

BOOK REVIEWS AND REVIEW ESSAYS

Julia D. Harrison, Co-Ordinating Curator, with Ted J. Brasser, Bernadette Driscoll, Ruth B. Phillips, Martine J. Reid, Judy Thompson, and Ruth Holmes Whitehead, editors: *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*. Toronto: Glenbow-Alberta Institute and McClelland and Stewart, 1987.

The Curator's task is ultimately impossible, because it depends upon what is, rather than upon what ought to be. No recent exhibition has made this fact as obvious as The Spirit Sings. Specifically, its task was to explore "the physical cosmological, and artistic realms of the native populations of Canada at the time of early contact with Europeans," by assembling objects "dispersed around the world," according to Julia Harrison's forthright Introduction to the Catalogue of the Exhibition,¹ published separately from The Spirit Sings.

In Canada, public recognition that Native art is, in fact, art, probably dates from the Canadian West Coast Art exhibition (1928), a collection of Native art works selected by Marius Barbeau which was accompanied by Emily Carr's paintings. It was nearly forty years later, however, when Doris Shadbolt wrote in her Foreword to The Arts of the Raven (1967), the catalogue of the major exhibition which launched the sequence of Native art exhibitions of which The Spirit Sings is the current culmination, "This is an exhibition of art, high art, not ethnology!"² In the same spirit, Robert Gessain, in his Introduction to the aptly-named catalogue, Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada (1970), described its 186 works as "prestigious objects."³ In both of these exhibitions, the majority of works were carvings, made by men, with a very limited number of skin and fibre objects, made by women.

In 1974, an exhibition of high significance, Athapaskans, Strangers of the North, displayed a broad selection of hitherto little seen works by men and women in truly balanced quantities. Norman Tebble stated that "those museums with great ethnographic collections have tended of late to concentrate upon 'art shows,'"

and pointed out that "we should not forget that artistic ability and the appreciation of colours, forms, and materials are only an aspect of a unique complex of subtle adaptations that go to make up the total culture."⁴ In this holistic spirit, Wilson Duff created the richly evocative speculations of his exhibition, Images Stone B.C. (1975), in which he examined the "inner logic which resides in the style and the internal structure of individual works of art."⁵ The most revelatory works were the reunited pair of stone masks, one with closed eyes, and one with eyes open, from Kitkatla, a Southern Coastal Tsimshian village, also shown in The Spirit Sings.

Ted J. Brasser continued this interpretive thrust in "Bo'jou Nejee!" (1976), which made works from the Speyer Collection available for viewing in Canada. Its central artifact, also included in The Spirit Sings, was a 1740s Naskapi painted skin which displays the Universe divided between "forest and summer" and "caribou and winter."⁶ In his catalogue, Brasser divided the many works by material, suggesting that bark was sewn with root and skin with sinew, in expression of a similar vegetable/animal duality. The role of Native spirituality became the central focus of Jean Blodgett's exhibition catalogue, The Coming and Going of the Shaman (1978),⁷ in which ancient, traditional, and modern Inuit and Alaskan Eskimo works were assembled to enhance understanding of the shaman's role in Arctic life. To these insights, Bernadette Driscoll added her catalogue, The Inuit Aautik (1980),⁸ in which the life of Inuit women was addressed through this garment and works of Inuit art depicting it. In her sophisticated commentary she interpreted both the garment and its representation as expressions of spiritual, social and cosmological meanings. Ruth B. Phillips' essential study in her catalogue, Patterns of Power (1984), made clear the cosmological meaning of Eastern Woodlands arts, with their embodiments, not least in their abstract motifs, of the Manitous of the upper world and the under world which comprise the cosmic polarities. The woven and embroidered bags bearing these motifs and images "can be seen as three-dimensional models of the forces that energize the cosmos."⁹

Having validated Native art as fine art, shown its relationship to the totality of Native life, and explored its profoundly spiritual dimensions, there remained the task of defining the relationship of Native art to that of the Europeans into whose hands these many superb objects had come. Dennis Reid and Joan Vastokas addressed to this their catalogue, From the Four Quarters (1984),¹⁰ of an exhibition of stunning originality, in which a sequence of four historic periods was illustrated by works of Native and European artists shown side by side. The display proceeded from the early equality of refined craftsmanship to the later inroads of mechanization in which radically changed values overwhelmed the visions of both groups.

