

Traditionalism vs. Modernism? The Art of the Northwest Coast

Indigenous communities of the Northwest Coast, notably in Canada, have a broad and colourful collection of cultures and ways of making art, but tend to be framed as one monolithic group by the world. This essay will explore the nature of Northwest Coast Modernisms in relation to the debate on traditionalism vs. progressivism and how colonialism has impacted said debate. I will first provide context for what Northwest Coast Modernisms are, then move on to examples of artists within the movement and how their practices question and comment on the narrative of colonialism in the Pacific Northwest. For the artists I will be studying, I chose Lawrence Paul Yuxweultun, Roy Henry Vickers, Jim Schoppert, and Sonny Assu. These artists hail from British Columbia all the way up to Alaska, all coming from different Indigenous communities to provide a variation in perspective for this essay.

Because the concept of the ‘Northwest Coast’ encapsulates such a broad geographic scope, the indigenous identities that fall under this umbrella are incredibly diverse. The Northwest Coast is a term referencing areas along the coast of Washington, through British Columbia, the Yukon, and finally Alaska. Groups within the movement include: the Tlingit in the North, the Haisla and Kwakwaka’wakw on Vancouver Island, the Haida of Haida Gwaii, Coast Salish (another umbrella term for various nations), and many more¹. Grouping of these indigenous identities together is historically arbitrary. In pre-colonial times, these groups didn’t necessarily inherently share any connections to one another. Now, the idea of the Northwest Coast does apply in some ways to the shared colonial impact on the areas, situated in what is

¹ Christopher T. Green, "Northwest Coast Native Art Beyond Revival, 1962–1992." PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2020. 7

now Canada and the United States. Still, many artists define themselves either within, against, or as extensions of this movement². So, in this essay, I will acknowledge that though the term has a bit of a controversial history, it is an important term in understanding the history of the movement.

The Northwest Coast Renaissance was a term coined in the 1960s, an artistic period believed to have started in 1967 with the exhibition *Arts of the Raven* at the Vancouver Art Gallery³. Though it initially started as the ‘Northwest Coast Renaissance’, the movement evolved to become the Northwest Coast *Modernisms* movement. The Northwest Coast Modernism movement was a reaction to the traditionalism of the Renaissance, developing a hybrid style instead that commented on the complicated nature between traditionalism, modernism, and colonial history of Canada and the United States⁴. Sometimes, ‘modernisms’ and ‘renaissance’ are used interchangeably. This movement carries on even today, where Indigenous Artists across the Northwest Coast continue to question the pervading colonial narratives in the art and museum world within the modern art movements.

The primary issue with the Renaissance or Revival is the question of when Indigenous artworks are ‘allowed’ to become heralded as fine art. However, it is first important to acknowledge that the historical reasons for a ‘revival’ are rooted in colonialism. If not for the

² Christopher T. Green, "Northwest Coast Native Art Beyond Revival, 1962–1992." PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2020. 7

³ Christopher T. Green, "Northwest Coast Native Art Beyond Revival, 1962–1992." PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2020. 16

⁴ Jaime-Brett Sine. "Reshaping Tradition: Linking Continuity, Change, and Formline Design in Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." Concordia University Montreal, 2012. 38

cultural decline because of colonial cultural suppression through operations such as the Residential School system, there wouldn't be a need for cultural rejuvenation.⁵ Native artists in the twentieth century were therefore seeking to reconnect with lost culture through the reconnection to traditional artwork. In conjunction, non-Native people were developing more interest in Native artworks, therefore creating a higher demand. This leads to the question of 'authenticity' within the movement, where some art is deemed as more valid or authentic, and therefore should be deemed as 'proper' Northwest Coast First Nations art by the art world.⁶ What is generally believed to be traditional for the movement falls under the category of formline design. Formline design is a style notably classified by Bill Holm in *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* and consists of specific design elements such as U-forms, ovoids, S-forms, particular colour choices, and more.⁷ If artists must stay within specific guidelines to create 'true' Northwest Coast art, some artists question how can the movement change? How can it adapt?

