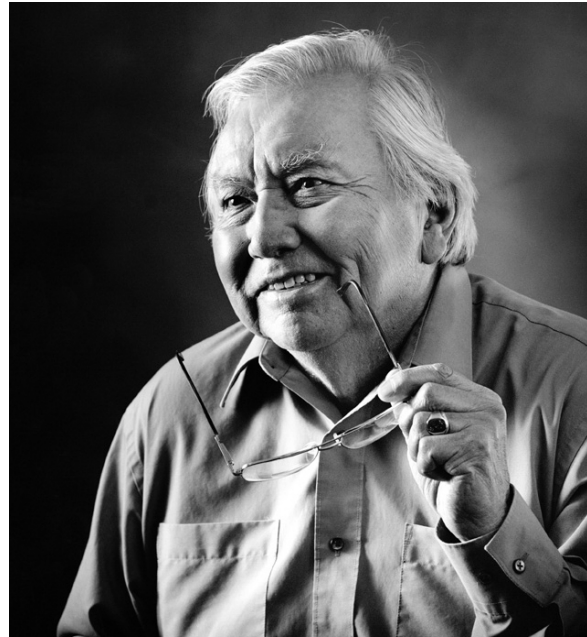


# "Simogyet Geel"

Gitxsan Carver  
Walter Harris

10 June 1931 -  
12 January 2009



Walter Harris was born in 1931 in the northern B.C. village of Kispiox. It was one of the last of the Gitxsan villages to feel the cultural oppression resulting from the anti-potlatch laws imposed by the Canadian Government in the 1920s. Totem poles continued to be erected in Kispiox throughout the period of the Great Depression and the Second World War and the Gitxsan language was spoken despite the pressure of residential schools to eliminate it. Because the theatrical performances, dances and singing of the potlatch were frowned upon, there developed a silent form of the ceremony held behind closed doors, away from the prying eyes of the local Indian agent. So, while some public elements of the Gitxsan culture were stripped away, other more covert and personal forms continued.

At 26, Walter Harris took on the name of Chief Geel and became the head chief of the village, a few years after the anti-potlatch law was set aside. The name of Geel belongs to the Fireweed Clan of the Gitxsan that is closely linked to the Killer Whale Clan of the coast. The interplay of the two family crests has been a major theme in Harris's art. One of his most memorable images is that of a breaching killer whale in which the spray from the blow hole has been replaced by a bouquet of fireweed. Other crests such as the grizzly bear and a unique figure known as "drum belly" are among the human and animal figures that Harris has explored throughout his career.

It was in the 1960s that Harris began to pursue the career of an artist. As a partner in a small lumber mill and a practicing carpenter, he began building carving sheds and old style plank houses for the reconstructed village of 'Ksan at nearby Hazelton. With the opening of the Gitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art at 'Ksan, Harris came under the tutelage of a number of artists and craftsmen drawn from throughout the coast, whose task was to rekindle the traditional arts.

Notable among Harris's influences was Bill Holm, a curator at the Burke Museum in Seattle, who had published an insightful analysis of Northwest Coast art. Called the "Rosetta Stone," it defined the grammar of the art style, including the "form-line" style of painting and the regional carving styles that differentiated Gitxsan poles and masks from those of the Haida, Tlingit and Kwakwaka'wakw peoples. Another major influence was Seattle artist Duane Pasco, who stressed the explosive energy of form-line design, which is suddenly released from the tension that normally bonds it into a tight composition. In traditional designs, form-lines define the outline, with the human or animal figures tightly bound within the design field. This creates an unending flow of primary lines that continuously fold back on themselves, filling the space to the bursting

point. In Harris's mature style, many of the form-lines break free into radical elements that release some of the tension, while retaining an aggressive and somewhat threatening tension of their own. Other influences at the Gitanmaax School included Jack Leland, who taught jewelry design, and Doug Cranmer, a Kwakwaka'wakw artist from Alert Bay who also favored the radicalized form-line.

In the early 1970s, Harris produced the first of a series of stunning masks and headdresses. The first, an articulated killer whale helmet echoed the headgear of his ancestors who wore such war helmets while defending their settlement. He also carved a delicate and graceful mask of a woman with eagle maskettes on her braids, inspired by an ancient Gitxsan mask in the Portland Art Museum. Perhaps the most spectacular was a carved headpiece depicting the legendary one-horned mountain goat, which, in a classic myth of the Gitxsan, triggered a disastrous mountain slide in the Skeena River valley several thousand years ago.

