

“Authenticity” and the Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market*

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The “Stretched Beaver Pelt” tag is familiar to those who have shopped in Canada for contemporary native art. The tag certifies the “authenticity” of the Canadian Indian art object to which it is attached. A similar tag, created by the British Columbia Indian Arts and Crafts Society, reassures the cautious buyer with the words, “Look for this tag, your guarantee of authentic Indian arts and crafts.” The tag also confirms that the object is “handmade by a native Indian of B.C.,” and, along with the price, may carry the artist’s name and tribe, the date, and a brief description of the article. But what is the authenticity which these tags claim to guarantee? Who defines it? Is there such a thing as native Indian art which is not authentic? This paper examines authenticity as it relates to contemporary Northwest Coast Indian art produced for the marketplace. Consumer expectations of Indian art will be shown to reflect the conceptualizations of “Indian-ness” that are often imposed on native art production.

The contemporary revival of Northwest Coast Indian art, which began in the 1960s, is largely the result of changing social, economic and political factors within both native society and the larger non-Indian society. The last two decades have witnessed continuing Indian political activity, a new interest by non-Indians in ecology and “the people of nature,” the attempted creation of a Canadian culture by the federal government, the implementation of government funding for the arts, and increased publicity for Northwest Coast Indian art through books and museum exhibitions. An accompanying extremely important development has been the growth of the non-Indian buying public. All these factors have created a climate favouring an emphasis on native traditions and a

* An earlier version of this paper was presented in a session on “The Uses and Misuses of Cultural Properties” at the 9th Annual Meeting of the Canadian Ethnology Society, Vancouver, 11 May 1982. I am grateful to Michael M. Ames, Director of the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, for allowing me to use data which I collected as his research assistant. All unacknowledged quotations were made to me personally.

growth in native art production. Today, the non-Indian public has almost totally replaced native society as the primary consumer of the art. In response to the new context, many aspects of art production have changed significantly. There have been changes, ranging from the subtle to the profound, in form, subject matter, materials and techniques, and there have been changes, almost all of them drastic, in use and meaning. The transformation of the traditional role of the arts in native society to their present one, providing "art objects" to be displayed in the modern living room, is closely connected with changes in aesthetic criteria. As Nelson Graburn has shown in his studies on Inuit art (1976), aesthetic judgments are qualified by viewers' perceptions of the use and meaning of the object, by culturally specific notions of artistic quality, and by previously formed expectations about the object. As I have found in my own surveys of museum visitors and buyers of contemporary Northwest Coast Indian art,¹ viewers' expectations of what constitutes authentic native art and traditions are major factors qualifying their aesthetic judgments and influencing their definitions of acceptable Indian art.

The dictionary definition of "authentic" appears straightforward in contrast to the implication the term can have when used to describe native art. According to *Webster's* dictionary (1970), "authentic" means "genuine, real . . . 'genuine' is applied to that which really is what it is represented to be." Concerning an antique, for example, it is clear that two criteria are involved: age and provenance. Concerning contemporary native art, however, at least four criteria are involved: (1) the quality of the item; (2) the ethnicity of the artist; (3) the degree to which the item may be considered traditional; and (4) the purpose for which the item was produced — that is, either for sale to non-Indians or for native use. The last three criteria are the contentious ones, for they are the ones which bring into focus contrasting interpretations of the boundaries that define contemporary Northwest Coast Indian art. The following discussion will present some of the issues raised by these criteria.

Quality of Art

The stretched beaver pelt tag, when it was distributed by the Central Indian Marketing Services, was issued in three different colours to designate three levels of quality: mass-volume souvenirs, intermediate quality crafts, and one-of-a-kind art forms. These different tags, however, did

¹ A description of these surveys and the data obtained from them are included in my University of British Columbia Master's thesis in Anthropology, "The Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market," (1983).

not serve as a guarantee of high quality or even that the item was completely handmade. As one gallery owner has stated, the tag only meant as much as the dealer who sold the item in question. Yet quality is one criterion of authentic native work that concerns many dealers and buyers, and they seek to distinguish for the uninformed consumer the difference between the genuine (generally handmade) object and the mass-produced imitation. The difficulty many consumers have in differentiating between argillite carvings and their plastic replicas illustrates the importance of a guarantee of authenticity that will help them make the distinction. Similarly, some dealers and collectors have called for certificates of authenticity that guarantee the quality as well as the limited edition of Northwest Coast silkscreen prints (see Scott, 1980). Prices in the print market often bear no relation to quality, and large edition sizes prevail. The Northwest Coast Indian Artists Guild was formed in 1977 by eleven native artists to upgrade the quality of Northwest Coast prints. The embossed stamp of the Guild on a silkscreen print was intended to "help the general public to recognize quality art of the Northwest Coast Indian people, and assure them of its authentic native origin" (Vickers, 1977). While the series of prints marketed by the Guild in 1977 and 1978 were of good technical quality, there was a wide range in the quality of the designs, suggesting that general quality control over works of art is difficult to achieve, even within an association organized for that purpose. With the dissolution in 1979 of both the Central Indian Marketing Services and the Northwest Coast Indian Artists Guild,² such "quality control" as exists continues to be exercised through a combination of individual artist's standards, dealers' policies and market response.

