Indigenous Influences
Indigenous Influences


Museum of Northwest Art
121 N. 1st Street
La Conner, Washington
98274

All rights reserved. No part of this catalogue may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by Regan Shrumm
420 Raynor Avenue
Victoria, British Columbia
V9A 3A6

Editor/Designer: Regan Shrumm
Authors: Regan Shrumm and Elissa Washuta
Copy-editors: Kathleen Moles, Chloe Dye Sherpe, Victoria Wyatt, and Adrian Paradis
Photography: Joe Mabel, Calvin F. Todd, Chris Felver, Andrew Paquet, Kirk Schwartz, Christy Lyman, and Wolfgang Sauber
Cover image: Sea Bear Panel by Jesse Campbell

Printed in Canada by Metropol Industries

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Museum of Northwest Art, host institution
Indigenous influences.

Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-9958600-0-1 (softcover)

I. Shrumm, Regan, writer of added commentary, organizer II. Title.

ND212.M87 2017 759.13 C2017-900219-8
Indigenous Influences
**Table of Contents**

Curatorial Statement  
1

Introduction  
3

The Northwest Mystics’ Interests In Indigenous Art  
7

The Swinomish Tribe  
11

Petroglyphs  
15

Helmi Juvonen  
17

Understanding Northwest Coast Indigenous Art  
21

Sincerest Form By Elissa Washuta  
31

Contributors  
37

Acknowledgements  
39
**Figure 1.** Guy Anderson  
*Night of the Whales*  
1957  
Oil on wood panel  
Gift of John Hauberg and Anne Gould Hauberg  
Photographer: Christy Lyman  
Courtesy of the Museum of Northwest Art (Collection no. 1985.009.016).
Curatorial Statement

The aim of *Indigenous Influences* is to allow you to look at Northwest art with new, unconventional eyes. By comparing non-Indigenous artworks from the Museum of Northwest Art’s permanent collection with Indigenous pieces from the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, I hope to connect the two types of work, encourage new stories to be heard, and provide an opportunity to promote both old and contemporary Indigenous artworks. Working with the local Swinomish Tribe as well as contemporary Indigenous artists was essential as part of this curatorial project. As a non-Indigenous curator, I wanted to ensure that Indigenous viewpoints and histories are affirmed in the exhibition, as underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples is still a frequent and hurtful occurrence. As Aboriginal Studies professor Rauna Kuokkanen writes in “Toward a New Relation of Hospitality in the Academy,” when Indigenous people have the freedom to tell their own story, this process can “inspire them to action, explain, and justify their acts, and define them in the eyes of outsiders….A people who affirm their history can make themselves strong” (269).

While researching, I found a clear connection between the racial tension that occurred throughout the 20th century and the country’s current status. These anxieties have been happening for hundreds of years in the United States and have not gotten better in some respects. A mistake that I found that many of Northwest mystics made was a lack of communication; visiting Swinomish Tribe’s ceremonies or museums with Indigenous art, but not talking to the communities and artists. A dialogue between individuals is so essential in all manners of life to truly understand each other.

Regan Shrumm
2016 Dana and Toni Curatorial Rust Fellow
Figure 2. Pioneer Square totem pole and pergola, Seattle, n.d.
Photographer: Calvin F. Todd.
Courtesy of the University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Calvin F. Todd Photograph Collection (Negative no. Todd 12383).
INDIGENOUS INFLUENCES

REGAN SHRUMM

Introduction

“A lot of people don’t understand that when they are appropriating our artwork that our history, our culture and even our laws are codified into this, so that when you take it and you manipulate it and you bastardise it and you put it out there as your own without understanding the meaning, you’re doing significant damage.”