In his own summary of the transition of Native art from "ceremonial" through "commercial" to "the new art," art of "personal expression" or "public statement," Tom Hill provided the distinctive insights of one who is both a Native person and a distinguished curator, in the catalogue he co-wrote with Elizabeth McLuhan, Norval Morrisseau and The Emergence of the Image Makers (1984).¹¹ When the Art Gallery of Ontario placed these contemporary Native works on its walls, the effort by art galleries to recognize in Native art the individual artist and the individual work had come full circle. And in 1986, Julia D. Harrison's exhibition, Metis: People Between Two Worlds, significantly and permanently broadened the canon of what comprises Native art yet again.¹²

It is to this sequence of exhibitions that The Spirit Sings (1987) is both successor and inheritor. It was accompanied by two publications: the book I am reviewing, which contains essays by the curators, and the actual catalogue--fully annotated and illustrated--which I have found indispensable in understanding and interpreting the essays. The Spirit Sings is a very good book written by a committee. It is sumptuously illustrated and its essays are major studies, most of which represent the state of the art in their respective fields. In all but one of these essays there is a balance of objects made by men and objects made by women,

so that the collaboration of the sexes in creating meaning and assuring survival is made clear.

Ruth Homes Whitehead, whose essay, "I Have Lived Here Since the World Began: Atlantic Coast Artistic Traditions," opens the volume, quotes an eighteenth century dismissal of Maritime art as "fanciful scrawls," (p. 25) but responds that "decoration is used to express and enhance magic." Once, I was told by a Micmac-speaking student, that there was one difference between a Euro-Canadian woman and a Micmac woman who had taught her to do porcupine quill embroidery: the latter taught that in sorting quills, one must always lay them in order, with "their noses pointing in one direction and their feet in the other." A porcupine quill is a porcupine, and life-forms are entitled to respect. In this instruction lies the whole of The Spirit Sings.

This meaning becomes clear in "Like a Star I Shine: Northern Woodlands Artistic Traditions," by Ruth B. Phillips. She states that Native arts "give outward visible form to beliefs about the correct relationship of human beings to one another and to the supernatural forces surrounding them" (p. 92). For the Native artist, making matter into art is a "transformational act" (p. 77). Phillips breaks new ground in establishing five aesthetic principles of Woodlands art: the use of naturalistic effigies; an "additive" principle of ornament; the symbolic importance of luminous materials such as shell; a spatial distribution of motifs which she calls "asymmetrical," to which I shall return below; and an aesthetic of positive and negative shape.

Ted Brassier's essay, "By the Power of Dreams: Artistic Traditions of the Northern Plains," continued the emphasis on spiritual elements, while suggesting that "after the holocaust of the early epidemics the spiritual world-view eroded and was replaced by a drive for material and prestige" (pp. 114-115). Judy Thompson's essay "No Little Variety of Ornament: Northern Athapaskan Artistic clothing, a "second skin,' closely linked to the soul and personality of its owner" (p. 148). Bernadette Driscoll in "Pretending to be Caribou: The Inuit Parka as an Artistic Tradition," demonstrates that the male parka depicts sea

mammals when used for marine hunting, and caribou when used for hunting on land, while the female parka is devoted to images of maternity. "As an artisan," she says, "the Inuit seamstress ranked among the most innovative and skilled craftspeople in the world" (p. 200).

Martin J. Reid's essay "Silent Speakers: Arts of the Northwest Coast," is in some degree of contrast to all this. First, she states (contrary to the evidence even of her own illustrations) that "art created by males...has a representational intention; art created by females...is non-representational" (p. 226). Secondly, her aesthetic canon is based upon Bill Holm's now-classic Northwest Coast Art: An Analysis of Form (1965), while recent exhibitions of North West Coast textile arts such as Doreen Jensen and Polly Sargent's Robes of Power (1986) have had no apparent impact. She uses the long-held view that northern and southern coastal art differed in emphasizing, respectively, social as opposed to spiritual themes, a view which is now being reinterpreted, as the spiritual meaning of a northern coastal cosmos expressed in terms of social hierarchy is being explored by Margaret Seguin's Traditional and Current Tsimshian Feasts (1985) and John Cove's Shattered Images (1987). Of course the scholarly study and aesthetic analysis of North West Coast art began earlier than any other so the inclusion of earlier interpretations is understandable.

