

Museum Anthropologists and the Arts of Acculturation on the Northwest Coast*

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Museum anthropologists now recognize the importance of the arts of acculturation — those produced for export by colonized tribal societies — as proper objects of research and collection (McFeat, 1962; Graburn, 1968). An equally interesting but neglected topic of study is of the museum anthropologists themselves as agents of this acculturation process. Through their various curatorial and research activities they are actively contributing to the development of the very phenomenon they are now so busily acquiring and studying. In this paper I review those contributions, some intended and others not, that museum anthropologists have made to the creation, promotion and distribution of acculturated artifacts on the Northwest Coast, and thus to what is being called the renaissance of Northwest Coast Indian art.

The problem with which I begin is a simple one. Some twenty years ago observers were recording the disappearance of Northwest Coast Indian art. Today people talk about its “renaissance” (Vastokas, 1975; Young, 1980). How did this renaissance come about, and what did anthropologists have to do with it?

British Columbia artist Jack Shadbolt wrote to a Vancouver newspaper in 1954, stating that the magnificent heritage of Northwest Coast Indian art was dying to the ground and the prospect was very bleak (Shadbolt, 1954). In her *Art Through the Ages*, published in 1959, Helen Gardner noted that from as early as 1910, in fact, good quality Northwest Coast Indian crafts were deteriorating “beyond recall” (Gardner, 1959:623).

By the mid 1970s, however, the production and distribution of contemporary Northwest Coast Indian arts and crafts had become a multi-million dollar industry. Newspapers are now referring to the “great art

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bonanza" of Northwest Coast Indian art (Scott, 1978). Contemporary pieces have become collector's items, eagerly sought after by both museums and private collectors alike. The carvers themselves are receiving wider and wider recognition and are increasingly being referred to, or refer to themselves, as "artists" rather than as "carvers."

There are a number of factors that may account for this renaissance of Northwest Coast Indian art during the past twenty years (Vastokas, 1975). First, there is in industrialized societies a growing interest in primitive art, the search for authentic experiences, and the desire for souvenirs of touristic journeys (MacCannell, 1978). Second, Indian political and cultural movements have contributed to a growing awareness among Indians of their own heritage and its value. Third, the marketplace has provided increasingly attractive rewards for both quality and quantity of production of Indian souvenirs and collectibles. A fourth significant factor has been the role of anthropologists in museums, who not only have aided the revival but also have actively participated in its genesis and in governing its direction. Museums and their anthropologists entered the marketplace in full flight, buying, evaluating and promoting contemporary Indian arts and crafts to a remarkable degree. It is this fourth factor that will be considered here.

Influence of Museum Anthropologists

Museum anthropologists influenced Indian art and craft industries on the Northwest Coast in three ways at least: through their reconstructions of the meaning of Northwest Coast art; by promoting and legitimating art and artists, as patrons to clients; and by inverting the relationship between anthropologists and Indians, so that the patrons become clients. Each of these types of influence will be discussed in turn.

1. *Reconstructing the meaning of Northwest Coast Indian arts and crafts.*

Anthropologists produced a distinctive and widely influential interpretation of the material culture collected from the Northwest Coast. This interpretation included both a *codification* of the elements or principles of Northwest Coast Indian design and a *redefinition* of its meaning or aesthetic quality, from a "primitive" or curio art to a "fine" or "high" art comparable to the arts of western civilization.

The codification of design elements has encouraged a standardization or rationalization of design and technique. The consequences are com-

parable to those that occur when customary law is transformed into written law: a general stereotyping of form and content. (A factor that has had a counter effect is the tendency among some more advanced Indian carvers to accept in part the role model of the "modern artist," who is expected to be individualistic and experimental.) Two anthropologists in particular played leading roles in this codification process: Franz Boas and Bill Holm.

Franz Boas was not the first to do anthropological investigations on the Northwest Coast, and not the first to show serious interest in Northwest Coast Indian design; but he did produce one of the single most influential codifications of that tradition, first publishing in the 1897 *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History* and subsequently in Chapter 6 of his *Primitive Art* (1927). He provided a masterful discussion of the elements and principles of Northwest Coast Indian art, such as the oval eye form (now called ovoid), the double curve design, split U's, split representation, and dislocation of parts, along with a set of illustrations that still rank among the best in the literature.

