

## A Review Article

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Some Implications of Connoisseurship for Northwest Coast Art: Review of *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics*. Bill Holm and Bill Reid. Institute for the Arts, Rice University, Houston. Clothbound edition distributed in Canada by J. J. Douglas, Ltd., Vancouver, and by the University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 263 pp., illus. (Originally published in 1975 under the title *Form and Freedom: A Dialogue on Northwest Indian Art*.) \$22.50.

This is a book by and for connoisseurs, and one that is also of importance to anyone who is interested in the art and material culture of the Northwest Coast. It is, first of all, the very *fact* of connoisseurship that compels our attention, for it is intimately associated with forces that are taking the objects of our concern out of both native hands and the public sector (museums) and into a rarefied world to which we do not have the price of admission. Second, the proficiency of that connoisseurship — the critical appreciation and judgment of works of art — has become so keen and penetrating as to merit not only our attention but our study. Connoisseurs do not know objects as members of categories or as types, as anthropologists tend to know them; they know them as individuals, as unique pieces with unique properties and histories. They know them intimately, lovingly, and well — well enough to see features and qualities the rest of us have not even learned to look for. Out of their experiential knowledge of form come insights and understandings that are missed by more “objective” and systematic methodologies. Art objects contain information about themselves that they only reveal to aesthetic perception — information that is, perhaps by intention, perhaps by necessity, hidden to ordinary, rational perception. Probably the greatest problem in anthropology is whether it can develop methodologies that transcend the received rationality of its practitioners. Perhaps the connoisseurs, those conversant with the hidden language of art, can point out some directions.

The book under review is in the unusual, perhaps unique, form of a conversation between Bill Holm and Bill Reid, recorded as they talked about 102 objects from the Jean and Dominique de Menil family collection, on loan to Rice University and currently a travelling exhibition. The book functions both alone and as a catalogue to the exhibition. Bill Holm is the very knowledgeable Curator of Northwest Coast Indian Art at the Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum and Associate Professor at the University of Washington.<sup>1</sup> Bill Reid is the gifted artist of Haida descent who is widely acknowledged to be the greatest living master of the Northwest Coast artistic tradition.<sup>2</sup> The book contains an introduction by Edmund Carpenter, anthropologist and advisor to the de Menils.

The conversation does not appear to have been much edited; it flows naturally, unencumbered by scholarly terminology (with a few exceptions) and apparatus. There has been some rearranging, in that the discussions of particular objects are not always presented as they occurred in the original conversation and reference is made to objects the reader has not yet seen, although each one is numbered and can be easily located. I found only one error in the arrangement of the book which distorts the sense of the conversation. On page 36 Holm is talking about the face on the tail of the raven of one pipe (Number 1), and the information is presented in the context of his comments about another pipe (Number 2). The photography is superb and every piece is illustrated at least once and, when needed, in up to five photographs to show the details being discussed. The 102 objects in the collection are pipes (6), daggers and a dagger hilt (5), spindle whorl (1), spear thrower (1), club (1), canoe model (1), ladles (6), spoons (4), bowls (14), boxes and chests (9), baskets (8), chilkat blankets (2), shirts and leggings (3), comb (1), hat (1), headdresses (3), frontlets (7), slave killer (1), rattles (10), masks (14), screen (1), a carved head (1), a carved costume piece (1), and a problematic tool or comb (1). Most of the pieces are Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian; there are only a few pieces from the other major groups on the Northwest Coast.

Previous ownership is indicated for only three pieces, yet Carpenter says in his introduction that "at least eleven museums once owned pieces

<sup>1</sup> Holm is the author of *Northwest Coast Art: An Analysis of Form* (1965), which is one of the few classics of scholarly writing about so-called primitive art.

