

**MAKING MEANING IN TOTEMLAND:  
INVESTIGATING A VANCOUVER COMMISSION**

by

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B.A., The University of Victoria, 1997

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

in

**THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

(Department of Fine Arts; Art History)

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

**THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA**

October 2000

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## ABSTRACT

In the years immediately following World War II in Vancouver, native Northwest Coast images and objects were frequently made visible in the public spaces of the city, claimed and exchanged physically and symbolically in events involving both aboriginal and non-native participants. Like the political and social relations surrounding them, the meaning and purpose of these objects and images was, arguably, pliable and constantly shifting. The Totemland Pole, commissioned in 1950 by Vancouver's fledgling Totemland Society, and designed by local Kwakwaka'wakw carver Ellen Neel, was one such object-as-symbol. Numerous individuals and communities, aboriginal as well as non-native, were implicated in the object's production. Following anthropologist Anthony Cohen's work on social symbols in *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, I argue that while the symbol itself was held in common, its meaning varied with its participants' unique orientations to it. The differently motivated parties, specifically the work's creator, Ellen Neel, and its commissioners, the Totemland Society, attributed divergent meaning to the Totemland Pole simultaneously. As Cohen suggests, I propose that this difference did not lead to argument. Rather it was the form of the Totemland Pole itself, its impreciseness or "malleability," within the particular socio-political climate of its production, which *enabled* these divergent meanings to co-exist.

In order to investigate ways in which the Totemland Pole was understood simultaneously as symbolically meaningful, this project attempts to map out the subject positions of and relations of power between Ellen Neel and the members of the Totemland Society, in relation to the particulars of the local historical moment. The forgotten details of the Totemland Commission and the lack of a legitimizing discourse

of Neel's production, both fuelled by the gendered, class and race inflected politics of knowledge construction, have necessitated that the concept of absence be fundamental to my project. I have therefore approached the Totemland Commission from a number of surrounding institutional and social discourses, which form trajectories I see as intersecting at the site of the Totemland Pole. Any one of these trajectories may have been taken as the singular approach for the investigation of such an object. However, I wish to deny the autonomy normally granted these discursive fields, emphasizing instead the ways they are interdependent and may operate in tandem to enrich our understanding of an object which was the result of, and relevant to, shared histories.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
List of Figures .....	v
Abbreviations .....	vii
Acknowledgements .....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER ONE      Encountering Ellen Neel .....	12
A Historical Context .....	15
The Native Indian Affairs Conference at UBC .....	21
"Since Time Immemorial...": Carving in Stanley Park .....	25
The Restoration Project at the Museum of Anthropology .....	33
CHAPTER TWO      In Search of Vancouver: A Voyage to Australia .....	40
The Creation of Totemland .....	48
Totemland Officialdom: Ambivalent Motives and Good Intentions ...	51
Ellen Neel: A Careful Choice .....	56
CHAPTER THREE    Looking at the Totemland Pole .....	60
A Tradition of Innovation .....	63
Laughter and the Totemland Pole .....	65
Marking Boundaries, Making up Stories: The Gift of the Totemland Pole .....	74
CONCLUSION .....	79
Bibliography .....	82
Newspaper Sources Consulted .....	94
Figures .....	95

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1</b>	Photograph of Ellen Neel holding the Totemland Pole, 1950.....	95
<b>Figure 2</b>	Totemland Society Letterhead, 1954.....	96
<b>Figure 3</b>	“Authentic Totem Ware” Royal Albert dinner plate, undated.....	97
<b>Figure 4</b>	“Authentic Totem Ware” reverse of Royal Albert dinner plate, undated.....	97
<b>Figure 5</b>	Totemland Pole, carved by Ellen Neel, 1950.....	98
<b>Figure 6</b>	Photograph of Ellen Neel and Maria Tallchief, undated.....	99
<b>Figure 7</b>	Raven Scarf (silk-screen), designed by Ellen Neel, 1950s.....	100
<b>Figure 8</b>	Map of Stanley Park .....	101
<b>Figure 9</b>	Photograph of the Totem Art Studios at Stanley Park, c.1949.....	102
<b>Figure 10</b>	Kwakwaka’wakw Talking Stick, carved by Ellen Neel, 1950.....	103
<b>Figure 11</b>	Cover of “The City of Vancouver’s Official Souvenir Commemorating the Visit of the British Fleet and Tyee Potlach,” 1924.....	104
<b>Figure 12</b>	“Chiefs of Potlach,” from “The City of Vancouver’s Official Souvenir Commemorating the Visit of the British Fleet and Tyee Potlach,” 1924.....	105
<b>Figure 13</b>	Canadian Pacific Railway tourist brochure, 1906.....	106
<b>Figure 14</b>	“North by West in the Sunlight,” tourist brochure for steamship voyages to Alaska and the Yukon from British Columbia, c.1916.....	107
<b>Figure 15</b>	“Fourteen Days at Vancouver,” tourist brochure, 1928.....	108
<b>Figure 16</b>	Map of Vancouver from souvenir program of Vancouver’s Golden Jubilee celebrations, 1936.....	109
<b>Figure 17</b>	“The Romance of Vancouver,” tourist brochure, c.1955.....	110

<b>Figure 18</b> “The Jubilee Show” Souvenir Program from Vancouver’s Silver Jubilee celebrations, 1946.....	111
<b>Figure 19</b> Totem Pole carved by Charlie James, c.1925.....	112
<b>Figure 20</b> Model totem pole carved by Charlie James, c.1920s.....	113
<b>Figure 21</b> Kwakwaka’wakw Killer Whale Mask from Alert Bay, undated.....	114
<b>Figure 22</b> White Spot Totem Pole, carved by Ellen Neel, 1953.....	115
<b>Figure 23</b> White Spot Menu featuring a drawing of Ellen Neel’s White Spot Totem Pole, 1955.....	116
<b>Figure 24</b> Map of the First Nations of the Northwest Coast.....	117
<b>Figure 25</b> Map of Kwakwaka’wakw territory.....	118
<b>Figure 26</b> Photograph captioned “Neel Family Totem,” photographed by Jim Ryan, c.1959.....	119

## ABBREVIATIONS

CAV .....	City Archives of Vancouver
UBC .....	University of British Columbia
MOA .....	Museum of Anthropology
NBBC .....	Native Brotherhood of British Columbia
BCIAWS .....	British Columbia Indian Arts and Welfare Society
AHSAV .....	Arts, Historical, and Scientific Association of Vancouver
CPR .....	Canadian Pacific Railway

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my thesis advisors, Dr. Charlotte Townsend-Gault and Dr. Maureen Ryan, whose guidance, knowledge, and timely sense of humour helped shape a dynamic project. I am grateful for my friend and colleague Aaron Glass, for the hours of enthusiastic conversation, for his imaginative suggestions, and for his eclectic taste in music (which always provided a welcome distraction). For generously sharing time and knowledge despite their busy lives, I wish to thank Dr. Ruth Phillips, Dr. Allan Ryan, Doris Shadbolt, and Pamela Creasy, as well as the particularly patient archivists at the City Archives of Vancouver. Finally, my sincere thanks go to my family, whose confidence in me never wanes, and whose fortitude and determination always gives me strength; and to Jonathan, who doubtlessly heard more than he ever cared to about the Totemland Pole, but continued to listen anyway.

## INTRODUCTION

"The BC totem pole may become as famous as the Idaho potato."<sup>1</sup> This was the forecast offered by Vancouver newspapers as they announced the inauguration of the city's recently formed Totemland Society in July of 1950. The Totemland Society, comprised of numerous civic officials and prominent local citizens under the direction of Mayor Charles E. Thompson, had adopted the slogan "Totemland" to advertise the province, declaring that "BC's interesting Indian lore is worth thousands of dollars in tourist publicity."<sup>2</sup> Articles soon followed which relayed the group's dual objectives to "advise, encourage and support the BC Indians," while simultaneously promoting "the use of a Thunderbird Totem ... as the symbol of the color and romantic interest of the BC Indians."<sup>3</sup> Members of the Totemland Society announced detailed plans to familiarize the city with the image of the totem pole. Totem poles were scheduled to appear on license plates, on stamps, and in newspaper and magazine advertising.<sup>4</sup> The group promised that hotels and cafes would soon begin serving "totem lunches,"<sup>5</sup> and even called for the erection of fifty-foot high totem poles at the province's border points of entry.<sup>6</sup>

As the months progressed, the Vancouver public was occasionally brought up to date on the Totemland Society's progress, and informed that the group was now

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<sup>1</sup> *The Vancouver Sun*, July 28, 1950.

<sup>2</sup> *The Vancouver Sun*, October 13, 1950, 1.

<sup>3</sup> "Message from Mayor Chas. E. Thompson, President of the Totem Land Society," *The Native Voice*, Special Totemland Supplement, August 1950, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *The Vancouver Sun*, July 28, 1950.

<sup>5</sup> *The Vancouver Sun*, October 13, 1950, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *The Vancouver Sun*, July 28, 1950.

searching for its own “distinctive totem”<sup>7</sup> to serve as the official advertising insignia. By December 1<sup>st</sup> 1950, a brief article confirmed that a two-foot model totem pole, designed and carved specially by the local Kwakwaka’wakw artist Ellen Neel, had been chosen by the Society’s executive council as the official “Totemland Pole.”<sup>8</sup> In the next day’s paper, Neel appeared in a photograph, displaying the successful prototype (figure 1).

As the representative image of a publicity-minded society, the Totemland Pole image took on numerous forms. A photogravure of the pole was featured on the Society’s letterhead (figure 2), and the image was silk-screened on scarves, T-shirts and ties.<sup>9</sup> Miniature model totem poles were carved by Neel to be sold as souvenirs, and in time the Totemland Pole was even reproduced as a dinner service on Royal Albert china (figures 3 and 4). The hallmark use of the Totemland Pole design, however, became the two-foot replicas of the original prototype, which were individually commissioned by the Society and carved from yellow cedar by Ellen Neel (figure 5). These Totemland Poles were then presented by Neel and the Totemland Society as a gift, “symbolic of Vancouver and BC,” to prominent dignitaries and minor celebrities who passed through Vancouver (figure 6). It is this form of the Totemland Pole that is the fundamental focus and departure point of my thesis discussion.

The Totemland Pole,<sup>10</sup> as a gift on behalf of the city of Vancouver, publicly visible at the time of its production and presentation, was cast in a central role at a highly specialized local ceremony. Designed by Neel and chosen by the Society to perform that specialized role, the Totemland Pole sufficiently expressed certain ideas of community

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<sup>7</sup> CAV M6650 Neel, news clipping dated December 1, 1950.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Phil Nuytten, *The Totem Carvers: Charlie James, Ellen Neel, Mungo Martin*, Vancouver, 1982, 48.

and identity to the people involved with its production, and was thought to communicate those messages to the foreign audience who received the Pole as a gift. It can be argued that in this context, the parties implicated in its production invested the Totemland Pole with symbolic value. The Totemland Pole, for the sake of my discussion, can thus be understood as a symbol.

The concept of the symbol, while generally defined as “something that stands for, represents, or suggests another thing; especially an object used to represent something abstract,”<sup>11</sup> has been the subject of extensive scholarship. Two British social anthropologists in particular, Victor Turner and Anthony Cohen, have published work considering the nature of the sign which has been instrumental in shaping my understanding of the Totemland Pole for the purpose of this thesis. In his studies of symbols in a ritual context among the Ndembu people, Turner found that he could not analyze symbols without studying them “in a time series in relation to other events.”<sup>12</sup> To Turner, not only are symbols “essentially involved in social process,”<sup>13</sup> but they can act as a “positive force in an activity field,”<sup>14</sup> a dynamic facilitator or instigator of human action and interaction. He argues that the most pertinent quality of these active social symbols is their “polysemy” or “multi-vocality,”<sup>15</sup> or the ability for a single symbol to stand for many things.<sup>16</sup>

Victor Turner’s notion of the socially activated symbol is further explored by anthropologist Anthony Cohen in his book *The Symbolic Construction of Community*.

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<sup>10</sup> From hereon in I will refer to “The Totemland Pole” in the singular, as I am interested in the phenomenon of the pole’s form, not any particular pole itself.

<sup>11</sup> *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, Victoria Neufeldt, Ed., USA, 1356.

<sup>12</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, New York, 1967, 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

Here Cohen investigates how symbols represent community, or more precisely, how the idea of community is constructed through symbolic form. Taking Turner's theories as his departure point, Cohen describes the essential aspect of these symbols not in terms of "multi-vocality" but "malleability,"<sup>17</sup> accentuating rather the elasticity and mutability of the symbolic form as it participates in a social field. Cohen, like Turner, argues that these symbols, as the focus of interaction, "do not so much make meaning but give us the capacity to make meaning."<sup>18</sup> Numerous different people, even different groups, share this object-as-symbol, as it operates from or even creates the center of social interaction. However, Cohen argues, sharing the symbol does not necessitate sharing the meaning.<sup>19</sup>

While other theorists have argued that the symbolic form itself has the ability to initiate or summon some consensus of meaning, Cohen asserts that in actuality the opposite takes place; a myriad of divergent meanings and motivations can exist within a commonly shared form. The symbol is "malleable." Although the symbol itself is held in common, its meaning varies with its members' unique orientations to it.<sup>20</sup> "So versatile are symbols," he maintains, "that they can often be bent into these idiosyncratic shapes of meaning without such distortions becoming visible to other people who use the same symbol at the same time."<sup>21</sup> The crux of Cohen's argument, of crucial importance to my understanding of the Totemland Pole for this thesis, lies in his view that the disagreement of the different parties, then, is not necessarily an impediment to their successful interaction.<sup>22</sup> The symbol is effective *because* it is imprecise.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, London, 1985, 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

The Totemland Pole, for the purpose of this thesis discussion, will be approached as one such malleable social symbol. At this particular moment in post-war Vancouver, the meaning and purpose of native images in the public sphere was, I should argue, pliable, problematic, and continually shifting over time, as were the political and social relations surrounding these images, both inside and outside native communities. Native images and objects in the spaces of the city were frequently made visible, claimed and exchanged both physically and symbolically, in specialized, complex events involving native and non-native participants. The Totemland Pole, created in and for this public space, was one such object-as-symbol. Numerous different individuals and communities, aboriginal and as well as non-native, were implicated and interested in this object's production. Each of these entities however, specifically the creator of the work, Ellen Neel, and the commissioners of the work, the members of the Totemland Society, attributed different meaning and divergent messages to the Pole simultaneously. As Cohen asserts, I suggest that this divergence did not necessarily lead to argument, but rather that the form of the Totemland Pole itself, within the particular socio-political climate of its production, *enabled* these divergent meanings and motivations to co-exist.

This project seeks to investigate how the Totemland Pole, for those implicated at the time and place of its production, was able to sufficiently house multiple and perhaps divergent sites of meaning simultaneously. To do this I attempt to map out the interplay of subject positions occupied by the individuals in question, namely Ellen Neel and the members of the Totemland Society, in relation to the institutional matrices, political forces and social tensions that characterized Vancouver and British Columbia at the end of World War II and in the first years of the 1950s. It should be stated at the outset that I

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

have chosen to frame my discussion of the Totemland Pole as a “malleable symbol” for a number of reasons. First, because I was interested in the number of divergent but simultaneous ways that this object was symbolically constructed, or the way it became part of a symbolic construction, I chose an approach that allowed for the examination of multiplicities, contradictions and discordance. Secondly, as a “malleable symbol,” I am able to access this object not as the passive or static outcome of an interaction but as the active and dynamic force in ongoing exchange. The object itself acts as an agent in my investigation, the window through which the actions can be discerned; without the object, the interaction may not have taken place.<sup>24</sup>

One of the problems facing this topic is that the existence of the Totemland Society has long since faded from local public memory, recalled only by newspaper articles and a single archived file of correspondence dated from 1954.<sup>25</sup> The particular circumstances surrounding the production and presentation of the Totemland Poles have slipped even further into obscurity. Furthermore, with the exception of a single book written by Phil Nuytten in 1982, called *The Totem Carvers: Charlie James, Ellen Neel and Mungo Martin*,<sup>26</sup> virtually no scholarship has been published which critically addresses the life or work of Ellen Neel. The absence of a legitimizing discourse for her production, driven by the politics of the construction of knowledge, and the selective amnesia in public and academic memory, is in my view due to three interdependent factors, namely Neel’s aboriginality, her gender, and readings given to her artistic production.

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<sup>24</sup> For a fascinating discussion of the object as agent, please see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: Towards a New Anthropological Theory*, Oxford, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Totemland Correspondence, CAV Add. Mss. 336, 547-C-7, file 6.

<sup>26</sup> Nuytten, *The Totem Carvers: Charlie James, Ellen Neel, Mungo Martin*, Vancouver: 1982.

Artists like Ellen Neel, who lived and worked within an urban community as rather than on reserves or in their traditional aboriginal territories, exist, in the words of Haida-Tsimshian scholar Marcia Crosby, “outside the place where aboriginal people are recognized ‘officially’ as having authority, and where the signposts of clearly defined ‘difference’ are still determined by the conventions of authenticity, origins, and tradition.”<sup>27</sup> These “signposts of difference,” according to Crosby, have emerged, in primitivist tropes of otherness, as “measuring sticks of Indianness.”<sup>28</sup> At the same time, Crosby argues, natives themselves have embraced these “signposts of difference” as political strategy, to mark and protect boundaries of ethnic identity against a colonizing majority culture.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the reason, she asserts, they “paradoxically impoverish the complexity of aboriginal subjectivity, cultures and histories,”<sup>30</sup> excluding the gaps and the hybrid individual and communal histories of contemporary aboriginal societies, and trivialize the innovative and often improvisational interactions that take place between native and non-native people in the urban sphere.

Discussions of First Nations artistic production are also not exempt from the gendered and class-based hierarchies in western discourses of art. As a woman of an ethnic minority producing work in a commercial context, Ellen Neel has not only been subject to discrimination based on the discourse of difference, but has also been all but dismissed from the “canon” of Native Northwest Coast Art due to her production of mere “craft.” Within the discourse of art history since the late 1970s, attention has turned

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<sup>27</sup> Marcia Crosby, *Nations in Urban Landscapes*, Vancouver, 1997, 11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

towards the discipline's continued marginalization of women artists.<sup>31</sup> While a growing body of literature critically addresses the experiences of "subaltern" women artists producing under colonial control,<sup>32</sup> there is still much work to be done to recognize women artists of native descent producing under such circumstances on the Northwest Coast, particularly in the middle of the twentieth century. I recognize the dilemma, which literary and cultural critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Helen Carr, and Tapati Guha-Thakurta among others have addressed, in constructing a project that takes as its focus a woman as both subject and object of knowledge. "The project of making women 'visible,' whether in the past or in the present, in public or private domains, has inevitably moved on slippery ground,"<sup>33</sup> warns Guha-Thakurta. "Feminist studies have been increasingly sensitive to the problems and pitfalls of this agenda," she continues, "arguing that there is no easy co-relation between empowerment and visibility..."<sup>34</sup> I also recognize the hazard of slipping into the use of such a monolithic signifier as "the marginalized woman" as a category of analysis,<sup>35</sup> and so in this study I have made a concentrated effort to avoid characterizing Ellen Neel simply in terms of her status as "woman" or as a passive "victim" of the colonial project.

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<sup>31</sup> See for example, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, London: Routledge, 1981; Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power: and other essays*, New York, 1988; among others.

<sup>32</sup> See for example: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," *History and Theory*, vol.24: 3, 1984, 247-272; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, New York, 1994, 196-220, and Helen Carr, "Woman/Indian: 'The American' and His Others," *Europe and Its Others, Volume Two*, eds. Francis Barker et.al., Colchester 1985, 46-61.

<sup>33</sup> Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Women as Artists in Contemporary India," *From Independence Towards Freedom*, India, 1999, 172.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>35</sup> See Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," 1984; and Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," 1994.

Although the gap in scholarship and amnesiac local memory towards Ellen Neel and the Totemland Society may appear to be a serious deficiency, it need not stand in the way of the sort of inquiry I am proposing. It simply necessitates my approaching this project from the standpoint of an absence. This thesis becomes a project primarily occupied with the mapping out of a series of *surrounding* events, personas, and power relations, institutional and social discourses, which form trajectories I see as intersecting at the site of the Totemland Pole. The concept of absence, then, is fundamental to my project, and becomes a structuring agent around which my argument is organized. The Totemland Pole, visualized in another way, can be seen as a negative and stationary point (an absence), around which all of these other aspects circulate and are held in orbit. Through the course of my thesis, as my discussion spirals inward, closing in on the object itself, the reasons for the existence of the Totemland Pole will become more sharply defined as the situation becomes more complex and entangled.

Although my own education has primarily consisted in training in art history, I have found that the majority of the art historical literature encompassing Northwest Coast cultural production, having been formulated under the discipline's western rhetoric of value, is invested in celebrating a lineage of certain "master" artists and "masterworks."<sup>36</sup> The literature, in my view, often lacks the means or language with which to satisfactorily address such forms of cultural expression as the Totemland Pole, which transgress or frustrate that particular lineage. As a result, much of my methodology for this project has been informed by anthropological discourse, not to supplant the confines of one field for

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<sup>36</sup> For an example of literature celebrating a lineage of "master" artists of the Northwest Coast, see for instance Macnair, Hoover and Neary, eds., *The Legacy: Tradition and Innovation in Northwest Coast Indian Art*, 1984; Thom, ed, *Robert Davidson: Eagle of the Dawn*, 1993; and Brown, *Native Visions: Evolution in Northwest Coast Art from the 18<sup>th</sup> through the Twentieth Century*, 1998.

another, but with the intention of expanding as opposed to compartmentalizing ways in which such cultural production might be apprehended.

