

**Art, Identity and Culture: The Politicization Of Contemporary Northwest Coast
First Nations Art**

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ABSTRACT

My premise in this thesis is that there is a circular link between art, culture, and identity, and that this link allows for the transmission of meanings and messages, either intentionally or unintentionally, from the artist to the larger society. I intend to examine this link as it applies to the cultures of Northwest Coast First Nations specifically. To demonstrate this I examine the history of Northwest Coast First Nations art, along with the parameters of the constructs of culture and identity. I investigate the relationships within and between art, culture and identity using theoretical principles drawn from perspectives relating to anthropology, cultural studies, art history, deconstructionist theory, and First Nations studies. Having demonstrated that art is a mechanism by which culture and identity are portrayed and disseminated, I turn to a consideration of what meanings and messages can be brought forth through their interplay. Exploring the relationship between culture, history, identity and authority over land, I will examine the potential for the meanings and messages inherent to Northwest Coast First Nations art to have a political impact in terms of bringing awareness and voice to First Nations issues and policy. In drawing my conclusions I use information gathered through interviews conducted with Martine Reid, Roy Henry Vickers, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, and Art Wilson ('Wii Muk'willixw). I assert that Northwest Coast First Nations art is able to transcend the isolation of cultural differences, act as a mechanism to rejuvenate culture and strengthen identity, and has undeniable potential in terms of bringing awareness and positive political change to issues affecting First Nations people.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

“It is becoming clear that the impulses underlying the resurgence of the art cannot be neatly isolated from those underlying other expressions of native vitality; they are part of the same cultural fabric in the process of regenerating itself.”

(Shadbolt, 1998: 11)

Perhaps more so than in any other region of Canada, First Nations art is both distinct and widely visible in the province of British Columbia. The unique colours, forms, and symbology inherent to the artistic traditions of Northwest Coast First Nations are easily distinguishable and evident throughout BC, from the Vancouver International Airport to the northernmost corners of the province.

It was upon having moved to British Columbia from Alberta that I first developed a fervent interest in and curiosity about Northwest Coast First Nations art. As a Métis of Cree ancestry hailing from the prairies, I was struck by the unique nature and qualities of Northwest Coast art, not to mention the incredible variety in forms and cultural particularities of the artistic traditions of the many different nations native to BC. Having lived in Victoria before moving to Prince George to undertake graduate studies at the University of Northern British Columbia, my increasing exposure to and discoveries of Northwest Coast artistic traditions continued to impress and surprise me in many ways, not the least of which was the degree to which they were so distinct from the prairie art forms and traditions which I was familiar with.

At the same time, I became increasingly aware of the political climate vis-à-vis First Nations issues in British Columbia, and began learning more about how and why it was distinct from the rest of Canada by virtue of several factors, including the ongoing land claims process and issues pertaining to logging and resource rights. As my studies in the area of First Nations issues continued, so, too, did my interest in Northwest Coast art. It became evident to me that the link between the artistic traditions of the Northwest Coast and the cultures and identities of its many First Nations was strong and irrefutable. Furthermore, I found myself wondering if, how, and to what degree the widespread appeal and reach of Northwest Coast art might be used in order to raise the profile of and impact First Nations issues in a political sense. From my desire to better understand the link between art, culture and identity in Northwest Coast First Nations, coupled with my curiosity about the potential politicization of Northwest Coast art, the topic for this thesis emerged.

Objective

That art has, since time immemorial, had an impact on the history of the human family seems like a natural starting point for a consideration of the relationship between art, identity and culture. Art has been used to record the stories and events that are history, it is an outlet for emotion and perspective, and it reflects the defining elements of the artist, including culture and identity. Insofar as that is true, art is a critical link with tremendous potential to disseminate meanings and messages from the artists and their culture(s) to a wider audience.

For the First Nations of the Northwest Coast of British Columbia, art has historically played a vital role linked as it is to the tradition and ceremony that is the foundation of the many cultures that hail from the region. In the absence of written languages, art was the means by which lineage and clan were recorded and communicated. Ceremony was not possible without art, and culture was not possible without ceremony, hence art and artists were a central component of Northwest Coast traditions and heritage.

Just as art can be used to strengthen and uphold a culture, so too can it be manipulated in order to unravel it. To this end, Northwest Coast traditional art suffered a destructive decline in the face of post-contact forces, including legislation and policy intended to cut at the heart of the great cultural traditions of the Northwest Coast First Nations. That Northwest Coast art and culture has undergone a significant and well-documented resurgence over the course of the last half-century is a testimony to the strength and will of those cultures to survive and tell their stories to new audiences in new ways.

At the same time, this phenomenon of cultural and artistic revival also raises several important questions that speak to the complex nature of the relationship between art, identity, culture and politics. Does art or the act of being artistic inform identity? If so, how does this happen, and what are the implications? Who defines what constitutes Northwest Coast art, and who is able to define other issues of authenticity, including those pertaining to the cultural identity of the artist? Can the term 'renaissance' be aptly applied to the regeneration of the art and culture of the Northwest Coast and, if so, what role does the art market play in the validity of that phenomenon? If art and identity interplay, are meanings and messages

transmitted, and if so, to what end? And, finally, what are the effects of the potential of those meanings and messages insofar as the political landscape facing Northwest Coast First Nations peoples is concerned?

I assert that there is an irrefutable link between art, culture and identity, and that this link allows for the transmission of meaning and messages, either intentionally or unintentionally, from the artist to the larger society. I will showcase this link as it applies to the cultures of Northwest Coast First Nations specifically, considering the history of Northwest Coast First Nations art, along with the parameters of the constructs of culture and identity. I will show how First Nation's identity is expressed through and relates to the art and material culture of the Northwest Coast. To this end, I will consider issues pertaining to how cultural identity is created and propagated, and what effects this can have on conveying meanings and messages that have the potential to impact the landscape of policy and politics.

Themes that I will consider along the way include issues pertaining to cultural decline and renewal, the interplay between language and culture, and the critical role of identity as a backdrop to the artist as storyteller and activist. Authenticity will be examined as it relates to the art market, issues of typology, and racial constructs.

Through conducting focused interviews with a limited number of Northwest Coast native artists, namely Roy Henry Vickers, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Art Wilson ('Wii Muk'willxw), as well as Martine Reid, widow of Haida artist Bill Reid, I assess what role they feel their artwork plays in terms of building upon their own identity as well as on the

cultural identities of their nations. Furthermore, I assess if and how they feel this in turn acts to propagate a First Nation's voice in political arenas. In drawing my conclusions I use information gathered through interviews conducted with Marine Reid, Roy Henry Vickers, Art Wilson, and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun.

Choice of Artists

For the purposes of my research, the population of interest was Northwest Coast native artists. Although the qualitative nature of my research limits the degree to which I will be able to broadly apply my findings, nonetheless my sampling frame was determined with an eye to being able to make some general determinations about Northwest Coast Native artists working in a broad range of artistic forms from quite traditional to overtly contemporary. The sample that I chose for my research was based on those artists who were accessible to me and who I believed presented variety in terms of background and scope of work.

While there exist any number of artists whose contributions would have been both valuable and relevant for the sake of the nature of my research, I endeavored to select for my sample a range of artists who represent a broad base of styles and perspectives. I would like to begin with an examination of the contributions of the late Bill Reid, using written material and an interview with Martine Reid to ground my research. From there I would like to turn to a synopsis of my interviews with Roy Henry Vickers, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, and Art Wilson.

I feel that the group of artists whom I've selected to examine in some detail represents the broad and fascinating range of contemporary Northwest Coast native artists. While I have chosen only a few of the many talented Northwest Coast artists whose work would be applicable to the context of this research, I feel that the sample that I have chosen draws on a wide range of interpretive styles. To the degree which they each represent different forms and styles, and to the degree that they each appeal to and produce for different markets, they represent diversity based on sameness.

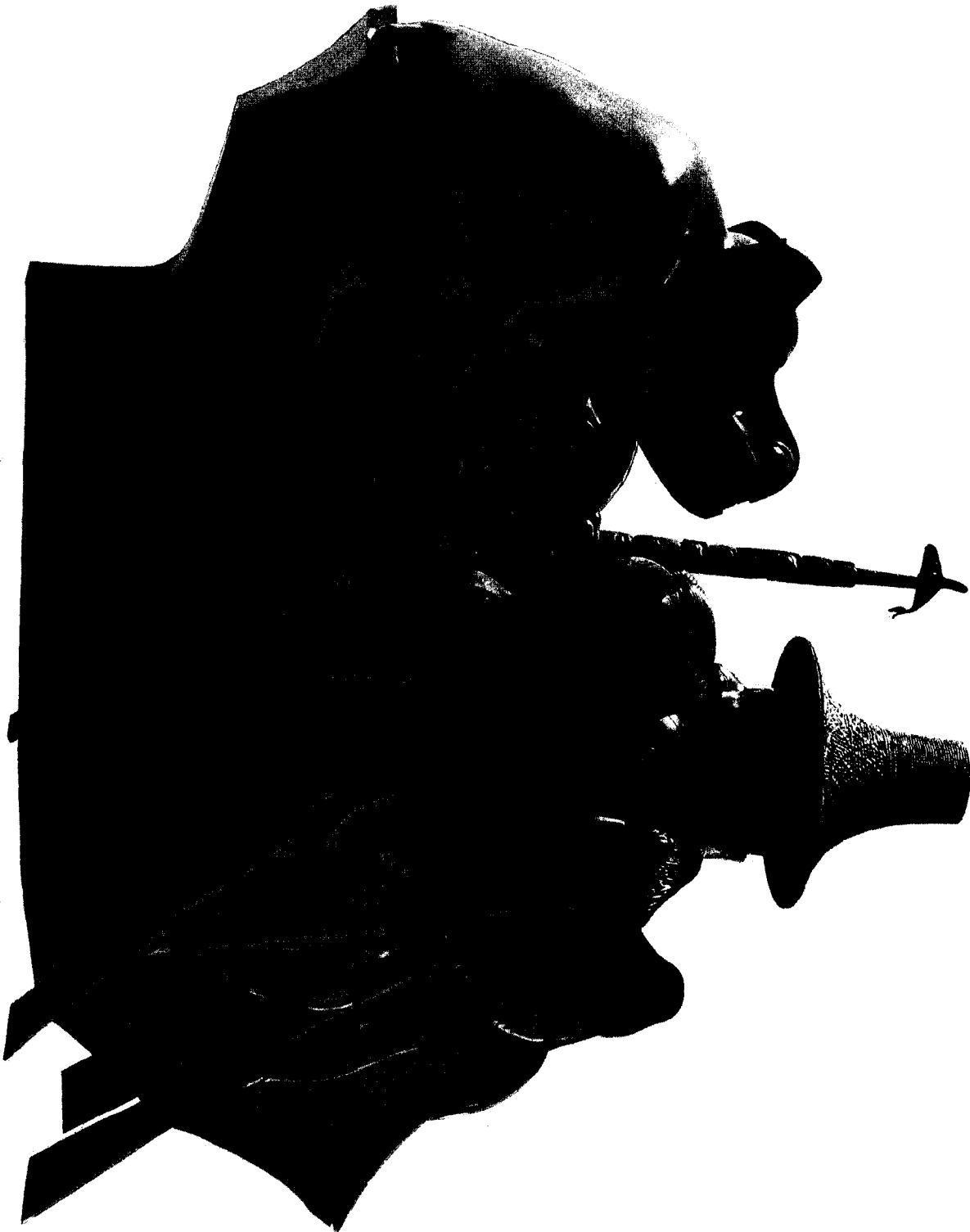
Bill Reid

Bill Reid's work represents a prime example of art that has achieved very wide renown on many levels. Furthermore, he has used his prestigious role within Canadian and global circles to raise political awareness of First Nation's issues, effecting positive change in that regard. For example, in 1986 Reid made an astounding international political statement when, in a show of support for the Haida nation's attempts to save Lyell Island from the logging industry, he halted production on his commissioned work *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* (figures 1 and 2) which was to be installed in the Canadian Embassy in Washington D.C. (Gray, 1986: 150). Since then, the spectacular bronze sculpture was completed and installed, and the South Moresby National Park Reserve was established on Haida Gwaii, finally bringing an end to logging in that area (Bringhurst, 1995: 46). Another casting of the sculpture, referred to as *The Jade Canoe*, welcomes visitors in the international wing of the Vancouver International Airport. *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* itself stands as a prime example of an amazing artistic statement about Northwest Coast history, reality, and identity, both cultural and political.

Figure 1 – Bill Reid, *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* (1991)



Figure 2 – Bill Reid, *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* (1991)



Roy Henry Vickers

Roy Henry Vickers' reputation as one of the Northwest Coast's premier artists is both long-standing and well-deserved. A native British Columbian who identifies with several communities throughout the province, he has established two of Canada's leading art galleries, the Eagle Aerie Gallery in Tofino, and the Roy Henry Vickers Gallery in Sidney, BC.

Vickers' work has been described as innovative, bold, and magical. He uses vibrant colors and sharp lines in a unique style that blends two worlds – traditional and contemporary, past and present – in his vision of the beauty inherent to the Northwest Coast. His work deals primarily with the splendor of the natural world, and is an uplifting representation of the awe-inspiring bounty of nature.

Roy Henry Vickers considers art to be an outlet for his own self-discovery, and feels that an inherent piece of his role as an artist is to connect with people, pass along his knowledge and experiences, and to reinforce the pride and identity of the communities that he is connected to, including the Tsimshian, the Haida, and the Heiltsuk.

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun is a young Northwest Coast native artist whose work is much more contemporary and overtly political than the traditionally grounded work of Robert Davidson or Bill Reid. Paul, a Cowichan-Salish, is considered to be a 'modernist' painter, working largely in the medium of very large-scale oil canvases.

Figure 3 – Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Usufruct Landscape* (1995)



Having been exposed from childhood to First Nation's social issues, Paul describes himself as a 'reporter' (Gerber, p. 80). Says Paul of his current work, "these paintings are pure art and they're just as political as my other work ... They're about what mainstream aboriginal society has become in the present" (Shier, 1998: 50).

Art Wilson ('Wii Muk'willxw)

Art Wilson is an artist whose work falls in between the parameters laid out above. A hereditary chief of the Gitksan people, he is very much grounded in tradition and in his community. The powerful images present in his artwork skillfully blend traditional Northwest Coast form with elements of the 'post-contact' world, and communicate very powerful statements concerning First Nations peoples, their history, and their future.

Low Level Ignorance (figure 4) shows a pregnant caribou aborting, as often happens due to the excessive noise caused by British Harrier jump-jets which fly at supersonic speeds just above the ground in Innu territory as part of a federal government-sanctioned pilot training agreement with NATO. In Wilson's own words, "The hands in this image represent the Innu saying no to the government's madness" (Wilson, p. 62).

Figure 4 – Art Wilson, *Low Level Ignorance*



Data Collection

My data was collected using open-ended interviews. I applied for and received the Bill Reid award in 1998, which enabled me to travel to conduct personal interviews. With an end goal of gathering in-depth information on particular topics from a limited number of artists, the time that I spent with each interviewee was largely conversational rather than observational. All interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the interviewees and subsequently transcribed.

To further support my knowledge base and understanding of Northwest Coast First Nations art prior to conducting my interviews, I visited the 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum in Hazelton, BC. "Since 1960, 'Ksan's antecedent the Skeena Treasure House, and the present 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum, have been amassing a sizable museum collection from the surrounding area, consisting of over 600 items. Comprised of both ceremonial and utilitarian materials, this collection illustrates the great diversity within the material culture of the Gitx̱san. Items include bent boxes, ceremonial masks, button blankets, shaman's regalia, fishing gear, hunting utensils, and assorted lithic artifacts" ('Ksan Village Heritage Site).

I also attended "The Legacy of Bill Reid: a Critical Enquiry" in 1999, a two-day symposium presented by the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology. This symposium brought together scholars, artists, museum and gallery curators, and the interested public to explore a range of issues surrounding the work of the late Haida artist. Several sessions explored themes relevant to the context of this research, including the question of the Northwest Coast artistic renaissance, artistic messages, and questions of authenticity and symbology in art.

Interview Questions

Each person that I interviewed was asked the following set of questions. Given that the qualitative methods utilized for these interviews welcomed open-ended responses that may have lead to additional questions, this set of questions should be considered but a consistent starting point for each interview conducted. In the case of my interview with Martine Reid, these questions were modified appropriately in order to speak to her views on Bill Reid's work as it applies to this research.

1. Do you believe that there is a cultural revival taking place in Northwest Coast First Nations communities?
 - a. If so, how has this been played out in your community?
 - b. What effect do you feel artwork has had on the cultural state of your community?
 - c. What effect do you feel that your artwork has had on your community's struggle for self-reliance?

2. Some academics have expressed the view that a First Nations artistic revival does not necessarily play into a revival of First Nations cultures.
 - a. What do you say to this?
 - b. What impact do you feel that First Nations art has on conceptions of First Nations cultural identity?

3. Do you produce artwork for different audiences or purposes (i.e.: art market vs. ceremonial / traditional)?
 - a. If so, does your intended audience influence what you produce and how you produce it?
 - b. How do you reconcile the demands of the mainstream art market with the unique ceremonial context of First Nations art?
 - c. Does this affect how you market your work?

4. To what degree do you believe that art is capable of conveying political meanings and messages?
 - a. How do you feel that this process is played out within First Nations communities?
 - b. Have you ever used your artwork to make an overt political statement?
 - c. What effects do you feel that your artwork has had on mainstream ideals / attitudes about First Nations issues?

Relevance of Research

I consider this topic to be both timely and relevant for several reasons. There seems to be a growing consensus that there is an emerging era of renewed cultural strength amongst First Nations peoples. Many suggest that First Nations art is a pervasive vehicle by which this renewal might affect an increased voice for First Nations issues and causes in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. I developed an interest in examining the important role of artists in this process of cultural revival, and sought an increased

understanding of how and to what degree First Nations cultural and political identity is being fostered by the works of native artists. I seek to enable a greater recognition of what a powerful tool artwork can be in furthering First Nations culture and causes.

A Note About Timeframe

The reader will note that the interviews conducted for the purposes of this research took place in 1999. Following the completion of my graduate coursework at UNBC in 1999, I returned to Alberta in order to be closer to my family. In 2000, I took a leave of absence from my studies at UNBC for a year in order to undertake a scholarship overseas in Auckland, New Zealand. Upon returning to Alberta, I began working in my current position as Director of the Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative, a broad based collaborative initiative aimed at developing effective partnerships between all levels of government, stakeholders, and urban Aboriginal Calgarians. Unfortunately, the realities of managing my career responsibilities have precluded me from completing this thesis in as timely a manner as I had originally intended. While several years have lapsed since this thesis was begun, recent research that I have undertaken for its completion assures me that the issues addressed continue to be as relevant and timely today as they were in 1999.

A Note About Terminology

It is relevant to remind the reader that, while the term Northwest Coast First Nations art is used broadly in the context of this research, the term in fact denotes a very wide body of artistic work and traditions hailing from the multitude of distinct First Nations cultures that have long inhabited the Northwest coastal region of British Columbia. Haida, Gitksan,

Kwakwaka'wakw, Tsimshian, Salish and Bella Coola are but a few of a wide variety of nations each with their own unique history, cultural context, artistic styles and traditions. It is also relevant to note that within the context of this work the terms First Nations, Aboriginal, Native, and in the case of interview quotes, Indian are used interchangeably to refer to the nations of people who first inhabited North America, and their descendants.

Theoretical Framework

In assembling theoretical constructs with which to frame my research, I considered works that hail from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, deconstructionist theory, cultural studies, art history, and First Nations studies.

