

TOWARDS AN ART HISTORY
OF NORTHWEST COAST
FIRST NATIONS:

A Review Essay of Recent Literature

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*Spirits of the Water:
Native Art Collected on Expeditions to
Alaska and British Columbia, 1774–1910*

Steven C. Brown, editor

Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre; Seattle: University of
Washington Press, 2000. 207 pp. Illus., \$60 (US\$45) paper.

*Souvenirs of the Fur Trade:
Northwest Coast Indian Art and Artifacts Collected by
American Mariners, 1788–1844*

Mary Malloy

Cambridge, MA. Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology,
Harvard University, 2000. 168 pp. Illus., US\$35 paper.

*The Transforming Image:
Painted Arts of Northwest Coast First Nations*

Bill McLennan and Karen Duffek

Vancouver: UBC Press; Seattle: University of Washington Press,
2000. 291 pp. Illus., \$80 (US\$60) cloth.

*Northwest Coast Indian Painting:
House Fronts and Interior Screens*

Edward Malin

Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 1999. 288 pp. Illus., US\$39.95 cloth.

Susan Point: Coast Salish Artist

Gary Wyatt, editor

Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre; Seattle: University of
Washington Press, 2000. 143 pp. Illus., \$39.95 (US\$30) paper.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE on the traditional Aboriginal arts of the Northwest Coast goes back to the 1890s and to the founder of their study, the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas (cf. Jonaitis 1995). As with all his cultural histories, Boas considered these developments within a long-term perspective, dealing in centuries rather than years. His ultimate interests lay in what had determined the formation of pre-contact, preliterate Aboriginal cultures. In fact, as is well known, Boas was reluctant to deal with what resembled Euro-Canadian history (i.e., the more recent changes that could be observed by the anthropologist or that were recorded in the writings of Westerners). This was due partly to a common belief that any observable change was the result of White contact and thus represented a cultural degeneration, and partly to a lack of training in archival research skills. In his early work at least, Boas also avoided the study of individual artists in favour of the analysis of pan-cultural styles (Jacknis 1992). Because of his wide influence, for decades Boas's views came to dominate the study of Native American art in general and of Northwest Coast art in particular.

The first serious challenges to a Boasian paradigm came in the 1960s as anthropologists began to critically consider, on the one hand, the resistance of First Nations to acculturative forces and, on the other, the creative aspects of culture change (Bruner 1986). On the Northwest Coast, anthropologist Wilson Duff (1965) – at the British Columbia Provincial Museum (now the Royal British Columbia Museum) and later at the University of British Columbia – was one of the first scholars to apply these historical perspectives to art and

material culture. Duff was soon followed by two scholars associated with the Washington State Museum at the University of Washington, Seattle: Erna Gunther (1972), who was a student of Boas, and then by her student, artist and art teacher Bill Holm (1983). The culmination of such temporal approaches may be seen in the recent contributions of two of Holm's students, the important regional review by Steven Brown (1998) and the more detailed study of *Northern Haida Master Carvers*, by Robin Wright (2001).

The recent historical turn in the scholarly literature on the art of Northwest Coast First Nations has had several distinct yet related manifestations. Among the key topics have been the history of collecting, formal developments in painting and sculpture, tourist arts and other arts made for sale to non-Aboriginals, and the varieties of contemporary art. Each of the five books under review here addresses some of these historical themes. One of the earliest topics to gain attention was ethnographic collecting, which was seen as an inter-relationship between the dominant society and Aboriginal cultures. Pioneered by Erna Gunther (1972), this topic was treated most comprehensively by cultural historian Douglas Cole in *Captured Heritage* (1985) as well as by King (1981), Jonaitis (1988), and Black (1997). Appropriately, museum collections are the focus of two of the books under review: the more inclusive *Spirits of the Water* and the more specific *Souvenirs of the Fur Trade*.