– Janet Rogers, Mohawk/Tuscarora poet, 2016

In 1953, Life Magazine published an article, “Mystic Painters of the Northwest,” that moved four painters into the national limelight: Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Guy Anderson, and Kenneth Callahan. The magazine stated that the four artists, who were deemed the 'Northwest School,' had one connection between them: “…they embody a mystical feeling toward life and the universe. This mystical approach stems partly from the artists’ awareness of the overwhelming forces of nature which surround them in the region…” While the article solely refers to the “forces of nature” as Asian and Asian-American art influences, the language the magazine uses also implies an association to what the 1950s public might have considered Indigenous culture. Although researchers have acknowledged that these four artists, as well as their fellow artist acquaintances like Hemi Juvonen and Wesley Wehr, began to collect Pacific Northwest Indigenous art and visit local Indigenous ceremonies, a connection between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists from this region is missing. Art historian Sheryl Conkelton proposes that Indigenous and non-Indigenous evolving histories responding to cross-cultural pressures “…[have] yet to be integrated into our sense of mid-century Northwest art.” Indigenous Influences examines the significance of Indigenous design and culture on Tobey, Graves, Anderson, Callahan, and Juvonen, as well as the problems and complexities that come with appropriating Indigenous styles.
Cultural appropriation is the act of a person from one culture taking culturally distinct items, aesthetics, or spiritual practices from another culture. The item is adopted without permission or contact, and is often imitated without being a direct copy. Cultural appropriation has been occurring for hundreds of years, as people from various cultures interact and create hybrid communities, foods, clothing, art, and ceremonies. While appropriation is not always a negative concept, it often becomes harmful when a majority culture appropriates from a minority culture. Throughout the world, Indigenous nations in particular have been subject to negative cultural appropriation. For example, Indigenous imagery was used in the city of Seattle throughout the 19th century, from the city’s annual Potlatch (Figure 3 and 4), named after a gift-giving feast practiced by many Pacific Northwest Indigenous peoples, to the Tlingit totem pole that was unveiled in 1899 in Pioneer Square (Figure 2). By examining this imagery, historian Coll Thrush explained that Seattle crafted a narrative that states it was the premier city of the Northwest Coast. However, the city would often use Indigenous imagery to depict Indigenous people as cannibals, uneducated, or drunken, creating misconceptions that would last decades.

Cultural appropriation can hurt Indigenous artists financially as imitating Indigenous art does not create a new category of artwork, but instead only adds to an existing market. Therefore, customers may buy non-Indigenous artwork that fills their desire to own a ‘Native-looking’ artwork. However, cultural appropriation can also misrepresent Indigenous cultures. Those who are appropriating might not fully understand the cultures and therefore create potentially harmful or false meanings and ideas about Indigenous cultures. Philosopher Elizabeth Burns Coleman explains that since traditional lands, ceremonies, and general ways of life have been confiscated from Indigenous peoples, “…the only thing left for Aboriginal people is identity through art, and this is now being abused.”
Figure 3. Seattle Potlatch Parade with parade participants wearing totem pole costumes, 1912. Photographer: unknown. Courtesy of the University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections (Negative no. UW 313).

Figure 4. Official postcard invitation to the Seattle Golden Potlatch, 1912. Printed by The Hopf Brothers Company of Seattle. Courtesy of the C. L. Morgan Postcard Collection.
Figure 5. Mark Tobey  
*Ecclesiastical Phantasy*  
1954  
Tempera on paper  
Gift of James Odlin  
Courtesy of the Museum of Northwest Art (Collection no. 1999.059.008).
The Northwest Mystics’ Interests in Indigenous Art

“Art, if Pacific, must have roots either in the Orient or the American Indian as no environment per se gives ‘Art.’”

– Mark Tobey, artist, 1956

The Northwest mystics is an artistic movement based in the Puget Sound area. Although commonly known as the ‘Northwest School,’ this title is a misnomer as the artists did not define themselves as a group; instead, the name was applied after the artists went their separate ways. Though the defining artists of the movement are Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan, and Guy Anderson, the inspirations are traceable to many artists who hung around the four men’s social circle, as well as contemporary artists today. A defining characteristic of the Northwest mystics is the conscious response by the artists to the events, cultures, and landscapes of the Pacific Northwest. This included appreciating the Indigenous cultures of the region.

Before the Northwest mystics artists became familiar with each other, many of them were interested in Indigenous arts. By the early 1920s, Mark Tobey began collecting Indigenous art in thrift stores, and even bought several pieces from Seattle harbor’s Ye Olde Curiosity Shop. As a boy, Guy Anderson was taken to the Washington State Museum (now the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture), where the totem poles and wood carvings by the Haida and other northern tribes were said to have left a lasting impression on him. Kenneth Callahan’s childhood neighbor in Glasgow, Montana was Ralph Breckenridge, a Blackfoot painter and local bronco champion, who encouraged Callahan to paint.

