

*Out of the Mist:
Treasures of the Nuu-chah-nulth Chiefs*

Martha Black

Victoria: Royal British Columbia Museum, 1999.
159 pp. Illus., maps. \$36.95 paper.

By Ki-ke-in (Ron Hamilton)
Emin

OUT OF THE MIST, the official catalogue for the Royal British Columbia Museum travelling show of the same name, is a large-format picture book. Profusely illustrated with no less than 256 photographs, this is an immediately impressive and enjoyable publication to look at. There are 205 coloured photographs and fifty-one historical black-and-white images. Aside from record shots of the artefacts, there are two groups of coloured photographs found here. Near the front of the catalogue are seventeen small, refreshingly informal portraits of Nuu-chah-nulth Ha'wiih (hereditary chiefs) (36-8). Near the back of the book are eighteen shots of Nuu-chah-nulth people at the opening ceremonies for the show in Victoria (136-40). The portraits are a respectful and tacit acknowledgment of our traditional system of government. The images of people speaking, singing, dancing, and just being at the opening clearly capture some of the joy, excitement, and gravity we feel when we open up our treasure chests and reconnect with our ancestors through the display and use of our *tuupaatis* – our crest objects.

Our *tuupaatis*: screens, curtains, talking sticks, boxes, whaler's hats, headdresses, dance-robos, masks, drums, rattles – these are the very heart and soul of this exhibition and this catalogue. Given this, and the

seminal nature and overarching importance of these types of artefacts to Nuu-chah-nulth ceremonial activity today, the record shots of individual objects are a major disappointment. Only three historic and two contemporary pieces are given full-page status (1, 2, 98, and 18, 133). The cover and many pages feature a single object but clutter the image with titles, patches of text, or both (45, 70, 82). A clear title page for each section would have been a nice touch. I find the manipulation of the mask image on the cover (certainly the oldest piece from the show most referenced by Nuu-chah-nulth carvers today) both ugly and disrespectful. Page 33 provides another example of the book's poor layout. With image and text on a single leaf, there is more empty space than used space here. The image of "The Whaler's Dream" could have been considerably larger; as it is, it is almost a throwaway.

Most of the black-and-white images the author utilizes in *Out of the Mist* were made during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century from large-format glass negatives. These photographs feature views of old Nuu-chah-nulth villages, with their characteristic big houses scattered along our west coast (8, 21, 26, 65, 158). A few others capture distinguished

individuals from our past dressed to meet or entertain the public (58, 64, 107, 142). Such images reach across the years and draw us back in time; they captivate us and speak eloquently of the dignity and pride of our immediate forebears. Three black-and-white photographs depict Nuuchahnulth women weaving baskets, and there is a single shot of a carver working on a model pole (118, 124, 125, and 108). I enjoy these photographs because they show some of the people who made some of the older objects in this catalogue.

The advertising blurb on the back cover of the volume claims that “this book is more than a catalogue ... Martha Black places the objects in context with the culture and history of these west-coast people.” This is an overstatement, as only 152 of the 218 items in the exhibit are illustrated in the book. Having seen the show a half dozen times, I would appreciate seeing more of the pieces included. As well, for almost two decades now, students of Northwest Coast art and history have been accustomed to exhibition catalogues with considerable contextual material. For example: Bill Holm’s *Smoky-Top: The Art of Willie Seaweed* (1983), Doreen Jensen and Polly Sargent’s *Robes of Power: Totem Poles on Cloth* (1986), Robin K. Wright’s *A Time for Gathering: Native Heritage in Washington State* (1991), and Steven Brown’s *The Spirit Within: Northwest Coast Native Art from the John Hauberg Collection* (1995). There is no new scholarship in Black’s work, only new material surveyed briefly.

Sadly, only two of the many photographs used in this book are noteworthy because of their potlatch settings. There is a beautiful historic shot of a graceful Nuuchahnulth canoe, with ten paddlers still aboard,

being carried aloft in official welcome by a crew of Tla-o-qui-aht (41). The shot of Queen Mary, wife of Tla-o-qui-aht chief Wickaninnish, in a potlatch house might have helped contextualize some of the Tla-o-qui-aht material in the show had it been placed in proximity to it. However, the shot appears in the pronunciation appendix at the back of the book (149). It is worth noting that Nuuchahnulth photographers have taken countless photographs during Nuuchahnulth feasts and potlatches from about 1930 onward. A selection of these would have enriched this catalogue immeasurably.

In contrast to the rich array of photographs in *Out of the Mist*, Black, as the curator of this important exhibit of material culture and as the author of this catalogue, seems to have little to say. She quotes various Nuuchahnulth people at length and throughout the book, but her own lack of expertise in matters Nuuchahnulth is all too evident. She has not provided even a simple essay to introduce the distinct character of Nuuchahnulth mythology, history, beliefs, politics, or ceremony and ritual. Perhaps she is wise to keep her observations and comments to a minimum.

In her preface, the author declares the museum show chronicled in this book to be the “first-ever exhibit of Nuuchahnulth arts and culture” (13). This statement is as bold as it is ignorant. Nuuchahnulth peoples have used great paintings and carvings, beautiful robes, strong songs and dances, eloquent speakers, and a broad range of ceremonies to proclaim our place and our authority along the west coast of this island since time immemorial. We have been exhibiting our culture to Europeans since 1778, when Captain Cook first visited our

shores and attended a potlatch. Witness the Nuu-chah-nulth woman pictured weaving at the 1904 World's Fair. She was part of a group who went to demonstrate various traditional skills and to entertain the public (125). Witness the Tla-o-qui-aht Ha'wiih ranged in front of Wickaninnish's curtain in 1928 (58). They were greeting Lieutenant-Governor Lord Willingdon in Tofino. Witness the truckload of Nuu-chah-nulth men and women decked out in their crest masks and headdresses for the Alberni Dominion Day parade in 1929 (142). They are trying to make a point: "We are still here. In spite of all that you've done to wipe us off the face of this earth, we are still here." Black

has chosen to use these images, but she has missed much of the very culture and history the book claims to offer.

Not since John Sendey's *The Nootkan Indian: A Pictorial* (1977) has a single publication featured so many images of Nuu-chah-nulth people. That long-out-of-print work is a collection of early illustrations and photographs interspersed with quotes from Captain Cook's journals. Furthermore, no other trade publication has quoted Nuu-chah-nulth people so profusely. Despite its weaknesses, readers of *BC Studies*, students of anthropology and history, Nuu-chah-nulth people, and many others may want to add this book to their libraries.

*Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique:
Manufactured by Joseph Dufour et Cie 1804-05
after a Design by Jean-Gabriel Charvet*

Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales and
National Gallery of Australia, 2000

Distributed in North America by University of Washington Press.
48 pp. Illus. US\$18.95 paper.

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THE VISITOR to the Honolulu Academy of Arts, housed in the former Cooke family mansion, will encounter a myriad of objects to charm the senses and to stimulate the intellect. In a dark corner, shielded from natural light, stands what is perhaps the most striking and unusual exhibit – a set of twenty panels, or strips, of wallpaper dating from the start of the nineteenth century. What fascinates are the scenes on the wallpaper. They represent a

panoramic view, in an open-air setting, of different Native peoples of the Pacific Islands and coasts. The scenes begin on the left, where a group of people wearing conical hats and long capes is engaged in drying fish hung from strings. The visitor from British Columbia at once exclaims: "Nootka Sound!" and that remark justifies this review of *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* in *BC Studies*.

The wallpaper was produced in 1805 by Joseph Dufour et Cie (a firm located