Hegemony is a term with particular relevance to the construction of theory to guide this research. Defined as “the ideological / cultural domination of one class by another, achieved by engineering consensus through controlling the content of cultural forms” (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 1988: 207), hegemony is associated with Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci. As a form of non-totalitarian cultural leadership in which “certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others” (Said, 1978: 7), this concept describes how “the domination of one class over others is achieved by a combination of political and ideological means” (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 1988: 111), and is regarded as being of considerable significance in terms of the development of an understanding of cultural life in the industrial West (Said, 1978: 7). The concept of hegemony is particularly relevant in considerations of the effects of colonization on a culture or population. It is therefore relevant and applicable to considerations of themes of

appropriation, prohibition, and authenticity in its many forms as those apply to an analysis of Northwest Coast art.

Behavioral scientist Edward Said draws on the concept of hegemony in contextualizing the premise for his theory of orientalism, as laid out in his book of the same name (Said, 1978). While Said's theory is based on considerations of the 'othering' of the Muslim Orient, the principles that he draws on in developing his theory of orientalism, a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and ... 'the Occident'" (Said, 1978: 2), are highly applicable to other instances of colonialist history.

Many authors frequently use postmodern terminology to define the parameters of First Nation's art. Among these are Houle (1992), Youngman (1992), and Métis filmmaker Loretta Todd (1992). In this light, certain theorists are of particular relevance, including French philosopher Jacques Derrida, considered to be one of the founding fathers of deconstruction. Deconstruction is a concept of some significance here given its treatment of the operation of exclusion. It questions what it is that permits "one group, or value, or idea to be kept out so that another can be safeguarded internally and turned into a norm" (Ryan, 1982: 3).

Many of Derrida's considerations are based on his idea that metaphysics typically attempts to understand the world through use of sets of binary oppositions, "...one of which is assumed to be prior and superior to the other" (Ryan, 1982: 9). The deconstruction of metaphysics, according to Derrida, hangs "on the frame of the interiority / exteriority binary" (Ryan, 1982:

13). From the deconstructionist perspective, we see the classical relationship between the dominant 'one' and the subordinate 'other' being played out against the backdrop of the Northwest Coast native art world, and tying in again to Youngman's concept of 'ghettoization.'

Deconstructionist principles allow us to notice who has authority to determine what is or is not art, First Nations or otherwise, as well as to question the dominant forces that drive the market for Northwest Coast art for better or for worse. Deconstruction allows us to consider what effects being colonized by the dominant 'one' have had on the First Nations cultures of the Northwest Coast, and in what ways dominance over and exclusion of First Nations art continue to serve the purpose of maintaining the status quo for mainstream society.

The applications and limitations of considerations of the implications of dominance and subordination in the context of this research are expressed by Todd who suggests that, "by reducing our cultural expression to simply the question of modernism or postmodernism, art or anthropology, or whether we are contemporary or traditional, we are placed on the edges of the dominant culture, while the dominant culture determines whether we are allowed to enter into its realm of art" (Todd, 1992: 75).

In opposition to the deconstructionist viewpoint is the structuralist concept of semiotics. First evolving from the work of Swiss structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the idea of semiotics was further developed by French social theorist Roland Barthes in the 1960's with the dawn of cultural studies (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner, 1988: 438). Based on

questioning relationships between cultural codes and power relationships, it relies on the key concepts of “the signifier (a thing, word, or picture) and the signified (the mental picture or meaning indicated by the signifier)” (ibid.). By “drawing attention to the layers of meaning that may be embodied in a set of representations” (ibid.) latent or manifest meanings may be communicated, signifying moral values and generating feelings or attitudes in the viewer, allowing for complex codes of communication. By way of these relationships between the signifier, the signified, and the resulting messages communicated and their effects and affects, semiotics have significant application to the consideration of meanings and messages intended or communicated by way of artwork.

Within the field of cultural studies some additional theoretical concepts exist which are relevant to this research. Director of the Institute of Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney, Ien Ang (1996: 237-254) considers issues of cultural identity in detail and, in particular, examines how cultural identity is often subordinated by a hegemonic and seemingly unnatural classification by nationality. While Ang offers many examples of how this struggle has been played out in the global arena, equally significant would be the example of North American First Nations, who have had imposed upon them a concept of nationality which ignores their unique historical and cultural traditions and boundaries.

David Freedberg is an art historian who has written extensively on the power of artistic images through time. Having conducted historical research drawing from the fields of psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and sociology, he posits that one cannot do justice to the images of art unless one recognizes in them the entire range of human responses, from

basic impulses that might result from prevailing popular imagery, to the refined images present in the great classical masterpieces (1989).

Freedberg counters the widely held view that certain characteristics of both art and responses to art are specifically confined to 'primitive', non-Western societies (1989: xxi). He posits that we suppress many of our reactions to images due to an inherent fear of their power over us (1989: 429). His work is unique insofar as it includes a consideration of the 'irrational' elements and influences of animist phenomena, aniconism, and magic. Freedberg's considerations of the impacts of images is comprehensive in scope, including broad ranges of effects and meanings such as awe, arousal, and even shame (1989: xxiii).

Freedberg concludes that the two major modern paradigms used to discuss art, namely high critical talk and reclamation of context, are both incomplete and thus apt to fail (1989: 431). He considers high critical talk too devoid of emotion and appetite to have much significance, while the contextual reclamation model is focused too centrally on purely historical considerations (ibid.). He suggests that in order to fully appreciate the power of images, we need to begin by recognizing and admitting the fundamental role of repression (1989: 435). Freedberg's weakness in terms of theoretical application within the context of the research is his failure to be more inclusive of cross-cultural considerations in his assertions, resulting in some of his assertions being questionably Euro-centric in orientation.

First Nations studies is a field which has enjoyed much growth in recent years, and should be central to framing research grounded in Aboriginal contexts and issues. Literature hailing

from First Nations studies allows us to consider a point of view and approach to research that runs counter to prevailing mainstream ideas about the pursuit of knowledge. It considers the traditional First Nations philosophy and the impacts colonization has had on indigenous life, experience and identity.

Maori educator and researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith has received global acclaim for her work on the decolonization of research methodologies. She considers the very word 'research' to be "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism", offending in many ways Aboriginal people's very sense of who and what they are (Smith, 1999: 1). "It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations" (ibid.). She posits that methodologies appropriate to collecting and interpreting the knowledge and experiences of indigenous peoples must "approach cultural protocols, values and behaviors" as inclusions that "be built into research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood" (Smith, 1999: 15).

Mi'kmaq educator Marie Battiste, in a consideration of the link between Aboriginal identity, language and culture, comments on the challenges that contemporary Aboriginal people have to face. She asserts, "the lack of a clear, comprehensive, and consistent policy about

Aboriginal consciousness has resulted in modern educational acts that suppress these integral cultures and identities” (Battiste, 2000: 192). She outlines the effects of cognitive imperialism, a term which she defines as, “the imposition of one worldview on a people who have an alternative worldview, with the implication that the imposed worldview is superior to the alternative worldview” (2000:193). She suggests that on account of the pervasiveness of cognitive imperialism in the public school system, “damaging myths about Aboriginal cultures, languages, beliefs, and ways of life” are perpetuated (2000: 194). Furthermore, Western science has been established as “a dominant mode of thought that distrusts diversity and jeopardizes us all as we move into the next century” (ibid.). She contends that the effects of these realities are two-fold, at once undermining “the right of Aboriginal peoples to exercise their own culture,” while blinding the Western world to the benefits inherent to the integration of tenets of Aboriginal cultures (ibid.). In this context it is significant that First Nations art provides a positive place for Aboriginal identity to manifest itself, both as a place of pride for Aboriginal peoples within their culture and as a means to reach out to the non-native world as well.

In establishing a theoretical framework from which to consider First Nation’s art and artists, it is relevant to include contributions from a wide range of disciplines, as it is crucial to remain mindful of maintaining an approach grounded in the complex and multi-faceted reality of a First Nations cultural context. “Anthropology and ethnology fill in the details of the cultural context within which early (First Nations) art resonates and from which it cannot be wrenched without losing its original full relevance” (Shadbolt, 1998: 76).

CHAPTER TWO - FIELD OF STUDY

Concepts of particular relevance in this study include art, culture, and identity, particularly as they relate to Northwest Coast First Nations populations. Within the context of this study, the political significance of these concepts is also of interest. In the following section I will give consideration to each of these elements of the field of study relevant to this research, and will also provide a brief case study of Haida master carver Robert Davidson intended to serve as an example of how art, culture and identity can interplay in the life and work of a Northwest Coast native artist.

I consider the concepts mentioned above to be linked together in a type of causal chain. First Nations artwork builds upon conceptions of First Nations identity, which in turn serve to strengthen links to cultural identity and may lead to a particular meaning or message that may, ultimately, impact policy or politics. While there is not a great deal of literature that directly links all of these concepts, some relevant material does exist. In the following section, I consider elements of the body of work that addresses issues related to my topic, in a format that is reflective of the conceptual link outlined above.

In reviewing the existing body of literature on the topics at hand, several themes emerged that assisted me in guiding this research as well as in shaping the conclusions drawn from this work. The first theme is what some authors and artists refer to as a ‘renaissance’, and what others refer to in terms of cycles of artistic expansion and decline. Taken to refer generally to the causes and effects of eras of positive or negative growth in the area of First

Nations art and, in particular, Northwest Coast art, currents of exploration of this theme run throughout this research.

Another theme of notable significance that emerges from this body of work is based on issues of authenticity. You will notice that this theme plays out in many contexts surrounding questions pertaining to art markets, typology, differential classifications of art forms, and issues of race, all of which will be further explored.

Northwest Coast Native Art

In a study aimed at contemplating the cultural and political effects of Northwest Coast First Nations art, it seems logical to begin by examining its recent history and assessing elements of its current as well as future potential reach. While Northwest Coast First Nations art finds its genesis in prehistory (Holm, 1965: 3), for my purposes here I will consider more recent elements of the history of this unique and compelling form.

Although Northwest Coast native art has been widely celebrated in recent history for its aesthetic, intellectual, and ceremonial qualities, historical evidence would suggest that at the time of first contact and trade the artistic traditions of Northwest Coast peoples were admired and appreciated (Macnair, 1996: 47). While there exist records that would suggest that early explorers and traders enjoyed an appreciation that went beyond the mere aesthetic quality of the artworks to an acknowledgement of the cultural and ceremonial context inherent to them, once removed from their place of origin pieces were often treated more as curios than as art (ibid.).

Northwest Coast art curator and scholar Peter Macnair goes on to suggest that, as recognition of the popularity of Northwest Coast art that was taken abroad grew in the First Nations communities from which the artworks originated, tourist art became a commodity that attracted the interest of both producers and consumers (1996: 56). That said, the decontextualization of ceremonial art prompted most of its artists to opt out of the production and trade of tourist art. “Such tourist art appears to have been produced mainly by individuals who had little or no connection with the production of traditional ceremonial art. Because the continuing use of ritual objects ... remained so private and so sacred, anyone with a significant knowledge of the art form would have been reluctant to produce commercialized images from this tradition” (ibid.). Thus, the differentiation between curio-status tourist art, and traditional ceremonial art was born.

However, scholar and former Director of the UBC Museum of Anthropology Ruth Phillips (1998) considers the realm of First Nations tourist art produced between 1700 – 1900 as being so significant in scope that it warrants artistic consideration apart from the usual paradigms and classifications used in First Nations art history. She considers in extensive detail issues surrounding the creation of a market for tourist art and the impacts that this had on First Nations artistic cultures.

Despite the growth of the tourist art market post-contact, the production of traditional ceremonial art continued. Macnair suggests that the dawn of anthropological art collecting around 1880 saw the advent of scholarly interest in the meanings and aesthetic value of

traditional Northwest Coast artistic pieces (1996: 47). As Northwest Coast ceremonial art suffered a decline in the face of both contact-related epidemics and the imposition of government policies forbidding cultural practices, ‘curios’ for a growing tourist trade “came to dominate the output of Native craftsmen” (Reid, 1996: 72).

Decline and Renewal, or Renaissance?

While the issue of the debate surrounding the concept of a ‘renaissance’ of Northwest Coast First Nations culture and art will be explored throughout this research, Macnair offers evidence that cycles of decline and expansion of the artistic forms and traditions associated with the Northwest Coast began long before the current renaissance debate raged.

“Significant new directions in the art form began late in the nineteenth century, some representing decline, others celebrating a new vigor. These trends, such as changes in style, are reflected in both traditional ceremonial art and art produced for sale” (Macnair, 1996: 47).

The wide popularity enjoyed by Northwest Coast First Nations art over the past 35 years is well documented, and shows no evidence of decline. Conditions have not always been as favorable for this artwork as they are now, however. Certainly, the early effects of contact-related epidemics combined with the effects of Canadian government policy on the arts and ceremonial practices of the Northwest Coast peoples are well known and well documented, as will be examined shortly. Northwest Coast First Nations art suffered a significant decline in the early half of the 20th century, a state of affairs that did not begin to reverse until the Potlatch Law, an 1884 amendment to the *Indian Act*, was repealed in 1951 (Duffek, 1996:

213). “This law had significantly aided the disintegration of the social, economic, and political structures that had supported the art and given it meaning” (ibid.).

While he does not dispute the notion of decline in Northwest Coast native art early in the 20th century, art and design scholar Ronald Hawker considers the period between 1922 and 1961 to be a rich one in some respects for Northwest Coast art. In an examination of “the negotiation of meaning around objects used in public projects in order to highlight their symbolic uses” (Hawker, 2003: 15), he contends that “during this era, Northwest Coast objects functioned in a complex and multifaceted manner, at once asserting the integrity and meaningfulness of First Nation identities and resisting the intent and effects of assimilation” (2003: 5). He asserts that during this period, “important steps were taken towards formulating two major characteristics of the post-1960 period: (1) a burgeoning market in ‘traditional’ Northwest Coast objects and (2) First Nations activism with regard to land claims and self-determination – an activism premised upon notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘art’” (ibid.).

The detrimental effects of residential schools and the ensuing loss of language on the arts and cultural decline of Northwest Coast peoples have been explored by many scholars. “Policy and logistics dictated that children be removed from their families to residential schools, where discipline was strictly enforced. For their own ‘good’, and to hasten the process of assimilation, the schools forbade the children to speak any language other than English: contact with other family members and, through them, with traditional practices and beliefs, was minimized or eliminated for long periods of time” (Phillips: 1996, 246).

Curator, scholar, and contemporary artist Gerald McMaster explores the effects of residential schools insofar as they contributed not only to loss of language, culture, and traditions, but furthermore as they contributed to the decline of traditional ceremonial art and the growth of curio art for the tourist trade. The act of ‘civilizing’ First Nations students through residential school policies “deprived them of a chance to have a traditional education” (1996: 95).

In the 1920’s, the Department of Indian Affairs began organizing First Nations exhibits at agricultural and industrial exhibitions, which “involved encouraging Indian students from industrial and residential schools to participate in the production of arts and crafts [that would demonstrate] their ‘civilized’ qualities rather than their traditions, assuming that this would instill a Euro-Canadian spirit of competitiveness and motivation” (ibid.). Students were given quotas for the production of various “handicrafts according to a set list of items, with catalogues containing price lists. These mass-produced objects were then marketed in both East and West in such places as the Hudson’s Bay Company, provincial exhibitions, and small tourist shops in national parks” (ibid.). While the rationale for these undertakings was masked as being based on a spirit of showcasing First Nations culture, “beneath the veneer ... lay the chilling fact that the Indian was a showcase for the department’s policy of assimilation” (ibid.).

While the effects of the residential school system on the decline of First Nations art is well documented, Phillips contends that, paradoxically, the residential school system played an

additional role of creating the impetus for the cultural renewal or renaissance of First Nations art that is widely accepted in the art community. She asserts that, for First Nations children subjected to residential school, being deprived of a way of speaking meant also being deprived of a way of thinking. “The attack on Native languages was inevitably an attack on the oral traditions – the irreducible essence of Native culture” (Phillips, 1996: 247). Phillips posits that the effects of this attempted eradication of language and culture has been a strengthened effort to reassert these later in life on behalf of many First Nations artists. “In this context, it becomes possible to understand the urgency felt by Indian artists born in the middle decades of the twentieth century about their efforts to preserve traditional knowledge” (ibid.).

Despite those adverse elements that may have lead to a temporary decline, the resurgence of Northwest Coast First Nations art is well-documented. Indeed, by the late 1970’s, UBC Museum of Anthropology art curator Karen Duffek (1986: 23) states that “the market for Northwest Coast art had become a several-million-dollar industry ... [involving] at least two hundred professional native artists and many more casual producers, supported by a primarily non-native buying public.” While the market for such artwork is still highly intact today, evidence supporting the notion of cultural renewal or renaissance suggests that since the mid-80’s a growing amount of artwork is being produced specifically for use in the First Nations cultural context (Duffek, 1986: 23; Reid, M., 1996: 81).

Director of the University of Alaska Museum and scholar Aldona Jonaitus (1988: 237) suggests that one of the initial steps in terms of “finally establishing Northwest Coast as a

great art style” was an exhibit staged at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941. The contributions of Boas and Lévi-Strauss are also widely considered as being significant to this end” (Jonaitus, 1988: 240; see also Gray, 1996: 138). The publication in 1965 of *Northwest Coast Indian Art: an Analysis of Form* by Bill Holm, who worked with Bill Reid, was important in that it provided Northwest Coast native artists with a stylistic manual for relearning their artistic culture, the effects of which were far-reaching (Jonaitus, 1988: 246; Duffek, 1986: 9; Duffek, 1996: 218).

Former Canada Council for the Arts Aboriginal Arts Coordinator Viviane Gray states: “Any student of twentieth century Indian art recognizes that Indian art existed prior to European contact. The First Nations always had the elements of artistic expression and visual aesthetics in their cultures. What was new in the development of native Indian art in the Twentieth century was the interest in and recognition of Native art by a non-Native public” (1996: 138).

Kwakiutl master carver Mungo Martin is widely acknowledged as having instigated the cultural renaissance of Northwest Coast native art, becoming “one of the most widely known of Northwest Coast artists through his work at the University of British Columbia and the British Columbia Provincial Museum” (Holm, 1983: 92). His talents were not recognized by mainstream non-natives until the 1940’s when, “in response to a general awakening to the aesthetic value of Indian art, several museum curators and academics realized how eminently qualified he was to restore traditional Northwest Coast art” (Jonaitus, 1988: 242).

If Mungo Martin is considered to be the grandfather of the Northwest Coast artistic renaissance, then surely Bill Reid may be considered to be the father of that same phenomenon. Bill Reid, according to scholars and art historians Alan Hoover and Kevin Neary (1984: 186), “was the first Northern artist born in the twentieth century to comprehend the formal rules of this complex intellectualized art tradition, the principles of which had been lost.”

In considering the validity of the Northwest Coast artistic renaissance and the claim that Bill Reid fathered it, art historian David Summers (2004: 154) concludes that Bill Reid “did his part. He made art that has earned a place in the contemporary world of art, based on principles that may serve both as the basis for the renewal of Haida tradition and as the basis of the more than aesthetic explanation of Haida art and culture to the world.”

While his role as father of the Northwest Coast artistic renaissance is widely acknowledged, it is relevant to point out that Bill Reid himself doubted the substance of the renaissance, claiming that it is “largely urban-based and anthropologist-created, not involving a meaningful renewal of native society” (Duffek, 1986: 23 – 26).

