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## Bill Reid (1920-1998)

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Bill Reid, one of the most celebrated Canadian artists, died in Vancouver, BC, on 12 March 1998. According to his will, his ashes were transported in his great dugout canoe *Lootas* (Wave Eater) to Tanu (Queen Charlotte Islands or Haida Gwaii), his maternal grandmother's village. Not only was he recognized as an outstanding gold- and silversmith but as one of the best Native Canadian carvers. Moreover, he was also a brilliant intellectual and a fine writer. Reid drew international attention to the arts of the Haida and through him close links were established between Native and Western art. His work has won him many awards and prizes.

Bill was born in Victoria, BC, on 20 January 1920 to William Ronald Reid, a naturalized Canadian father of Scottish and German origin, and Sophie Gladstone, a Haida mother<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Bill was born a Canadian, he died a Haida. In her early teens, Bill Reid's mother was sent to an Anglican school in Coqualeetza. There she learned English and throughout her life did her best to forget her Native language and traditions. As Reid once said: "My mother had learned the major lesson taught the native peoples [...] during the first half of this century that it was somehow sinful and debased to be, in white terms, an 'Indian,' and certainly saw no reason to pass any pride in that part of their heritage on to her children" (Vancouver Art Gallery 1974). She married a White man and according to the former rules of the *Indian Act*, she lost her Indian status. Her children were considered as non-Native. Bill Reid was not legally a Haida before 1988, a few years after the repeal of the *Indian Act* (1982). Bill Reid belonged to the Haida Raven moiety. His main crest was the Wolf. In 1980, he received the Haida name Iljuus from his mother's family.

Bill Reid's father was an adventurer who throughout his life had an unstable ca-



Fig. 1 Bill Reid photographed in 1996 wearing a button blanket designed by Robert Davidson and sewn by Robert's grandmother Florence Davidson-Edenshaw. Photograph: Michel Setboun/Planet.

reer, living in the United States and in Canada. He was running an hotel in Smithers, BC, when he met his wife Sophie. Bill Reid's mother was Haida, a child of Charles and Josephine Ellsworth Gladstone—English names which they, like all Canadian Natives, were given by White authorities at the end of the nineteenth century. Bill's grandmother was born in Tanu on South Moresby. She was a woman of high rank and belonged to the Raven moiety—the Haida were a matrilineal society divided into two main sides, the Raven and the Eagle—and her main family crest was the Wolf. Born to a Haida mother and an English father, Bill's grandfather came from Naikun, situated at the northeastern part of Graham Island. At the age of six years, he was adopted by his mother's brother, Charles Edenshaw. The Reids had three children: Bill (b. 1920), Peggy (b. 1921), and Robert (b. 1928). From 1932 onward they were raised by their mother—then a dressmaker—after their father went bankrupt during the depression, and lived in Victoria, BC, where they went to school.

Bill had an only child, Amanda, with Binkie, his first wife, whom he divorced in 1959. His second marriage with Ella Gunn ended in 1962. In 1991, he married Martine de Widerspach-Thor, a French anthropologist who came to study at UBC in the mid-1970s.

whose parents lived in Skidegate. He grew up as a Canadian child and was partly raised by a French "nanny." His awareness of being of mixed descent dawned upon him when he reached his early youth, and after his father's death in 1942, his interest in his Native ancestry developed when he visited the Queen Charlotte Islands for the first time. There he met his maternal grandfather, Charles Gladstone, a canoe builder, argillite carver, and silversmith<sup>2</sup> who had learned his trade from his uncle, the famous Haida artist Charles Edenshaw (1839–1924). Charles Gladstone certainly played a major role in Reid's nascent awareness of Haida art and culture as he once expressed: "Through him, I also gained the friendship of many of the old men and women alive at that time who still remembered something of the great days of the Haida past. And I began to identify more and more with them" (cp. *Canadian Native Prints* 1979).

Bill Reid's early career was in broadcasting. During his stay in Toronto where he was employed as a radio announcer with the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), Reid discovered the Royal Ontario Museum's Northwest Coast collections and was particularly impressed by a Haida pole from Tanu, his grandmother's village. From this time dates his fascination for the "Indian thing" (Shadbolt 1986:28); as he liked to phrase it, "[T]hings began to come together in that pole" (Shadbolt 1986:29), meaning that he suddenly realized that what he had experienced through his grandfather's sayings and understood from his readings started to give him a clear understanding of Haida stylistic structure. Reid first learned by study-

<sup>2</sup> Bill Reid remarked: "He [Charles Gladstone] was the last in the direct tradition of Haida silver workers. He was not a particularly good artist, but he was a careful silver engraver" (Iglauer 1982: 18; cp. also *Canadian Native Prints* 1979). Charles Gladstone's work is discussed in Barbeau (1957).