Aside from engaging in a number of invaluable conversations with individuals generous with both their time and knowledge, and my own observations and formulations about the Totemland Pole, I have deliberately restricted my research material to publicly available printed sources such as archived documents and correspondence, newspaper articles and photographs. As this study takes as its focus and point of departure an object that was created within and for the public realm, I felt it appropriate that my research methods should resonate with the debates and conflicts articulated within that same realm.<sup>37</sup> My use of the public record (with all its gaps and disparities) as primary source material attempts to emphasize how the amnesia of public memory and the exclusionary tendencies of the disciplinary discourses encompassing Northwest Coast cultural expression not only reinforce one another, but perpetuate the exclusion of certain First Nations artists and cultural forms, resulting in monotonous, predictable discussions and methods of analysis.

An investigation of the Totemland Pole could approach the object from the perspective of "fourth world"<sup>38</sup> or "tourist" art,<sup>39</sup> or as a particular moment along the artistic career of its creator, Ellen Neel. The pole could be analyzed as one point along

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<sup>37</sup> Although I was privileged, at several points throughout my project, to converse with Pamela Creasy, one of Ellen Neel's daughters, I felt it inappropriate (and for my purposes unnecessary) to include any personal family information I may have received.

<sup>38</sup> See Nelson Graburn, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*, Berkeley, 1976 and Graburn, "The Fourth World and Fourth World Art," *In the Shadow of the Sun: Perspectives on Contemporary Native Art*, ed. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa, 1993, 1-26.

<sup>39</sup> See Ruth Phillips, "Why Not Tourist Art? Significant Silences in Native American Museum Representation," *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Post-Colonial Displacements*, ed. Gyan Prakash, Princeton, 1995, 98-125; Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900*, Seattle, 1998, especially 2-7; and Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art: An African Semiotic System in Comparative Perspective*, New York, 1984.

the trajectory of Kwakwaka'wakw cultural production, or approached as part of British Columbia's continuing legacy of constructing a distinctive provincial identity through the appropriation of aboriginal images and tropes. However, in my analysis I try not to acknowledge the autonomy normally granted these discursive fields, hoping instead to keep in view the ways in which they are interdependent. The result is that the argument of my thesis, although tracing events in a roughly chronological order, does not follow a determinate linear path toward a firm or conclusive point, but makes a number of incursions into different discourses which not only contributed practically to the Totemland Pole's production, but also ideologically and socially to its perceived meanings. In my view, this approach shows a greater respect for the complexities and tensions under which such an object was produced, and is a testament to the enterprising nature of Ellen Neel, as she operated within the fields of influence available to her.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Encountering Ellen Neel

Ellen Neel was born in 1916 in the coastal village of Alert Bay, British Columbia as a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw tribe, the daughter of Charles Newman (Nulis) and Lucy Lilac James (Lalaxs'a). Despite the Department of Indian Affairs records, which state that she was born the child of "100% full blooded Indians of the Kwawkewlth Band,"<sup>40</sup> both her mother and her father were half-white.<sup>41</sup> According to Phil Nuytten, a childhood friend of the family who published an account covering much of Neel's life in *The Totem Carvers: Charlie James, Ellen Neel, Mungo Martin*, children of white parentage were not as readily accepted in the village.<sup>42</sup> However, Ellen Neel "looked Indian, spoke both Kwakwala and English with equal facility, and thus was accepted within the community."<sup>43</sup> In her youth Neel attended St. Michael's Residential School, but spent much of her free time with her grandfather, the well-known carver Charlie James, where she learned the rudiments of Kwakwaka'wakw design and carving. By age twelve Neel's work was of fine enough quality to sell to tourists who stopped in at Alert Bay en route to Alaska.

Neel left school at age eighteen and at twenty-one she met Edward Neel, a young, white, extroverted newcomer to Alert Bay. Edward Neel, who in his earlier days had been allegedly "prone to the continual bending of the law,"<sup>44</sup> arrived as a minor sensation in the village. Having easily secured a job as a sheet metal salesman, the bachelor was

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<sup>40</sup> Nuytten, 44, plate 82.

<sup>41</sup> Charlie James and Sara Nina, her grandparents on her mother's side, were both descended from marriages of Indian/Europeans and were half Caucasian. Her paternal grandparents, James Newman and Gauthilas were, respectively, white and Kwakwaka'wakw. (Nuytten, 44)

<sup>42</sup> Nuytten, 44.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 44:

considered a “prize catch” for marriage.<sup>45</sup> Neel chose the young Ellen Newman over a host of other willing possibilities, and “tongues wagged,”<sup>46</sup> according to Nuytten, when they soon set up housekeeping. Their first child, David Neel, was born in 1937 and the Neels were formally married in 1939. The young family grew rapidly: Ellen Neel gave birth to Ted Jr. and Bob in 1939, Cora in 1941 and Theo in 1942.

In 1943 the Neels moved to Vancouver, presumably in the hopes of an increased income for the growing family. Nuytten asserts that Vancouver was both exciting and intimidating for Ellen Neel.<sup>47</sup> “She made friends easily,” he claims, “and between raising her children, keeping house, and extending hospitality to visiting friends and relatives, the time passed quickly.”<sup>48</sup> He relates that the Neels lived “from one pay day to the next...there was usually enough, but never any extra to put away.”<sup>49</sup> The Neels’ financial situation was already less than ideal, and in 1945 a third daughter, Pamela, was born. In 1946 however, Edward Neel suffered a serious stroke – the first of a series of strokes that were to impair his health for the rest of his life. Facing destitution, Ellen Neel turned to the one economic possibility that seemed to make sense – carving and selling native art.<sup>50</sup> She had carved the occasional piece for collectors since her marriage, and had often spoke of how easily her totem poles had sold to tourists in Alert Bay.<sup>51</sup> After speaking with several collectors and curio dealers in the city of Vancouver, Edward Neel was

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>50</sup> I use the phrase “native art” because it is the term Neel herself used to describe her work when she spoke at the conference at UBC in 1948. I use it conscious of the fact that her definition of “native art” was a very different one from that which was used beginning in the 1960s, when native cultural production was institutionalized in Vancouver into the fine art gallery space.

<sup>51</sup> Nuytten, 45.

encouraged, as there appeared to be a demand for native design.<sup>52</sup> He was adamant, however, that if the venture was to be economically viable, it would have to be built on a "sound financial investment"<sup>53</sup> and conducted as a full-time business.

Phil Nuytten writes that by 1947 the family's home on Powell Street had been transformed into "Totem Art Studios," a combined workshop and store. Although Edward was partially incapacitated, it was decided that he would handle the buying of materials, the rough preparatory work, the finances and the promotion of his wife's talent. Ellen Neel would design, carve and paint, and the now six children became an essential part of a near-production line. As the years passed Neel's work would command increasing attention from private collectors,<sup>54</sup> however the livelihood of the family was secured by the production of small, modestly priced model totem poles. Large quantities of these model poles could be turned out in a "reasonable amount of time," to be sold to department stores and local souvenir shop proprietors.

"By any normal standards," Nuytten postulates, "the endeavor should have failed miserably." He commends the young aboriginal woman, recently arrived in an urban center and faced with supporting a large family, having the courage and determination to establish a career in a field traditionally dominated by men.<sup>55</sup> However, although she was described as armed with tenacity and an "ego-piercing"<sup>56</sup> sense of humour, Neel was not

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<sup>52</sup> The "demand for native design" came from souvenir and curio shops, as well as department stores such as Woodward's and The Hudson's Company. These were the days before native art galleries had established themselves in the city, commanding high prices for original or old work.

<sup>53</sup> Nuytten, 45.

<sup>54</sup> Ellen Neel produced an abundant and diverse body of work, including, among many others, five totem poles for Westbrook Mall in Edmonton, Alberta, and the entire foyer decoration for a new resort in Harrison Hot Springs, BC. Her carvings have traveled as far as Denmark and even Korea, where a pole was erected memorializing Canadian soldiers fallen in the Korean War. The majority of this commissioned work is grossly under-researched, and though beyond the scope of this present investigation, deserves further critical attention.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

working within a political and social vacuum. Time and circumstance played a large role in the establishment of her career. The Neels moved to the city of Vancouver at a time when relations between natives and non-natives in the province were undergoing rapid change; active, vocal aboriginal leaders and shifting attitudes in the general population were beginning to alter the definitions of "nativeness" itself as well as who had the power to articulate those definitions. A particular social and political climate as well as certain key individuals helped facilitate Neel's establishment as a public figure in the city. It is essential, therefore, to outline briefly some of the more significant events in provincial Native affairs immediately prior to and contemporary with the Neels' move to Vancouver, to establish the climate wherein Neel would launch her carving career. Instead of following a rigid chronology, the following section is organized around several different issues affecting native relations in the province's public, political, and academic spheres between 1927 and 1949, many of which erupted concurrently and were often in contradiction to one another.

### **A Historical Context**

Following the banning of all land-claim-related political activity by Parliament in 1927, organized native activity in British Columbia appeared to crumple, and the effects of the Depression soon closed in behind.<sup>57</sup> By 1931 however, the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia was established on the north coast,<sup>58</sup> an essentially "pan-Indian"<sup>59</sup> organization whose leading members included Chief William Scow (Kwakwaka'wakw),

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<sup>57</sup> F.E. LaViolette argues that since minority groups are usually employed in the marginal occupations of an area, it is possible that the depression was felt sooner by the aboriginal peoples of British Columbia. (F.E. LaViolette, *The Struggle for Survival: Indian Cultures and the Protestant Ethic in BC*, Toronto: 1973, 145)

<sup>58</sup> J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*, Toronto, 1989, 219.

<sup>59</sup> Ronald Hawker, *Accumulated Labours: First Nations Art in British Columbia, 1922-1961*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Department of Fine Arts, UBC, 1998. 228.

Guy Williams (Kitamat), Reverend P.R. Kelly (Haida), and later Andrew Paull (Coast Salish). The mandate of the new Brotherhood, while explicitly avoiding the now illegal topic of land claims, advocated greater acknowledgment of aboriginal rights, favored replacing the residential schools with day schools in the villages, and pushed for meeting with Ottawa officials.<sup>60</sup> The organization gave advice to individual Indians, often commercial fishermen, and annual conventions became important forums for communicating with government officials.<sup>61</sup> During World War II the Brotherhood began to forge close ties with rapidly expanding labor unions,<sup>62</sup> and presented a petition to the federal government in Ottawa opposing the implementation of an income tax on the native peoples – “no taxation without representation,” noting that BC First Nations peoples were still denied the right to vote federally or provincially.<sup>63</sup>

Although the Brotherhood was established in the northern region of the province, it quickly gained support on the south coast, and though it was inwardly fraught with diverging political positions, the group solidified itself outwardly as a well-organized and vocal presence. By the mid-1940s, both government and industry officials moved to recognize the Native Brotherhood as a legitimate and powerful bargaining agent.<sup>64</sup> By 1946, along with the return of thousands of native veterans from World War II, Ottawa had launched the Special Joint Committee, an official inquiry into the Indian Act, and the Native Brotherhood was selected by the federal government as the sole representative of

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<sup>60</sup> The Native Brotherhood of British Columbia also fought for legalizing the potlatch, for increased recognition of aboriginal rights in hunting, fishing, trapping and timber harvesting in official reserve lands, and it opposed singling out of Indians for prohibition against alcohol consumption. Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989*, Vancouver, 1990, 116.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-118.

<sup>62</sup> In 1942 the Brotherhood amalgamated with the Pacific Coast Native Fishermen's Association (PCNFA).

<sup>63</sup> Jacqueline O'Donnell, *The Native Brotherhood of BC, 1931-1950: A New Phase in Native Political Organization*, Unpublished MA Thesis, UBC, 1985, 46. Quoted in Hawker, *Accumulated Labours*, 228.

British Columbia First Nations. At this time it became clear to the Brotherhood that a reliable and rapid means of disseminating information was an urgent need and thus began publication of the *Native Voice*, the second aboriginal newspaper in all of North America.<sup>65</sup> Based in Vancouver and initially owned and managed by a white woman, Maisie Hurley, the *Native Voice*, as the "official organ" of the Brotherhood, strove to be "the means of uniting into one solid body the Natives of Canada by keeping them in touch with affairs relating to our people."<sup>66</sup> It resolutely stated in the first issue that: "the *Native Voice* is being printed for all people to lend a helping hand to bring about a change in the living conditions that held back an advanced mode of life for the original Canadian. It is to change the state of affairs that the *Native Voice* appears."<sup>67</sup>

The *Native Voice* is but one example of the fact that by the 1920s, not only were many members of the First Nations of British Columbia increasingly literate but many of their leaders had become well-versed in the written history of the various issues in which they were now involved and of their relations with the whites. They had become more familiar with the principles of Canadian law, and through the preparation of many petitions, trips to Victoria, Ottawa, and later to England, they had become better acquainted with Canadian political procedures.<sup>68</sup> Just as Jacqueline O'Donnell has stated specifically of the Brotherhood, the First Nations of BC became adept at "utilizing the

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<sup>64</sup> Hawker, 229.

<sup>65</sup> Some scholars have emphasized that the publication of the *Native Voice* was the product of a "new Canadianized Indian," holding "the modernized version of the Protestant ethic." LaViolette, *The Struggle for Survival*, 161. Another perspective would be to view the publication of the *Native Voice* as evidence of British Columbia's First Peoples embracing the methods of the majority population for the dissemination of their own ideas and information.

<sup>66</sup> *Native Voice*, first issue, 1.

<sup>67</sup> *Native Voice*, first issue p1.

<sup>68</sup> LaViolette, 141.

methods of the majority society for good public relations and to attain recognition as well as respect for [their] aims and goals from industry and government officials.”<sup>69</sup>

Another, more drastic indication of BC’s aboriginal leaders’ ability to seize attention by manipulating the media of the majority society occurred in January of 1947, prompting front headlines of BC newspapers to cry, “Indians ‘Dissolve BC Government,’”<sup>70</sup> and “White government of British Columbia is ‘at an end.’”<sup>71</sup> Chief William Scow, President of the NBBC, exasperated by the provincial government’s refusal to grant the First Nations of the province the franchise, issued an official proclamation to Premier John Hart at the Legislature in Victoria. The proclamation “dissolved” Premier Hart’s “unofficial” government, declared white residents to be “wards of the state,” and “removed” their right to vote. It announced that the First Nations would be shortly taking over operations of lands that were never officially ceded to the Crown, and that the seat of government would be shortly moved to Alert Bay.<sup>72</sup> Scow’s proclamation, which was intended to bring to the attention of voters the feeling of native BC residents towards plans to extend the franchise to East Indians and Chinese without the inclusion of BC aboriginals, confronted the white government with a parody of their own pedantic methods, and was successfully devoured by the press.

By 1949, the provincial legislature finally removed all racial restrictions from the provincial franchise; the First Nations people of British Columbia were granted the vote.

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<sup>69</sup> O’Donnell, 46.

<sup>70</sup> CAV pamphlet file 4456-2.

<sup>71</sup> CAV pamphlet file 4456-2.

<sup>72</sup> The actual proclamation, as quoted in Vancouver newspapers, read: “Whereas the present government of the Pacific Coast has been established by voting of white settlers resident on Indian territory, and whereas legal title of the Indian lands has never passed from our hands, and whereas the present Chief of the village of Victoria has seen fit to deny the resident of thousands of years ancestry the right to take part in governing their lands, we, in the name of all Pacific Coast bands do hereby declare white control of our

Within the aboriginal community, this decision was met with reactions ranging from jubilation by the members of the Native Brotherhood, to strenuous opposition from other aboriginals, who felt that provincial enfranchisement further stripped the First Nations of their unique ethnic identity in the province. The broad spectrum of opinion underscored yet again the reality of a complex and often divided native population. In 1951, two years after the Special Joint Committee had recommended "a complete revision of the Indian Act to remove many of its coercive methods without altering its assimilative purpose,"<sup>73</sup> legislation was finally passed. Although features such as the ban on the potlatch and the prohibition on consumption of alcohol were deleted, the general outlines of the policy remained unchanged.<sup>74</sup>

The impact of World War II, according to the Canadian historian J.R. Miller, did much to begin moving the First Nations out of "the era of irrelevance."<sup>75</sup> As he states in his book *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*:

In the midst of a war against institutionalized racism and barbarity, it was impossible not to notice that the bases of Canadian Indian policy lay in assumptions about the moral and economic inferiority of particular racial groupings. The horrors of war, in conjunction with the widening influence of relativism in the social sciences, seriously discomfited Canadians when, on rare occasions, they looked at the way in which they treated the aboriginal peoples of their country.<sup>76</sup>

This increasing sensitivity toward racial tolerance, coupled with the visibility of the Special Joint Committee proceedings, began prompting, in First Nations leader George

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lands at an end, and order the white chieftains to immediately surrender their false authority to an all-Indian government which we will form shortly." (CAV pamphlet file 4456-2.)

<sup>73</sup> Miller, 221.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 221-2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

Manuel's words, "spokesmen of every political stripe within the non-Indian community to pursue the cause of Canada's First Peoples."<sup>77</sup> He continues:

The anti-poverty craze produced spokesmen of every political stripe within the non-Indian community who were labeling Indian reserves, based on last summer's visit or a canoe trip in their camping days, as Canada's Apartheid Policy. Indians had always been complaining. Now there were sophisticated, organized urban voters, whose view of the matter may have been entirely different from ours, but who were, nonetheless, pointing at the same problems and the same administration.<sup>78</sup>

Such heightened awareness, combined with the increasing legitimization of social welfare movements since the 1930s, provided the catalyst for the founding of numerous private non-native interest groups. One such organization was the British Columbia Indian Arts and Welfare Society, established in Victoria in 1939,<sup>79</sup> dedicated to arousing public interest and appreciation of the "distinctive arts and crafts of the Indians of British Columbia." The BCIAWS advocated for the commercial sale of "native arts and crafts," and believed that by providing the "necessary training," and by "fostering, developing and utilizing the artistic skill and innate qualities inherited by their decendents [sic],"<sup>80</sup> they could help the natives achieve a more stable, self-supporting means of livelihood.

Headed by the retired Protestant schoolmistress and philanthropist Alice Ravenhill, the "philanthropy" of the BCIAWS teetered close to the edge of self-congratulatory paternalist patronage, feeding on the well-worn trope of the naturally artistically gifted but resourceless aboriginal. The BCIAWS, working in conjunction with the Provincial Museum in Victoria, as well as such missionaries and residential

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<sup>77</sup> George Manuel and Michael Poslums, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, Don Mills, Ont., Collier-Macmillan Canada, 1983, 129.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>79</sup> The Society was originally established in 1939 under the name "The Society for the Furtherance of of BC Indian Arts and Crafts," was later changed to the British Columbia Indian Arts and Welfare Society, under which title it became better known.

school instructors as Rev. George Raley and Anthony Welsh, organized sales, competitions and exhibitions in Victoria and Vancouver featuring the work of both accomplished adult artists from up and down the coast, as well as work submitted by children in the residential schools. The group was particularly interested in establishing and regulating standards of high quality, “authentic” native craft for the market – contemporary designs were discouraged – promoting only those native artists whose work was felt to uphold the Society’s standards of “truly Indian design.”<sup>81</sup> Because she often applied “traditional” elements of design to contemporary media (figure 7), Ellen Neel was one individual that the Society held up as a model native artist.

Other concentrated sites of interest towards the province’s aboriginal peoples emerged in the immediate post-war period. In 1947 Dr. Harry Hawthorn was appointed the first anthropologist at the University of British Columbia, and together with his wife Audrey, founded the Department of Anthropology and the Museum of Anthropology at the University. Both the new department and the museum aimed to “serve both scholarly purposes and the needs of contemporary people,”<sup>82</sup> and immediately strove to place scholarly emphasis on and establish positive working relationships with the First Nations communities of the Northwest Coast, particularly their artists.<sup>83</sup>

### **The Native Indian Affairs Conference at the University of British Columbia**

In April of 1948, local philanthropic efforts converged with those of academia; the British Columbia Indian Arts and Welfare Society, together with Dr. Harry

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<sup>80</sup> Objects of the Society, British Columbia Archives, Society for the Furtherance of BC Indian Arts and Crafts Originals, 1939-1954, MS-1116.

<sup>81</sup> Josephine Godman, *Report of the Conference on Native Indian Affairs*, ed. Harry Hawthorn, Victoria, 1948, 11

<sup>82</sup> Michael Ames, quoted in Audrey Hawthorn, *A Labour of Love: The Making of the Museum of Anthropology, UBC, The First Three Decades, 1947-1975*. Vancouver, 1993, Foreword.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, Foreword.

Hawthorn, co-hosted the first annual Conference on Native Indian Affairs held on the campus of the University of British Columbia. The object of the conference, as stated in the published report, was to bring together all those interested in Native Canadian affairs to exchange information related to Arts and Handicrafts, Health, Welfare, and Education, with the hope of fostering "greater co-operation between agencies and organized groups and further the general welfare of the Native people."<sup>84</sup>

The conference, one of the first forums to directly address the First Nations themselves,<sup>85</sup> was a landmark event from the perspective of this thesis discussion, for a number of reasons. First, aside from the members of the BCIAWS and Harry Hawthorn, the speakers included A.E. Pickford, anthropologist at the Provincial Museum in Victoria; Norman MacKenzie, president of UBC; and several Indian Agents. Also speaking were numerous members of the Native Brotherhood, including Andrew Paull and Guy Williams, as well as several local native artists. Eighty-four people attended the conference, and though the coming together of these different voices exposed a grating tension in attitudes ranging from respect to condescension, many of the participants were influential figures earnest about the First Nations' cause. Working independently, these individuals may have been restricted to their immediate spheres of influence, but their co-operative participation in this forum began to generate a space of opportunity for artists such as Ellen Neel. Secondly, the conference programme laid great emphasis on the potential role of "Arts and Handicrafts" in improving the economic situation for the First Nations of BC. The proceedings began with an Art Display and Sale, exhibiting the

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<sup>84</sup> Harry Hawthorn, *Report of the Conference on Native Indian Affairs*, Foreword.