Many artists within both the earlier days of the Revival and further into the Northwest Coast Modernisms movement toe the binary of traditional and the contemporary. The unifying element between the artists I chose to explore in this essay is how each artist chooses to straddle the binary, to create modernist-styled artworks that pull from each of their respective cultures. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun is of Coast Salish and Sylix descent. However, his artwork

⁵ Barbara E. Milmine "Art, Identity and Culture: The Politicization of Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." PhD diss., University of Northern British Columbia, 2006. 30

⁶ Jaime-Brett Sine. "Reshaping Tradition: Linking Continuity, Change, and Formline Design in Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." Concordia University Montreal, 2012. 3

⁷ Alice Marie Campbell. "About humanity, not ethnicity?: transculturalism, materiality, and the politics of performing aboriginality on the Northwest Coast." PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2004. 23.

breaches lines of identity, borrowing elements of traditional Haida and Kwakwaka'wakw designs to question the idea of timelessness and unchangeability of Northwest Coast First Nations art.⁸ His work primarily focuses on political issues that affect First Nations peoples in Canada, explaining how his choice to borrow between different Coastal First Nations styles as a commentary on how many of these groups have been culturally assimilated.⁹ His artworks tie together the historical and the contemporary, not only in artistic style but also in the thematic sense. Yuxweluptun's paintings explore how Canada's racist past is still very much in action today through land issues in British Columbia and elsewhere, pervading colonial attitudes, and much, much more.¹⁰ This phenomenon leaks into the art world as well, where Native Art is still deemed as separate to that of Contemporary Art. Watson explains how some of the reasons why Native art is framed this way in institutions is because it raises the uncomfortable question of what Canadian identity is if Canada is built on the suppression and elimination of Native cultures.¹¹ With this in mind, we can understand more about how Yuxweluptun uses his

⁸ Scott Watson, "The Modernist Past of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's Landscape Allegories," *Born to Live and Die on Your Colonialist Reservations*, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Scott Watson, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, eds. (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1995), 1.

⁹ Barbara E. Milmine "Art, Identity and Culture: The Politicization of Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." PhD diss., University of Northern British Columbia, 2006. 86.

¹⁰ Barbara E. Milmine "Art, Identity and Culture: The Politicization of Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." PhD diss., University of Northern British Columbia, 2006. 90.

¹¹ Scott Watson, "The Modernist Past of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's Landscape Allegories," *Born to Live and Die on Your Colonialist Reservations*, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Scott Watson, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, eds. (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1995), 8.

paintings to disrupt the cultural status quo and call out the racist policies that are ingrained in Canadian society.

Roy Henry Vickers considers community connection as a two-way process, that the communities that identify him with them, he likewise identifies with. He is from British Columbia and of Tsimshian, Haida, and Heiltsuk descent.¹² Vickers is most famous for his prints of landscapes, featuring shadow images and his signature eagle moon. In terms of the political nature of his works, Vickers believes that his art is always political, bringing messages of community and of the strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Therefore, his understanding of the Northwest Coast Revival is more of one in relation to a revival spirit *alongside* that of the revival of culture.¹³ His ideas on the Northwest Coast Revival argue in favour of embracing the revival, though he understands how it is impossible to return completely to a time before colonialism. Therefore, he wishes to express positive change, how people can move past categorizations and accept one another as they are.¹⁴ Vickers art is political in the personal sense, he comes from both an Indigenous background and an English background. The blending of styles plays into the bridging of gaps between cultures. His artwork features flat shapes, bright colours, and gradients, a very modern style blended seamlessly with Formline designs, like the previously mentioned eagle moon. They show images from various locations around British Columbia, including that of people and animals interacting with the landscape. It

¹² Barbara E. Milmine "Art, Identity and Culture: The Politicization of Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." PhD diss., University of Northern British Columbia, 2006. 76.

¹³ Barbara E. Milmine "Art, Identity and Culture: The Politicization of Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." PhD diss., University of Northern British Columbia, 2006. 81.

¹⁴ Barbara E. Milmine "Art, Identity and Culture: The Politicization of Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." PhD diss., University of Northern British Columbia, 2006. 84.

is understandable upon taking in his works how they express his ideas of a spiritual revival and that of community.

We find an example of an artist whose work directly responds to the Northwest Coast Renaissance in Jim Schoppert. Born in Alaska and of Tlingit descent, Schoppert questions primitivism and the appropriation of Indigenous art by Euro-American artists in his work.¹⁵ Schoppert uses elements of Formline design in his paintings but breaks from traditional styles in his choice in messy style of painting and abstraction. His artworks push back against the narrative of sticking to the traditional, eternal 'past' of Northwest Coast art. The way he uses abstraction to his advantage sends this message; in that he breaks up images of Formline design into pieces. Where, while these designs are still recognizable, they reflect styles such as cubism.¹⁶ Like the previous two artists I studied, Schoppert believes his artworks are not breaking from tradition, but rather bringing traditional styles into a modern context. He did so by combining Tlingit and Northern Formline designs with the styles of European and American modernists, most notably through abstract sculpture.¹⁷ Green explores Schopperts approach to colonialism's impact on Native Art through his wooden mask *Art is a One-Eared Madman*. The design of the mask borrows from Chugach mask design as well as the painting style of Vincent Van Gogh. Schoppert compares the treatment of Van Gogh to that of Native Art, in that people appreciate the art, but don't appreciate the artist and likewise the surrounding context of the

¹⁵ Christopher T. Green, "Northwest Coast Native Art Beyond Revival, 1962–1992." PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2020. 133.

