

Letter to the Editor*

Response to Aaron Glass' 2009 Review Essay on The Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art

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This letter to the editor is offered as a personal response to Aaron Glass' 2009 Review Essay focused on the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art, a museum project with which I have been involved. In connection with Glass (2009), this response will address specifically: 1) the curatorial intent in the permanent exhibition of Bill Reid's precious metal works, namely the division of Reid's creative journey into three phases and 2) my use of Alfred Gell's reference to the "techniques of enchantment" in the text panel.

Past and current research on the *Bill Reid Catalogue Raisonné* (BRCR) has informed the curatorial intent for the exhibition *Restoring Enchantment: Gold and Silver Masterworks by Bill Reid*. I had originally titled the exhibition *Deeply Carved: Gold and Silver Masterworks by Bill Reid*, but I changed it to its definitive title after reconsidering the writings of Gell, which were seducing as they seemed to relate appropriately to Reid's concept of the "well-made object." A catalogue essay, which would have clarified some of Glass' relevant points, had been planned but time and financial constraints did not permit its publication.

When I was asked less than three months prior to the opening of the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art (BRGNWCA) to be the curator of the permanent exhibition featuring Reid's jewelry, my response to the daunting challenge was to choose a theme and format that would best make use of the Bill Reid Collection (BRC) and would articulate my knowledge of Reid's works within the larger spectrum of his artistic development and practice. I have been working on Reid's *Catalogue Raisonné* using a chronological model, and my curatorial theme for the exhibition followed that theme. Research for the BRCR started during Reid's lifetime and therefore had the benefit of his invaluable insight and input. Research is intended to gather, document, illustrate, and distill in a critical and scholarly fashion the artist's full spectrum of work, and through a better understanding of his creative process, provide a unified view of the artist and his multilayered *oeuvre*.

In addition to works selected from the BRC, major early works were borrowed, thanks to the generous loans from private collections, resulting in the largest exhibition of Reid's jewelry ever mounted. *Restoring Enchantment* was not conceived to be static. Since its opening the display has changed at least four times, some pieces have been returned, others have come in, and specific sub-themes have been developed such as the current "Variations on the Dogfish Theme."

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For study purposes I have divided the artist's *oeuvre* into three phases, which I have named Pre-Haida (1948-51), Haida (1951-68), and Beyond Haida (1968-98, which includes unfinished works.). While somewhat arbitrary, these temporal phases correspond, interestingly, to Reid's progression through geographical space. The overlapping of certain activities by Reid makes the categorization by period necessary. He lived and worked in Toronto as a radio announcer by day and an apprentice jeweler by night during the first phase, in Vancouver during the second, and in London, Montreal, and Vancouver during the third. He never dated works he made during the first period, and only inconsistently near the end of the second phase. This format will reveal the true complexity of the artist's development, his process of acquiring traditional knowledge, aesthetic insight, and carving/sculpting skills. So far, nearly a thousand original works have been catalogued, perhaps a little less than half of his entire estimated life's output. Much of Reid's work is still to be discovered.

Surprisingly, most critical discourse about Reid's work relates to fewer than two-hundred of his better-known pieces, or ten percent of his entire output, and most current critical writing on the artist is directed to debates about Reid as a "social phenomenon," or a "historical figure," or a "complicated Indian," instead of his artworks *per se*. (Duffek and Townsend-Gault 2004:9) There is plenty of room for true critical assessment beyond "hagiography" (Glass 2009:16) and "inflated kitsch" (Duffek and Townsend-Gault 2004:8). It is hoped that, through such assessment of newly discovered works coupled with critical attention to the context in which they were made, Reid's writings (published and unpublished) and other critical scholarly works on Reid, the *BRCR* will enhance considerably our understanding of the gradual and complex development of his art from its grounding in Haida tradition to his evolution as an individual engaged in art practices.

As one extended label accompanying the current display reveals, Reid's exploration of a given concept and corresponding style of execution could in some cases be in a continuum spanning a decade and overlapping phases (while working on far-ranging technologically or conceptually different projects), until he was satisfied or had exhausted the potential for expression of the concept.¹

During the Pre-Haida phase Reid apprenticed in the European goldsmithing and silversmithing techniques with the idea of creating bracelets such as those worn by his female Haida relatives, and made by John Cross or his grandfather, Charles Gladstone (Reid 2009a:205). At my request, Reid drew from memory his very first piece engraved with Northwest Coast-like line conventions, a brooch, which, I found out later, he had executed in 1949-50. I later also had the immense joy of handling that very piece, realizing that he had drawn it in reverse. Nearly fifty years after its creation that very first image was still vividly present in Reid's consciousness with all its details and its subject matter recurring throughout his career.

Contrary to what Glass claims (a cliché perhaps influenced by Maria Tippet's writing [2004]), Reid was not "largely ignorant of his Aboriginal ancestry" (Glass 2009:14). Reid knew he was Haida through his mother and her lineage; he did not know, however, what it meant culturally to be Haida. It is also a fact that during his Haida (immersion) Phase, Reid executed some non-Haida-like works, as the *BRCR* will document, but the majority of his output was based on Haida designs and mythology, a phase during which he signed his works "HAIDA ART, Reid." He

abandoned “HAIDA ART” as part of his signature only at the very end of this period. Self-taught but guided by the teachings of his great-great-uncle Charlie (Edenshaw) *in absentia*, Reid behaved like a 19th century ethnographer searching the museums and collections of the world for answers to all that mattered in the Haida world. He learned a new (visual) language, to use another worn out metaphor, with its grammar and syntax, eventually becoming eloquent in that language.