The Ethnicity of the Artist

Probably the most important and obvious criterion of authentic native art for many buyers and viewers is that the object be created by an Indian. Comments such as the following, made in answer to the question "What would you consider to be an 'authentic' piece of Northwest Coast Indian Art?", characterized the responses of a significant number (44 per cent) of the one hundred individuals I interviewed at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology: "It is essential to be Indian made — I get upset when white people get on the bandwagon,"

² The CIMS went bankrupt because its overly-centralized structure rendered it unable to respond adequately to the needs of artists or to the demands of the market. The bankruptcy of CIMS was a primary factor leading to the dissolution of the Guild, for which CIMS had served as wholesaler.

and “made by an Indian — a white person couldn’t capture the heritage as well.” Despite such opinions, which predominate and are reflected in the marketplace, there are a number of non-Indian artists, perhaps twenty,³ creating and selling Northwest Coast style work. Of these, several have established reputations as being among the best contemporary Northwest Coast artists — two examples are John Livingston of Victoria and Duane Pasco of Seattle. Bill Holm, referred to affectionately by Haida artist Bill Reid as “that Swedish-American Indian from Seattle” (Iglauer, 1982: 14), is the foremost expert on Northwest Coast art, and is himself among the best Northwest Coast artists. Sensitive to his position as a non-Indian, however, he does not sell his work.

In Seattle, where the teaching of Holm and Pasco has stimulated much interest among potential artists in producing Northwest Coast art, the majority of artists working in the Northwest Coast style are non-Indian.⁴ Dealers make only a subtle distinction between the work of Indian and non-Indian artists in their stores, writing, for example, “Northern style mask” rather than “Tlingit mask” on the price tag of a mask by Pasco. They state, however, that they “always let people know if it’s made by a non-Indian.” Some dealers do treat art made by non-Indians differently. One dealer says, “The non-Indian made work that I sell has to be extremely high quality. It must be by a devoted artist who is not just in it for the profit, and it must be by someone who is contributing to the art and culture.” Few dealers apply such a standard to works by artists of native ancestry. Another dealer restricts the quantity of non-native art carried in her gallery, and notes that work by non-Indians is priced less because it is anticipated that collectors will pay less.

In Vancouver, most dealers of native art do not carry the work of non-Indian artists, partly because of a feeling that the right to produce the art belongs to native people, and partly because of anticipated pressure from native artists, who fear that the non-native work will cut into the market for their own work.

The two overriding difficulties raised by the ethnic criterion of authenticity are: how to define and determine the Indian-ness or authenticity of the artist himself; and how to decide what kind of Indian is the “right”

³ From personal interviews with curators, dealers and artists, I would estimate a total of between 300 and 500 Northwest Coast Indians currently producing work for sale.

⁴ Some of the other non-Indian artists whose work can be seen in Seattle’s shops and galleries, or who are otherwise well known, include: Jim Bender, Steve Brown, Harry Calkins, Jean Ferrier, Jay Haavik, Barry Herem, Tom Speer and Robin Wright.

kind. More generally there is the question of whether it is important to make a distinction between Indian and non-Indian artists. With regard to the first question, who qualifies as a legitimate Northwest Coast artist? A status Indian, a non-status Indian, someone who is half Indian over someone who is one-sixteenth? Some respondents to the museum visitor survey added a cultural component to their definition of authentic Indian art, stating that the art should be made by an Indian "who has strong roots in his culture" or "who has been studying his cultural art." Others felt that "it would have to be done by a person who knows the culture very well — Indian or not." One dealer has told me that "three-quarters of the artists don't understand the cultural traditions behind the art. John Livingston knows more about Kwagiutl culture than most Kwagiutl carvers do." Pasco says that "some non-Indians are more culturally involved than Indians are. I feel more Indian than non-Indian — I'm an assimilated white." Pasco, like Livingston, Steve Brown, and several other non-Indian artists, participates in dancing and other cultural activity when invited to do so. He carved four masks for Haida artist Robert Davidson's last potlatch, all of which were given away as potlatch gifts. In addition, he has played a major role as a teacher of Northwest Coast Indian art at the Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art at 'Ksan, as well as in Seattle and in Alaska. Despite such contributions, however, the expertise and experience in Indian culture for non-native artists is restricted primarily to interpreting the artistic and ceremonial traditions of a culture to which they do not have ancestral connections, and does not extend to the contemporary experience of *being* Indian within North American society. Some native artists, on the other hand, may not possess the same degree of expertise in traditional Northwest Coast art and culture that Pasco or Livingston have, but feel that the right to create Northwest Coast art should belong only to those whose heritage the art represents.