Harris explored a variety of media during these halcyon days, in what came to be known as the 'Ksan style of Northwest Coast art. In 1972, he was appointed to the Board of the 'Ksan village and soon became senior instructor of wood sculpture at the school.

Of the totem poles that lie at the heart of Northwest Coast art, Harris has said, "They are our deeds to the land. They serve as witnesses to the encounter of our ancestors with the supernatural beings who control all the fish, animals and plants in our world. They are our charter of rights from time immemorial." The totem poles that stood like sentinels at the centre of each Gitxsan village carried images of the encounters of the ancestors with the powerful spirits of the land. Figures of humans and animals were carved into the living trees as boundary markers. Fascinated by these carvings, Harris rescued one such boundary marker cut by loggers near Kispiox. It has served as an icon of his people's territorial claims and has an honoured place in his studio.

From his earliest childhood Walter Harris and his young friends played among the mostly fallen poles of Kispiox village. In the early seventies Harris, assisted by other 'Ksan carvers, raised the first traditional pole in modern times. He used his family crest of "Obsidian Nose" (the progenitor of all mosquitoes) as the main figure at the base. Several years later, he designed another totem pole at Kispiox with the figure of the weeping woman at the base, to honour another village chief, Mary Johnston.

Housefront paintings were another inherited tradition. Working with the 'Ksan carvers, Harris produced a series of monumental bas reliefs for architectural installations on the southern mainland. Among them were four large screens for the Royal Bank of Canada on Georgia Street in Vancouver and a set of massive red cedar doors for the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia.

Among other major commissions was a carved stone lintel in the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. The Tyndall limestone necessitated very different tools than the adzes and carved knives used in wood carving. Harris drew from a tradition of elaborate stone carvings in war clubs and shamanic charms that had flourished centuries earlier. For this commission, he studied with George Ramel, a gifted Vancouver stone sculptor who had assisted Haida artist Bill Reid with his monumental sculptural works over several decades. Harris's Killer Whale crest for this ceremonial doorway is one of the most important stone sculptures by any Northwest Coast artist.

Another important Ottawa commission was a totem pole on Victoria Island in the Ottawa River below the Parliament Buildings. In 1979, he produced a carved and painted screen for the Canadian Embassy in Paris. Other major projects included poles in Rochester, New York (a collaboration with Art Sterrit) and Baltimore, Maryland, and a large killer whale carving for the Vancouver Art Gallery. In 1978, Harris was appointed to the Canadian Government's Fine Arts Committee, which assisted in the purchase of native art from across the country.

After more than a decade of instructing young artists at 'Ksan, Harris established his own studio in Kispiox in 1984. He had already carved and raised four large poles in the village, including two twenty-foot poles and matching carved doors for the Band Office there. It was in "The Hiding Place Gallery and Studio" that he and his wife Sayde began selling the jewelry and woodcarvings he produced. At the front of his studio he produced a housefront painting of his favorite crest, two ten-foot high killer whales joined at the nose in the "double-profile" style of Northwest Coast art.

After a massive stroke in 1987 and major heart surgery in 1990, Harris started a long and difficult recovery. To recognize the family support he received during this period, he created a complex graphic work entitled "Celebration of Life." In it, a new generation of life springs from a killer whale, while helpful family members look on. In 1998 he completed a 10' x 12' red cedar painted panel for the Kispiox Secondary-Elementary School.

Walter Harris clearly could have pursued a more lucrative career closer to the insatiable art markets of Vancouver and Victoria, as so many other Northwest Coast artists have done. It is a tribute to this unique artist that his duties to his village, his clan and his family took priority. His major sculptural works over the years, including some 20 totem poles and 10 large-scale screens, have nevertheless been remarkable. Walter Harris continues to produce hundreds of pieces of jewelry, each bearing the distinctive family crests of Chief Geel.

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Right: "Eagle" by Walter Harris  
Red Cedar Pole  
\$25,000.00 CAD  
Lattimer Gallery