Spirits of the Water, an edition translated from the Spanish, was produced to accompany an exhibition organized by the Fundación "la Caixa," Barcelona. The editor is Steven Brown, former curator of Native American art at the

Seattle Art Museum and now an independent curator and scholar. Although he is credited with “clarifying translation issues” and contributing “additional catalogue entries,” the extent of his work is unclear; many of the entries do seem to echo his previous writings. The introductory essay by Leoncio Carretero Collado on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century expeditions is rather superficial. Much more useful is Paz Cabello’s essay on the eighteenth-century Spanish expeditions, which reflects the Spanish sponsorship of the book. Neither Bill Holm’s brief review of the functions of the art, nor Alberto Costo Romero de Tejada’s musings on the appreciation of Eskimo and Northwest Coast art by European Surrealist artists, offers much that is new. One gets the impression that the collections from Spain were of more interest to the organizers than those from other countries. Not only are they highlighted in the introduction but, conversely, many of the important later North American expeditions are omitted. Perhaps it would have made sense to focus on the earlier expeditionary collections, before the large-scale collecting by anthropologists in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The bulk of the volume is devoted to four illustrated sections on the respective national expeditions: Spanish (1774-92), English (1778), Russian (1778-1890), and North American (1867-1910). As suggested by the single date, the only English expedition is Captain Cook’s third voyage. Approximately 175 items are illustrated, each with a colour plate, from public and private collections. While most are Aboriginal objects, several illustrations made by expeditionary artists are also included. The book places a heavy emphasis on masks and other ceremonial

carvings – items that could be construed as “art” in the Western sense. The volume’s regional scope is wider than the Northwest Coast culture area as it also includes Eskimo and other Arctic cultures of Alaska. Its coverage of these cultures, however, is rather meagre and somewhat arbitrary. With few exceptions the captions speak of functional and aesthetic issues rather than of collecting (as is suggested by the volume’s title and organization). Good as far as they go, they seem to be the work of Brown, bearing his insights.

The objects chosen for illustration are a mixed-bag. Most are wonderful pieces, and while it is important to have such good photographs of them, many have already been published, sometimes repeatedly (e.g., collections from the Harvard Peabody Museum). The opposite situation is presented by the many pieces from private – and some anonymous – collections. While a visual representation of these pieces is preferable to having no public knowledge of them, they are not very accessible to scholars. Compared to the existing literature, this catalogue does not have much of a focus; nor does it offer much information that is new to scholarship. Its primary virtues are its set of attractive photographs, especially of the earlier collections from Spain and Russia, and of some fine pieces in private collections.

Souvenirs of the Fur Trade deals with some of the material results of the 175 New England voyages to the Northwest Coast between 1788 and 1844. Author Mary Malloy, who teaches maritime studies at the Sea Education Association in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, has long been researching this subject. The first part of this book consists of two chapters: “Yankee Observations of Northwest Coast Indian Life” and

“Souvenirs and Scientific Collecting.” The second half, comprising the bulk of the volume (about 100 pages), is, in the author’s words: “The first attempt to create a comprehensive catalogue of all of the Northwest Coast Indian artifacts that entered into those institutions while the maritime fur trade was active” (59). Ten chapters are devoted to the original museum collections.¹ Unlike many museum scholars, Malloy starts from the documentation of collections and not the surviving objects. One justification for her approach is the fact that, even if some of these artefacts no longer exist or cannot be found, one can still consider the activities of their early collectors. As each museum section is prefaced by a summary of the institution and its Northwest Coast collections, the volume also offers insights into the early history of New England museums, most of which no longer exist as separate institutions.

