

Bill Holm, Willie Seaweed and the Problem of Northwest Coast Indian "Art": A Review Article

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How should we think about Indian art? Is it really Art, should it be exhibited as Art, and who are Indians anyway?

The Western World is still struggling to come to terms with indigenous minorities and their arts. There is no longer even a generally acceptable label for such people. Once commonly referred to as primitives (anthropologists, at least, are now nervously shying away from that term), and before that, around the beginning of this century, as savages and barbarians, indigenous peoples are now more likely to be called tribals, natives or, more possessively, "our native peoples." None of these terms are happy choices, being if not insulting at least either misleading or condescending.

This uncertainty about how to refer to other peoples — only slowly and reluctantly do we learn simply to call others by the names they call themselves — reflects a deeper uncertainty about how we should think about what these people do and the creative materials or "arts" they produce. At one pole is the nominalist position that if the natives do not have a word for "art" in their language they could hardly have any art in their culture, so even observers should not talk about their creative productions as art. If they do not name it we cannot see it! The other pole is occupied by those who venerate anything "primitive." If it is made by an authentic native (whoever that might be) it must be good; primitive art is art because it is quaint, exotic, mysterious and preferably, though not necessarily, simple and aesthetically pleasing.

Between these extremes lies the connoisseur's appreciation. It is ridiculous to assume, Bill Reid asserts, that if there is no word for "art" in native languages,

the people of the past had no appreciation of the "formal" elements of their creations, that they had no aesthetic criteria by which to distinguish good work from bad, that they were not moved by excellence and beauty. With-

out a formal and critical public, the artists could never, in these societies as in any other, have produced the great works they did.¹

Franz Boas, the founder of professional anthropology in North America and a pioneer student of Northwest Coast Indian cultures, was one of the first anthropologists to evoke the words "beauty" and "art" in connection with the creative works of other peoples.² Aesthetic pleasure is felt by all members of humankind, Boas said;³ even the simplest tribes "have produced work that gives to them esthetic pleasure, and those whom a bountiful nature or a greater wealth of inventions has granted freedom from care, devote much of their energy to the creation of works of beauty."

Though anthropologists may be willing to recognize art as a universal category of culture, there is disagreement over how indigenous and non-western arts should be presented or exhibited to the rest of the world. According to what is probably the dominant view among anthropologists, and perhaps among art critics as well, the meaning of art is determined by its context; therefore to view art otherwise is to distort it. Worse, said critic Fleming in her review of *Legacy: Continuing Traditions of Canadian Northwest Coast Indian Art*, an exhibition produced by the British Columbia Provincial Museum and opened at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology in November 1981, a non-contextual exhibit is a form of appropriation and therefore exploitation of the people whose work is being displayed.⁴ To display Indian art out of its context thus becomes an immoral act. Because the *Legacy* curators were only interested in formal analysis, argues Fleming, they failed "to reflect on the history and sociocultural circumstances of Indian art objects and the people who made them. . . . Formal analysis has, in this instance, divested the objects of their religious, political and mythological meanings; a type of exploitation has therefore taken place, with Indians being the last to benefit."⁵

¹ Bill Reid, "The Legacy Review Reviewed," *Vanguard*, vol. 11, nos. 8-9, 1982, p. 34.

² Douglas Newton, "The Art of Africa, the Pacific Islands, and the Americas: a New Perspective," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Fall 1981, p. 9.

³ Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 9.

⁴ Marnie Fleming, "Patrimony and Patronage The Legacy Reviewed," *Vanguard*, vol. 11, nos. 5-6, 1982, pp. 18-21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18-19. The catalogue issued by the *Legacy* curators provided some of the descriptive information Fleming wanted. See Peter L. Macnair, Alan L. Hoover and Kevin Neary, *The Legacy: Continuing Traditions of Canadian Northwest Coast Indian Art* (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1980).

