

OBITUARY

*William McLennan, 4 October 1948–3 July 2020.
Curator Emeritus, Museum of Anthropology at
UBC, Vancouver*

ANTHONY ALAN SHELTON

WISE, THOUGHTFUL, and immensely learned, Bill McLennan carried his knowledge of Northwest Coast arts and cultures lightly and discretely. His telltale whistling announced his approach, even before his quick steps brought him into sight. Quietly at first, but with quickening animation, he would describe a new insight into one of the works he had been studying or describe one of the projects he had been working on. Resolute in his scholarly and curatorial standards and his support of Indigenous artists and cultures, he was welcomed and embraced by First Nation and non-Indigenous friends alike up and down the coast of British Columbia. Bill was a man of integrity and clear vision, generous and direct, and it was these qualities that had impressed my predecessor, Michael Ames, so much so that he recommended I seek Bill's advice in times of uncertainty. Not only did Bill judiciously provide that guidance, but soon after my arrival in 2004, he started inviting me to accompany him at different times to Haida Gwaii, the Nass Valley, Hazelton, Prince Rupert, and Kitamaat to meet Elders, artists, curators, and council members, and during these visits he showed and explained the importance of the relations between the museum's collections and the different communities. Bill taught me about the Coast and demonstrated the values and humility required to become part of it.

Bill shared his munificence with everyone around him, with students, colleagues, specialists, and non-specialists alike. He was a friend of some of Canada's greatest collectors, and in some cases helped shape their collections; he was a close friend of artists, especially Bill Reid, Jim Hart, Lyle Wilson, and Dempsey Bob, whose work he greatly admired. He was generous to students, especially the younger generation of Northwest Coast carvers, some of whom he helped teach at his beloved Freda Diesing School of Northwest Coast Art; to community researchers – he would spend days tracking down a photograph or researching the



Bill McLennan's last public tour of MOA prior to his retirement in 2013. Photo by Carol E. Mayer.

history of a piece; and to the public at large. I have never known anyone who was so warmly welcomed and respected as Bill, wherever he went. He was self-effacing, content to stand in the wings or in the background or behind a lens rather than assume the spotlight, yet his presence and spirit suffused and promoted so much of what was happening around him.

Bill started work at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) in 1975 as a photographer and project manager. He was responsible for the photography and design layout of the early MOA occasional paper series. Even then, his own photography was crisp and precise and brought out the elegance and technical virtuosity of the artworks he staged. When he aimed his camera at individuals, such as Bill Reid whom he sat under the protective wing of *The Raven and the First Men* sculpture, or at the hands of carvers using tools, he brought an intimacy that would have been impossible without the mutual respect and good humour that

comes from long friendships. A year ago, when we were planning for Bill to photograph works in cultural centres across British Columbia, he talked about photographic methods and effects, about how it was possible to produce technically faultless work. However, he emphasized that, without “getting inside a work,” without appreciating and feeling it from multiple angles, you could never capture its essence. David Jensen, his longtime friend and colleague, wrote to me: “He was very dedicated to doing things well. As well as doing the right thing ... He was like that, through his whole life he never compromised quality for speed or convenience.”

MOA could not contain Bill’s curiosity and excitement about other cultures. In 1983, he took a year’s leave to work on the Pakistan Pavilion at Expo ’86. Later, after its closure, he shepherded some of the extraordinary textiles shown there to enrich MOA’s own holdings. He admired Asian textiles for the rest of his life, and, during a trip to see his daughter in Thailand in 2010, he put together a small collection for MOA. Technique especially interested him, as did the life of the Thai villagers with whom he stayed. During his forty years at MOA, after Expo ’86, he frequently and proactively worked as a consultant on important external First Nation initiatives that have changed the face of Canada. He was one of the designers of the Great Hall of the National Museum of History (then the Canadian Museum of Civilization), the nation’s showroom, with its reconstructions of different styles of Indigenous Northwest Coast architecture. He was a consultant for the U’mista Cultural Centre, Alert Bay; the Nuyumbalees Cultural Centre, Quadra Island; and the Squamish Lil’wat Centre, Whistler. He was an early supporter, consultant, and later board member of the YVR Art Foundation at Vancouver International Airport, and he sat on numerous prestigious juries, too many to list.

Bill received international acclaim for his remarkable Image Recovery Project. Based on his discovery that infrared light could make visible long eroded and faded painted compositions that decorated nineteenth-century and earlier Indigenous house fronts, Bill set about locating what appeared to be plain house boards and bentwood boxes that had been stored in museums across North America and Europe. Photographing these discrete pieces, he was later able to reconstruct the original paintings and fit house boards from different collections together to reconstitute the whole of the painted surface. In the process, Bill noticed an earlier, more dynamic curvilinear Northwest Coast painting style that has since been re-embraced by many First Nation artists. I remember seeing carvers in the north of British Columbia with Bill’s book open

in their studios, earnestly discussing some of the works, including the smaller-scale reproductions of earlier works that Lyle Wilson had painted. *The Transforming Image: Painted Arts of Northwest Coast First Nations* (2000), written with his long-time collaborator Karen Duffek, is one of the most influential and multi-award-winning books written on Indigenous Northwest Coast art. Just before his untimely death, Bill had completed another book with Karen Duffek and Jordan Wilson, *Where the Power Is: Indigenous Perspectives on Northwest Coast Art* (in press), which promises to become a similar landmark publication.

