

Vancouver Art Gallery

Hornby Street
Vancouver BC V6Z 2H7
Daily 10 – 5
Tuesday open until 9PM
Info Line: 604-662-4719

Haida Gwaii: A Magical Land Reclaimed and Threatened

Charles Edenshaw

October 26, 2013 – February 2, 2014

Admission: Adults \$25. Seniors 15.

Reviewer: Susan Noyes Platt
www.artandpoliticsnow.com

A rare opportunity approaches this fall. We can see the first major exhibition of one of the founders of twentieth century Haida art at the Vancouver Art Gallery in Vancouver BC. Robin Wright, Director of the Bill Holm Center for the Study of Northwest Coast Art at the Burke Museum and international expert on Haida art, has curated a new exhibition of the work of Charles Edenshaw (1839-1920), a pioneering artist working at a time when Haida and their culture were under great duress.

Haida had no word for art in their language. Art for them was deeply integrated into life. It did not exist as an aesthetic object until after contact with European traders, but Haida art is now a central reference point for creative expression in the Northwest. Along with other Northwest tribes, Tshimshian, Kwakwaka'wakw, and Tlingit, these artists carve, weave, engrave, and paint extraordinary art based on complex design principles.

Since I have just returned from a soul expanding trip to Haida Gwaii (formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands see my blog www.artandpoliticsnow.com for more detail), I can say unequivocally that this exhibition is not to be missed. We have a small collection of Haida art on view at the Seattle Art Museum

that you might want to revisit before you go. You can also prepare yourself by looking more carefully at our many poles in Seattle, some of which are Haida, revisiting the Burke Museum and exploring their website which has a wealth of information.

The Haida have maintained their culture for 10,000 years. They reached low ebb around 1900, as small pox decimated their traditional settlements and forced them to consolidate in just two villages on Graham Island: Masset and Skidegate. At the same time, many Haida children were sent off to boarding schools; potlatch, the celebration that accompanies pole raising, was outlawed (until 1951); Christian missionaries forced rapid changes in all aspects of life; and economic resource exploitation by outsiders led to crushing poverty in the midst of natural plenty.

Yet, these powerful people have survived, and today their culture is strong again. One turning point was the 1985 Repatriation act, which allowed First Nations peoples to reclaim their rights and to return to their villages. They immediately staged a logging protest on Lyell Island the same year, which stopped indiscriminate old growth logging and led to widespread changes in the logging industry as a whole. It also led in 1993 to a joint management agreement with the government of British Columbia for Gwaii Haanas, the islands in the southern Part of Haida Gwaii, which includes seven ancient villages, now abandoned. The pact required agreement from the Haida for actions from the bottom of the sea to the sky. Their strength is not surprising. Haida Gwaii (HY-duh-GWY) is a group of hundreds of islands that sit on the very edge of the continental shelf. The seas are filled with a wealth of marine life, from whales to tiny crustaceans. The temperate climate supports edible vegetation year round on both land and sea, (supplemented today by deer introduced in the 19th century).

The stunning landscape of the Haida has a magnetic appeal: we feel the real depth of nature's power and its dangers; we feel the closeness of animals and birds. In the midst of this wealth of nature, the Haida have lived for tens of thousands of years. They have been shaped by it and they are continuous with it, as we see in their many stories preserved through oral traditions.

Throughout this long history they have produced a wealth of art from cedar and spruce roots, from argillite (the only deposit is on Haida Gwaii and only

the Haida can have access to it) and from the tall cedar trees. Bill Reid's large sculpture of Raven discovering humans in a clam shell is one of the most famous sculptures of the Haida, but their poles are everywhere, both in original and in replica. Their distinctive tales of Eagle, Raven, Bear, Whale, Humans and other creatures are represented in their art over and over.

Charles Edenshaw is part of a family who made art at the turn of the twentieth century. In spite of dominant "vanishing race" perspectives of collectors and museums, who were helping themselves to poles and other artifacts, Edenshaw created extraordinary sculptures based on traditional stories, assimilation of traditional styles, and creative reinterpretations based on contact with Europeans. Edenshaw's work is a fascinating interweaving of traditional approaches to design and form, with new interpretations and ideas. For example, on an extraordinary argillite box in the collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, is a startling three dimensional lion head (obviously a creature unknown in Haida Gwaii.)

The exhibition will include 200 pieces and has five themes, Haida Traditions, Narratives, Style, Forms and Legacy. Perhaps the most fascinating is the Traditions, which will include both work from his family and objects that were commissioned by others to demonstrate the Haida "way of life" to outsiders. In the Narratives section, we will be able to see the artist's original creations in argillite that provide lively interpretation of traditional stories. Style and form will give a closer understanding of the construction of this complex art work. Finally the Legacy section includes contemporary artists; many eminent contemporary Haida artists claim their lineage as well as their inspiration from Charles Edenshaw.

Today, on Haida Gwaii, there are seven new poles at the Haida Heritage Center that honor the ancient villages. <http://www.haidaheritagecentre.com/>. There are poles in Masset and Skidegate that honor individuals and community. This summer the Gwaii Haanas Legacy Pole was raised on Windy Bay on the same island as the first strong act of resistance by the Haida.

But the Haida are once again threatened by the Enbridge plan to send tar sands oil in tankers through the waters of these irreplaceable and fragile islands. The Haida have been protesting it in hearings and in signs for over a year. "Thanks, But No Tanks," at the Haida Cultural Center exhibited 25 works

protesting the oil tankers and pipelines Now they are also laying their bodies on the line to resist along the pipe line route. They have never given up rights to their land, and they will not allow their cultures to be destroyed again.

When you visit the Charles Edenshaw exhibition this fall, keep in mind how far the Haida have come since this artist began to make art, and how strong is the will to keep the Haida life and spirit alive for another 10,000 years. Charles Edenshaw left his tools to the grandfather of Bill Reid, the well-known carver who led the revival of Haida art and culture starting in the 1950s. Bill Reid is the father of Gwaii Edenshaw who assisted on the Legacy pole as well as making a strong protest image in "Thanks, But No Tanks." The face on the oil tank is disintegrating. Who will win, the oil or life itself? Gwaii Edenshaw's work, called "False Promises," is also a protest of prostitution that is rampant among transient workers on sites of energy extraction. The work, like that of his ancestor, relies on both tradition and innovation to make its point. Life and death is once again the issue.

I recommend going on Amtrak, it is cheap and easy (\$60. Round trip) especially with border and a short trip on local transportation leads you to the Vancouver Art Gallery. You can also do a round trip in one day and avoid hotels.