<sup>2</sup> An earlier collaboration between Reid, as author, and Adelaide de Menil, as photographer, resulted in the beautiful and evocative book on Northwest Coast Coast totem poles, *Out of the Silence* (1971).

in this exhibition" (p. 17), including "at least eighteen pieces" from the Museum of the American Indian (p. 15). Although he says indignantly that that museum "has declined to make available *for this publication* either the catalog entries or field notes on these specimens" (Notes, p. 257, emphasis added), such information is included in the publication for only *one* piece, a chest formerly owned by the Thomas Burke Museum. Two pieces believed to have been collected by Captain Cook are possibly from the defunct Leverian Museum in London, but we are not told the names of the other eight museums, nor given the former catalogue numbers and names of the collectors of the pieces. It may be, indeed it is likely, that these were undocumented pieces, for which reason they were possibly deaccessioned (Carpenter says that "most came out at a time when curators traded freely, sometimes not even recording transactions".) (p. 17). But to indict the Museum of the American Indian for refusing to share its data and to not even name eight other museums seems curious. The former's unfortunate deaccessioning practices have become well known. Those of us in the business know that other museums also deaccession to the private market as, indeed, this collection bears witness. By not indicating which museums the pieces in the collection came out of, and when, those responsible for the publication can themselves be accused of withholding important information. I will return to other matters of the market further on.

The dialogue between Holm and Reid is a most informative and entertaining conversation between two likeable, knowledgeable and articulate friends who are doing something they obviously enjoy — looking at good and at times outstanding pieces of Northwest Coast art. Others of us have been privileged to hear shorter of these conversations at museum and gallery openings and in the homes of mutual friends, but this book now makes this pleasant experience widely available. At the end of it, the reader feels he or she not only knows the pieces discussed, but the two men who have been discussing them. Although they are usually in agreement as to the overall aesthetic quality of a piece, they respond differently to them. Holm calls their two perspectives "intellectual" (himself) and "intuitive" (Reid) (p. 195). While I do not quite agree with his choice of words, the two men do complement each other well. By following these conversations and studying the photographs which show the pieces and features being discussed, those to whom the enthusiasms of experts seem baffling at times can actually participate in their enthusiasms in conjunction with the pieces which inspire them. It is the veritable phenomenology

of connoisseurship. But this is only what might be called the surface level of what is going on in this book. We can find a lot more.

In his introduction, Carpenter is rather scornful of the anthropologists who curated and studied pieces such as these, usually in museums of natural history down the hall from dinosaur bones and beetles and other "natural" phenomena, and who did not know (or care) that they were works of fine art. To the traditional museum anthropologist, objects from other cultures are simply "specimens" or sources of data to be used in scientific and historical research. Such specimens are not assigned differential value on the basis of aesthetic considerations, but on the basis of the utility of the documentation associated with them. Of course, until recently neither the public nor collectors and dealers interested in other kinds of exotic art saw objects from the Northwest Coast as other than ethnographic curios, either.<sup>3</sup> Their time as "fine art" had not yet come, although it was prophesized by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1943: "Certainly the time is not far distant when the collections of the Northwest Coast will move from anthropological museums to take their place in art museums among the arts of Egypt, Persia, and the Middle Ages. For this art is not unequal to those great ones" (Lévi-Strauss, 1943:175). Twenty-four years later, Bill Holm, Bill Reid and the late Wilson Duff organized the "Arts of the Raven" exhibition of Northwest Coast art for the Vancouver Art Gallery, which Duff (1975:13) wrote was "the threshold over which Northwest Coast art had come into full recognition as 'fine art' as well as 'primitive art'." What happens when *ethnographic specimens* cross that threshold to become *fine art*? Perhaps more significantly, what can this tell us about the category "art"?

Art is a Western concept. Although other cultures have aesthetic concepts and make aesthetic judgments, it seems that we alone have created a class of art objects kept separate from other objects made and used by man. This is the class into which we have now put objects made by the Indians of the Northwest Coast. While philosophers and art historians have been quarrelling over definitions of art for hundreds of years, and doubtless will continue for hundreds more, anthropologist Jacques Maquet (1971) has proposed a simple definition of art as a category which is at least workable. The great virtue of Maquet's definition is that it is based upon observable behaviour:

<sup>3</sup> A fascinating exception described for the first time by Carpenter (pp. 9-11) was the surrealists who were refugees in New York in the 1940s and began to collect Northwest Coast pieces as art objects.