Bill Reid’s widow and anthropologist Martine Reid echoes some of these sentiments in her examination of what she calls a ‘renaissance myth’ (1996: 74). She states that while parallels are often drawn between the European renaissance and the Northwest Coast cultural renaissance, the difference, as she sees it, is that while “Europe used the relics of classical Greece and Rome as the starting point for its Renaissance, and built on them a completely

new structure embracing all aspects of art – painting, sculpture, music, drama, and literature ... the Northwest Coast ‘renaissance’ ... was encouraged not by an indigenous impulse or an inner innovation but by a few members of the white community, whose interest began to bloom thirty years ago. It involved only a few artisans, not a whole culture. And the rebirth it contemplated was not meant to serve some social or religious need, but to satisfy a commercial market ranging from ‘fine art’, to ‘airport art’” (Reid, 1996: 71).

Reid goes on to suggest a variety of possible motivations for this sudden interest in Northwest Coast art on behalf of non-native populations, ranging from general appreciation, to boredom with conventional ‘western’ art, to displaced guilt about Canada’s bleak history with regard to native treatment, and the conditions of the survivors of that history (1996: 74). Her contentions are quite clear when she adds that “despite a flood of more or less skillfully made objects for sale ... and the attempt at a revival of nineteenth century native ceremony, there has been nothing that can justly be called a cultural renaissance among the Northwest Coast people” (1996: 74).

On this subject, Reid’s contentions tend to run counter to a number of other contributors (including Duffek, 1996; Jonaitus, 1988) who feel that the renaissance or revival of Northwest Coast native culture and art is undeniable. Some scholars have examined the possibility that terminology compounds the polarization of the Northwest Coast renaissance debate. Summers (2004: 133) suggest that “the term *renaissance* is an inappropriate imposition of a category of Western culture upon another. Intellectual times and issues change, and, whatever Bill Reid might have meant by his demurral, reference to a

‘renaissance’ may in fact raise all the ethical and political questions of the relation of European culture to other cultures at a time when faith in the ideologies of colonialism has faded.”

Determining if, and to what extent, the renewal of the cultural and artistic traditions of the Northwest Coast shares parallels with aspects of the European Renaissance necessitates some consideration of circumstances and outcomes of the latter phenomenon. Being as each instance of cultural renewal developed and was played out within its own distinct context and timeframe it seems only logical to assume that there will be differences in both formative ideologies and histories of the European and Northwest Coast ‘renaissances’, but it is also significant to establish if there exist similarities between the two.

The term ‘Renaissance’, when properly used, refers to “a diverse series of cultural developments which occurred over several hundred years in many different parts of Europe” (Brotton, 2005: 1). While it is true that the Renaissance as an era in European history spread through the continent and, as such, has different referential dates depending on which particular geographical area is being considered, as a rule the Renaissance is widely accepted as having had its genesis in Italy in the 15th century and having lasted for over two hundred years.

Tenets of thought that characterized the Renaissance era included the State as a work of art, the development of the individual, the revival of antiquity, and the discovery of the world and man, played out in the revolution in cultural and artistic life that was the defining

hallmark of the era (Learner.org, 2005). The Renaissance developed through “three fundamental phases: from the Florentine Humanism of the early Quattrocento to the Renaissance proper in the second half of the century, with its center in the refined Laurentian culture, to the Mannerist phase of the early 16th century with its fulcrum set in papal Rome” (Leonardonline, 2005: 2).

It is interesting to note that the term ‘renaissance’ was first applied to this era as late as the 19th century by French historian Jules Michelet in his *History of France* published in 1855 (Brotton, 2005: 1). In 1860, Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt further refined Michelet’s term in his book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. “Like Michelet, Burckhardt believed that the cultural achievements of the period heralded a ‘rebirth’ (the French ‘renaissance’) of the classical Greek and Roman values of literary purity and aesthetic beauty” (ibid.).

Given that the European Renaissance lasted for several generations, and was not named until several hundred years after its passing, it is relevant to consider the possibility that parallels between the Northwest Coast artistic renaissance and characteristics of the European Renaissance are perhaps somewhat premature. That said, the fact that several phases have been identified throughout the Renaissance in Europe presents a possibility that in fact the revival of Northwest Coast art and culture in recent years is but a first phase of a greater phenomenon that is playing out still and will grow increasingly less shallow with the arrival of subsequent phases.

Despite the disparities in the apparent scope and depth of the European Renaissance as it compares to the Northwest Coast artistic and cultural renewal, there are several elements that the two instances of revival share in common. A critically defining element of the European Renaissance was that it closely followed an unprecedented era of discovery of new worlds and cultures, “from Columbus to Copernicus, from Copernicus to Galileo, from the discovery of the earth to that of the heavens” (ibid.). Hence, exchange with and exploration of other cultures and of worlds beyond their usual boundaries of knowledge inspired Renaissance artists in Europe to expand their horizons of thought and creativity, rediscovering the great artistic forms of previous ages and taking them in new and innovative directions with tremendous and unprecedented results. It might easily be argued that a similar impetus drove and continues to drive the artistic and cultural renewal of the Northwest Coast, beginning with the rediscovery and reestablishment of classic traditional design. As global influences continue to pervade the awareness of Canadians, Northwest Coast First Nations included, traditional forms blend with new ideas and fewer boundaries in order to bring Northwest Coast art to new audiences in new and unprecedented ways.

Just as the European Renaissance is said to have been based on an era of artistic experimentation based on the questioning of religious authority, it could be argued that the Northwest Coast artistic revival, particularly in more recent years, has also been characterized by the same type of experimentation, evidenced especially in the growing numbers of contemporary artists blending tradition and innovation in Northwest Coast artistic forms. To suggest that this phenomenon is in part due to a new era of questioning authority in the shape of policy or legislation does not seem like too great a stretch.

Finally, it has been established that “much of the impetus for this lavish display of art [characteristic of the European Renaissance] ... was the product of growing political tensions of the time. Even in the 15th century, the Roman Catholic Church was in disarray, recovering from bitter in-fighting and factional schisms” (Brotton, 2005: 4). While we will consider in further detail some defining elements of the political landscape affecting Northwest Coast First Nations, it seems reasonable to suggest that growing political tensions may be a factor fueling the regions cultural and artistic revival.

Insofar as this examination of the European Renaissance could serve to clarify the renaissance debate surrounding Northwest Coast art, it seems that while there are significant differences between the two phenomena as might be expected, there are also elements that are common to both. Those who would argue against the existence of a Northwest Coast artistic renaissance would still generally agree that, at the very least, cycles of decline and renewal have been in effect. The European Renaissance, despite being a great and significant period in history, did eventually come to an end, suggesting that it, too, was characterized by renewal and also decline or progression to other expression.

While Jonaitus supports the notion of a Northwest Coast First Nation artistic renaissance, a recent review of the renaissance debate saw her suggest a rethinking of elements of the terms of that debate that might be constraining. “With the insights provided by the passage of time and perspectives acquired from critical reassessments of histories, we should reconsider the constraints imposed upon us by the renaissance metanarrative, which omits references to the

continued life of twentieth-century Northwest Coast art, ignores the major roles played by non-Native experts in the invention of the renaissance and overlooks the influence of the art market” (2004: 172).

What Jonaitus’ recent stance on the renaissance debate speaks to is the notion that, beyond the constraints of terminology, there exist furthermore constraints in terms of differences in experience. While the term ‘renaissance’ may be charged with meanings and implications that complicate the debate surrounding phenomena that have taken root in Northwest Coast First Nations insofar as art, identity, and culture are concerned, focusing that debate too narrowly on issues of terminology and parallels to the European Renaissance detract from the dynamic nature of the Northwest Coast cultures being examined. While we have seen that there appear to exist significant parallels between elements of the European Renaissance and the Northwest Coast ‘renaissance’, it should be noted that certainly there is a marked difference between the experience of “the integration of classic art in the European Renaissance, and the revitalization of [Northwest Coast] First Nations art after a drastic period of spiriting it away and prohibiting it” (Mills, personal correspondence, 2006).

Authenticity and the Art Market, Typology, and Race

Authenticity is a theme that runs throughout much of the literature on native art in general and Northwest Coast art in particular. A broad theme, authenticity will be explored here as it relates to questions of the effects of the market in driving or propagating artistic renewals, the classification of Northwest Coast artistic forms, and the role that cultural identity plays in determining the validity of an artist’s expression through his or her work.

The theme of authenticity begins to emerge in considerations of the issue of the art market and its effect on both the authenticity of classification of what constitutes art, as well as on the authenticity of the renaissance of Northwest Coast First Nations art as previously discussed. While the resurgence of the artistic forms of the Northwest Coast seem undeniable, some would lessen its cultural significance by virtue of claims that it has been market rather than culture-driven.

There have been some debates surrounding the classification of First Nations art insofar as there exist problems associated with native languages not having any accurate words for art as it is defined by 'western' cultures, an issue area examined in some detail by Gray (1996: 143). Indeed, author Hilary Stewart highlights the fact that "in Northwest Coast Indian languages there was no word for art. Painting, carving, basket weaving and all forms of creativity were part of the complex pattern of living" (1979: 7). Considering the strong link between ceremonialism, symbolism, and Northwest Coast native art, Anthropologist Franz Boas concludes that "it would almost seem that among many primitive tribes decorative art for its own sake does not exist" (1983: 217). The differential classification of fine art, handicrafts, and folk art as it pertains to native artistic traditions is determined to be a matter of typology by First Nations artist Youngman (1992), who states that imposed classifications have been taking place for centuries.

Anthropologist and historian James Clifford analyzes cultural practices, including the act of 'collecting' and museum displays of tribal art and 'Mankind', suggesting that these have,

since 1900, “become institutionalized in academic disciplines like anthropology and in museums of art or ethnology” (Clifford, 1988: 12). He asserts that “a restrictive ‘art-culture system’ has come to control the authenticity, value, and circulation of artifacts and data” (1988: 13). In determining that culture has become subject to translation, he proposes that “any collection implies a temporal vision generating rarity and worth, a metahistory. This history defines which groups or things will be redeemed from a disintegrating human past and which will be defined as the dynamic, or tragic, agents of a common destiny” (ibid.)

Duffek (1986: 27) offers an analysis relevant in this context by examining the link between cultural identity and art. She asks whether native art should be placed in its own category, or judged by the standards of the non-native art world. She adds that some artists consider ‘indianness’ to be a barrier confining their work to curio status.

Youngman (1992: 83) adds to Duffek’s analysis by providing a discussion of the ‘ghettoization’ phenomenon as it relates to First Nations art. He describes this phenomenon as the situation which arises as a result of native artists abandoning the world of First Nations art at the urging of members of the mainstream art world – those being gallery directors, museum curators and the like. He refers to this as the “Native American art is dead” syndrome, and adds that artists who fall prey to this belief system put themselves at risk insofar as art history’s inability to record Native art history in such a way as to properly contextualize Native works of art (ibid.).

In response to the debate raging around the question of what constitutes First Nations art, Youngman offers the art policy statement of Exit Art, a New York gallery, which asserts “the right of history to have opinions other than those of the status quo, parallel histories, ... and the right of any culture to change itself” (Youngman, 1992: 81). He concludes that “Native art is, in fact, part of a continuum of Native American cultural and metaphysical existence that has persisted for thousands of years with no loss of authenticity” (ibid.).

Anthropologist Nelson Graburn (1996: 10) adds to this dilemma surrounding the definition of native art by questioning the validity of labeling native arts as ‘traditional’ when they have been influenced to such a considerable degree by contact. He contends that post-contact ‘fourth world’ art becomes a cash crop – produced to satisfy the market demand of a foreign culture.

Certainly, there are many that would disagree with Graburn’s questioning of the validity of post-contact art, deeming his analysis to be very external. There is a good deal of evidence that suggests that native peoples have always been innovators and experimenters, taking full advantage of new methods, materials, or tools whenever the opportunity arose (Sturtevant, 1986: 31; Reid, 1996: 76; Davidson, 1993). Indeed this appropriation of innovative methods and materials seems to have been widespread even before contact, with the creative methods of First Nations groups being influenced through contact with other First Nations groups and as new materials became available through human migration or the establishment of new trade networks. Youngman references French social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s notion of “bricolage, in which the bricoleur fashions new things out of the shreds

and patches of the things salvaged” as an example of First Nations abilities for cultural resiliency and evolution, even in the face of adversity (Youngman, 1992: 81).

Echoing the contentions of Graburn, surrealist artist and Northwest Coast native art scholar Wolfgang Paalen considered items produced primarily for the tourist trade, “at times beautiful and of great craftsmanly perfection [but an example of] the decadent stage at which a great art loses its *raison d’etre* and degenerates into trifles” (from Reid, 1996: 73). For Paalen, Graburn, and others who share a like mind on this issue, “any Northwest Coast art that was not fully ‘traditional’ was not ‘authentic’ and not worthy of esteem. Art objects produced by tribal society in transformation were denatured, products of a decadent culture. Often, their very existence was seen as material evidence of this deterioration” (Reid, 1996: 73).

Phillips (1998: x) posits that ascribing commoditized wares as inauthentic has created significant problems in the way that First Nations art has been addressed by the discipline of art history. “The authenticity paradigm marginalizes not only the objects but the makers, making of them a ghostly presence in the modern world rather than acknowledging their vigorous interventions in it” (ibid.). She goes on to suggest that by excluding works of art as inauthentic by virtue of being produced as a commodity, we lose out on an understanding of “the processes by which transcultural aesthetic expressions emerge, processes that have operated throughout the centuries of contact and colonial rule not only in North America but in innumerable times and places from the *pax romana* to the *pax Americana*” (ibid.).

Insofar as the classification debate is concerned, Shadbolt writes of Bill Reid that “the art versus craft distinction, which seems to be an issue for those concerned with categories or status, [did] not impinge on Reid, working as he [did] out of an art tradition that existed long before such a differentiation would have been possible or meaningful” (1998: 92). While from this perspective Reid may have escaped elements of the authenticity debate as it relates to artistic classification, he is nonetheless central to a consideration of questions pertaining to the relationship between authenticity and cultural identity or race.

That Reid was only half Haida is a well-known fact which has, on the one hand, won him praise for embracing to such an extent a cultural identity that he only began to explore at middle age, and on the other hand criticism for winning such high acclaim insofar as he rediscovered, regenerated, and perfected the artistic traditions of the Haida to whom he had limited connections early in life. Central to this debate on race and authenticity are questions pertaining to who gets to establish what does and doesn't constitute First Nations art, and, if messages and identity are being transmitted through that art of questionable origin, is the cultural imperative of those messages still valid?

While Bill Reid is central to the debate over authenticity, cultural identity and race in Northwest Coast art, there are certainly other artists for whom these questions factor in considerations (by some) of the validity of their artwork. Master carver Freda Diesing, like Reid, is only part Aboriginal, but has nonetheless enjoyed wide and celebrated renown for her talents and for her role in “[sparking] a revival of her culture’s artwork ... [establishing] herself as not only an exceptional carver, but also an enthusiastic teacher and mentor. Some

of today's emerging masters like Dempsey Bob and Stan Bevan thank Freda for their success. In recognition of her achievement, she received a National Aboriginal Achievement Award in 2002" (Moving Images, 2006: 1).

At the polar extreme of this debate are non-Aboriginal artists who endeavor to break into the world of Northwest Coast art, but despite possessing high levels of talent and a strong desire to help further the cultural traditions of the region are often contentiously criticized for their efforts. An example of one such artist would be Joe Mandur Jr., a non-Aboriginal artist living in Terrace, BC who, after having met Bill Reid in 1979, was so inspired that he undertook a career in art in Haida Gwaii (Mandur, 2006: 1).

Although Joe Mandur spent four years enrolled in the Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art and was adopted into a Haida clan in 2000 (ibid.), his endeavors to produce art for the Northwest Coast market have been strongly criticized by some. In a letter to the editor of the Terrace Standard which was printed on Dec. 7, 2005, Dawn Wale-Derrick of Terrace writes, "...I know for a fact that Joe Mandur isn't aboriginal therefore I have to ask why is he stealing our heritage? ... In past months Terrace people have been talking about authenticity and I would like to know how it is acceptable for a white man to be doing native art. Keep the native in art and stop paying him money and start supporting local native art... As a Kitselas First Nation I would like to know why Terrace city council accepts artwork from white men and (doesn't) acknowledge the local native men who do just as good if not better native authentic art... And Joe Mandur you should get a life and stop stealing from us. Look up authentic in the dictionary."

While this is a particularly strongly worded viewpoint that is likely grounded in issues that go beyond art into the realm of land claims, political authority, and cultural appropriation, it sheds some interesting perspective on the questions surrounding the debate on authenticity and race. While some clearly feel that non-Aboriginal artists have no right integrating the cultural components inherent in Northwest Coast art due to issues of race and cultural identity, it might otherwise be argued that engaging non-Aboriginal artists in a further understanding and appreciation of the arts and culture of the Northwest Coast might serve an important function insofar as bridging cultural gaps is concerned. In an era when much of the political landscape surrounding Aboriginal issues rests on notions of heightening awareness in the non-Aboriginal community of Aboriginal history, culture, and rights, is it ironically counter-productive to both the artistic revival of the Northwest Coast and to the political ends of its First Nations to operate in an environment characterized by exclusion based on race?

Indeed, some have argued that part of Bill Reid's success in terms of broad acclaim and wide reach into mainstream and international society was in part facilitated by his mixed heritage. Part of his broad acceptance as an artist may well have hailed from his ability to walk in two worlds, hence bridging the gaps between cultures and making First Nations culture more 'palatable' to a mainstream public. "...Reid was becoming known in scholarly and journalistic circles as an unusual person, someone who had a root by blood in the Haida culture, but also a critical distance from it; someone knowledgeable, thoughtful, responsible,

who could write and speak precise, poetic and eloquent English, qualities his experience in broadcasting had revealed and developed” (Shadbolt, 1998: 40).

Catherine Siermacheski takes the debate surrounding authenticity in Northwest Coast art one step further in her MA thesis which provides a consideration of northern Northwest Coast women carvers and the added dimensions that their gender plays in considering the authenticity of their works in artistic forms that have been traditionally relegated to the male domain. Given that Northwest Coast carving has historically been a male pursuit, Siermacheski begins her consideration of issues of authenticity by determining that the realm of female Northwest Coast carvers is almost strictly contemporary in the sense of not having a historical base. She asserts that “the continuation of tradition is carried on even through contemporary works” (Siermacheski, 2005: 33), while concluding that authenticity is not linked to considerations of classifications of art as either traditional or contemporary (2005.: 113). While the five female Northwest Coast carvers that Siermacheski interviewed “did not recognize colonial induced gender divisions as factors and thought that it was perhaps due to the generational differences and views of gender equality” (2005.: 111), they have each experienced different and varying levels of acceptance in their communities (2005: 117). While issues pertaining to authenticity and gender will not be further explored in this thesis given that the artists that I have interviewed and am showcasing are all male, this analysis does explore a further layer of considerations that influence issues of authenticity in Northwest Coast art.

Issues pertaining to authenticity as it applies to multiple aspects of a consideration of Northwest Coast art are obviously complex and not easily answered. Central to the authenticity debate, be it around issues pertaining to art markets, the renaissance concept, or elements of race, cultural identity, and even gender, are questions relating to whose story is being told, how, by whom, and to what end? While we have established that art is a powerful tool for recording and disseminating stories and histories, problematic layers inherent to that process begin to emerge if we are left without a clear answer to these questions.

Identity and Culture

The relationship between identity and culture is relevant to whether the act of creating art or the notion of an artistic renaissance leads to a strengthened sense of cultural identity both on personal and collective levels.