¹⁶ Christopher T. Green, "Northwest Coast Native Art Beyond Revival, 1962–1992." PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2020. 137.

¹⁷ Christopher T. Green, "Northwest Coast Native Art Beyond Revival, 1962–1992." PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2020. 153.

artists life.¹⁸ He uses this work to question why museums and the Art World as a whole take in indigenous art into their collections but choose to ignore the inherent biases against the artists themselves and the stories they wish to tell. Overall, the general theme of de-identifying Native artists to shy away from colonial attitudes appears to carry on throughout the explorations I am taking between my chosen artists.

We then move on to our final artist, Sonny Assu. Assu was born in Richmond British Columbia, and only at the age of eight did he find out about his Kwakwaka'wakw heritage on his mother's side. His art education at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design led him to focus more on developing artistic practices that connected to his culture, for he grew up quite separated from his heritage.¹⁹ Much of Assu's work centres on using recognizable pop cultural symbols as introductory points to get the average person to relate to the work, then teaching the reader about important political issues surrounding the Northwest Coast, both within the art world and beyond. Examples of works that do this include *The Breakfast Series* where he uses iconic cereal brands and his series of works which take aesthetics from Apple's iPod advertisements.²⁰ Further, Assu takes his commentary on colonialist attitudes directly in commentary on museums as well with his work titled *Longing*, where he takes 'masks' from off-cuts disposed from home development operations and places these leftovers into a museum. It works simultaneously as a questioning on the harms of land development in Canada and a commentary on what counts as

¹⁸ Christopher T. Green, "Northwest Coast Native Art Beyond Revival, 1962–1992." PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2020. 154.

¹⁹ Jaime-Brett Sine. "Reshaping Tradition: Linking Continuity, Change, and Formline Design in Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." Concordia University Montreal, 2012. 15.

²⁰ Jaime-Brett Sine. "Reshaping Tradition: Linking Continuity, Change, and Formline Design in Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." Concordia University Montreal, 2012. 52.

Indigenous arts. There is no traditional artistic element to these works, no evidence of Formline design, but nevertheless are presented like Northwest Coast masks when exhibited.²¹ Though the works do call back to traditional presentations and ideas of Northwest Coast masks, they disrupt the narrative that all Northwest Coast art should remain in the past. Sonny Assu uses direct and blunt references to contemporary culture and unusual approaches to art to fight against the colonial narrative of Canadian museums.

All the chosen artists react and interpret the nature of the Northwest Coast Renaissance in very different ways. However, a unified theme weaves through them: each of these artists questions why the traditional and the contemporary must be separate ideas. A large issue with Northwest Coast artists, and minority artists as a whole, is the pressure to perform one's identity for a wider audience.²² The choice to take a fully traditional approach is not being criticised here, nor is the choice to fully reject this style either. What is being questioned is the expectation to fulfil a particular historical narrative to fit into artistic norms and colonial museum narratives. Traditional artists such as Doug Cranmer and Mungo Martin are integral to the movement in reinforcing traditional styles.²³ If not for the continuation of traditional carving and other artistic practices the modernist off-shoots of Northwest Coast would not exist. What can be taken away from my analysis of these artists is that the Northwest Coast modernisms movement need not be subjected to categorical boxes. The way to make Indigenous arts free and equal is to rid the

²¹ Jaime-Brett Sine. "Reshaping Tradition: Linking Continuity, Change, and Formline Design in Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." Concordia University Montreal, 2012. 54.

²² Alice Marie Campbell. "About humanity, not ethnicity?: transculturalism, materiality, and the politics of performing aboriginality on the Northwest Coast." PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2004. 10.

²³ Barbara E. Milmine "Art, Identity and Culture: The Politicization of Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art." PhD diss., University of Northern British Columbia, 2006. 50.

narratives of what is or is not acceptable. This is primarily an issue of colonialism. The exhibition that brought Northwest Coast art into a 'renaissance', *Arts of the Raven*, exhibited Northwest Coast art as *art* and not a historical product and was the first major exhibit within Canada to do so.²⁴ But one exhibition does not undo hundreds of years of colonial thinking. The work of the artists I chose to study are integral in creating varying perspectives on Northwest Coast artworks and what it can be.

²⁴ Alice Marie Campbell. "About humanity, not ethnicity?: transculturalism, materiality, and the politics of performing aboriginality on the Northwest Coast." PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2004. 28.

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