On the other side is the view that works of art can also stand by themselves and therefore communicate on their own terms as creative achievements without denigrating the history of which they are a part.⁶ There is, nevertheless, a continuing reluctance to consider Northwest Coast Indian art in this autonomous or transcendental fashion. "We do . . . seem to have lacked the means," Vancouver Art Gallery curator Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker wrote in her review of Bill Holm's two 1983 exhibitions of Northwest Coast Indian art in Seattle, "to extract westcoast Indian art from its anthropological context, to reveal its dramatic, conceptual, philosophical power, and to make it available to non-Indian artists and viewers as a compelling and vital part of their own cultural heritage."⁷ Confining an artistic tradition to its original setting, and requiring that this contextualism must always be part of our understanding, inhibits a work of art from developing that transcendence which is a quality of all high achievements and makes it difficult to judge a work according to general standards of aesthetics (assuming, reasonably, that there are aesthetic standards sufficiently general to apply to historically separate instances).

Museums are more frequently giving public recognition and honour to the artistic merits of tribal arts, however, letting those works "stand by themselves" in elegantly designed exhibitions and specially constructed galleries. Attention is now being paid to a work of art from another tradition for its own sake, its own identity, the Metropolitan's chairman of the Department of Primitive Art, Douglas Newton, wrote in his introduction to the catalogue issued at the opening of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art in 1981,

even when it comes from so remote a source as one of the world's primitive cultures. Early art is becoming familiar to the public directly, rather than filtered through Western artists, and has taken an equal footing in the major museums with other great art.⁸

Can true art be political or utilitarian? Like the common assertion that social science research should be value-free, it is also frequently asserted that true or aesthetic art must be free from political or religious interest; if it is utilitarian it may be dismissed as "only decorative," just as practical or contract social research is dismissed by academics as "only applied." Art can excel, it is said, only if it is independent. It may be all very well

⁶ Reid, p. 34.

⁷ Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, "The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art," Seattle Art Museum, and "Smoky-Top: The Art and Times of Willie Seaweed," Seattle Science Center, *Vanguard*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1984, p. 38.

⁸ Newton, p. 10.

for tribal arts to be viewed within their ceremonial settings — how else, indeed, are we to understand the exotic? The characteristic of modern art, however, is that it transcends its time and its place in history, and thus becomes in the eyes of its advocates a universal Art.

Primitive sculpture is not art in our sense of the word because the plastic or decorative product is not separated from other manifestations of life. Art was one form of social expression amongst others, born of man's knowledge of his community, and of his religious experience. Since the Gothic age it has no longer held this function in Europe.⁹

Western artists today, whether they are considered great or not, *begin* by reaching for this autonomy from their social and political contexts. They do not want their work to serve the establishment (though they voice fewer objections to government support or to their work serving as criticism of established values).

Not only are there standards asserted to be universally applicable, then, but there are also universal forms of art; but typically — if we take as typical what major Canadian art galleries display — that usually means art after the western European tradition, or "white art," as it is sometimes called. Native or tribal arts are still seen to be somehow inextricably and harmoniously bound up with ceremonial systems, all part of an exotic tribal complex, that is actually impossible, conceptually illogical, and ethically improper to disentangle. It is further assumed, to continue this point of view, that when particular native social conditions cease to exist, the art associated must die as well since it is not imagined to have any legitimate autonomy of its own. The only good Northwest Coast Indian art, it has been suggested by more than one museum and gallery official, is dead Indian art: that which was produced in the misty past when, so the myth of the Romantic Native goes, Indians lived in a stable, integrated and happy tribal society. The coming of the Europeans brought about the decline and fall of the untouched primitive and thus everything produced thereafter is thought to lack a true essence, a cultural meaning (the traditional social system is no more, after all). Recent works are written off as deviations from scholastically defined traditional standards and are therefore not considered suitable for display in important art galleries. Contemporary Indian artists who try new media or new forms are criticized for abandoning their traditions or for catering to the money market. If tribal art is to retain its purity, its acceptability in wider society, it seemingly must remain parochial, unchanging and exotic, that

⁹ Charles Wentinck, *Modern and Primitive Art* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1978), p. 5.

is, "primitive." Evolution of form and style, like freedom from cultural embeddedness, is a privilege reserved for white art.

