

# Unlimited Editions and Cultural Imprints

Curated by Faith Brower and India Young, Cultural imPRINT (April 22–August 20, 2017), a recent exhibition of prints by Indigenous artists at the Tacoma Art Museum, was a visually stimulating yet challenging experience. Artists from territories north of the 49th parallel were well represented, and seeing them outside of Canada was an opportunity to encounter them anew. There was a particular thrill in discovering and immediately recognizing Musqueam artist Susan Point's print *Memory* (2005), depicting the metamorphosis of a frog, which Vancouver residents casually tread underfoot daily—the design adorns several storm sewer covers in the city.

The most intriguing discovery was *Underlying States* (2014), one of a series of prints by the New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective. Using the exquisite corpse technique of the Surrealist movement, artists in the collective contributed to the print without knowing what the other had drawn. The aim of the exercise was to draw attention to the art practices of each individual member. The goal is very much at the heart of what the New BC Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective intends to do. Spearheaded by Tania Willard in partnership with other founding members Peter Morin and Gabrielle Hill, the collective emerged in 2014 from Willard's research on the history of Northwest Coast prints. The collective focuses on land-based activations and contemporary art conversations within Indigenous territories.

Amphora contacted Tania Willard to find out more. She generously provided the following essay, adapted from her text for the catalogue of *unlimited edition*, an exhibition she curated at the Kamloops Art Gallery from January 17 to March 22, 2014, during her time as the gallery's Aboriginal curator in residence. The original, fully annotated catalogue is available online at <http://bit.ly/2yIFWlq>.

—Peter Mitham, editor

*Printmaking also helps keep the culture alive. Most houses in Indian communities today have screen-prints by tribal artists on their walls. Children grow up familiar with images nearly forgotten by their parents.*

—Bill Ellis, 1978

INDIGENOUS ARTISTS have worked in the medium of printmaking for over six decades in Canada, yet very little is written about their contributions from an art historical perspective. Their absence from historical accounts of printmaking in Canada became impossible for me to ignore during my curatorial residency at the Kamloops Art Gallery in 2013–14, when I became further attuned to the work of artists such as Chief Henry Speck (Udzi'stalis) (1908–1971). The desire to validate these artists' influence as contemporary artists and upon broader perceptions of Indigenous arts sparked what would become *unlimited edition* and, later, the formation of the New BC Indian Arts and Welfare Society Collective (more about this shortly). This essay will explore how Indigenous artists in Canada negotiated the integration of their prints in the tourist trade, gallery world and art market from the late 1940s to the early 2000s, avenues which came to shape public perceptions of Indigenous arts in North America.

## THE FORMATION OF “NATIVE ART”

Prior to the 1940s, there was little formal recognition of or effort to organize Indigenous artists. This was a time when federal legislation imposed severe constraints on Indigenous rights to free association, trade and other aspects of daily life that non-Indigenous artists took for granted. The limits began to lift with revision to the federal Indian Act in 1951, allowing for the formal establishment of the British Columbia Indian Arts and Welfare Society that year by Alice Ravenhill.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this, Ravenhill and Anthony Walsh, who taught at the Inkameep

Day School in the southern Okanagan from 1932 to 1942, had established the Society for the Furtherance of Indian Arts and Crafts in British Columbia in 1940.<sup>2</sup> It was formally constituted in 1942, the year Walsh left his teaching post, but through the 1940s began to informally call itself the B.C. Indian Arts and Welfare Society (from 1973 until its dissolution in 1983, it operated as the British Columbia Indian Arts Society).

