

*Down from the Shimmering Sky:
Masks of the Northwest Coast*

Peter Macnair, Robert Joseph, and Bruce Grenville

Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, Seattle: University of Washington Press, and Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1998. 192 pp. Illus, maps. \$39.95 paper.

*Native Visions: Evolution in Northwest Coast Art from
the Eighteenth through the Twentieth Century*

Steven C. Brown

Vancouver and Toronto: The Seattle Art Museum in association with Douglas and McIntyre, 1998. 216 pp. Illus., maps. US\$70 cloth.

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Down from the *Shimmering Sky: Masks of the Northwest Coast*, the book, is remarkable for the same reason that the exhibition, at the Vancouver Art Gallery in the summer of 1998, was remarkable: it allows a close and uninterrupted look at masks, and only masks. To an extent the book overrides the contradictions implicit in such a project and a variety of critiques. (A mask exhibition had been in the gallery's plans for four years before it was brought forward in what all concerned admit to having been too much of a rush.) It is illustrated in the same style in which the masks were displayed – radiant, glowing, isolated. The curators' essays supply what the gallery labelling, for complex reasons, largely withheld; that is, the nicely judged curatorial collaboration, the narratives of new scholarship, of context, of the masks themselves, which constitute the significant contribution of *Down from the Shimmering Sky*.

Arguably the contradiction is really between visual and other forms of knowledge, the balance between them shifting in response to the state of the struggle over who knows what and who has the right to tell it, and who has the right, or the need, to apply the art label. That the art label is problematic is one of the interesting issues of the politico-aesthetic present. For the narratives about other ways of valuing do not tell themselves, as vox populi pointed out in the gallery, asking for more information, aware of ambiguities: If masks should not be shown except when performed, why are we looking at them? Where are the stories without which they are diminished and misunderstood? Significantly, Wilson Duff is invoked in the curators' introductory essay as a kind of presiding genius – the anthropologist who struggled eloquently with the problems caused when objects come adrift from their narratives.

Bruce Grenville manoeuvres the enterprise into the art gallery zone – where the Vancouver Art Gallery has its own history of paradigm-shifting exhibitions in this area – most notably *Arts of the Raven: Masterworks by the Northwest Coast Indian* (1967) and *Images, Stone, B.C.: Thirty Centuries of Northwest Coast Indian Sculpture* (1975) – rightly identifying the split between aesthetics and ethnography that has shaped the discussion and that this project aspires to narrow.

In his eloquent essay Chief Robert Joseph says things of great consequence with a light touch, giving a much-needed account of what it is to grow up as a dancer, to encounter Bakwas and Dzunukwa as a child, and to see masks playing their roles as instruments of moral instruction and social control. This kind of exegesis is an invitation to a wide audience to think about masked beings as something beyond quintessential exotica, as part of the human struggle with the unspeakable in humanity and of cosmic battles between order and chaos. Macnair's commentary follows the same cosmologically derived organization as does the exhibition.

The representative selection of masks from all the coastal peoples, with a numerical emphasis on the Kwakwaka'wakw, was assembled by Joseph and Macnair from the international diaspora of Northwest Coast material in public and private collections. It includes the sightless stone mask (one of a pair from Tsimshian territory) and masks that show remarkable modulations of anatomical structure, from skin on bone to the most elaborate constructions.

Peter Macnair, for thirty years curator of ethnology at the Royal British Columbia Museum, is himself a repository of knowledge that has

been acquired through his long-standing friendship with Robert Joseph and other Kwakwaka'wakw associates. This publication forced him into print, although his original contribution to scholarship is modestly marked with very small asterisks in the catalogue listing. His text explicates the cosmological organizing principles of the exhibition display. Having assembled masks, most of which could not have been seen together before, his text demonstrates continuity, proves longevity, and extends attributions and influences. An important assertion has to do with the extent to which masks have been made for non-Native consumption. This, in turn, complicates an over-simple picture of cross-cultural contact in this part of the world, implies that visitors' interest may not always have been malign, and points out that Native artists are perpetuating a tradition by working for the market (rather than betraying authenticity) and that they were not averse to adapting their iconography to changing circumstances.

Bill Holm's *Northwest Coast Art: An Analysis of Form* has been an extremely influential book since it first appeared in 1965. It established, on a formal level, the understanding of style, particularly what Holm termed the Northern two-dimensional style of the nineteenth century, as a formal language with grammatical rules. The identification and schematic drawings of formlines, ovoids, u forms, and the permutations and combinations of these elements, offered a route to understanding at a time when the transmission of knowledge seemed to be at risk. Few carvers are without a well-used copy, Robert Davidson among them (who called it his bible when he was learning). It has enabled many to do as well as to see. Holm's claims for his

work were more modest and more limited than many who have used it to perpetuate the discussion of Northwest Coast art as a detached, if brilliant, schema (what Marjorie Halpin and other have criticized as "the Boasian paradigm").

Steven Brown, like Holm, is an expert (non-Native) carver himself, and they share an infectious curiosity about how it is done. His book *Native Visions* makes an even-handed assessment of the role of formal analysis. It would have been more valuable if the conversation between protagonists and detractors about whether and how "the visual elements and principles of the Northwest Coast tradition reflect the tenets and values of the cultures and social systems that artistically employ them," which emerges at certain points, had been further developed. But Brown's own belief about time and society are summed up when he speaks of "a natural, karmic return of the tide."

The importance of *Native Visions* (the title may be misleading) lies in its detailed amplification of these principles. Two things emerge: some subtle readings of individual pieces and an account of what Brown terms the evolution of stylistic paths – paths that began at least 5,500 years ago. He shares Macnair's interest in establishing earlier dates than has hitherto seemed possible and in showing that he has a plausible technique for doing so. That it can also be problematic is betrayed in remarks such as the following (with regard to establishing a date before 1860 for a Chinookan sheep horn ladle): "By that time, it would seem that many traditional pursuits would have been interrupted through settlement of the region" – a masterly understatement.

The book is based on an exhibition drawn from private collections in the

Seattle area and is complemented by works from that particular assemblage of material known as the Hauberg Collection (now in the Seattle Art Museum). As such, it will provide further scope for studying the symbiotic relationship between collectors, institutions, and what gets talked about.

Brown is at his most persuasive, and his prose at its most limber, when he is most moved. He provides some subtle accounts, particularly of the classic period formline art of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, extolling the perfectly judged tension that determines the degree of curve, for example, or the way in which calculation seems to yield to sensuality in the conjunctions between elements. By the time Brown has worked his way through the analysis, the well-placed illustrations allow the reader to register the nauseating slackness when the tension is eased, by accident or design, or by the grossness of lumpy, misconstrued ovoids.

Such responses might seem to vindicate the notion – one subtext of formal analysis – that there is a trans-cultural aesthetic in operation. Such was the theme of the discussion between Holm and Bill Reid that was published as *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics* (1975). It could be argued that it is here that modernism has made itself felt on the Northwest Coast. But here also is the interesting difficulty. Modernism made its case independently of signification. Those who want to claim that this is "art" today have to build their case on more than form to satisfy all those, Native and non-Native, who are interested in something other than formal values – who want to know about what cannot be seen.