The Spirit Sings, taken as a whole, combines aesthetics with interpretations of the spiritual elements that are central to Native art. A striking leitnotif, introduced by Phillips, is the element of "asymmetry," for which I would prefer the term "complementarity" or even "simultaneity." The effect is not really characterized by a lack of symmetry, since the actual images are almost always axially symmetrical, but by the use of two motifs which simultaneously coexist but differ even as they complete one another. On North West Coast kerfed boxes, and Eastern Woodlands woven or quilled bags, one image appears on one side and another on the other. When these objects are rotated the images appear and reappear, each presupposing the other. Again,

one of two carved posts of a North West Coast house may bear the crests of a noblewoman and the other the crests of her husband, signifying a marriage which has combined two clans. On the Plains, the imagery of one military society may appear on one moccasin, and that of another on the other. Each motif enhances and reinforces the other in such usages. And yet again, the two halves of the Naskapi painting depicting the summer and the winter, represent alternating states of being, while North West Coast crest images combine elements of animal, human, vegetable, spirit, in a single form, even as transformation masks express successive identities.

The implication is not one of permanent change as in the Western concept of conversion or evolution, but of various states of being and various cosmic elements existing simultaneously. This transformational element has often been remarked upon, and it appears in Western culture in the concept of the sacrament, but that long understanding has been accompanied by an equally long Western emphasis upon all forms of process as linear and irreversible. To the more complex, supple, and multivalent world of Canadian Native art, such concepts might be seen not only as rigid and simplistic but even dangerous. We will have to wait for exhibitions of Western art curated by Native people in order to find out.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

NOTES

¹Julia D. Harrison, Introduction, The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples--The Catalogue of the Exhibition (Toronto: Glenbow-Alberta Institute and McClelland and Stewart, 1987), p. 7.

²Doris Shadbolt, Foreword, Wilson Duff, Bill Holm, Bill Reid, Arts of the Raven (Vancouver: The Vancouver Art Gallery, 1967).

³Robert Gessein, Introduction, Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada (Paris: Societe des Amis du Musee de l'Homme, 1969; Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 1970).

⁴Norman Tebble, Foreword, The Athapaskans: Strangers of the North (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1974), p. 5.

⁵Wilson Duff, Images Stone BC: Thirty Centuries of Northwest Coast Indian Sculpture (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975).

⁶Ted J. Brassler, "Bo'jou, Neejee!": Profiles of Canadian Indian Art (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1976), p. 23.

⁷Jean Blodgett, The Coming and Going of the Shaman: Eskimo Shamanism and Art (Winnipeg: The Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1978).

⁸Bernadette Driscoll, The Inuit Amautik: I Like My Hood to be Full (Winnipeg: The Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1980).

⁹Ruth B. Phillips, Patterns of Power (Kleinburg, Ontario: The McMichael Canadian Collection, 1985), p. 25.

¹⁰Dennis Reid and Joan Vastokas, From the Four Quarters: Native and European Art in Ontario 5000 BC to 1867 AD (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984).

¹¹Elizabeth McLuhan and Tom Hill, Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984), *passim*.

¹²Julia D. Harrison, Metis, People Between Two Worlds (Calgary: The Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1985).

Victor P. Lytwyn: The Fur Trade of the Little North Indians, Peddlers, and Englishmen East of Lake Winnipeg, 1760-1821. Winnipeg: Rupert's Land Research Centre, University of Winnipeg, 1986.

This is a study of the fur trade in the area known to early Canadian fur traders as the Little North, or Le Petit Nord, as distinguished from the Grand North lying northwest of Lake Winnipeg. More precisely Lytwyn defines it to be the region between Lake Superior in the south and the Hudson Bay Lowlands in the north, and between Lake Winnipeg in the west and the divide between the Albany and Moose River systems in the east. Common economic interests and linkages distinguish it from surrounding areas. The time frame is the period of rivalry between the Hudson's Bay Company and Montreal traders which began in 1760 and terminated with the union of the Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company in 1821. Attention throughout focuses upon this rivalry and the shifting locations where it was