As is well known to scholars in the field, the earliest collections from Aboriginal areas were colonial creations and thus do not reside in their homelands but, rather, in the imperial metropolises. As an emblematic case study, Malloy begins with the group of about a dozen famous Haida portrait masks, made around 1820, most of which now survive in these New

England institutions. Noting that most include the labret lip plug worn by noblewomen, she speculates that this “bizarre” ornament stimulated the curiosity of visiting sailors. This leads to a good discussion of the various motivations for collecting. As these merchant collectors were primarily in the business of trading sea otter pelts, such items had potential as commodities in a regular trade. In some cases they were early examples of tourist art; in fact, production for sale to outsiders had begun as early as 1815 (xv). In addition to their function as personal souvenirs, some of these objects were gathered as early natural history specimens from foreign lands. In considering the nature of the interaction between buyer and seller, Molloy concludes that, in most cases, the decision to sell was made by Northwest Coast Aboriginal peoples (xv). The book is a fine illustration of Kopytoff’s (1986) notion of a “cultural biography of things,” as objects were redefined from souvenir to curio to ethnographic specimen to art object as the artefact travelled from owner to owner (xi-xiv).

All the objects reviewed by Molloy were gathered before anthropologists began systematically collecting around 1875. “Ethnographic incunabula,” they are the earliest Northwest Coast artefacts in the United States. In fact, they are often the earliest of their type in any museum collection (these include the earliest extant examples of Haida argillite carving). Well researched, this valuable book demonstrates how far we have come since Erna Gunther’s pioneering, but often erroneous, efforts. On the whole, the photographic illustration is sparing, with fifty (out of 241) objects in black and white (some in multiple views) and fourteen in colour. Because of its detailed, item-

¹ Salem East India Marine Society, Massachusetts Historical Society, Dartmouth College Museum, Deerfield Academy Museum, Boston Athenaeum, American Antiquarian Society, Boston Marine Society, Boston Museum, Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology (which received the four previous collections), and Newburyport Marine Society-Historical Society of Old Newbury- Newburyport Maritime Society. Only the Salem museum still maintains its collections, although with a name change (it is now the Peabody Essex Museum).

by-item record, *Souvenirs of the Fur Trade* will be of interest more to specialists than to a general scholarly or popular audience, although the introductory chapters can be read with profit by all with an interest in the period.

Of all the aspects of Northwest Coast Aboriginal arts, perhaps painting has been the subject that has received the greatest attention – from the original studies by Franz Boas to the system of “formline” design analyzed by Bill Holm (1965). Again, two of the books reviewed here may be paired: McLennan and Duffek’s *Transforming Image* and Malin’s *Northwest Coast Indian Painting*. Both contribute to an Aboriginal art history by attending to specific, dated, and localized examples found in museum specimens and historic photographs.

Transforming Image is a real classic, without doubt the most significant of the books under review. McLennan and Duffek are both associated with the UBC Museum of Anthropology as projects manager/curator and curator of art, respectively. Since 1980 Bill McLennan has been working on what he calls the Image Recovery Project. Because Northwest Coast artefacts are so often coated in dirt, smoke, grease, and grime, their designs have been literally obscured. McLennan has photographed these with infrared film, which, because of its differential sensitivity to light rays, is capable of registering design elements that are not apparent to the naked eye or on regular film. Another innovative technique is the computer-assisted manipulation of historical photographs. Finally, working with Haisla Lyle Wilson and other First Nations artists, older designs have been recreated in contemporary reconstructions. In this book, and the exhibit upon which it is

based, McLennan and Duffek have used these modern methods to make available for the first time many paintings that were “hiding in plain sight.”

After the introduction, *Transforming Image* is divided into chapters that deal with the Image Recovery Project, the antiquity of painting styles, the social context and uses of painted objects, the painter’s tool kit, iconography and meaning, regional styles, individual styles, and, finally, a look at twentieth-century styles. A photographic appendix is devoted to chest-end motifs, illustrating the fourth end, which was left out of earlier sets of front, back, and one side. As the authors admit, their focus is on northern styles (e.g., Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian) and such central coast styles as Heiltsuk and Nuxalk. Partly for technical reasons – such as the fact that infrared film is unsuitable for the later commercial paints found on many southern objects in museums – they do not attempt a full treatment of the more southern styles of the Kwakwaka’wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Coast Salish. Unfortunately, these styles were also neglected by Boas and Holm. Admittedly, these styles are less formalized and show more individual variation than do the northern and central styles, but until they get the scholarly treatment they deserve we can be grateful for the analysis provided by McLennan and Duffek.

