

# REGIONAL SURVEYS OF NORTHWEST COAST NATIVE ART

## *A Review Essay*

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### *Art of the Northwest Coast* Aldona Jonaitis

Vancouver/Seattle: Douglas and McIntyre/University of Washington Press, 2006. 322 pp. 63 black-and-white illus., 89 colour illus., 2 maps. \$29.95 paper.

THE ARTS OF THE First Nations of the Northwest Coast are one of the great aesthetic traditions of world culture. Since the late nineteenth century, they have accordingly attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. The recent publication of *Art of the Northwest Coast*, a contemporary summary of the subject, offers us an excellent occasion to review that scholarly tradition, its history, and its current state.

The author of this volume, Aldona Jonaitis, is well known in the field. Trained as an art historian at Columbia University, she is the author of works on Tlingit art (1986), the Northwest Coast collection at the American Museum of Natural History (1988), the art of the Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch (1991), and Franz Boas's writings on primitive art (1995). She currently serves as director of the University of Alaska Museum of the North and professor of anthropology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

There are many ways to organize a review of Northwest Coast Native art; this volume is very much an art *history*. After an acknowledgment and introduction come nine chronological

chapters: creating a great art tradition (on the prehistoric roots of the art), art at the time of contact, nineteenth-century southern coast art, nineteenth-century central region art, nineteenth-century northern coast art, settlement and its consequences, public awareness of Northwest Coast art, persistence of artistic traditions (1900–60), and identity and sovereignty (1960–today), followed by notes, a bibliographical essay, and an index.

Unlike many previous reviews, Jonaitis adopts an expansive regional and artifactual purview. Following the Smithsonian Institution's *Handbook of North American Indians* (Suttles 1990), she takes a broad definition of the geographic scope of the Northwest Coast: ranging from the Tlingit in Alaska, along the coast of British Columbia, down through Puget Sound and the Olympic Peninsula, to the southern coast of Oregon. For natural and historical reasons, much scholarship in Canada has avoided Alaska, but even in the United States, scholarly attention to the region's art has generally not included the Native peoples of the

Washington and Oregon coasts. This was due mainly to the common belief that their art was not of the same high aesthetic standards as was that of their more northerly neighbors.

Jonaitis also considers quite an inclusive range of object types. In addition to the painted wood carvings so prized by museums and collectors, she examines monumental media such as architecture and canoes as well as various women's arts such as basketry and textiles. She even briefly mentions tattoos and other forms of body art. And by extending her history to the present, she is able to deal with new media such as glass, couture fashion, photography, and mixed media.

Her three chapters devoted to the nineteenth century reflect both the amount of such material available and public interest in the period. Even as it witnessed substantial stylistic change, this period came to be regarded as the "classic" phase of Northwest Coast art (see Brown 1998; Jacknis 2002). Unlike some earlier reviews, but in keeping with contemporary trends in scholarship, Jonaitis very much relates Native arts to shifting colonial and national contexts, especially of the collection, study, and appreciation of the arts in the dominant society (seen most particularly in her chapter on the "public awareness of Northwest Coast art").

Jonaitis's basic content is sound and well chosen. While it presumes no previous knowledge, it is not simplistic. On the other hand, it is an overview and, thus, cannot be particularly detailed on any given issue. Jonaitis's writing style is clear and straightforward, avoiding professional jargon and theoretical constructions. Although the two maps are somewhat schematic, they effectively delineate tribal territories and the principal villages and towns

mentioned in the text. In addition to the more straightforward "notes," which cite references and other points of discussion, the author includes an extremely useful "bibliographical essay." Arranged roughly according to the chapter categories of the main text, it serves as a kind of annotated bibliography to major works on various subjects.

Most of the predominantly colour illustrations are excellent, generally filling about half a page, along with extended captions. While there are some unusual or little known pieces, most seem to have been published before in respective collection reviews, suggesting that these images were readily available for reproduction. The design and production are attractive; while the volume is substantial, it is not too large to hold comfortably in the hand. Clearly, *Art of the Northwest Coast* is intended for a general, non-specialized, though educated, audience.

As noted, Aldona Jonaitis's book is the latest in a long line of works, spanning more than a century, that has attempted to present a general review of Northwest Coast art.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, the subject has been differently construed. What is perhaps surprising is how conservative the scholarly tradition has been.

The founder of Northwest Coast art studies was the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas. His 1897 publication on the decorative art of the region was the first thorough review of the subject, a revised version of which was included in his more widely distributed 1927 book *Primitive Art*. Although he also made important studies of the art in a ceremonial context (1897b), in this work Boas took

<sup>1</sup> Of course, this essay can discuss only some highlights of this vast literature.

a primarily formal approach. The next book-length overview, by artist Robert B. Inverarity (1950), was primarily a pictorial assemblage of photographs. An expression of the newly developed aesthetic appreciation by artists and art curators, this book followed an important 1941 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art and the "primitivist" appropriation of the region's art by Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist painters.

