

Native Art of the Northwest Coast: A History of Changing Ideas

Edited by Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Jennifer Kramer, and Ki-Ke-In

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This massive tome of over a thousand pages brings together a very diverse range of articles, with cited selections that span nearly 250 years. Consisting of an introduction and thirty chapters, it presents the work of twenty-eight contributors drawn from various fields, including Indigenous artists and scholars, as well as non-Indigenous anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, art historians, and others. It is a monumental effort, “years in the making” according to the book’s back cover, shepherded into print by the three editors: Charlotte Townsend-Gault (professor of art history at UBC), Jennifer Kramer (associate professor in anthropology and curator at UBC’s Museum of Anthropology), and Ki-ke-in (also known as Ron Hamilton, a Nuu-chah-nulth artist, poet, ritualist, and historian). These editors provide a thoughtful introduction, critiquing the idea of Northwest Coast art and setting up the dynamic that flows through the following pages.

The purpose of this volume, as the editors explain, is to “unsettle the conventions” that have shaped our understanding of Northwest Coast art. The book takes as its premise that our perceptions of Northwest Coast art have been constructed over time through written observations and analyses as much as the objects themselves. The shaping of these ideas has privileged some voices, particularly those of non-Indigenous academics. Thus, this book “responds to Aboriginal critiques of colonial knowledge formation” (p. 3) by bringing together a wide range of voices, experiences, and perceptions to show how the present body of knowledge has formed and to provide historical and cultural context for broader

understanding. This volume is far from the typical Northwest Coast art book with glossy images of impressive art objects; instead it questions the basic idea of Northwest Coast art and how that has developed, offering a wide range of often competing viewpoints. As such, the editors present a “work of critical historiography” (p. 2), allowing readers to evaluate the historical underpinnings of our present understandings of the art form.

The following chapters, including two each by Ki-ke-in and Townsend-Gault, and one by Kramer, are highly diverse. Most consist of a short essay by the chapter author, followed by selected excerpts from previously published (and in a few cases unpublished) sources. Brief introductions are provided for most excerpts, allowing the authors to contextualize each within the chapter theme. However, not all chapters contain excerpts from previous works: several Indigenous scholars (Daisy Sewid-Smith, Ki-ke-in, Gloria Cranmer Webster) provide short personal reflections or reminiscences, while Michael Nicol Yahgulanaas offers “a series of visual notes” in his characteristic “Haida manga” style (and thus fits with the editors’ earlier reminder that “knowledge does not necessarily reside with the printed word” [p. xxxvi]). Chapter lengths vary widely, from only a few pages to substantial treatments of a theme followed by numerous excerpts from other sources.

After the first few chapters, a chronological flow is evident. Andrew Martindale provides the only section specifically tied to archaeology. He addresses considerations of “meaning” in Northwest Coast art, using excerpts from many of the discipline’s early

practitioners in British Columbia to examine changing theory and perceptions. Ira Jacknis presents the observations of early non-Indigenous explorers and ethnographers to 1870, while Andrea Laforet discusses the written accounts and collecting practices of ethnographers from 1880 to 1930. Bruce Granville Miller examines shifting paradigms in the anthropology of art from 1870 to 1950. The papers that follow include such topics as Northwest Coast art and the surrealist movement (Marie Mauzé), missionary perspectives (John Barker), the role of the art in developing Canadian national identity (Leslie Dawn), and the art/craft distinction in the early 20th century (Scott Watson). Later chapters address such recent issues as the Northwest Coast art market (Karen Duffek), art and law (Douglas White), and museums and collaborations (Aldona Jonaitis, Martha Black). Townsend-Gault examines the political nature of Northwest Coast art “in the age of Delgamuukw,” noting that the art is “inseparable from rights-based claims over land and sovereignty” (p. 865). Also addressed are Aboriginal media production (Kristin Dowell) and Internet art (Dana Claxton), both recent developments that confound any neat categorization of “Northwest Coast art.” Some themes and excerpts in this diverse collection do not directly address Northwest Coast art at all, but are included to provide historical and/or cultural context.