On the other side of the fence is an argument for the functional autonomy of symbol systems. Any art style, according to this view, is capable of working out (or being worked out) of its original social milieu and constructing a history of its own, and perhaps even subsequently returning to its roots to redefine and resuscitate the society from which it sprung. While all art traditions originate in sociocultural situations, are culturally embedded, they all have the potential to spring loose. We encourage transcendence in Western or "white" art, but seem less willing to grant similar opportunities to alien traditions of creativity. Yet to seek the meaning of a work of art solely in terms of its social origins is to make a fetish out of context and a museum piece out of the artist.

When, therefore, to what extent, and by what means could an art form extend beyond its primary social boundaries? How much assimilation into a dominant society can an indigenous community undergo before it ceases to be a community in its own terms? Can a non-Indian or one with mixed Indian-white parentage produce authentic Indian art? Is being Indian good enough, or must one be born into the right tribe? When, if at all, does an *Indian* artist become an *artist* who is Indian? Must he change his pedigree or his art form? When does he or she merit an exhibit in a major museum or gallery? Museum and gallery officials become exercised over these issues when trying to decide what to collect, to exhibit, or to sell in their shops, though, perhaps insecure in what they are doing, they usually keep their arguments to themselves. Artists, and more frequently their agents, also express concern about the lack of standard definitions and the narrow-mindedness of those museums and art galleries that do not acquire what the agents have to sell.¹⁰

Bill Holm, curator of Northwest Coast Indian Art at the Burke Memorial Museum and professor of art history at the University of Washington, does not directly address these issues of definition and conceptualization in his various writings and exhibitions. He more wisely concentrates instead on presenting meticulously researched ethnographic and historical

¹⁰ A discussion of these and related issues pertaining to Northwest Coast Indian art can be found in Karen Duffek, "The Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market" (University of British Columbia Master's thesis, 1983). See also Duffek, "'Authenticity' and the Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market," *BC Studies*, no. 57, Spring 1983, pp. 99-111; "The Revival of Northwest Coast Indian Art," in Luke Rombout et al., *Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931-1983* (Vancouver: The Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983); and *A Guide to Buying Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Arts* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology Museum Note No. 10, 1983).

accounts of Northwest Coast Indian sculptural and painting traditions and, in his most recent work, an exhibition and catalogue on the art and times of — let us not mince words — a master artist called Willie Seaweed. Seaweed (c.1873-1967) was from the village of Ba'a's, Blunden Harbour, Queen Charlotte Straits, an artist and leader of his people whose works "were prized and preserved by the Kwakwaka'wakw traditionalists for whom they were made, as well as by museums and collectors."¹¹ As in all good empirical research, however, there is much in the Seaweed exhibit and catalogue, and in the way the author presents his material, that bears upon issues much broader than the particular study itself. In this case it is the question of how we might see and think more creatively about the creative workings of other peoples.

Willie Seaweed — his Kwak'wala familiar name is translated as "Smoky-Top," suggesting a volcano — was chief of the 'Nak'waxda'xw, one of the groups of Kwakwaka'wakw (speakers of the language Kwak'wala) who are commonly but incorrectly referred to as Kwakiutl (a term properly belonging to only some of the Kwakwaka'wakw groups). A note on Kwak'wala orthography, based on the system adopted by the language program of the U'Mista Cultural Society of Alert Bay, British Columbia, is appended to the Introduction. (That orthography is only approximately followed in this review.) The catalogue thus begins with an unequivocal answer to the question, "Who are they?" They are, in the first instance, properly to be defined in relation to themselves, not as they are related to the Western World — people Columbus mistook for residents of India and who were subsequently colonized, disorganized and deculturated. Grant them at least the dignity of their own names, Holm implies, which is a privilege customarily denied most dominated peoples.

