

Book Reviews

Bill Reid, by Doris Shadbolt. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1986.
Pp. 192; 175 illus., 40 in colour. \$60.00.

One of the central concepts in anthropological studies of art is that in order to understand and appreciate the form of an object, it is necessary to consider the cultural context in which it was made. This approach has long dominated the way we exhibit, critique, and write about Northwest Coast Indian art, but it is being questioned by artists and, increasingly, by anthropologists themselves. Today, native artists seek recognition as *artists* first, unbounded by restrictive and outdated criteria of ethnicity or “Indian-ness.”

This book marks an important step — perhaps even a leap — toward a new art criticism that is essential for the development of both Northwest Coast art itself, as it enters the mainstream art world, and the way in which we view the contemporary work. Author Doris Shadbolt, eminent art historian and long-time personal friend of her subject, speaks of making “direct contact” with native art — approaching it “as an experiencer of art, not as anthropologist or art historian.” In making this statement, she asserts the power of fine art, from any cultural tradition, to transcend its specific context and be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities alone. Shadbolt’s approach does not deny or denigrate the vast accumulation of information about Northwest Coast ethnology, upon which we can rely “for an extension of our response into the old culture”; she devotes one entire chapter, “Looking Backward,” to describing “the containing formal world” of the northern style. The artists themselves, after all, place an emphasis on creating art within centuries-old conventions of form and composition. At the same time, they are clearly of the twentieth century, immersed in the dominant North American culture. The work of Haida artist Bill Reid and his peers has its roots in recognized styles and imagery of Northwest Coast art, but is part of new genres developing out of the contradictions and ambiguities of the present day.

"It is the attempt of this book," Doris Shadbolt writes, "to bring some understanding of Bill Reid's art in its slow unfolding, in relation both to its grounding in Haida tradition and his evolving inner self." Unaware until he was a teenager of being anything other than an average Caucasian North American, Bill Reid has moved from the position of an artist/historian, learning his art by copying museum pieces, to a creator of original images in Haida and "universal" styles. His most recent works, which blend complementary elements of Northwest Coast iconography and Western naturalism, extend the definition of Haida art beyond its generally understood boundaries. Shadbolt recreates for us "that necessary process of evolution" by which Reid's work achieved its "hard-won authenticity." She shows us how "on the difficult basis of full historical awareness and concise choice, the only way in which some kind of continuity could happen," Bill Reid's entry into a near-dead ancestral tradition "was first through craft and technique, and then through an analysis of the forms, and gradually to a deeper and deeper understanding of and empathy with what they were expressing. Only in his own personal interiorization of what had once been culturally assumed could that which was universal in the old art be kept alive."

This "interiorization" or personal assimilation of the old subjects and forms, Shadbolt implies, is essential for contemporary artists to create masterworks within the constraints of the tradition. In his best pieces, Bill Reid has resolved the artistic problem that confronted him early on in his career: "the creation of an imagery and a mode of representation that would, within the required illustrative framework, successfully bridge the gap between a mythically and iconically known and presented past and a historic present that is experienced in 'real life' terms." With his emphasis on "making things well," Reid found a "sudden aching sense of identity with the distant cousin who first lovingly made . . . the elegant line, the subtle curve, the sure precise brush stroke." Shadbolt uses the term "deeply carved" to describe the resulting works that transcend the rules of Haida art and invest the forms with vital life. By regenerating for himself a Haida spirit and sensibility that is also universal, Reid has himself become deeply carved.

Doris Shadbolt has written a book that is long overdue in its celebration of Bill Reid the artist and its recognition of the place of native art in the evolving culture. One only regrets the relative lack of critical comment regarding Reid's less successful works — the author tends to decline comment rather than offer "negative" judgement. Shadbolt's portrait of Reid nevertheless extends our understanding of an extraordinary individual

whose struggles have often been overshadowed by his public superstar status. In its sensitive juxtaposition of text and Reinhard Derreth's rich photography, *Bill Reid* truly complements its subject's love of the well-made object.

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To the Totem Shore — The Spanish Presence on the Northwest Coast, ed. Santiago Saavedra. Madrid: Ministerio de Transportes, Turismo, y Comunicaciones, 1986. Pp. 239.

This book is a collection of articles by various authors. It was produced for sale at the Spanish pavilion at Expo 86, and arrangements for distribution of the unsold copies are being made. The titles of the articles given below have been abbreviated.

The opening article "California, 17th Century," by Francisco Morales Padrón, describes both the real and apocryphal explorations of the North Pacific, the latter being important because of the influence they had on plans for subsequent voyages.

This article is followed by "Incursions into the 'Spanish Lake'" by Thomas Vaughan and E. A. P. Crowhurst Vaughan. Russian, French, and British explorations are described. The most useful part is the account of Russian exploration and establishment of trading posts in the Aleutian Islands and farther east, a subject the Vaughans have studied intensively.

Mercedes Palau's article, "The Spanish Presence," is badly translated. For example, the armament of (Concepción) included six "stone-cutters," according to the translator. These were "pedreros," small swivel-mounted guns which sometimes used stone cannon balls.

The author has confused two separate voyages through the Strait of Juan de Fuca in 1790 and 1791, and she or her proofreader are ten degrees out in the latitude of the supposed Strait of Maldonado.

Palau gives considerable space to the Malaspina voyage, which reached Alaska in 1791, including some material not readily available in English.

In "Spanish Cartography—the Corps of Steersmen" [*sic*], Luisa Martin and Lola Higuera have provided a pair of articles which would be better separated, since the subject matter differs. The translator has made one conspicuous error. The "steersmen" of the title were "pilotos," who were the navigators and often the cartographers on the ships of the