

VISIONS CAST ON STONE:

THE PETROGLYPHS OF GABRIOLA ISLAND

By Amanda S. Adams

Introduction

Gabriola Island, located within the Gulf of Georgia region, is home to an extraordinarily rich collection of petroglyphs. To date, twelve petroglyph sites on the island have been formally registered with the province; several more sites, located on private property, currently remain unregistered. The number of images at each site varies dramatically: some sites contain a single carving while other sites display over 70 separate images in tight proximity (i.e., DgRw 192). And while Gabriola Island possesses many petroglyph sites, nearby islands such as Valdes Island (McLay 1999) and the northern end of Galiano Island have few or none (despite heavy summer populations and ample opportunity for discovery). Surely, Gabriola Island stands as an area of extraordinary interest to archaeologists while being a very sacred place for members of the Snuneymuxw First Nation.

Ten of the more popular petroglyph images (i.e., the "kingfisher" and "dancing man") have been trademarked with the Canadian Intellectual Property Office. This action was the result of frustration, on behalf of the Snuneymuxw Nation, over the fact that sacred petroglyph images produced by their ancestors were—and still sometimes are—used for commercial gain (i.e., pasted on bags of coffee beans, sold as tourist postcards, made into jewelry, painted on boat hulls and replicated in pieces of artwork later sold for profit). Many Snuneymuxw Elders firmly believe that any reproduction of a petroglyph image "steals its power" away; hence, just as use of the images is prohibited in commercial contexts, it has also been requested that photographs of petroglyph sites not be included in this article. I have abided by that request. And although no images are incorporated into this overview of Gabriola Island petroglyph

sites, I highly recommend the examination of Mary and Ted Bentley's publication, *Gabriola: Petroglyph Island* (Bentley 1998) for an illustrative and useful inventory of motif types and site layout.

That being said, this article provides an overview of a pre-contact visual culture and builds upon Margaret A. Holm's (1990) unpublished Master's thesis, *Prehistoric Northwest Coast Art: A Stylistic Analysis of the Archaeological Record*. Her data, which derive predominantly from well-dated contexts within the Gulf of Georgia region, provide a comparative sample of design elements and motifs. Holm (1990: ii) argues that by the end of the Locarno Beach phase or the beginning of the Marpole phase, the "essential character of the Northwest Coast art style had developed." Furthermore, she observes that, "although [her] study had not focused on rock art, a casual examination of petroglyphs from the Gulf of Georgia area reveals parallels with the motifs, design elements, and compositional principles of Marpole

phase art. Most examples of rock art... fit comfortably within the stylistic parameters of Marpole phase art" (Holm 1990:314). This statement provides an important point of departure for my investigation into the Gabriola Island petroglyphs: did the petroglyphs emerge out of the Marpole phase culture type and the general artistic florescence evident 2400 to 1000 years ago (Matson and Coupland 1995:203; Thom 1995:45)? And if so, what is it about an image that makes it distinctly Marpole?

There are approximately 115 known petroglyphs on Gabriola Island and they divide into surprisingly even groups of motif-type: a total of 35 known anthropomorphic carvings are found on the island along with approximately 40 zoomorphic figures and 42 abstract/symbolic designs (Table 1). Most of these sites are found inland and cluster within a five-kilometer radius of the extensive False Narrows midden located on the southeast portion of the island. All petroglyphs found within 20 meters of the high tide mark are solitary

Table 1:
Motif Type Distribution For Gabriola Island Petroglyph Sites.

Site #	Anthropomorph	Zoomorph	Abstract	Total
DhRw 2	1	0	0	1
DhRw 5	2	0	0	2
DhRw 13	1	1	0	2
DgRw 2	0	1	0	1
DgRw 30	1	1	0	2
DgRw 63	0	2	0	2
DgRw 192	16	22	33	71
DgRw 193	2	4	3	9
DgRw 194	1	3	0	4
DgRw 198	1	3	3	7
DgRw 201	7	1	0	8
DgRw 224	1	0	0	1
Dgrw 225	0	1	0	1
Unregistered #1	1	0	3	4
Unregistered #2	1	0	0	1
Unregistered #3	0	1	0	1
Total	35	40	42	115

carvings (with the exception being that of the Lock Bay site, DhRw 13).