Complicating the issue further is the question of the more specific ethnic identity of the artist. While the stretched beaver pelt tag claims to guarantee that the object was made by a Canadian Indian, it does not always certify whether, for example, a Haida hat was made by Haida weaver or whether it was made by a native person from another tribal group. That the authenticity of a Kwagiutl mask by Cree carver Gene Brabant or Cherokee carver Lelooska is questioned by some experts, artists and collectors illustrates an additional concern as to whether the Indian person who created the piece was the "right" kind of Indian. It is ironic in this regard that the work of a white woman who has achieved Indian

status through marriage may be considered more authentic than the work of a native artist working in another tribal style.

Whether the authenticity of Indian art should rest on the ethnicity of the artist remains an irresolvable question. Although there are more than two sides to the issue, arguments tend to fall into two camps. The first argument, used by many artists and consumers, calls for the protection of an industry and a tradition that should remain uniquely Indian. White "imposters" are seen as "taking something of the culture away" and, as one of the survey respondents said, "making a lot of money off somebody else's ethnic heritage." The second argument is applied more specifically to the Northwest Coast fine art market, and is used by some collectors, gallery owners and a number of recognized artists. This view holds that people should be buying art that appeals to them aesthetically, regardless of the ethnic origins of the artist. One Vancouver dealer believes that it may make sense to protect the crafts market (saying, "the buyer has the right to buy for romantic or racist reasons"), but concludes that such protection only serves to restrict the recognition of Northwest Coast art as "fine art."

The collecting practices of major North American museums have reinforced the perception that Northwest Coast style art by non-Indian artists is not authentic. In part because of the limited budgets most museums have for the purchase of Northwest Coast Indian art (both traditional and contemporary), Northwest Coast style art by non-Indians has generally not been viewed as a desirable addition. It is also the case, however, that many of those in charge of museum acquisitions accept the ethnicity criterion as an essential one, and thus will purchase and display as Northwest Coast art only the work of Indians. Since museums have considerable influence in defining authentic and collectible Indian art (see Ames, 1981), the fact that they do not collect the work of recognized non-Indian artists such as Pasco and Livingston directly affects the legitimacy of these artists in the eye of the collecting public.⁵

⁵ Pasco's and Livingston's work, along with the work of twenty-one other contemporary Northwest Coast and Inuit artists, was featured in a special show and sale at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago from 24 April to 25 May 1982. Three non-Indian artists whose works were also included in the sale were Steve Brown, Katie Pasco and Cheryl Samuel. The Indian artists whose works were featured included Bill Reid, Joe David, Robert Davidson and Tony Hunt, among others. The brochure accompanying the sale stated that the artists were selected "in recognition of their commitment to excellence in traditional continuity and innovative creativity" (Field Museum of Natural History, 1982). The show and sale coincided with the opening of a new permanent exhibit, "Maritime Peoples of the Arctic and Northwest Coast." Work by Reid, Davidson, David and other con-

It is evident that ethnicity of the artist is an important if not the most important aspect of contemporary native art for many participants in the Northwest Coast Indian art market. Native art, from souvenir products to fine art, is rarely considered apart from its connection to native culture (usually traditional culture). For the artist and dealer, the ethnicity of the art can be its most saleable feature. For the tourist, a souvenir made by an Indian and which incorporates recognizable "Indian" qualities provides an unmistakable connection to the place and its unique culture and serves as a marker of the tourist's experience there. Even the "fine art," which includes high quality carvings, prints and works in other media, is souvenir-like in the way it is viewed and promoted as "Indian" — the connection between the art and the culture of the producer remains primary. This situation is reflected in the general attitudes of art galleries toward collecting or showing native art. Reluctant to accept it or assess it simply as contemporary art, they relegate it to its "proper" place, the ethnology museum. Thus it is the successful presentation of Indian-ness, according to the criteria of the viewer, rather than the aesthetic qualities of the work alone, that forms the basis for judgments of the quality and authenticity of most contemporary Northwest Coast Indian art. This way of viewing the art suggests that an item created by a non-Indian artist lacks an essential connection with the culture from which stem the traditions of the art.