Saultaux artist Robert Houle (1992:47) contends that native artists cannot be separated from the context of their unique heritage and histories. While this seems for all intents and purposes to be a valid statement, it is also a problematic one insofar as it has the potential to contribute to the ‘ghettoization’ phenomenon previously touched upon. Author William Sturtevant (1986: 43) expands upon this problematic notion of paradoxical identities, stating that “the Indian artist faces an ambivalence between, on the one hand, being allowed and able to compete on an equal basis in contemporary cultural movements of the larger society, gaining recognition as an artist *tout court* rather than as a special, separate ‘Indian artist’ [discriminated against or in favor of], and on the other, being able and allowed to maintain

and express in art his special Indian or even tribal identity, and to have that special status recognized and valued by the rest of the society, not just by tourists and anthropologists.”

Author Jamake Highwater (1986: 223) comments upon Sturtevant’s analysis and points to the controversy surrounding native art in relation to questions of personal and cultural identity. He identifies conflicting feelings of adherence to native vs. non-native values as central to that debate. Duffek (in Youngman, 1992: 98) notes that with regard to modernist native artists, the question of maintaining ‘cultural distinctiveness’ may be irrelevant since their work is likely to be grounded in multiple identities relating to the self, to one’s tribe, to one’s ancestry, as well as to the larger community.

While Highwater (1986: 223) posits that rooted in the definition of ‘indianness’ in art is the native artist’s wish to gain control over native art imagery, Youngman (1992: 88) counters this claim by asserting that “[First Nations artists] have literally reinvented their cultures many times over with no loss of continuity with earlier native cultures and consequently, they have had, and do have, an untold influence on the way the ‘outside’ world perceives them.”

At any rate, it seems that Northwest Coast native art is considered to have a particular strength in its ability to purposefully transcend the problematic relationship between tradition, identity, and contemporary realities. Duffek (1996: 213) asserts that “On the Northwest Coast and across Canada, issues of political and cultural self-determination for First Nations people are receiving increasing recognition. These issues are not lost on

prominent artists working in Northwest Coast styles, who are engaged in a struggle to define their art as contemporary self-expression while working within centuries-old conventions of form and composition. If there is one overriding feature of the development of Northwest Coast art in the past four decades that sets this region apart from Native art communities in the rest of Canada, it is the art's connection to tradition and a cultural imperative that charges the artist with expressing not only a personal but also a collective identity" (1996: 213).

Reid (1996: 75) supports Duffek's claim, and cites traditional references in Northwest Coast art as "a cognitive way of assuming or reinforcing identity."

Anthropologist Gloria Cranmer Webster (1992: 25) considers the important identity-formation role played by traditional art and ceremony in pre-contact times: "Carving masks and rattles, composing songs, performing dances, feasting, and telling myths and legends occupied the dark winter period. Together all of these activities ensured that each individual group enjoyed a healthy sense of identity." Webster also offers a consideration of how government policies in the early part of this century served to destroy native identity (1992: 35), a phenomenon that was undeniably circularly linked to the historical effects of government policies on the decline of artistic traditions as previously discussed. For those nations of the Northwest Coast whose cultural identities were so tied up in ceremony and tradition, government attempts to ban potlatching had particularly harmful and long-lasting effects on their cultural fabric.

Gloria Cranmer Webster is particularly well qualified to speak on this subject. "After the potlatch ceremonies were banned by the Canadian government in 1884, her father Dan

Cranmer became famous for hosting one of the greatest potlatches in coastal history, on Village Island in December of 1921. After 17 years of preparation, the enormous gathering attracted white authorities under the direction of Indian Agent William Halliday. After 44 arrests, 22 participants were sentenced to Oakalla Prison Farm. The rest were given suspended sentences on the condition that they surrender their potlatch regalia” (BC Bookworld Author Bank, 2006: 1). Gloria Cranmer Webster narrates the widely acclaimed documentary film *Potlatch: A Strict Law Bids Us Dance* (Wheeler, 1975) which recounts the telling of her father’s potlatch and its devastating outcome.

While the detrimental impact of early government policy on native cultural identity has been well-documented, there is also cause to believe that, at least along the Northwest Coast, a process of cultural rediscovery is serving to slowly counteract the effects of those dark years. Gloria Cranmer Webster’s brother Doug Cranmer is one of many artists whose work speaks to this critical process. “Their father Dan Cranmer and great-grandfather George Hunt both worked with Franz Boas who first came to Kwakwaka’wakw territory in 1886” (BC Bookworld Author Bank, 2006: 1). Doug Cranmer received his first formal artistic instruction from master carver Mungo Martin, and later worked with Bill Reid at the UBC Museum of Anthropology, “carving five totem poles and supervising the construction of the two Haida houses that are now located on the Museum’s grounds” (Virtual Museum of Canada, 2006: 1). Cranmer has gone on to instruct a new generation of carvers at ‘Ksan, at the Vancouver Museum, and in Alert Bay, in addition to “contributing extensively to the construction of the U’mista Cultural Centre and the newly-built Bighouse at Alert Bay” (ibid.).

Reid (1996: 90) credits the ability of Northwest Coast artists to synthesize the traditional forms and conventions of their artistic styles with their own personal creativity and innovations as having resulted in an evolution of Northwest Coast native art forms. She adds that “out of this process of evolution artists grew more numerous, more confident in their own identity and in their own style” (ibid.).

The artistic performance of creating also seems to have an impact on the identity of the artists themselves, given the strong interrelationship between First Nation’s art, myth, history, and culture. Of Bill Reid, the late Doris Shadbolt, art critic and curator, wrote, “of course, Bill knew that the old ways were over and gone, but he was also wise enough in his youthful maturity to see that western Euro-cultures were mostly adrift, lacking central living myths to sustain them. He wanted to end his own cultural drifting and access that inner knowledge and sense of identity for himself” (1998: 208).

It is undeniable that First Nation’s identity is particularly complex. On top of the many pressures felt by mainstream Canadians to identify with various roles, First Nations peoples have the difficult task of trying to reconcile identities which were largely suppressed by immigrant populations who increasingly placed upon their ancestors a foreign and destructive value system. Many Aboriginal people must grapple with this pressure while dealing at the same time with pressures to conform to mainstream society.

Today, Northwest Coast native artisans and craftsmen are playing a critically important role as they rediscover and rebuild their society's cultural traditions. We will now turn to a consideration of the potential of that role insofar as transmission of meaning and message is concerned.

Art, Culture and Identity – a case study of Robert Davidson

Intertwined as it is with ceremony in Northwest Coast native cultures, art becomes by definition one more layer in a complex cultural fabric which shapes the cultural consciousness and, hence, the cultural identity of a First Nation and its citizens. Haida master carver Robert Davidson is well respected not only for his superior craftsmanship and artistry, but also for his attempts to strengthen the Haida culture through a synthesis of art, culture, and identity through ceremony. Of the role played by art in traditional Haida societies, Davidson says, "We Haida were surrounded by art. Art was one with the culture. Art was our only written language. It documented our progress as a people, it documented the histories of the families. Throughout our history, it has been the art that has kept our spirit alive" (Thom, 1993: 8).

It is critical to note that Davidson grew up in a Haida village that was devoid of any vestiges of traditional Northwest Coast art or totems. He only rediscovered the artistic traditions of his people through visiting museums and, later, through apprenticing and working with Bill Reid (Mills, personal correspondence, April 20, 2006).

Davidson is known to produce a certain percentage of his art for potlatching purposes. The potlatch, or ceremonial feast, is perhaps the most poignant example of the synthesis of art, ceremony and cultural identity in Northwest Coast native societies. A ceremony at which various aspects of social status are conferred and witnessed, potlatches include ceremonial regalia, dancing masks, and various articles, often artwork, to be given away as gifts to guests. "...The [potlatch] feast is a focal political forum in the government of social relations and the central integrative institution of that society" (McDonald, 1995: 131).

Davidson's ability to synthesize art, tradition, and function is evidenced in many of the stunning ceremonial masks which he creates, of which *Eagle Transforming into Itself* (figures 5 and 6) is a prime example. *Eagle Transforming into Itself* is just one of the masks which are regularly incorporated into Haida ceremonial life through use by the Rainbow Creek dancers, a group of Haida performers which Robert Davidson founded in 1980 due to his increasing interest in Haida ceremony (Thom, 1993: 89). The Rainbow Creek Dancers wear Davidson's masks regularly at Haida totem pole raisings, potlatches, and various other clan ceremonials (ibid.). The dance troupe has been an outlet to fuel Davidson's interest in and research on Haida dances, songs, and drums. He began creating masks and drums as potlatch gifts in 1980; this marked the debut of his career as a painter (ibid.). Davidson's commitment to synthesizing ceremony with art is evidenced by the fact that every mask which he carves – even those commissioned strictly for aesthetic purposes – is made to be a wearable and fully functional dance mask (Thom, 1993: 21).

Figure 5 – Robert Davidson, *Eagle Transforming Into Itself* (1990)

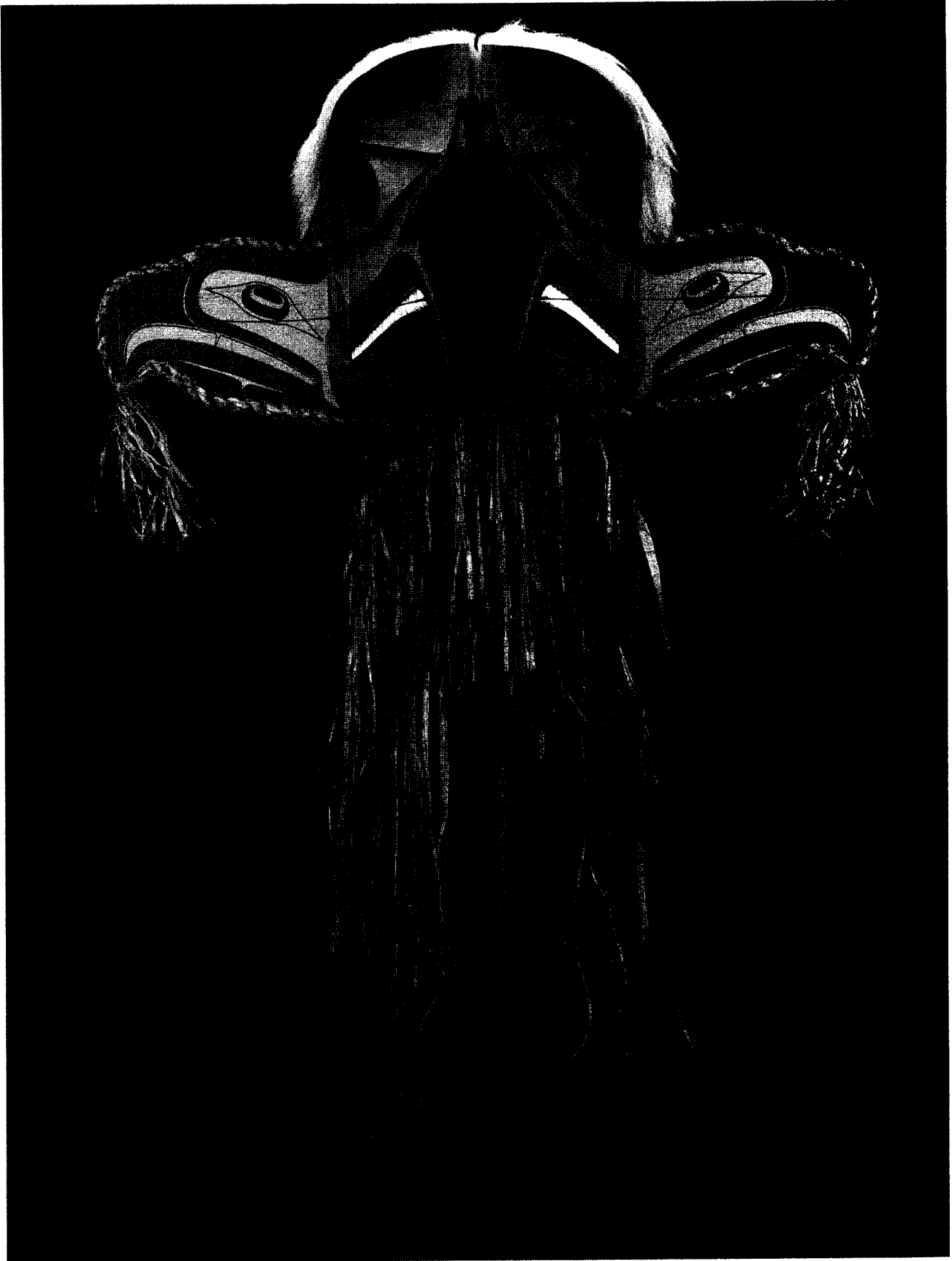


Figure 6 – Robert Davidson, *Eagle Transforming Into Itself* (1990)



By virtue of his recognition of the role of artist performance in the act of creating Haida art, Davidson stands as a good example of the circular relationship between art, culture, and identity amongst his people. “Always pushing himself to the limits of his creativity, Davidson credits participating in ceremonialism, learning to sing, and studying his language as profound enhancements to his continued understanding of Haida art ... Art introduced Davidson to ceremonialism and singing, these practices consequently motivated him to study his language. This in turn inspired him to new artistry, new innovations” (Thom, 1993: 20).

The relationship between art and identity amongst Northwest Coast First Nations can be seen on several levels. The art itself has always been linked with identity on a fundamental level, as is evidenced by the importance of family crests and totems as displayed on totem poles, house posts, ceremonial coppers, dancing blankets, jewelry, grave markers and such (Jonaitus, 1988: 37).

Furthermore, in pursuing artistic endeavors, the artists help to reclaim the identity of their people, acting as teachers and lending inspiration to the process of cultural revival. Of Robert Davidson’s role in this regard, it has been said that “most assuredly Robert’s been an inspiration in ... all of the villages of the Haida ... our teachers are more precious than anything we have in terms of our identity as a nation” (John Yeltatzie, Haida artist, interview July 1992 in Thom, 1993: 10).

Meaning / Political Message

The assertion that all artwork carries some meaning or message is particularly true for Northwest Coast native art. In Gray's words (1996: 140), "all forms of material culture are made for a purpose, and their aesthetics convey a message to the user and to the viewer." For the purpose of this study, consideration must be given to what meanings are present in Northwest Coast native artwork, and the potential for those meanings to play out and impact on the political landscapes that they may influence."

In one respect, Northwest Coast native art has always been political, insofar as it has always been used to record significant events and family histories, often serving as the only written language of a people, documenting progress and lineage (Thom, 1993: 8). Sturtevant further supports this notion of art in general, and First Nations art in particular, as being commonly accepted and viewed as a system of communication, even insofar as the signs and symbols present on ancient artifacts are concerned (1986: 34). While the signs and symbols may have changed somewhat and evolved over generations, their power to convey meanings and messages has remained. This in itself politicizes the art and the artist alike, particularly in the contemporary context, where, as we will see, artwork can be used as a powerful medium to record and disseminate information pertaining to First Nation's issues, both historically and currently.

This is prominently evident in the artwork of such contemporary artists as Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Art Wilson, and Jim Logan. In Art Wilson's words "[my artwork] has been a way of delivering a message and recording today's history. Through [it] I hope I can clarify

issues at hand ... I feel very strongly that these stories of injustice and resistance need to be recorded in art form because, in general, people have short term or selective memories. A painting stands out as a constant reminder of the atrocities that have taken place. And the language of a painting is universal, understood by all cultures” (1996: 14).

Issues pertaining to the political economy of art and markets of production are relevant to a consideration of meaning and message. While we have seen that considerations of the existing market for First Nations art features in the debate surrounding the validity of the renaissance concept as it applies to Northwest Coast artistic traditions, it also undeniably has relevance to considerations of the potential scope of transmissions of meaning and message through art. “... the interest in and recognition of Native art by a non-Native public ... enabled the native Indian artists to show and sell their works to a new public, one beyond their own people. Indian artists quickly recognized the benefits of this phenomenon and took advantage of this opportunity to communicate not only their tribal aesthetics but all aspects of Indian realities” (Gray, 1996: 138).

While Bill Reid produced largely for the art market and to please a wide and growing global audience, he was also very connected to his community, carving on Haida Gwaii, while still managing to capitalize on his accepted position within the mainstream art world when it suited his political ends, as will be examined later. Robert Davidson produces for both the art market and for traditional and ceremonial purposes. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun capitalizes on his success in the art world to make bold political statements, both through his artwork, which speaks volumes, and through his own commentary now that he is in a

position to have his voice 'heard.' Whether artists are producing for the mainstream art market or for traditional ceremonies, some degree of politicization surrounds each intended purpose.

Sturtevant makes an interesting distinction of some relevance to this research in his historical accounts of the meanings behind artwork in pre-contact 'traditional' native societies. He classifies meanings in art as being either external or internal. External meanings are those qualities inherent to a piece of artwork that are recognizable by the society that has classified it as art. Internal meanings are those meanings or messages which are conveyed by the artist whether intentionally or unintentionally (1986: 33-34). He adds that internal and external meanings may be the same, especially when both artist and observer share cultural understandings, but that in the case where a particular ceremonial or traditional significance contextualizes the internal meaning of the work problems in transmitting meaning and message can and do occur.

Gray (1996) expands upon Sturtevant's analysis of meaning by taking that concept one step further. She considers how those artistic meanings are used to convey messages within the unique context of Canadian First Nation's art. She contends that "throughout the twentieth century, native Indian artists in Canada communicated strong messages throughout their art. Expressing their tribal aesthetics or social or political views, the message was always different from that of other Canadians artists. It was based on their common ancestry as people of the First Nations of the Americas" (1996: 137). As interest in First Nation's art expanded, native artists were able to reach a new public.

Gray credits First Nations artists with quickly recognizing the potential benefits of this new situation, and taking advantage of “this opportunity to communicate not only their tribal aesthetics but all aspects of Indian realities” (1996: 138). Gray goes on to add that today, more venues than ever before are open to native artists who wish to voice their views. Beyond the opportunities provided by gallery and museum exhibits, she contends that the growing interest in First Nations artwork has led to increased opportunities for artists to voice their views through newspaper and magazine reviews and in feature interviews.

While this is no doubt the case, Gray seems to oversimplify related issues to some degree in failing to address the question of native artist’s access to these mediums. Furthermore, she fails to consider the full contextual significance of Northwest Coast native art, including its symbolic and ceremonial applications. In this light, Gray’s analysis comes across as being somewhat Euro-centric and elitist.

Phillips (1996: 247) contends that there is a need on the part of First Nations artists to inform a public which is largely ignorant of the realities of First Nations history and culture, to “set the record straight,” so to speak. Highwater (1981: 13) adds that art is the best way to “transcend the isolation of different cultures,” bridging the gap created by centuries of misunderstanding.

There seems to be consensus on the fact that, for Canada’s First Nations, issues with political implications have been on the rise. Duffek contends that this reality is not lost on Northwest

Coast native artists, who she adds are “engaged in a struggle to define their art as contemporary self-expression while working within centuries-old conventions of form and composition” (1996: 213). This emphasis on tradition among Northwest Coast native artists seems to be leading them on a path toward political ends. Given the current political climate on the Northwest Coast related to treaty and land claim issues, it is not surprising that a recurring theme insofar as those political ends are concerned is that of authority over land.

In contextualizing the exhibit *Land Spirit Power* at the National Gallery of Canada in 1992 to mark the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ discovery of the Americas, Nemiroff, Houle and Townsend-Gault provide an analysis of the connection between the appropriation of culture, history, symbols, and authority over land. They contend that contemporary attitudes about place or land are often contradictory, being spoken about lightly on the one hand, and yet increasingly critical to global survival due to environmental destruction on the other (1992: 13). While concepts of place are the backdrop of our daily activities, our notions of place and land are only really heightened when we travel or are made to question previously ascribed meanings (ibid.).