However, an interest in Indigenous arts broadened for all four artists in the 1930s. With the spread of fascism and the onset of World War II, the four artists felt that the modern ‘Western’ world was marked in irrationality. The Northwest mystics started to
meet once a week to discuss and create art using their anti-war thoughts and their ideals of world unity.\textsuperscript{14} Instead of referencing European art history, which the Northwest mystics felt was created in a culture that bred hatred and unreasonableness, they looked at Indigenous arts for inspiration. However, according to curator Colin Browne, Indigenous arts and cultures were often seen by the artists from this time as “living in a prehistoric age, uncorrupted by Western civilization.”\textsuperscript{15} This very declaration is ironic as by the 1930s, Indigenous peoples around the country had been forced to give up some of their traditional cultures due to two hundred years of oppression. Tobey, Graves, Anderson, and Callahan may have had a particular interest in Northwest Coast Indigenous culture as they thought that their spiritual beliefs of universal humanity as well as their faith in the primacy of the laws of nature were in-line with Indigenous culture.

Interest in Indigenous art was not found just in the Northwest Coast of the United States, but also in Europe, with Surrealist artists like Max Ernst, as well as in the eastern United States, with New York Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock. However, this Indigenous influence was more at the conceptual level compared to the Northwest mystics, who occasionally used specific formal or design terms in their artworks. The Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists were inspired to use Indigenous artworks to evoke the origins of natural and human history, revealing the foundations of the modern mind through a universal psychology.\textsuperscript{16} Not surprisingly, the majority of the Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists came to know Indigenous artworks from museums and books, yet this was also true of most of the Northwest mystics. Although the Northwest mystics had a chance to meet and talk with Indigenous artists, most of the Northwest mystics observed from them afar. Like most enthusiasm for Indigenous art during that era, the Surrealists, Abstract Expressionists, and Northwest mystics’ perception of the art were based more on what they thought of it rather than on an understanding of the realities of the cultures.
While many Northwest mystics attended ceremonies, such as the Swinomish Tribe’s Treaty Day, most of the artists had no connection to Indigenous artists. In an interview with curator Patricia Svoboda for the Seattle Art Museum’s *Northwest Traditions* exhibition, Guy Anderson admitted that he never personally talked to any of the artists from the Northwest Indigenous nations while he witnessed the ceremonies. Instead, he left anthropologist and friend Erna Gunther to be an ‘interpreter,’ who would describe the meanings of the ceremonies to Anderson and his fellow artists.17 Reviewing the notebooks at the University of Washington’s Special Collections that Helmi Juvonen (an artist associated with the Northwest mystics) used to sketch Indigenous peoples and ceremonies, it appears that the information she captured is mostly anthropological in nature. Juvonen has noted down questions on imaginary and symbolism in wardrobe and artifacts. She appears to look at Indigenous people as curiosities, constantly questioning their “savage” and “un-godly” practices in her notebooks.18 One notices, however, that most of the Northwest mystics use a much more literal interpretation of Indigenous motifs than in the work of the Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists. One can only guess at the reasons, but perhaps the regional artists were more concerned with creating a sense of place and home.

While these three artistic groups often problematically interpreted Indigenous arts, by taking an interest in Indigenous arts, they significantly changed the way that Indigenous arts was looked at by non-Indigenous people. By the 1940s, rather than being limited to anthropology and natural history museums, Indigenous arts were beginning to be shown alongside non-Indigenous artists in art museums in major exhibitions like the Museum of Modern Art and National Gallery of Canada.19 Ironically, while the artistic world was recognizing the beauty and power of Indigenous arts, this occurred during a long period of cultural oppression for many Indigenous nations.
Figure 6. The Swinomish Totem Pole, carved by the Paul family. This new pole was raised on May 19, 1989 is a replica based on Charlie Edwards’ 1938 Works Progress Administration Totem Pole. Photographer: Joe Mabel. Courtesy of Joe Mabel.
"We are overcoming the broken cycles that have challenged and impacted our way of life. Our strength comes from the values and principles of cultural teachings that keep our spirit and mind balanced as we continue to walk in two worlds. We are committed to providing a prosperous future for generations to come.”
– Dianne Edwards, Swinomish citizen, 2013

Although the Northwest mystics and their associated artists were not heavily involved with Indigenous communities, several of the artists did attend ceremonies held by the Swinomish Tribe.

For thousands of years, the Swinomish people maintained a culture through living off the natural resources that are found around what is now known as Skagit County, Washington. They are known as the People of the Salmon, and their way of life and teachings are connected to the land and waters, still to this day. However, by the mid-19th century, the Swinomish Tribe was overwhelmed by the number of white settlers who wanted to possess their land in the region. In 1855, after much discontent from the Indigenous peoples that white settlers were encroaching on Indigenous lands, the Swinomish Tribe, along with several other nations, signed the Treaty of Point Elliott. This treaty gave fishing rights, reservation land, the promise of Indigenous schools, and payment for the lands that were given up by the tribes. However, it took decades for the federal government to fulfill any of its treaty promises.