By bringing to light a much larger sample of artistic creations, McLennan and Duffek reveal that there was much more diversity and complexity in these painting styles than has long been thought. For instance, by comparing all sides of a box, with details made visible by infrared images, we see that Northwest Coast painting is not nearly as bilaterally symmetrical as it

has been described and, thus, is less dependent on the use of templates for its production. Some of the house front recreations, particularly the Tsimshian ones, are breathtaking in their monumental detail, going far beyond most of the smaller objects that have survived in museums. The painstaking acts of recreation on the part of the UBC team are tantamount to the completion of an unfinished symphony from fragmentary sketches. While it may not be an exact replica of a historical creation, it may well capture some of its aesthetic power for audiences in the present.

Many years in preparation, this attractive book has a particularly elegant design, with a long, horizontal format especially suited for reproducing house frontal paintings and for presenting the helpful series of matched sets showing all four sides of a box. The book is lavishly illustrated with colour, black-and-white, and infrared photographs, usefully integrated on the same or facing pages along with the relevant text. Beyond the specific contributions of its text, *Transforming Image* is important because it allows access to this rich archive of images. First, like cleaning and other conservation treatments, the infrared photographs make the paintings more visible. Yet, like all photography, the Image Recovery Project is able to collect widely dispersed examples into a convenient, consultable corpus for analysis, for scholars, and, even more important, for Aboriginal artists (a kind of “visual repatriation”). There is not enough space here to treat the book’s many important contributions, which scholars will be digesting and debating for many years to come.

The two books about painting overlap, and, while McLennan and Duffek’s *The Transforming Image*

largely supersedes Malin’s *Northwest Coast Indian Painting*, the latter contains important information that the former does not. Malin, an anthropologist and author of two previous books on Northwest Coast masks (1978) and totem poles (1986), was a student of Tlingit specialist Frederica de Laguna, herself a Boas student. Although Malin first conceived the study in 1949, the book is the product of six years of effort that took place in the 1990s. *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* has significant limitations with regard to its subject. As is indicated by the subtitle, it is based on a corpus of 188 house fronts and interior screens, in contrast to McLennan and Duffek’s more inclusive volume, which features boxes as well as facades. After an introductory chapter entitled “Native Cultures and the Painting Tradition,” and a chapter on the social context of that tradition, Malin reviews the paintings in the northern style (Tlingit, Tsimshian, Haida) and the southern style (Bella Coola, Northern Kwakiutl, Southern Kwakiutl, Nuu-chah-nulth, Coast Salish). Next comes a summary of the general characteristics of Northwest Coast painting (largely derived from Boas and Holm) and a chapter on individual artists and their practice. The brief concluding chapter, which is more like an epilogue, on the recent revival in painting is not a very adequate treatment of this important subject.

Following the text are two extensive sections of illustrations: fifty-seven of Malin’s coloured drawings of specific paintings and fifty-three mostly black-and-white historic photographs. The paintings and drawings are like those by the First Nations artists working at UBC in that they are reconstructions: they clarify the details of the designs not fully apparent in photographs and

render them in colour. Unlike these UBC examples, however, they are somewhat impressionistic, not as precise as those that Wilson and others made from direct tracings. One of the book's key features, however, is its collection of historic photos, printed on large-format glossy paper. Since most of these monumental paintings no longer exist, the images will prove useful to all concerned with the subject. The book is conveniently organized by nation and locality. Perhaps its greatest strength is its treatment of Tlingit painting and, secondarily, its complete coverage of southern styles. Although McLennan and Duffek do include the Tlingit of Alaska, they do not emphasize them as much as does Malin, who has personal experience in the area. In fact, Malin's sample of 188 paintings includes 35 examples of Tlingit monumental paintings, including 28 interior screens (27), the most from any group. Malin's incorporation of his own fieldwork with the Tlingit will be his greatest contribution to the writing of an art history of the region.