Given that Aboriginal peoples have traditionally had a more acute relationship to land and place, their artwork is perhaps particularly well positioned to convey meanings related to notions of space and place. “As the ongoing struggle of the aboriginal people of North America for their ancestral lands reveals, the land has social meanings that are profoundly spiritual and intensely political in their implications ... In the sometimes cosmopolitan world of art, the phrase ‘local practice’ is an attempt to recognize that what we do is grounded in a

knowledge of a place that shapes and is shaped by us ... Native artists carry in them the memory of the land – place at its most primordial – as a spiritual and political legacy” (Nemiroff, Houle and Townsend-Gault, 1992: 13).

While it seems to be widely recognized that meanings are inherent in art, and that these meanings, in turn, can convey powerful messages, what seems to be less well documented is how this process plays out in the contemporary Northwest Coast artistic context. I believe that this is a particularly relevant consideration in an era when, as previously discussed, First Nation’s issues are becoming increasingly prevalent. Determining to what degree meanings and messages can be conveyed through the dynamic medium of art affords a better understanding of how art can be used to its greatest advantage by Northwest Coast native peoples, or any indigenous group for that matter.

While it seems that descriptive terminology of the phenomenon is problematic, most would agree that Northwest Coast art has experienced, if not a renaissance of some description, then cycles of decline and renewal. Questions of authenticity are both contentious and especially problematic when transposed with issues such as pre- vs. post-contact art, ceremonial vs. market art (be it tourist or art market), and art vs. craft. Authenticity is further called into question when issues pertaining to the race and cultural identity of the artist are considered. The link between art and the regeneration and transmission of cultural identity seems to be a strong one, both on personal and collective levels. Furthermore, the notion that issues pertaining to First Nations identity are especially complex and often laced with paradoxes seems to be generally agreed upon.

The special ability of art to transcend cultural barriers in disseminating meanings and messages appears to be well documented. The potential of this phenomenon in terms of political ends in general, and issues pertaining to authority over land in particular, seems to be playing out in the context of the current Northwest Coast political landscape.

A clearer understanding of the link between art, identity, and what meanings and political messages can be brought forth by the connection of art and cultural identity may better inform both First Nations and mainstream communities about what potential exists in the interplay between art and action, how that potential is being played out in the contemporary forum, and how it may best be capitalized on to meet First Nation's needs and increase their political voice.

CHAPTER THREE – NORTHWEST COAST ARTISTS ON ART, IDENTITY AND RENAISSANCE

Bill Reid

Bill Reid's work has long been acknowledged and revered within Canada as well as throughout the world. His eloquent artistic style, astute knowledge of Haida mythology and tradition, and, especially, his unparalleled genius in blending modern art with highly traditional Northwest Coast forms has made him something of a Canadian legend.

Unfortunately, Bill Reid passed away in 1998, prior to my undertaking the research for this thesis. His memorial service was held in the Great Hall of the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, with which he had had a long and sincere relationship. "[Bill Reid's memorial service] was an extraordinarily moving event that will long be remembered by the more than one thousand people in attendance. Over a period of six and a half hours, each of the friends, relatives, colleagues and admirers who spoke added a new layer of anecdote, tribute and remembrance." (Phillips, 2004: 3).

This speaks to one of the defining characteristics of Reid's life – he was many things to many people. A former CBC news reporter who went on to become a master goldsmith prior to engaging in the process of discovering his Haida roots late in life, Reid brought a sense of genius to all his many endeavors. "The ceremonials of his passing indicates, as had his life, that there were many Bill Reid's: CBC broadcaster; provincial society jeweler; successor of Haida carvers and engravers Charles Edenshaw and Charles Gladstone; heir to the

eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose legacy included the romance of the ‘noble savage’, humanity’s original state of freedom; colleague of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss; co-decipherer of the codes of Northwest Coast art with analyst and emulator of the northern Northwest Coast style Bill Holm; co-eval of Ojibwa modernist Norval Morrisseau; teacher of Jim Hart and Robert Davidson, and mentor to a younger generation of carvers; maverick catalyst for the Haida, [he] had come to stand for many things to many people” (Townsend-Gault and Duffek, 2004: 7).

Beyond simply reaching many different people in many different ways, however, Bill Reid had an impact on those whose lives he influenced in one way or another. In the words of his granddaughter, Nika Collison, “Bill truly had an *impact* on the lives of people who knew him personally and the people who know him through the legacy he’s left behind. He affected people from many cultures and parts of the world, people with different histories, experiences and educations. Bill reached people in multiple ways and continues to do so” (2004: 1).

The following section is based on an interview that I conducted with Bill Reid’s widow, Martine, at her apartment in Vancouver on July 25th, 1999. An accomplished academic in her own right, Martine met Bill Reid while she was pursuing her Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of British Columbia, consulting him about mounting a show of Northwest Coast art in her native France; they married in 1981. A structuralist with a great deal of insight into not only Bill Reid’s life and work, but Northwest Coast art in general, I looked to Martine to supplement the great body of literature that exists on Bill Reid in order to bring her personal

perspective to an analysis of how his endeavors dealt with issues of identity, cultural revival and politics.

While some have criticized the authenticity of Bill Reid's work based on the fact that he was not raised Haida, there are those who would argue with equal voice that this is not relevant and, in fact, has proven to be a strength in terms of his drive to acquire knowledge about the Haida and in terms of the pervasive reach of his influence, a viewpoint upheld by Martine Reid: "It wasn't a choice of his – he didn't decide to grow up in Victoria and to be raised away from his culture ... both as a broadcaster and as a goldsmith he was obviously talented, and he was good with his hands and wanted to do things [with that talent] ... He had the drive and the curiosity and probably because he was away from it he was curious to know more" (Reid, personal interview, 1999).

Bill gradually went through the process of becoming Haida, eventually fully participating as a true clan member and partaking in Haida tradition. "At the very beginning he didn't understand about participating in that culture and it was a very slow process, and obviously the more he worked on Haida designs the more that he was involved with the culture and the more he behaved as a Haida citizen" (ibid.).

Bill Reid's reverence for and desire to participate in his Haida culture was not superficial. "I've always thought that he was probably more Haida than some Haida, for he was quite a spiritual man. His wish of going back and resting in Tanu, which had not been done for more than a century – there is no Haida yet who has gone back to that site. People want to be

where they can be visited by relatives. I think that he always has been there, and consciously it was part of his journey to get back there” (ibid.).

In the process of discovering his Haida roots, Bill Reid also developed a very deep knowledge of Haida mythology, which can be seen in the themes inherent in many of his masterpieces. “His approach to art was not an external one – he makes it happen, which means that he had deeply rooted in his subconscious this knowledge of Haida form, Haida myth, and this is why his route was a long one and a deeply meaningful one and not a superficial one” (ibid.).

While Reid has had his critics, few would dispute that he always held a deep and sincere respect for the ancestral link that influenced his work, something which Martine Reid says he always was careful to acknowledge. Reverent of his predecessors and their inspiration, especially Charles Edenshaw and Charles Gladstone, Bill Reid has in turn gone on to inspire a new generation of Northwest Coast artists, although Martine suggests that often he is not granted the same acknowledgement in turn. “Today I see many guys who copy Bill – they could acknowledge him and it would not diminish their work” (ibid.).

While Bill Reid had a great respect for the traditions inherent to his Haida roots, he also did not let tradition hinder his own identity formation or the creativity that he brought to his work. “Bill died as a Haida. He saw his long journey and consciously he discovered his roots through learning an artistic process and all kinds of mythology. Bill loved people and

he loved knowledge, but instead of being a slave to tradition ... he freed himself from it and was able to integrate his own personality and his own ideas” (ibid.).

While many set Bill Reid apart from other contemporary Northwest Coast artists by virtue of his rare ability to transcend issues of scale and of medium, able to produce masterpieces both in miniature and on massive scales, and equally well in metal, stone, wood, or ink, Martine Reid sees this skill as a further testament to the innate ability that he possessed to grasp and apply Haida artistic traditions. “It’s just a part of being a Northwest Coast artist, who were capable of carving both totem poles and spoons, and Bill was aware of both exquisitely huge and very small. It is a unique characteristic of [Northwest Coast artistic] style – that they’re capable of doing this, but of course today there are not too many artists who are capable of being good in both scales. This is in the art, in the tradition” (ibid.). An excellent example of Bill Reid’s mastery of scale is his interpretation of the Haida creation myth, a design which he first completed as a 7 cm boxwood miniature entitled *Raven Discovering Mankind in the Clam Shell* in 1970 (figure 7), and in 1980 as a massive cedar sculpture entitled *The Raven and First Man* which finds its home at the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology (figure 8).

Perhaps the most overt example of the synthesis between Reid’s great grasp of Haida mythology, his gift for artistic style, his conceptions of his own identity and his ability to convey powerful statements through his work is *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* (figures 3 and 4), credited by the Washington Post as being one of the greatest sculptures of all time. Reid, an accomplished and prolific writer prior to his artistic journey, wrote a poetic rendering of the

Figure 7 – Bill Reid, *Raven Discovering Man in the Clam Shell* (1970)

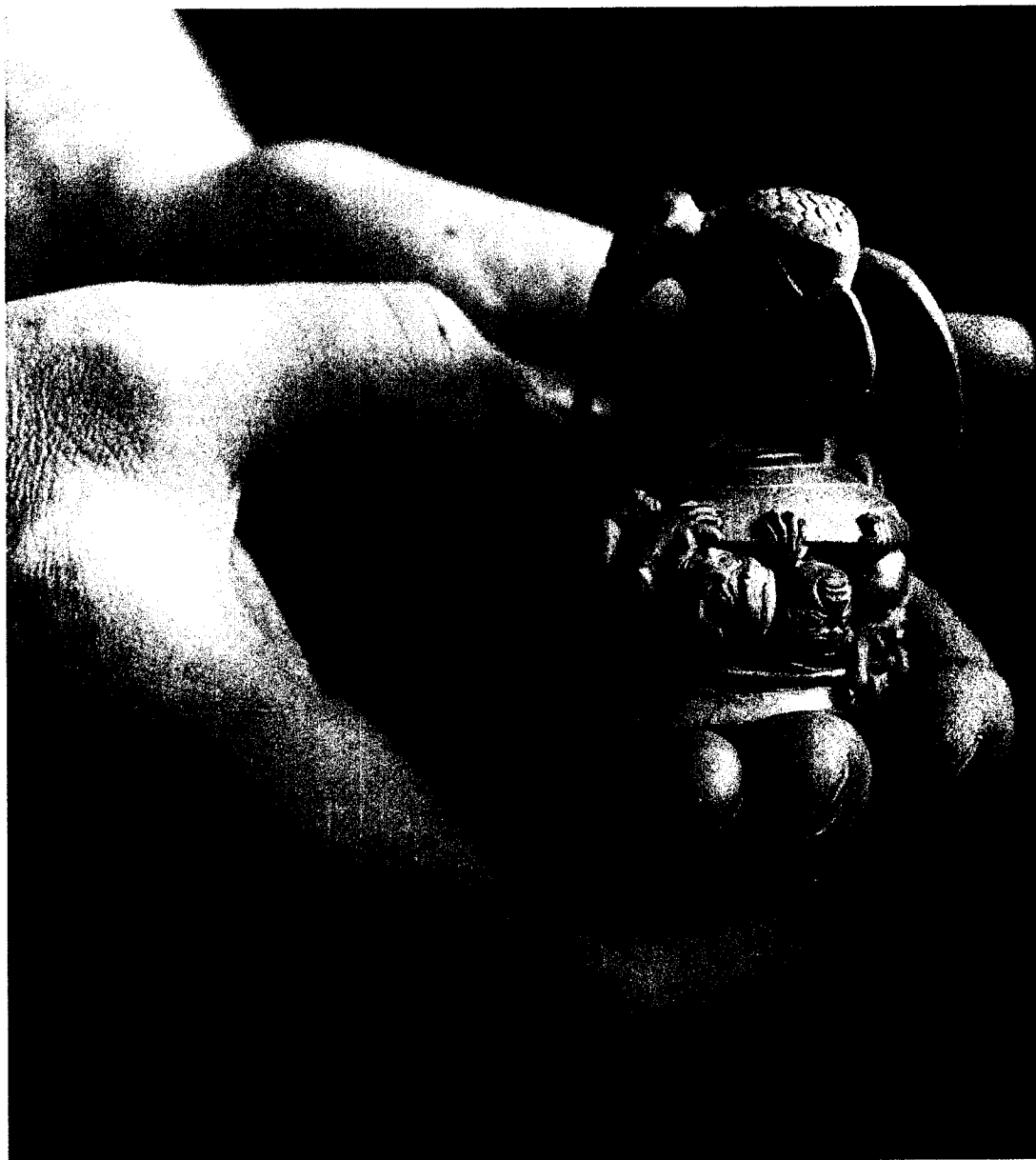
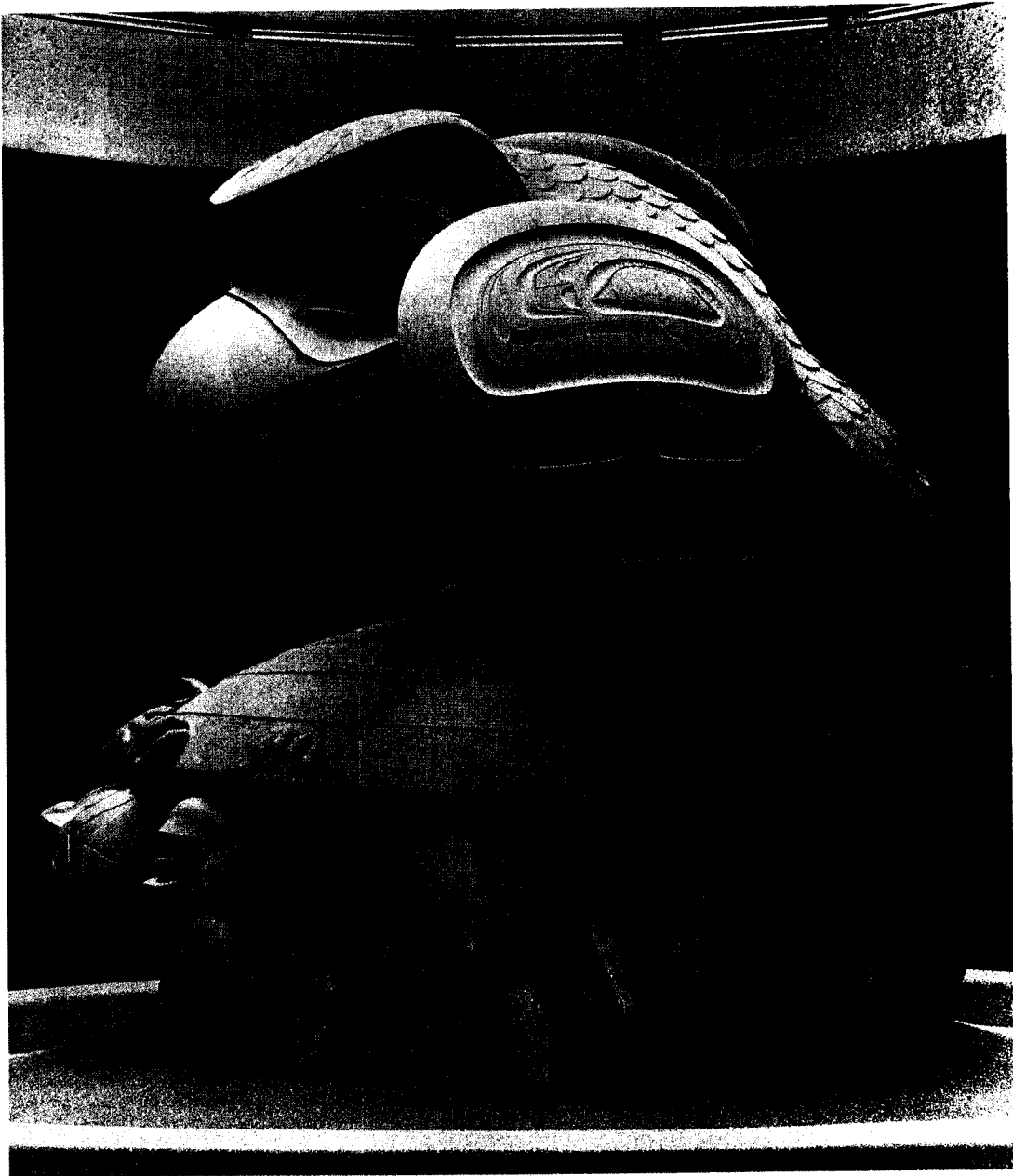


Figure 8 – Bill Reid, *The Raven and First Man* (1980)



images that he included in his famous masterpiece in the foreword to Ulli Steltzer's book celebrating the massive and widely acclaimed sculpture:

“Here we are at last, a long way from Haida Gwaii, not too sure where we are or where we’re going, still squabbling and vying for position in the boat, but somehow managing to appear to be heading in some direction; at least the paddles are together, and the man in the middle seems to have some vision of what is to come.” (Reid, 1997: 8).

Indeed, this famous piece has been analyzed as a microcosm of Canadian culture itself, “... with a Chief, slaves, some mythical creatures, bear cubs, immigrants ... all fighting and vying for a position on the boat, but still they all paddle in the same direction” (Martine Reid, personal interview, 1999). The application of its symbology to a broader Canadian context is further supported by the fact that a rendering of this sculpture appears on the new issue of the Canadian twenty dollar bill. That Reid’s other widely acclaimed and previously noted masterpiece *Raven and First Man* also appears on the bill is further testimony to Bill Reid’s significant place in Canadian art history and reach into broader Canadian society and culture.

The Spirit of Haida Gwaii conveys strong messages that have global application and that transcend the boundaries of Haida mythology to make a statement about the functioning of society and how people get along. It is interesting to note that there have been few criticisms of this sculpture – indeed it has been well-received by a very broad and diverse audience of critics, academics, and mainstream society alike.

That Bill Reid included himself in his famous canoe is no secret, and this piece is a synthesis “of all of the characters that factored in his own mythology – from both his European and Haida backgrounds” (ibid.). The words that he uses to describe “his favorite character, which he had been playing all his life” (ibid.) provide a valuable introspection into the role that Reid considered himself to play in the forums of his wide sphere of influence:

“A culture will be remembered for its warriors, philosophers, artists, heroes and heroines of all callings, but in order to survive it needs survivors. And here is our professional survivor, the Ancient Reluctant Conscript, present if seldom noticed in all the turbulent histories of men on earth. When our latter-day kings and captains have joined their forebears, he will still be carrying on, stoically obeying orders and performing tasks allotted him. But only up to a point; it is also he who finally says “Enough,” and after the rulers have disappeared into the morass of their own excesses, it is he who builds on the rubble and once more gets the whole thing going.” (Reid, 1997: 9).

In those words crafted by Reid there emerge some of the germinations of those elements that contributed significantly to his impact. He exhibits a modesty and reverence to the traditions that govern his people, but not without a sense of personal responsibility. He blends themes relating to the origin of mankind, the riddle that human beings have and will always face, embedded in the mythological tradition of his people, with a statement that can be applied on a national or even global scale. “It’s an interesting piece because everybody relates to it

whether they are elderly, young kids, and it's quite austere when you look at it but everybody finds something in it and I think this is a sign of true art – universal art. It is up to the public to decide what is art” (Martine Reid, personal interview, 1999).