In 1883, the federal government established the Code of Indian Offenses, thereby outlawing and/or restricting traditional ceremonies in many reservations. This code specifically hurt the Swinomish community’s connection to their land and ancestors, making it difficult for both the culture and the Lushootseed language to develop in younger generations. This hardship was only made more difficult by the fact that Swinomish children were taken by federal Indian agents to over 40 miles away from their homes to attend the Tulalip Tribe’s boarding school, where children were
forced to assimilate and become ‘civilized.’ Contact between students and their families was restricted by the boarding school employees and federal Indian agents, therefore making the teaching of traditions nearly impossible. The boarding school and the lack of traditional teachings caused emotional, spiritual, and psychological trauma that persists to this day.

In 1912, the Indian agent Charles Buchanan allowed for a slight resumption of these ceremonies, called Treaty Day, as a way to commemorate the anniversary of the Treaty of Point Elliott. During these ceremonies, many Swinomish artworks would have been produced to sell, such as the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture’s Swinomish basket (Figure 7). While the Swinomish Tribe embraced the resumption (though not due to the celebration of the treaty), Buchanan again shut down the ceremonies referring to them as non-progressive “pagan” rituals. When Buchanan died in 1920, Treaty Day resumed, and by the 1930s, the ceremony was opened to the non-Indigenous friends and community members in Skagit County. This open summons continued until the 1960s, allowing artists such as Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Guy Anderson, and Helmi Juvonen to view the ceremonies.

While the Swinomish Tribe has been through a lot of pain, they are also resilient. The Swinomish Tribe is currently working with the La Conner High School to teach Lushootseed language courses to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. In 2016, the tribe was honored with a Climate Adaption Leadership Award for Natural Resources by the federal government for implementing adaptive actions for natural resources in the Pacific Northwest. The Swinomish Tribe is currently one of the largest employers in Skagit County, and also hosts numerous community events, such as the Skagit River Salmon Festival.
Figure 7. Swinomish Basket
Collected 1916
Split cedar root, grass
Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture (Catalog number 7926).
Petroglyphs

“I think still one important thing is to see great drawings, and not just contemporary ones, but to see all the greats, beginning with the Altamira Lascaux Caves; beginning 10,000 years ago.”
– Guy Anderson, artist, 1974

One interest of the Northwest mystics that developed alongside Indigenous-style art was linguistic signs such as petroglyphs, carvings found on rocks that were created thousands of years ago. Petroglyphs marked the beginning of humans and their relationship to both art and nature. Therefore, the Northwest mystics used petroglyph symbols to refer to the prehistoric age that was “uncorrupted by Western civilization.” However, this interpretation of Indigenous peoples is problematic, as it represents Indigenous peoples as purely from the past, and implies that colonial history did not affect them.

Some artworks like Helmi Juvonen’s Pictograph (n.d.) are based on actual petroglyphs that artists had discovered in books. Kenneth Callahan’s interconnecting rock-forms and figures in artworks like The Clashing Rocks (c. 1950s -Figure 8) or Creation (n.d.) were inspired by the petroglyphs he would encounter while hiking as a boy in Raymond, Washington. Tobey’s symbols in works like Characters (1954), are simplified outlines of many Northwest Coast animals such as the orca or deer skull that look reminiscent of petroglyph pictures that depict large scenes involving humans and animals.
Figure 8. Kenneth Callahan
*The Clashing Rocks*

c. 1950s
Tempera on board
Bequest of James Odlin Estate
Figure 9. Helmi Juvonen  
*Indian Family*  
C. 1953  
Linoleum print on rice paper  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Ulrich Fritzsche  
Courtesy of the Museum of Northwest Art (Collection no. 1986.002.014).
Helmi Juvonen

“Case after case of this [Indigenous] material makes us aware of the fact that these supposedly simple people once were creative artists and expressed themselves in such a way that we can marvel at, and appreciate, their handicraft.”