The majority of petroglyphs located on Gabriola Island are distinguished by their bold and curvilinear appearance. The line quality of many of the carvings (usually the zoomorphic ones) is confident, fluid, consistent (in both width and depth), and masterful (particularly with regard to use of symmetry and negative space). Some of the petroglyph motifs may have been painted onto the rock surface prior to engraving.¹ Paints and pigments were certainly known and used during the time period spanning 4000 to 2500 BP (Carlson 1993:7) and—given the unforgiving nature of stone as a medium—it does not seem unlikely that these complex images would be painted before being carved and made permanent.²

Another striking feature characteristic of many of the carvings is their 'signature' look. Other researchers have noted the same: with regard to the carvings found at Petroglyph Park in Nanaimo (rock carvings which undoubtedly relate to those of Gabriola Island), Douglas Leechman states that "...of the whole petroglyph[s]... there is very little overlapping of figures. This fact and the quite evident similarities in style suggest that most of the figures shown were made by the same artist" (Leechman 1952:267). Close examination of the Gabriola Island petroglyphs leads me to also suggest that an individual specialist or a small group/family of trained carvers produced the bulk of well-crafted petroglyph panels located on both Gabriola Island and Vancouver Island (i.e., in Snuneymuxw traditional territory and possibly at the Sproat Lake site, DhSf 1). Given the strong stylistic similarities found between the two and the fact that seasonal rounds encompassed both places, the theory is a plausible one.

Stylistic harmony and cohesion is most evident within motif-type groups (i.e., anthropomorph, zoomorph, abstract). The extant patterns of similarity do not find substantial or consistent overlap across motifs; rather, it is the congruity with which faces, for

example, are consistently portrayed. The same is true of 'animal' depictions and abstract forms. A stylistic toolkit of techniques and aesthetic approaches thus seems to be at work, one that is content specific and utilizes a determinate repertoire of forms. Certain design elements (such as eye-forms with secondary features rendered in profile) seem to have been reserved for certain images and not used in others. And though one hesitates to rely too heavily on subjective judgments regarding the 'quality' of a carving, some petroglyphs do indeed exhibit a remarkable application of skill (and surely a larger investment of time and labour) while others appear to have been rendered in a rough and less careful manner. Such differences should be acknowledged as a marked point of contrast.

Marpole Connections

Comparisons based on style (i.e., design elements, technique and composition) between artifact assemblages collected from Gabriola Island (i.e., False Narrows), Holm's comparative sample, and other Marpole phase artifacts (Carlson and Hobler 1993), support assigning production of the majority of Gabriola Island's petroglyph sites to the Marpole period (2400-1000 BP).³ Rationale for this chronological placement is threefold: (1) the striking and strong similarities found between petroglyph motifs and those found on portable artifacts recovered from Marpole contexts; (2) a generally bold and curvilinear style type not seen either before or after the Marpole period; and (3) the presence of the expansive False Narrows village site and cave burials which date largely to the Marpole time period (Burley 1989) points to an active Marpole occupation on Gabriola Island, while the sheer density of sites (17 in a 3 linear km area; Wilson 1987:57) located on the False Narrows bluffs underscores the clear importance of the place. A host of radiocarbon dates (Curtin 2002) also demonstrates extensive occupation within the Marpole phase timeframe. Each point shall be briefly expanded upon in turn.

A significant correlation is found

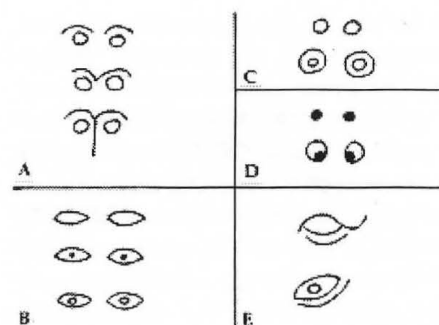


Figure 1: Eye-forms. A) Eyes with crescent brows and/or unibrow; B) End-pointed eyes with iris; C) Basic circle; D) Deep pitted eye; E) Eyes with secondary and tertiary features, i.e., 'elaborate.'

between eye-shape and motif type in both the Gabriola Island petroglyphs and Marpole period portable artifacts. Zoomorphic figures tend to have both round and sharply pointed, downturned eyelids with secondary elements while anthropomorphic figures are portrayed with basic circle-shape eyes sometimes accentuated with eyebrows but never with pinched ends, points, or large irises. Holm notes the same pattern in her study and concludes that during Marpole times an increasing complexity in the way features are delineated begins to emerge and, in close accordance with the Gabriola Island petroglyphs, approximately 75% of her sample contains eye-shapes with "secondary and tertiary elements" (Holm 1990:136).

