

In the Spirit of the Ancestors: Contemporary Northwest Coast Art at the Burke Museum.* Robin K. Wright and Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse, eds. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 150 pp.

Reviewed by Jay Miller

In the Spirit of the Ancestors inaugurates a series from the Bill Holm Center Series titled “Native Art of the Pacific Northwest.” Its eight chapters bring together working artists and scholars from the entire Pacific coastline, assessing developments since the landmark “A Time of Gathering” exhibition and book that marked the 1989 centennial of Washington State as well as the 2006 exhibition with the same title as this book. It also profusely illustrates items from the Burke collection of 2,400 recent Northwest Coast art works.

Shaun Peterson’s “Coast Salish Design: An Anticipated Southern Analysis” describes and illustrates with examples his struggles with mastering his ancestral art tradition, despite strong financial and regional pressures to make north coast formline style art, which is recognizable to non-specialist audiences and sells well. Learning from museum collections, older artists, and trial and error, Peterson realized Salish designs were defined by “cutout negative areas...to suggest movement” (14-15). His epiphany came with wing designs, whose key elements are crescents and wedges, not a dominant eye indicating joint mobility. Intended mostly for private and family use, Salish art was not public art, though many aspects of it have now become commercialized as savvy clientele grows within the United States and British Columbia triangle marked by the cities of Seattle, Vancouver, and Victoria.

Margaret Blackman discusses the collection of 1,166 Northwest silkscreen prints that she and her husband assembled, which has been housed at the Burke Museum since 1998. Since it was the work of academics, it has a detailed database subject to wide ranging analyses. Often the most available and affordable art now sold, these images appear on prints, t-shirts, greeting cards, and tourist souvenirs. Blackman has published books and articles on these styles, as well as commissioned a design for her child’s birth announcement. Such is the ubiquity of the art that all native events, from sport contests to elaborate potlatches, invariably include a commemorative design on paper or clothing (for t-shirts on the coast, see Glass 2008).

Evelyn Vanderhoop, a Haida weaver, describes her efforts with the *naaxiin*, the Haida and Tlingit name for what has been called the Chilcat robe, though it came to these Tlingits as a marriage privilege from the Nass River. Highly prized heirlooms, this style was revived by the careful study of museum specimens by weavers of many nationalities, though it largely appears today on leggings, headgear, pouches, tunics, and aprons worn at native events.

Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse, “Wearing Identity: The Strength of Expression through Personal Adornment,” addresses such contemporary usages in ceremonial regalia and silver and gold jewelry—especially earrings and bracelets displaying the hereditary crest of wearer, a steady market in Feastwear high fashion...and all those t-shirts, too.

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Haida Lisa Telford, “Intertwining: Learning for the Future from Our Past,” discusses her missed opportunity to learn weaving from her own grandmother and her later decision to apprentice with an aunt and gain a Bill Holm Center Visiting Research grant to study Burke materials. Her forte became shoes, an overlooked aspect of Northwest weaving with few examples in museum collections. In consequence, Telford had provided elegant examples of both loafers and high heels as proof of the versatility of the weaver’s art.

Joe David, an Opitsah Nuu-chah-nulth artist of a family of international note, shares his fascination with masks, illustrated with vivid colorful examples in his Nootkan style.

Robin Wright returns attention to huge wooden box drums that once boomed along the coast until replaced by commercial bass drums preferred by school and marching bands, as well as a sign of accommodation to Western music. Missing from her discussion is mention of the square leather-covered drums that characterize certain tribal grounds, an easy transition marker between round hand drums and these open sided boxes.

Emily Moore’s “Acts of Propatriation: Two Kaats’ House Posts” by Nathan and Stephen Jackson tells a story of reciprocity in return for the repatriation of two houseposts from the Tlingit village of Gaash near Cape Fox, Alaska, “stolen” by the famous 1899 scientific and social expedition financed by the railroad magnate Edward Harriman, who “generously” shared their “finds” with universities and museums across the United States. The two posts were long literal hallmarks of the old Burke Museum, greeting visitors from the main stairway, yet it was always clear they were not legitimately acquired. As they were repatriated, a decision emerged for “swapping out the spoils of a colonial past for objects that Native artists design specifically for museum display” (79). Thus, Nathan and Stephen Jackson, Tlingit father and son, each carved a new pole representing the crest story of Kaats’—a man married to a Bear woman whose children tore him apart when he proved unfaithful. Nathan’s pole is in traditional style, while Stephen’s portrayal is gorier, showing the moment when the right to this crest was “paid for” with the father’s life. It is also a less than subtle statement of the Alaskan and the United States dismemberment of Tlingit lands and resources.

I regret to note in this context that the University of Washington Press, after publishing two linguistically-based dictionaries of the Lushootseed language, has again herein unfailingly mangled spellings of this language native to its own turf. More positively, a color portfolio of 50 works of art fills the back section—textiles, baskets, hats, bowls, boxes, puppets, glassware, prints, drums, bracelets, and lots of masks. It is followed by a bibliography, index, and biographies of the contributors. Vivid, abundant, and colorful, this book does Bill Holm proud.

Reference Cited

Glass, Aaron

2008 Crests on Cotton: “Souvenir” T-Shirts and the Materiality of Remembrance Among the Kwakwaka'wakw of British Columbia. *Museum Anthropology* 31(1):1-18. DOI: 10.1111/j.1548-1379.2008.00001.x

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