Of the several scholarly genres reviewed here, perhaps the most directly art historical is the artist monograph. Pioneered for Northwest Coast artists by Bill Holm's (1983) work on Kwakwaka'wakw carver Willie Seaweed, such treatments have now been devoted to Haida masters Bill Reid (Shadbolt 1998; Duffek 1986) and Robert Davidson (Stewart 1979; Thom 1993) as well as to the related Kwakwaka'wakw artists Charlie James, Ellen Neel, and Mungo Martin (Nuytten 1982). Susan Point, an important contemporary Coast Salish artist, has created innovations in modern media such as glass, bronze, and architectural decoration. She is also one of the female path-breakers in a field tradi-

tionally limited to men. Since Coast Salish art has not received as much scholarly or public attention as has the more northerly Northwest Coast styles, this new study is especially welcome.

Susan Point was edited by Gary Wyatt, "curator" at Vancouver's Spirit Wrestler Gallery, with contributions by Michael Kew, Peter Macnair, Vesta Giles, and Bill McLennan. The two introductory essays by anthropologists Michael Kew (on traditional Coast Salish art) and Peter Macnair (with a biographical and artistic review) are excellent. Among Kew's more important points is his consideration of the "constraints" on Salish artistic creativity, which takes up a notion put forward by Salish specialist Wayne Suttles (1984). There are good cultural reasons why Salish produce less "art" than do other groups and share less of it with non-Aboriginals when they do. Macnair's account, based on an intimate knowledge of Point's oeuvre and illustrated with black-and-white photos of her previous work, is an illuminating treatment of her innovative practice. Included at the end is a useful chronology summarizing Point's exhibitions, commissions, appointments, and awards (1981-2000). The bulk of this volume, like the Spanish catalogue, features specific objects. Each of the forty-four pieces comes with a full-page colour photograph and a commentary from the artist recorded by Giles and McLennan. It is wonderful to have this direct testimony from the artist on the concerns that motivated her in the creation of each work.

On the other hand, one must note that the book is not the scholarly treatment that it could have been. Like most art gallery publications, it features current work. Each featured piece was made between 1998 and 2000 (most in

the latter year), and, one assumes, were available for purchase. Wyatt lauds this expansive opportunity to consider such a large body of an artist's work (7); however, while it may be lavish, it is more or less standard practice for art galleries. Museums, with their long-term perspective, more often attempt full-career retrospectives. Despite Macnair's fine essay, this book is not that comprehensive. Point is still in mid-career, having been born in 1952 and begun her career in the early 1980s, and consequently this volume is devoted very much to "work in progress." Still, Susan Point is an important contemporary BC artist, and the illustrations are fine representations of her current work.

This is an exciting time for the study of First Nations arts of British Columbia. Scholars have built upon the basic descriptions and collections of earlier generations of anthropologists but have gone far beyond them in considering the nuances of artistic practice in the region. In fact, one of the healthiest trends, embodied in McLennan and Duffek, is the constant reminder of the inherent ambiguity in the art and the emphasis on how much we shall never know. At the same time, one must note the many mediocre books that are produced, stimulated by a vast commercial infrastructure of museums, galleries, dealers, and publishers.

While some of the books reviewed here attest to the institutionalization of Northwest Coast Aboriginal arts within a Western discourse of art history, we should also remember that these arts derive from a distinctive culture and that, in many cases, they may not even be art at all (cf. Jacknis 2002:205-6). Although living in a multicultural world, many of the

makers and users of such objects persist in regarding them as cultural patrimony and ceremonial prerogatives (both family and individual). Thus an art history of Northwest Coast First Nations, fine as it may be, will never be able to answer all the questions that we may ask of these beautiful and fascinating objects.

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