<sup>85</sup> Harry Hawthorn stated in his introductory remarks, "It is from you, the Indians of BC that the best statement of your needs can come, and the others are gathered in the expectation of hearing this. It is first of all to you that those working in this field will want to address their statements of what they are doing and

paintings of British Columbian native artists Sis-ult, Judith Morgan, and George Clutesi; carvings by Ellen Neel and Leslie John, as well as works by Emily Carr and M. Armitage Moore, A.M.D. Fairbairn, and children's crafts from the Alberni, Christie and Inkameep Residential Schools. Lastly, and of most interest for our purposes, the conference was of great consequence to Ellen Neel. Her participation in this event would serve as the instigation for a number of subsequent experiences that would be of great consequence to her carving career in Vancouver. In addition to the fact that her work was exhibited in the Conference Art Display, Neel was invited to participate as a speaker on the first topic of discussion, the Arts and Handicrafts session. Neel immediately seized the opportunity to speak at a public forum before a varied and interested audience; she not only voiced her views about the role of native art and its future in greater Canadian society, but also saw the event as an invaluable chance for self-promotion.

Like many of the native artists participating, she spoke of the problems they faced in selling their work: public indifference, low financial return, and competition from cheap bulk souvenir imports. However, the tone of Neel's address was earnest and optimistic; she was concise and articulate and her message laid the ethical groundwork for her later involvement with the Totemland Society. Neel began by echoing the sentiments of numerous others at the conference, that "great work could be produced by the native people, if a true appreciation of their art could be instilled into the general public."<sup>86</sup> But while numerous other speakers, such as Josephine Godman of the BCIAWS, expounded the need for native designs to remain "truly Indian," "authentic"

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what they hope to do. For you are the people who will wear the shoe. You alone can say where it fits and where it needs to be changed." *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Ellen Neel, *Ibid.*, 14.

and "traditional" in order to be commercially viable,<sup>87</sup> Neel stressed the need for innovation and change. She denounced the idea that native art was a "dead art" and professed her disapproval of the fact that current efforts in Anthropology were confined to the preservation of the old work. "To me," she said, "this idea is one of the great 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."<sup>88</sup>

"Whereas to me," she continued, "it is a living symbol of the gaiety, the laughter and the love of color of my people."<sup>89</sup> The art forms of the Northwest Coast had always been an imaginative, evolving and responsive art, she argued, citing the history of rapid response to new materials and technical innovations. Native artists must continue to innovate: "We, the Indian artist, must be allowed to create. We must be allowed new and modern techniques, new and modern tools, new and modern materials."<sup>90</sup> She voiced her conviction that with continued innovation, native design could be applied to everyday living, stating, "I believe it can be used with stunning effect on tapestry, textiles, sportswear, and in jewelry... Small pieces of furniture lend themselves admirably to the Indian designs. Public buildings, large restaurants and halls have already begun to utilize some of the art."<sup>91</sup> Perhaps most significantly, Neel's speech reveals a decided note of patriotism, at once protective of her own local ethnic identity, but simultaneously placing that identity within a larger Canadian nationality. Neel argued for native art to "take its rightful place beside other Canadian art,"<sup>92</sup> stressing her conviction that native art could be "a powerful factor in combining the best part of the Indian culture into the fabric of a

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<sup>87</sup> See Josephine Godman's remarks, *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>88</sup> Ellen Neel, *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

truly Canadian art form,"<sup>93</sup> a central element of the nation's cultural heritage. The UBC conference functioned for Ellen Neel as an amplifier for her voice, and several interested individuals were listening to what she had to say. At this event she was exposed, for perhaps the first time, to the different structures of power that would form a constellation around her, and through which she would begin to navigate and assert herself in the coming years.

### **"Since Time Immemorial...": Carving in Stanley Park**

Although written records leave unclear whether Neel's conference speech provided the direct impetus, less than one month after, in late April 1948, she approached the Parks Board of Commissioners, to propose that she set up a workshop at Ferguson's Point in Stanley Park to carve, display and sell her work. Stanley Park, the largest urban park in the country, has since its dedication in 1889 been the source of immense civic pride and revenue; by the late 1940s the Park had become one of the city's greatest attractions for tourists and locals alike. Ferguson's Point, well known as the final resting-place of Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson, occupies the westernmost tip of the park (figure 8). Together with Third Beach it was closed to the public during World War II and taken over by the military. "Part of a defensive ring around English Bay,"<sup>94</sup> barracks were erected, barbed wire was strung along the paths and shoreline, and naval guns and searchlights installed.<sup>95</sup> By the spring of 1948 however, the military had abandoned the area, leaving behind a number of empty barracks and officers' quarters, and the question of how to "beautify" Ferguson's Point became the subject of much discussion during

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>94</sup> Mike Steele, *Stanley Park*, BC, 1993, 61.

meetings of the Board of Parks Commissioners. The meeting minutes record that after numerous proposals had been reviewed, a decision was made to rent the officers' quarters out to a Mr. and Mrs. Southworth, who would transform the building into a tearoom and concession, with space also for an art display.<sup>96</sup>

On May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1948, the minutes from the Board of Parks Commissioners reveal that Ellen Neel and her husband had approached Superintendent F.B. Stroyan, proposing "the carving of authentic totem poles for sale at Ferguson's Point...to be carved by British Columbia Indians who would be trained in the art."<sup>97</sup> By June 21<sup>st</sup>, Commissioner R. Rowe Holland had drawn up an agreement with Ellen and Edward Neel, which granted permission to set up a carving studio at Ferguson's Point, with the work to be displayed and sold in the studio presently operated by the Southworths.<sup>98</sup> (figure 9) The Board granted the Neels the use of an abandoned military building at Third Beach as a workshop, and the use of a "concrete dugout for preparing and setting up a totem exhibit to interest tourists and incite sales."<sup>99</sup> The Board provided the Neels with a \$1000 fund for machinery and incidental expenses, with the agreement that the Neels would pay the Board 10% of everything they sold themselves, as well as train "a minimum of six young Indians in totemology [sic] and carving."<sup>100</sup> The workshop and store were a great success. By the end of the summer, the Board of Parks Commissioners had received

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<sup>95</sup> See Steele, *Stanley Park*, 62 for a more detailed discussion on the military transformation of Ferguson's Point during WWII.

<sup>96</sup> From the Minutes of the Parks Board of Commissioners meeting, February 26, 1948. CAV MCR 48 file 2.

<sup>97</sup> From the Minutes of the Parks Board of Commissioners meeting, May 3, 1948. CAV MCR 48 file 2.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, June 21, 1948. CAV MCR 48 file 2.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

letters congratulating them on the “very fine development at Ferguson’s Point,”<sup>101</sup> and the Neel’s contract was renewed for the summer of 1949.

Since its date of dedication, Stanley Park not only been the source of pride for the city of Vancouver, but also both the site and subject of bitter argument. Its history, especially with regard to aboriginal peoples, is as long and complex as that of the city itself. At the time it was dedicated and received its name in 1889, the area around Stanley Park was home to Squamish (Halkomelen-Salishan speaking) peoples, who had been the traditional inhabitants of the area for thousands of years.<sup>102</sup> The area around Lumberman’s Arch (see map of Park, figure 7)<sup>103</sup> had been a permanent Salish village from the 1860s known as XwayXway,<sup>104</sup> and potlatches involving up to several thousand natives and their European guests were reported into the 1880s.<sup>105</sup> Around the time of the its dedication, the park’s aboriginal population went into decline, quite possibly as a result of the smallpox epidemics that ravaged the Natives in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Fearing infestation and disease, the city of Vancouver forcibly relocated the few remaining inhabitants of XwayXway, and burnt their houses to the ground.

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<sup>101</sup> From the Minutes of the Parks Board of Commissioners Utilities Board meeting September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1948. CAV MCR 48 file 2.

<sup>102</sup> In 1888, work crews constructing the drive that encompasses the park unknowingly uncovered a vast Native midden, essentially a garbage heap created over thousands of years by the region’s indigenous population, near the current site of Lumberman’s Arch. The enormous deposit of broken clam shells, which measured over 2.4 m in some places, serving the foundation for trees estimated to be over 500 years old, was considered an ideal material to surface the new road. (See Steele, *Stanley Park*, 47)

<sup>103</sup> Lumberman’s Arch, an imitation classical triumphal arch made from local cedar and fir, was one of Stanley Park’s first monuments. It was originally erected in 1912 at Pender and Hamilton Streets as a tribute to the visiting Duke and Duchess of Connaught and then moved the following year to Stanley Park. The re-location of Lumberman’s Arch resulted from local support of the City Beautiful movement just prior to the war, which advocated the taming of the park. (See Steele, *Stanley Park*, 47-50 and 169)

<sup>104</sup> Steele recounts that when Captain George Vancouver explored Burrard Inlet in 1792 no native village could be seen, “even though Vancouver’s journal leaves no doubt that he and his crew were looking for signs of habitation that would explain the origin of the Native People who greeted him. Had there been a village at Lumberman’s Arch it would have been recorded. By the 1860s, however, there definitely was a village here, noted in various accounts by travelers and others. The most likely explanation is that the site was used seasonally by Natives who lived perhaps in Howe Sound or along the Fraser River and only after 1792 were permanent dwellings built.” (Steele, *Stanley Park*. 49)

In 1921, while the last of the Salish people were removed from their hereditary homes in the Park by the Squatter Eviction Trials,<sup>106</sup> the Art, Historical and Scientific Association of Vancouver (AHSAB)<sup>107</sup> proposed that an entire Kwakwaka'wakw village including "two or more Indian lodges of prehistoric character"<sup>108</sup> be transplanted from Alert Bay to Stanley Park.<sup>109</sup> Without paying any attention to the possibility of conflicts to contemporary First Nations peoples, the scheme was thought to be a "great attraction" to the city of Vancouver, and "of great educational value in illustrating Indian and other early life"<sup>110</sup> to tourists and Vancouverites alike. By 1923, two freestanding totem poles (one carved by Charlie James, grandfather and carving instructor to Ellen Neel) and two house posts (also carved by Charlie James) originating from Kingcome Inlet,<sup>111</sup> were purchased through an Association member and temporarily erected near Lumberman's Arch,<sup>112</sup> virtually on top of the discovered Salish midden.

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>106</sup> From the early 1920s onward, the federal government, the city, and the Parks Board sought the eviction of all the residents (native and non-native) of Stanley Park. The only individual who was granted permission to stay was an elderly aboriginal woman called "Aunt Sally," who proved she had lived in the Park for over 60 years, giving her title to the land. (*Ibid.*, 16).

<sup>107</sup> The Art, Historical and Scientific Association of Vancouver, founded in 1894 and incorporated under the Benevolent Societies Act in 1901, had been absorbed into the city's political system as a "quasi-municipal institution" in 1903. See Hawker, 79-80.

<sup>108</sup> H.E. Carry, "The Indian Village," *Museum Notes Vancouver*, June 1926, 15, quoted in Leslie Allan Dawn, *Ksan: Museum, Cultural and Artistic Activity among the Gitksan Indians in the Upper Skeena, 1920-1973*, Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Victoria, 1981, 28.

<sup>109</sup> The AHSAB's proposal to erect a native village in Stanley Park originated from R.C. Campbell-Johnston, a mining engineer, who in 1915 had made a stirring plea in the Vancouver daily newspapers for the re-erection, in Vancouver, of a transplanted Northwest Coast native village "complete in its primeval artistic status." Campbell-Johnston's argument was that the real homes were too far off the beaten path for the tourist, and so "to catch his eye must be brought to his very doors...All this replica of the simple grand dignity of these early native people would be an endless source of interest too us all...tourists would throng to see it." *Vancouver Daily News Advertiser*, July 1, 1915, 4. For a more in-depth discussion of Campbell-Johnston and the transplanted Indian village proposal, see Dawn, 26-27.

<sup>110</sup> AHSAB Annual Meeting, January 1921. CAV Add. Mss. 336.

<sup>111</sup> Hawker gives a detailed description of the Stanley Park Poles, 85. See also Hilary Stewart *Totem Poles, Vancouver*, 1990, 84-91.

<sup>112</sup> AHSAB Annual Meeting, January 1923. CAV Add. Mss. 336.

The plans for the Indian village in Stanley Park never materialized, however, as they were defeated by the Squamish people in 1925. Andrew Paull of the Salish territories<sup>113</sup> called a meeting with the Department of Indian Affairs Agent C.C. Perry, and members of the AHSAB Indian Village Committee, and pointed out that the proposed spot was historically significant to the Squamish people.<sup>114</sup> As it was Squamish land, they strenuously objected to the erection of a Kwakwaka'wakw village, and although they had no objections to a mixed village or unattached poles, they demanded that the presence of the contemporary Squamish be recognized. News of the meeting was leaked to the press and funding for the AHSAB project evaporated; the Indian Village, consequently, did not materialize. The four poles already purchased by the AHSAB were placed in the care of the Parks Board.<sup>115</sup>

Neel's move to carve in Stanley Park, whether she was conscious of it or not, contributed to this already established history of ambivalent obliteration and celebration of native presence within the Park. In addition, like the AHSAB's "conflation of different societies and linguistic groups into one 'totem pole culture' exemplified by the crest poles of the 'distant Kwakiutl,' of the central coast,"<sup>116</sup> Totem Art Studio's Stanley Park workshop also contributed to the erasure of the physical reminders of the local Salish, who did not conventionally carve free-standing poles, and their claims to Stanley Park and other parts of the city. Given the history of argument over native presence in Stanley Park, it is interesting (but perhaps not surprising) that no mention is made by the

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<sup>113</sup> Andy Paull was, at the time, the secretary of the Allied Indian Tribes of British Columbia and future president of the North American Indian Brotherhood. (see Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics*, 89-94 and 120.)

<sup>114</sup> According to the Squamish, the proposed site for the Indian Village was the spot where Chief Capilano had welcomed Captain George Vancouver.

<sup>115</sup> Hawker, 92.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

Parks Board in 1948 of the possible political ramifications of granting a Kwakwaka'wakw woman permission to carve and sell work in a park deemed the traditional territory of the Salish. The Parks Board's largest concern appears to be in establishing that Ellen Neel is indeed a "full blooded Indian." Interestingly, the Board was indirectly compelled to verify that claim.

A misleading press release was published, mistakenly claiming that the Parks Commission had endeavored to employ two white men to "revive Totemology [sic] the white man's way."<sup>117</sup> Ellen Hart, secretary of the BCIAWS, promptly addressed a letter to the Chairman of the Vancouver Parks Commission expressing the group's alarm at these prospects. "Genuine Indian crafts cannot be revived in this way," she wrote, "because native craftsmanship arises from the culture and traditions of the people."<sup>118</sup> Stating that "we are in close touch with several skilled native workers, who are able and willing to do beautiful carving,"<sup>119</sup> the letter urged the Parks Commission to modify the proposed plan, adding that "if the Board so desires, we should be most happy to make suggestions along these lines."<sup>120</sup> Six days later a similar letter reached the Parks Board, signed by Professor Hawthorn, supporting the concerns of the BCIAWS.<sup>121</sup> Commissioner Holland replied by correcting the misprint, assuring both Hawthorn and the BCIAWS that the Ferguson's Point operation had been undertaken by Ellen Neel and her husband. After having affirmed that "she is a full blooded Indian, and he is, I

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<sup>117</sup> Quoted in a letter from Ellen Hart to the Vancouver Parks Commission, dated June 30, 1948. (UBC Special Collections Archives, Harry Hawthorn Papers)

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Letter from Harry Hawthorn to the Vancouver Parks Commission, dated July 5, 1948. (UBC Special Collections Archives, Harry Hawthorn Papers)

understand, quarter Indian,”<sup>122</sup> Holland stressed to the concerned parties that “there is no doubt as to her artistry and talent, or her authentic and conscientious interest in the work of her own people.”<sup>123</sup>

If Ellen Neel herself had concerns about carving on Salish territory, no mention of it was preserved for posterity.<sup>124</sup> One could speculate that her feelings on the matter might approximate those expressed by the *Native Voice*, in an editorial reporting on the Neels’ new business opportunity. The newspaper’s leading administrative staff, although comprised of individuals from numerous different First Nations communities,<sup>125</sup> did not include a member of the Coast Salish nation, the group who had virulently protested against the proposed Indian village twenty-three years earlier. Perhaps not surprising, then, is the fact that the article announcing the Neels’ contract in the Park made no mention of its contested history or the possibility of renewed tension. The *Native Voice* writer, in a tone not unlike that of the AHSAV’s sentimental proposal, romanticizes the history of native presence in Stanley Park, ignoring past bitter conflict over territory and thereby effacing all tribal distinction. The article fashions Stanley Park into an undefined place of presumably peaceful habitation for “native people...since time immemorial,” and rejoices that Ellen Neel and her husband will rekindle those traditions.

Here amongst the towering trees, with the sound of the sea waves gently lapping the beach and in a place where native people may have held their

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<sup>122</sup> Parks Commissioner R. Rowe Holland, in a letter to Harry Hawthorn dated July 9, 1948. (UBC Special Collections Archives, Harry Hawthorn Papers)

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> As a point of clarification, I should state that Neel’s concerns about carving on Coast Salish land have not survived within western repositories of knowledge such as public archives, the sources to which I deliberately confined my research for this thesis project. I acknowledge that Neel’s views may indeed survive within other repositories of knowledge, by way of family members, oral histories of Kwakwaka’wakw communities that surrounded her, and so on.

<sup>125</sup> Chief William Scow was Kwakwaka’wakw from Alert Bay, editor Jack Beynon was Tsimshian from Port Simpson, Rev. P. R. Kelly was a member of the Skidegate band from Haida Gwaii, and Guy Williams was Kitimat. (LaViolette, 156)

potlatches; eaten their barbecued salmon and steamed clams since time immemorial, Ellen and her husband will make the first effort to conscientiously attempt the resuscitation of the real old native arts.<sup>126</sup>

The tone of the article evokes the words of John Gillis who, writing on the politics of commemoration, reminds that “both identities and memories are highly selective, inscriptive rather than descriptive, serving particular interests and ideological positions.”<sup>127</sup> During this particular political climate in the late 1940s, as is evident by the formation of the “pan-Indian” Brotherhood itself, it was presumably more constructive to exude the image of a consolidated, solidified native body in British Columbia, rather than to waste energy and cripple strength by quarreling over tribal distinctions. Identity, Gillis asserts, like memory, “is a process which shifts strategically over time and circumstance.”<sup>128</sup>

The agreement made for Ellen Neel to establish Totem Art Studios in Stanley Park was a significant one. Swarming with visitors and locals alike during the summer months, the greatest tourist attraction of the city practically guaranteed a healthy business, and provided instant publicity for her artistic career. One might speculate that she was aware that her presence in the Park fueled the narrative of an imagined past, a narrative that the city had for years attempted to maintain. Strengthening that narrative could only bolster her sales. Perhaps more significantly, the arrangement offered the opportunity to expand and strengthen her web of support, men (as opposed to women) within Vancouver’s business and political communities who would ultimately enable the Totemland commission, by directly implicating them in the success of the Totem Art

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<sup>126</sup> *Native Voice*, July 1948, 7.

<sup>127</sup> John Gillis, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, New Jersey, 1994, 4.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

iStudios at Ferguson's Point. By agreeing that ten percent of the shop's gross sales would be yielded to the Parks Board, the Parks Commissioners would do all they could to help the fledgling business prosper. Indeed, after the success of 1948, the Neels were invited to renew their contract for the following summer, and the Parks Board began to draw on their own web of support; the Tourist Association was asked to help publicize the venture at Ferguson's Point, in its endeavor to "encourage the making of authentic Indian totem poles and souvenirs."<sup>129</sup>

### **The Restoration Project at the Museum of Anthropology**

Neel's tentative role in the city's self-promotion machinery was further solidified by another set of events in the same summer of 1948. Soon after the UBC conference in April, Ellen Neel received a letter from Harry Hawthorn, who informed her that Dominion Ethnologist Dr. Marius Barbeau had purchased a collection of totem poles for the University the previous year,<sup>130</sup> and that some of the poles were in need of "considerable repair."<sup>131</sup> The letter invited Neel and her husband out to the University to "talk with us on ways in which the repairing job might be effected."<sup>132</sup> Barbeau, while completing an exhaustive survey of carvings, had arranged for the purchase of these decaying totem poles and fragments, originally from Alert Bay, Fort Rupert and nearby villages. When the shipment arrived at UBC, Hawthorn established a Totem Pole Committee, appointing himself as chairman, with the purpose of exploring these new acquisitions. A plan evolved to restore the poles, "re-carving the sections which were

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<sup>129</sup>Parks Board of Commissioners Utilities Meeting, February 14, 1949. CAV MCR 48, file 1.