If we ask anybody where art objects are to be found, we are directed to fine arts museums and to art galleries. The material pieces exhibited in museums, and bought and sold in galleries, are defined as art objects. Before getting to the art dealers' shops, the objects are to be seen in the artists' studios where they are made, and after leaving the commercial galleries they are either in museums or on the premises of the buyer, which may be the private home of an art lover, the executive office of a corporation, or the hall of a public building. *Art objects circulate along a special commercial network; they are commodities bought and sold on an organized market. In our society a first criterion, crude but fairly accurate, of art is access to the art market. Objects belonging to that network are art objects* (Maquet, 1971:3-4, emphasis added).

Objects come into that art network in two ways: either (1) by being made for that purpose, which Maquet calls art objects "by destination", or (2) by being brought into it after having been made for other purposes, which he calls art objects "by metamorphosis". Objects which are metamorphosed into art are usually those distant from us in space (from other cultures) or time (from the past). However, objects from other current systems in our own culture are also subject to metamorphosis, as in junk sculpture, found art, and Maquet's favourite example, the Olivetti typewriter in the Museum of Modern Art. When used by Maquet in his study the typewriter is not art; when exhibited by the museum it is. In other words, "it is the framework that creates the art object" (*ibid.*:5).

Who decides which objects are to be metamorphosed? Maquet's answer to this question is a cynical one, but it well deserves our consideration:

... the precise reasons why certain pieces make the grade and actually reach the art network are to be found in the clever manipulation of the art market. The discovery of primitive art has resulted in a few extremely lucrative enterprises and in many reasonably profitable businesses. In 'the field' artifacts were — and to some extent, still are — cheap to buy and, when metamorphosed into works of art, can be sold in New York, Paris, and London at very handsome prices (*ibid.*:5).

As well as dealers, of course, those who participate in metamorphosing objects from other cultures into art also include art critics, museum curators and other connoisseurs in tandem with their clientele, the elite who are looking for new prestige symbols. The relationship between connoisseurship and the art market is obvious, and based, at least in part, on the fact that the elite themselves seldom speak the "language of art", and need the connoisseur to interpret it for them (i.e., tell them what to buy and why). It must be said, in fairness, that the participation of the con-

noisseur in the market is often a source of moral discomfiture to him or her. I will discuss this below as a double bind.

Carpenter's introduction to *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast* is an anecdotal history of collecting objects from the Northwest Coast. I suggest that it be read from the foregoing perspective of their metamorphosis into art objects. Consider, for example, the following statements: "When I tell collectors that I once hesitated to pay \$3.00 for a fine mask, since this was double the highest price I had previously paid, they express envy and regret at not having enjoyed such opportunities. But everyone enjoyed such opportunities. The point is, few cared." (p. 17). The point is, the objects had not yet been metamorphosed into art which is (1) when most people begin to care, and (2) when prices go up. Excellent nineteenth century masks from the northern Northwest Coast now sell for many tens of thousands of dollars on the art market. One cannot help but "care" about such things.

I said at the beginning of this review that the advent of connoisseurship on the Northwest Coast compels our attention, and I have attempted, following Maquet, to explain why. It is a matter that deserves much more attention than it has received. I have not meant to embarrass Holm, Reid, Carpenter, or any of the rest of us who participate in the art market as curators or connoisseurs. Although we undoubtedly contribute to the inflation of that market, on the one hand, we have professional obligations to study, exhibit and write about Northwest Coast art, on the other. To hide our heads in the sand and continue to speak only of "specimens" and "material culture", to ignore the metamorphosis which is happening around us, would be futile and probably pompous. Anthropologists, curators and connoisseurs are indeed in a double bind vis-à-vis primitive art — damned if we do and damned if we don't. There may be a way out of it, but we will not find it until we collectively recognize our situation and address ourselves to it.