That his own words give greater meaning to the symbology of his artwork is a further strength that is unique to Reid and that speaks to his multi-faceted talent. While his visual images are powerful, his words heighten the experience of his artwork and make the meanings and messages conveyed by that work more readily accessible.

“Bill always said that he was not a political man, in that he did not belong to any party,” yet Martine Reid agrees that Bill’s influence has been far-reaching and has been used as a “political instrument to help the goals of the (Haida) people in their quest for land claims and such” (ibid.), although not in a predicated manner. While Reid’s stand on Lyell Island received widespread publicity, Martine Reid shared that some of Bill Reid’s most significant political statements were much less public ones. “He refused the Order of Canada twice, but that was never made public because when you are asked to accept it you are supposed to remain quiet until you receive it. As he declined it, it was never made public. He was asked [to reconsider a second time], and he declined it a second time. He felt that Canada was not treating their Haida people well enough to accept it – he didn’t want to be a part of that. Obviously he had very strong feelings, in the same way that he had always refused to meet the Queen. So, he refused, but these events were never made public. You cannot say that he was using the fact that he was Haida to make statements. Bill made statements for himself” (ibid.).

And yet few would deny that the statements that Bill Reid did make, be they public or private, conscious or subconscious, had a meaningful impact on the Haida nation. “Bill has had a very important role by virtue of what he has done, but also because of what he wrote and because of what he said. He was a very eloquent spokesman for the Haida, for their land claims. He was a kind of ambassador of Haida culture to the world. He also wanted to show Haida people the world and wanted them to see beyond the Haida world. He was also a very important spokesman on the issue of logging, and people listened to him. He played a very important role in raising the profile of native people in the world” (ibid.).

While, as has previously been stated, Bill Reid is widely acclaimed as the father of the Northwest Coast artistic renaissance, the fact that both he and Martine Reid have questioned the validity of this notion has been an interesting caveat in a long-standing debate. Martine Reid suggests that it is relevant to stipulate a timeframe surrounding the question of a Northwest Coast revival. “If you would have asked Bill in the ‘50’s or ‘60’s if there was a revival he would have said ‘no’, and even in the late ‘70’s he would have said ‘no.’

Something has happened, of course, and whether it’s a revival or something else has yet to be assessed. The outcome of this is that we can presume that many things took place” (ibid.).

She further suggests that “a good question would be whether this so-called revival would have happened had it not been for Bill” (ibid.).

That is a good question indeed, and one that can be examined to some extent in light of the timeframes suggested by Martine Reid as they apply to Bill Reid’s early wood-carving

experience and his evolving take on the issue of Northwest Coast artistic revival. It was in the 1950's that Bill Reid became involved with projects initiated by the Royal British Columbia Museum aimed at salvaging and restoring totem poles, which led to his first professional wood-carving experiences working with master carver Mungo Martin (Canadian Museum of Civilization – Biography, 2006: 3). In the early 1960's, Reid completed a UBC Department of Anthropology project, with the help of Doug Cranmer among others, reconstructing a Haida village, including two houses and five poles, which are now outdoor exhibits at the UBC Museum of Anthropology (Canadian Museum of Civilization – Biography, 2006: 4). In the late 1960's he began working with Wilson Duff and Bill Holm in preparing the *Arts of the Raven* exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, which exhibited pieces of Reid's own work including a decorated bentwood box which Reid considered to be a pivotal piece in terms of his "understanding of the visual language of Haida design" (Canadian Museum of Civilization – Early Work, 2006: 1).

Between 1970 and 1980 Bill Reid created some of his best known pieces, including *Raven Discovering Mankind in the Clam Shell* (1970), a gold dish in the form of a bear mother suckling her cubs (1972), and *The Raven and First Man* (1980). By this time, Reid had also apprenticed, amongst many others, master carvers Robert Davidson and Jim Hart, both descendants of Charles Edenshaw (Canadian Museum of Civilization – His Legacy, 2006: 2). In the mid-1980's work began on Reid's best-known creation, *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, a grand scale project which resulted in two bronze castings, the second which was completed in 1994 (Steltzer, 1997: 16). While this is but a very brief synopsis of some of the highlights of Bill Reid's early career, it provides some sense of the extent of his own artistic evolution,

which in turn had a monumental impact on the revival of Northwest Coast artistic traditions during this significant timeframe.

As referenced in earlier sections, Bill Reid's contributions to the Northwest Coast artistic renaissance have been a topic of continuing debate in academic and artistic spheres. Still, his unique ability to synthesize identity, culture, meaning and message within a highly skilled blending of contemporary and traditional forms and mythologies has undoubtedly been significant, as has his role as ambassador for the Haida in particular and First Nations people generally. He is certainly missed by the many whose lives he touched by virtue of his broad reach and powerful influence.

Roy Henry Vickers

Roy Henry Vickers was born in Nisga'a territory, in Greenville on British Columbia's Nass River. His mother was an English school teacher and his father was a fisherman whose heritage was a mixture of Tsimshian, Haida, and Heiltsuk from Bella Bella. I interviewed Roy Henry Vickers outside of his gallery in Tofino, BC, on July 1st, 1999.

Vickers feels fortunate to identify with several communities in addition to the strong ties that he maintains with Greenville and the village of Kitkatla where he lived as a boy. "If I thought that I was going to move anywhere away from Vancouver Island I always thought it would be to Hazelton, which I love, because that's where I spent from age eight to eighteen. Then we moved to Victoria, and I graduated from high school and started first-year University there, so I felt like Victoria was home. My father was from Bella Bella and we

went to live there many times in the summertime. Now when I go to Bella Bella people tell me that's my home, and so I have a very strong affinity with Bella Bella. I was adopted in both Skidegate by a family there and by a family in Oweekino and they were formal adoptions in the traditional way, so I carry names from both Oweekino and Skidegate. And so I feel that I'm part of those two communities. And I've lived in Tofino longer than I've lived anywhere else, so this is where I grew up as an artist and opened my own gallery, so what I say now is that British Columbia is my home" (Roy Henry Vickers, personal interview, 1999). In 2004, Vickers moved with his wife and seven children back to the village of Hazelton. That same year, he opened his second gallery in Sidney, just outside of Victoria.

In terms of community connection playing into one's sense of identity, Vickers sees this as a two-way process. "I think it has got to the point now where the communities that I identify with are also the communities that identify me with them. So if you go to Bella Bella they'll say I'm from there, if you go to Kitkatla they'll say I'm from there, if you go to Victoria they'll say I'm from there, if you go to Oweekino they will tell you I'm one of their Chiefs, if you go to Skidegate they'll tell you I'm from there, if you come to Tofino they'll say 'well this is where his gallery is, this is where it all started for him. He helped to change the way this whole town thinks, so he's from here'" (ibid.).

Vickers believes that "everyone is an artist, that people are born with the ability to be creative." He experienced the genesis of his desire to be artistic from early childhood, sketching totems for classmates and using paint-by-numbers kits to hone his skills early on.

Figure 9 – Roy Henry Vickers, *Going to the Potlatch* (1984)



He began working in traditional Northwest Coast art at the age of seventeen, motivated by his first taste of discrimination. “It was a shock. I was struck by the fact that someone did not like me because I was an Indian. I couldn’t understand why someone would think that way. What it did for me was make me want to find out what they saw. So I began to study, and study, and study” (ibid.).

He was influenced at an early age by both Hilary Stewart and Wilson Duff, who urged Vickers to embrace traditionalism to the point of ethnocentricity. Although Vickers credits Duff with having inspired his evolution as an artist, it was the debates that they held around conceptions of traditionalism that helped Vickers to craft parameters around the role that his conceptions of identity forged in terms of the art that he was producing. “[Duff] wanted me to be very ethnocentric. I would have great arguments and debates with him about how I could endeavor to be ethnocentric as a Tsimshian Haida Kwakiutl Englishman. Where’s the ethnocentricity there? [Duff] would say, ‘Well be Tsimshian – that’s what the Department of Indian Affairs acknowledges you as’, but that’s not what the Kwakiutl acknowledge me as. That’s not what the Bella Bella think that I am. That’s not what the Haida think that I am. That’s not what my English grandmother thinks that I am” (ibid.).

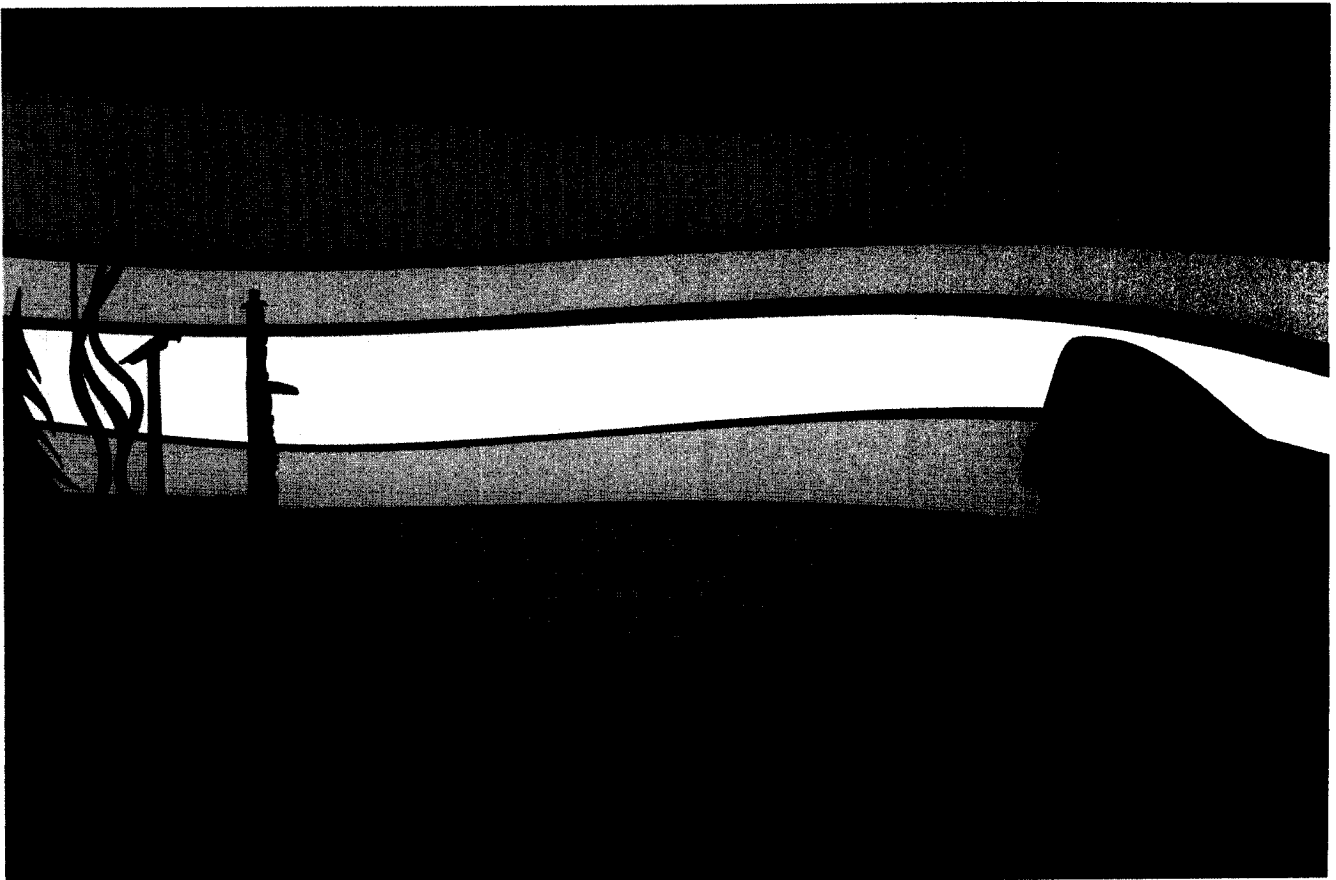
While Vickers began to work in the traditional artistic forms of his father’s ancestors, this phase lasted only a short time, as Vickers was “left with the question of how to be a traditional Indian artist when I’m not a traditional Indian? Where is the connection? I don’t live in a longhouse. My mode of transportation is not a canoe” (ibid.).

Vickers credits this recognition of the multi-faceted dimensions of his own identity with expanding and evolving the scope and reach of his own artistic style, and his conceptions of what it means to be an artist. “What that did was it took me down this road where as an artist we have this burning desire to communicate with people what we see, what we have to say, what we believe. So what happened was I became a teacher, and what I wanted to show people was the beauty of the Northwest Coast and its people” (ibid.).

Vickers strongly supports the notion of a Northwest Coast artistic and cultural revival, and largely credits Bill Reid’s influence with having inspired it. “When Bill Reid first began his voyage of discovery when he left CBC and began to grow as an artist and a jeweler, what he was really doing was giving people like myself direction ... It’s a very beautiful giant that he woke up and I’m part of that giant, Robert Davidson is part of that giant, and Ron Hamilton and Art Thompson are part of that giant - there are so many of us who were influenced by him” (ibid.).

Vickers considers the revival of which he speaks to be a complex phenomenon that cannot be separated from the identities of those involved in it, however. “It’s more than a revival of the art and culture of the Northwest Coast. What has happened on the coast was almost a cultural genocide, and the Kwagiutl say that they were the ones who held it together, and everybody’s had that claim as being the one’s who’ve held it together, and when it comes right down to it they’re all right. People have maintained some sort of a tie to their ancestors... When we come to understand who we are, when we can step out of being the victim and become the person who’s living their lives in all of the beauty and truth of who

Figure 10 – Roy Henry Vickers, *Visions of the Future* (1984)



they are, there's going to be a revival, and it's actually the revival of the will of the human being to be beautiful, not just a revived culture. What I see happening is that a whole lot of Canadians are coming to a place where we are looking at how we live and what it is that we have to say" (ibid.).

Vickers certainly sees a particular role for the artist to play in the process of revival as he describes it. "On the Northwest Coast we as artists are privileged to be a part of that growth ... We are influential not just with art, but with the way we live, and think, and act" (ibid.).

While he is appreciative of the influence that his success has afforded him, Vickers maintains a grounded view of the pervasiveness of that influence. "For me being influential has nothing to do with having a lot of money, it has to do with living your life in the right way, and it's the strength and beauty of the way that you live your life that has the strongest influence" (ibid.).

Similarly, Vickers does not see a marked distinction between producing art for traditional use or for commercial sale, but rather sees both applications of an artist's skill as reflecting a traditionally inherent notion of resource sharing. "So I've created an image, a limited edition print, which is sold to raise funds for a village that's building a longhouse. That's very traditional. I can't see the line drawn between [producing for traditional purposes or for commercial purposes]. I create images that are sold here in the Eagle Aerie Gallery, and the money goes to help me live – to help my family to live. It goes to schools, or to help with scholarships. It goes to a lot of different places. I believe that our human resources are to be

shared, and that the way that we work together is for the purposes of sharing our resources. It's about making a difference. It's about being influential" (ibid.).

Vickers is also careful to point out that in discussing a Northwest Coast revival people often err in having a fixed sense of what it is that is referred to as being revived culturally. "There will never be a revival of the culture of the Northwest Coast as the cultures existed at the time of contact with the white man, because it's not the same. Cultures change. Traditions change. The revival is not a culture – it's the revival of the human spirit that we're talking about. All that art is, is a communication of what people believe in" (ibid.).

The role that Vickers sees the communicative power of art playing in terms of conveying messages with political significance is a considerable one. "So, are we political? Damn right we are. I used to say that I'm not political, but now I believe that everybody is – politics is about people, so you have to be political if you're a human being – that's just part of it. So, can you convey a message through art? Yes – that's what art is. Art is always communicating messages, and that's very powerful" (ibid.).

The messages that Vickers sees as being conveyed through his artwork are strongly linked to identity and a global sense of one-ness with humanity. "What is the message? 'This is who I am. This is my family.' What do you see when you walk into my gallery? 'Oh, this is who he is. This is his family – Kitkatla, Bella Bella, Oweekino, Victoria, Vancouver. This is his world. This is the way that he sees it.' And what is the message? The message will always

be centered in the community, and the community is the country, and the country is the world” (ibid.).

The possibility of change in order to overcome the discrimination that was an early motivator in Vickers’ process of artistic discovery is another strong theme in the messages that he attempts to convey by way of his artwork, and one that again hearkens back to his multi-faceted sense of identity. “All of my artwork is a political statement, and the message that I’m sending, first and foremost, is that as a human being it’s possible to change. As human beings, it’s possible to look at one another and see one race, not four races, because there are not four races, just four different types of skin color ... There’s one race – the human race – and we’re all brothers and sisters, and that’s my strongest political statement” (ibid.).

While Vickers believes in the power of change, he also recognizes that it is a process which takes time, and which must be “effected gently, not forced, the way that is was forced on my father’s ancestors” (ibid.). Vickers sees one of the potential strengths of conveying messages through art as being able to effect this gentle evolutionary change in communities which can have a broader pervasive effect. “Although the totem poles that I played on and climbed on as a kid are all gone, they’re in my drawings and in my paintings. When my village sees those drawings they’re proud of who they are - not just proud of me, but proud of who they are - their culture, what it has to say, and what they have to offer. So, they’re slowly changing ... I can see now where I do make a difference” (ibid.).

Roy Henry Vickers considers feeling that he makes a difference to be critical to his ultimate measure of success – personal happiness. “Happiness comes from knowing that you make a difference. As a First Nations person what I say is, ‘We make a difference.’ If you want to keep thinking of yourself as a victim of the impact of white people, go ahead, but history should be there only to show us where we come from and why we are the way we are. So that’s another political statement that I try to convey in my artwork – nothing can take away my own happiness. To make a difference in you makes a difference in your family, it makes a difference in the community, and it makes a difference in the country” (ibid.).

In terms of his own personal growth, Vickers credits art as having helped him through the long process of recovering from adversity just as it helps communities recover from adversity. “My art, my artistic expression is my lifeline. If it wasn’t for my art, I would be dead; I would have committed suicide a long time ago. Art has made a big difference in my life – I’m still here! When you are seeking to express yourself as a human being, you’re doing it from the very deepest part of yourself. Art helps us to recover a sense of who we are, and this takes us on a journey of discovery. That’s what artistic expression is about to me” (ibid.).

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

Born in Kamloops, Lawrence Paul, whose traditional name is Yuxweluptun, is of Coast Salish / Okanogan ancestry, although he largely considers himself to be an urban Aboriginal, living in the Greater Vancouver area (McMaster and Martin, 1992: 157). I interviewed Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun at his apartment in Vancouver on June 7th, 1999.

Having spent four years enrolled in the Emily Carr College of Art and Design, he went on to receive wide recognition for his modernist, controversial artwork that derives its content largely from the documentation of social issues affecting native peoples (ibid.). Known for producing large scale canvases in acrylic and oil, his paintings “integrate familiar forms from traditional Northwest Coast art with vivid colours in a surrealistic landscape. The effect disrupts the logical order inherent in the art of the region and suggests a dream-like world inhabited by remnants of Native culture. Disoriented by the lack of perspective both spatially and psychologically the viewer is forced to participate in the artists’ fantasy in order to translate the juxtapositions of naturalism and distortion” (ibid.).

Paul is a modernist painter who considers this particular style to have “a different place within art.” When questioned about the link between art and identity in the Northwest Coast, he supports the notion of the importance of that link, but true to form examines that link within the context of the effects of contact on native peoples. “Northwest Coast art has become such a hybrid, containing influences from different regions – Hazelton, Bella Bella, Bella Coola, Kwakiutl, Salish. Now all of them are evolving simultaneously in the world. In a sense, mine are a modern approach to a modern Indian. They’re an investigation of one’s self or identity – a gauge of how much we’ve been culturally assimilated” (Shier, 1998: 50).