– Erna Gunther, anthropologist, 1947

Out of all the artists associated with the Northwest mystics, Helmi Juvonen was the most connected with Indigenous artists. Between 1938 to 1940, Juvonen joined the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a progressive federal program that helped employ artists and many other types of workers to help the country get out of the Great Depression. For example, it was due to the WPA program that the Swinomish Tribe carved their totem pole in 1938 created by Swinomish artist Charlie Edwards (Figure 6). With the WPA, Juvonen helped create dioramas of Indigenous life for the Washington State Museum (now the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture) with anthropologist and friend Erna Gunther. Juvonen’s interest in Indigenous art and culture intensified after the WPA, when the artist would often spend weeks at a time at the Makah, Yakama, Swinomish, Lummi, Muckleshoot, and Tlingit Tribes where she recorded ceremonies. Often Juvonen was not able to travel outside of Seattle due to her frequent admittance into psychiatric wards due to her mental health issues. However, Juvonen would then draw hundreds of sketches of Indigenous artworks in the Seattle Art Museum and the Washington State Museum.

Although she did spend much time with various tribes, there is a lack of evidence that Juvonen had a cultural understanding of the tribes. For example, Juvonen believed that the Kwakwaka’wakw peoples had a secret cannibalistic society, which she concluded did not “kill their victim[s] any more [sic], just tap their blood.” Juvonen is referring Hamats’a, a ‘cannibal’ dance performed by the Kwakwaka’wakw. However, the act of cannibalism in the dance was purely symbolic, with the ‘cannibal’ dancer being “inspired by the spirit of a ferocious
man-eating monster." When the *Hamat’sa* dance was performed in front of non-Indigenous people, it was occasionally dramatized with its ‘cannibalistic’ aspects to poke fun of new viewers. Non-Indigenous viewers, like Juvonen, may have believed that the dance was actually cannibalistic, as the stereotype that Indigenous people are cannibals began as Coll Thursh explains "...from the earliest encounters with 'new' worlds..." where "...cannibalism was both a metaphor and a vehicle for social critique."

Juvonen’s drawings and prints were often not directly copied from Indigenous sources, and are often embedded with the artist’s own interpretations, such as added Scandinavian folk art flowers, background, dynamic lines, and the simplification of shapes.

Although Juvonen should be recognized for her visitation to various tribes, there is a problematic nature to the artist’s work. Firstly, though Juvonen was invited to view the ceremonies by various Indigenous nations, these ceremonies were still sacred in nature, and therefore should not be viewed by the general public. Yet Juvonen’s prints are circulated in museums around the world revealing scenes that only certain individuals from that tribe should be able to view. Secondly, Juvonen’s simplified sketches of Indigenous art make many of the works look child-like. While pieces like *Sisioohl Figure* (n.d.) depict the realistic detail that Juvonen was able to draw, other pieces, such as *Indian Family* (1953 – Figure 9) are more cartoonish in imagery, giving the appearance of an untrained artist. To the average viewer, some of Juvonen’s works may suggest they were created by Indigenous artists, thus perpetuating the stereotypical perspective that Indigenous artists were ‘primitive’ people, who could only create ‘crafts’ and not ‘fine art.’
Figure 10. Helmi Juvonen
*Imaginative Perceptions* (also titled *Symbolic Realism*)
c. 1953
Linoleum print
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Ulrich Fritzsche
Understanding Northwest Coast Indigenous Art

“The observer must be mindful of the simple fact that there are three ‘spaces’: phenomenal space (the world of nature, of phenomena), the space ‘outside’ of us; mental space, the space in which dreams occur, and the images of the imagination take shape; the space of consciousness...are revealed. From this space of consciousness come the universally significant images and symbols of the greatest religious works of art....”

– Morris Graves, artist, 1950

Northwest Coast Indigenous art covers a large range, from what is now known as Washington and Oregon, Vancouver Island, the lower mainland and western coast of British Columbia, and southeast Alaska. It should be acknowledged that this term as well as Coast Salish are colonial constructs, and can often be counter to many Indigenous nations sense of place and space. More than one hundred Indigenous tribes inhabit this area, each with their own distinctive culture and language. Similar to the Northwest Coast Indigenous cultures, the art is far from a homogenous style. It ranges from a close realism to complete abstraction, and there are many different artistic styles among different language groups in the area.

For many decades, art and anthropology museums, art dealers, and even tourist gift shops have been exhibiting work from the Tlingit, Haida, and Kwakwaka’wakw Nations in Alaska and British Columbia, more often than Coast Salish art from Washington State and southern British Columbia. While the Northwest mythics artists lived near and occasionally viewed Coast Salish culture, they would more often reference Haida, Tlingit, and Kwakwaka’wakw art.

Coast Salish art usually employs geometric symmetry with the use of circles, crescents, and trigons (a triangle with curved sides), and is often more minimalist in style compared to other Northwest Coast Indigenous art. Art from the Haida, Tlingit, and Kwakwaka’wakw Nations on the other hand, such as the Burke Museum’s Tlingit lidded
Figure 11. Tlingit; Stikine
Lidded Bentwood Box
Collected c. 1900
Cedar, paint, operculum
Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture (catalog number 1396).