<sup>130</sup> Correspondence from Dr. Hawthorn to Mrs. Ellen Neel, April 30, 1948. UBC Special Collections, Harry Hawthorn Papers.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

most decayed or missing, and after chemical treatment and repainting, erecting the poles and a house frame in a suitable area of the campus."<sup>133</sup>

Hawthorn's letter appears to invite Ellen Neel to participate in the totem pole project as early as the end of April. There is an interesting discrepancy, however, in the sources which record this event, which is worth discussion as it further elucidates Ellen Neel's position in relation to those forces around her, as well as how it is understood and remembered by posterity. Audrey Hawthorn, describing the events in *A Labour of Love*, a publication which details the first thirty years of the Museum, states that Barbeau knew of and immediately suggested Mungo Martin, an accomplished Kwakwaka'wakw carver living in Alert Bay, as the perfect candidate for the appointment.<sup>134</sup> Hawthorn affirms that Martin, who was Ellen Neel's uncle, was formally invited to the University in writing.<sup>135</sup> Her account leaves no doubt as to Neel's relationship to the project:

At the same time we conferred with Ellen Neel, who was the carver's niece. She, living with her husband, supported her family by the carving of souvenir items. She had spoken impressively at the Conference on Indian Affairs, stressing the deadening effect of working repeatedly on the production of cheap and meaningless pieces for the trade, carving what has come to be known as airport art. She was not, however, in a position to assist Mr. Martin on restoration work at that time.<sup>136</sup>

If we were to understand the course of events from Hawthorn's description, Mungo Martin was clearly the university's primary choice to do the reconstruction work. Ellen Neel was simply "conferred with," and it is implied that she was asked only to "assist" Martin. It is interesting to attempt to decode what is possibly inferred by Hawthorn's choice of words in that one short paragraph. She mentions that Ellen Neel

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<sup>133</sup> Audrey Hawthorn, *A Labour of Love*, 9.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

“supported her family by the carving of souvenir items,” and in the next sentence makes the point of stating that Neel had, in her conference speech, stressed “the deadening effect” of producing “cheap and meaningless” souvenir pieces.<sup>137</sup> The last sentence of the paragraph states that she was unable to assist Martin. One can infer from this set of statements that Hawthorn feels, or leads the reader to feel, that Neel would have much *preferred* to work at the University, given the “deadening effect” of producing “cheap and meaningless souvenirs.” I do not mean to imply that Audrey Hawthorn believed all of Neel’s work to be “cheap and meaningless.” However, in the context of *A Labour of Love* at least, Hawthorn does seem to loosely correlate Neel’s production for the tourist trade with the fact that the artist was unable to work at the museum.

In contrast, Phil Nuytten, recording the events in *The Totem Carvers*, indicates that if Neel was not asked to participate in the restoration project first, she was certainly the primary candidate, and did in fact commence work with the University. He states,

After lengthy discussions...Ellen agreed to undertake this formidable task – with some misgivings. The summer was ‘tourist season’ and even though the restoration project would enhance her reputation in the academic world, it wouldn’t put much in the way of food on the table. Economics dictated that the family should concentrate on carving at the Stanley Park workshop during the summer, but Ellen agreed to spend at least part of the summer on the restoration project.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Although I could find no such letter addressed to Mungo Martin, written simultaneously or before the one addressed to Ellen Neel, preserved in the Hawthorn Papers of the UBC Special Collections Archives, this of course does not mean that one did not exist, or exists somewhere else.

<sup>136</sup> Hawthorn, *A Labour of Love*, 9-10.

<sup>137</sup> Unless Hawthorn is referring to a private conversation she had with Neel at the conference, from Neel’s speech, recorded in the conference proceedings, it is clear that Neel did not stress the “deadening effect” of producing “cheap and meaningless souvenirs,” so much as she voiced her dismay that “efforts should be confined to preservation of the old work.” *Report of Conference on Native Indian Affairs*, 12.

<sup>138</sup> Nuytten, 52.

According to Nuytten, "Ellen worked hard that summer and the results were impressive."<sup>139</sup> He states however that "once into the restoration project, two things became apparent; tourist sales in Stanley Park were suffering badly; and patching up old decayed poles was an incredibly difficult job to do properly."<sup>140</sup> In realizing that restoring badly decayed poles was an exercise in futility the Totem Pole Committee decided instead to copy the originals. This new plan, Nuytten emphasizes, presented a problem to Ellen Neel, as it threatened to compromise both her artistic integrity and her economic situation:

She was a carver, but more, she was an artist. She wanted to turn out new, original work that would bear her name and allow her particular art style to continue to develop...her growing list of commitments would suffer, the exhibitions that were desperately needed to bring her work before the public would be neglected.<sup>141</sup>

However Nuytten contends that "the dilemma resolved itself when they talked to her uncle, Mungo Martin, who was visiting Ellen at the time."<sup>142</sup>

The discrepancy in these two sources briefly exposes some of the contested stakes in the recording of these local histories, as the two authors are each personally and professionally invested in the very histories they write, and conscious that their participation in these histories contributes to a larger discourse. Phil Nuytten, for example, is an independent scholar, not affiliated with the University or any other prominent local institution. His book, primarily a commemorative biography of Ellen Neel, Mungo Martin and Charlie James, is written from the perspective of a longtime family friend, for as a child, he enjoyed the company of the Neel family and their

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

children, and learned to carve under the tutelage of Ellen Neel. His agenda is to reinsert this woman who has been of tremendous influence to him personally, into the accepted “canon” of Northwest Coast production.

Audrey Hawthorn on the other hand, writes her account of the sequence of events not only after having worked for numerous years at the Museum of Anthropology, but also as one of the figures responsible for its establishment and cultivation. In hindsight, there is little doubt why it was Mungo Martin, as opposed to Ellen Neel, who established a lasting relationship with the institution. Equipped with sufficient “signposts of difference,” to use Marcia Crosby’s term, Mungo Martin proved to be a tremendously valuable asset and resource during the formative years of the museum, providing the institution with the sort of cultural information it desired to bolster its own validation project. Aside from restoring and carving new totem poles and examples of ceremonial regalia Martin recorded countless ethnographic interpretations, Kwakwaka’wakw histories and songs. He also played a major role in the acquisition of roughly sixty-five percent of MOA’s current Kwakwaka’wakw collection,<sup>143</sup> acting, in the words of my colleague Aaron Glass, as a “‘culture broker,’ forging relationships between disparate communities...a middleman in a complex system of exchange.”<sup>144</sup>

Even though the museum at UBC defines itself in terms of *anthropology*, the institution has played a principal role, primarily through its language of exhibition and display, in re-valuing and “elevating” Northwest Coast native cultural production from

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<sup>143</sup> Audrey Hawthorn cites that during the time of Martin’s employment at the Museum, “there began an extraordinary, possibly unprecedented flow of materials into the museum. Perhaps in the history of museums there has been no period like the one which followed...crates of masks, rattles, whistles and headdresses arrived weekly, followed or accompanied by a letter enumerating the contents and naming prices.” Hawthorn, *A Labour of Love*, 1993, 13 and 15.

the status of "ethnography" to that of "high art" in the discursive space of Vancouver. With its "strong representational tradition of monumental coastal art,"<sup>145</sup> the museum participates in much of the hierarchical ranking of objects and the exclusionary, and masculinist rhetoric of western "high art" discourse. As such, MOA's decision to employ Mungo Martin not only underscores notions of "otherness," but reinforces deeply entrenched antithetical categories of the solitary male artist-as-genius creating works of spiritually inspired "art," versus women as collective producers, generating "soulless" utilitarian, decorative, material craft.<sup>146</sup> Writing thirty years after the fact, I believe Audrey Hawthorn aims to validate and underscore those traditions of representation, which she herself helped to implement. Martin was an elderly male carver nearing his seventies, steeped in a lifetime of stories and customs, and unfamiliar with life in a large metropolis. His mother had allegedly taken magical steps to ensure that her son would grow up with artistic talent,<sup>147</sup> and he was often observed working alone in his workshop, singing quietly in Kwakwaka. In contrast, Ellen Neel may have reflected back too much of the code of "Europeanness," appearing, in the words of Homi Bhabha, "almost the same, but not quite...almost the same but not white."<sup>148</sup> Dressed in Western-style clothes, visibly comfortable in an urban setting, and in perfect command of the English

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<sup>144</sup> Aaron Glass, "Cultural Salvage or Brokerage? The Emergence of Northwest Coast 'Art' and the Mythologization of Mungo Martin," unpublished paper for Anthropology 551, University of British Columbia, December 1998.

<sup>145</sup> Julie Cruickshank, "Imperfect Translations: Rethinking Objects of Ethnographic Collection," *Museum Anthropology*, Volume 19, number 1, Spring/Summer 1995, 25-38, 28.

<sup>146</sup> Please see Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, London, 1981, especially 8-10 and 50-61.

<sup>147</sup> Nuytten states that "It is said that when Mungo was a baby, his mother wished that he might be a fine artist and singer. She asked a noted carver named Yakudlasame for his advice...he plucked two lashes from each of the baby's eyelids. These lashes, the carver combined with porcupine guard hairs and tied them all into a paint brush. Yakudlasame used this brush so his skill would be transferred to Mungo..." See Nuytten, 75.

<sup>148</sup> Homi K Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986*, ed. Annette Michelson, et.al., Cambridge, 1988, 317-325, 322.

language, Neel negated the stereotype of the solitary, spiritual indigenous male artist. She was a woman, not only practicing an art form historically pursued only by men, but also producing that work on a near-production line basis for a living, involving her six children and (non-native) husband as essential elements of her carving practice.

However motivated, and however retroactively remembered, the fact that Neel did not end up establishing a relationship with the anthropologists at UBC shifted the spheres of influence available to her. Her views towards native art, that efforts should not be confined to preserving older work but should be poured into the innovation of new materials, tools and applications,<sup>149</sup> were fostered out of both conviction and necessity. Both conviction and necessity led her to establish closer ties with civic as opposed to academic circles, where she would quickly learn that asserting these convictions would afford her artistic and political leverage, against and between the surrounding structures of power.

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<sup>149</sup> Neel, *Report of Conference on Native Indian Affairs*, 12.

## CHAPTER TWO

### In Search of Vancouver: A Voyage to Australia

In *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, social anthropologist Anthony Cohen argues that the word “community” expresses a “relational idea” – that members of a group of people have something in common with each other, which distinguishes them from other putative groups.<sup>150</sup> Cohen focuses his investigation of the idea of community on the element that embodies this sense of discrimination: the *boundary*, the markers that begin and end a community.<sup>151</sup> He asserts that “the consciousness of community is, then, encapsulated in perception of its boundaries, boundaries which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction.”<sup>152</sup>

“The boundary,” Cohen says, “may be perceived in rather different terms, not only by people on opposite sides of it, but also by people on the same side.”<sup>153</sup> Simultaneously, boundaries perceived by some may also be imperceptible to others,<sup>154</sup> and the people of any given community are constantly involved in the process of redefining these boundaries, not only with other outside groups, but also negotiating the definitions of their community from within.<sup>155</sup> The meaning (or meanings) that people ascribe to the boundary, Cohen contends, is the symbolic aspect of the community boundary.<sup>156</sup> Therefore the symbols that are exchanged, articulated in interaction and

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<sup>150</sup> Cohen, 12.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

come to represent these communities, also in a constant process of change and mutation, are frequently found at the community's edges.<sup>157</sup>

In March of 1950, the mayor of Vancouver called for one such symbolic articulation of community. A brief article appeared in the *Province* newspaper informing readers that the mayor of Vancouver, Charles Thompson,<sup>158</sup> would soon be departing for a goodwill tour of Australia. The article, which asked "do you pride yourself on your knowledge of local history?"<sup>159</sup> urged readers to write or phone in suggestions for a distinctive gift, one that would "best represent Vancouver and BC"<sup>160</sup> to present to the Lord Mayor of Sydney. In the numerous letters of response preserved in the Vancouver archives, the suggestions ranged from dogwood and fir tree saplings, to moccasins and "totem book-ends...for sale at the CPR depot."<sup>161</sup> Although it is unclear as to how the decision was made, the final choice however, was none other than a five foot Kwakwaka'wakw talking-stick, carved by Ellen Neel (figure 10).

Several days before the Mayor departed for Australia, Chief William Scow formally entrusted the talking-stick to him in a private ceremony at City Hall. Witnessing this event were several other leading native dignitaries, all of them active members of the Native Brotherhood, as well as Ellen Neel herself. It is worth noting that the Vancouver archivist Major M. Matthews, who recorded this event, added in a note

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>158</sup> Born in Ontario in 1890, Charles E. Thompson had moved to Vancouver in 1924, where he formed Vancouver Motors, Ltd, and later became President of the Motor Dealers Association. In 1935 Thompson served as Deputy Chairman in co-operation with Mayor G.G. McGreer on the Golden Jubilee Committee. In 1936 he was an unsuccessful candidate for Mayor, but was elected as Alderman for the term 1945-1946, and then again in 1947-1948. With this aldermanic experience behind him, Thompson became Vancouver's Mayor for 1949-1950, but lost to Fred Hume in the 1951-1952 civic election. CAV Add. Mss. 54. 505-D-2, 42

<sup>159</sup> Undated news clipping from *The Province* newspaper. CAV 34-F-3, File 5

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Letter written by Mrs. Mary E. Ross, CAV 34-F-3, File 5

that “of all the native people present Mrs. Neel was the only one not asked to speak.”<sup>162</sup> Although Matthews was probably unaware that as a woman, Neel, had she been present at a traditional native ceremony, would probably not have been asked to speak either, it is interesting to note that a white male archivist in 1950 noticed and felt conspicuous silence of an aboriginal woman carver.

Along with the talking-stick, Mayor Thompson was formally granted the Shesaht name “Hyapeneulth,” by Thomas Shewish.<sup>163</sup> The ceremony also offered the new Chief Hyapeneulth “the power to carry BC Indian tradition to Australia,”<sup>164</sup> by in turn bestowing the name “Chief of the Southern Blue Waters” upon the Lord Mayor of Sidney. The phenomenon of a white civic official receiving the privilege of a native name was not extraordinary. One precedent, examined by Trudy Nicks in her essay “Indian Villages and Entertainments: Setting the Stage for Tourist Souvenir Sales,” concerned the village of Kahnawake on the St. Lawrence River between the 1930s and the late 1950s.<sup>165</sup> The recipients, including numerous sports figures, politicians, and business officials, were presented with Mohawk names as well as a Plains-style headdress of dyed turkey feathers.<sup>166</sup> “From the natives’ perspectives,” Nicks asserts, “these naming ceremonies were mainly important as public relations functions,”<sup>167</sup> with outsiders specifying and funding the event. However, Nicks also cites other examples

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<sup>162</sup> CAV Add. Mss. 54: 504-G-7, 16.

<sup>163</sup> Thomas Shewish was brother of the Chief of the Shesaht Tribe (Nu chah’nulth), and according to the newspapers, the grandson of the man who first bore the name, Chief Tom Shewish. (news clipping dated April 13 1950, CAV 34-F-3, File 5)

<sup>164</sup> CAV 34-F-3, File 5.

<sup>165</sup> Trudy Nicks, “Indian Villages and Entertainments: Setting the Stage for Tourist Souvenir Sales,” *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds*, eds. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, California, 1999, 307.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>167</sup> Conrad Hilton was named “Chief King of Hotels in 1958.” (*Ibid.*, 307)

wherein the native community, in order to establish an alliance, commemorate a good deed, or solidify political ties, specifically selected the recipient.<sup>168</sup>

The Vancouver newspapers described Mayor Thompson's naming ceremony as "the first time in civic history that a mayor of Vancouver has been initiated an honorary chief of an Indian tribe."<sup>169</sup> It was not, however, the first time that the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia had bestowed an honorary chieftainship on a Government official. Four years earlier, at the site of the temporary "Indian Village" created in Kitsilano for the 1946 Vancouver Diamond Jubilee festivities, the Governor General of Canada, Viscount Alexander, was made an honorary chief by the Native Brotherhood of Canada, and presented with an eleven-foot tall totem pole, carved by Mungo Martin at the Kitsilano Indian Village site.

The Governor General's public naming ceremony, performed entirely in the native tongue, with the participants dressed in full regalia, is another example of the Native Brotherhood's skillful use of publicity to press for political reform. As Ronald Hawker has pointed out, "the Brotherhood was aware of the hold more "traditional" art forms had on the public imagination and sought ways of establishing a sense of continuity with tradition while stressing the participation of its membership in the contemporary realms of industry and politics."<sup>170</sup> The naming ceremony serves as an illustration of Cohen's theory that the symbols marking community, in this case the actual performance and accompanying props (Mungo Martin's totem pole), are used and understood simultaneously as meaningful to diversely interested parties, and function

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<sup>168</sup> In 1958 a headdress was presented to Malcolm Montgomery, Q.C. in recognition of his legal services on behalf of the Confederacy Chiefs of the Six Nations Iroquois at Brantford, Ontario. He was given the title Tie-wa-gai-nah, "He who interprets the law." (*Ibid.*, 308)

<sup>169</sup> CAV 34-F-3, File 5.

successfully because of this malleability. The native ceremony was no doubt enthusiastically included in the Jubilee celebrations by the organizing committee because it lent a decidedly “authentic” flavour to the festivities, which already made generous use of native signs for promotion. To the Brotherhood, however, the ceremony, which on the surface was intended to honour the Governor General’s bravery in the war, succeeded in publicly connecting the Governor General, a highly visible federal official, to the cause of the First Nations, precisely at the time when the Special Joint Committee debated the Indian Act in Ottawa.

Like those of the Jubilee naming ceremony in 1946, the political undertones of Mayor Thompson’s naming ceremony was far from opaque. Thompson’s new name, ‘Hyapeneulth,’ was translated in the enthusiastic newspaper coverage alternately as, “one who has the ability to carry ten men on his back,” or, “one who helps his fellowman, regardless of race, colour or creed, with a willing hand.”<sup>171</sup> Chief Tom Shewish was quoted in the papers as commenting that he hoped the ceremony “would bring his new brother closer to his people,”<sup>172</sup> and Chief Earl George of Ah-oust (Clayquot Sound) stated simply that he “hoped the new chief would always help his brothers.”<sup>173</sup> The naming ceremony was also not without political advantage for the Mayor. It is quite possible that Thompson was anxious to publicly acknowledge as allies the ever-more powerful Native Brotherhood, especially considering their influence with industry trade unions, given the upcoming civic election.

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<sup>170</sup> Hawker, 227.

<sup>171</sup> CAV 34-F-3, File 5.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

Mayor Thompson's honorary chieftainship ceremony, his acceptance of a traditional staff of office and headdress, and his subsequent bestowal of the same privilege and aboriginal objects on a white official in Australia, can be contextualized along another historical continuum, that of a tradition of mimicking, or "playing Indian." "Almost from their very arrival in the Americas, Europeans found it useful, perhaps essential, to 'play Indian' in America,"<sup>174</sup> asserts Rayna Green, in her article "A Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe." "This performance, or set of performances," she continues, "has its roots in the establishment of a distinctive American culture... it represents one of the ways in which we can demarcate the boundaries of an American identity distinct from that which affiliates with Europe."<sup>175</sup> A "generalized, romantic interest in American Indians,"<sup>176</sup> specifically in their "arts and handicrafts," dance performances, trading, and in wearing native (primarily Plains) costume, has been a pervasive, self-conscious movement in North America since the end of World War II.<sup>177</sup> However, the historical roots of this urge to "play Indian" stretch back to the time of first contact in the Americas,<sup>178</sup> and can be viewed as a prevailing element of the North American colonial experience.

Robert Young, in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* contends that a fantasmic, often sexual desire to meet, incorporate, even *become* the cultural Other is a characteristic complicit with colonialism itself.<sup>179</sup> In his first chapter,

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<sup>174</sup> Rayna Green, "A Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe," *Folklore*, vol.99:I, 1988, 30-55, 30.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>176</sup> William K. Powers, "The Indian Hobbyist Movement in North America," *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 4: History of Indian-White Relations*. Vol. Ed. Wilcomb E. Washburn, Washington, 1988, 557-561, 557.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 557.

<sup>178</sup> Green, 31.

<sup>179</sup> Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London, 1995, 3.

Young examines how an incalculable number of English novels from the colonial period betray a “painful sense of, or need for, otherness,”<sup>180</sup> an active desire for the other, for “forsaking their own culture.”<sup>181</sup> He muses that the rigid identity for which the English developed such a reputation “has always, like the Prime Meridian, been divided within itself,”<sup>182</sup> and “was rather designed to mark its uncertainty, its sense of being estranged from itself, sick with desire for the other.”<sup>183</sup>

For the Anglo-European in British Columbia, conceived by some as merely a prosthetic limb strapped to the cultural body of Europe,<sup>184</sup> the “sense of being estranged from itself,” of being insufficient, uncertain, of being “almost the same yet totally different”<sup>185</sup> from England may have been (and still may be) all the more discernable.

Christopher Bracken theorizes the ambivalent identity of colonized British Columbia:

Newly tacked to the edge of the edge of North America, the port of Vancouver marks the point where Europe comes to its end and gives way to something called ‘Asia.’ But just when it has arrived at its limits and begins to rub against the borders of the ‘East,’ the West folds back to find that even at its end it is still contiguous with itself. The British Columbia coast is soon to be tied with Australia, a once Eastern space that, like Canada, has been forced into the orbit of the Western World... Vancouver binds together a set of contradictory movements: it points away from Europe by pointing directly back to it.<sup>186</sup>

British Columbia is and yet is not England; therefore it is and is not unique.

Without a recognizable and distinct identity of its own, it attempts to mimic what it is not – the antithesis of European culture – the “Indian.” This act of mimicry emerges most palpably during occasions of official public ceremony and commemoration, or more

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<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>184</sup> Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History*, Chicago, 1997, 10.

<sup>185</sup> Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” 322.