While Boas was a major influence on the field, he seems to have had a somewhat retarding effect. Few of his students went on to study the region's art, perhaps out of the belief that he had covered it so thoroughly. One who did was Erna Gunther, longtime professor at the University of Washington, Seattle. She supplemented his formal focus with a functional and social orientation. The most prolific author of regional overviews of the art during the 1950s and 1960s, Gunther wrote many relatively brief exhibition catalogues. A more substantial overview was her 1966 book on the Rasmussen collection at the Portland Art Museum. Although ostensibly a guide to a specific collection, it was in fact an excellent general survey of the art, considered according to function (e.g., daily occupations, dress, social ceremony, secret societies, and winter dances).

A fundamental shift in the creation of the art – and, consequently, of its perception – occurred around 1967 (see Jacknis 2002). One influential symbolic moment was the Arts of the Raven exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, curated by Wilson Duff, curator at the BC Provincial Museum (and later UBC), Haida artist Bill Reid, and artist and teacher Bill Holm (Duff, Holm, and Reid 1967). While this exhibit was widely acknowledged as having finally made the case for

the appreciation of Northwest Coast objects as fine art, perhaps even more significantly it also called attention to new creations, in the work of Bill Reid and Kwakwaka'wakw artists Tony Hunt and Douglas Cranmer, all of whom were included in the exhibit. Bill Holm, although trained in art practice, was mentored by Erna Gunther. He went on to become the most important scholar of Northwest Coast art, eclipsing even Boas in his attention to the subject (e.g., 1965, 1972, 1983a, 1987, 1990). Building on his predecessor's insights, Holm is noted for his formal analysis of northern graphic style.

Where most of these scholars, including the early Holm, were concerned with establishing basic regional styles and exploring general artifactual uses, later writings have sought to reconstruct stylistic change and development (see Jacknis 2002). Using archival sources, Gunther reviewed the first European accounts and collections of Northwestern peoples (1972). Other scholars began to consider the so-called "arts of acculturation" such as silk screen prints (Hall, Blackman, and Rickard 1981), argillite carving (Macnair and Hoover 1984), and button blankets (Jensen and Sargent 1986). For the first time in Northwest Coast studies, Bill Holm, in his study of Kwakwaka'wakw carver Willie Seaweed (1983b), applied the common methods of Western art history to trace the development of an artist's career.

This shift – the most substantial and consequential in the entire history of Northwest Coast art studies – can be seen in one of the next major regional surveys. *The Legacy* (Macnair, Hoover, and Neary 1980) was also an influential exhibition catalogue.<sup>2</sup> In its

<sup>2</sup> The Legacy exhibit had a lengthy history of versions and revision. Opened in 1971,

first chapters, Peter Macnair – curator for many years at the British Columbia Provincial (now the Royal British Columbia) Museum – reviewed the region’s graphic and plastic tribal styles, based on Holm, but these were followed, for the first time, by a consideration of aesthetic change from the time of contact to the present. Holm’s successor at the University of Washington, his student Robin Wright, has focused her writing on more particular traditions and topics.

It was another Holm student, Steven Brown – then working as curator at the Seattle Art Museum – who reviewed in book-form all of the region’s art in an art historical perspective (1998).<sup>3</sup> Three years before, Brown had edited a catalogue of the Hauberg collection in the Seattle Art Museum (1995). Like the Gunther catalogue in many ways, it treated the collection more from an art historical perspective, with the objects arranged by tribe and object type, than from a functional one. What was most significant about the book, however, was its inclusion of a Native voice. Relying upon Native consultants for both essays as well as for information,<sup>4</sup> Brown strove to put these objects into specific contexts relating to clan, personal ownership, and privilege.

In addition to these prime examples of scholarship, the literature includes several more popular reviews of the region’s art (Stewart 1979; Shearer 2000). With somewhat similar titles (i.e., “looking at” and “understanding”

Northwest Coast art), both these books are organized as timeless guides to the formal styles of the art and its system of crest representations: essentially, they offer Bill Holm’s revision of Boas’s overview. One can only conclude that their authors felt that beginning collectors and students needed basic identifications – in the fashion of birder field guides – more than a sense of historical development.

