

## PREFACE

For those of us involved in its preparation, the Arts of the Raven show at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1967 was a highly <sup>rewarding</sup> satisfying experience.

It was not <sup>for one thing</sup> just that we were able to indulge our long-held preferences and assemble such an exhibition of the finest Northwest Coast Indian art as <sup>from collections of the continent</sup> will probably never be seen in one place again. It was also the <sup>an unexpected bonus</sup> frequency

of the thrill of discovery - which comes occasionally to everyone who works intensively with <sup>the</sup> anonymous arts - of setting side by side two pieces from different collections, and perceiving, suddenly and with certainty, that they must have been made by the same artist. It was as though individual artists were insistently making themselves known by their works, and each such flash of recognition brought us a step closer to knowing them. <sup>who they were.</sup>

The conviction grew in our minds that the great assemblage of art which Bill Reid, Bill Holm and I had chosen simply because we thought it the best was, <sup>very</sup> largely, the work of a <sup>relatively</sup> small number of master artists. Bill Reid expressed the feeling best in his introductory essay in the catalog:

One thing has become apparent...from the investigations leading to this exhibition. If these people were an artistic race, they were not a race of artists. The recurrently similar styles can lead only to the conviction that the high art of the region was the product of a few men of genius, many of whom apparently had long, slowly maturing, productive careers.

The exhibition, as had been planned from the outset, did have a section featuring the art of one Haida artist, Charles Edenshaw. Of the works which we attributed to him, many were well-documented masterpieces about which there was no doubt. Others we attributed on the basis of our mutual recognition of his style. But about some we were not equally certain, and in these cases my opinion was accepted by my <sup>some-</sup>times doubting colleagues. I feel I must admit that I am less certain

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For those of us involved in its preparation, the Arts of the Raven show at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1967 was a highly satisfying experience. For one thing, we were able to freely indulge our preferences and assemble from collections all over the continent such an exhibition of the finest Northwest Coast art as will not like be seen again: the best half dozen chests, the best dozen panel pipes, the best two dozen carved horn spoons, as we wished. What came as an added bonus, however, was the frequent thrill of recognition, on setting side by side two pieces from different collections and perceiving suddenly and certainly that they must have been made by the same artist.

now than I was then about some of these attributions (and <sup>there were</sup> some others, which I made only in my own mind, I now believe to be wrong). The recognition of styles is partly <sup>an</sup> intuitive <sup>process</sup>, and intuition can be a fickle instrument, despite the feeling of certainty it usually brings. Postulated styles must stand the test of more analytical kinds of <sup>examination</sup> analysis.

The essays which follow are attempts to identify and validate <sup>some</sup> personal styles in Haida art. Perhaps they will provide leads for others who are working with other anonymous arts.

Haida art is anonymous in the sense that the artists did not "sign" their works, and the collectors did not make a practice of learning who they were. In some cases, however, the name of the artist did get recorded, and these provide a means of linking a given style with a known artist.

But for the most part the approach must be to separate out from the vast corpus of anonymous art what we consider to be individual styles. <sup>Then link them, when we can, with known artists</sup> The <sup>others</sup> artists thus discovered <sup>may still have to</sup> remain anonymous, known by their works alone.

My use of the term "Haida" for all of the art shown here also requires a word of explanation, since obviously if I do not know who some of the artists were I can hardly assert that they were all Haidas. <sup>Haida</sup> All of the works shown, <sup>when they</sup> which are of known authorship, were made by Haida artists. All of the styles shown, if not individual styles, were at least <sup>shared</sup> shared by Haida artists, although many of the examples in these styles are presently listed in museum records as Tlingit, Tsimshian, or northern Kwakiutl. It is the purpose of this book to show that they are individual styles, and are Haida.