Among the society's early projects drawing attention to the work of Indigenous printmakers was the publication of Walsh's *Native Designs of British Columbia* (1948), credited as having the first known serigraph prints of historic Indigenous designs. These prints included a series of original colour silkscreens by non-First Nations sign maker Ray Garside. The prints were based on various First Nations art forms, including Kutanaxa basketry and Northwest Coast ethnographic-sourced art that Walsh references in his book. While he was committed to promoting First Nations art and its educational and commercial potential, a paternalistic streak colours Walsh's writing. Walsh valorizes what he considers the "purity" of First Nations art as it existed pre-contact, and laments the polluting influence of the tourist trade for which Indigenous artists had begun to produce work. At one point in his introduction he proclaims, "Unfortunately, during the last twenty-five years, the high standard of craftsmanship of [the past] has fallen to a low level." Walsh's negative view of the tourist trade coloured his ability to see contemporary First Nations art as an innovative response to the cultural, political and economic forces impacting First Nations artists. It's notable that *Native Designs of British Columbia* was published at a time when non-Indigenous artists such as Emily Carr and Walter J. Phillips were celebrated for their representations of First Nations village sites often devoid of their inhabitants—works that contributed to the notion of a "vanishing race" prior to the potlatch ban (introduced in 1884) and other restrictions being eased with Indian Act changes of 1951.

## THE ADVENT OF SILKSCREEN IN NORTHWEST COAST FIRST NATIONS ART

*In those early years, the printing was not good, the paper cheap, the editions unlimited and unsigned.*

—Hilary Stewart, 1979

Edwin Hall, Margaret Blackman and Vincent Rickard claimed in *Northwest Coast Indian Graphics* (University of Washington Press, 1981) that Indigenous artists began producing silkscreen prints in response to appropriations of Northwest Coast First Nations motifs by non-Indigenous artists such as Charles Greul. While commercially successful, these prints were undertaken without considering the demand on First Nations artists to produce work representative of "true Northwest Coast Indian design." And if the commercial success of Greul's mass-produced pieces was a model, First Nations artists also came under tutelage from critics such as Hilary Stewart, who focused on "quality" and distinctions between "high" and "low" art, rather than assessing the work of Indigenous artists within their own contexts.

To understand the development of silkscreen design in Northwest Coast First Nations art, the early works on paper by artists such as Mungo Martin are helpful. Many of Martin's works depict formal and conceptual elements specific to the Northwest Coast that would influence other First Nations artists across the province who wanted to re-examine examples from their families and communities that had been suppressed by the residential school system and other forms of colonial control.

*Soogwilis* (1951) included some of the earliest examples of Northwest Coast First Nations silkscreen prints in published form.<sup>3</sup> The prints were based on drawings by a young Kwakwaka'wakw boy from Fort Rupert, Charlie George, who had been a patient at the hospital in Bella Bella. George had given 33 colour drawings to Richard Whitefield Large, a medical missionary, and Large's son, Richard Geddes Large, used these as the basis for the prints illustrating *Soogwilis*. Richard Geddes Large, a doctor like his father, was chair of the Prince Rupert school board when the book was published.



Ellen Neel (Kwakwaka'wakw), Raven Scarf Design, c. 1950s. Serigraph on silk, 74 x 73 cm. Collection of University of Victoria Legacy Art Galleries.

The prints in *Soogwilis* represent animals from the natural and spiritual worlds such as eagles, whales, bears, thunderbirds and the *sisiutl* or two-headed serpent. Images of transformation such as a figure with a bear's head and salmon tail are also included. Other prints depict house fronts, feast dishes, crests and totem pole designs. While the designs are somewhat loose and more sketched out than the fluid and smooth lines often associated with contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations art, the customary palette of turquoise, red and black was used. Large framed the prints with stories of his own choosing. While

his foreword acknowledges the anthropologist Marius Barbeau (among others) for his insight and editing, he makes no mention of the "boy" who made the drawings or the community to which he belonged. Large instead describes the illustrations as "undoubtedly crude" but holding "value as ethnological data."