As Helen Codere remarked in her introduction to Boas' *Kwakiutl Ethnography* (1966:xx-xxi), "even rather superficial knowledge of the elements of this art and its symbolic and operational conventions, as Boas has analyzed and described them, makes it simple to specify what is wrong with anything that is not, but only purports to be, Northwest Coast art."

Codere then went on to make a prophetic statement: "There seems to be no reason why thorough mastery of the details of Boas' analysis, with a requisite technical skill in painting or carving, should not make it possible to produce authentic new Northwest Coast art." She pointed out how this would provide a generative test of the adequacy of Boas' analysis, and this is precisely what has happened.

Bill Holm, of the University of Washington and Thomas Burke Museum, is today recognized as the leading analyst of Northwest Coast design. He took the process of codification even further than Boas, at least for two-dimensional or flat design, and produced what has become the standard text studied by both anthropologists and Indian carvers alike (Holm, 1965). Holm taught himself how to produce Northwest Coast art, and then taught others, including Indian carvers. He briefly assisted in the development of the 'Ksan style of Northwest Coast art at Hazelton, B.C., for example, which is an amalgam of traditional and anthropologically reconstructed rule-based principles. It was, in fact, in 1966, the year Codere's prophetic statement was published, that Bill Holm took his

slides and notes to Hazelton and lectured there on the elements of Northwest Coast flat design. The codifications produced by Boas and Holm provide the primary criteria according to which the Northwest Coast artist is judged. Indian carvers themselves learn from the Boas and Holm books, and teach from them.

The second way anthropologists contributed to the reconstruction of the meaning of Northwest Coast Indian art was to promote a change in classification, from the exotic status of "primitive art," where it was compared to other tribal and curio traditions, to the more dignified status of "fine art," where it is now compared with the great traditions held in highest esteem by western civilization. Lévi Strauss was perhaps the first anthropologist to propose this redefinition, writing in 1943 that, "certainly the time is not far distant when the collections of the Northwest Coast will move from anthropological museums to take their place in art museums among the arts of Egypt, Persia, and the Middle Ages. For this art is not unequal to those great ones" (1943:175).

On the west coast since the 1950s a number of people, through their teachings, writings, and exhibits, also promoted this theme of Northwest Coast Indian crafts as fine art. Wilson Duff, who was curator of anthropology at the B.C. Provincial Museum and then a professor of anthropology at the University of B.C., played an especially important role. One of the more significant exhibits during this period was the 1967 "Arts of the Raven" at the Vancouver Art Gallery, supervised by Doris Shadbolt, with the assistance of Wilson Duff, Bill Holm and Haida artist Bill Reid.

In the catalogue prepared for that show, Doris Shadbolt (1967) referred to the "shift in focus from ethnology to art" that the exhibit represented. Looking back upon that exhibit eight years later, Duff wrote that "Arts of the Raven" was the "threshold over which Northwest Coast art has come into full recognition as 'fine art' as well as 'primitive art'" (1975:13).

In the catalogue Duff prepared for his spectacular exhibition of prehistoric stone sculpture, *Images: Stone: B.C.* (1975:24-25), he remarked upon the high intellectual and aesthetic quality of Northwest Coast art. With the Images exhibition, he stated, we are at last beginning to grant to the Northwest Coast "artists-philosophers" of long ago "credence as people of intellect and mature wisdom." In his words: "to the existing proof of the prior claim and Indian presence in Canada may be added, however poorly understood, this evidence of thirty centuries of hard thinking."

There is by now a well established litany repeated by anthropologists and others on appropriate occasions. In his foreword to the 1977 Graphics Collection of the Northwest Coast Indian Artists' Guild, for example, George Macdonald of the National Museum of Man stated that Northwest Coast art, "is only now being internationally acclaimed by experts as of similar importance to the artistic heritage of mankind as are the arts of ancient Egypt and China." William Taylor, director of the National Museum of Man, contributing a foreword to the 1978 Graphics Collection of the Northwest Coast Indian Artists' Guild, observed that Northwest Coast Indian art is "one of mankind's great artistic achievements ranking with the outstanding traditions of China and Japan, tribal Africa, pre-Columbian Middle America and the European Renaissance." He then repeated Lévi Strauss' proclamation that Northwest Coast art can be placed "on a par with that of Greece and Egypt" (Taylor, 1978).