It is far more pleasant to discuss other implications of this book, those pertaining to the aesthetic perceptions of Holm and Reid. Had either of them sat down to *write* the book, it would have been entirely different. Holm is a scholar, Reid a poet — both of them careful and precise writers. Conversation is an entirely different medium, and the reader who enjoys the informality of the conversation might miss some of its more significant contributions. I shall attempt to draw some of these out of the conversation under the headings of *Rules, Courage, Representations* and *Art and Society*.

### *Rules*

In 1965 Bill Holm published *Northwest Coast Art: An Analysis of Form*, in which he explicated the basic rules underlying the design system — the elements, their composition, and colours — of northern Northwest Coast two-dimensional art. In so doing, he created a vocabulary which has been widely adopted by anthropologists, critics, carvers and the informed public. The basic element of the design he called the *formline*, the bold swelling and tapering curvilinear lines which outline the major design shapes and areas. The major design shapes are *ovoids* (a word already in use) and *U's*. The vocabulary includes modifications of these, as in primary, secondary and tertiary formlines, split U's, and so on. There is an "Explanatory Design Diagram" at the end of the book (p. 262) in which these shapes are named and illustrated. The reader unfamiliar with the vocabulary will need to study this diagram before reading the book, since aesthetic comments and judgments are made using the vocabulary and in reference to the rules governing the elements so named.

These rules are expressions of the "logic" of the art, a word also used frequently by Holm and Reid in the book. It is a tight logic, and the art can initially seem compulsively rule-bound. When one first "sees" the logic it appears inexorable and constraining to the point of rigidity. But it is a serious mistake to think this is all there is to it. Holm says of a painted wooden bowl:

In a way, this bowl is interesting because it doesn't achieve perfection. The fellow used exactly the same system the next man used. He followed all the rules. Nothing here is out of line, in any way, as far as the system is concerned. That's interesting because after people realize that Northern flat design follows rules, they sometimes wonder if it's really art. But the rules are only part of the story. Here somebody proved that. A piece that obeys all the rules doesn't automatically wind up as a great thing. It takes something beyond that (p. 123).

Holm and Reid identify a number of pieces for us in which the rule system is displayed. Reid says of a sheep horn ladle:

One nice thing about this design is that it adheres so strictly to the conventions. It's a classic example of what you do if you apply all the rules. . . . He wasn't very adventurous, but he certainly knew what he was doing. It comes off very well (p. 82).

The newcomer to the art should study these pieces; they are by the "academicians" of the Northwest Coast. Until we appreciate their con-

ventionality, and they are thus the best from which to learn the rules, we cannot appreciate those who venture beyond convention.

### *Courage*

When Holm said in the quotation above that “it takes something beyond that”, he was talking about courage — the courage to take the rules to their breaking point. As Holm and Reid identify the pieces that do this, and share with us the aesthetic thrills they inspire, we are in the most exciting parts of the book. Others have written about the rules, but this is the first time in print that connoisseurs take us beyond them. And they do it in such a way that we have no trouble following them. This is where anthropological methodologies, which are applied precisely for finding the rules, cannot take us. Reid says:

That’s what it’s all about. That’s why so much contemporary revival doesn’t work. You have to push a carving to the ultimate, beyond what seems immediately logical. You work it down to a certain level, where you think it ought to be, only to find that the real object you are looking for is still further underneath. And you keep pushing and pushing until you finally arrive at that point where it all comes together, where one area relates perfectly to another. And that point, somehow or other, determines itself. It’s that crazy mystique of the object inside the wood, which of course is madness, yet it’s never been explained in a better way (p. 36).