When Reid came back to Vancouver after his goldsmithing training in Toronto, his intention, however, was no longer to create jewelry in the Haida tradition, but to create western modernist jewelry. As the *BRCR* will demonstrate, it is clear that he did a little bit of both until that fateful “transformative encounter” during a trip to Skidegate where he saw a pair of bracelets made by Edenshaw that were *deeply carved*. Those ornaments left an indelible impression on him, and led him to redefine his intention in the creation of Haida art.

Deeply carved is an aesthetic judgment. In Haida language, which has no general word for “art,” *deeply carved* means “well made,” a quality Reid always strove to achieve. “Joy is a well-made object” (Reid 2009b:238), he would later say. However, according to Haida philosophy and aesthetics, *deeply carved* has deeper meaning. As Doris Shadbolt has clearly stated, “Well-making affirms respect for and belief in the meanings and purposes invested in art at society’s imperative; it speaks of man’s control of his material environment and of his ability to shape the mental and spiritual forces that animate his work and life” (1998:84). *Deeply carved* means “that the design must carry the charge that invests the images with their life as form and hence their meaning, empowering them, in short, to be *carved deeply into our consciousness*” (Shadbolt 1998:86, emphasis added).

In the light of scholarly works by Gell, I have interpreted *deep carving* as one of the “technologies of enchantment,” a way of looking at “art objects as agents of an ideology affecting the form of social relations” (Gell 1992:43). My reading of Gell, who considers “the various arts—painting, sculpture, music, poetry, fiction—[as] components of a vast and often unrecognized technical system, essential to the reproduction of human societies, which he called the technology of enchantment,” (Gell 1992:43) differs from that of Glass.

At the onset of his Haida phase, Reid began by making personal objects of adornment from old crest and tattoo designs. In the recent Haida past, tattoos were strong statements about who their wearers were as individuals and as social entities. Tattoos manifested identity and spiritual connections through crest figures and/or guardian spirits that were *carved* into the skin. Tattooing was the art of empowering the body to link men with spiritual or ancestral figures.

Haida society was and is competitive, and aesthetic principles speak not just of beauty but also of power, conviction, and efficiency. Haida creations during the colonial era and up to the start of Reid’s jewelry practice were weak or shallowly engraved, lacking convincing power. Weak works speak of a demoralized world in which the memory of the life force embedded in the arts was faintly expressed. Bill McLennan concurs: “An aesthetic value for the art remained in place, though diminished from the refinement and complexity characterizing works from the 19th century. The loss of aesthetic or visual sophistication in Haida art paralleled the people’s forced loss in cultural determination” (2004:39).

Body art and adornment were expressive means for individuals to exhibit their participation as part of a social unit, a moiety or a lineage. They were icons through which the identity could be physically explained, changed, and transformed during social transactions. “Not only did these attributes offer visual proof of who their owners were by affirming and confirming their identities; they also reinforced their owners’ ideas of who they *thought* they were. The attributes translated their owners’ dreams into matter and mediated between supernatural and human worlds” (Reid 2004:64). Could tattoo and crest art not be interpreted as having the power of “casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form” (Gell 1992:44)?

By reproducing crest designs, which originally were in the form of tattoos, Reid reignited the memory and the thinking that are associated with crests: identity—personal and collective—kinship and social relations, and material culture. “Reid saw works of art that had begun in homage to the past become rallying points for the renewal of broad forms of cultural expression and that today contribute not only to the pleasure of individual art lovers but also to the health and viability of contemporary aboriginal communities” (Phillips 2004:6).

Many of Glass’ criticisms were well-founded, but the timing of his visit to the BRGNWCA, immediately after it opened and before a reorganization of the displays and personnel, was unfortunate. We invite him to return to the BRGNWCA, to revisit the permanent collection and the temporary exhibitions to see what changes have been made in the Gallery’s first year of operation and to reconsider his criticism of the appropriateness of our admittedly somewhat arbitrary but defensible division of Reid’s artistic development into three phases, as well as our use of Gell’s theory of “technology of enchantment” as a tool to assess the place of Reid’s technical skills and processes in the development of his art practice, and their impact on the socially and culturally specific practices of the Haida people.

Note

1. Such was the case for the *The Milky Way*, a gold and diamond necklace with a detachable brooch, which Reid started in London in 1968 and completed in Montreal in 1969. The original concept, however, had been given form at the onset of his second phase in an Arts-and-Crafts-inspired set of wall sconces and matching chandelier, all hand-crafted in brass, followed in the intervening years by a gold and diamond ring (c. 1964) and a pair of gold and diamond earrings (c. 1965) in a similar modernist style but somewhat unresolved. Further exploration of the concept resolved his dissatisfaction and resulted in the *The Milky Way* necklace.

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