Fig. 2 Gold bracelet with design referring to the Natnasimgyet story, 1974 (width 4.2 cm). Photograph: Michel Setboun/Planet.

ing pieces—especially those created by Charles Edenshaw—behind glass cases and copied Haida designs—many of them drawn by Edenshaw—from Swanton's *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Haida* (1905), Boas's *Primitive Art* (1955), and Barbeau's publications on Haida argillite carving and totem poles (1950, 1953, 1957). He showed a special interest in the bracelet tradition, which during his youth was his only introduction to Northwest Coast art—he had admired gold and silver bracelets worn by his mother and aunts, some of them engraved by his grandfather. Reid's ambition was to perpetuate this tradition, which goes back to the mid-nineteenth century with the mastering of Western jewelry techniques. In 1948, he registered at the Ryerson Institute of Technology to study jewelry making; he then worked as an apprentice at the Platinum Art Company in Toronto for a year and a half before he was laid off because of the recession. He came back to the West coast and started to create his first pieces of jewelry. Reid later completed his training in silver-smithing in London (1968–1970).



Fig. 3 Charles Gladstone was privileged to get his maternal uncle Charles Edenshaw's engraving tools, which were later passed on to Bill Reid. Photograph: Michel Setboun/Planet.



Fig. 4 *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, bronze cast with a jade patina (length 605 cm, height 390 cm, width 348 cm). Photograph: Michel Setboun/Planet.

In 1955 and 1957, he was part of a team of the Provincial Museum which aimed at salvaging poles from the abandoned villages of Tanu, Ske-dans, and Ninstints on the Queen Charlotte Islands. In 1957, Wilson Duff, then curator of the British Columbia Provincial Museum, gave him the opportunity to work with Mungo Martin, a Kwakiutl carver from Fort Rupert, with whom he had a two-week apprenticeship. Despite his little training in monumental wood carving, museum people right away recognized his understanding of traditional Northwest Coast artistic forms. Harry Hawthorne invited him to participate in a new project for the University of British Columbia campus, which consisted in recreating a section of a Haida village with two houses, seven poles, and other wooden sculptures. Bill worked from 1958 to 1962 at the construction of the Haida village with the assistance of Doug Cranmer, a Kwakiutl carver from Alert Bay. By that time, Reid had left the CBC and was working full-time as a craftsman.

From the 1960s on, Bill Reid kept trying out various techniques, using new materials for his artistic production. In jewelry-making, he introduced European techniques: repoussé, assemblage, casting, and soldering which expanded his repertoire beyond the traditional engraving; he also used gem-setting techniques to inlay the silver and gold with abalone, fossil ivory, and argillite. Reid contributed to the introduction of changes in design with regard to proportion and symmetry. His originality lay in his conception

of jewels as three-dimensional sculptural works. Combining his experience both as a jeweler and as a carver,<sup>3</sup> Reid created new pieces—boxes or containers in gold with carved tops, as the one produced for Expo 67 in Montreal, or the *Bear Mother* bowl for the National Museum of Man in Ottawa (1972). From the late 1970s on, Reid undertook a series of public monumental sculptures, some directly inspired by these three-dimensional pieces, as, for example, the bronze *Killerwhale* for the Vancouver Public Aquarium (1983–1984). A first study for this sculpture was the gold box he created for the British Columbia Provincial Museum (now Royal British Columbia Museum) (1971) after Edenshaw's argillite compotes that feature figures of Haida mythology as the handle of the lid. His monumental sculptures were always produced after a small model in wood (boxwood was one his favorite materials), clay, or plaster, as such a Western approach to sculpture. In the large-scale projects, he was assisted by Native and non-Native skilled carvers and other craftspeople from a variety of traditions. *The Raven and the First*

<sup>3</sup> He carved a small pole (250 cm) for the Shell Oil Centre in London, England (which was later given by the company to the Skidegate Museum) and a 17 meter frontal pole (in 1978) for his mother's village of Skidegate, the first pole to be erected in that community in over 100 years. He also carved a large wooden screen for the Provincial Museum in Victoria.



Fig. 5 The canoe named *Lootas*, carved out of a single cedar log according to traditional Haida techniques. Photograph: Michel Setboun/Planet.

*Men*, commissioned by Walter Koerner for the UBC Museum of Anthropology (1980) was carved in the round out of laminated cedar. His next large creation was a 7.3 meter bronze mural frieze titled *Mythic Messengers* for Teleglobe-Canada headquarters in Burnaby, near Vancouver (1984). For Expo 86, Reid was commissioned to carve and paint a canoe, which he named *Lootas*. Two other canoes, *Black Eagle* and *Red Raven*, were built in a carving shed in Skidegate. His last and main work, *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, representing the Haida

mythical menagerie embarked on a canoe steered by Raven (cp. Steltzer 1997), was commissioned for the new Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC (1991). A second bronze cast, titled *The Jade Canoe*, was purchased for the new International Terminal Building of Vancouver Airport and installed in 1996. This was to remain his last major work.