Adherence to Tradition

The third major criterion that is used to define authentic Northwest Coast Indian art is the contemporary art's adherence to "tradition." The degree to which the contemporary art conforms to the materials, forms, styles, subject matter and meaning of the "traditional" art of the nineteenth century determines its authenticity for many viewers. These viewers include museum professionals, connoisseurs knowledgeable about Northwest Coast art, some artists, and consumers who are familiar enough with Northwest Coast Indian art to have formulated some notions of what the "real thing" looks like. With regard to the formation of such notions of authenticity, Delange-Fry has observed that

what most occidentals still seem to seek in the "primitive" arts is a set of qualities that correspond to their idea of traditional "primitive" life. The

temporary native artists is included in the permanent exhibit, but the work of the non-Indian artists was included in the sale only, and was not purchased for permanent display.

objects are considered valid or authentic only if they have served in religious, magic, or even political functions, but the very notions of these functions lack roots in reality. Any object that does not fit the standard notions is rejected as inauthentic. (1971/72:96)

While traditional art and culture is sometimes referred to as if it were a closed or static system, Northwest Coast art was always incorporating change, whether it stemmed from outside sources or individual innovations. But a characteristic of Northwest Coast art, particularly of northern two-dimensional design, allows viewers to judge design quality on a basic level by its adherence to conventions. Contemporary Northwest Coast arts derive from a tradition that is sophisticated both conceptually and stylistically and that requires long training and much sensitivity to master. Furthermore, different regional styles are based upon specific design elements whose form and use are governed by sets of conventionalized "rules." The contemporary revival of Northwest Coast art has depended on a reconstruction, reinvention and reinterpretation of these forms and rules, using museum collections, books written by anthropologists, and verbal recollections as sources of information. In Bill Holm's book *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (1965), the rules and elements of Northwest Coast design are codified and explained in such a way that the book has become a "how to" book of design for artists and a means of judging Northwest Coast art for experts and collectors. This book, sometimes called "the Bible" by artists, is only one example of the strong influences museum anthropologists have had on defining, intentionally or not, what constitutes authentic Northwest Coast Indian art (Ames, 1981).

Experts and accomplished Northwest Coast artists continually stress the importance of achieving a full understanding of the formal principles of the art before successful innovation can occur. Bill Reid, for example, feels that "the formline is the basis of all the art. It is the essential element that sets the art from the north coast apart from any art in the world. If you don't conform to it you're doing something else [i.e., something other than Northwest Coast Indian art]" (Reid, 1982). Robert Davidson has expressed his recognition of the importance of traditional form by stating that "I became aware of the great level that the Haida artists reached in the 1850s, and I felt that once I had attained that level, I could go on to my own directions—to innovate" (1978:11-12). There is a difference, however, between the emphasis placed on the traditional as process by Davidson and others and the emphasis on tradition (found among some museum professionals and consumers)

that seeks to restrict native artistic expression to a particular historic phase of that tradition. Where contemporary native art productions are evaluated in terms of their re-creation of the past, a departure from the traditional is often interpreted as a degeneration of the art.

Consumer definitions of authentic Northwest Coast art as traditional are generally reflected in the marketplace. Stewart (1979:69) cites the example of a 1973 print by Davidson which was originally titled "Abstract," and at first did not sell. She notes that "evidently such a modern art term was not acceptable for a work of Haida art, which is renowned for its classic traditionalism." Since there were few buyers of the print, Davidson renamed it "Killer Whale Fin" and raised the price. The edition sold out.

Expectations that authentic Northwest Coast Indian art should show strongly traditional qualities also featured prominently in the responses I obtained in my museum visitor survey. Definitions of authentic Northwest Coast Indian art included "something traditionally used," "traditional forms and colour," "staying within the confines of the tradition" and "something that reflects the traditional lifestyle." Some viewers specified that only the old art is authentic, and one person defined authentic Indian art as having a "primitive simplistic feeling, not touched up by today's standards." On the other hand, a few individuals felt that there is room for innovation in authentic Northwest Coast art, one person saying that "it should have a relationship to traditional design, but adaptation is also exciting — the contemporary arts are just as authentic as the old." The responses suggest that two main factors enter into this definition of Northwest Coast art: first, that the viewers have formulated an idea of what constitutes the "authentic traditional" to which the contemporary art can be compared; and, second, that this understanding helps construct and preserve a model of Indian-ness to which the contemporary art should adhere, even though this model may not actually be traditional.