<sup>186</sup> Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History*, Chicago, 1997, 8.

specifically, as in the case of Mayor Thompson's trip to Australia, occasions that involve the representation or display of the city to those "outside the boundaries of community."<sup>187</sup> In 1924, for example, to commemorate the visit of the British Fleet, the city of Vancouver hosted the "Tyee Potlatch." To entertain the visiting naval officers, and freely admitting itself to be "young in years, with no particular historical attractions,"<sup>188</sup> the city staged a potlatch, an exotic spectacle, one that would undoubtedly leave a lasting impression after the fleet returned to the "Old Land." As though frozen in a moment of painful desire for the Other, the Official Souvenir of the "Tyee Potlatch" captures the image of the "Chiefs of Potlatch," the Mayor of Vancouver and the Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia together with others, posing for the camera in ornamented frontlets (figures 11 and 12). During the same period that the Canadian National Railway, against the wishes of village chiefs, launched a project to move a large cache of totem poles near the Skeena River closer to tourists travelling along the rail line,<sup>189</sup> and in the same year that Salish leaders protested the proposed Kwakwaka'wakw "indian village" in Stanley Park, the white civic officials of Vancouver "play Indian." Aside from their apparent oblivion of these contentious events, the "Tyee chiefs" act without concern for the fact that the real potlatch, an institution essential to the social lives of most native Northwest Coast communities, remained outlawed by the draconian Indian Act, and that less than three years before, the participants of one such illegal

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<sup>187</sup> Cohen, 12.

<sup>188</sup> *The City of Vancouver's Official Souvenir Commemorating the Visit of the British Fleet and Tyee Potlatch*, June 25<sup>th</sup> to July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1924.

<sup>189</sup> See Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*, Vancouver, 1992, 183 and Leslie Dawn, *Ksan: Museum, Cultural and Artistic Activity among the Gitksan Indians in the Upper Skeena, 1920-1973*, Unpublished MA Thesis, Victoria, 1981, 28-35, for a more in-depth discussion of the Skeena River totem pole project.

potlatch in Alert Bay had been arrested, brought to trial, and convicted, their regalia confiscated and shipped to museums across the country.

### **The Creation of Totemland**

After returning from Australia, Mayor Thompson organized a luncheon with several of the city's noted businessmen and prominent civil servants, and announced that the gift of the Kwakwaka'wakw talking-stick had been a decided success. The Mayor, calculating that the city had overlooked a lucrative business opportunity, suggested they "use the name 'Totemland' more often and pursue that aspect of the city's attraction for tourists."<sup>190</sup> The luncheon turned into the inaugural meeting of the Totemland Society, and by August 1950, the Vancouver public was introduced to the fledgling organization.

The Totemland Society came into existence during what has been characterized by Vancouver's historians as a period of post-war prosperity and civic expansion,<sup>191</sup> and Mayor Thompson's tenure coincided with the arrival of record numbers of tourists, an industry worth \$30 million in 1948.<sup>192</sup> The tourist trade was looked upon in these times as an untapped resource, and the archived minutes of many of the Tourist Association's meetings betray their concern for developing fresh ways to capture and retain tourists' imaginations and dollars within the city<sup>193</sup> and to provide a distinctive, original touristic experience.<sup>194</sup> The heightened need to assert a colorful and distinctive identity percolated just below the surface of these discussions.

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<sup>190</sup> Harry Duker, Secretary of the Totemland Society. Quoted in Nuytten,, 48.

<sup>191</sup> Mike Steele, "The Boom Years: 1946-1958," *Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation: The First 100 Years*, 1988, 129.

<sup>192</sup> Eric Nicol, *Vancouver*, Toronto, 1978, 207.

<sup>193</sup> Minutes of the Vancouver Tourist Association, Annual Meeting 1949. CAV 1949-102 Pamphlet Files

<sup>194</sup> The Tourist Association was particularly worried that the majority of British Columbia visitors merely passed through Vancouver on their way to the picturesque capital city of Victoria on Vancouver Island. "The Knowledge that Victoria had retained a charm, as a little bit of Old England, that was being dissipated in the pace and pollution of Vancouver, nagged at the city's tourist bureau." Nicol, 207.

The Totemland Society's notion of promoting Vancouver and British Columbia "through the distinctive arts of the Indian"<sup>195</sup> is hardly a novel one, as the examples of the 1924 "Tyee Potlatch" and the 1946 Jubilee have already made clear. The province's history of appropriating the cultural signifiers of the Native Northwest Coast, particularly the totem pole, is nearly as long as the history of visitors' awe, appreciation, and indiscriminate consumption<sup>196</sup> of these same cultural goods. As early as the 1880s, steamships travelling up the coast of British Columbia to Alaska<sup>197</sup> advertised "Indian villages" at which the "wonderfully carved totem poles are constant objects of curiosity to visitors and matters of delight to kodakers."<sup>198</sup> It was not long before the image of the totem pole became synonymous with tourist travel in British Columbia and Alaska. As Ronald Hawker notes, "by the 1920s, after four decades of the collecting activities of museums and curio shops, of tourist steamship lines running the Inside Passage from Olympia to Skagway, totem poles had become a pervasive, primitivist symbol closely associated with the region." (figures 13 and 14). Though Nuytten suggests that the appellation "Totemland" originated in Australia with the popularity of the Mayor's Kwakwaka'wakw talking stick,<sup>199</sup> there is evidence that not even this name was unique to the Society. In the 1920s, the cache of about 70 totem poles that stood in the Git'ksan villages along the Skeena River was recognized as a major tourist attraction, and Canadian National Railways began advertising the Skeena Valley Line as the "railway to

<sup>195</sup> Objectives of the Society, *The Native Voice*, Special Totemland Supplement, August 1950, 1.

<sup>196</sup> Aldona Jonaitis, "Northwest Coast Totem Poles," *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, eds. Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner, Berkeley, 1999, 104-121, 104.

<sup>197</sup> Gold was discovered near Juneau in the early 1880s, bringing thousands of people to Alaska, many of whom traveled on steamships from San Francisco and Seattle. Aldona Jonaitis states that, "In order to fill the empty berths in these boats, the steamship companies began to encourage 'excursionists' to that region." Jonaitis, "Northwest Coast Totem Poles," 110.

<sup>198</sup> "Alaska - Puget Sound - British Columbia Summer Trips, Canadian National Railway Steamship Service," CAV 1906-29 Pamphlet File.

totem-pole land.”<sup>200</sup> One Montreal newspaper calculated that the Skeena Valley Poles were the most photographed spot in Canada after Niagara Falls.<sup>201</sup>

In Vancouver, the Arts, Historical and Science Association also recognized the tourist potential of the totem pole in the 1920s as they proposed the re-location of the Kwakwaka’wakw village in Stanley Park, easily the most frequented spot in the city by tourists. Although totem poles were not historically produced by the aboriginal cultures in the geographic vicinity of the contemporary city, the image of the totem pole was also adopted as a symbol of the “evergreen playground.” The highly animated Kwakwaka’wakw pole topped with the figure of the Thunderbird with wings outstretched, reproduced countless times in miniature as souvenirs, was soon synonymous with the imaging of Vancouver on maps, on tourist brochures and guidebooks (figure 15). Such appropriation was especially concentrated during civic celebrations such as the Vancouver Golden Jubilee in 1936, as illustrated in the official Jubilee map featuring the representation of a totem pole in the compass (figure 16).

Ronald Hawker, referring specifically to the poles erected in Stanley Park, suggests that totem poles were deemed symbolically “appropriate” and desirable for Vancouver because they set up a striking foil for the lived reality of the urban centre. He remarks:

Totem poles in a city setting ...suggested how life on the coast had ‘progressed’ from primitive village to urban modernity...the placement of the ‘antique’ Kwakwaka’wakw totem poles in Stanley park, across Coal Harbour from the Canadian Pacific Railway station and at the Burrard Narrows entrance to the harbour, made a highly visible modern/primitive juxtaposition near the heart of the city.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Nuytten, 48.

<sup>200</sup> Francis, 183.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>202</sup> Hawker, 78.

Just as the raw beauty of Stanley Park served as a reminder for the city of its rugged, frontier roots,<sup>203</sup> so the image of the totem pole, often visually juxtaposed against that of the modern skyline, served to underscore Vancouver's position as a modern, industrialized and sophisticated metropolis on the edge of the wilderness, acting as the "tangible manifestations of an imagined past in Vancouver's unified social memory,"<sup>204</sup> (figure 17). The culturally, geographically, and (at least in the public's imagination) temporally remote totem pole, symbolically marking the "boundaries of community,"<sup>205</sup> to use Anthony Cohen's term, is visually articulated and symbolically claimed as Vancouver's own. At Stanley Park, first with the re-erected totem poles and then with Ellen Neel herself, this remote boundary is encircled, contained within the literal borders of the urban community, re-assembled and posed against the backdrop of downtown.

### **Totemland Officialdom: Ambivalent Motives and Good Intentions**

The men listed as "Officials of the Totemland Society" were conspicuously involved, in some form or another, in Vancouver's self-promotion. The President of the Society, Charlie Thompson, aside from serving as the city's Mayor, had served two terms as Alderman, and had been a key figure in the organizing committees of both the 1936 and the 1946 Jubilee celebrations. Vice-Presidents of the Society included Hedley Hipwell, President of the Tourist Club and Automobile Association of British Columbia; Professor H.M. King, President of the Pacific National Exhibition; E.G. Rowebottom, Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry; Col. William Swan, President of the Board of

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<sup>203</sup> In 1939 an article appeared in the *Vancouver News Herald* which gushed, "a city that has been carved out of the forest should maintain somewhere within its boundaries evidence of what it once was, and so long as Stanley Park remains unspoiled that testimony to the giant trees which occupied the site of Vancouver in former days will remain." (*Vancouver News Herald*, October 30, 1939, quoted in Mike Steele, *Stanley Park*, frontispiece.)

<sup>204</sup> Hawker, 91.

Trade, Leo Sweeney, President of the Evergreen Playground Association and Maisie Armytage-Moore, publisher of the *Native Voice*. Serving as Secretary of the Society was Harry Duker, prominent businessman and active member of the Tourist Association. The members of the Executive Committee included, among others: P.N. Stroyan, Superintendent of the Board of Parks Commissioners, who had initially heard Ellen Neel's proposal to carve in Stanley Park; R.Rowe Holland, the Parks Commissioner responsible for drawing up Neel's Stanley Park agreement, and Al Wood, Secretary-Manager of the Tourist Association, who had listened to the Parks Commissioners' request to publicize Totem Art Studio's Stanley Park venture in 1949.

When we learn the occupations of the men (and woman) who comprised the executive officers of the Totemland Society, it is not difficult to understand why articles in the mainstream press justified its existence by assuring that "BC's interesting Indian lore is worth thousands of dollars in tourist publicity."<sup>206</sup> Conversely however, the objectives of the Society published in full in a special supplement to the August 1950 issue of *The Native Voice*, augmented the group's loyalties towards the cause of the First Nations:

To collect in writing and disseminate the legendary history, customs and philosophy of our native Indians; also to encourage and preserve their ancient weaving, painting and sculptural arts; to promote the use of a Thunderbird Totem and the slogan Totemland as the symbol of the colour and romantic interest of the British Columbia Indian together with their singular totemology [sic] and unique wood-carving art; to advise, encourage and support the British Columbia Indians in overcoming obstacles that may stand in the way of their attainment to the enjoyment of full citizenship.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Cohen, 12.

<sup>206</sup> *The Vancouver Sun*, October 13, 1950, 1.

<sup>207</sup> *The Native Voice*, Special Totemland Supplement, August 1950, 1.

The special supplement devoted much space to assuring its aboriginal readership that the motives of the Totemland Society were in the best of faith, and spent an entire page naming the prominent indigenous leaders of the province whom the Society had sent letters of invitation to become honorary members.<sup>208</sup>

The jarring discrepancy between the tone of the two forums points to an antagonistic tension in the internal agendas of the Totemland Society. This tension, resulting from the need to justify the existence of the Society differently for different constituents of the population, appears to resonate with the dominant society's problematic comprehension of its own role in relation to the country's indigenous people at this historical moment. It indicates an uncomfortable collision of social welfare, paternalist patronage, and tourist promotion. On the one hand, the Totemland Society unabashedly promotes and displays, for the financial benefit of the dominant society, the cultural heritage of a minority group whose rights continue to be denied. On the other hand, the Society's one surviving file of correspondence, dated 1954 and preserved in the Vancouver City Archives, shows that the members of the Society did in fact use their powerful civic connection constructively to preserve a discovered midden on the bank of the Fraser River.<sup>209</sup> Furthermore, while the Society strenuously emphasized that they stand shoulder to shoulder with their native brother, basing their project on the protection of indigenous arts and culture, the group appears interested only in fighting for the rights that would provide "the enjoyment of full citizenship."<sup>210</sup> This paradoxical mandate, in the wake of the natives' enfranchisement in 1949, reflects the official government policy's continued and tiresome conviction that complete acculturation into the Euro-

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<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>209</sup> Totemland Society Correspondence, 1954, CAV Add. Mss. 336, 547-C-7, file 6.

Canadian way of life would dissolve the “Indian problem,” while scrambling to salvage and preserve what was left of the “dying culture.” This said, the Totemland Society also reflected the shifting tide of provincial native/non-native relations, in that the group did involve itself directly with, if not aboriginal communities themselves, then at least the leaders of powerful First Nations political organizations.

The ambivalent motives of the Totemland Society are perhaps better understood when they are viewed from the perspective of a previous instance wherein the City of Vancouver attempted to project a distinctive identity by way of the province’s First Nations. In 1946, less than four years before the creation of the Totemland Society, those men who would become its most active members, namely Harry Duker, R. Rowe Holland and Charlie Thompson, acted as prominent members in the organizing committee for the Vancouver Silver Jubilee celebrations. A major element of the festivities, as has previously been mentioned, included the erection of a temporary “Indian Village” in Kitsilano, predictably imaged in the official Souvenir Program against the backdrop of Vancouver’s modern downtown skyline (figure 18). For the duration of the Jubilee, the Indian Village, jointly produced by William Scow and by Ralph Hiltz,<sup>211</sup> provided entertainment for the public in the form of a native arts fair, the ceremony bestowing the Governor General of Canada with an honorary chieftainship, and daily performances of native dances and ceremonials, “never previously performed by the Indian people in the presence of the white man.”<sup>212</sup> Thirty-seven Kwakwaka’wakw dancers traveled from

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<sup>210</sup> *The Native Voice*, Special Totemland Supplement, August 1950, 1.

<sup>211</sup> Hiltz was a Vancouver show producer and former reservation teacher. Hawker, 238.

<sup>212</sup> *Vancouver’s Official Diamond Jubilee Souvenir Booklet*, ed. David Loughnan, Vancouver BC, 1946. CAV Pamphlet File 1946-17.

Alert Bay and other remote coastal points in the province to perform at the Kitsilano Village.

However, almost immediately after their arrival, the performers lodged complaints which nearly succeeded in shutting down the Indian Village entirely, much to the embarrassment of the city and to the Jubilee Organizing Committee. The Kwakwaka'wakw objected that "the Indians were taken to Vancouver from coastal points in second class accommodation, that no arrangements were made in advance for their transportation in the city, that a private citizen had to provide a truck for them to take part in Monday's Jubilee parade..."<sup>213</sup> They also charged that the totem poles decorating Vancouver's streets were "cheap caricatures" and "an insult to our people,"<sup>214</sup> and some Vancouver newspapers reported that all 37 performers had been stranded without pay.<sup>215</sup> The group threatened to withdraw from the Jubilee Celebrations. William Scow, determined to control representation of the First Nations presence at the Jubilee and heighten public awareness of the First Nations cause while the Special Joint Committee sat in Ottawa, seized this chance to steer the media, who were eager to report news other than the predictable formulaic promotion. The story was picked up nationally by the ninth of July. "Within a day," Ronald Hawker cites,

The government had been reached and although no specific details were made public, it included the paid return of 17 of the dancers to the north on time for the fishing season and presumably some change in the city's previous offer of room and board, an allowance of \$1 a day for incidental expenses and the sharing of some \$2000 profits earned though the village show.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> CAV M6145.

<sup>214</sup> CAV M6145.

<sup>215</sup> CAV M6145.

<sup>216</sup> CAV M6145.

The events surrounding the Jubilee celebrations may help to explain why Mayor Thompson, painfully involved with the embarrassing scandal, was so eager to ally himself with Scow and the other leaders of the Brotherhood in 1950 by accepting an honorary chieftainship. The Jubilee fiasco also helps to explain the lengths to which the fledgling Totemland Society went, to inform the province's native constituent of the group's motives to "help the native brother." The not-so-distant memory of the Jubilee, combined with Scow's proclamation to the government in 1947, was no doubt more than enough to make the members of the Totemland Society anxious to remain on the congenial side of the Native Brotherhood. It is also highly probable that for Scow and the other leaders of the Brotherhood, the Totemland Society was another prime chance for yet more exposure and validity, well aware of the civic officials' tenuous position and their desire for positive publicity.

### **Ellen Neel: A Careful Choice**

Bound up in their complex of motives, and linked to the nearly disastrous experience of the Jubilee, was the Totemland Society's choice to patronize Ellen Neel, and position her as the group's unofficial native representative. The choice, I believe, was largely influenced by Neel's public persona. The tensions in Neel's subject positions, constructed jointly through her gender, her production of souvenir goods, her progressive ethical views, her strategic relationships to the city (not to mention her residence in the city), but particularly through the language and images continually used to describe her in both the native and mainstream press, positioned her – in the eyes of the Totemland officials – as attractively safe, non-threatening, and to a great extent, depoliticized. These tensions provided just the right formula to validate and underscore the Society's mission.

Just as Parks Commissioner R. Rowe Holland declared Neel to be “authentic” enough to carve in Stanley Park, the Totemland Society must have perceived Neel as sufficiently “other” to be “truly Indian.” Newspapers hailed her as a “gifted young Indian matron,”<sup>217</sup> and “one of Canada’s outstanding authorities in the art of totem carving.”<sup>218</sup> Her nativeness was also authenticated in the papers by the constant mention of her Kwakwaka name. Some articles drew an explicit connection between Neel’s aboriginal name and her abilities as a native carver. One editorial stated, “a tribute to Ellen’s knowledge of her art is in her Indian name, ‘Kakasolas’ meaning ‘one whom everyone visits, by water, for counsel.’”<sup>219</sup> Others, after mentioning Neel’s artistic achievements, simply stated the fact that, “Mrs. Neel is an Indian, and her Indian name is Kakasolas.”<sup>220</sup> Neel’s abilities as a carver were validated by her placement at the end of a long lineage of “master totem carvers.” Even in a brief article much space would be devoted to the solemn report that, “she learned the art from her grandfather who, in turn, inherited the right to carve from his mother’s bloodline.”<sup>221</sup>

Simultaneously, however, Neel must have appeared familiar enough not to be alien. Vancouver archivist Major J.S. Matthews, who first met Neel during the name-giving ceremony in Mayor Thompson’s office, patronizingly described her in a personal note as “a bright, vivacious lady who would adorn any company.”<sup>222</sup> Her role as a “master totem carver” was balanced by her description in newspapers as “bright and attractive” and “a busy mother and wife,” playing “with equal efficiency the home-maker

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<sup>217</sup> CAV M6650 Neel

<sup>218</sup> *Native Voice*, July 1951, 5.

<sup>219</sup> CAV M6650 Neel, news clipping dated August 4, 1950.

<sup>220</sup> CAV M6650 Neel.

<sup>221</sup> CAV M6650 Neel, news clipping dated June 19, 1950.

<sup>222</sup> CAV Add. Mss. 54 504-G-7, 16.

and mother role.”<sup>223</sup> Unlike the “high-art” rhetoric practiced by the Museum of Anthropology, news articles often placed considerable emphasis on Neel’s ability to cheerfully juggle six children, a convalescent husband, and a family business. She is commended for involving the children in the carving process: “‘They are eager to learn and also,’ she explains with a twinkle, ‘six children are no problem if you keep them busy.’”<sup>224</sup>

Neel’s persona may also have appeared conspicuously devoid of native politics, as she was rarely photographed in traditional regalia or other highly politicized visual markers of cultural difference. She did not vocally associate herself with land claims disputes or other native rights issues, but instead advocated appreciation for what she described as the “best part of Indian culture” (brightly-painted native art).<sup>225</sup> Newspaper photographs that portrayed her wearing horn-rimmed glasses, red lipstick and a modern wardrobe made her disarmingly indistinguishable from countless other young urban housewives in Vancouver (see figures 1 and 6). Though it may have been unacceptable for the Museum of Anthropology, who could not bear to have reflected back at them a partial image of their own gaze, Ellen Neel’s code of replication, to borrow from Homi Bhabha’s formulation – that is, her appearance as “almost the same but not quite...almost the same but not white”<sup>226</sup> – proved to be the satisfactory formula for the Totemland Society. According to Rayna Green, “the living performance of ‘playing Indian’ by non-Indian peoples depends upon the physical and psychological removal, even the death, of

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<sup>223</sup> *Native Voice*, July 1951.

<sup>224</sup> CAV M6650 Neel, news clipping dated July 3, 1951.

<sup>225</sup> Please see Ellen Neel’s speech at the Conference on Native Indian Affairs in *Report of Conference on Native Indian Affairs*, Victoria, 1948, 12.

<sup>226</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986*, ed. Annette Michelson et al., Cambridge, Mass., 1988, 322.

real Indians.”<sup>227</sup> Thus, we can postulate that in order for the white officials of the Totemland Society to ‘play Indian’ with clear conscience, it was necessary to interact only with aboriginals who did not physically exude a threatening Otherness, a nativeness that would undermine and make inauthentic their own desire for the Other. Whether strategic or not, Neel succeeded in returning just enough of the gaze of the dominant society for the Totemland Society to identify with her, while retaining sufficient markers of her ethnic difference to perform well for them.