The organization and structure of these various general surveys tells us much about their disciplinary and theoretical approach to Northwest Coast art. Interestingly, even though Bill Holm was trained in art practice rather than in anthropology, and has certainly written specific formal analyses, in most of his several regional overviews he has tended to stress the functional. This was probably an inheritance from his mentor Erna Gunther. By 1990, however, in his summary of “Art” for the Northwest Coast volume of the *Handbook of North American Indians*, he adopted a scope and scheme more in keeping with contemporary approaches – and similar to the one taken by Jonaitis – prehistory, the historic period, tools, cultural provinces (with discussions for the northern, central, and southern regions), extra-areal influences, two-dimensional art, sculpture, basketry, textiles, and the twentieth century. Aldona Jonaitis very much adopts an art historical approach, which is considered as both aesthetic form and as chronological sequence. As she notes, the field of Northwest Coast art studies has developed through an interplay between anthropology, which initially controlled the discourse, and art history, which has now redefined the situation for all, including anthropologists. Jonaitis herself moves between the disciplines. While trained as an art historian, she has been influenced by

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it was revised substantially in 1980, which coincided with the catalogue publication.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to their regional overviews, Macnair, Wright, and Brown have addressed more specialized topics.

<sup>4</sup> Nora Dauenhauer (Tlingit), Robert Davidson (Haida), Gloria Cranmer Webster (Kwakwaka’wakw), and Joe David (Nuu-chah-nulth).

anthropological mentors such as Wayne Suttles, to whom *Art of the Northwest Coast* is dedicated. In this, she follows in the interdisciplinary footsteps of Bill Holm.

Like many contemporary scholars (see Jacknis 2002), Jonaitis critiques previous anthropological scholarship, such as the Boasian salvage paradigm and its refusal to take account of change and intercultural influences. Specifically, she rejects former beliefs in the decline of Northwest Coast art. When confronted in the 1960s with continuing aesthetic creativity, informed opinion proclaimed a “renaissance.” Instead of what Jonaitis calls the “birth–death–rebirth scenario” (xvii), she maintains that there were a variety of continuing – but transforming – artistic traditions.

In her final chapter, Jonaitis reflects the most recent scholarly trends and concerns. Although this particular work does not literally express a Native voice, some of her previous work does so (e.g., Jonaitis 1991). As examples of Native assertions of national and personal autonomy, Jonaitis discusses efforts of repatriation and curatorial collaboration. Somewhat reflexively, she also cites a number of objects that she was not able to illustrate because she was not able to obtain permission from the owners and/or descendants (294).

Regional reviews such as *Art of the Northwest Coast* have been a major and important genre of scholarship, although they are perhaps in the minority. Naturally, as scholarship grows and expands, scholars are inclined to address more specialized studies of object types.<sup>5</sup> As a general review, *Art*

*of the Northwest Coast* most resembles the last three surveys by Macnair et al. (1980), Holm (1990), and Brown (1998), respectively. Like them, it is structured primarily by chronology and secondarily by region. It differs from them in at least three ways: Jonaitis’s interest in gender and women’s arts, her consideration of the impact of the changing Western evaluations of the art, and her summary of the recent developments in the postmodern art world. With the exception perhaps of Brown’s, Jonaitis’s book is longer and more lavishly illustrated than is any previous survey.

In format and approach, *Art of the Northwest Coast* most resembles several recent popular reviews of world art. For Native American art, volumes have been published in the World of Art series by Phaidon and then by Thames and Hudson (Feest 1980; Penney 2004) as well as in the Oxford Art History series (Berlo and Phillips 1998). When viewed from the perspective of world art – as reflected in art museum galleries and in survey series – Native America is something of a minority subject and, thus, is often considered from a continental perspective. In fact, among the arts of so-called tribal (formerly, “primitive”) peoples, Native America ranks behind Africa, although it comes before Oceania. On the other hand, when compared to other art styles in Native America, the Northwest Coast

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1996); Chilkat weaving (Samuel 1982); button blankets (Jensen and Sargent 1986); basketry (Busby 2003); argillite sculpture (Macnair and Hoover 1984); silk screen prints (Hall, Blackman, and Rickard 1981); tribal summaries (Hawthorn 1979 [on Kwakwaka’wakw], MacDonald 1996 [on Haida], Jonaitis 1986 [on Tlingit art]), and the works of individual artists (Holm 1983b [on Willie Seaweed], Shadbolt 1998 [on Bill Reid]).

<sup>5</sup> For the Northwest Coast, these have included historical change (Brown 1998); collecting (Cole 1985); painting (McLennan and Duffek 2000); totem poles (Halpin 1981); masks (Macnair, Joseph, and Grenville 1998); shamanic art (Wardwell

is one of the major subjects of collector and scholarly interest, second only to the Southwest. Certainly, it is the most studied Native art region in Canada, eclipsing attention to the styles of British Columbia's Interior or Plateau peoples.

As is common to the survey genre, there is little in this book that has not been previously published. Yet originality is not and should not be the point of such summarizing and synthetic exercises. *Art of the Northwest Coast* will be very useful to the broad readership of *BC Studies*. Beyond its aesthetic subject, it also speaks to issues of cultural representation, treaty claims, and Native autonomy. This new volume would be an excellent place to start (or to catch up) for both beginners and experts.

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