Three years before *Soogwilis* was published, Ellen Neel started to print silkscreened images of Kwakwaka'wakw designs onto silk scarves. Her grandfather was the important Kwakwaka'wakw carver Charlie James and her great-uncle was the aforementioned Martin. Her grandfather's illustrative watercolours of Northwest Coast First Nations designs from the late 1920s almost certainly played a key role in Neel's development as an artist. She would go on to create silkscreen designs for ties, placemats, tea sets as well as trade-size and full totem poles throughout the 1950s. Her designs were the first to be created by a First Nations artist solely for the medium of silkscreen. This is in contrast to the previous examples discussed, where First Nations designs were translated into print form by non-First Nations technicians.

There was a great deal of debate taking place about the state of First Nations culture in Canada when Neel made her first silkscreen scarf. People such as Walsh and Richard Geddes Large claimed that the most valuable forms of First Nations culture were from the past and that contemporary First Nations culture was in decline. But artists such as Neel argued against such a static view of their culture. She asserted,

This idea is one of the greatest fallacies where the art of my people is concerned. For if our art is dead, then it is fit only to be mummified, packed into mortuary boxes and tucked away into museums. Whereas to me it is a living symbol. . . . Our art must continue to live. . . . We must be allowed to use new and modern techniques. I do not mean that we should discard the old, only that we be allowed to use the new.<sup>4</sup>

Two decades later, Chief Henry Speck, from the Tlowit'sis of the Kwakwaka'wakw, created a series of drawings and paintings that



Chief Henry Speck (Kwakwaka'wakw), *Sea Monster—Ya-gish*, unlimited edition, 1963.  
Silkscreen on paper, 62.2 × 48.2 cm. Collection of the Kamloops Art Gallery.

included one of a *Ya-Gish*, or sea monster. The drawings were then reproduced as silkscreens and exhibited through the New Design Gallery in Vancouver. There are clear similarities between Speck's *Ya-Gish* and Mungo Martin's drawing of *Pugwis*, or Merman-in-the-sea (c. 1951). Yet Speck's work is also distinct in its use of fine lines with a furlike texture that reveal the influence of brushwork in his paintings. As Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun describes:

When he [Speck] drew hair onto the surface, he went over the form line, making what was a stylized two-dimensional image into a pictorially three-dimensional one. I remember seeing his small catalogue in my father's library: it was new, on paper and in colour. He used new inks, new materials—it was modern. His influence on me was colour, because then there was more black and white.

Colour was his signature. He had a certain style that other artists would try to copy.<sup>5</sup>

Doug Cranmer was among the early artists involved in the widening field of First Nations art on the Northwest Coast. During the 1960s he produced a series of silkscreens in his studio and store called Talking Stick on South Granville Street in Vancouver. Talking Stick was an important early First Nations-run enterprise meant to ensure greater control and financial return for First Nations carvers and artists. Cranmer was experimental with his use of silkscreen, producing prints for sale on different surfaces (including burlap) and serializing images for bags. The innovations of Cranmer along with Neel and Speck set a critical precedent for First Nations artists working in the medium of printmaking.

In 1965, Roy Henry Vickers produced a series of prints in his art class at Oak Bay High

School in Victoria, B.C., and sold all of them at his school art fair. He continues to produce prints and has received many distinctions for his work. Also in the 1960s, Tony Hunt produced a series of silkscreen prints with the Women's Committee of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Robert Davidson began his silkscreen production in 1968 with a series of cards. Bill Reid, Robert Davidson, Roy Henry Vickers, Tony and Richard Hunt would go on to create a recognizable "face" of Northwest Coast First Nations art with their silkscreen prints.

The organization of *Arts of the Raven: Masterworks by the Northwest Coast Indian* by the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1967 was significant in that the exhibition included First Nations artists in the contemporary art world. Also significant was the absence of any works in the growing medium of silkscreen. None of Speck's prints (which would have been known in Vancouver at the time due to their exhibition in 1964) were included. Karen Duffek, in her essay "Mapping Henry Speck's Journey," notes that this exclusion from *Arts of the Raven* marginalized Speck as an artist, while Bill Reid (who served as the First Nations consulting curator) and others set precedents and won acclaim with their later work.<sup>6</sup> Reid's illustrations in Christie Harris, *Raven's Cry* (1966) and George Clutesi's for his books *Son of Raven*, *Son of Deer* (1967) and *Potlatch* (1969) are key examples that raised the profile of Northwest Coast Indigenous arts.