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<sup>227</sup> Green, 31.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Looking at the Totemland Pole

Traditionally, a full-sized Kwakwaka'wakw totem pole was not designed so that the combination of depicted figures relayed a narrative or "legend;" rather each figure was carved to represent a heraldic crest, and may have carried its own individual story or context.<sup>228</sup> However, Ellen Neel was well aware that the non-native recipients of her model totem poles "most often wanted to know the 'story.'"<sup>229</sup> "It was pointless therefore," according to Phil Nuytten, who as a young boy often observed the Totemland Poles take shape, "to explain the figures represent only crest figures or, more rarely, participants in a legend, story or event – not the event itself."<sup>230</sup> Instead of attempting to right the misconception that many non-natives had about totem poles, Nuytten relates, Ellen Neel designed the Totemland Pole "to bridge that gap."<sup>231</sup> In other words, the Pole could be read didactically, thereby delivering the "legend" that would be sure to capture both the primitivist imaginations and the pocketbooks of her recipients. The Totemland Pole therefore, as recounted by Nuytten in *The Totem Carvers*, literally tells a particular story of "Totemland," by imaging how 'Kwankwanxwalige' the thunderbird gave the land-mass of British Columbia to 'Bagwanam,' the first man.<sup>232</sup> The pole depicts the mighty Thunderbird, beating its powerful wings, as it grasps the world in its talons and lowers it onto the back of mankind (see figure 5). Initially sketched by hand on a block of yellow cedar, the shape of the Totemland Pole was roughed out with a bandsaw, hand-carved and then sanded to a satin smoothness. The pole was mounted on a base, the

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<sup>228</sup> H. Stewart, 47.

<sup>229</sup> Nuytten, 59.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

thunderbird's wings slotted into place (they could be removed again for easy travel) and the entire surface was painted with watercolours of black, vermillion, deep yellow, brown and two shades of green. Finally the pole was given several coats of high-gloss lacquer to protect the surface and bring back the intensity of the dried paint.<sup>233</sup>

Although the Totemland Pole may visually appear raucous in its intensity and jarringly out of context with Native Northwest Coast design, Ellen Neel's creation can indeed be located within a greater history of Kwakwaka'wakw innovation and imagination. Particularly from its "classic period" of the early to mid twentieth century, most scholars agree that the Southern Kwakwaka'wakw style is easily distinguishable as among the most theatrical on the Northwest Coast. No doubt because the theatrics of dance drama and ceremonial performance "achieved their ultimate expression among the Southern Kwakwaka'wakw,"<sup>234</sup> elements of the plastic arts also reflected a similar concern for performativity. Although Kwakwaka'wakw artists drew from the same general design vocabulary as the rest of their native coastal neighbors,<sup>235</sup> the descriptive words commonly used to distinguish the style in art historical literature about the Northwest Coast include "baroque," "exuberant," "theatrical" and "embellished."<sup>236</sup>

Frequently in Kwakwaka'wakw art, the entire surface of the carving is painted with elaborate and complex patterning. The Kwakwaka'wakw not only used red, black and white, the three colours most commonly adhered to on the Northwest Coast, but also

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<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>233</sup> Please see Nuytten 58-59 for a detailed step-by-step description of the carving process.

<sup>234</sup> Peter Macnair, *The Legacy: Tradition and Innovation in Northwest Coast Indian Art*, eds. Macnair, Hoover and Neary, 1984, 27.

<sup>235</sup> See Audrey Hawthorn, *Kwakiutl Art*, Vancouver, 1967, 19 and Bill Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art*, Seattle, 1965, for a description of the characteristics of Native Northwest Coast design.

<sup>236</sup> See Steven Brown, "Bridging Generations: Northwest Coast Art in the Middle 20<sup>th</sup> Century, 1920-1965," *Native Visions: Evolution in Northwest Coast Art from the 18<sup>th</sup> through the Twentieth Century*, Vancouver, 1998; Audrey Hawthorn, *Kwakiutl Art*; and Peter Macnair et al., *The Legacy*.

frequently employed deep yellow, orange and brilliant green. The use of poster paints was common to obtain the most vibrant colour possible, and pieces were often finished with shellac for shine.<sup>237</sup> Charlie James, Ellen Neel's grandfather and instructor, was an artist particularly known for the freedom and originality in his use of colour,<sup>238</sup> and Neel's model poles would resonate with the influence of both her grandfather's plasticity and his imaginative colour schemes.

In such monumental Kwakwaka'wakw sculpture as totem poles, animal forms are highly animated and often asymmetrical, cut in deep relief with appendages such as wings, beaks and fins projecting outward from the body mass, as is exemplified in many of Charlie James' full sized poles (figure 19). Eyebrows, nostrils and mouths are often prominent and heavily stylized. Not surprisingly, this highly animated style was extremely popular with tourists, and so was soon translated into miniature form and sold as souvenirs. The brightly coloured miniature Kwakwaka'wakw pole, topped with the figure of a Thunderbird with outstretched wings, was soon instantly recognizable to foreigners and locals alike as the "real" totem pole, a mass-produced type signifying the cultural production of the entire Northwest Coast (figure 20).<sup>239</sup>

Just as the Totemland Pole's vivid colour and animated form are by no means a betrayal of Kwakwaka'wakw style, so too the height of those poles presented to foreign visitors (about two feet) were not out of the ordinary. Among the Haida, as Peter Macnair has pointed out, "miniature" poles ranging from fifty centimetres to almost a

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<sup>237</sup> Macnair, *The Legacy*, 72.

<sup>238</sup> Steven Brown, 148.

<sup>239</sup> Aldona Jonaitis contends that "a bird perched atop a pole, ready to fly off, gives a dynamic energy to the carving and attracts the observer's attention in a way that strictly columnar poles cannot." For a discussion on Kwakwaka'wakw style totem poles as the quintessential symbol of Indianness, see Jonaitis, "Northwest Coast Totem Poles," especially 116-118.

metre in height were fashionable with tourists from around the 1880s.<sup>240</sup> Speaking of the Kwakwaka'wakw more specifically, art historian Steven Brown notes, "there are many model poles extant from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and more recently that are three feet and even taller, up to about six feet, that would still be considered "model" poles."<sup>241</sup>

### **A Tradition of Innovation**

Along with the Kwakwaka'wakw's artistic tradition of theatricality and high colour is a long history of experimentation, innovation, and eclectic borrowing from the design conventions of other tribal groups, particularly their northern neighbors.<sup>242</sup> Macnair comments that the Southern Kwakwaka'wakw artist appear to have re-worked conventions, by inventing new graphic elements if more conservative ones failed to fit into a design field.<sup>243</sup> Brown argues that the greatest era of Kwakwaka'wakw art was in fact the time of heaviest oppression, when artists were forced to innovate and adapt in order to survive and produce.<sup>244</sup> This history of borrowing, of experimenting with innovative materials and subject matter is such that it has become a tradition in its own right. Drawing upon this "tradition" has become a way for many young present-day Kwakwaka'wakw artists to legitimate their own artistic production within a tribal tradition. Ellen Neel's grandson, the contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw artist David Neel, has spoken about his own production, affirming that his work is traditional because it reflects and is part of the contemporary world. In referring to his series of carved masks that "satirize, document and critique the world we live in today,"<sup>245</sup> including such works

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<sup>240</sup> Peter Macnair and Alan L. Hoover, *The Magic Leaves: A History of Haida Argillite Carving*, Victoria, 1984, 113.

<sup>241</sup> Steven Brown, personal communication, June 3, 2000.

<sup>242</sup> Macnair et al., *The Legacy*, 27.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>244</sup> Brown, *Native Visions*, 147.

<sup>245</sup> David Neel, *David Neel: Living Traditions*, David Neel and Andrew Hunter, Kamloops, 1998, 15.

as "Mask of the Injustice System" (1991)<sup>246</sup> and "Residential School Transformation Mask," (1990)<sup>247</sup> David Neel has stated that in Kwakwaka'wakw culture "innovation has always been an intrinsic part of tradition."<sup>248</sup> From this perspective, Ellen Neel's insertion of the western-style globe to represent "the world" in the centre of the Totemland Pole, thus corresponds with a long and self-conscious Kwakwaka'wakw tradition of invention and appropriation.

This history of clever experimentation and adaptation in Kwakwaka'wakw culture can be seen to run parallel to a general comic spirit and great capacity for playfulness.<sup>249</sup> Audrey Hawthorn has observed this sense of play emerging in Kwakwaka'wakw art with the device of visual punning or "kenning,"<sup>250</sup> as it has been termed, where "a natural space in the carving or painting is used for the introduction of a new form with an independent meaning;"<sup>251</sup> a face will be found in the ear of a bear, for example, and another in its paw. (figure 21) This sense of play can be frequently found in Northwest Coast art created through acts of cross-cultural exchange and communication. Although scant published scholarship has addressed this phenomenon as it exists specifically among the Kwakwaka'wakw, Peter Macnair, in his work among the Haida, identifies such comic elements in Haida model totem pole carving. He has found that when carving specifically for tourists, Haida craftsmen would create model totem poles by jumbling up

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<sup>246</sup> See *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>247</sup> See Gary Wyatt, *Spirit Faces: Contemporary Native American Masks from the Northwest Coast*, Great Britain, 1999, 127.

<sup>248</sup> David Neel, *Living Traditions*, 14.

<sup>249</sup> Helen Codere published an article in 1958 which helped dispel one of the most pervasive presumptions of the Kwakwaka'wakw people. Counter to the widely accepted claim that the culture in general could be characterized as "paranoid and megalomaniac," (Benedict 1934) Codere asserted that in actuality, laughter and fun-making, both innocent and ribald, were intrinsic parts of everyday life, particularly in the institution of the potlatch. (See Codere, "The Amiable Side of Kwakiutl Life: The Potlatch and the Play Potlatch," *American Anthropologist* 58, 1958, 334-351.)

<sup>250</sup> John Howland Rowe, *Chavin Art*, New York, 1962.

<sup>251</sup> Audrey Hawthorn, *Kwakiutl Art*, 20.

the order of the figures, or by inserting obscure or entirely invented figures, as opposed to simply duplicating the designs of the full-sized poles. These “nonsense” poles, although completely meaningless in terms of the normal function of a totem pole, would nonetheless satisfy the tourist, who seemed assured that he/she was purchasing an “authentic legend.”<sup>252</sup>

This sense of play is more than evident in a number of Neel’s commissioned works. Often when she was asked to design a model pole for a specific collector, Neel would “custom make” a legend to suit the recipient. One example, cited in a Vancouver newspaper, records the instance of Neel carving a model totem pole for the F. Ronald Graham family, who had the reputation of being “good hosts.”<sup>253</sup> “Ellen Neel,” the newspaper assured, “insists her legend be authentic,”<sup>254</sup> and after listening to the family’s characteristics, would “cast about in her active mind for an Indian legend which will tell the story”<sup>255</sup> in order to find “a legend to suit their fame.”<sup>256</sup> Like the Haida “nonsense” poles, Neel thus jumbles up the figures to create a new “legend,” one appropriate to the commissioner in question, creating a “personalized” totem pole, but literally an inauthentic one.

Often, as in the case of the Totemland commission, Ellen Neel would not only carve “made to order legends,” but incorporate personalized, original, non-native figures into the totem pole. In 1953, for example, Neel was commissioned to design and carve a totem pole for White Spot, the popular Vancouver restaurant chain. White Spot, which

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<sup>252</sup> See Macnair and Hoover, *The Magic Leaves*.

<sup>253</sup> CAV M6650 Neel, news clipping dated June 19, 1950.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

was something of a Vancouver “legend” in itself,<sup>257</sup> asked for a totem pole depicting the original “Wonderbird Legend,”<sup>258</sup> which would feature the restaurant’s mascot, the White Spot Rooster (the restaurant was known for its chicken dinners). The resulting White Spot Totem, as it came to be known, showcased a grinning white, cartoon-like rooster perched atop a totem pole. The five-foot carved model graced the front entrance of the main restaurant on Granville Street (figure 22),<sup>259</sup> and a drawing of the White Spot Totem adorned the cover of the restaurant’s menus for years to come (figure 23). It is this space for laughter, this freedom for play, that Neel had argued passionately for in her conference speech of 1948, in her pleas for expansion and innovation. It is evident, therefore, that the comic element should be explored with regards to Neel’s Totemland commission, as this will bring us closer to understanding how this Totemland Pole functioned as symbolically meaningful to Ellen Neel.

### Laughter and the Totemland Pole

The subject of humour is vast and extends across the terrain of numerous disciplines, including linguistics, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, philosophy

<sup>257</sup> Former baseball player Nat Bailey opened the original White Spot in Vancouver in 1928, on Granville Street at 67th. White Spot was known nationally as the first drive in restaurant in Canada, but its local fame was due to its “legendary hamburgers with triple-o sauce.” Constance Brissenden, *Triple-O: The White Spot Story*, Vancouver, 1993.

<sup>258</sup> The “Wonderbird Legend” was printed on the cover of White Spot menus and read as follows: “In the beginning, the men of the Pacific Coast were brown men and the totems were brown totems made of brown wood. With the coming of the white men came other white things also and among these white things was a white rooster. The white rooster saw the birds and beasts so wonderfully caved on totems of the Kwakiutl and the Tsimshians. It became his great desire to be the first rooster to be placed on the top of the totem poles. He asked Chief Che-Che-Kin how this could come to pass. ‘You will have to do something that no other rooster has ever done before,’ said the Chief, ‘You will have to do something that neither Kolus, the Thunderbird, nor Hwahwasa the silver salmon nor Gwa-tum the great whale has ever done.’ When the white rooster thought and thought in fact he thought so hard that he brooded. Now everybody knows what happens what happens when a chicken broods. He lays an egg. When the white rooster thought so hard that he became broody, he did something that no rooster has ever done before. He laid an egg. A big white egg. The white rooster was very proud of what he had done, and he took the egg to Che-Che-Kin. I have done what no rooster ever did before, eh, Chief...” Quoted from the front page of a White Spot menu from the 1950s, *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>259</sup> The Wonderbird Legend Totem Pole can be found today at the Delta location White Spot.

anthropology and sociology. There are an almost infinite number of avenues through which to explore the issue of humour in the Totemland Pole. For the purpose of the present study however, I will limit my discussion to one of the most central aspects of humour, that of humour as social practice,<sup>260</sup> defined by one scholar as “an activity by means of which work is performed within and upon a concrete and historically specific social situation.”<sup>261</sup> Humour, wit, comedy and jokes are *events*, according to James F. English, referring to “whole scenes and systems of symbolic exchange whose determining feature is simply the involvement of laughter.”<sup>262</sup> The words, gesture, or (in our case) object, do not in themselves constitute a “comic transaction,”<sup>263</sup> but require knowledge of a shared system of social codes and social (power) relations.<sup>264</sup>

Most theorists agree that the fundamental core of the humorous situation is incongruity,<sup>265</sup> or rather the *perception* of incongruity, the perception of disjointed, ill-suited pairings of ideas or situations, or the presentation of ideas and situation divergent from habitual customs.<sup>266</sup> Comic incongruity occurs, asserts English, because society is structured in contradiction; “the incongruity that virtually every commentator has found at the heart of the comic transaction is a particular aspect of, or moment within, some

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<sup>260</sup> This observation was acknowledged even in 1900, when Henri Bergson published *Le Rive*, stating: “To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one.” Quoted in James F. English, *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humor, and the Politics of Community in Twentieth-Century Britain*, London, 1994, 1.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>265</sup> It was Francis Hutcheson who first located humour in a perception of incongruity, although he offered no real evidence that incongruity is either a necessity or a sufficient condition of something appearing comical. (“Reflections on Laughter,” *Dublin Journal*, 1725) *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn, New York, 1994, 212.

<sup>266</sup> Susan Vogel, *Humor: A Semio-genetic Approach*, Bochum, 1989, 6.

binding tension or contradiction on the level of the social.”<sup>267</sup> In the case of the Totemland Pole, the source of the incongruity, and thus the main comic element, is quite obviously the oblong globe, perched ridiculously on top of the First Man’s head, looking vaguely like a gigantic egg freshly laid by the Thunderbird. The globe functions as comic in a number of ways.<sup>268</sup>

First, as Mary Douglas asserts in her study of joke perception, “the successful joke imagines the subversion of something formal and organized (a control) by something informal and energetic (that which is controlled) so the balance of power is changed.”<sup>269</sup> While the viewer attempts to “read” the Totemland Pole vertically for its “Indian legend,” his or her efforts are frustrated by the rude interruption of this western sign, the globe. The “balance of power” is shaken, as Neel undermines the preconceived notion that “modern” western ways of imaging the world are inappropriate on “authentic” totem poles. The incongruous globe sets up a tension, the realization of which triggers a comic reaction.

Secondly, the globe is humorous because it reads *too* literally. The non-native viewer may expect that the images appearing on totem poles will be ones which signify “otherness,” signs from a foreign cultural tradition, which the viewer will presumably need interpreted, since he or she is most likely ignorant of the particulars of Northwest Coast heraldic figures. Instead, the Totemland Pole can be read and interpreted very literally; the world is visualized as a western mind would conceptualize it. Like the rooster perched atop the White Spot Totem, so the Totemland Pole, to quote Douglas

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<sup>267</sup> English, 8.

<sup>268</sup> I would like to acknowledge that many of my ideas about humour and the Totemland Pole have emerged as a direct result of suggestions and criticism from Allan Ryan, author of *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*, with whom I conversed on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

again, “affords the opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective.”<sup>270</sup> The solemnity of this “Totemland creation myth” is mocked and subverted, and the viewers’ presumed craving for an “authentic” primitive Indian legend is frustrated.

Thirdly, the globe, although it may be immediately recognized as such by its general shape and land-mass outline, is of course not a geographical map of the “world” as the audience would expect, but merely the outline of British Columbia, succinctly saying BC *is* the whole world, or the only part of the world that matters. However, if the viewer looks closer yet, he or she will discover that the depicted land-mass does not represent the entire province of British Columbia, but rather only the central and southern coastline, from the southern tip of Haida Gwaii to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. This being so, the centre of the “globe” is not the geographic midpoint of the province, or even Vancouver, headquarters of “Totemland.” The heart of this “globe” is positioned at the central coast of BC, precisely Kwakwaka’wakw territory (figures 24 and 25). As it is highly unlikely that the Totemland officials were aware of the geographics of traditional Kwakwaka’wakw land, it seems as though Ellen Neel was enjoying her own private joke, accessible only to those (presumably Kwakwaka’wakw) viewers who could recognize the significance of the area imaged. Presumably the Totemland Officials who had commissioned the piece were unaware that the artist had cheekily inserted a bit of ethnic pride into the work, and that their Totemland Pole did not boast the glory of British Columbia, but instead the traditional lands of the Kwakwaka’wakw, Ellen Neel’s home.

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<sup>269</sup> Mary Douglas, “The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception,” *Man* 3, 1968, 364-5.

In "Humour as a Tool of Social Interaction," Thomas Kane, Jerry Suls, and James Tedeschi explain that humour can serve as an instrument of social influence. The use of humour can allow the user "to claim or disclaim responsibility for his [or her] actions, can reveal courage or relieve embarrassment, may invoke...or release the individual from commitments."<sup>271</sup> Comic practice is "always on some level or in some measure an assertion of group against group, an effect and an event of struggle," in the words of James English, and fundamentally connected to "the inescapable heterogeneity of society, the ceaseless conflict of social life, the multiple and irreconcilable patterns of identification within which relationships of solidarity and hierarchy must be negotiated."<sup>272</sup> As such, humour is never "innocent," and the "comic transaction" can be understood as inherently political or activated to serve an implicitly political purpose. Humour succeeds as such a subtly powerful political weapon, Kane, Suls, and Tedeschi attest, by way of its very nature:

Humour can serve such purposes because it generally can be interpreted in several different ways at the same time. The reason for this is that humour carries with it a cue that it is non-serious, that it is play. This means that the source can communicate a message and then take it back if need be by simply saying 'it was a joke.' In fact, since everyone is aware of the ambiguous nature of humour the disclaimer may not even be necessary. At any rate the source can to some extent decide how he [or she] wishes his [or her] statement or action to be interpreted if he [or she] couches it in humorous terms.<sup>273</sup>

Thus it is likely that the humorous elements in the Totemland Pole functioned for Neel as a kind of subversive political tactic. The climate of the province's political arena during the late 1940s and early 1950s forced First Nations leaders to seize both public and

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 364-5.

<sup>271</sup> Thomas R. Kane, Jerry Suls, and James T. Tedeschi, "Humour as a Tool for Social Interaction," *It's a Funny Thing, Humour*, eds. Anthony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot, Oxford, 1977, 13.

<sup>272</sup> English, 9.

government attention by the use of highly vocal, media-grabbing techniques, such as those demonstrated at the 1946 Kwakwaka'wakw Jubilee protest and Scow's 1947 proclamation at the provincial legislature. Ellen Neel, although not a participant in these outspoken interventions, was indeed able to quietly exercise her political views, using humour as a communicating medium. The sharp statement of ethnic identity and ownership in the Totemland Pole, accessible to a very restricted (aboriginal) audience, could be retracted and neutralized with the disclaimer "it was only a joke," empowering Neel with the control not only to speak her mind, but also to control the volume and frequency of her message.