Marpole mobiliary objects also display many of the same stylistic traits seen in the Gabriola Island petroglyphs: bold and curvilinear form-lines; the distinctive 'sea-wolf' motif replete with hunched limbs, open mouth and elaborate eye-forms with secondary features; zoomorphic figures that contain lateral-sectioning and the peculiarly elongated, bulbous nose; and anthropomorphic figures rendered with heart-shaped heads, basic concentric eyes and limbs tipped with three to five digits (see Figure 2).

Parallel distribution of motif types (human, bird and 'sea-wolf') found between portable objects and petroglyphs forms another point of intersection. Emphasis, in terms of skilled craftsmanship and investment of time and talent, was consistently placed

on certain motifs (i.e., 'sea-wolf' and bird forms) and not on others. "There is great interest in the human figure and in particular the human face" notes Margaret Holm (1990:311) with regard to Marpole phase objects, and "[f]acial features are usually rendered in detail while the rest of the body receives perfunctory treatment." The same is very much the case for the Gabriola petroglyphs. Also in accord with the rock carving subject matter is the second most common motif: the long-legged or long-beaked bird ($n = 6$ on Gabriola Island) and the third most common motif: the 'sea-wolf'⁴ ($n = 3$ on Gabriola Island with another 3 carvings representing possible sea-wolf motifs). It should be added, that in contrast to Holm's sample, fish motifs are popular in the Gabriola Island petroglyph repertoire ($n = 7$).

The popularity of these three motif types during Marpole times—as rendered in both portable objects and petroglyphs—points to a stylistic compatibility or visual language (i.e., an iconographic vocabulary) bridging the two media. Birds, 'sea-wolves' and the human forms were clearly figures of cultural significance and value at the time. What's more, it seems as though mutual emphasis was placed in a similar manner on not only the product—the petroglyph or antler spoon or pendant—but also on the process of creation. Although one may find many 'unrefined' (if that word should be used) or 'rough' anthropomorphic faces and figures, one never encounters a poorly carved 'sea-wolf' or bird anywhere. This mirrors Holm's observation that with only one exception, all of the 'sea-wolf' motifs inscribed on mobiliary objects in her Marpole sample are "well-made, deeply engraved compositions" (Holm 1990:110).

Seven of the anthropomorphic petroglyph figures found on Gabriola Island display pronounced genitalia.⁵ It was not until approximately 1000 BP that male and female genitalia are seen on decorated objects, specifically in antler figurines (Holm 1990:231). Figurines collected from the Puget Sound and Gulf of Georgia region are typically distinguished by their

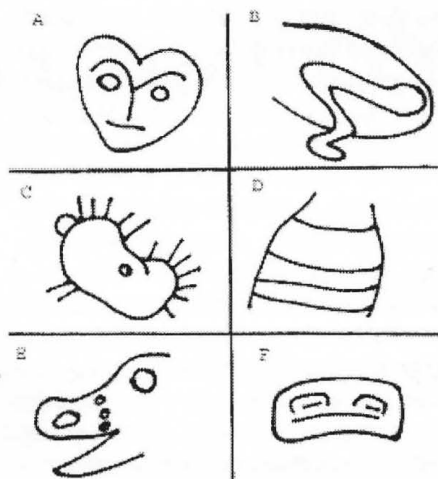


Figure 2: Design Element Illustrations. A) Heart-shaped head; B) Hunched limbs; C) Rays; D) Lateral sectioning; E) Rounded nose; F) Ovoid.

exaggerated pointed heads, necks defined by two notches which give the jaw a "squared-off look" and rectangular-shaped eye margins (ibid.). Many of these figures also sport 'skirts' rendered by straight parallel lines and hair that is fashioned with the same angular symmetry.

As previously mentioned, curves abound in the petroglyph sites of Gabriola Island and one of the most distinctive and overlapping characteristic found across both the petroglyph repertoire and Marpole period aesthetics is the ubiquitous, curvilinear form-line. Despite the fact that explicitly rendered genitalia do not emerge in the archaeological record until Late/Gulf of Georgia times, and that such genital features are indeed portrayed with frequency in the petroglyphs (isolated vulva forms are also found at several sites), I do not believe that there is a close relationship between the two. The difference is style, design elements, detail, and general content is so radically different—in terms of appearance—that any temporal connection seems nebulous. Unlike Late Period motifs—distinguished by a more linear and squared-off style—the petroglyphs of Gabriola Island rarely, if ever, exhibit an angular nature or composition.

