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The Black Canoe

BILL REID AND THE SPIRIT OF HAIDA GAWAII

John K. Grande



Looking for all the world like the last survivors from a great natural disaster, or a motley crew of mythical expatriates embarked on a journey to who knows where, the profusion of half-human, half-animal characters that populate Bill Reid's *The Black Canoe* aren't the typical ones one would expect to meet up with in Washington D.C. Culled from the ancient Haida culture this mysterious cast of redolent beings have all the intricacy of a jewellery box design scaled up 100 times over and woven in bronze. Part of physical cosmology of Haida beliefs and customs, the heraldic and traditional motifs that adorn this canoe are outward expressions of a seafaring culture that thrived along the coastal bays and inlets of the Queen Charlotte Islands in northern British Columbia for some 8,000 years before they came on a collision course with European economic expansionism.

It is typical of Bill Reid's resilient character that he did not see the placing of this massive bronze tribute to cultural self-sufficiency in the wasteland nexus of America's bureaucratic and commercial empire as an act of cultural subjugation. In Reid's own words, "In considering the art for the building, it occurred to me that this was an appropriate opportunity to represent the kernel of the founding nations, which are really not acknowledged in any other way in Washington, except in museums."

Born of a Haida mother from Skidegate, B.C. and a Scots-American father, Bill Reid is a native craftsman and a sculptor par excellence, as readily at home with European as with native traditions in art. Often credited with singlehandedly resurrecting the Haida language of formline painting relief carving and three dimensional carving, Reid revived a sophisticated cultural legacy that lay dormant for decades, was in danger of extinction. He brought the formal traditions of Haida art back to life, but transformed them into a truly contemporary artform, in part because he had the liberty of knowing that no one was looking over his shoulder to tell him how to do it.

As a youth, Bill Reid was relatively unaware of his native roots. His original interest was in American

and British literature. It was in the 1940's, when he went up north to visit the Haida Gwaii and met his grandfather Charles Gladstone, an argillite carver, that his curiosity about Haida customs, mythology, and carving traditions was aroused, but he remained an outsider looking in. While working as a C.B.C. broadcaster in Toronto he studied jewellery and engraving at Ryerson. By the 50's he was carving in both European and Haida styles in his native city of Vancouver. While attending his grandfather's funeral in 1954, he discovered the sculpture of Charles Edenshaw, one of the last great Haida carvers with direct links to the original craft traditions, active at a time when the Haida culture proper had collapsed.

In 1957 Reid gained direct experience working with one the last old-time Kwakiutl carvers, Mungo Martin, recreating a Haida totem that had disintegrated at the Friendship Peace Park on the U.S.-Canada border in Blaine, Washington. Martin sang to the wood as he worked, as if evoking the ancestral spirits of a long ago out of the wood itself. He didn't speak much, simply pointed to a small human figure signalling Reid to begin carving. A little later Reid asked, "Mungo, where are the Band-Aids?" and was told, "We don't use 'em," the implication being that a native carver never cut himself.¹ Reid went on to

study goldsmithing at the Central School of Art and Design in London, England in 1968 to further his already significant technical expertise. The numerous small scale carvings he has made over the years: boxes, jewellery and carved relief work in gold, silver and cedar are now in many private and museum collections worldwide. He is one of the only natives anywhere to combine a sophisticated knowledge of traditional native imagery with advanced technical expertise based on years of formal training.

The Haida were a brash, sometimes violent seafaring culture, but ecologically resolved. The potlatch ceremonies that took place between opposing families of the Eagle and Raven lineages were an effective form of social, familial and economic exchange in a region burgeoning with natural resources. Any number of items: cedar boxes, masks, jewellery, utilitarian and decorative objects were given away in these feasts. The notion of capital accumulation or amassing wealth over time beyond basic necessity was simply not high on a Haida's list of priorities. A colonial commenting on potlatch activities of Kwakiutl, the Haida's neighbors to the south in 1895, wrote that he was, "told by the older men that they might as well die as give up the custom."² Douglas Cole, a cultural historian at Simon Fraser University states that, "Instead of adopting the social values of their European employers and customers, they used their earnings to reinforce the most significant aspects of their social systems."³ Contact with white colonial culture catastrophically reduced the Haida population from 8,000 to a mere 600 people due to smallpox epidemics. Villages were abandoned and the remaining Haida regrouped to live in Skidegate and Masset. The carvings and paintings of war canoes, body paintings, oral literary and dance traditions effectively died out, though artifacts were still made for collectors and visiting tourists.



Bill Reid, *The full size plaster model for The Dogfish Woman* showing formline relief carvings on The Raven's Wing typical to Haida sculpture. July 1989. Photo credit: Ulli Steltzer.

Bill Reid, *The Black Canoe*, 1991. Detail. Photo credit: Ulli Steltzer.