Phil Nuytten recalls that Neel "laughed a lot about the Totemland Poles."<sup>274</sup> The humour and wit that Neel injected into the Totemland Commission can be understood as indicative of a greater comic spirit in her life. Nuytten in fact credits her "ego-piercing sense of humour,"<sup>275</sup> which "quickly saw through pretensions and minor pomposity – even her own,"<sup>276</sup> as one of the artist's signs of resilience. According to Nuytten, she approached her work with determination and passion, but refused to take herself, her profession, or her ethnicity too seriously.<sup>277</sup> A publicity photograph taken for a Canadian newsmagazine in 1959 illustrates such an approach towards life (figure 26). The photograph, captioned "The Neel Family Totem," captures the entire Neel family modeling as a human totem pole. Mocking the well-worn signifier of native Northwest Coast culture, the pose undermines the popular assumption that native art was a serious, solitary, spiritual venture, and parodies the nature of the Neel family business – by

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<sup>273</sup> Kane, Suls, and Tedeschi, 13.

<sup>274</sup> Nuytten, 47.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

necessity a semi-production line, with Neel herself as “foreman” – designed to churn out totem poles. The Neel family photograph, and indeed Neel’s Totemland commission, is not without a measure of self-deprecating ethnic humour which, as anthropologist Mahadev Apte writes in *Humour and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*, is “a type of humour in which fun is made of the perceived behavior, personality, or any other traits of a group of its members by virtue of their specific socio-cultural identity.”<sup>278</sup> Mahadev states that in an ethnically pluralistic society, “ethnic humour is more likely to be present among minority/subordinate groups because of their need for social cohesion, than among majority/dominant groups who do not face the dilemma of choosing between acculturation and the maintenance of a distinct ethnic identity.”<sup>279</sup> Living in the urban space of Vancouver, Ellen Neel may well have felt the strain of retaining and projecting the codes of her distinct ethnic ancestry, as well as the tension in combining elements from both the dominant society and an ethnic minority (often positioned antithetically) to construct her own personal identity. Enlisted as such a survival tactic, “humour undermines the forces that stifle the basic human needs for freedom, justice, and dignity,” in the words of professional clown Ron Jenkins, and “laughter is experienced as a wave of liberating release.”<sup>280</sup> Injecting a comic element into her commissioned work may have served as a way of making light, not only of the tensions in Neel’s subject positions, but also of her difficult life situation: of the oppressive strain of being an aboriginal woman supporting a young family in a large city, of caring for a husband who was

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<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>278</sup> Mahadev Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*, London, 1985, 108.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>280</sup> Ron Jenkins, *Subversive Laughter*, New York, 1994, 2.

gravely ill, of continually pulling herself and her family back from the edge of destitution.

In addition to being “a means of exposing or subverting oppressive hegemonic ideologies,” and “a way for affirming life in the face of objective troubles,”<sup>281</sup> Michael M. Fischer, quoted in *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*, identifies humour as “a tool for acknowledging complexity.”<sup>282</sup> It is Fischer’s last statement that perhaps most clearly resonates with the Neel’s Totemland commission. The comical hybrid form of the Totemland Pole, with its western globe, may have acted as a visualization of her own life’s complexity, a way of acknowledging her entanglement with numerous different cultural forces, and her active navigation between the power structures and institutional matrices surrounding her. In this way, the Totemland Pole may have even functioned as a symbolic definition of her community, a visual articulation of her own act of permeating boundaries, of straddling communities.

In a sense, the Totemland Pole could have metonymically symbolized her participation in the Totemland commission. Just as Neel inserted the comical, egg-shaped globe into the center of a “traditional” Kwakwaka’wakw totem pole, so does the Totemland commission offer the opportunity to thrust her views into an expansive, foreign, potentially limitless audience. Her desire, as she had stated in her 1948 conference speech, for innovation, for “new and modern techniques...new and modern materials,”<sup>283</sup> and her conviction that native art was “part of the fabric of a truly Canadian

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<sup>281</sup> Michael M.J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory,” *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, Berkeley, 1986, 224. Quoted in Allan Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*, Vancouver, 1999, 8 (fn. 10).

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 (fn. 10).

<sup>283</sup> Neel, *Report of the Conference on Native Indian Affairs*, 12.

art form,”<sup>284</sup> embedded symbolically within the Totemland Pole, could be projected outward, into a greater sphere.

### **Marking Boundaries, Making up Stories: The Gift of the Totemland Pole**

For the commissioning Society, the two-foot carved cedar Totemland Pole appears at first to function as a typical souvenir, which, according to Dean MacCannell, can be read as “an essential element in the structure of the touristic experience,”<sup>285</sup> necessary as a marker of the ephemeral event that has been consumed. Unlike a souvenir, however, which is voluntarily purchased by the visitor to commemorate and recall a specific experience, the Totemland Pole’s essential aspect is that it is a *gift*, presented to the chosen dignitaries and visiting celebrities by the host City of Vancouver. A gift is, in the words of Nicholas Thomas, “both a thing and a kind of act,”<sup>286</sup> and as an act it has a social effect, carrying numerous potential implications.<sup>287</sup> In this way, and unlike a souvenir that is produced to be purchased, the Totemland Pole tells us more about the giver than about the receiver.

Susan Stewart, in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, has applied psycho-analytic theory to an investigation of the need to collect souvenirs. If Stewart’s theory of the lure of the souvenir is inverted, we may be closer to discovering the possible motives behind the Society’s gift of the totem pole. Stewart claims that souvenirs distinguish experiences.

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<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>285</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York, 1976, 147.

<sup>286</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Cambridge, 1991, 17.

<sup>287</sup> In Chapter One of *Entangled Objects*, Nicholas Thomas acknowledges the major contributors to the subject of gift theory in furthering the topic of exchange relations in general. He briefly reviews and situates the fundamental thinking of Marcel Mauss and Malinowski, C.A. Gregory’s “distillation of ideas of gift and commodity, Annette Weiner’s theory on inalienable wealth, and Arjun Appadurai and Daniel Miller’s innovative thoughts on the commodification and “promiscuity” of objects. See Thomas, 14-33.

“We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable,” she asserts, “rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative.”<sup>288</sup> A normal souvenir functions to validate an ephemeral experience once enjoyed by the visitor, displacing “the point of authenticity as it itself becomes the point of origin for narrative.”<sup>289</sup> The Totemland Pole, however, not only attempts to ensure (on behalf of the Totemland Society) that the touristic experience of Vancouver (aka Totemland) is one worth recalling, but in effect *supplies* the visitor with an invented narrative of the “Totemland” experience. This is a narrative beyond any lived experience, a nostalgic fabrication of the province’s “splendid pre-white man civilization.”<sup>290</sup> The Totemland Pole, which symbolically and physically locates British Columbia (represented succinctly as ‘the whole world’) within the “timeless” and “exotic” cultural tradition of the Northwest Coast natives, acts as a visualization of this narrative in miniature, packaged like a trophy, to be interiorized and taken home. As the actual lived tourist experience of Vancouver will gradually fade from memory, the Totemland Society gives the gift of the Totemland Pole in the hopes that its fictional narrative will replace reality, or at the very least provide a pleasing foil, like the Stanley Park totem poles raised against the backdrop of the modern downtown skyline.

This fictional narrative, as Anthony Cohen suggests, is narrated from the boundary, from the border of community. A narrative so carefully constructed, in my view, was not manufactured for the members of the Totemland Society themselves, nor

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<sup>288</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives on the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, London, 1993, 135.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>290</sup> *The Native Voice*, “Totemland Supplement,” August 1950, 1.

was it particularly directed towards the citizens of Vancouver. Rather the recipients of the Pole, a very specific constituent including celebrities, foreign government officials and other individuals (no doubt powerful in the eyes of the Totemland Society), indicates that the imagined narrative was created for the benefit of those from distant regions; persons who would not otherwise have any impression of Vancouver. The members of the Totemland Society, it appears, have a need not only to assert the distinctiveness of Vancouver to influential individuals whose impression of the city "matters," but also to ensure that this narrative, so carefully designed, so politely presented, would resonate far beyond the borders of their own community. Such desire is revealed in a letter written only months before the inauguration of the Totemland Society, sent from Mayor Thompson to Chief William Scow after his return from Australia, describing for the Chief the presentation of Ellen Neel's talking stick to the Mayor of Sydney. The Mayor writes:

It gave me much pleasure to present the totem pole to the Lord Mayor in the palatial Town Hall at Sydney *in the presence of a very large group of the most representative citizens of this great city*...the pole will be set up in the great hall and I am sure will be a source of great interest to the people of New South Wales in the years to come. (emphasis mine)<sup>291</sup>

The desire on the part of the Totemland Society to fabricate a historical continuum for the city of Vancouver resonates with the statement made twenty-six years earlier in the Tyee Souvenir Booklet, that Vancouver was admittedly a city "young in years, with no particular historical attractions."<sup>292</sup> The desire to construct that continuum by appropriating the easily recognizable yet exotic cultural forms of the native Northwest Coast resonates with a need implicitly present in the colonial project, as

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<sup>291</sup> Letter from Mayor Charles Thompson to Chief William Scow, dated May 18, 1950, CAV 34-F-3, file 5.

Robert Young asserts, to ingest, incorporate or become the cultural Other. Although the Totemland Pole does include a representation of the Thunderbird, one of the most stereotypical images on Northwest Coast totem poles, its riotous colour, its trophy-like size, and especially its egg-shaped globe, do not signify "tradition" or "purism." From the commission's scant historical records, it is unclear whether the Society explicitly stipulated the acceptable parameters of design, or whether Ellen Neel was given artistic license to conceptualize the Totemland Pole entirely at her will. Nonetheless it is interesting that the Totemland Society, their mandate being "to collect... the legendary history, customs and philosophy of our native Indians...to encourage and preserve their ancient weaving, painting and sculptural arts..."<sup>293</sup> would choose to represent that mandate and symbolize Vancouver with such a humorous, unorthodox, blatantly non-traditional design, a design that clearly frustrates the viewer's expectations of the stereotypical totem pole. In a sense, the farther the Society's design moved from that of a "traditional" totem pole, the nearer it came to the border, to the edge of *both* communities, the less it could be definitively claimed by the First Nations, and thus the nearer Vancouver came to finally having its *own* totem pole, to becoming uniquely Other to itself.

At the same time, however, given the post-war climate of native relations in the province under which it was produced, the Totemland commission cannot be dismissed as simply another instance of insensitive appropriation. The increasingly visible presence of local First Nations political leaders, combined with shifting attitudes within the general population, had begun to make more audible to both government and public the demands

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<sup>292</sup> *The City of Vancouver's Official Souvenir Commemorating the Visit of the British Fleet and Tyee Potlatch*, 1924.

of the aboriginal people. The active members of the Totemland Society (particularly Mayor Thompson, Harry Duker, and R. Rowe Holland), all prominent men in Vancouver's business and political communities, had previously interacted with the Native Brotherhood and were by no means unfamiliar with the demands of the First Nations. With the near-disastrous episode at the 1946 Jubilee lurking like a spectre only four years behind them, and combined with the influence of such zealous philanthropic organizations as the British Columbia Indian Arts and Welfare Society, the members of the Totemland Society invest their official insignia with an uncomfortable combination of paternalist patronage and the sudden urge to make allies with an increasingly vocal ethnic minority.

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<sup>293</sup> *The Native Voice*, Special Totemland Supplement, August 1950, 1.

## CONCLUSION

The selective amnesia of public and academic memory, due in part to the racialized, class-based, and gendered politics of the construction of knowledge, have left much of Ellen Neel's artistic production, particularly the circumstances surrounding the Totemland commission, all but unrecorded. The concept of absence, then, has been a fundamental element of this project, acting as a structuring agent around which my argument is organized. I have visualized the Totemland Pole, the central object of my discussion, as a negative, a void defined in silhouette by mapping out a number of *surrounding* social relations and events, separate trajectories which intersect at the site of Ellen Neel's Totemland commission. This thesis has therefore entailed a number of incursions into various different discourses. Instead of arriving at a single conclusion, the project's ultimate aim has been to indicate how these seemingly separate trajectories are in fact interdependent and indeed inseparable.

In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin remarked, "the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again...for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present threatens to disappear irretrievably."<sup>294</sup> The past often flashes before us in the form of an image: a grainy newspaper photograph, a silk-screened scarf, a dust-covered carving, forgotten in the display case of some distant civic hall. That object or image, and the symbolic meanings embedded projected upon it, act as the catalyst, the "facilitator of interaction," in the words of Victor Turner, not simply at its time of production, but in the

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<sup>294</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York, 1968, 255.

present, as we work to untangle the past. It is the persistence of the object itself that enables us to gain glimpses into the complex, unbalanced and often ambivalent relations that make up our shared histories.

In the years immediately following World War II in Vancouver, Northwest Coast images and objects were frequently made visible within the public spaces of the city. Often these objects and images were claimed and exchanged as symbolically meaningful in specialized events involving both native and non-native participants, and their symbolic meaning and purpose, like the highly politicized native relations surrounding them were layered, pliable, and constantly shifting. The Totemland Pole, I have argued, created in and for this public sphere, was one such malleable social symbol. Taking Anthony Cohen's ideas on the socially constructed symbol as my departure point, I assert that the different participants involved in the Totemland Pole's production, namely its creator, Ellen Neel, and its commissioners, the Totemland Society, had different political agendas and motivations for becoming involved with the commission. Though they were all implicated in the same object's success, they derived alternate symbolic meanings from its form simultaneously. By charting out a number of different events preceding the production of the Pole, and by plotting institutional and individual forces of power and subjectivity at work in those events, I have shown how divergent meaning could be procured from one such object, and that far from provoking argument, the Pole's "malleability" actually enabled successful interaction to take place.

For the civic-minded members of the commissioning Society, the Totemland Pole articulated a particular narrative of an imagined past. Such a narrative was not original, but a continuing effort on the part of British Columbia to search for a distinctive local identity at the "boundaries" of its own community, in the cultural production of the First

Nations cultures of the Northwest Coast. As such, the Totemland Pole was invested with an implicit desire on the part of the Society to incorporate, ingest, and mimic the cultural Other. At the same time, however, First Nations political leaders and organizations such as the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia were commanding a greater space of recognition in both national and provincial political arenas, demanding both government and public attention. Within this climate, in reflection of the province's changing attitudes towards the First Nations, as well as the Totemland Society's ambivalent motives, the Totemland Pole was host to an uncomfortable collision of paternalist patronage, social welfare and the desire to make political allies with an increasingly vocal ethnic minority.

For Ellen Neel, the Totemland Pole may have served as a conduit through which to channel her forward-thinking views about the role of Native Northwest Coast cultural production in contemporary society. As a Kwakwaka'wakw woman living and working within a large heterogeneous urban community instead of on traditional aboriginal territories, she argued for native art to be an active and vital participant of a larger Canadian culture. The Totemland commission projected Neel's desires for innovation, her call for freedom of design, material and subject, accessible a diverse and foreign audience. The Totemland Pole's unorthodox and humorous figural combination, possibly unexpected by her non-native patronage, can be seen to visually articulate Neel's assertion of her own subjectivity amidst individuals and institutions of power, perhaps not as an attempt to reconcile divergent communities and different cultural traditions, but in declaration of their co-existence.

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## NEWSPAPER SOURCES CONSULTED

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*Vancouver News Herald* 1939-1966

*Vancouver Sun* 1940-1966

*Victoria Colonist* 1939-1954

*The Ubyyssey* (publication of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC) 1948-1950

## FIGURES

**Figure 1**

Photograph of Ellen Neel holding the Totemland Pole, chosen as the official emblem of the Totemland Society, *Vancouver Sun*, 1950. (Nuytten, 47)



Figure 2

Totemland Society Letterhead, 1954. (CAV Add. Mss. 336, 547-C-7, file 6)



# "TOTEM-LAND"

SOCIETY

*A Non-Profit Organization Incorporated Under the Societies Act of British Columbia to Foster and Protect Indian Arts and Promote Goodwill Among all Canadians*

CHARLES E. THOMPSON  
"HY-A-PENEULT"  
IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT

PRESIDENT  
R. ROWE HOLLAND

HALFORD D. WILSON  
FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT  
AND ASST. TO THE PRESIDENT

HARRY DUKER  
HONORARY SECRETARY-TREASURER

PHONE: KE. 7400

5851 WEST BOULEVARD  
VANCOUVER 13, B.C.

December 9th, 1954.

Mr. T.H. Ainsworth,  
Secretary Curator,  
Art, Historical & Scientific Association,  
Corner Hastings and Main Street,  
Vancouver, B.C.

Dear Mr. Ainsworth:

## Re Fraser Indian Midden

The above subject came up for discussion at our last meeting and I was asked to write you to ascertain, if possible, the exact location of part of this midden, having in mind, if the land is vacant, that it might be appropriate to have a Sign erected on the exact location and a directional sign located at an appropriate location.

If you will be kind enough to furnish us with the above information we will follow through from there.

Thanking you in advance for anything you can do for us regarding the subject matter of this letter.

Sincerely yours,

Harry Duker,  
Hon. Sec-Treasurer.

HD/es

**Figure 3**

“Authentic Totem Ware” dinner plate by Royal Albert Bone China, England, undated.  
(Personal collection of Trudy Nicks, Royal Ontario Museum, 1999)



**Figure 4**

“Authentic Totem Ware” reverse of dinner plate, undated. (Personal collection of Trudy Nicks, Royal Ontario Museum, 1999)



**Figure 5**

Totemland Pole, designed and carved by Ellen Neel, 1950. (Nuytten, 63)



**Figure 6**

Photograph of Ellen Neel, right, presenting a Totemland Pole to Maria Tallchief, prima ballerina of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, undated. (Nuytten, 64)



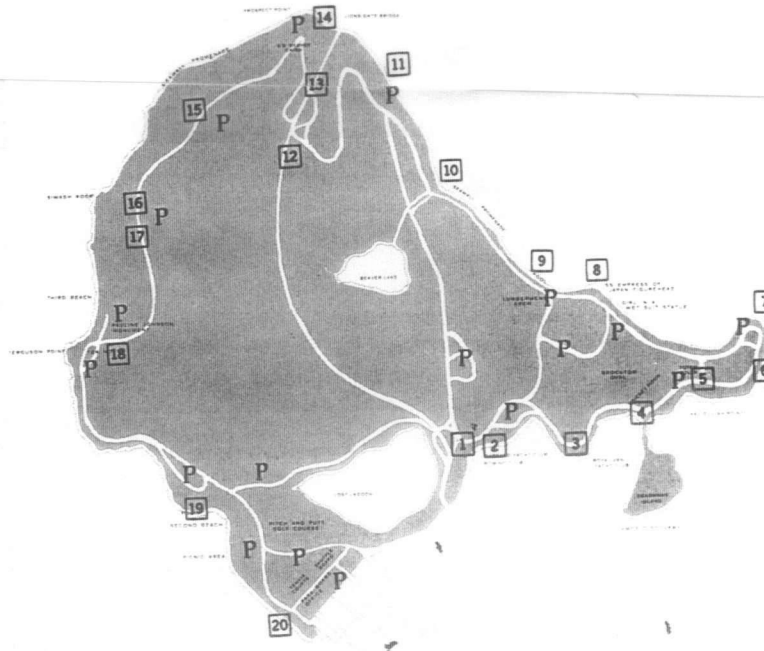
**Figure 7**

Raven Scarf (silk-screen), designed by Ellen Neel, 1950s. (Blackman, 51)



**Figure 8**  
Map of Stanley Park. (Steele, 19)

## Destinations & Parking



DESTINATION	DISTANCE KM./MI.	
Starting Point: Promenade <b>1</b>	0/0	
Zoo Turn-Off <b>2</b>	.16/.1	
Royal Van. Yacht Club <b>3</b>	.7/.4	
Deadman's Island <b>4</b>	1.1/.7	
Totem Poles <b>5</b>	1.3/.8	
Nine O'Clock Gun <b>6</b>	1.5/.95	
Brockton Point <b>7</b>	1.8/1.1	
Empress of Japan figurehead <b>8</b>	2.8/1.7	
Lumbermen's Arch <b>9</b>	3.0/1.85	
Beaver Lake Creek <b>10</b>	3.6/2.2	
"Chaythoos" <b>11</b>	4.1/2.5	
Exit to Lions Gate Bridge <b>12</b>	4.9/3.0	
Bridge Highway Cross-over <b>13</b>	5.2/3.2	
Prospect Point <b>14</b>	5.4/3.3	
"Reservoir" Picnic Area <b>15</b>	6.0/3.7	
Hollow Tree <b>16</b>	6.3/3.9	
"National Geographic" Tree <b>17</b>	6.5/4.0	
Ferguson Point/Tea House/ Third Beach <b>18</b>	7.3/4.5	
Second Beach & Coal Harbour Road Turnoff <b>19</b>	8.4/5.2	
Beach Avenue Entry/Exit <b>20</b>	9.1/5.6	

P Parking Lots; all no charge except at Beach House Restaurant

**Figure 9**

Photograph of the Totem Art Studios at Ferguson's Point, Stanley Park, c. 1949.  
(Nuytten, 51)



**Figure 10**

Kwakwaka'wakw Talking Stick, designed and carved by Ellen Neel, 1950. (Nuytten, 48)