Several themes run through multiple chapters. One of the most pervasive, addressed specifically in a chapter by Aaron Glass, but touched upon in many other places, involves the oft-invoked idea of a Northwest Coast art “renaissance.” This narrative, with its assumption of a long decline followed by a rebirth by the end of the 1960s, held considerable currency for some time but is heavily criticized today, largely for ignoring the considerable continuity in art production in many areas of the Northwest Coast. That narrative also placed undue emphasis on Haida artist Bill Reid’s monumental achievements, at the expense of the many artists who had continued their artistic output, often for traditional uses in In-

digenuous communities, through the presumed period of decline. Rather than a “rebirth” of ancient traditions, the so-called “renaissance” is better viewed as a shift of art production to external markets and new agendas, creating a context that allowed artists such as Reid to flourish. Glass’s chapter ends with a long and rather bitter poem by Ki-ke-in that sharply rebukes non-Indigenous academics who have created the frameworks in which we view Northwest Coast art, including the idea of a “renaissance.”

Many authors, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, challenge “academic authority” and question the role of outside “experts” in interpreting the art. In a chapter on formal analysis in Northwest Coast art history, Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse traces the history of that approach from Franz Boas to Bill Holm and beyond, noting that the attention to form has tended to downplay the object’s cultural context. In his voluminous descriptive works, Boas documented form and iconography in an attempt to find order and “read” Northwest Coast art. Such an approach is strongly criticized by Marjorie Halpin in an excerpt in Alice Marie Campbell’s chapter. In contrast to “the Boasian rule-based paradigm,” Halpin characterized Northwest Coast art as “ambiguous, imaginative, unstable, poetic, [and] endlessly variable” (p. 584). She charges Boas with attempting to impose a set of rules without understanding the relationship between crest art and the oral histories that gave such works meaning and calls into question any interpretations that are not based on the cultural context that led to the object’s creation. Bunn-Marcuse makes the related point that if an object was created to document family and territorial prerogatives, then placing it in the category of “art” could be seen as “an act of suppression” (p. 410). In a chapter titled “Art for Whose Sake?” Ki-ke-in attacks Holm and others for analyzing Nuu-chah-nulth objects outside their context of use, noting that formal analysis serves to detach valued objects from their community of origin and ignores the rich associated knowledge still held in that community.

Several papers address the important role

played by Indigenous community members who provided insider knowledge on the context in which the art was created. Judith Berman discusses such “Aboriginal cultural experts” (p. 166) in a chapter that focuses on Louis Shotridge, a Tlingit man who worked as a museum collector and ethnographer. She places Shotridge in a category with George Hunt, who worked closely with Boas to compile extensive texts on the Kwakwaka’wakw, and William Beynon, who collected detailed information on his Tsimshian heritage for anthropologist Marius Barbeau. Others, of course, could have been included; Alex Thomas, for example, played much the same role in Edward Sapir’s study of the Nuuchahnulth, as Hunt had earlier played with Boas. In another chapter, Marianne Nicholson, a Kwakwaka’wakw artist and anthropologist, examines the long history of what she calls “auto-ethnography” among her people, presenting excerpts from individuals such as Hunt, Charles Nowell, and James Sewid. Nicholson and Jonaitis separately criticize Boas’ focus on reconstructing an earlier “traditional” culture rather than documenting Kwakwaka’wakw life as he and Hunt observed it. In contrast, as Nicholson notes, Nowell and Sewid directly addressed recent changes wrought by colonialism when telling their life stories to anthropologists.

A book of this size and diversity, by its very nature, is uneven in its coverage. Not all chapter themes or cited excerpts are of equal strength or value. The sheer volume of such material gives the impression of a somewhat “bloated” compendium. Doris Shadbolt’s catalogue foreword for the important *Arts of the Raven* exhibition, given in Judith Ostrowitz’s chapter, includes her original acknowl-

edgements, which are surely unnecessary here. Also in that chapter, a rather lengthy dialogue between Bill Reid and Bill Holm features several small items that are not illustrated, nor are most objects discussed in an excerpt from *The Legacy* catalogue. Figure references are given for the original publications, although it seems to defeat the purpose of this massive compilation if the reader is forced to other sources. Also regarding illustrations, the few colour images placed together in a short section all also occur in black and white elsewhere in the volume, which seems unnecessary duplication (or a missed opportunity to feature additional images).

In summary, this important book compiles in one place historical writings and contemporary thoughts from a wide range of time periods, disciplines, and perspectives that have shaped how we perceive Northwest Coast art. This collection broadens understandings and forces critical re-evaluation of established views. The editors have ensured that diverse voices are presented, and that Indigenous perspectives are incorporated and valued. The Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences awarded this book the 2015 Canada Prize in the Humanities. However, it should be noted that it is addressed primarily at an academic audience. The sheer size, as well as the lengthy theoretical examinations and dense academic phrasing that characterize some articles, make it impenetrable for any casual reader. For those willing to make the effort, however, and as a handy reference guide to the history of ideas related to Northwest Coast art, this book merits careful attention.