These are illustrated essays, and they attempt to speak not just to that part of the reader's mind which comprehends words, but also to that part which assimilates visual images. The selection and sequence of the

illustrations are as much a part of my argument as the sentences and paragraphs, and aesthetically a better part. <sup>I am attempting to educate the eye as well as persuade the intellect</sup> To attain the degree of familiarity required for the recognition of individual variations in style, it is necessary to exercise the visual sense and sharpen the perception beyond what words can convey. <sup>to the end</sup> I hope that the reader will perceive, as I do, that fine examples of Haida art are intellectual and aesthetic achievements of a high order. (I also hope that I can make my points in the final chapters with fewer words than in the early ones.)?

The proposition that tribal arts are the products of individual artists with styles <sup>by</sup> distinctively their own is of course not a new one. Its principal proponent for Northwest Coast art has for many years been Marius Barbeau. His Totem Poles of the Gitksan (1929), for example, makes it a point to document the carvers, and expresses Barbeau's appreciation of the best of them as great artists. In his studies of Haida argillite carving, notably Haida Myths (1953) and Haida Carvers in Argillite (1957), one of his principal concerns is the identification of individual artists and their works. He assembled prodigious numbers of photographs of slate carvings in the world's collections, and carried large numbers of these into the field in 1939 and 1947 to show to Haida informants for identification. Unfortunately the technique produced inconclusive and often contradictory results, and his published attributions are all too often uneasy choices between his informants' opinions and his own <sup>his</sup> (imperfect) <sup>at was</sup> recognition of the styles. It will be necessary in later sections to point out many errors in his works, and <sup>to</sup> suggest that his attributions should be accepted with all due caution, unless they are firmly supported by documentation in museum records.<sup>1</sup> However this should not be allowed to obscure the value of his richly-illustrated volumes, nor the fact that <sup>he</sup> he was foremost in

1. Many of his published attributions have been uncritically fed back into museum records, which makes errors, where they did occur, more difficult to find.

stating one of the conclusions that we now want to be accepted: speaking of one of the great Gitksan totem carvers, he wrote:

To Haesem-hliyawm goes the credit of having emerged from mere traditional conventions and reached into the higher sphere of art, where a creator obeys his own instinct and freely expresses himself in terms that belong to humanity as a whole (1929, p. 121)

The astonishing growth of interest in Northwest Coast art which began about three decades ago and still seems not to have reached its peak has <sup>mainly</sup> been a glorification of the art, <sup>rather than</sup> not of the artists. Objects collected in the past century as specimens for anthropology museums, often with ~~their~~ accession numbers still prominent <sup>printed</sup> on their surfaces, have increasingly been exhibited as works of art in their own right. Their dollar values have risen a hundredfold and more, to the point where prices paid in today's art auctions seem to defy all logic in their extravagance. Books on the art continue to appear in steady flow. Exhibitions are mounted in ever more <sup>more</sup> prestigefull surroundings; this past year, for example, in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and at Man and his World in Montreal (however the reluctance of museums to lend out their treasures is <sup>rapidly</sup> hardening, and it is unlikely that an exhibit as lavish as Arts of the Raven will ever be assembled again). Yet through it all the anthropological habit of thought that prompted the original collectors to ask "What does it represent?" but not "Who made it?" has tacitly persisted. Even when eminent art historians have <sup>viewed</sup> deigned to view the exhibits and have pronounced the art great, they have left unasked the most usual question of their <sup>profession</sup> trade and have been content to let the masterpieces remain anonymous. In retrospect the books and exhibits <sup>of these three decades</sup> show a curious lack of selectivity: Haida art has been shown cheek by jowl with Kwakiutl, and prehistoric carvings from the Salish area have <sup>shared between</sup> shared the same covers as Haida argillite carvings. <sup>a few of</sup> The most recent books have become more selective, but have retained the habit of treating the

art as the product of cultures rather than of artists. Bill Holm's splendid analysis of the northern style (Holm, 196 ) shows only incidentally his <sup>keen</sup> ~~growing~~ perception of individual styles, and Carøbe Kaufmann's more recent study of changes in Haida argillite carving between 1820 and 1910 treats the variations in style as anonymous culture traits, with the individual artist being irrelevant to the argument. I do not imply that this traditional anthropological approach does not yield valid results, but I am convinced that the further understanding of Northwest Coast art also <sup>demands, now more than ever,</sup> requires the art historical approach of sorting out individual artists' styles.