This attempt to redefine and upgrade the meaning of Northwest Coast Indian art, and especially its present representations, has not by any means received universal acceptance. Not everyone has agreed to remove it from the category of primitive or curio art. To give just one example, the Northwest Coast Indian Artists' Guild asked the Vancouver Art Gallery if the Guild's first graphics collection, issued in 1977, could open at the Gallery. The Indian artists, of course, wanted to proclaim to all the message that their silkscreens were "fine art" deserving exhibition in a major art gallery. The Vancouver Art Gallery agreed to have the opening, but hung the prints in an ante chamber to its gift shop, through which people had to go in order to see them. The only Gallery staff at the opening were the gift shop manager and her sales clerks, who were there to sell the prints.

2. *The promotion and legitimization of Indian art and artists through patronage.*

Museums in British Columbia, especially the three big ones (B.C. Provincial Museum, UBC Museum of Anthropology, and Vancouver Centennial Museum) have in the last twenty years been major patrons of contemporary Indian artists. These museums provided or arranged a number of major commissions which helped to establish the legitimacy of contemporary carvers. Probably the single most important event was in 1949 when Audrey and Harry Hawthorn of the UBC Museum of Anthropology commissioned Kwakiutl carvers Ellen Neel and Mungo Martin to restore some of the poles at the university. This commission estab-

lished Martin as a full-time carver and informant in residence, first for two years at UBC and subsequently for ten years at the Provincial Museum with Wilson Duff. It demonstrated publicly that an honourable living could be made by producing high quality carvings for white people and their museums. (It is interesting to note at this point, and I will discuss it again later, that Duff's successor at the B.C. Provincial Museum, Peter Macnair, has since endeavoured to demonstrate that carvers can now also make an honourable living by carving once again for Indians.)

After Mungo Martin came Bill Reid and Douglas Cranmer, both commissioned to design and construct Haida houses and poles for the UBC Museum of Anthropology from 1957 through to 1963, and Henry Hunt and his sons (relatives of Martin) at the Provincial Museum in Victoria. The Haida house project was a major one for both Reid and Cranmer. It not only had a considerable influence on their own careers, but it attracted wide attention and influenced others as well. Through the 1960s and 1970s commissions multiplied, as did the number of carvers who emerged to take advantage of them. Newly carved totem poles now dot the B.C. landscape and have become a standard gift item for other nations, and during the last ten years carvers have begun to carve and erect poles in their own villages as well. Even Indians are now beginning to collect Indian souvenir art.

In the twenty-four years from 1956 to 1980 the four major museums and galleries in British Columbia (BCPM, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver Centennial Museum, UBC), occasionally with the assistance of their gift shops, have produced over thirty temporary exhibitions of Northwest Coast Indian art and opened two major permanent exhibitions (Provincial Museum and UBC), all of which promoted the aesthetic merit of Northwest Coast Indian art, and most of which included contemporary examples (see Table 1). The first important show of this kind was the Audrey Hawthorn and J. A. Morris 1956 exhibition "People of the Potlatch" at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Other exhibits that had a major impact were the 1967 "Arts of the Raven"; the 1969 Northwest Coast exhibit at Montreal's Man and His World prepared by the Museum of Anthropology; the 1971 "Legacy"; the 1974 "Bill Reid Retrospective"; and the series of one-man shows and print exhibits instituted at the UBC Museum of Anthropology in 1977. The earlier shows featured early pieces along with a small sample from contemporary artists, but gradually the balance has shifted to a preponderance of contemporary works of living artists. The Provincial Museum, for example, commissioned most of the pieces for its two Legacy exhibits.

One of the most powerful statements about the aesthetic merits of traditional Northwest Coast Indian art was made by the new UBC Museum of Anthropology when it opened in May 1976. It would not be inaccurate to say that the Great Hall of massive carvings and the Masterpiece Gallery of the museum stunned the public. This was the first time anywhere that such a wide variety of first class Northwest Coast Indian carvings, ranging in age from 13 to 200 years, was ever collected together and elegantly displayed in one place as "masterpieces of fine art." Art experts did not hesitate to proclaim the earlier sculptures as high art on a plane with the great artistic traditions of the world.

