

TOWARDS AN ART HISTORY OF
NORTHWEST COAST FIRST NATIONS:*3. Contemporary Period (1930–present)*IRA JACKNIS

For present purposes we may define the contemporary period of Northwest Coast Aboriginal art as taking us from the cessation of substantial museum collecting (roughly 1930) to the present. As before, art production was affected by major political and economic changes, most notably in 1951 when the potlatch ban was revoked. In the following two decades potlatching revived, and new ceremonial community houses and Aboriginal museums were constructed. At the same time, the dominant, non-Aboriginal society gradually acclaimed many of the Northwest Coast objects in museums as “fine art.” As new production increased there arose, principally in Vancouver during the late 1960s, specialized art galleries selling contemporary Northwest Coast art. At first, relatively inexpensive silkscreen prints provided a medium for the two-dimensional Northwest Coast style, but soon people began to carve elaborate masks specifically for the art market. At the same time, however, First Nations artists continued to create works for Aboriginal ceremonial use, although necessarily on a much smaller scale than that associated with the mainstream art market.

During this period there have been far too many important artists to be summarized in a brief note, but the four represented here – Mungo Martin, Douglas Cranmer, Robert Davidson, and Susan Point – are certainly among the more significant.

Along with Willie Seaweed (ca. 1873–1967), Mungo Martin (ca. 1881–1962) is one of the most influential Kwakwaka'wakw artists of the twentieth century. The stepson of Charlie James, Martin began his career by accepting important commissions for masks and totem poles. During his middle years, he combined his carving with work

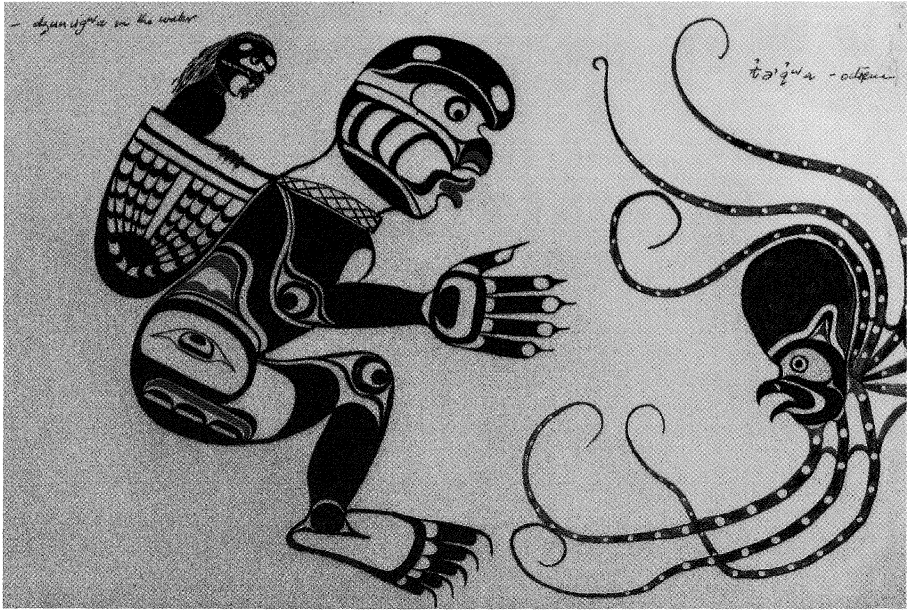
as a commercial fisher. The last thirteen years of his life were the most significant because of his critical role as a teacher at the UBC Museum of Anthropology and at the British Columbia Provincial Museum. Among his students were Henry Hunt (1923-85), his son Tony Hunt (b. 1942), and Douglas Cranmer (b. 1927), who have, in turn, taught succeeding generations.

Douglas Cranmer, who is related to Mungo Martin and the Hunt family, assisted Haida artist Bill Reid (1920-98) in carving the Haida houses and totem poles at UBC. Due to this experience his painting style acquired a northern accent, which he employed in his innovative paintings of the 1970s.

Perhaps the leading contemporary master is Haida Robert Davidson (b. 1946). After being instructed by his father and grandfather in the Queen Charlottes, Davidson went on to attend art school in Vancouver and to apprentice with Bill Reid, the most famous Northwest Coast artist of his time. Working in diverse media and forms, Davidson has both revived traditional forms and invented innovative styles of Haida masking and ceremonialism.

Until recently, the art of the Coast Salish was little collected or appreciated. Susan Point (b. 1952) has changed that. She began in jewellery but first came to attention with her silkscreen prints, which adapted and extended the designs of traditional Salish spindle whorls. Point has become progressively more ambitious, carving monumental posts in cedar and creating in innovative media such as glass, bronze, and architectural decoration.

Compared to other world art styles, that of the Northwest Coast is a classical one, based on an accepted body of forms. Yet, as the past century has demonstrated, innovative artists will surely accept the challenge of extending this tradition by creating styles that are both intellectually and visually compelling.