One compelling reason why this should now become a principal avenue of research is that it offers <sup>the best</sup> a good possibility of "setting the record straight". <sup>in terms of who made what and when</sup> The need arises from the present inadequacy of museum records on the basic questions of place of origin and age, <sup>at present hampered by</sup> which prevents the undertaking of meaningful studies of local sub-styles and their interactions. A large proportion of the finest pieces in museums and private collections have no firm documentation whatever. Even when the place and date of acquisition is recorded, it usually leaves unknown the place and time of actual manufacture. Pieces collected in a given village cannot always be assumed to have been made by artists of that village, because of the prevalence of itinerant artists and intervillage trade. During the period with which we are concerned, such freedom of trade and travel was undoubtedly more a factor than before, and so, in all likelihood, was local specialization. For example the Chilkat Tlingit made most of the coast's Chilkat robes and traded them down the coast as far as the northern Kwakiutl. Similarly, the Niska made and traded a large proportion of the raven rattles, and the Haida, the canoes and decorated boxes and chests. Furthermore,

~~the~~ white settlements such as Sitka, Port Simpson, Port Essington, and Victoria were frequented by members of many of the tribes, and much of the trading and collecting was done at these centres. For such reasons it is not possible to define local styles on the basis of place of collection.

In much the same way, the <sup>date</sup> time of manufacture is usually in question. Argillite carvings are unique in that they were usually sold (collected) immediately upon completion. But other objects were usually of unknown age when collected, and since <sup>the older the object the higher it was valued</sup> older things were valued more highly, the estimates of age were usually questionable. One chest in the Rasmussen collection, for example, was said to be 300 years old (Gunther, 196 , p. 19), and another, which Charles Edenshaw sold to Dr. Newcombe, was said to have been 150 years old.

The method of discovering personal styles and reconstructing individual artists' careers, to the extent that it is successful, will set the record straight and permit the reconstruction of local styles and their histories. This kind of study is already under way: Bill Holm is preparing a book on Kwakiutl masks with individual styles as an important <sup>part of the</sup> area of enquiry. Trisha Glathaar has recently completed an MA thesis in Fine Arts, under my direction, dealing with the work and style of one of the Haida artists, Tom Price. Looking back, we can already see that other scholars, in the preparation of books and museum exhibits, have unconsciously tended to choose the works of individual artists - as we tended to do for the Arts of the Raven show. In Boas' Primitive Art, <sup>to give another</sup> for example, the designs taken from slate dishes and chests are mostly those by Tom Price (Boas, 19 , Figs. 258, 259, 262, 263).

There is one further reason why I choose to attempt this approach. As in traditional Art History, it tends to be the finest works and the greatest artists who receive the <sup>attention</sup> greatest emphasis, while lesser artists

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**It will facilitate the study of the role of the artist in his culture, especially during a time of great change, and perhaps help to show how conditions of change may produce great leaders. It will advance, in short, the anthropological study of art as an aspect of Haida culture.**

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tend to be left anonymous. It is my hope to identify <sup>some of</sup> the greatest Haida  
artists of the period, so that they may join the ranks of the world's ack-  
nowledged masters. It is my hope to restore to the Haida people some of  
their half-forgotten heroes.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was completed during a sabbatical leave from the University of British Columbia, and with the support of a Canada Council Leave Fellowship. Bill Holm has contributed so much to it in so many ways that he should be considered its joint author, and Bill Reid, at an earlier stage, shared with us some of the discoveries. It is usual to acknowledge the role played by ones students as teachers, and I wish to thank Trisha Glathaar for the section we developed together on Tom Price, and Suzan Thomas Davidson for earlier work on the style of Charles Edenshaw. Mrs. Florence Davidson of Masset, a daughter of Charles Edenshaw, also gave freely and graciously of her recollections.

Vancouver Art Gallery (Doris Shadbolt) for the Arts of the Raven show.

Vancouver Centennial Museum for the Age of Edenshaw show and specimens.

Provincial Museum

Provincial Archives

etc.

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