To complement its exhibits of traditional carvings, the Museum of Anthropology immediately instituted a program of presenting contemporary Indian artists and their works after the fashion of one-man shows of white art produced by art galleries (Macfarlane and Inglis, 1977; Macfarlane, 1978; Halpin, 1979).

In 1976 the B.C. Provincial Museum opened its Anthropology Gallery, and that same year the Museum of Man in Ottawa opened its Children of the Raven Gallery, both of which again played on the theme of fine art. Also in recent years the Vancouver Centennial Museum, especially through its gift shop, has promoted contemporary Indian artists, holding shows for Robert Davidson, Tony Hunt and his colleagues, and 'Ksan. Indian art shows are now a regular occurrence among commercial galleries in Vancouver and Victoria, which suggests that contemporary Indian art is becoming well established in local circles.

What the public museums are in effect doing through their exhibits and acquisitions is to museumify the contemporary Indian artist and his works, and this has the effect of legitimating both artist and artifact in the eyes of both whites and Indians. Whites see artifacts displayed in museum contexts as collectibles and investments. Indians discover a new value for their own material heritage, seeing what were once stage props now treated as valued objects, sanctified through being coveted by curators, lovingly cared for by professional conservators, and elaborately displayed by artistic designers. Even the carver himself is displayed and labelled a modern artist. At the UBC Museum of Anthropology, for example, Indian carvers are hired to lecture to students and to the public, and arrangements are made for them to be interviewed by the art critics.

3. *The redefinition of the anthropologist and the role of museums*

The third way museum anthropologists have influenced the Indian art scene has grown out of their redefinition of the museum enterprise itself.

TABLE 1

Some Exhibitions of Northwest Coast Indian Material Culture Displayed as Art by Major Museums and Galleries in B.C., 1956-80

<i>Date</i>	<i>Exhibit</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Curator/Organization</i>
1956	People of the Potlatch	VAG	J. A. Morris, A. Hawthorn
1958	100 Years of B.C. Art	VAG	R. M. Hume
1967	Arts of the Raven	VAG	D. Shadbolt
1968-70	Age of Edenshaw	VCM	W. Duff
1969	Mungo Martin Retrospective	?	A. Hawthorn
1969	Henry Speck	New Design	A. Hawthorn
1969-70	The Northwest Coast	Man & His World	A. Hawthorn
1971	Robert Davidson	VCM	Gift Shop
1971	The Legacy	BCPM	P. Macnair
1973-74	Selections from the Lipsett Collection	VCM	L. Maranda
1974	Bill Reid: A Retrospective	VAG	D. Shadbolt
1975	Images: Stone: B.C.	AGGV	W. Duff
1975	Northwest Coast Renaissance	VCM	Gift Shop
1976	Opening of new UBC Museum of Anthropology with Legacy Exhibition		
1976	The Cook Argillite Collection	VCM	Gift Shop
1976-77	B.C. Indian Artists at Work	VCM	L. Maranda
1976	Selections from the Lipsett Collection	VCM	L. Maranda
1977	Opening of the Anthropology Gallery	BCPM	P. Macnair et al.
1977	The 'Ksan Show	VCM	Gift Shop
1977	Roy Vickers: Beginnings	UBCMA	H. Ratner
1977	The Lightbawn Collection	VCM	Gift Shop
1977	Norman Tait, Nishga Carver	UBCMA	H. Ratner
1977	Silver Workshop: NWC Carvers at Work ("Treasures of London")	VCM	R. Watt

1977	NWC Indian Artists Guild 1977 Graphics	VAG	Gift Shop
1978	Joe David	UBCMA	H. Ratner
1978	NWC Indian Artists Guild 1978 Graphics	UBCMA	H. Ratner
1979	NWC Indian Artists 1979 Graphics	UBCMA	H. Ratner
1979	Cycles: The Graphic Art of R. Davidson	UBCMA	M. Halpin, H. Stewart
1979	The Evolution of Bill Reid's Beaver Print	UBCMA	Student Exhibit
1980	West Coast & Kwakiutl Graphics	UBCMA	Student Exhibits
1980	Salish Weavers	UBCMA	Student Exhibit
1980	Bent Boxes	UBCMA	Student Exhibits
1980	Legacy II (Edinburgh Festival)	BCPM	P. Macnair

ABBREVIATIONS

- AGGV Art Gallery of Greater Victoria
 BCPM British Columbia Provincial Museum
 VAG Vancouver Art Gallery
 VCM Vancouver Centennial Museum
 UBCMA UBC Museum of Anthropology

Some museum anthropologists are inverting the relationship between anthropology and the Indian.