Holm:

... what constantly amazes me about these pieces is the *balance* between the courage to go beyond logic and, at the same time, to hang in there with tradition. Sure, anybody could go beyond it — there’s lots of wild things one could do (p. 37).

To go beyond the logical to the ultimate and, in so doing, to discover new limits, new logic. To be thus logical and wild at the same time. This is the art of the masterpiece as we learn to see it from this book. It is to find that cutting edge, of a breathtaking certainty, in a piece that could not possibly exist until we see it. As Reid says, “it looks perfectly natural, as if that were the right thing to do. It isn’t that he didn’t know what he was doing — he merely [*sic!*] pushed it to its ultimate limits” (p. 86).

### *Representations*

The life forms in Northwest Coast art are highly stylized or distorted and difficult for the Western viewer to recognize. The first guide to the conventions by which life forms can be recognized was published in 1897



by Franz Boas. These are the now familiar rules that, for example, a beaver can be recognized by its cross-hatched tail, prominent incisors and chewing stick. The problem is, as we are increasingly finding out, that these rules do not always obtain, which is why Bill Holm says in the book: "I'm going to play the most dangerous game in Northwest Coast art — interpretation. No one has ever successfully done it. Early anthropologists tried and tried to get interpretations from the artists themselves, but got widely differing interpretations from everybody" (p. 108). Holm then engages, as he does throughout the book (although he says it is as a "speculative fling"), in the same exercise as Boas and the other early anthropologists. I wish he hadn't, for the reason he himself indicates: that when the artists themselves were asked, their interpretations differed. If the artists did not consistently follow or recognize the postulated rules, perhaps they are not there, or are not meant to be used as we use them.

The essence of Northwest Coast art and myth is transformation. Carpenter says it well:

When depicting . . . reality, Northwest Coast artists often showed two beings simultaneously occupying a single space by sharing various parts. Such visual puns did more than express complexity: they depicted transformation. Before one's eyes, Bear became Wolf, then Bear again. The image didn't change, of course. What changed was the observer's organization of its parts. But the effect was one of transformation. . . .

This single feature, above all others, proved to be the one most difficult for early anthropologists to understand. When told a carving represented a bear and later told it represented a whale, they assumed there must be an error (p. 9).

To pin such forms down, to *either* bear *or* whale, is to engage in typically Western *either/or* thinking, rather than transformative *both/and* thinking. Even when the figure is the most unambiguous beaver, according to the rules, with tail, teeth and chewing stick in proper places, it still has the arrangement of facial features and posture of a human. Is it then really a beaver?

This doesn't mean that we should not attend to the human/bird/mammal/frog/insect clues the figures contain, for these are what trigger the transformative gestalt in our perception. I think this is what Reid means when he says:

. . . Northwest Coast art can't exist without symbolism [images]. I don't think you can take the basic structural forms, without the animal or mythical forms, and create a viable design. People have tried, but it doesn't happen,

no matter how beautifully done. The focus is lost and I think focus is what it's all about, or at least a lot of it (p. 73).

What I am advocating is that we let ourselves surrender to the transformative gestalt, rather than attempt to determine the form in any rigid way. This would relieve us of the following kind of exercise (remember, these are the two greatest living authorities on these forms):

REID: What kind of beast do you think this is?

HOLM: I don't know. It looks like some kind of quadruped. Might be a sea lion. That would be my first choice. That would be as good a choice as I could make. All the parts are there.

REID: . . . you could interpret this as a spout hole and make the creature into a sea monster with whale characteristics.

HOLM: You could do that, but I would not.

REID: In any case, that's not the important thing (p. 64).

I rest my case.