In the 1970s, Bill Reid was one of the first Northwest Coast artists to produce a series of silkscreen prints featuring Bill's favorite Haida mythological characters: *Haida Eagle*, *Haida*



Fig. 6 Bill Reid and Gudjaw (G. Edenshaw) in a carving shed in Skidegate. Photograph: Michel Setboun/Planet.

*Wolf*, *Haida Dog Salmon*, etc. He as well illustrated a few books: *The Raven's Cry* by C. Harris (1965) and *Haida Monumental Art* by G. MacDonald (1983). As for his writings, Reid wrote a script in 1958, *Totems*, which later became a TV film documenting the British Columbia Provincial Museum expedition to salvage the poles from the abandoned villages of the Queen Charlotte Islands (Reid 1963). He is the author of *Out of Silence* (1971), a text which accompanies Adelaide de Menil's photographs of Northwest Coast poles. With Robert Bringhurst he wrote *The Raven Steals the Light*, a collection of nine Haida stories dedicated to Henry Young, an old man from Skidegate who once attempted to pass his wide knowledge of Haida mythology and tradition on to him.

Bill Reid played a major role in the organization of the famous exhibition *Arts of the Raven* presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery (1967), in which some of his own pieces were shown. This exhibition largely contributed to the public recognition of Northwest Coast art.<sup>4</sup> In 1974 a first retrospective exhibition was held at the Vancouver Art Gallery,<sup>5</sup> and in 1986 the UBC Museum honored forty years of Bill Reid's work with an exhibition entitled *Bill Reid: Beyond the Essential Form*. In 1989, another exhibition was planned in conjunction with *Les Amériques de Claude Lévi-Strauss* at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (cp. Mauzé 1990).

Reid always rightly claimed that the Northwest Coast artistic revival was initiated by anthropologists and sponsored by Canadian museum institutions. However, he set an example for generations of young artists who followed his steps and some of whom contributed to the revival of Northwest Coast art. Although he is credited by anthropologists, including Lévi-Strauss (1974), with having "tended and revived a flame that was close to dying," Reid sometimes denied his prominent role: "I never believed in this so-called cultural renaissance of Northwest Coast Indian culture, nor that I had any contribution to make to the art form. I did what I did because I enjoyed doing it" (Wyman 1986:51). Reid was critical about artistic revival, arguing that art was no more part and parcel of Haida everyday life. He always deplored the

<sup>4</sup> The text for the catalog was written by Wilson Duff, Bill Holm, and Bill Reid.

<sup>5</sup> The catalog was published with a preface by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

gap between the good image of present-day Haida culture provided by Northwest Coast art and the reality of life, with its high unemployment rate and rampant suicide and alcoholism. As an artist in his own right, he passed along his knowledge to young Native apprentices, such as Robert Davidson, Jim Hart, etc. He helped to build a market that supports a few hundred full-time artists and craftsmen who work for the tourist industry as well as for museum commissions. Today, more and more works are being created for ceremonial use and as potlatch gifts.

Bill Reid was a theoretician of Northwest Coast art. For fifty years, he studied the formline, the basic principle of Northwest Coast art, be it applied to painting, engraving, sculpture, or print. While Bill Holm provided the vocabulary for the elements of what has been recognized as classic Northwest Coast design—ovoid, U-form, and formline—, Reid as a crafts-person expressed his deep knowledge of the latter as follows: "The secret is in the tension of the line [...] Never let it straggle or lie stagnant on the page" (Mohr 1990:72). He argued "... that the canoe itself was the source of those basic designs. [...] Inevitably, people who spent as much time as the Haida spent working on canoes would take the lines that were familiar to them when they move to other creative activity" (Wyman 1986: 54).

Surely, Reid's position as an urban artist often disagreed with younger Native artists who felt he was not enough involved in today's cultural revival. Indeed, instead of close ties with daily Native life he had rather established an intellectual relationship with Haida culture. Nevertheless, his opposition to the logging of the Queen Charlottes, his support to local museums for the repatriation of Native artifacts, and his attempts to involve Haida communities in projects like canoe building express his whole-hearted commitment. Bill Reid's work was more discussed in anthropological circles than in artistic ones. While some labeled his production as "largely copyist" (Mohr 1990:84), others criticized him because his last works did not conform enough to the old styles of Northwest Coast. Lévi-Strauss (1974) credited him with being "as gifted as the best of his predecessors." Indeed, Reid probably secretly claimed a direct filiation with Charles Edenshaw who in his opinion succeeded in creating pieces in the

purest Haida style, a style in which "each object becomes a frozen universe, filled with latent energy" (Shadbolt 1986:29). Bill Reid's artistry however goes beyond any particular ethnic group or culture.

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