The Marpole style thus embraces a range of craftsmanship—expert and deft as well as untrained or, at least,

less labour-intensive—while the entire group of motifs adheres to a consistent pattern: zoomorphs are often elaborate and well-craved, anthropomorphs generally appear to have been created with less effort and 'flair' and abstract motifs haunt the middle ground.

The hypothesis that part- or full-time specialists were involved in creating certain petroglyph panels is an intriguing one and, given the discrepancies between finely executed petroglyph panels and those more stylistically 'rough' (as well as the preponderance of the former), I suggest that this may well have been the case. In tune to Suttles' definition of Northwest Coast art where "...some Central Coast Salish art may have been decorative [art for art's sake], much of it can be related to four sources of power and prestige—the vision, the ritual world, the ancestors, and wealth" (Suttles 1983:69), I suggest that this was (and actually still is) the case for Gabriola Island's petroglyph sites. Elites may have commissioned some of the complex petroglyph panels while commoners may have produced some of the lesser-quality images as they trained for or endured the spirit quest. Tied to the fact that within Coast Salish "winter ceremonies" and concomitant vision/guardian quests, the acquired 'spiritual helper' often took the form of "birds, animals, and fabulous spirits or monsters" (Barnett 1938:136), precisely the types of creatures found depicted ubiquitously as petroglyphs. It does seem that perhaps, petroglyphs truly were visions cast on stone.

While it can be surmised then that the petroglyphs, broadly speaking, do not belong in Late/Gulf of Georgia period based on notable stylistic difference (linear and square vs. curved and round), the question of why the petroglyphs are not representative of, or included within, the Locarno Beach culture type (3300-2400 BP) remains. The answer is circumstantial in nature; grounded not in obvious stylistic difference but rather, upon the lack of evidence currently available to draw any other conclusion with confidence. When compared to the later abundance of Marpole mobiliary objects, the paucity of the preceding archaeological

assemblage is stark. Of the few portable art objects that have been recovered and associated with the Locarno Beach phase, none of these display any convincing stylistic features that might underscore some relationship to the petroglyph styles found on Gabriola Island. As Carlson states, "there are no pictographs or petroglyphs which are close enough in style to the excavated mobiliary art of the period 4000-2400 BP to permit assigning them to this period" (Carlson 1993:8). Artifacts made by pecking, grinding, incising and sawing of hard stone do not become common in the archaeological record until after 2500 BP and a curvilinear style depicting birds and animals starts to emerge only later, in sites dating from about 2500-1700 BP in the Strait of Georgia and Lower Fraser River regions (*ibid.*).

Mobiliary art from this time period is, as mentioned above, scanty and most of it dates to approximately 2500 BP, the tail end of the Locarno Beach phase and beginning of the Marpole. Holm admits that "imprecise dating of Locarno Beach phase components and a small inventory of decorated objects makes it difficult to hypothesize when or how artistic developments took place during this time period" (Holm 1990:305). Given this uncertainty coupled with the minimal overlap in stylistic conventions as expressed in two Locarno Beach spoons (Holm 1990:87) and zoomorphic petroglyphs (*i.e.*, sea-wolf figures), it seems possible that they demonstrate not a one to one relationship (*i.e.*, contemporaneous) but rather, an example of continuity in terms of motif styles.

The strongest argument for designating the Gabriola Island petroglyphs as Marpole, and not Locarno Beach lies in the fact, however, that no Locarno Beach phase sites have been found on Gabriola Island. One does exist at nearby Duke Point, but this, like the sparse numbers of poorly dated mobiliary art objects in general, adds little real weight or conviction in favor of a Locarno Beach assignment for the Gabriola Island petroglyphs.⁶ By and large, it does seem that it was not until after 2500 BP that the practice of

making petroglyphs really commenced and gained momentum.

Summary

The Gabriola Island petroglyphs appear to be commensurate—in terms of style—with Marpole phase material culture. One straggler does remain, however. Site DgRw 225 consists of a solitary carving depicting what looks to be an anthropomorph (or perhaps a frog) with limbs bent at the knee and spread to the side and which contains two well-developed ovoids as eyes. The first ovoid appears in the archaeological record around 800 BP in Prince Rupert (Holm 1990:322) and the similarity between this petroglyph and one located at Myers Passage is unmistakable (Hill 1974:181). Although beyond the scope of this thesis, such co-occurrences should be investigated further.

Decorated objects dating to the Locarno Beach time period—although slightly similar in content—are nevertheless marked by a lack of internal design detail (hunched limbs, elaborate eye-forms, open-mouths, skeletal features, etc.) when compared to both the Gabriola Island petroglyphs and later Marpole period artifacts. More importantly, not only is there a general paucity of decorated material dating to this time period in Holm's exhaustive sample, no Locarno Beach phase sites have been found on Gabriola Island. It is extremely unlikely that the petroglyphs pre-date 2500 BP.

