

*Trading Identities: The Souvenir of Native North  
American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900*

Ruth B. Phillips

Montreal and Kingston/Seattle: McGill-Queen's University Press/  
University of Washington Press, 1998. 334 pp. Illus. \$49.95 cloth.

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READING THIS MAGISTERIAL work conjured up a personal image for me: Duncan Campbell Scott fingering his beaded tobacco pouch as he contemplated the implementation of government policies intended to address the "Indian problem." It serves to underscore the central thesis of this book: the "contradictions and absurdities" implicit in the dominant culture's appropriation of souvenir wares that were proxies for the complex construct of "Indianness." Phillips puts her case at the very outset:

This book is about souvenir arts and commoditization, and the ways in which this class of objects and this mode of production have historically inscribed images of otherness [that] are particularly illuminating of transcultural aesthetic processes articulated through the asymmetrical power relations of colonial regimes. (3)

Of course, these complex dialogic interrelationships were not static and, throughout the ensuing 300 pages and 280 images, Phillips demonstrates how they were renegotiated "as European ideologies shifted from late-Renaissance Christian cosmology to Enlightenment rationalism, romanticism, and the Victorian dogmas of

progress and cultural evolutionism" (13). In doing so, she underscores how Aboriginal people's participation in commoditization and tourism was an explicit strategy for economic and cultural survival that mediated the assimilationist forces of the dominant culture.

Phillips defines souvenir wares as "commoditized objects, market-oriented arts," predominantly female-produced and consumed "crafts" that have been relegated to "the edges of the canonically correct and the typologically pure" (x). More specifically, her focus is on the 200-year continuity of souvenir art production in three northeastern North American sites: the beadwork of the Mohawk reserve at Kahnawake (Caughnawaga) near Montreal, the ash splinter baskets produced by the Mikmaq of Eskasoni on Cape Breton Island, and the porcupine quill work on bark of the Odawa-Ojibwa (Anishnabek) of northwestern Michigan and Manitoulin Island. No mere lavishly illustrated catalogue, Phillips breaks "the silence of the objects themselves" by approaching her investigation from a rich interdisciplinary perspective informed by a Foucauldian analysis of power, Panofskian iconography, and modern critical theoretical approaches to colonialism, tourism, art history, and museum theory and praxis.

Thus, the public and private collecting practices of professional ethnologists, rare art collectors, Aboriginal agents, and tourists are considered as historically contingent systems that have permitted or excluded particular representational forms. In particular, Phillips exposes the “central contradiction that has run like a fault line” through museum presentations: the separation of materials that displayed the Aboriginal as passive, other, and marginalized from the premodern forms of commoditized art that demonstrated a dynamic negotiation of Western artistic and economic systems. The exclusion of souvenir art forms deprived the establishment-academy of insights into transcultural aesthetic expressions, silenced the producers and consumers of these objects, and obscured the transformative nature of their production and consumption. Transcending the distanced aesthetic and academic view, it is forcefully argued that “these souvenir and trade wares seem to be the most authentic representations of the courageous, innovative, and creative adaptation that Woodlands Aboriginal peoples made during one of the darkest periods in their histories” (69). Moreover, their recent inclusion in collections marks the postcolonial challenge of the museum as the principal agent of a colonial discourse that rendered the Native American as pre-modern, static, and dead.

Following this strong theoretical introduction, the core of the volume consists of four roughly chronological studies of genre and iconography that are diagnostic of major phases in the dynamics of souvenir production and consumption and which, taken together, elucidate complex processes of transculturation. First to be addressed is a staple of the northeastern souvenir

trade, the three-dimensional miniature. Whether they be dolls, canoes, tepees, or weapons, the advantages of the miniaturized form are quite evident: cognitive accessibility, ease of manipulation, aesthetic pleasure, portability, and – especially before the advent of photography and the picture-postcard – the capturing of the image as memento. Moreover, for Phillips, “the quality of reduction lent the illusion of simplification and intellectual control that has been repeatedly exploited in the context of colonial power relations” (102).

Phillips next turns to the “quintessential example of trans-cultural production” and a fascinating demonstration of the process of cultural exchange: the eighteenth-century invention of moosehair-embroidered birchbark curiosities by Quebec nuns and their nineteenth-century appropriation by the Huron-Wendat, Mi’kmaq, and Maliseet, who transformed them into the standard iconography of Indianness throughout northeast North America. Their graphic images are interrogated iconographically and semiotically to elucidate a pictorialism as it was negotiated by French-Canadian nuns; genteel Euro-American women; and Huron, Mi’kmaq, and Maliseet women. Their products incorporated both ideal images and contradictions as they represented emblematic images of the noble savage, Edenic wilderness, and the picturesque.