Though the *Arts of the Raven* exhibition positioned the work as contemporary expression, an Eaton's Salute to Indian Culture, a program the Eaton's department store organized to run in conjunction with the exhibition, was problematic in its perpetuation of such binaries as "high" and "low" art and "primitive" and "modern." Though many artists participated in both events, the essence of the Eaton's event was to create a spectacle of culture, with a Native carver carving in the open for crowds to view. Though many carvers continue to work this way, the position of the viewer and the relationship to how culture is performed are both important considerations and are paralleled in the commercial market for First Nations art.

## SELF-REPRESENTATION & ARTIST RIGHTS

The formation of the Northwest Coast Indian Artists Guild in 1977 exemplified a desire for self-representation that was informed by the experience of First Nations life in Canada. The guild was active for only a few years, but it did much to promote and validate silkscreen prints made by First Nations artists. It also forged important relationships between these artists and the collectors and marketers who were seeking "museum quality" prints. The guild represented a voice for First Nations artists who were lobbying for art gallery exhibitions rather than museum displays.

Women artists during this period, including Ellen Neel, Freda Diesing, Daphne Odjig, Susan Point and many others, were highly influential. The increase in women who were earning a living as artists challenged definitions of gendered artistic production. Odjig is often credited as a co-founder of the Indian Group of Seven, formally known as the Professional National Indian Artists Incorporation, which came into being in 1973. The group's members hailed from across Canada and also included Jackson Beardy, Eddy Cobiness, Alex Janvier, Norval Morrisseau, Carl Ray and Joseph Sanchez. Odjig created her first series of unlimited editions in 1968 and was informed by earlier experiments with reproductions. Many of her silkscreen prints were reproductions from original paintings. While her work dealt with issues of self-representation and self-determination, she resisted expectations of how to make her work look "Native."

In 1970, Odjig formed Odjig Indian Prints of Canada Ltd. with her husband Chester Beavon, and together they dedicated themselves to furthering Odjig's artistic practice as well as opening doors for other First Nations artists. The business distributed a catalogue of reproductions of First Nations art. When Odjig and Beavon opened their Warehouse Gallery in Winnipeg in 1973, it became the informal meeting place of a number of artists who later would become the Indian Group of Seven. Odjig Indian Prints of Canada also distributed unsigned and unlimited edition prints, books for children, notecards and Christmas cards. Odjig was committed

to making her own work as well as the work of other First Nations artists accessible.

