow "better" than the art of the Southern Coast. Writing first in 1939, Viola Garfield, a noted scholar of the Tsimshian peoples, stated:

The most elaborate work was done by the Haida, Tlingit and Tsimshian whose complex clan organization stimulated artistic production, and by the northern Kwakiutl, whose secret society dramatizations provided inspiration for creative artists. Excellent work was also done by southern Kwakiutl, Bella Bella, Bella Coola and Nootka carvers (Garfield and Wingert, 1966:58).

By the 1960s this view had become entrenched in the popular literature about Canadian Indians. For example, Symington praised all the west coast tribes for their "well developed art forms, highly stylized and full of symbolic meaning, with great strength and often considerable aesthetic merit" (1969:100). He went to note, however, that the Haida developed totemic design and sculpture to the highest level" (*Ibid.*). The exhibits in Canada's National Museum of Civilization reinforce this view. Hilary Stewart wrote:

Because some authorities believe that Haida artists brought Northwest Coast art to its peak (some do not agree), and because it is the best known of the cultural styles, its bold uncluttered look has become a standard. The purity of its forms, and the refined sense of balance that governs their use, show up in contemporary printed designs (1979:104).

Despite the “new” art history, and more attention being paid to the socio-cultural functions of art, and less concern to its appearance the “authorities,” operating from their European aesthetic position, have not been challenged in any major way. Brown, for example, still reflects dominant disenfranchising views:

Northwest coast native art reaches its most complex, technically perfect, and interesting forms from the Kwatiutl in the south to the Tlingit in the north. Though the Nootka and the Coast Salish sometimes approached this degree of excellence, they did not equal it (1977:44).

Design Elements

As we have seen, European aesthetic standards were particularly evident in the ways that an artifact's formal qualities were discussed. Franz Boas (1903) and his student, Herman Haebler (1918) were among the first anthropologists to consider Northwest Coast art in terms of design elements, composition, and style. Paul Wingert was the first trained art historian to study Northwest Coast art. He too, using the same limiting “elements and principles” approach that has characterized much school-based art education, discussed the work in terms of line, plane, rhythm, repetition, balance, proportion, contrast, unity, and texture. He seems also to have required that all art should give aesthetic pleasure. Such a view is widely held, and, in the end probably doesn't help us either appreciate or understand art in a multicultural context. A true formalist, Wingert found Tsimshian sculpture

particularly rewarding in its strong aesthetic qualities. These require discerning observation and reveal, as a consequence, rich visual effects. But, typical of the art of the entire area, these results also produce a strong tactile response. Sculpture and painting often collaborate. Color emphasizes the carved forms and details and in many instances adds to them. Moreover it gives an effect that contributes substantially to the initial visual response to the forms. That initial response is, after renewed contacts, often supplanted by one stimulated by the merging of sculptural and expressive forms. It is necessary to examine

any object of Tsimshian art many times before a true comprehension of its forms, and an appreciation of its aesthetic qualities, can be arrived at. The resulting knowledge and pleasure are, however, more than worth the effort (Garfield and Wingert, 1966:94).

Tsimshian sculpture is extremely complex and, although we may never have access to all the cultural and contextual aspects of it, we need to appreciate it for more than just those aesthetic qualities which non-Aboriginal people easily see.

The stylistic and formalistic appreciation of Northwest Coast art was particularly encouraged by the publication of Bill Holm's *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (1967) and Hilary Stewart's *Looking at Indian Art of the Northeast Coast* (1979). Above all, viewers were taught to look for form lines, ovoids, inner ovoids, u forms, split u forms, and s forms. Thus anthropologists too, by the 1960s, were generally discussing Northwest Coast art in terms of the aesthetics of its formal characteristics. Indeed, they would often do this even before they discussed the subject matter (see, for example, Gunther, 1966).

The earliest major exhibition of Northwest Coast art as *art* was at the American Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. The European invention of primitive art has often been credited to artists working in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century: Derain, Matisse, Picasso, and Vlaminck, and to the German Expressionists. In 1956, when various pieces of Northwest Coast art were borrowed from several anthropology museums and private collectors and exhibited, as fine art, at the Vancouver Art Gallery, they were decontextualized. Viewers were especially referred to the "perfect balance of line, space, and form" (Hawthorn, 1956:30).

Finally, the beginning recognition of many worlds of art

Douglas Cole has argued that

Museum personnel were slower than artists and imaginative anthropologists to reflect upon the possibilities of Northwest Coast artifacts as art. The decorative carving and painting of non-literate people had long been classified, if only for want of other terms, as art, craft or *kunst*. Ethnologists tended to concern themselves with technique and with arguments about whether abstract patterns were degenerations of representational forms or vice versa. Art museum directors, trained in the Great Tradition of European sculpture and easel painting, were uninterested (1985:283).

Appreciation of diversity began to emerge in the 1960s. Although they may have titles that we now find offensive, for example, *The Totem Pole Indians* (Wherry, 1964) these appreciations foreshadowed the new approaches of professional art historians. Joseph H. Wherry is typical. He wrote his 1964 book as a tribute to the Squamish Indian who gave him a toy canoe when he was seven years old. Wherry called himself an “Indian lover” and admitted that there would be bigots who would challenge his sympathetic view that

The Native art of the Northwest Pacific Coast was an integral part and manifestation of the infinite order that provided a beneficent environment. This order—nature or the “inner spirit” power of all creatures in the universe—provided the impetus for the regionally unique Aboriginal arts that were never practised merely to occupy space (1964:140;144).

By the mid 1970s it was not unusual to find statements such as “The people of the Northwest Coast produced some of the world’s most notable art” (Hawthorn, 1975:17). The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia now exhibits these objects as fine art and refers to them as masterpieces. By exhibiting the objects with very little written information, unless the viewer consults available files, the work is perhaps decontextualized, but, to a certain extent, it is also decolonized. We had begun to anthropologize the West, as well as so-called ethnological societies and now realize that some art objects cannot be understood by outsiders. We have started to listen, to create what art historian Griselda Pollock (1988) has called a conversational community, and to do what anthropologist James Clifford (1986) has called “multivocal ethnography.”

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