Reid is not really talking about symbolism above, but about images or representations. A symbol is an image that points beyond itself to deeper meanings, meanings that cannot be directly expressed. Neither Holm nor Reid engage in symbolic interpretation in this book, nor do they do it elsewhere. Symbolic interpretation of Haida images was Wilson Duff's life's work. Before his untimely death in 1976, he was the third in the trio — Duff, Holm, Reid — that created Northwest Coast connoisseurship; it is unlikely that their aesthetic perceptions will be surpassed for a great many years. If the book under review is read in conjunction with Duff's *Images: Stone: B.C.* (1975), the dimension he might have supplied to the conversation can be appreciated. After reading Duff's book, I suggest turning to piece number 63 (p. 160) in the present book, which is the piece most directly amenable to the kind of symbolic interpretation he was doing. It shows a large female animal with an upside-down smiling little man in her mouth, both of them with explicit sexual characteristics (most unusual in Northwest Coast art). Duff believed that body images were sexual statements, although usually metaphoric rather than literal as in piece 63, and comprised equations in which the roles of "part" and "whole" were inverted (Duff, 1975:21). This piece must surely have fascinated him, as it will anyone who is receptive to his thought.

### *Art and Culture*

It may someday be possible to infer things about a culture from the art its carriers made and used. So far, we are pretty well restricted to moving

in the opposite direction, from culture to art. That is, we can postulate certain things about art on the basis of what we know about the culture which comprised its context. The goal of museum anthropology could be defined as developing the ability to move from object to culture. We have a few assumptions or hypotheses which point in this direction. Maquet, following Lévi-Strauss (in Charbonnier 1969), has formulated a general hypothesis which differentiates the art of small and homogeneous societies from that of large, diversified ones. In the former,

... the audience of the carvers and painters includes all members of the society. The network of "representational communication" is coextensive with the other societal networks, encompassing all the members of the society. ... Like the spoken language of such groups, their "aesthetic language" is particularized (it becomes different from neighboring similar languages), stable (it changes slowly, at the same rate as the rest of the culture), and closed (outsiders do not understand it). The style of representation tends toward formalization and schematization. In order to communicate messages effectively, apprentices look at effigies carved by their masters and not at the human beings the statues are supposed to represent. The style is conceptual, intellectual, very far from naturalism (Maquet, 1971:32).

Reid makes a number of suggestive comments relevant to this hypothesis about the Haida and their art. They are not of a testable nature, but they can stimulate us to reformulate them in ways that might be.

These objects weren't merely used at ceremonial affairs. They were treated as art objects, passed from hand to hand, admired, fondled, examined closely. Everyone was a critic and connoisseur. Everyone probably felt some direct relationship with the objects in his immediate family, and maybe even with those in the whole community. These were communities of connoisseurs (p. 97).

I'm looking at it now from the belly side — this little man is all tensed up like a coiled spring. Somehow, through this; the whole intricacy and precariousness (perhaps that's not the right word, but it comes to me all the time) the *precariousness* of the society is expressed. It was a society that had been highly structured over a long period and had developed to a point where all its parts had to fit together perfectly to function as it did. This comes out in the works of the great carvers (p. 35).

Holm:

It had to be that way for these things to happen this way (p. 36).

### *Conclusion*

There's more in the book, and one cannot help wishing that ideas, especially new ones, that are so casually introduced, almost thrown away,

were more systematically developed. Holm and Reid discuss the relationship between function and beauty, art and the sea; Holm presents some of his as yet unpublished ideas about skeuomorphism (the imitation of structural features from one kind of object in another) and negative formlines in Coast Salish art; and they both discuss features by which they distinguish the style of one Northwest Coast group from another. I've quoted extensively from the book, but perhaps not enough to give its special flavour, so let me conclude with another quotation from Reid; he is talking about "one of the great pieces of Northwest Coast art", a round rattle with carved faces on either side:

Yeah, [the carver] had a problem. He thought it through and obviously drew on all levels of his consciousness to bring this to fruition. He did it and it worked. He took it to the person who had commissioned it, and I suppose the joy of that whole creation eventually permeated the entire society; and now, if you want to get high-flown about it, it enhances the whole of human experience by its existence. It's the other side of the human coin from the obvious, the trite (p. 205).

Regardless of what such things do to the market, they need to be said.

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