Tsonokwa in the Water with an Octopus, by Mungo Martin (Kwakwaka'wakw), 1950. Watercolour on paper; 30.0 x 45.7 cm. UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver (no. A9045).

While spending a brief period in hospital, around 1949-50, Martin began drawing and painting Kwakwaka'wakw mythological creatures, crest beings, masks, dancers, and ceremonial objects, using coloured pencils and watercolours. He enjoyed the process, and over the next two years continued to create paintings both for his own use and for others. "For these paintings," writes [Audrey] Hawthorn, "he made his own brushes, trimming commercial paintbrushes to fashion the traditional tapered, slanted brushes of the Northwest Coast artist" (1967). He also tended to work with a palette of black, red, yellow, and green. Most of his output is now in the collections of the UBC Museum of Anthropology and the Royal British Columbia Museum.

Martin's painting of Tsonokwa in the water is one of several narrative images in which he depicted the Wild Woman of the Woods as an undersea being, here confronting a beaked octopus with flailing arms. The figures are shown in profile view, their faces and bodies defined by flowing black lines and elaborated inside and out with joint forms and other compositional elements. Although there is some overlapping of components, Martin did not otherwise attempt to achieve a sense of spatial depth or perspective. (McLennan and Duffek 2000, 255; 256, fig. 8.6-B)

Kuginn Jad, by Robert Davidson (Haida), 1991. Acrylic on deerskin drum; 50.8 cm. Private Collection. →



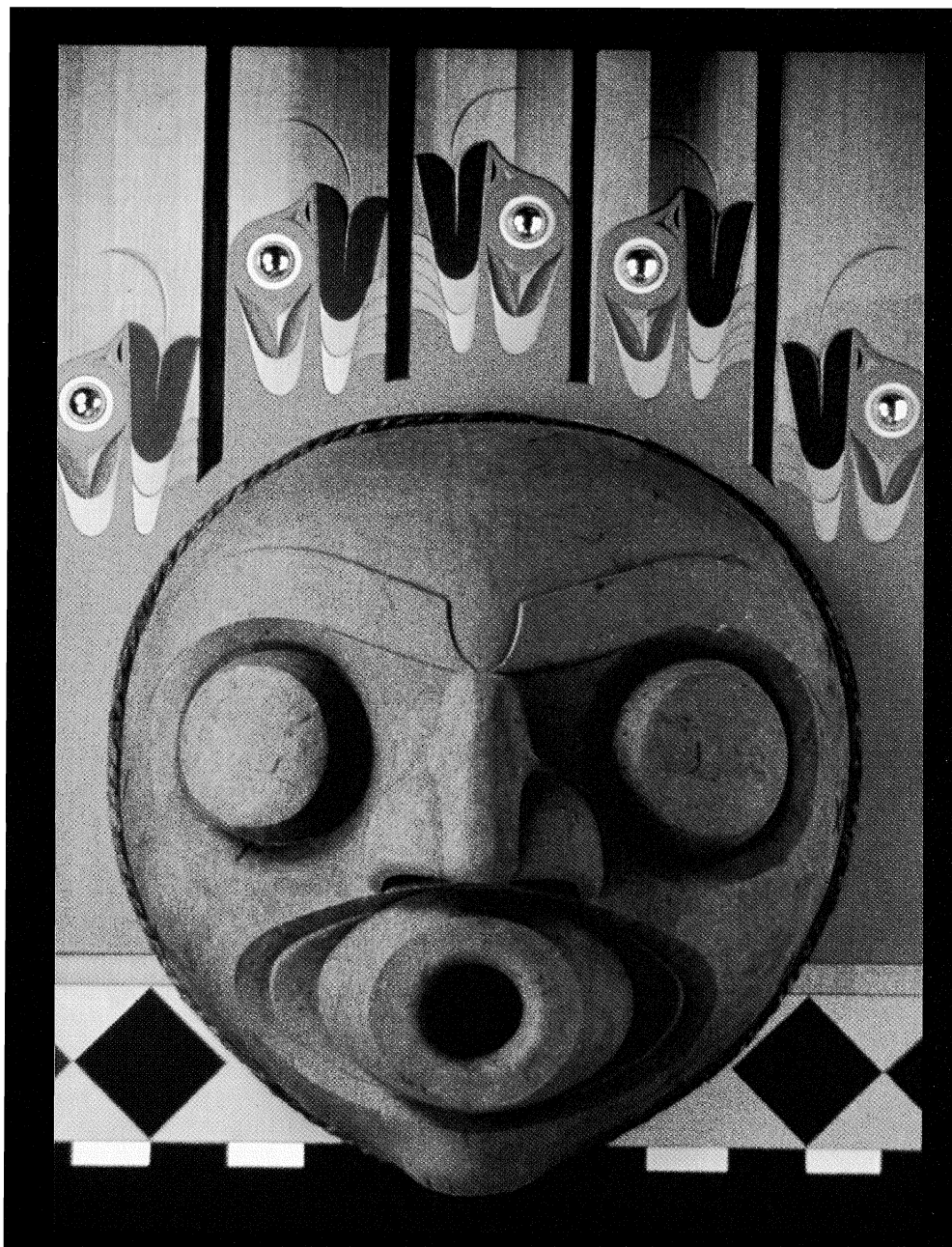
River Monster, by Doug Cranmer (Kwakwaka'wakw), 1975. Acrylic on mahogany plywood; 53.0 x 74.3 cm. Private Collection.