As mentioned previously, many of the carvings look to have been created by a single hand or by a group of trained specialists. Margaret Holm argues that during the Marpole period "there is evidence to suggest either that a limited number of carvers used the more significant carving techniques, design elements, and principles of form, or that these related techniques were reserved for carving higher status items and motifs" (1990:314, *emphasis my own*). I venture to suggest that the creation of the Gabriola Island petroglyphs does not represent an "either/or" scenario; rather, I believe that the majority of petroglyphs were produced in a fairly short period of time by a limited number of specialists who did indeed utilize

certain techniques that were exclusive to certain imagery. By "short" I mean within a single life span or, perhaps, within a generation or two. Had the petroglyphs been made over and over and again through the course of many decades or a century more variation in style types, motif content, superpositioning and design elements would be seen (Lewis-Williams 2002); as it stands, these are not.

The more elaborate petroglyphs (*i.e.*, the 'sea-wolf and bird panel at DgRw 198) may have been produced, or commissioned, to satisfy the spiritual needs/wants of elite individuals who had access to (or control/ownership of) specific motifs. As has been argued throughout this essay, some images were consistently well-carved and their composition was particularly artful. Special techniques, or simply specialists in general, were probably called upon for their making (see also Thom 1998:6). Given our conventional understanding—that an ascribed society has been in existence within the Gulf of Georgia (and specifically at the False Narrows site) from at least Marpole times onward (Matson and Coupland 1995:209, 225)—we can conclude, ostensibly and with grounded speculation, that opportunities for visual expression were socially distributed along hierarchical lines with higher status individuals able to commission elaborate petroglyph panels to improve or strengthen their connection to the spirit world. This theory is conjectural but it adheres to current archaeological knowledge concerning social stratification during Marpole times, the emergence of specialization, and theories pertaining to restricted access of symbolic wealth (Thom 1998:6).

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to demonstrate that a stylistic relationship exists between petroglyph sites located on Gabriola Island and Marpole phase material culture. While Locarno Beach phase material culture shows some possible relation to the petroglyph sites—their motif content (*i.e.*, 'sea-wolf') and use of design elements—the

lack of internal detail combined with the general paucity of 'art' objects available to compare the petroglyphs with, leads me to conclude that any relationship between the two is a slim one. My feeling is that the Gabriola Island petroglyphs do not pre-date 2500 BP (see also Carlson 1993) and that any stylistic overlap found between the two samples is of an ancestral and not contemporaneous nature.

Stylistic associations evident between the Gabriola Island's petroglyphs and Marpole phase material culture are based upon a shared toolkit of design elements and motifs generally rendered in a bold and curvilinear style as well as an observable tendency to produce certain images (i.e., birds, 'sea-wolf') with notable effort and labour and others (i.e., faces) with much less. My conclusion that the Gabriola Island petroglyphs are Marpole in character finds concurrence with Carlson (1993), implicit agreement with Holm (1990) and even, to some extent, Lundy (1974).

Although I had expected to find stylistic resonance between anthropomorphic petroglyph figures displaying explicit genitalia and Late Prehistoric antler figurines with the same, this proved not to be the case. Marpole phase aesthetics are dominated by a curvilinear quality whereas the Late Prehistoric assemblage is best defined as more angular, linear, and squared-off. Based on this incongruity, any proposed relationship between the two is unwarranted.

Due to a lack of superpositioning and notable stylistic variation, it may have been the case that the vast majority of Gabriola Island's petroglyphs were produced in a fairly compressed period of time: by one person or a few, or, alternatively over the course of generation or two. Perhaps a single family specialized in the production of petroglyphs and knowledge of the craft was passed down? Exactly when, however, within the 2400-1000 BP time frame, this flurry of petroglyph making occurred, remains ambiguous.

To summarize: I propose that the majority of petroglyphs located on Gabriola Island were made in a short period of time, perhaps over the course of a single life (if a single, prolific

specialist were responsible for most of the imagery) or, at most, over the course of a few generations (maybe a family of trained carvers). The bulk of all petroglyphs were, I argue, produced during the Marpole culture phase (2400-1000 BP) and their primary *raison d'être* pertained to the acquisition of supernatural power. In other words, 'art' in the service of: "the vision, the ritual world, the ancestors, and wealth" (Suttles 1983:69).