It can perhaps be said that the "otherness" of native culture, as presented through the art, is manifested in its traditional form. It is this "otherness" that is considered authentic and imperative to preserve. Definitions of contemporary Northwest Coast Indian art based on this notion of authenticity can create additional restrictive boundaries for artists. Relevant to this point is a comment by Davidson:

I am not content to "recycle ideas." I recognize the need for continued growth and now feel I must go beyond the accepted limits of the art set by

masters of the past. I want to expand my ideas and create boundaries that are my own. (Stewart, 1979:113)

The Purpose of Art Production

A final criterion used to determine the authenticity of contemporary Northwest Coast Indian art concerns the purpose for which the art is produced. For some viewers, the fact that most of the contemporary art is made for sale to people outside of native culture rather than for native use makes the art less meaningful and less authentic. A comment by a newspaper art critic illustrates this perception: "the question that arises from Reid and Davidson's prints is whether or not the soul, or the spiritual essence of the work, still carries into the mass-produced editions of silkscreened prints that enter an almost exclusively non-native market" (Perry, 1979:D-1). Here production of art for sale may in itself be considered to be a "cultural loss" and, therefore, to mark a loss of authenticity.

For respondents to my museum visitor survey the market context for contemporary Northwest Coast Indian art seems to demarcate an important boundary between traditional and contemporary native art production. As one person stated, "It makes those things made in the past for Indians more valuable for me; now anybody can get anything except the old things made for the Indians, which have become unavailable." Respondents also found certain contemporary Northwest Coast Indian art objects to be aesthetically pleasing because they appeared less commercialized and closer to their expectations of authentic Indian art. They stated that an item was pleasing because "it looks old" or "it looks used." These comments reflect ideas about "primitive" arts, referred to by Delange-Frye in an earlier quote, that suggest a restrictive correlation between authenticity and traditionalism.

In 1974 anthropologist Wilson Duff expressed the dilemma felt by Reid and other native artists concerning their re-creation of old forms in the contemporary context:

It is fine art. It bears a fresh imprint of life. And yet . . . And yet . . . Why is it that Bill won't stop talking about "artifakery?" What is the unfinished business? Where is the haunting doubt in this birth of a new art from an old style, this birth of new melodies from old rhythms? . . . nobody can express more eloquently than Bill, when he turns to the medium of words, the tragedy in the truth that the life has gone out of the Haida shell, and he has not been able to put it all back in. (1974)

Since Duff wrote those words, an expanding revival of art production for the *native* consumer in the *native* context has begun. Producing Northwest Coast art for sale has led to an investigation by some artists into the traditional functions and meanings of the art, and to a re-creation of the ceremonial context in which they were used. The amount of Northwest Coast art now produced for personal, spiritual, community and potlatch purposes, often for little or no economic benefit, indicates the importance such purposes are now attaining for some contemporary artists. Producing art for native use is a means by which some artists can "put the life back in" the art forms and make the art more authentic for themselves. At the same time, collectors who are able to obtain an item used in a potlatch or dance are willing to pay extra for its added authenticity.

In the realm of the "meaning" and authenticity of the contemporary *commercial* art, however, debates continue as to whether the art is merely "anthro-decoration" (Perry, 1979:D-1) for "ethnic eccentrics" or whether it is a means of personal expression relevant to the present day. Restrictive definitions of authentic Northwest Coast Indian art in the marketplace may actually lead art production more toward the former than the latter.

Conclusion

The stretched beaver pelt tag, in claiming to certify the "authenticity" of an Indian art object, illustrates the ambiguous boundaries of native art. Market definitions of authentic contemporary Northwest Coast Indian art generally refer to boundaries between high and low quality art, Indian and non-Indian artists, traditional and non-traditional art, and art made for commercial purposes and for native use. Predominant interpretations of these boundaries suggest that the "Indian-ness" of the art is its defining quality. It is the successful presentation of this Indian-ness to the viewer that determines the authenticity of the art.

A perception of contemporary Northwest Coast Indian art held by many specialists and consumers is that the art functions to preserve a traditional culture that would otherwise be lost; the artists should therefore emphasize an adherence to tradition in their work. This perception contrasts with one which sees the art as a means of transforming the past cultural tradition to a living one, in which contemporary expressions and innovations build on traditions of the past. Contemporary native artists themselves pursue different approaches to their art, ranging from tradi-

tionism to complete rejection of old conventions. Consumer demands and expectations can be an influential force affecting artistic choice and production. It is important, therefore, that informed consumers, and especially those who find themselves in the role of cultural specialists and authenticators, reconsider their notions of authenticity in light of how their notions may influence the directions contemporary native art will take.

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