

## CHAPTER 7

### A LINE OF INNOVATION

In an art style in which the rules are fixed and major innovations are few, such innovations when found should help to identify the artists who created them. This chapter examines the painted designs on a series of wooden boxes from the northern coast which seem to reveal steps in the working out of a major innovation in design construction: the use of extra heavy primary formlines, often combined with the overlapping of one colour on another. If these are all from the hands of a single artist, as I suggest they are, several other implications naturally follow.

time. When we find one of them consciously developing his style in new directions, yet firmly based in the style of his period, we have found a member of the avant-garde of his time, and by his works we should be able to know him.

Harda painted designs, as Bill Holm has shown, in a style of strict conventions. The rules, once learned, were seldom violated. There was room for an infinite amount of minor variation within the rules (indeed the art seems to show a compulsion for such variation), but major conventions were strict. When we find deviations from the rules we can assume that we are viewing the work of an alien or novice, or that we have found the conscious innovation of a master.

The typical box design in figure X shows the two rules with which we are concerned in this chapter. The first involves the primary formlines. These are usually black, though in a few cases red, and usually form a strong, flowing, connected grid <sup>over the design field</sup> which establishes the main structure of the design. Though constantly changing <sup>within limited range</sup> in thickness, they are read as lines which define sub-fields within which the secondary designs, usually in red, are placed. When the primary formline grid is black the secondary formlines are red, and vice versa. The second rule with which we are concerned here is the prohibition of overlapping. Secondary formlines usually touch the primary formline pattern at one or more points, but do

## Chapter 5

### A line of Innovation

In an art style in which the rules are fixed and major innovations are few, <sup>such</sup> innovations <sup>when found</sup> should <sup>help to</sup> identify the artists who created them. This chapter examines a series of painted boxes from the northern coast which seem to reveal the working out of a major innovation in design construction, the use of extra heavy primary formlines combined with the overlapping of one colour on another. It is suggested that these are the work of a single artist, and some of the implications of that possibility are explored.

It is probably true of the art history of any period that we are not equally interested in all of the artists, nor (are we equally interested) in all the works of a given artist. That was evident in the earlier chapters where we sought out the masterworks of Charles Edenshaw and Tom Price — those pieces in which their leading contemporaries were "most present". It is in <sup>such</sup> these masterworks that they <sup>leave</sup> reveal the surest clues to their identity. The sure hand of the virtuoso pervades the work; and any idiosyncrasies or innovations are those of a master artist thoroughly schooled in his craft, consciously expressing his individuality. It was undoubtedly the same with Haida artists of earlier generations. It is the same with Haida art produced by earlier generations. It is the masterpieces that attract most of our interest. We seek out the works of the greatest artists of their

not overlap. The general rule is never to paint red over black, or black over red.

In the series of box designs considered here, these rules are deliberately broken in an attempt to develop a new kind of design <sup>composition</sup> structure. The primary formlines are made exceedingly thick and divide up the field in new ways. In addition, on most examples, secondary elements are painted directly over these primary forms. The series shows a great deal of experimentation with these innovations, and culminates in one of the acknowledged masterpieces.

It is best to begin with this box, which already has a unique place in the art history of the Northwest. It was collected by G. T. Emmons from the Chilkat Tlingit, probably in the 1880's, and is now in the American Museum of Natural History. According to the museum's records, the highly abstract painted design represents a seal.

These boxes are examples of a special type, keeled and bent like storage boxes, but without <sup>flat tops and</sup> wooden lids. The tops of two opposite sides form convex curves, and of the other two, concave. Covers woven of <sup>strips of</sup> split cedar bark and slipping down over the whole box were often made. The shape is like that of a kind of dish, <sup>except for the proportions</sup> made the same way, with a similar bark cover, though the designs painted on were not of the same composition.

The design has always been an enigma to experts on the art of the region. For example it marks the point at which Franz Boas, after many years of research, had to admit that he had reached the limit of his understanding. His "Decorative Art" -- published in 1897, did not include this type of highly stylized box design. However for his 1897 field trip to the coast he had drawings made of this and other box designs. That August he showed them to Charles Edenshaw at Port Essington and <sup>obtained</sup> received an explanation of the design, which, <sup>as we shall see</sup> apparently, he did not accept. <sup>and did not publish for 30 years</sup> <sup>knowledge in print</sup>

When he published his <sup>analysis</sup> study of Chilkat blanket designs in Emmons' The Chilkat Blanket (1907)\*, Boas included drawings and explanations of the designs on sheets and boxes, ending with this box <sup>(Fig. 558 d)</sup> <sup>558 d</sup> and others like it, and admitting that the designs "are so intricate that I have not succeeded in analyzing the irregular grouping of eyes, arms, and feet." (p. 365). before returning to the Chilkat designs. Not until he published Primitive Art in 1927 did Boas pursue the analysis as far as this type of design. After threading the tortuous path through Chilkat blanket designs and those on carved and painted sheets, <sup>and draped</sup> he came again to the drawing of this box (Fig. 287 b), and finally revealed what Edenshaw had told him in 1897. It is best recorded in full:

|| Copy ||

\* "Notes on the Blanket Designs" by F. Boas, pp. 351-400

It is intriguing that the search should lead us once again to Edenshaw. One question has to be: was his explanation an informed one (did he know the painter and the design?) or <sup>simply another</sup> expert attempt at interpretation? The theme, four interpretations of seven, reminds me of another work on the same theme, the famed Laven Screens. Why did not Boas record (or ask) who painted the designs?

Boas concluded that the design's importance was more as decoration than as interpretation (p 275). Here we are led once again (as on the chests) to purely decorative, fully abstract design. It could hardly "represent" a coat, being so abstract. But in the artist's mind, so imbued with concepts of animal design, could it be completely divorced from representational design? Or as he worked did he have a theme in mind?

MUSEUM of ANTHROPOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH  
COLUMBIA  
STAFF LIBRARY

Cat. No.