Although only made a curator at MOA in 2004, lack of title thankfully didn't keep Bill from curating, and his extraordinary contribution to the museum's history covered the whole of his career. In the last few years leading up to his retirement in 2013, he curated the Haida section of the Multiversity Galleries (2010) in collaboration with the Haida; *Treasures of the Tsimshian from the Dundas Collection* (2010); *Signed without Signature: Works by Charles and Isabella Edenshaw* (2010); and (with Pam Brown) *Speaking to Memory: Images and Voices from St. Michael's Indian Residential School* (2013). More recently, he co-curated with Karen Duffek and Jordan Wilson *In a Different Light: Reflecting on Northwest Coast Art* (2017).

Each exhibition had a unique and, for many of us, an unforgettable tilt. The *Treasures* exhibition contained small works that were exquisitely mounted and lit, floating in intimate spaces that couldn't fail to touch anyone seeing them for the first time. *Signed Without Signature* was designed to the same unfailingly high aesthetic standard, and, having worked for years with descendants of Charles and Isabella Edenshaw, Bill helped host a gathering for all branches of the family on opening night. *Speaking to Memory*, in its simplicity and rawness, brought many visitors to tears. Bill was a consummate curator; his research was meticulous and his scenography impeccable – the type of curator of which there are now too few.

Bill contributed enormously to MOA's growth from a small university museum to a large state-of-the-art research facility with one of the best collections of Northwest Coast art anywhere in the world. Having experienced the slow pace of collection-based research while working on the Image Recovery Project, Bill worked enthusiastically with former director Ruth Phillips on developing the idea of the Reciprocal Research Network to connect and facilitate searches across Northwest Coast collections in museums in North America, Brazil, and Europe. After Ruth left the Museum in 1997, it was Bill (with Jill Baird) who kept the idea of the Reciprocal Research Network and the larger Partnership of

Peoples Project alive for another two years, even though we had only raised what was then less than a third of the total capital cost. After 2004, we relaunched fundraising and were able to complete the project in 2010, resulting in the museum's considerable increase in size, in part thanks to Bill's unwavering commitment and support.

I want to end this sad note with a recollection of mutual generosity, a miracle really that, in Bill's retirement – in his supposedly more relaxed life that he had dreamed of dedicating to his family and to his painting – he helped bring a multi-million-dollar gift to the museum. Shortly after I arrived at MOA, Bill had spoken to me about a mysterious Montreal collector, strongly moved by Northwest Coast art, who often telephoned him to ask his opinion about specific works. Both spoke very directly, and I suspect neither willingly tolerated fools, so with their shared interest they seemed to get along very well. I remember how excited and nervous Bill was when, later, perhaps around 2013, she asked him to deliver her a work she had recently purchased. Their meeting lasted but minutes, but their mutual respect seemed only to increase, and Bill remarked to me more than once about her good judgment and the interesting pieces in her collection. "Ah!" he once said after seeing a work he had admired twenty years back, "that's where it went." Elspeth McConnell was part of Bill's community, exchanging knowledge and sharing the enjoyment of the exquisite pieces she was able to collect. That relationship, borne only out of shared interests, bore utterly unexpected results: the gift of the most important collection of Northwest Coast art that MOA has received in the past half century; a gift borne of friendship and generosity that reveals both Bill's and Elspeth's sincerity, their integrity and resolve to give back to First Nations communities and Canadians more generally.

Bill resolutely avoided the limelight, but, I expect, he was more of a leading actor than he ever intended or would ever have recognized himself to be. Since David Jensen told me a little about his early days, I now like to imagine Bill when he was young, working on sound and light shows for rock and roll bands, before he discovered museums. Somehow, it softens a little the feeling of loss. All his life, Bill gently, selflessly, and sincerely brought fortuitous circumstances, conditions, and possibilities together to please all parties and bring about miracles and revelations. At work, but also I suspect for rock and roll and, I'm sure, for his family, of whom he always spoke so tenderly, he gave himself – totally. MOA has lost one of the most distinguished curators it has had in its history, and, for many of us, we have lost a dear friend.

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- The Transforming Image*. Co-curated with Karen Duffek. Museum of Anthropology, 1992 to 1993.
- Doug Cranmer’s Paintings*. Museum of Anthropology, 1994.
- Through My Eyes: Northwest Coast Artifacts through the Eyes of Contemporary First Nations People*. Vancouver Museum, 1998.
- Attributed to Edenshaw: Identifying the Hand of the Artist*. Co-curated with Karen Duffek. Museum of Anthropology, 1998 to 2001.
- Three Case Studies: The Richardson Collection; The Stroke of the Paddle, the Stroke of the Brush; and Wood to Bronze, Old to New*. Co-curated with Karen Duffek. Museum of Anthropology, 1999 – 2000.
- Transforming Image: Tsimshian House Boards. Component of co-curated exhibition Gathering Strength: New Generations in Northwest Coast Art*. Museum of Anthropology, February 2000 – 2004.
- Haisla, Haida, Tsimshian, Gitksan, and Nisga’a displays, Multiversity Galleries. Developed with community consultations. Museum of Anthropology, January 2010–ongoing.
- Signed without Signature: Works by Charles and Isabella Edenshaw*. Co-curated with Karen Duffek. Museum of Anthropology, 26 November 2010–30 September 2011.
- The Friedman Collection of Bill Reid Art*. Co-curated with Karen Duffek. Museum of Anthropology, unveiled 5 March 2012 (permanent exhibition in Bill Reid Rotunda).
- Speaking to Memory: Images and Voices from St. Michael’s Indian Residential School*. Exhibition co-organized with U’mista Cultural Centre and presented at MOA, 18 September 2013–2 March 2014, followed by presentation at the U’mista Cultural Centre, May 2014–present.
- In a Different Light: Reflecting on Northwest Coast Art*. Co-curated with Karen Duffek and Jordan Wilson. Museum of Anthropology, 22 June 2017–ongoing.