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Notes

¹ Professor Michael Kew was the first person to suggest this idea to me (personal communication 2003).

² Wilson Duff, in *Images: Stone: B.C.* (1975), devotes much discussion to the qualities and permanence of stone with attention given to Northwest Coast art and culture.

³ Although the Marpole culture type is conventionally defined as ending around 1500 BP, my feeling is—and I am in concurrence with Thom (1998)—that this temporal bracket

marking a "transitional period" is somewhat arbitrary and should be extended to 1000 BP (after Matson and Coupland 1995).

⁴ The label 'sea-wolf' should not be viewed as either accurate or definitive. Commonly spoken of as 'lightning snake' or hai'itlik (the Church site [DgRw 192] and Museum both use this title in their information boards) and sometimes as 'Wasgo' or 'Wasco', the former terminology derives from a specific Nuu-chah-nulth figure (the "hai'itlik" or Lightning Serpent is associated with the Thunderbird and becomes the Thunderbird's harpoon when it takes whales). The term really should not be used outside the Nuu-chah-nulth area and that specific context (Alan McMillan, personal communication 2003). It is difficult, however, to find an appropriate descriptive designation for this peculiar creature. Certainly a label such as 'sinuous beast with hunched limbs, long tail, ferocious teeth, and fiery mouth' is cumbersome and inconvenient. I employ the name 'sea-wolf' here for descriptive purposes—as the creature does possess wolf-like features and a sea-serpent's form—yet I do so with awareness that the label lacks ethnographic specificity. Several Snuneymuxw refer to the creature simply as 'mythical.'

⁵ The sex of a given figure is, however, often ambiguous and in many cases it appears that hermaphrodites may be portrayed; gender indeterminate beings instilled with powers both masculine and feminine.

⁶ But see the extraordinary artifact recovered from the Pender Canal site (Carlson and Hobler 1993; Figure A30). This object depicting a 'sea-wolf' motif problematizes any tidy or linear chronology with regard to the evolution of Northwest Coast design elements and style. The piece looks to be of Marpole age but has been associated with the date of 3600 +/- 10 C-14 years BP (Carlson and Hobler 1993:47).

HILARY STEWART

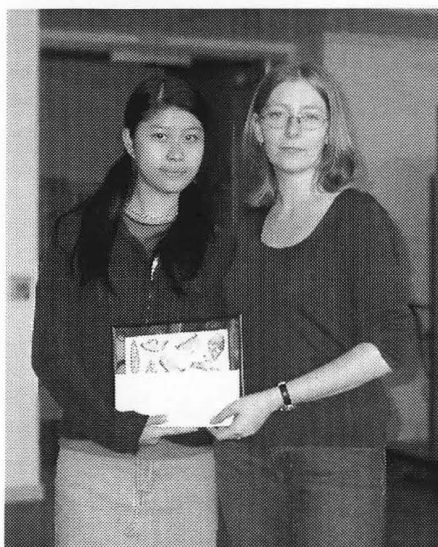
ART & ARCHAEOLOGY

COMPETITION

MAY 2004

On May 12, just before the ASBC's monthly public lecture, I was pleased to present several prizes to Lucy Tran (age 17, from Vancouver, BC), the winner of the new Hilary Stewart Art & Archaeology Competition. The winning illustration by Lucy is featured on the cover of this volume of *The Midden*.

The Hilary Stewart Art &



Incoming ASBC President awards prize to student Lucy Tran

Archaeology Competition was launched this year in honour of Hilary Stewart, a talented award-winning British Columbian author best known for the nine books she has written and illustrated on Northwest Coast First Nations cultures. The competition is designed to encourage the interest of young people in the Archaeology of British Columbia.

Prizes include a copy of one of Hilary Stewarts' books, *Cedar*; a \$50.00 cash prize; their artwork featured on cover of the ASBC's publication, *THE*

MIDDEN; and an original drawing of a suite of Northwest Coast First Nations artifacts, provided by Hilary Stewart.

Ms. Stewart generously submitted two drawings to the ASBC and Lucy chose one of the two which included illustrations of a hand maul, slate knife, awl, beads, and stone bowl, and several other artifacts.

Thanks to everyone who participated in this years' Competition. The Competition will run again in Fall of 2004 and will be open to children and youth between grades 3-7.

Congratulations Lucy, on your fine illustration! We at the ASBC wish you all the best in the future, and encourage you to continue to explore your interest in Archaeology.

Sarah Ladd
President
2004-2005
ASBC