This is followed by an iconographic analysis of floral motifs displayed by the quilled bark wares of the Anishnabek of the central Great Lakes as a complex site of dual signification of Aboriginal cosmography and Western perceptions of a cultural inferiority. The increased use of floral images in souvenir wares was emblematic of widespread iconographic change in

northeastern visual cultures. By the mid-nineteenth century, floral iconography had displaced earlier geometric motifs and figurative depictions of *manitos*. Initially interpreted through the lens of a cultural evolutionist and racist perspective, the adoption of floral imagery was seen as both a sign of lost artistic integrity and also of progress towards civilization. But Phillips argues convincingly for a more sophisticated “contact perspective” of transcultural interaction and negotiation implicit in the emergent hybrid artistic styles. Recognizing the multivalency of floral motifs, she seeks out their dual signification. For Victorian consumers, they were signifiers of theories of primitive art, the feminine, and folk; for Native Americans, they connoted indigenous beliefs in cosmic powers immanent in vision-inspired images. Together, these forces constituted reformulations of older constructions of Indianness in response to the realities of nineteenth-century colonialism. More powerfully, it is argued that floral designs were part of a strategy to ensure cultural continuity in a period of cultural repression by camouflaging profound animistic beliefs with the artistic conventions of the dominant culture.

Next to be considered is the production and consumption of beaded and basketry domestic ornaments and clothing accessories in the Victorian era. Situated within the context of the prevailing ideologies of femininity and the home, attention is directed to the imposition of rigid gender roles upon Aboriginal communities. Again, a strategy of cultural resistance comes to the fore. In the face of expropriation of their lands, assimilationist educational and religious policies, and a generally oppressive power structure, a close reading of the visual text of

souvenir objects reveals the retention of powerful indigenous artistic concepts. No mere pandering to Victorian popular demand, art commodity productions were proactive negotiations of hybridity within the interstices of power. Thus, they demonstrated a cultural continuity through a canny marketing of signs of exotic difference that penetrated that inner sanctum of Victorian taste – the parlour. Perhaps this is the greatest irony of the ongoing transcultural contact zone: the celebration of the barbaric in the temple of perceived order and decorum!

In her final chapter, Phillips turns to six contemporary Aboriginal artists (Norval Morrisseau, Rebecca Baird, Rebecca Belmore, Rick Hill, Jolene Rickard, and Shelley Niro) to assess how they reinsert the commoditized arts into the continuity of Native American art and, in so doing, attempt to bridge the gap between formal art history and Native American art. At once epilogue and prologue, the chapter serves to underscore the links between historic souvenir production and contemporary Aboriginal art. Thus, nineteenth-century art commodities are located within a history of Woodlands art that is continuing to evolve as inclusive of gender, genre, and medium. This speaks well of “the value placed on the unique combination of skill, inventiveness, and strength these works embody and of their legitimate place in the Native art histories of the Northeast” (280).

What more could I expect of a scholarly study? A comprehensive array of empirical evidence has been subjected to a sophisticated and innovative theoretical analysis, the results presented in a provocatively written and lavishly illustrated text. Given the author’s powerful deconstruction of

visual imagery and form, the extensive array of representations of the several genre of the souvenir-art form are crucial to her ability to make her points. Accordingly, this volume is copiously illustrated with over 200 black-and-white images and a glo-

rious central collection of thirty-eight colour plates that celebrate the beauty and complexity of the commoditized objects of art. Simply put, this is a thought-provoking and groundbreaking study.

### *Solitary Raven: The Selected Writings of Bill Reid*

Robert Bringhurst, editor

Vancouver/Seattle: Douglas and McIntyre/  
University of Washington Press, 2000. 250 pp. Illus. \$40 cloth.

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THE HAIDA ARTIST Bill Reid (1920-98) is arguably Canada's most renowned sculptor. Among his monumental works are the partial replica of a Haida village at the University of British Columbia (UBC); the band council housepole in Skidegate, the first pole raised in the village in a century; *The Raven and the First Men*, the large yellow cedar representation of a Haida creation myth that has become the signature piece of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC; *Chief of the Undersea World*, his cast bronze sculpture of a killer whale located at the Vancouver Aquarium; and *Loo Taa*, the 15.7-metre canoe featured at Expo '86, paddled to Skidegate in 1987, and later paddled up the Seine to Paris. Reid's greatest sculpture is *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, installed at the Canadian Embassy in Washington in 1991. A replica, *The Jade Canoe*, graces the departure lounge of the Vancouver Airport.

Reid was raised in Hyder and Victoria without knowing that his

mother was Haida. Only as an adult, about to embark on a career with CBC Radio, did he visit Haida Gwaii and discover that his lineage included several great carvers. He made his life's ambition the exploration of art and of his cultural heritage. First, he acquired European, technical jeweller's skills. Then, he steeped himself in the vision of Haida artistic tradition. Finally, he transcended cultural boundaries to create art for all. As Reid matured and his art gained acclaim, he assumed an active role articulating Aboriginal rights. In the 1970s and 1980s, when Haida allied with preservationists to wage a thirteen-year campaign to save the southern portion of Haida Gwaii from clear-cut logging, Reid contributed to their cause as both fundraiser and advocate. Who will forget the March 1987 headline in the *Vancouver Sun*: "Haida Artist Abandons Carving for Embassy"? Reid informed the federal government: "I'm not prepared to enhance your international reputation when you treat my people