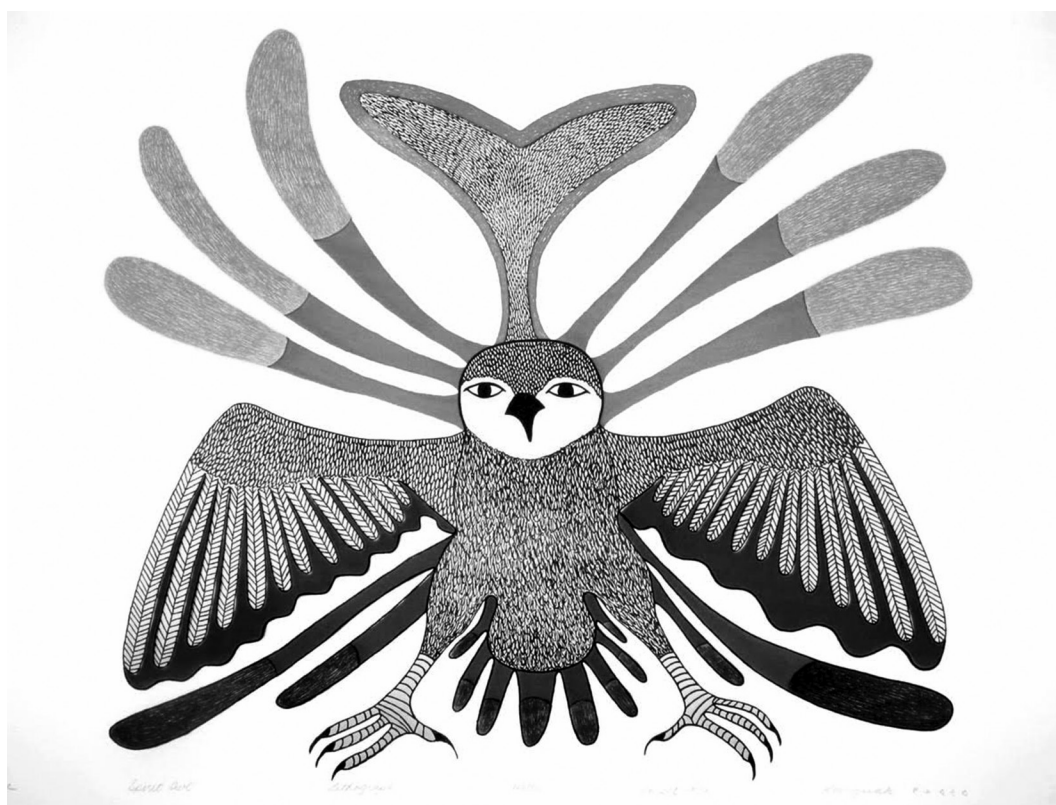
While greeting cards and notecards are often considered market items, they often began life as art prints. Artists frequently employed silkscreen prints in ways that circumvented the market and realigned them with community, using prints for birth and marriage announcements, potlatch invitations and ceremonial gifting. Speck, Art Thompson and Ki-ke-in, for instance, were deeply involved in customary art forms (including the powerful ceremonial dance-screen paintings of Ki-ke-in as a way to support First Nations cultural traditions). As Marcia Crosby points out,

Making a living was still a concern for Aboriginal artists at the time. Speck made prints for a tourist art market, as did other artists such as Bill Reid. Speck signed his prints at The Bay in 1964 during the week of his “World Premiere” opening at the New

Design Gallery and Reid carved for the public at Eaton’s in 1967 during the opening of Arts of the Raven at the Vancouver Art Gallery.<sup>7</sup>

Though traditional cultural economies were displaced by capitalist modes of exchange, it became possible for First Nations artists to use the market to exploit the spaces between the repression of their cultural traditions and a curiosity about those traditions.

Inuit printmaking occupies a similar time frame with the advent of silkscreen production in Northwest Coast art. Even though the story of Inuit artists’ co-operatives and their relationship to the histories of printmaking are not the focus of this essay, the coinciding time frames from the early prints in the late 1950s to the boom of the art market in the late 1970s and early 1980s must be acknowledged. These overlapping histories of printmaking could be viewed as concurrent with changes in the socio-political landscape in



*Kenojuak Ashevak (Inuit), Spirit Owl, from the Kenojuak Lithography series, edition 43/50, 1979. Lithograph on paper, 56.7 × 78.8 cm. Collection of the Kamloops Art Gallery.*



*Chuuchkamalathnii (Nuu-chah-nulth), Lightning Snake, edition 9/105, 1972.  
Silkscreen on paper, 45.5 × 56 cm. Collection of Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa.*

Canada, with art production contributing to a new way of seeing First Nations and Inuit people and their culture. Yet the relationship between artist and purveyor was seldom comfortable. “I was really scared with my first drawing when I had to take it to James Houston,” the acclaimed Cape Dorset artist Kenojuk Ashevak told Michael Neill in 1978.<sup>8</sup> The intertwined dynamics of power and colonial histories remained in play as artists engaged with the market for First Nations and Inuit art in Canada.

