

Faces in the Forest: First Nations Art Created on Living Trees

by Michael D. Blackstock,
McGill-Queen's University Press,
Montreal and Kingston. 240 pp.



Forestry, forest art and First Nations oral history and knowledge are brought together in this book as Blackstock takes the reader on a journey through the forests of Northern British Columbia and the Yukon Territory. Through his investigation of tree art, Blackstock takes the reader through each step of what would become his master's research and along the way he shares important oral teachings from elders. These teaching, transcribed conversations are an integral part of the story and also provide the elders an opportunity to pass this traditional knowledge to future generations. The sharing of traditional knowledge is particularly important with tree art because, as Blackstock outlines, industrial development poses a serious threat to this art form. Although the focus of his book is the carvings, etching, paintings, drawings, and writings done on the wood or bark of living trees by First Nations people, his message goes beyond an exploration of art in the forest. His message is a complex one and it is relayed in various ways in each of the four chapters.

Beginning in the introductory chapter, it is clear to the reader that there is a loss of

knowledge regarding tree art. His guides know the landscape and have many lessons to teach but the meaning and history of tree art remains largely an enigma. Even in his training as a forester, Blackstock had not heard of, nor encountered, carvings on trees. In Chapter Two, he begins to learn about tree art and it through his study of ethnographic examples and correspondences that the range of artwork in the forest and its significance becomes apparent. The art created on trees is a visual communication system which is known to be utilized by first peoples in parts of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the American Mid-west and the southwest. In terms of classifying the tree art, the following definitions are utilized: an *arborograph* is a drawing or painting on exposed wood of a tree; an *arboroglyph* is a carved image on the bark or exposed wood of a tree; an *arboroscript* is written or painted text on the bark or exposed wood of a tree. The possible meanings for these forms of tree art varies, depending upon the images created and the artist, but in general the purpose was to relay information to traveler's, record events and mark burial areas or trail systems.

With this knowledge about tree art, Chapter Three describes a textual and visual journey across the First Nations' landscape. Through a series of conversations and informal interviews, several examples of tree art are discussed including "George" the face carved on a hop pole, faces carved on trees along the Phillips River, and several carved trees near Hazelton. There are photographs and descriptions of the tree art and also a discussion of the spiritual aspect of the art. Among the Gitksan, the carvings of a human-like face in trees are referred to as "Gyetim Gan," which means person in the tree or wood. In this sense, the art in the forest is seen as living force, not a static entity with the forest being the intended viewing context of tree art. Unlike crest or totem poles that have a viewing context in a village, the carved face is a living spirit and resides in the forest setting. Moving south into the Carrier Territory forests, examples of arboroscript with syllabics marked a burials (death), traplines, meeting places, and seasonal camps, also the art also served as thanks or apology to the spirit of an animal (lynx, for example) that was killed. As one reads these accounts you

begin to understand spiritual power of the tree art and also gain a glimpse of how First Nation peoples utilized the forest landscape in the past.

The use of the forest and the art left beyond is in danger of being lost. As continues his Blackstock journey north from the Central Interior, he discovers that a recorded tree (GgRg-1) with a carved face near Tumbler Ridge that has disappeared. Tree art from the Yukon has also been lost although photographs were taken prior to their disappearance or destruction. In the final chapter, Blackstock reflects on what he has learned on his journey through the First Nations landscape. He then draws on his experiences as a forester and outlines ways to preserve and protect tree art. He suggests a "recognition and celebration" as well as a strategy of "protection and maintenance" of Trees of Aboriginal Importance (TAIs). He briefly outlines portions of the Heritage Conservation Act which are designed to protect culturally modified trees and encourages professionals to learn about tree art and the First Nations' Landscape. It is puzzling why Blackstock does not offer more information on archaeological impact assessments and the current methods used by archaeologists and forest licensees to protect heritage resources. The Culturally Modified Tree (CMT) handbook Reference as well as traditional use studies are now mainstream resources used in all kinds of natural resource extraction projects whether it being mining development, forest cut blocks or road development. It seems that Blackstock's caution is targeting the wrong audience. I believe that professionals are aware and actively protecting forest art, in part, because of requires outlined in the Forest Practices Code and Ministry of Forest's (MoF) Protection of Aboriginal Rights Policy and they are also concerned about protecting the forest and it's living history. Perhaps the audience to target is the general population of the province who use the landscape for recreation reasons and who are not aware of the faces in the forest.

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