He is quick to distinguish between ‘traditional’ and what he calls ‘nailed’ art. “In the past, there was never a nail behind it, and it was never brought to market and sold – traditional art is just for the community, a continuation of culture” (Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, personal

interview, 1999). Insofar as the question of a Northwest Coast cultural revival is concerned, Paul's point of view is that, for the Salish, while artistic and cultural traditions may have gone underground, they were never extinguished or even in decline. "The Salish world was very strong culturally and artistically, so in terms of the cultural revival, to the Salish people it's only a continuation ... sure [some aspects of Salish culture and traditions] went underground, but I think that to speak of revival is a strictly colonial perspective. A real potlatch is when there are no anthropologists around – that's a real continuation of culture" (ibid.).

He sees a paradox in mainstream Canada partaking in debate surrounding cultural revival when, in his eyes, broad based oppression of First Nations people is still the order of the day. For Paul, the question of cultural revival "is really a question of state of mind. How can you revive languages, culture, when colonialism has control over education? How do you define a cultural revival when Aboriginal people are being oppressed in this province?" (ibid.). According to Paul, this creates a paradoxical situation where there exist "two different political spectrums to deal with – one that is trying to have a sustainable culture and one that is trying to destroy it" (ibid.).

Paul sees this paradox further echoed in current systems of Aboriginal governance, differentiating between 'traditional' and 'government' chiefs, a system that he sees as devoid of accountability which has grown more pronounced with the progression of land claims in British Columbia. "But that's government chiefs, puppet chiefs, for you. The Assembly of First Nations is a classic example of government chiefs. It's funded by the government and

accountable to Ottawa. The chiefs vote each other in and the national chief is elected by the other chiefs. He's not accountable to the people because the people never vote for him" (Shier, 1998: 51).

Paul's work is overtly political and created for the purpose of disseminating a clear meaning and message. "It's about an exercise of communicating with the outside world. It is very important to me and I feel that this is where there exists a meeting point. How do you translate from one culture to another?" (Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, personal interview, 1999). The modernist style that characterizes his work is one chosen purposely insofar as he feels that it allows him more artistic freedom in terms of conveying messages through his artwork. "Modernism can deal with things that traditionalism can't, but you have to give up something in return. You have to give up traditional. Can you carve a molestation mask? Can you dance a molestation mask? ... I like modernism. Information is endless for your ideas and concepts ... Some artists say that [because I'm doing modernism and not traditionalism] I'm not doing anything native, but then when they see the images it's just a modern version of native identity ... I've probably changed the Northwest Coast forever" (ibid.).

Paul seems to have long recognized the powerful messages that may be transmitted through art, and the potential effects that this can have in terms of creating a political statement are inherent to his motivations to continue producing and showing his work. "I approach my work and have always approached it taking my social and ideological responsibility as an artist first, as they relate to this time in history. I cannot celebrate or feel any national

Figure 11 – Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Scorched Earth Clearcut Logging on Native Sovereign Lands, Shaman Coming to Fix* (1991)



allegiance to the Canadian flag while such racist legislation as the *Indian Act* remains in force: the system native people are governed under is the despotism of white self-interest. Because of this, a lot of my pieces are historical. You cannot hide the real history or even the censorship of native history, a colonial syndrome. You can hide Department of Indian Affairs documents from the time of Confederation, but you cannot hide my paintings. They are for all people to see” (Paul in Nemiroff et al, 1992: 220).

Paul does not mask the fact that he considers Canada to be a racist country which is still in the process of actively colonizing Aboriginal peoples. In fact, he has repeatedly used his growing recognition to decry the legacies of racism and oppression. “We are not decolonizing, we are being colonized. We’ve been colonized. It’s only a matter of sharing our experiences of being the oppressor and the oppressed. It’s a matter of dealing with us and them” (Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, personal interview, 1999). With typical bluntness, Paul states, “They hate Indians in this country. It’s very racist ... Politically this is not a democracy. I don’t see native people as free. I don’t think any native in this country understands the meaning of that word yet. Or self-government, self-determination ... I think that what is really scary about this country is that there is so much hate, and there is no will in this country to change at this point. That’s what I’ve seen and experienced. So I think that it’s important to relate to the outside world and try to change it. I’ve done a lot of exhibitions and explained a lot of things, but it takes time” (ibid.).

For Paul, art is a medium with which to assert his own self-determination, while sharing his view of history with a mainstream public. “Painting is a form of political activism, a way to

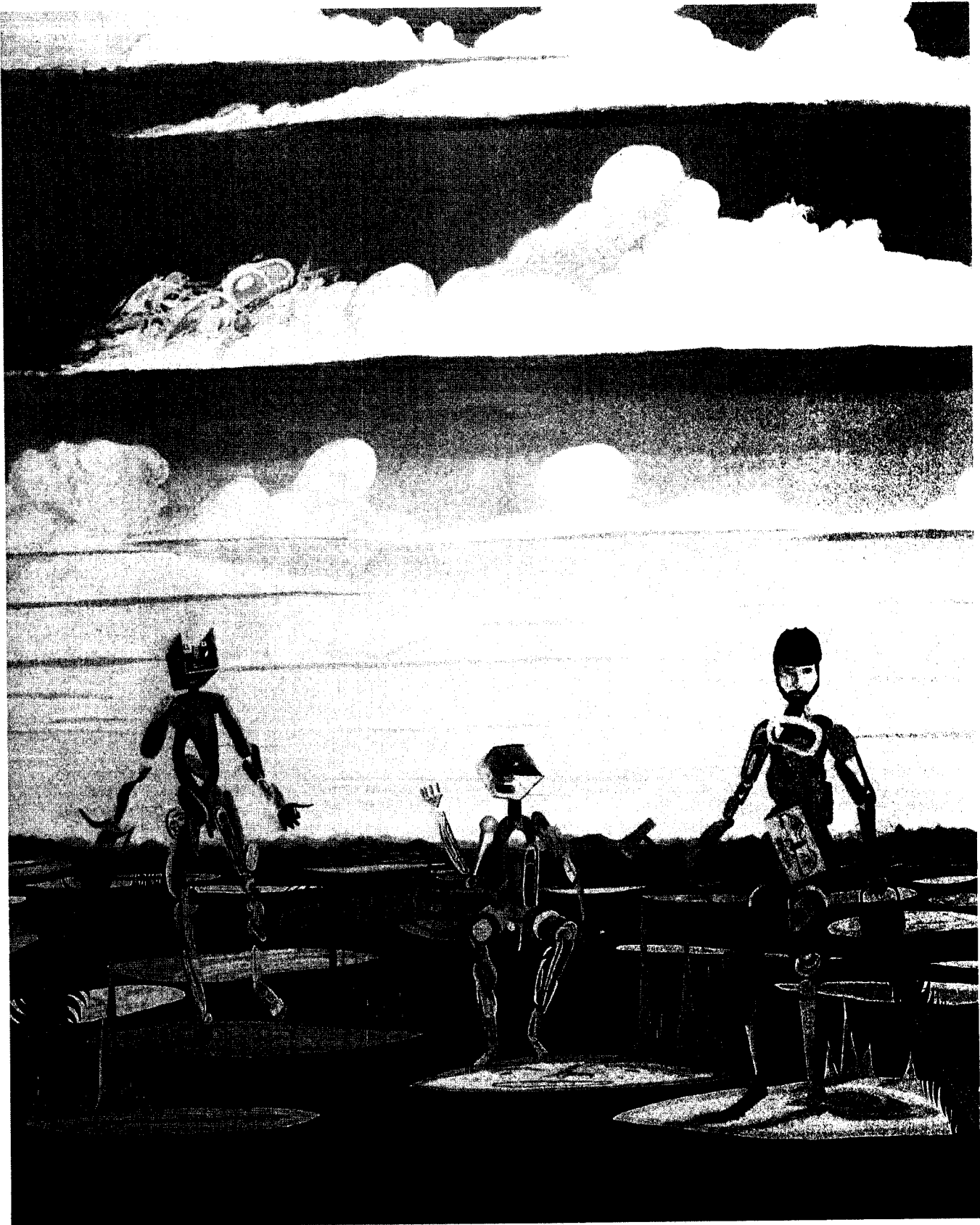
exercise my inherent right, my right to authority, my freedom. This is real freedom for me. I am proud these days, I have self-dignity in my art when I paint this world ... I can speak out in my paintings even without the recognition of self-government.” (Paul in Nemiroff et al, 1992: 221 – 222).

It is not possible for Paul to separate the concept of politics from both his daily life and his art work. “Some call it political, but this is my everyday life. This is what I deal with. I’m not painting a bed of roses. It’s not so sweet. I’m just recording history. Culturally I guess that I couldn’t sit around and wait for things to change. I think it had to be brought to attention. If you don’t have power what do you do? You send a message to the top, and you keep sending messages to the top. Politically I don’t think that I could have waited for my Chief to say something” (Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, personal interview, 1999).

Beyond the role that his artwork plays for Paul insofar as asserting his own voice and influence, he recognizes that there are many methods by which to convey meaning and messages, and hopes that the statements inherent to his work inspire others who wish to assert a political voice. “It’s by example that I exercise that right to say that if you’re an individual, if you feel that you are being violated, you can say something. You have e-mail, you have all the information in this world. Exercise all the capacity that you can. I think that I’ve been able to share that responsibility with others to exercise that right” (ibid.)

And Paul’s messages have been shared broadly around the globe. While his work hangs in the National Gallery of Canada, he enjoyed international success before he became more

Figure 12 – Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *MacMillan Bloedel Ecosystem Destroyers and Their Preferred Weapons* (1994)



widely acclaimed at home, with significant works in Europe and the United States. He is pragmatic about the art market and, while he enjoys his success and the broader scope that his popularity allows insofar as disseminating his political views, he is also critical of aspects of it that reinforce those very elements that his artwork speaks out against. “In 1992 Land Spirit Power showed at the National Gallery for the Year of the Indigenous Peoples. They’ve bought my art and now they have an Indian room. A segregation room. I was born in a segregated room, and now my art is born in this segregated room. I wish somebody would go there and slash my work” (ibid.). He has also been openly critical of art critics who believe that his departure from traditional Northwest Coast style is disrespectful of cultural traditions.

Paul sees his artistic statements as being particularly relevant to the current political climate in British Columbia as the provincial government endeavors to negotiate land claims, negotiations which, in his opinion, are being poorly conducted. “I think that they’ve gone around the wrong way with land claims. I think that [the government] should just pay rent, back rent as far as I’m concerned, and then go with self-government from there and stop land claims because technically British Columbia can’t afford the land ... I want the real McCoy and I want them to pay. And I think that the position I see is that there is no deal. There should never be any deal” (ibid.). Furthermore, Paul is incensed by a spirit of hypocrisy which he sees governing the negotiation process. “It’s a belief system that [Canadians] have that I want them to live up to which says ‘thou shall not steal.’ And if they expect me to abide by their laws, then I expect them to live up to theirs as well” (ibid.).

While Paul may have lofty goals when it comes to reforming the direction of policy and politics in Canada through his artistic statements, he is also realistic about the process and the time that it takes in order to effect positive change. “I often think that policy’s wrong, but it takes time to teach people. They’re like little children ... You need to teach them that you shouldn’t be doing that. So, you have to have politics. To me it’s just a part of my everyday life” (ibid.).

Paul sees the up and coming generations as playing a pivotal role in political reforms affecting Aboriginal peoples. “When [my artwork] goes into public institutions thousands and thousands of people will see it. What I think is most important is that the children have been able to see what I’ve done, and have an experience of learning how to deal with expressionism or the freedom of expression, and to cherish that freedom quite strongly because it may be that the only thing that you have as a person in this country is to exercise that right at some point somehow” (ibid.).

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun is something of a unique case study in that unlike many other artists, his desire to exercise his voice politically seems to motivate his artistic endeavors rather than the other way around. He says, “I’ve been involved in social discourse for fifteen years and I haven’t run out of political issues in this country” (Shier, 1998: 50). It seems unlikely that he will anytime soon.

Art Wilson ('Wii Muk'willxw)

Art Wilson, whose traditional name is 'Wii Muk'willxw, is much more than just an artist. A hereditary Chief of the Gitksan, a political activist, a fisherman, a father, a teacher – Art Wilson's amazing artwork captures and reflects the multi-faceted identity of an artist wanting to represent the cause of the Gitksan and of other Aboriginal peoples in an enduring way (Wilson, 1996: 10). "Art took to painting the grief and suffering that his people felt at their oppression as well as those inspired moments of resistance, often infused with humour and delight" (ibid.). *Heartbeat of the Earth* is a collection of 40 of his politically-inspired paintings, each accompanied by a brief commentary by the artist himself. The native self-representation present in Art's work is created not only to speak to Art's people, First Nations people, but to larger society – mainstream Canadian society, and beyond.

Art's work represents in a concrete way images of the people and of their land. Nature figures strongly in his work, as do the animals that form the totems of the major clans – eagle, raven, bear and wolf (Wilson, 1996: 11). Major artifacts of his culture such as bent-wood boxes, button blankets, and longhouses also appear in his paintings (ibid.). Perhaps what makes his work most remarkable, however, is the fact that these traditional elements combine with tangible signs of the post-contact era in telling and powerful ways.

Helicopters, tanks, jetfighters, clearcuts, and cityscapes interplay with the traditional elements and style in Art's work. The effect is striking, powerful, and very memorable. He typically depicts white people as skeletons, which is consistent with Gitksan prophecies about "the ghosts who would come to live among us" (Wilson, 1996: 16).

All of the prints included in *Heartbeat of the Earth* are rendered, true to the typical style of Northwest Coast native art, in black, red and white. When depicting the totemic animals so prevalent in his works, he uses the traditional ovoids and u-forms which are strongly associated with the traditions of this style. The result is that when one first lays eyes on one of Art's pieces, its native association is unavoidable. The real strength in his works, however, comes when one looks at his artwork a little closer, letting their powerful messages register.

At first glance, "Beat the Drum Slowly" (figure 13), a print featured in *Heartbeat of the Earth*, is a striking example of Northwest Coast native painting. Upon closer consideration, however, one notices that the hillside is crying "from a devastated area known as a clearcut" (Wilson, 1996: 34). In Art's own words, "this painting depicts the sorrow we feel about the present state of the Earth," hence, the drum is beating slowly (ibid.).

"Seizure on Luulak's Land" (figure 14), another print featured in the aforementioned collection, is a depiction of an event which saw several Gitksan Chiefs removing the equipment from an unwanted logging operation off the land of Gitksan hereditary Chief Luulak. Art explains the images depicted in the painting as follows: "When we got on site, we decided to first seize the front-end loader. An eagle Chief hot-wired it – you can see him driving it away. The body of the vehicle is depicted as a frog because Luulak is a Frog Chief, and the seizure was made on her behalf. The skulls in the wheels represent Luulak – the Gitksan word for ghost" (Wilson, 1996: 42).

Figure 13 – Art Wilson, *Beat the Drum Slowly*

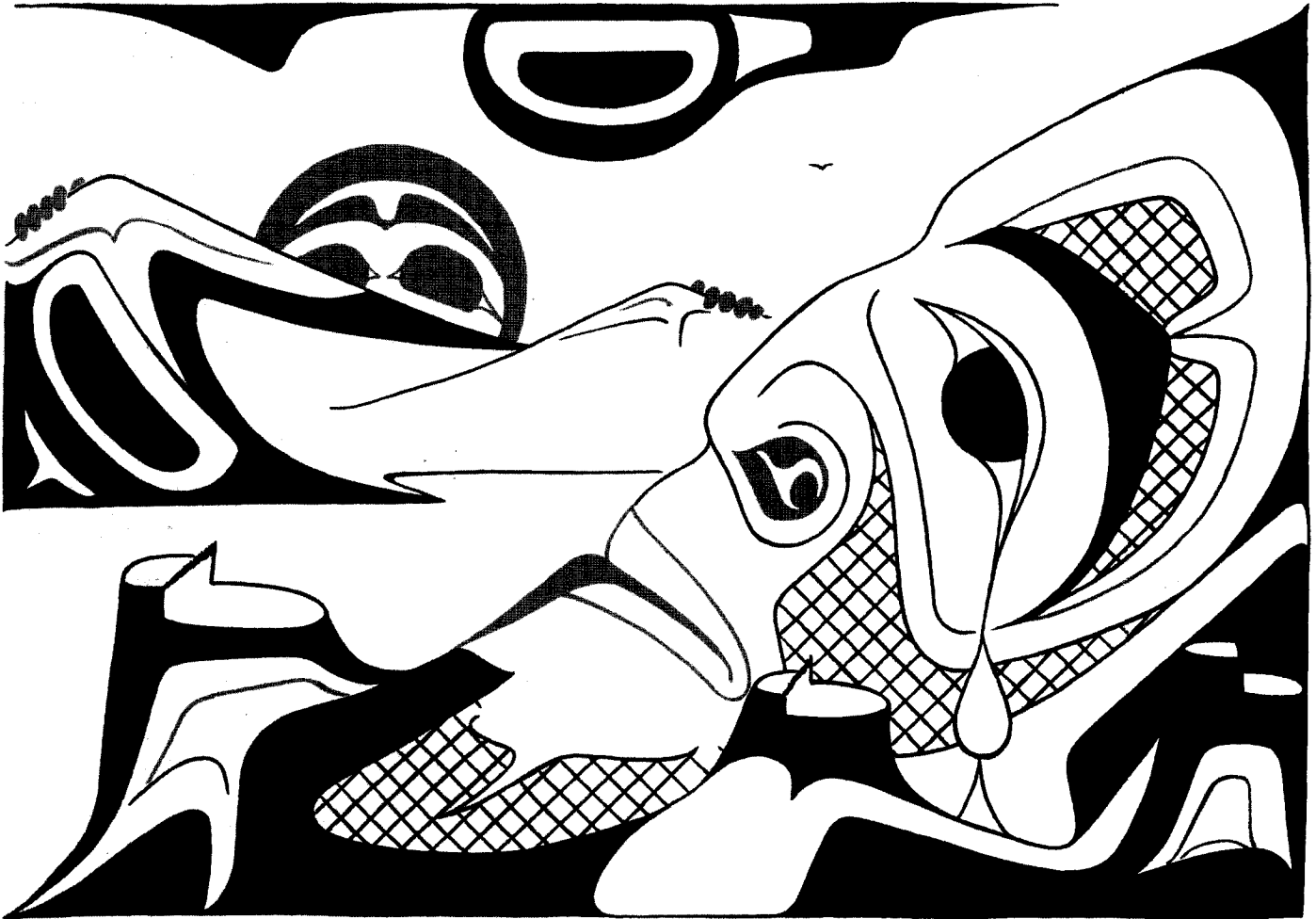


Figure 14 – Art Wilson, *Seizure on Luulak's Land*



Images of native self-representation are rampant in Art Wilson's work, and speak to the complexities which surround native identity in contemporary Canada. First Nations people appearing in Art's work are depicted as mothers, warriors, prisoners, addicts, fishermen, political activists, and residential school students, to name just a few. Sometimes, the Aboriginal people are drawn in the image of a clan or totem animal, and sometimes they are drawn conventionally. Some of Art's works cause us to reconsider many of the more prevalent stereotypes surrounding native people, by making poignant statements about the very real causes and effects surrounding native issues. For example, "Davis Inlet" (figure 15) makes a powerful statement about the social problems plaguing this northern First Nations community relocated by the Newfoundland government. This painting depicts the alcoholism and drug addiction rampant in the community, as well as the house fire which killed six small children (Wilson, 1996: 68).