Figure 12. Guy Anderson
Fishing Boat—Evening
1962
Oil on board
Gift of The Blair and Lucille Kirk Collection
Figure 13. Mark Tobey
*Woman in a Market Stall*
1946
Tempera
Gift of the Blair and Lucille Kirk Collection
bentwood box (Figure 11), use ovoid and U-form shapes, with thicker contoured lines that give the impression of continuity between the various elements of the design. The use of these thick black outlines, as well as the common use of black, red, and blue, connects many of the Northwest mystics’ artists to Haida and Tlingit art, and can especially be seen in works like Anderson’s *Night of the Whales* (1957–Figure 1), Anderson’s *Fishing Boat—Evening* (1962–Figure 12) and Tobey’s *Woman in a Market Stall* (1946–Figure 13).

The Northwest mystics not only used Indigenous styles in their artworks, but also employed what they misconstrued as Indigenous culture. With a lack of interaction from Indigenous artists directly, the Indigenous art and the ceremonies that the Northwest mystics attended were perceived more as a form of entertainment of a ‘vanishing’ people, and an opportunity to convey identities onto the Indigenous population.

Tobey, Graves, Callahan, and Anderson each identified an interconnectedness between humans and all aspects of the universe, a concept that they felt came from Indigenous communities. Nature became a central presence, and was the source of stability, even though the artists often portrayed organic matter as actively living. Throughout his career, Callahan noted his attempt to visually convey the “interrelationship between man, rock, and the elements.” In both *The Clashing Rocks* (c. 1950s–Figure 8) and *Creation* (n.d.), Callahan’s human figures blend in with the geometric rocks, creating a flux of dynamic movement between the two and therefore representing an interconnectedness.

With Tobey’s white writing, a method that overlaid white lines and symbols to create an abstract field, the artist created a multi-dimensional web that abstracts a higher state of consciousness. Or, as Tobey stated, the white writing gives “awareness to the smallest detail of [Earth’s] vastness as though the whole world were contained therein and from a leaf, an insect, a universe appeared.” The hypnotic repetitiveness of Tobey’s white writing is similar to Coast Salish spindle whorls (Figure 14), a tool that weavers once used to
create thinner wool. The spindle whorls are more significant to the Coast Salish than mere practicality—these objects are also spiritual in nature. The whorls are decorated on the convex side, which faces the spinner when in use, with floral, geometric, anthropomorphic, or zoomorphic designs. Some evidence suggests that the creatures are associated with the ancestors who act as spiritual helpers for the spinner. Due to the pulsating movement of the whorl, the spinner often reaches a trance-like state. While in this capacity, the weaver may see a spirit guide emerge from the whorl.

Figure 14. Coast Salish spindle whorls located at the Royal BC Museum in Victoria, BC. Photographer: Wolfgang Sauber. Courtesy of Wolfgang Sauber.
Though nature and its interconnections is often a part of many Indigenous cultures, the Northwest mystics romanticized Indigenous spirituality as something that is ‘vanishing’ and interpreted it as their own, without consulting or learning from Indigenous communities.

Transformation is also a common motif in Northwest Coast Indigenous art that was used by the Northwest mythics. In many creation stories in the Northwest Coast, creatures were essentially all alike, but donned the cloaks of various animals to adopt different appearances and behaviors. This belief in transformation is often connected to the oneness of all things in Northwest Coast cultures. Gitxsan carver Ken Mowatt created a bentwood bowl (Figure 16) that depicts an owl/human hybrid that is now located at the Burke Museum of Natural Science and Culture. Although there are feather designs surrounding the artwork, the face has smaller eyes and defined eyebrows, which could indicate that the owl is transforming into a human. This artwork also demonstrates the multiple perspectives that Northwest Coast Indigenous artists often use as viewers can see the owl’s wing feathers both in the front of the bowl and on the sides. This is very similar to Graves’ pieces, where his bird figures, like Spirit Bird (1950–Figure 15), are ensnared in a mysterious “cosmic atmosphere,” therefore depicting more than one perspective of a bird in motion.