The reserve of Haida cultural heritage we see in many world class museums are relatively recent, less than 200 years old. The Haida did not believe in preservation of artifacts, but instead recreated them perpetually. They lived in a world of wood and water and did not go through the stone, bronze and iron age progression that European cultures did. As a result, we have little evidence of the Golden Age of their past, one that is every bit as complex as our own for its lineage of indigenous evolution and local variation. In *The Black Canoe; Bill Reid and the Spirit of the Haida Gwaii*, a book he co-authored with Vancouver-based photographer Ulli Steltzer that documents the 5 years that went into the making of *The Black Canoe*, Vancouver poet and writer Robert Brighurst draws a comparison between these two vastly different

little vessel in the Piazza di Spagna in Rome. The animal images it contains - the family's bees - are heraldry alone, with hardly a shred of mythology left. Bernini's boat is white instead of black, and full of ruminative sighs instead of embryonic speeches. And though the tourists crowd upon it by the thousands, it is resolutely empty: an abandoned ship, simultaneously melting and sinking into its pool."

When he was asked to create two Welcome Figures for the Chancery, the entrance court to the new Canadian Embassy in Washington D.C. by its architect, Arthur Erickson in 1985, it was already apparent that Bill Reid's plans for the project were decidedly more ambitious than that. He wanted to create more than a mere adjunct to Erickson's building, a sculptural calling card that would be humbled by the architecture. Reid decided that he would prefer to create a monumental sculpture that would recall the black argillite canoe carvings of the 19th century replete with figures from Haida legends, a form he always appreciated intensely. The result was *The Black Canoe*, one of the most ambitious native sculptures to have been created anywhere this century. George Rammell, his project manager, suggested that instead of black granite, cast bronze

reason was longstanding Haida land claims, imminently threatened by commercial logging firms' plans to clear-cut sections of Lyell Island. When a deal was finally arrived at between the federal, provincial, and Haida, blockades came down, Gwaii Haanas (literally The Islands of Awe in Haida language) became the South Moresby National Park Reserve. Work on the construction of a full size clay prototype build over a complex web of welded steel and wire mesh armature resumed in 1988. Over 100 interlocking positive sections were formed and cut from a plaster mold. Continually critical of the work as it progressed "from one end to the other", Reid had sections taken apart and reassembled numerous times, to rework details he was not satisfied with directly on plaster. Each piece of this jigsaw puzzle in 3D was coated in white shellac to stabilize the plaster during shipment to the Talix Foundry in Beacon, New York. The casting, welding, chasing and patinating of the final 79 pieces was completed by February 1991, whereupon the entire piece was patinated with commercial black shoe polish to give it a dark, reflective patina as is done in contemporary Haida argillite carving. The foundry only allowed Reid's celebrated ark to paddle on to

its final resting place in Washington D.C. after an additional payment of \$250,000 was made. (Costs for the project, from start to finish, had escalated to \$1.5 million). Owned by the Canadian Government, *The Black Canoe* now stands in a pool of moving water at the entrance of the Canadian Embassy in Washington. It measures 388,6 cm high, 363,2 cm wide and 604,5 cm long and weighs a massive 4900 kg. Plans are under way to make a second casting of *The Black Canoe* for a location in front of the Old Court House on West Georgia St., in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Located in the centre of all benign symbols and powers (the Haida do not have a word for God) that go to make up *The Black Canoe's* overall composition, stands the resolute figure of the chieftain who is the undoubted leader of this self-contained voyage into the dark heart of the Haida mythology. Each figure seems to exist in relation to all the others only by necessity, not



traditions through example: "I think of another boat as well, that sits in public space in front of another embassy in another major capital, yet seems to differ from this canoe in every way. It is Pietro Bernini's

patinated black would better suit the vicissitudes of long term outdoor exposure at its future site. Reid, who suffers from Parkinson's disease and required the help of assistants throughout, began work on the clay maquette in 1986. When funding for the project could not be found, Ray Johnson, the Winnipeg-born president of Nabisco foods, committed his company to supporting the project in its entirety.

In late 1986, after a bronze cast had already been made from the clay sketch, Reid halted work on the project, steadfastly refusing to work on anything destined for a federal government building. The

choice. We get the feeling this boat is not truly a seafaring vessel at all, but instead a powerful emblem of cultural survival on the periphery. The whole complex matrix of the piece, its unfamiliar equations, suggest that spiritual wholeness has nothing to do with mankind's conception of itself as the conscious centre of the universe, but with how we realize our connectedness to all the other forms of life. After all, it is the ubiquitous Raven, not the tribal chieftain who is actually steering the canoe with his wings and tail, determining the direction of this voyage. He is the trickster of Haida mythology,

Bill Reid, *The Black Canoe* in the process of being installed at the new Canadian Embassy, Washington D.C., 1991. Bronze. 388,6 x 363,2 x 604,5 cm. Photo credit: Ulli Steltzer.

an omnipresent character, greedy, curious and timeless as the universe. Nestled under one of his wings we see the tiny figure of the bewhiskered Mouse Women, the meekest and wisest of all the characters in Haida legend.