The interconnectedness of creation is another theme which is visible across many of Art's pieces, with spirit animals depicted in waterways or on hillsides, shedding a tear on behalf of Mother Earth. This reinforces the degree to which traditional native culture sees identity as an interconnected phenomenon, incorporating one's ancestors and all elements of creation.

Art's work in general speaks directly to the long-held stereotyped notion of the 'vanishing Indian.' His artwork leaves no doubt in one's mind that, indeed, First Nations people have survived, and demand a voice. One of his paintings in particular, "The Train to Assimilation" (figure 16), explores this theme directly. It deals with Canadian attempts to assimilate First Nations people through such means as residential schools. Of this, Art says,

Figure 15 – Art Wilson, *Davis Inlet*



Figure 16 – Art Wilson, *The Train to Assimilation*



“Slowly we are re-establishing the parts of our culture that the government tried to destroy. One high level government official once said, “there will be no ‘Indian problem’ because there will be no Indians.” Lo and behold, however, we are still here” (Wilson, 1996: 26).

In creatively juxtaposing elements of traditional native culture with those elements of contemporary culture which run counter to traditional beliefs and lifestyles, Art Wilson’s artwork makes a strong statement about the state of First Nations issues in contemporary Canada. Furthermore, in dealing with and in representing in unique ways a variety of images of First Nations peoples, Art Wilson, through his work, causes us to rethink some of the problematic issues surrounding First Nations identity, and stereotyped imagery in Canadian society.

I interviewed Art Wilson at the Gitxsan Treaty Office in New Hazelton, BC, on June 9th, 1999. His perspective was unique as compared to the other artists that I am considering in that his first line of interest is politics, with art as a secondary pursuit. This piqued my interest in terms of better understanding the relationship that he sees play out in his own experiences between art, culture, identity, meaning, and the potential political implications of these.

Interestingly, although Art Wilson claims to have always had an interest in art and long recognized it as a gift, his first experience venturing into the art market was during the outset of the Gitxsan court hearings. He began by developing a series of four paintings at the onset of the trial, and happened to show them to some Chiefs in attendance who liked the pieces.

Art Wilson produced a series of one hundred prints of the series and sold them in order to offset court costs for the Gitksan. “I had started doing a series of four when we first went to court, and I had showed [that series] to some Chiefs and they liked it, so I thought that I would do a hundred [of each print and sell them] for fifty dollars each to fundraise for the court case. From the reaction that I got at the time I thought that maybe I should [have done] more because people liked what I was doing, whereas [prior to that] I really didn’t care to show people what kind of artwork I was capable of doing” (Art Wilson, personal interview, 1999).

But those beginnings should not be mistaken as leading one to infer that Art Wilson’s motivation as an artist is economic. Far from it. While he sees many benefits inherent to producing art, he is quick to clarify that he sees a marked difference between producing art for mere economic gain as opposed to producing meaningful artwork grounded in tradition and the stories of the Gitksan. “Some people say that because I have a particular kind of talent ... that I should capitalize on it, but it doesn’t work that way with me” (ibid.).

First and foremost, Art Wilson considers his artwork to be a living record, “because people forget too easily and if they have something hanging on the wall then it’s sort of like a totem pole. It reminds (them) of what happened in the past ... art still has a way of recording that life experience. And I think that it does help other people ... it keeps them from forgetting who they are” (ibid.). These words echo a strong link to the concept of the role of the artist in identity formation, of the artist and of the community.

With a feeling of responsibility to preserving records of the past through the universal language of art, Wilson feels that although the scenes and stories portrayed in his artwork are not always his stories to tell, “[they are] somebody’s history. And it’s not necessarily my history, but I think that my contribution is more in putting it on paper so that it hangs on the wall so that people will remember” (ibid.).

Of the role that creating art plays in terms of his own identity, Art says, “I don’t want to lose sight of who I am” (ibid.). He also considers the process of story telling through his artwork to help him deal with elements of Gitksan history that he’d rather not dwell on. “That’s the kind of stuff that I want to let go of, and I don’t want to hang onto it forever” (ibid.). While Art Wilson agrees that a renewal of artistic traditions can assist a community with overcoming the effects of colonization, it would seem that there is also a cathartic aspect to the creation process that is helpful insofar as healing is concerned.

While he agrees that there has been a cultural revival taking shape amongst Northwest Coast First Nations, he is quick to point out that while art can play an important role in renewing and rediscovering culture, this is not always necessarily so. “I see a lot of art and it doesn’t necessarily contribute to culture... Crests in our society are very precious, and particular kinds of crests are only worn by Chiefs. Not everybody wears them. And so I see people designing dresses and clothing and all kinds of things with crests on them, and they sell them to anybody and those somebodies are not Chiefs. And so I think that in those cases they are actually watering down the culture. I think that if they flood the whole society with something that it loses meaning” (ibid.).

Art Wilson considers the role that art can play in molding the knowledge and talents of the younger generations to be key. Spending a lot of time working in the local school with young Gitksan, Art thinks that artists can play a special role in providing a positive influence to students, inspiring them to “work hard at what they’re good at... I want to see a better life for our kids and I think that’s what it should be all about, not about us but about the people that come behind us. I really think that our generation is going to spend all [of its] time speaking and negotiating ... but we’re hoping that the next generation is going to have smooth sailing” (ibid.).

Art Wilson credits his childhood experiences with creating the germinations of an early sense of political awareness in him. He grew up in a traditional setting but in an era of early European settlement and government policy reforms including the implementation of the residential school system, events which shaped his consciousness from an early age. “So that kind of sucked me into the political situation right off the bat, because as a result of seeing those things I asked a lot of questions, and my grandmother finally insisted that I went to school. So those kinds of things shaped my life as far as politics goes. And my role has been more in politics, art has been secondary. But I’ve used art to tell about those things” (ibid.).

One of the most critical roles that Art Wilson considers his sometimes controversial artistic statements to play is that of fuelling intelligent debate. “I like to encourage people to have an intelligent discussion about something and I don’t want to get into a screaming match... but if it gets people angry then that’s okay. People get angry for a reason. It’s a case of denial or

something else – it’s not necessarily a bad thing. Even if they initially don’t like my artwork then we can’t fight about it forever. We have to talk about it, because I don’t want to spend all of my life waiting” (ibid.).

To this end, Art Wilson considers his artwork to be primarily an educational tool, both for his own people to better remember and understand their own histories, and for the rest of the world to learn from them. Wilson’s artwork has attracted attention from various groups across North America and even globally. He considers himself to be a global thinker, a theme that is reflected in many of his pieces that deal with international indigenous issues. He cites this recognition of the educational potential of artwork as an impetus for publishing *Heartbeat of the Earth*. “I thought that if I was to publish my artwork then I could contribute to educating people about what I know of certain situations” (ibid.).

For Art Wilson the question of the relationship between art and meaningful messages is clear. Relating it back to conceptions of his own identity he adds, “[the process of being an artist] makes me feel like I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing, and it’s meaningful to our society and it fills that gap... If you create something ... there has to be some meaning behind it. If we create a whole slough of meaningless things then we’re basically lost” (ibid.).

Given his political involvements, it makes sense that Art Wilson sees his artwork moving in the direction of commentary on the negotiation process. He believes that the knowledge and

history that he is able to pass on through his artwork will help his community manage current negotiations while better preparing future generations to manage land claims.

Art Wilson provides an insightful example of a politician and traditional Chief who has discovered the potential that artwork has to preserve history, reinforce both collective and personal identities, engender useful debate on timely issues, transcend nationalities and borders, and provide a tool by which future generations can be better prepared to address issues that affect their ties to the land. Of his talent and its positive impacts Wilson says, “The healers always tell us that we have a particular gift and that there’s a reason for that gift [so we must] use it in the right way. I could very easily say ‘to heck with politics’ but my heart wouldn’t be in my artwork. My heart would still be in politics and it would make me feel that I’m letting the people down” (ibid.).

CHAPTER FOUR - DISCUSSION

A pivotal theme of this examination has been the link between art, culture, identity, and the broader applications of art in terms of meanings and messages that might bear political relevance. In order to fully understand that link it is helpful to consider issues related to the integration of art into broader society. In examining the function of art and the role that it plays in the human venture, it is useful to consider these concepts from a socio-historical perspective.

Artistic endeavors have, through time, proven to be a fertile ground for innovation. Art allows individuals to develop creativities, engage challenges, and develop self-mastery without threatening convention or the status quo too overtly. The significance of the potential role that art can play in communities increases when considered under the lens of oppression.

Artistic endeavors have consistently proven to be one of the first ways for individuals, societies, and nations to re-tell their own stories, emerging as communities become more adaptive. In addition to considerations of how this functional element of art plays out in emerging cultures or societies, it is also interesting and relevant here to consider the potential of this same phenomenon in societies that have suffered oppression as they struggle to re-tell stories that have long been suppressed by the dominant 'one.' In this light, art can be seen to have great potential value not just as a tool for societies that are becoming increasingly adaptive, but also for societies that are learning to re-adapt. I would suggest that this premise

can be usefully applied to an examination of Northwest Coast First Nations, and lends credence to the notion of a revival of culture following years of oppressive assimilationist policy.

The role that art plays in re-telling stories might arguably be of even greater significance in the case of societies which had no form of written language, a tenet that again applies to Northwest Coast First Nations, whose art and crest poles tell their creation stories. If we accept that the ability to re-tell our own stories is key in the process of social innovation, then art becomes a critical tool. One theme echoed by many of the artists whom I spoke with is being motivated to record history through their work. While some may argue that an artists rendering of history is, by definition, subjective, upon further reflection it becomes evident that that might be no less so than the written word, penned by the victors as historical ‘fact.’

Identity in the context of the current discussion might be understood to be a set of stories about one’s function and purpose – stories that might exist on individual, community, national, and global levels simultaneously. While some theorists posit that identity is fixed, evidence collected for the purposes of this research would suggest a conception of identity that is adaptive and open to creation and change. This is supported by Roy Henry Vickers assertion that a revival or renaissance of Northwest Coast culture will never and can never result in a rebirth of the cultures as they existed pre-contact, because they are and have always been ever-changing.

History tells us that a hallmark of many First Nations societies is an adaptive capacity that has allowed them to survive through the millennia. It would be difficult to conceive of such adaptive skill in a society that did not value and display a broad range of evolutionary capacities. Vickers suggests that the revival that has been transpiring in the nations of the Northwest Coast is one of human will and spirit. If this is true, then perhaps it helps to explain why there is such lack of consensus on how to describe the artistic and cultural phenomenon that has been taking shape in that region for the past half century.

On the question of a Northwest Coast artistic ‘renaissance’, one thing seems (almost) universally agreed upon – namely that *something* is happening, despite an inability to reach consensus on what exactly that is. As might be expected, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun is the one contrary voice in my sample of artists, insisting that amongst the Salish there was never a cultural decline, and further suggesting that to speak of revival is to pander to a colonialist perspective that would paradoxically impose a sense of cultural revival even as racist and assimilationist policies continue.

While Art Wilson agrees that a cultural revival is underway, he also points out that not all art contributes to that process. In suggesting that some art, ungrounded and removed from elements of true meaning, acts to water down Northwest Coast cultures rather than to fortify them, he introduces elements of the authenticity debate.

As we have seen, questions of authenticity can be applied to many aspects of an examination of Northwest Coast art. Each artist that has been examined here has had to face questions of

authenticity in one form or another. Roy Henry Vickers, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Art Wilson all incorporate classical forms into the modern landscapes and issue areas represented in their work, and could therefore have the authenticity of their work questioned insofar as it departs from the traditional.

Early in his career, Roy Henry Vickers' mentor Wilson Duff encouraged the young artist to embrace traditionalism to the exclusion of modern interpretations. Vickers, recognizing that he was not a 'traditional' First Nations person, recognized the ethnocentric and paradoxical nature of trying to produce artwork that was not representative of his own experiences and which would not lend itself as well to sharing his voice and his stories.

Ironically, Bill Reid, the most classically 'traditional' of the artists examined, dealt with questions of the authenticity of his artwork based on his race and cultural identity. Central to the issues related to authenticity as explored here is the question, "who decides"? Martine Reid suggests that it is up to the viewing public to decide what is or is not art, and what is or is not valid, but inherently problematic to that approach is the question of the cultural identity of the viewing public. If an artist and their work can be labeled authentic by one person and contested as inauthentic by another, where does that leave us?

This research suggests that the impact of an artists work should be the real hallmark of authenticity. Each of the artists examined here has expressed similar statements concerning their need to connect to their culture, record and retell stories and histories that validate their own identities and those of their cultures through their artwork. Each produces images which

show the interconnectedness between man, his ancestors and creation. In so doing, powerful and meaningful messages are transmitted that speak to Northwest Coast cultures, history, and authority over land. Each artist's work has reached audiences far beyond those of the Northwest Coast, and has therefore made strides towards putting First Nations issues on a global stage.

Art and identity can interplay once a context of higher-level engagement evolves with a connection to the human spirit and the stories of a person or a broader community, a connection which no doubt exists in the case of all of the artists examined in the context of this research. A message that has been echoed throughout is that in order for identity to be well-formed and functional, be it on personal or broader societal scales, it must be linked to a sense of personal efficacy. We have heard that the artists examined here use different terms for this – pride, influence, making a difference. If we use the lens of the link between personal efficacy and identity in considering the revival of Northwest Coast art and culture, it lends an interesting perspective to the authenticity debate as it relates to art production for traditional versus commercial purposes. It would seem logical to propose that the creation of a market affirms confidence and a sense of efficacy on the part of the producer.

While some artists such as Bill Reid and Robert Davidson differentiate between the creation of art for traditional purposes versus the production of art for market driven purposes, Roy Henry Vickers does not see a necessary difference between the two. Others, like Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, feel constrained by the tenets of traditionalism. While there seems to be a spectrum of points of view on this issue, if we consider that a cultural revival has effected

an increase in the ‘traditional use’ market, just as the commercial art world and outside demand for Northwest Coast pieces has effected an increase in the commercial use market, artists producing for either market may likely get similar payoffs when it comes to affirming their identities.

Just as a review of the existing theoretical literature on identity came up with different conceptions of the construct, the concept of culture is no less complex. Based on information gathered over the course of my research, I would posit that a cognitive view of culture is more applicable to my current considerations than Darwinian views which would suggest an unconscious connection between culture and the individual. If we consider culture in the light of something that is consciously drawn on, the potential for a conscious revival or renewal of culture seems very viable.

“Culture is that sort of freely available and all-purpose knowledge that you acquire in general at an age when you don’t yet have any questions to ask. You can spend your life increasing it, cultivating it for its own sake ... you can use it as a sort of more or less inexhaustible toolbox” says Bourdieu (1990: 29). That a society would look to this cultural toolbox for the purposes of overcoming a period of significant oppression seems both viable and adaptive.

Behavioral scientist James Scott offers an interesting consideration of how culture is used to resist domination. While his focus is on peasant cultures, there is undeniable application to the situation of post-contact First Nations. “While folk culture is not [coordinated] in the formal sense, it often achieves a ‘climate of opinion’ which, in other more institutionalized

societies, would require a public relations campaign. The striking thing about peasant society is the extent to which a whole range of complex activities – from labor exchange to house movings to wedding preparations to feasts – are coordinated by networks of understanding and practice ... No formal organizations are created because none are required; and yet a form of coordination is achieved that alerts us that what is happening is not just individual action” (Scott, 1985: 300-301).

The ‘public relations campaigns’ of each of the artists that I’ve examined differs some, but they share a collective theme of overcoming oppression and domination as the ‘other’ in the face of the dominant ‘one.’ Themes of overcoming racism and discrimination, safeguarding cultural integrity and self-determination, protecting the environment, and educating a largely ignorant mainstream public about the environmental and socio-economic plight of Aboriginal peoples are all themes that we have seen echoed in the life work of the artists considered here.

Art allows the artist to give voice to their own stories, together with their unique interpretations and meanings. It would seem reasonable to expect that when art begins to push and challenge the status quo, ecologies of influence begin to develop around it, referring to spheres of influence that can exist at multiple levels, from subconscious, personal influence to broad global influence, depending on context. Sometimes these ecologies of influence are based on controversy, as in the case of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Art Wilson, and sometimes these are based on wide acclaim, as in the case of Bill Reid.

Arguably, it is when these ecologies of influence begin to develop that the potential of art to exert influence on landscapes of policy and politics is exercised. After a reflection on the outcomes of the research that has informed this discussion, it seems that that is what has in fact been demonstrated – the potential that artwork has to convey meanings and messages based on the intent of the artist in question.

Both Bill Reid and Roy Henry Vickers did not consider themselves to be ‘politically minded’, and yet both used their artwork and influence to transmit meanings and messages that are undeniably political in nature. That Vickers’ perspective on politics evolved to consider everyone as being political given that “politics are people” (Roy Henry Vickers, personal interview, 1999) is instructive in a consideration of the interplay between art, meaning, and message. Art Wilson and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun bring a different perspective to considerations of politics, since they each consider their artwork to be a medium to serve their political ends.

A reexamination of Sturtevant’s discussion of the internal versus external classifications of meanings behind artwork leads to a consideration of the interplay between intent and outcome on the part of the artists that have been studied.

While it has clearly been determined that all of the artists considered impart internal meanings to their work, either intentionally or unintentionally, the question of whether the external meanings being conveyed are the same becomes relevant in the context of analysis

of impact. Sturtevant suggested that these may indeed be the same in the case when both artist and observer share cultural understandings.

This brings to bear a further question about whether the external meanings of the artwork shift depending on whether they are being viewed by an Aboriginal audience or a mainstream audience. Further research on this topic would be warranted in order to better understand and contextualize the link between art, identity, and culture as examined here.

Conclusion

We have explored the complexities associated with constructs of identity and culture, specifically as those concepts lend themselves to reinforcement through art. The subject of the validity of a Northwest Coast ‘renaissance’ in art and culture has been debated for some time. After having examined this issue in some depth throughout the course of this research, I have concluded that this is an instance where issues pertaining to terminology and experiential differences constrain the understanding of a phenomenon. It is imperative that we not diminish the dynamic nature of the First Nations cultures in question in the course of exploring the renaissance debate, nor the realities of those community’s experiences with colonization and decolonization.

Does it matter whether we term the process that has taken root in rebuilding the cultures and artistic traditions of the Northwest Coast First Nations a renewal, revival, or renaissance?

What seems more critical in considering the outcomes of this research is the fact that a tide of artistic and cultural resurgence has taken root in the region, and on account of that, culture,

identity, conceptions of relationship to land, and the potential for positive political implications are being left in its wake.

Often, the strength of a culture or society is measured by how well it resists domination. This research suggests, however, that a further measure of strength might be the ability of a culture to rediscover, regenerate, and recreate itself following generations of domination. The cultures of the Northwest Coast First Nations serve as an excellent example of artists playing a critical role in renewing and regenerating culture, while contextualizing it in such a way as to make it relevant in contemporary contexts. In so doing, Northwest Coast artists assume the roles of scribes, storytellers, historians, teachers, leaders, conservationists and politicians.

I have shown that not only does a link exist between art, culture, identity, and the transmission of meanings and messages that have political potential, but I have furthermore established that this is a link that is both well established and functional in the work of Northwest Coast artists. Examinations of the lives and works of Bill Reid, Roy Henry Vickers, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, and Art Wilson have shown us that this link exists despite being played out in different ways from the classical traditionalist to the radical modernist.

Northwest Coast First Nations art is able to transcend the isolation of cultural differences, act as a mechanism to rejuvenate culture and strengthen identity, and has undeniable potential in

terms of bringing awareness and positive political change to issues affecting First Nations people.

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