While the Northwest mystics artists were undoubtedly influenced by Indigenous design and culture, their efforts at adaptation had mixed and problematic results, involving a lack of understanding of these traditional cultures. The Northwest mystics assumed that Indigenous artists lived in a “primitive” world in need of preservation and representation, prompting the adaption of Indigenous designs, like many artists from the time. However, this has led to contemporary Indigenous artists finding themselves confined by cultural assumptions not of their own making. It has also produced a continuation of cultural appropriation of Indigenous arts.
Figure 15. Morris Graves
_Spirit Bird_
1950
Tempera on paper
Gift of The Catterall Collection

Figure 16. Ken Mowatt
Gitxsan/Tsimshian
_Bowl_
ca. 2000
Wood, acrylic paint
Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture (catalog number 2004-2/418)
Notes


Ibid.


Ibid.


Colin Browne, *I had an Interesting French Artist to See Me This Summer: Emily Carr and Wolfgang Paalen in British Columbia* (Vancouver, BC: Figure 1, 2016), 11.

Jacknis, *The Storage Box of Tradition*, 127.

Guy Anderson, interviewed by Patricia Svoboda, March 17, 1978, transcription of sound cassettes, University of Washington Special Collections, Accession Number 2444-002.

19 Jacknis, The Storage Box of Tradition, 120-123.

20 Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, People of the Salmon (La Conner, WA: Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, 2012), 4.


25 Ibid., 176.


28 Guy Anderson, interviewed by Wesley Wehr, June 6, 1974, transcription of sound cassettes, University of Washington Special Collections, Accession Number 2444-001.


30 Conkelton and Landau, Northwest Mythologies, 22.

31 Bernice S. Moore, Art in Our Community (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers Limited, 1947), 44.

32 Wehr, The Eighth Lively Art, 58.


34 W.J. Granberg, Land of the Thunderbird, Page 6, November 18, 1952, Box 3, Folder 1, Helmi Juvonen Papers, 1934-1986, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Accession Number 2731-001.


Ibid.


Jacknis, *The Storage Box of Tradition*, 134.
**Figure 17.** Philip McCracken  
*Spirit Fish*  
1952  
Woodcut on paper  
Gift of John Hauberg and Anne Gould Hauberg  
Courtesy of the Museum of Northwest Art (Collection no.1986.009.001).
The walls of every room in my house display formline prints—two-dimensional Northwest Coast Indigenous art with characteristic curvilinear shapes that are combined according to a logic older than the settler colonial states from which contemporary non-Indigenous artists now emerge with borrowed elements: an ovoid here, an S-form there.

Daisy Sewid-Smith writes,

“When non-Indigenous people, and some of our own non-traditionalists, take cognizance of what we now know as ‘Northwest Coast Native art,’ they scrutinize and they analyze the object or painting as you would a Rembrandt. They study the light, the shade, the brush strokes, and then they proceed to interpret what they are viewing in European art terms. They see the paintings, carvings, and dances as visual art and nothing more. [. . .] To the traditional Indigenous Kwakwaka’wakw, our carvings and representations are not just art objects or paintings. They are alive: they teach, they reveal knowledge of the past. The symbols and carvings cause a spasmodic action in the brain, and torrents of stories and meanings flow to the surface of our remembrance. They explain our existence in the universe. They reveal who we are, where we originated, who our ancestors were, and whom and what they encountered.”

Native-style aesthetics have become so trendy that even the Seahawks logo is rendered in mock-formline style, inspired by a Kwakwaka’wakw transformation mask. I live in Seattle, and imitative formline is everywhere: on travel mugs, in galleries, and in downtown tourist shop windows where it’s splashed across t-shirted mannequin chests.

In American settler culture, imitation is, as the cliché goes, considered the sincerest form of flattery. But imitation of Northwest
Coast Native art can be a violence. Without participation in a lineage of the careful transfer of intellectual property—the knowledge of how to use individual elements to craft a whole work, deliberately passed on by a skilled artist-teacher—the use of a few echoes represents a ripping of visual elements from the culture that birthed them.

Between 1884 and 1951, Northwest Coast Indigenous peoples in Canada were legally prohibited from practicing potlatch and the dances associated with it. Fearing jail time, many Indigenous people stopped passing on traditions that had shaped their cultures for thousands of years. In the United States, the potlatch wasn’t officially outlawed, but through the efforts of government agents and missionaries, the practice was seriously wounded and diminished.

Nearly every day, I encounter instances of non-Native people wanting to plunder our cultural practices for what they see as the most precious nuggets, which they take freely without the burden, blessing, and lives-long responsibility of Indigeneity. To be Native is to have relations, to be responsible to those relations, and to contribute to the continuance of cultures that have endured on this continent for thousands of years.