Did Seaweed produce art in the true, universal, white tradition, or only a more parochial tribal form firmly embedded in ceremony? Holm, who through many years of ethnographic and museum research knows the work of this man better than anyone, talks about Seaweed's control of line, proportion, scale, and balance, his intellectual approach and "passion for perfection," his outstanding craftsmanship, his adoption of new techniques when they facilitated his work, the "power" of his creations, the evolution of his style, and his reputation among the Kwakwaka'wakw, museums and collectors as a great carver within a recognized genre. Holm also describes the cultural and littoral setting of Willie Seaweed's work. Almost everything he made, except for some miniature totem poles

¹¹ Bill Holm, *Smoky Top: The Art And Times of Willie Seaweed* (University of Washington Press and Douglas & McIntyre, 1983), p. 8.

for sale to whites, was for use in the Kwak'wala social gatherings, political manoeuvrings, ceremonial displays and economic exchanges anthropologists call *potlatch*. It is evident from Holm's analysis that Seaweed's work, as all good art must be, is both deeply embedded in a complex cultural ecological system and transcendent of it. Good work can be viewed both ways, singularly as artifact-in-context or as art-standing-by-itself, and binocularly as a creative production possessing both local history and comparative significance.

Can good art also be political? Willie Seaweed's work certainly was. Not only were his pieces prized instruments of the Winter Dances, an integral part of elite Kwak'wala society, they also made "political" statements in a broader sense as well. Throughout Seaweed's productive career Kwak'wala ceremonies were denigrated and suppressed by white authorities. Regalia were at one point seized by the Crown and owners threatened with imprisonment if they did not renounce potlatching. Seaweed along with others continued to produce and to participate in ceremonies, frequently in remote and secret places like so many resistance fighters. Some of his finest works, the magnificent monster bird *Hamatsa* masks, were made during the 1930s and 1940s, years "following the most active oppression of the potlatch and the Winter Ceremony when it was widely believed that those institutions were dead."¹²

When does an Indian cease to be an Indian and become assimilated into the dominant society? Willie Seaweed was born in a cedar plank house on the shores of an inlet that knew only canoe travel, Holm says, and by the time he died unmanned space craft were landing on the moon. He lived through a century of rapid and disruptive change during which the very foundations of his society were being questioned, his people dislocated, divided and proselytized, their traditional economic pursuits eliminated and their ceremonies suppressed. Seaweed nevertheless lived a full and productive life through all of it, and was honoured by his people and by outsiders. His legacy extends beyond the objects he produced, most of which have now been retired to museums and private collections. Holm's study makes clear that the life and works of Willie Seaweed continue to inspire and to challenge new generations of Kwak'wala artists and performers who appear as thoroughly assimilated to white society as they are committed to Kwak'wala heritage. "The most expert carvers," Holm says, in reference to Seaweed among others, "were, and are, in demand, and they in turn make every effort to live up to their

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

reputations for imagination, skill, and knowledge."¹³ Willie Seaweed and others, Holm says,

kept concepts alive in spite of that change and the active opposition of every outside authority which forced its way over them. He lived to see his art honored by those same authorities. The traditions which he, Mungo Martin, and others of their generation held and perpetuated have been taken up by younger hands. The new generation of Kwakwaka'wakw artists are inspired by the work of those predecessors. They are carrying the tradition, just as Willie Seaweed did in his own time.¹⁴

A Kwakwaka'wakw is thus one who, regardless of the accidents of parentage or degree of acculturation, consciously shares in the privileges and responsibilities of a particular heritage rooted in a particular coastal setting, as both *continue to evolve*. It is a cultural, ecological self-definition that cuts across anthropological, political and legal definitions the Kwakwaka'wakw have acquired, and have had bestowed upon them, in more recent times. When we come to think about other peoples, then, the first things to recognize are that complexity and ambiguity are likely to be natural parts of the situation and that we will come to understand the significance of self-definitions only as we learn to listen.

The story of Willie Seaweed demonstrates that works of art can take on universal significance precisely because of their primordial strength and that they can continue to be meaningful even while everything around changes or when they are examined away from their locality. *Smoky-Top: The Art And Times of Willie Seaweed* is a valuable contribution not only to our limited but growing understanding of Northwest Coast Indian art and culture, but also to our appreciation of cultural and artistic differences everywhere.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.