Between 1975 and 1978, Cranmer embarked on a series of experiments with abstraction, engaging in a kind of formal and conceptual play with elements of Northwest Coast art. He produced more than forty paintings in this period, many of which are truly abstract ... Cranmer painted his series on a base of mahogany plywood. Like his predecessors who used red or yellow cedar as their primary medium, he employed the subtle movements inherent in the wood grain as a further element of the compositions. His choice of colours, as well, remained tied to the traditional palette. He mixed a variety of red hues for individual works but otherwise made no attempt to mute the brilliance of the acrylic paints. A bright blue adds a dynamic quality to [this painting]. Here, Cranmer observes the traditional uses of this tertiary colour by allowing it to overlap the secondary red forms but not the primary black. (McLennan and Duffek 2000, 261; 264, fig. 8.8-E)



In 1991, Davidson embarked on an ongoing series of painted drums. The compositions are contained within a circular field, a format rarely used by nineteenth-century painters. Davidson uses this field to full advantage, engaging in a dialogue with positive and negative space and creating an interplay of recognizable elements and improvised forms ...

A recurrent motif within Davidson's painted drums, canvases, and jewellery of the 1980s and 1990s is the abstract yet creature-like configuration he has often identified as Kugannjaad, the mouse woman. In the painted drum, *Kuginn Jad*, 1991, the mouse woman is shown in side-by-side reversals of positive and negative space. Symbolized by two or more essential characteristics – ears, eyes, dimple, beak, and mouth – this ambiguous entity may also be a conceptual element of many nineteenth-century Haida chests ... Davidson's variable interpretations have discovered within the multiple forms of Kugannjaad a metaphor for transformation. "I think of it as the conscious and subconscious," he says; "sometimes I've created it consciously, and sometimes it just appeared" (personal communication, 12 March 1998). Davidson has also begun to reconceptualize this figure beyond its manifestation as the mouse woman: "When I was a child, people used to talk about the 'little people.' Now nobody does anymore. Where have they gone? Before my uncle died, I asked him about the little people. He called them *Sgansanwai* – forest spirits" (ibid.) (McLennan and Duffek 2000, 268; 271, fig. 8.9-E)



Singing the Season, by Susan Point (Coast Salish), 2000; one from a variable edition of three paper casts. Handmade green cotton paper, red cedar, silver, cedar bark rope; 4 ft. x 5 ft. x 24 in. Spirit Wrestler Gallery, Vancouver.

[Susan Point's three paper casts], *Speaking Great Silence*, *Singing the Season*, and *Raven's Song*, each make powerful statements. A trilogy, their voices echo through the heart of a viewer as few other pieces can. Each of the wall-mounted sculptures carries through the theme of voices and listening to nature. Susan Point has given each work a unique voice and message. The trick, from a viewer's standpoint, is to be available to listen.

Each piece of this limited edition set features a face, approximately 1 metre (40 inches) in diameter, lying in the centre of its design. On each of the faces, which are cast in different colours of paper, the lips are pursed, illustrating the sounds and messages that form the overall theme of the group. Behind the faces are individual mounts that elaborate on the story of the individual piece ...

The second piece in the trilogy, *Singing the Season*, brings Susan Point back to a creature and theme she enjoys revisiting. Point loves creating frogs and learned as a child that listening for the frogs to begin singing was the first sign of spring. When the frogs stopped singing in late fall, Point knew that the quiet months of winter had arrived. Thus, the frog's voice has been a trusted marker of time in the Musqueam community. As development and urbanization encroached on the frog habitat, the song of the frog has been harder for Point to hear. Now it seems the frogs, with their growing silence, are singing an alarm; the balance of nature is in danger and time is running out.

The face in *Singing the Season* is cast in brilliant green paper and is trimmed along the edge where it meets the mounting section with a reddish-coloured cedar bark rope. The panel for mounting the face is rectangular. The carving and the shape of the wooden bark represent a headdress and woven blanket. Five frogs, each with silver domes for eyes, are carved above the face. In the shoulder area, a carved Salish weaving pattern appears. (Wyatt 2000, 50, 52; 53)