In contrast to the traditional role of museums, which was to collect from Indians to show to whites, this new role involves collecting from whites to show to Indians. A striking example is provided by the efforts of the B.C. Provincial Museum and the National Museum of Man to compete in high-priced international art markets to purchase and repatriate to Canada prized pieces of earlier manufacture (Bruce, 1976). Another example is provided by the Ethnology Division of the B.C. Provincial Museum. This division has drawn upon Indian resources to prepare exhibits for the museum's galleries, in the manner that museums have traditionally done. In addition, however, the division has become more and more involved in drawing upon its own resources to cater to the cultural needs of Indian communities. Provincial Museum anthropologists have become the clients and the Indians the patrons, though the anthropologists (or, more correctly, their institution) continue to pay the bill.

Here are two examples initiated by the Ethnology Division of the Provincial Museum:

(1) Ever since Kwakiutl master carver Mungo Martin joined the B.C. Provincial Museum in 1952, Indian carvers have been employed to carve in residence, both to copy museum pieces and to experiment on their own. Ten to twenty years ago, museums in B.C. were concerned about assisting the growth of white markets for these carvings. In more recent years, however, Peter Macnair, Chief Curator of Ethnology at the B.C. Provincial Museum, has also attempted to stimulate an Indian market. He paid his carvers to produce pieces for Indian potlatches, and he has loaned items from the museum's collection and donated newly carved pieces to sponsors of potlatches. When a few years ago he first invited several young carvers to produce masks for a potlatch, they were skeptical, remarking that it was a rather strange thing to do (personal communication from P. Macnair). Today, the masks carvers make for potlatches rank among their own most prized possessions (Macfarlane, 1978).

(2) The B.C. Provincial Museum Ethnology Division is also putting on tape and film a detailed record of contemporary Kwakiutl potlatching. According to the arrangements worked out by Macnair, the museum acquires custody of the information but ownership remains with the Indians. The museum grants access to scholars only with the permission of the owners, and at no cost to themselves the owners are given photos and copies of the tapes which they use to plan future potlatches or for their own entertainment. (A sign is displayed in the Anthropology Gallery of the B.C. Provincial Museum prohibiting the use of tape recorders because the songs and music played in the exhibit are "copyrighted by Indian families.")

Thus data collected is recycled to the source from which it came, codified electronically and sanctified institutionally perhaps, but recycled nevertheless and without most of it being routed through the traditional scholarly or public audiences of the museum. The B.C. Provincial Museum Ethnology Division is a leader in providing important cultural services to Indian communities which traditionally were exploited to serve the cultural and economic interests of others.

Indians, traditionally treated by museums only as objects and clients, now enjoy the role of patrons. The next step has also occurred. Indian communities establish their own museums, seek their own National Museum grants, install their own curators, hire their own anthropologists on

contract, and call for the repatriation of their own collections (Inglis, 1978). (One notes here the irony of contemporary anthropology: the more widely Indians accept the anthropological definition of their former greatness the less willing they are to accept the anthropologists themselves. Anthropologists are taking on the second-class role among Indians that Indians have always held among whites. But that is another story.)

Conclusion

Graburn (1968) says that the production of ethnic art in rapidly changing situations functions as an identity-maintaining mechanism for the subject population. What is happening on the Northwest Coast is the active participation of museums and their anthropologists in defining that ethnic identity and the ways it is to be promoted. Anthropologists sit in judgment about what constitutes a proper artifact, a proper price, a proper potlatch and, by implication, a proper Indian.

Meanwhile, Indian communities in co-operation with established museums are beginning to develop their own museum ideologies and to establish their own museumification programs. Both anthropologists and Indians extol the moral and museological virtues of repatriation of museum collections and of staged authenticity in displays and programs. It would seem that for some people at least the line between museum anthropologist and Indian has blurred; each is acculturating to the standard of the other. Some anthropologists even carve and dance at potlatches. Museum anthropologists are thus helping to manufacture the objects they study. But this is hardly a new phenomenon. Anthropologists have always been in the business of reconstructing by means of their own theoretical categories the social constructions of those they study. It is not surprising that material culture should receive the same treatment.

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