Reducing Native art to a cluster of related elements and appropriating a selection thereof is an act rooted in the colonial policies designed to eliminate us. Those who wish to erase us do so by reducing our existence to parts. They tear us limb from limb. Some parts, they kill. Some, they take, and before long, they begin to call them their own. The parts become disposable when they work them into passing fads, like Western films and warriors painted on black velvet. In truth, though, when they take a part, they don’t take anything at all, because there are no parts: there are only wholes, and the wholes can never belong to anyone, but the people who risked their lives for them.

Because Northwest Coast Native art was never intended simply to please the eye, it is meant to be used—and my understanding is that,
at least in some communities, the works themselves have a spiritual
need to be used: masks for dancing, baskets for gathering, bentwood
boxes for holding.

What are the spiritual needs of works built from plundering?

The same, maybe, as a nation built from plundering—a nation
sickened by the wounds that birthed it, a nation that has never been
well. There are people who have the remedy. They will not reveal it
outside the walls that keep it from leaking into the changed world
that only knows how to dismember, to leech, to absorb until there's
nothing left. The sincerest form of flattery: to respect the closed door
of the smokehouse. To trust that the people inside know their lives,
histories, and culture better than anyone seeking to visit. To pray for
an end to plundering. To know that it hurts us, but it hasn't killed us
yet.
The United States and Canada are considered settler colonial states because these nations were built upon stolen land and with the labor of the Indigenous people displaced and exploited by foreign colonists.


Potlatch is a gifting tradition and economic practice among Northwest Coast peoples. Wealth is redistributed during a ceremony involving food, dance, and other ceremonial elements.

Figure 18. Guy Anderson
*Eclipse*
1960
Oil on board
Bequest of the James Odlin Estate
Courtesy of the Museum of Northwest Art (Collection no.1999.059.001).
Contributors

**Jesse Campbell** is a Metis artist, who works mainly in pencil, pen, and acrylic in Victoria, British Columbia. He has also worked as a mural artist for the past five years doing projects for Open Space, Greater Victoria Harbour Authority, M’akola Housing, and the City of Victoria. View his work at @jesc_art.

**Regan Shrumm** is an independent curator who is currently a guest on the unceded territory of the Lekwungen peoples. She received a master of arts in art history and visual studies from the University of Victoria. She has held curatorial positions with Open Space and Legacy Art Gallery in Victoria, British Columbia and the Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of American History in Washington, DC. Her essay, “Connecting a Collection,” was recently published in the exhibition catalogue, *The Art of A. Banana Unpeeled.*
Elissa Washuta is a member of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and a writer of personal essays and a memoir. She is the author of two books, *Starvation Mode* and *My Body Is a Book of Rules*, named a finalist for the Washington State Book Award. Her work has appeared in *Salon, The Chronicle of Higher Education, BuzzFeed*, and elsewhere. Elissa holds an MFA from the University of Washington and currently serves as the undergraduate adviser for the Department of American Indian Studies at the University of Washington and a nonfiction faculty member in the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts.

Elissa has received fellowships and awards from Artist Trust, 4Culture, Potlatch Fund, and Hugo House. Born and raised in New Jersey, she now lives in Seattle.
Acknowledgements

The Museum of Northwest Art is a non-profit museum in La Conner, Washington that opened on October 3, 1981, originally called The Valley Museum of Northwest Art. Its mission is to "connect people with the art, diverse cultures, and environments of the Northwest."

Both the exhibition and publication, *Indigenous Influences*, is generously funded by the Dana and Toni Ann Rust Curatorial Fellowship, with the support of the Museum of Northwest Art staff.

Thank you to the Museum of Northwest Art staff, in particular to Curator Kathleen Moles and Associate Curator Chloe Dye Sherpe, whose expertise was much appreciated. Thank you to Swinomish Cultural Director Aurelia Washington and Swinomish Tribal Archivist Theresa Trebon for advising with Swinomish’s history and the artwork selection. Thank you to Elissa Washuta, for writing a wonderful essay amongst her busy schedule. Thank you to Jesse Campbell for allowing for his artwork, *Sea Bear Panel*, to be used for the cover of this publication. Thank you also to Dr. Victoria Wyatt and Adrian Paradis for graciously editing the texts and giving thorough comments. Thank you to Megan Quigley for use of her InDesign program.

Finally, thank you to the Burke Museum of History and Culture for allowing their artifacts to be on display for *Indigenous Influences* as well as the University of Washington Special Collections for assisting with the publication’s research and images.