The staff the chief holds in his hand is an actual reconstruction of a staff purported to have belonged to chief Xana from Masset that has been in storage at the Smithsonian Museum for over 100 years. Reid commissioned Don Yeomans, a young native sculptor to recreate its original figures of a Raven with human hands and the snag (a power who lives at the bottom of the sea) in the form of a grizzly bear with finned arms and a killer whales tail. Through the act of reclaiming the symbolic imagery on the original staff Reid has, in a sense, liberated it from its permanent museological imprisonment. As we look at the rich visual and cultural symbology that the staff represents, it becomes a sculpture, a key to the past whose ancient motifs are intact, encoded in its sculptural form.

At the opposite end of the canoe sit a group of figures consisting of bear, bear-woman and her two cubs. Haida legend tells us that bear-woman once made a wicked comment about the bears, one

sculptural inter-relation. The Dogfish Woman with her beaklike nose is a more austere, unsettling figure, lost somewhere between the human and the non-human undersea world. The frog (land crab in Haida) is a female transformation figure, a child of the Raven's wife, who symbolizes wealth and is a migrant between two distinct realms of the sea and the land. It is a work that bears resemblance to *Phyllidula, the Shape of Frogs to come*, a yellow cedar carving made in 1984. Other figures on the canoe include a beaver, a wolf, an eagle and *The Ancient Reluctant Conscript*. Named after a poem by Carl Sandburg, the latter is a self-portrait of Reid himself, a rare occurrence in Haida art of any kind, who is paddling and wears a cedarbark cape and plain-woven spruce root hat, clothing traditionally crafted by women.

These composite figures are not modern-day theatre of the absurd but a concrete representation of the multiplicity of forms the human spirit can take in Haida Culture. The worldliness of Haida wisdom lies in its implicit realization that any physical relatedness to the beyond relies on our recognizing the *that* which is within *everything*. More than mere symbols, or what philosophers would now call an

The foundation of human nature is instinct."⁵

The creatures that inhabit Bill Reid's *The Black Canoe* are not in a race with time, but are a composite expression of the fact that when mystery is attributed to apparently ordinary things, they give a wholeness and form to everything we experience. ♦

- 1 Hillary Stewart, *Totems Poles* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990), p. 53.
- 2 Aldona Jonaitis, ed., *Chiefly Feasts* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1991), p. 137.
- 3 Douglas Cole, *Chiefly Feasts* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1991), ch. 3, p. 136.
- 4 Robert Brighurst & Ulli Steltzer, *The Black Canoe: Bill Reid and the Spirit of Haida Gwaii* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991), p. 76.
- 5 Carl Jung, ed., *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964), p. 265.



which annoyed them. She was guided by a man beyond the mountains to a village inhabited entirely by bears, who when they went indoors, took of their skins and became people. Bear-woman won the bears confidence by leaving pieces of her copper jewellery around and thus married the village chief's son, raising two bear cubs for children, transformers who had the power to adjust the balance of the world. This integral grouping of four figures (Reid named the two bears Good Bear and Bad Bear after A.A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh) communicate a message of overall harmony though their succinct

ecology of the mind, the balancing and interchangeability of human and animal imagery in these complex, near abstract figures is part of the entropic cosmology of the universe. Their function parallels symbolic animal representations in all distinct cultural traditions. They "show how vital it is for men to integrate into their lives the symbol's psychic content - instinct. In itself, an animal is neither good nor evil; it is a piece of nature. It cannot desire anything that is not in its nature. To put this another way, it obeys its instincts. These instincts often seem mysterious to us, but they have a parallel in human life:

Cet essai analyse *The Black Canoe*, une oeuvre du sculpteur haida Bill Reid. Agé de 71 ans, ce dernier réalise la plus achevée des sculptures haida de ce siècle, ce qui constitue, selon ses propres termes, «une occasion tout indiquée de représenter le coeur des nations fondatrices, lesquelles ne sont pas vraiment reconnues à Washington en dehors des musées.» L'article jette un regard sur le riche passé tribal de la peuplade Haida et sur l'effondrement quasi total de leur culture et ce, suite à l'expansion économique européenne et aux épidémies de vérole. Il signale également l'actuelle résurgence de leur héritage culturel, une résurgence dont Reid est l'un des artisans les plus actifs. L'auteur décrit en détail les événements et les procédés techniques qui ont conduit à la réalisation de *The Black Canoe*, de la proposition initiale de l'architecte Arthur Erickson, en 1985, à son coulage en bronze à la fonderie Tallix de New York, et à son installation dans le hall de la chancellerie de la nouvelle ambassade du Canada à Washington D.C. L'oeuvre donne à voir un répertoire complexe de personnages mi-humains, mi-animaux, une symbolique inspirée de la mythologie haida. Au dire de l'artiste, son oeuvre pénètre au coeur même de l'humain puisque toutes les cultures s'identifient de façon intuitive avec les éléments essentiels de leurs milieux de vie respectifs, une démarche qui rejoint le lien ultime que nous entretenons tous avec la nature.

Bill Reid at work on the clay sketch for *The Black Canoe*, July 1986. Photo credit: Ulli Steltzer.