#### ART AND THE POLITICS OF FIRST NATIONS STRUGGLE

*The relationship between the art historian, the patron and the market for serigraphy should be juxtaposed with the Indigenous objective of reclaiming and restoring through storytelling.*

—India Young

First Nations art has always included a political dimension, even though the consumption of such art in a capitalist economy has a tendency to separate the political from the former. Artists such as Speck, Neel and others mentioned in this essay were actively engaged in First Nations political life. While these artists were able to integrate political and cultural concerns in their work, they had to contend with how their work was defined and valued by a non-First Nations market. In Chuuchkamalathnii’s 1972 print *Lightning Serpent*, a *Hayiitl’ik* is portrayed in vivid colours not unusual in Nuu-chah-nulth art but uncharacteristic of styles that had become accepted in Northwest Coast First Nations art. The artist remembers having difficulty marketing the print and suggested that this was due to his use of non-traditional colours.

One of the most politically charged works I have encountered is *Seizure on Luulak’s Land* (1992) by Art Wilson (Wii Muk’Willixw) of

the Gitxsan Nation. It includes an image of an eagle driving a bulldozer rendered in minimal black and red line work. The work instantly calls up the struggles of First Nations people at Oka, Ipperwash and Gustafsen Lake. I remember this image emblazoned on a number of political pamphlets and ephemera when these conflicts were at the forefront of the political landscape in Canada. While *Seizure on Luulak's Land* was produced during a particular political moment, it has also transcended that moment to become emblematic of First Nations' political struggles across the country.

The 1990s also saw First Nations artists use printmaking to problematize the idea of authenticity in art. Whereas protecting the authenticity of images and objects made by First Nations artists was previously viewed as countering the appropriation of Indigenous designs by non-Indigenous artists, self-identifying as an act of challenging colonization began to emerge in First Nations art practices at this time. Carl Beam's self-defining identity can be seen as opening the doors for increasingly conceptual and experimental practices in printmaking by First Nations artists today.

It is now more than 75 years since the formation of the Society for the Furtherance of Indian Arts and Crafts in British Columbia. My study of the art historical record of First Nations and Inuit printmaking has deepened my appreciation of the multi-layered histories of First Nations and Inuit artists and their prints. This appreciation was part of the impetus for the creation in 2013 of the New B.C. Indian Art and Welfare Society Collective, which has been as much about reclaiming an old name as allowing artists to define its identity—subverting what was once part of colonial and capitalist strategies meant to speak for and even assimilate Indigenous culture. First Nations and Inuit artists have long

been excluded from art historical accounts of Canadian printmaking, but the inspiration, cultures and ideas that drove our predecessors to speak through such a dynamic medium remain as alive as ever and continue to shape our artistic expressions and cultural imprint.

1. See "Ravenhill, Alice," *ABC BookWorld*, <https://abcbookworld.com/scripter/scripter-6371>.
2. A selection of art from the Inkameep Day School is available online at <http://osoyoosmuseum.ca/index.php/exhibits/collections/inkameep-day-school/the-art.html>.
3. See Richard Geddes Large, *Soogwilis: A Collection of Kwakiutl Indian Designs and Legends* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1951).
4. Quoted in Ronald Hawker, *Tales of Ghosts: First Nations Art in British Columbia, 1922–61* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 10.
5. Quoted in Marcia Crosby, "Making Indian Art Modern," in *Ruins in Progress: Vancouver Art in the Sixties* (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2009), <http://aboriginalart.vancouverartinthesixties.com>.
6. Karen Duffek, "Mapping Henry Speck's Journey," Satellite Gallery [blog post], August 25, 2012, <https://satellitegallery.wordpress.com/2012/08/25/mapping-henry-specks-journey>.
7. Crosby, "Making Indian Art Modern."
8. *Dorset 78: Cape Dorset Annual Graphics Collection 1978* (Toronto: M.F. Feheley, 1978).

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