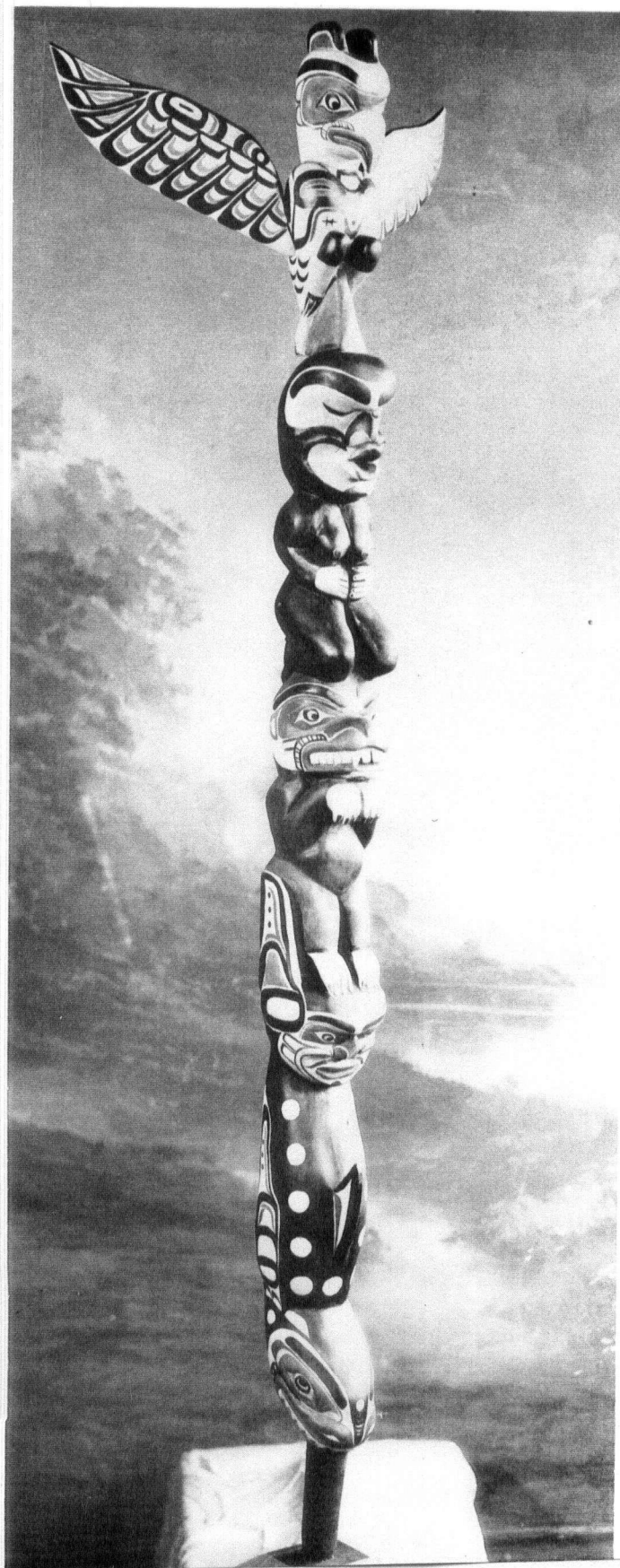
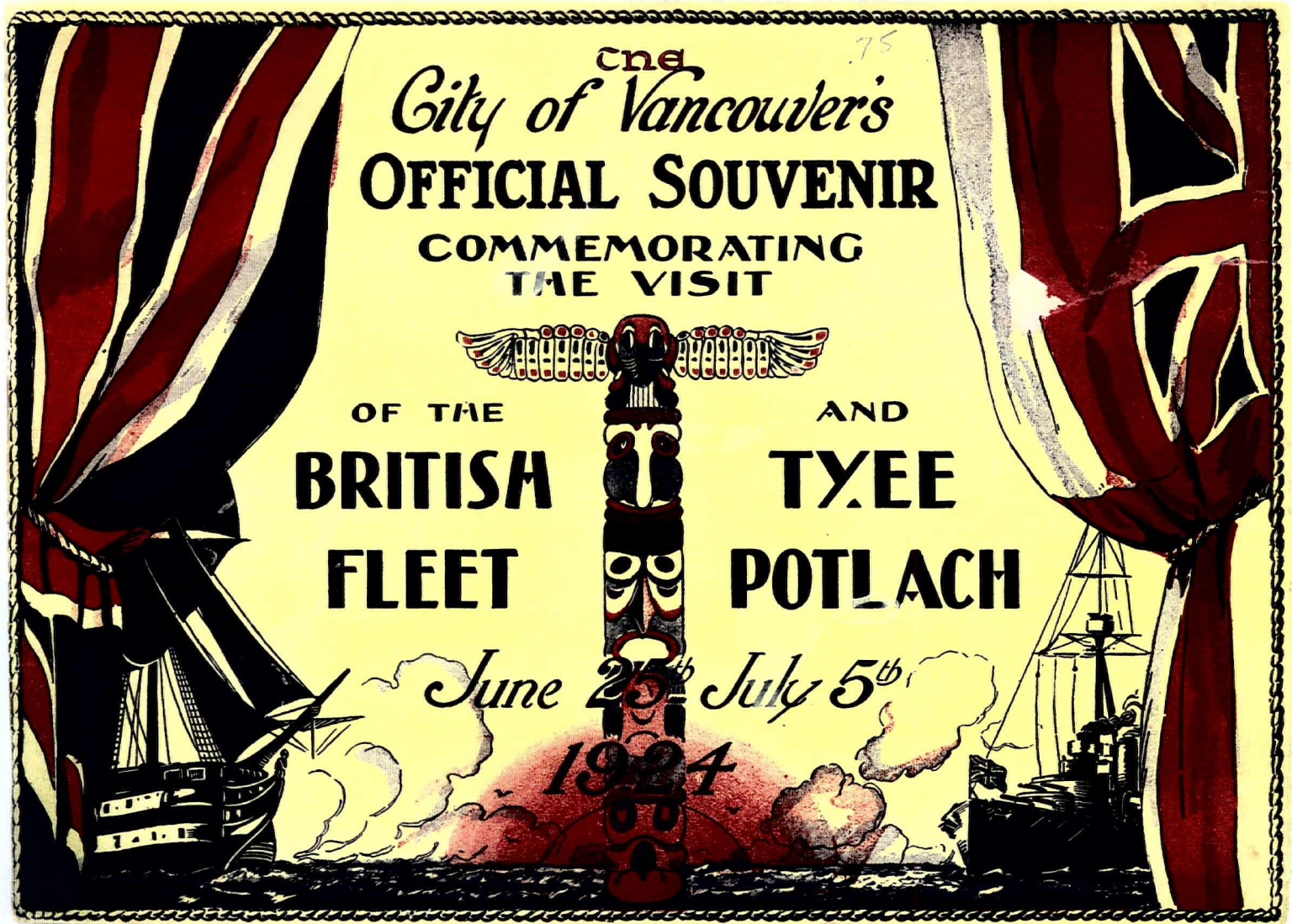


Figure 11

Cover of "The City of Vancouver's Official Souvenir Commemorating the Visit of the British Fleet and Tyee Potlach, June 25<sup>th</sup> – July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1924," 1924.



**Figure 12**

"Chiefs of Potlatch," from "The City of Vancouver's Official Souvenir Commemorating the Visit of the British Fleet and Tyee Potlach, June 25<sup>th</sup> – July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1924," 1924.



HIS HONOR MAYOR OWEN  
"Heap Big Chief"

## Chiefs of Potlatch



HON. W. C. NICHOL  
Lieut.-Governor of British Columbia  
"BIG WHITE CHIEF"



JONAH B. WISE  
President of B'Nai B'Nith  
"CHIEF WISEMAN FROM SOUTH"



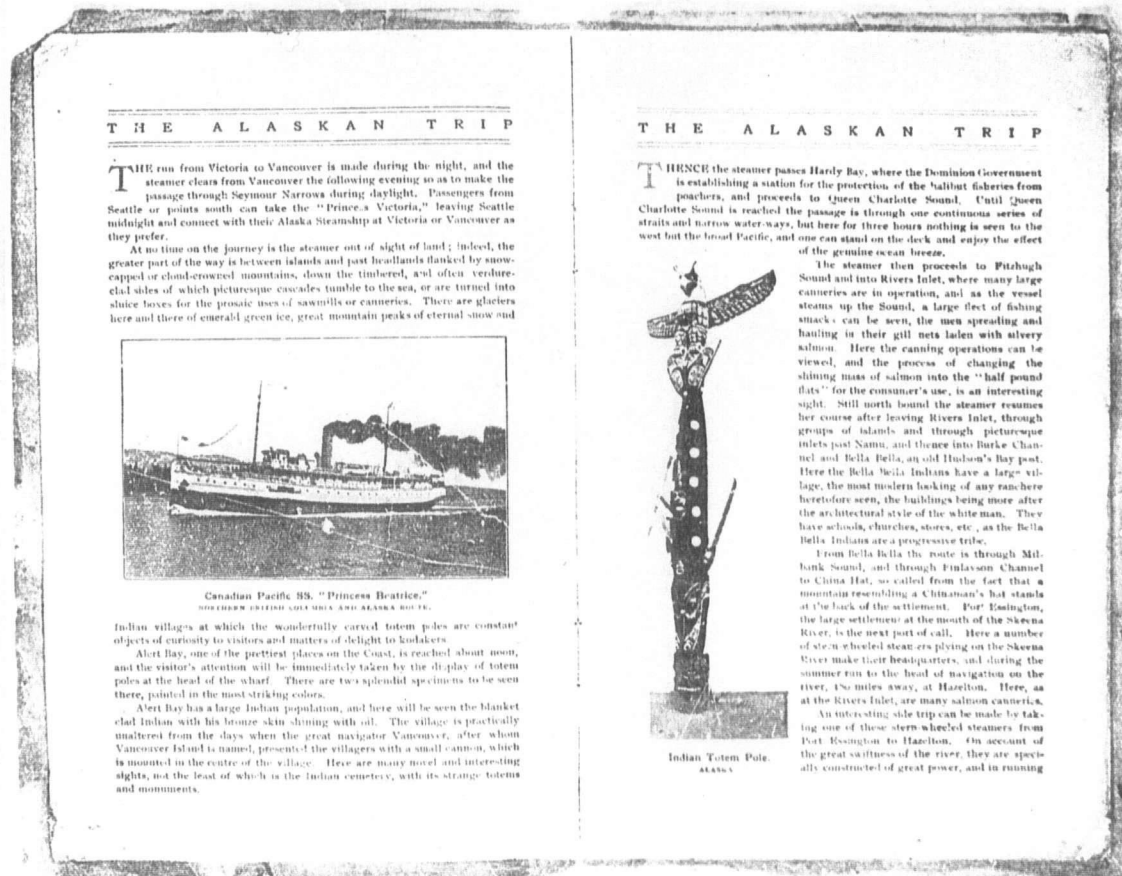
JOHN IMRIE  
President Canadian Press Association  
"CHIEF BRIGHTLIGHT"



THOMAS MEIGHAN  
Moving Picture Star  
"CHIEF WHITE PRINCECHAP"

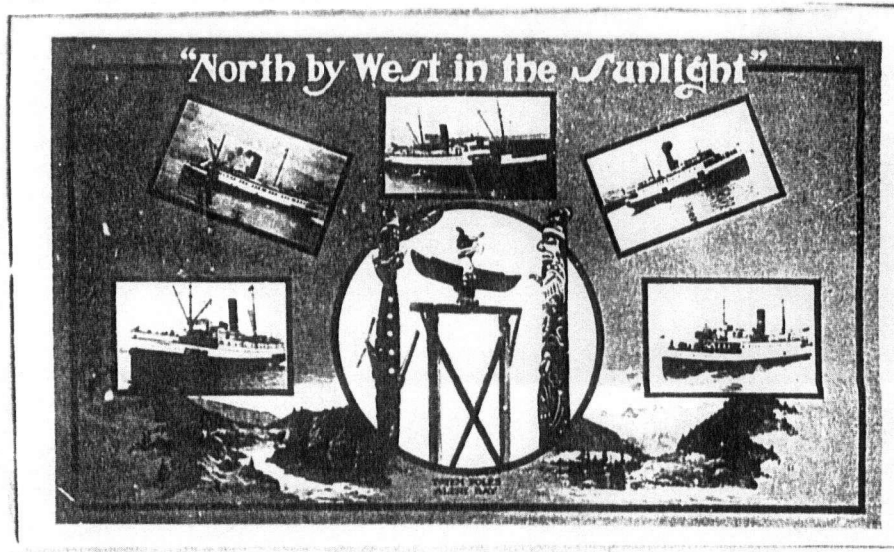
**Figure 13**

Canadian Pacific Railway tourist brochure for summer steamship voyages to Alaska, with photograph of totem pole, 1906. (CAV pamphlet file 1906-29)



**Figure 14**

"North by West in the Sunlight," photograph of totem pole, taken from tourist brochure for Steamship voyages to Alaska and the Yukon from British Columbia, c.1916. (CAV pamphlet file undated-367)



**Figure 15**

“Fourteen Days at Vancouver” tourist brochure, 1928. (CAV pamphlet file 1928-64)



**Figure 16**

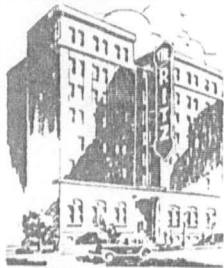
Map of Vancouver from souvenir program of Vancouver's Golden Jubilee celebrations, with image of totem pole in compass, 1936 (CAV pamphlet file 1936-156)

**FIRBANK & LANGE LTD.**  
Diamonds • English China  
Seymour at Dunsmuir  
OPPOSITE BUS DEPOT



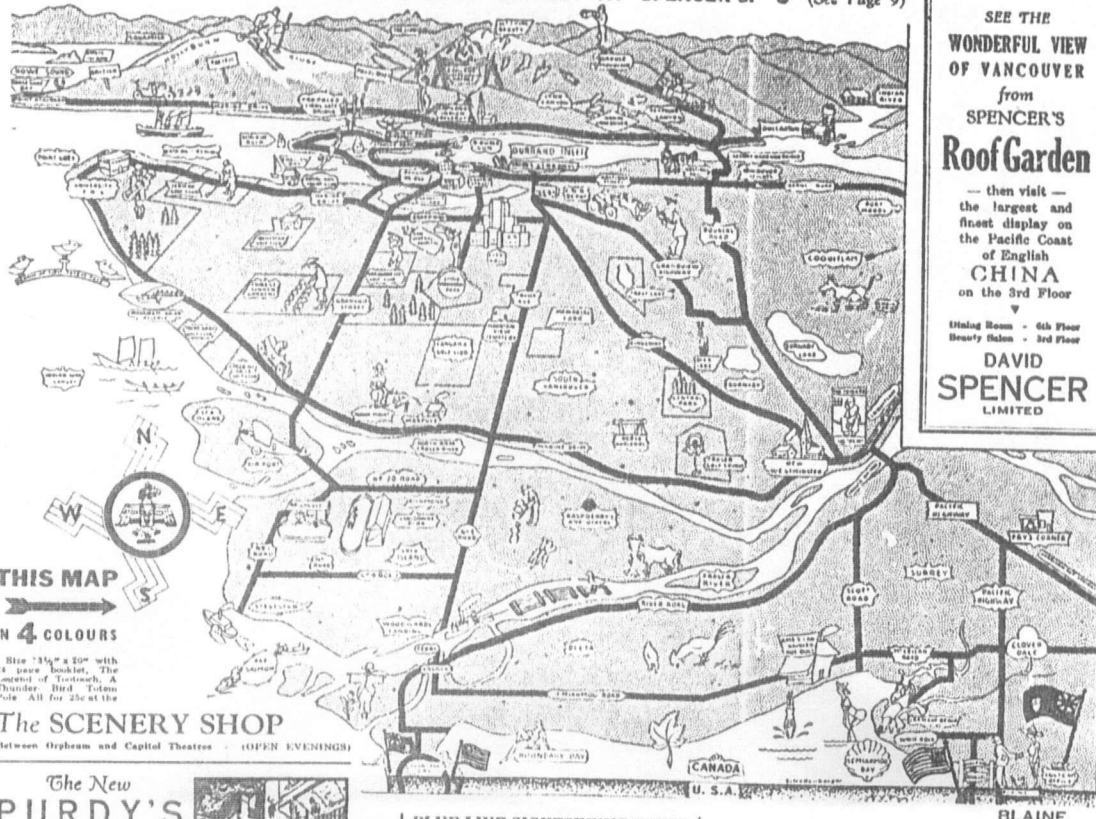
**GRAY LINE SIGHTSEEING TOURS**

Gray Line Buses leave from Hotel Vancouver or Bus Terminal at Seymour and Dunsmuir Sts. on the following tours: Stanley Park and City at 10.00 a.m., 2.00 p.m. and 3.00 p.m.; price \$1.00. Marine Drive and Shaughnessy Heights at 11.00 and 3.00 p.m.; price \$1.50. Combination Tour of the above two trips at 10.00 and 2.00 p.m.; price \$2.00. Three hour tour Capilano Canyon at 10.00 a.m. and 2.00 p.m.; price \$2.00.



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● BE SURE YOU VISIT THE CROWN JEWELS EXHIBIT AT SPENCER'S. ● (See Page 9)



**THIS MAP**

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Size 13 1/2" x 20" with 24 page booklet, The Legend of Totem, A Thunder Bird Totem Pole. All for 25c at the

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Between Orpheum and Capitol Theatres (OPEN EVENINGS)

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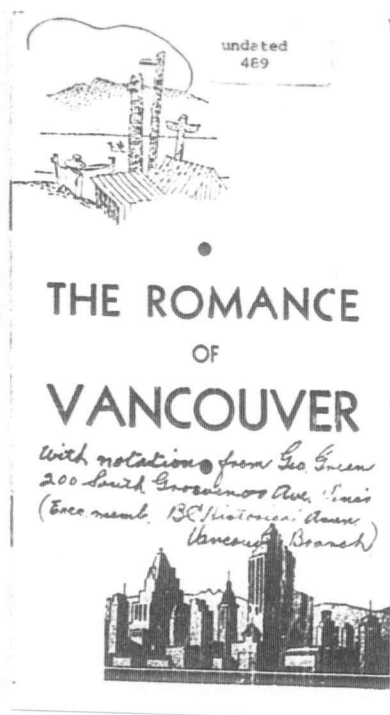
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Dining Room - 6th Floor  
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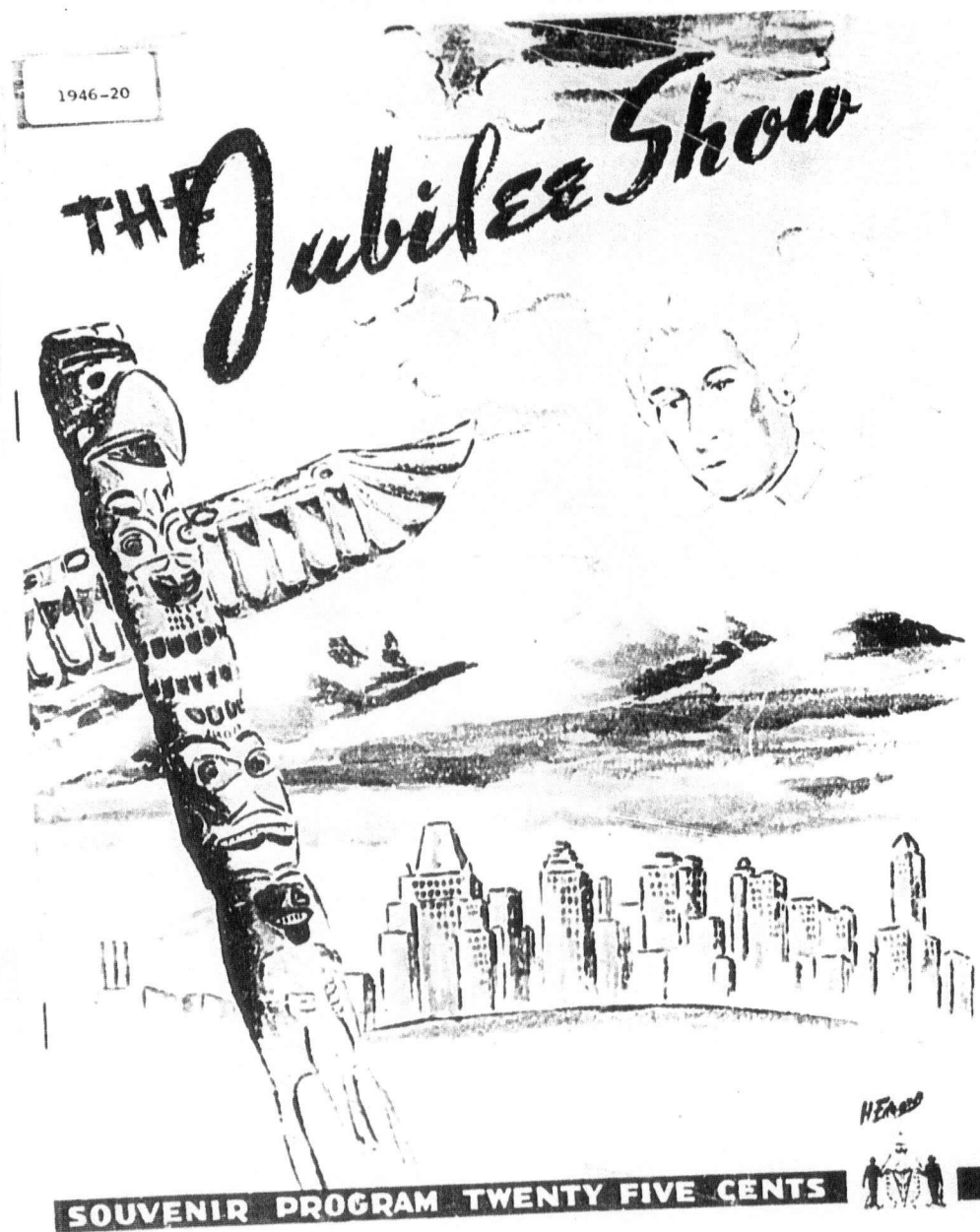
**Figure 17**

"The Romance of Vancouver," tourist brochure, c. 1955. (CAV pamphlet file undated 489)



**Figure 18**

"The Jubilee Show" Souvenir Program from Vancouver Silver Jubilee celebrations, 1946.  
(CAV pamphlet file 1946-20)



**Figure 19**

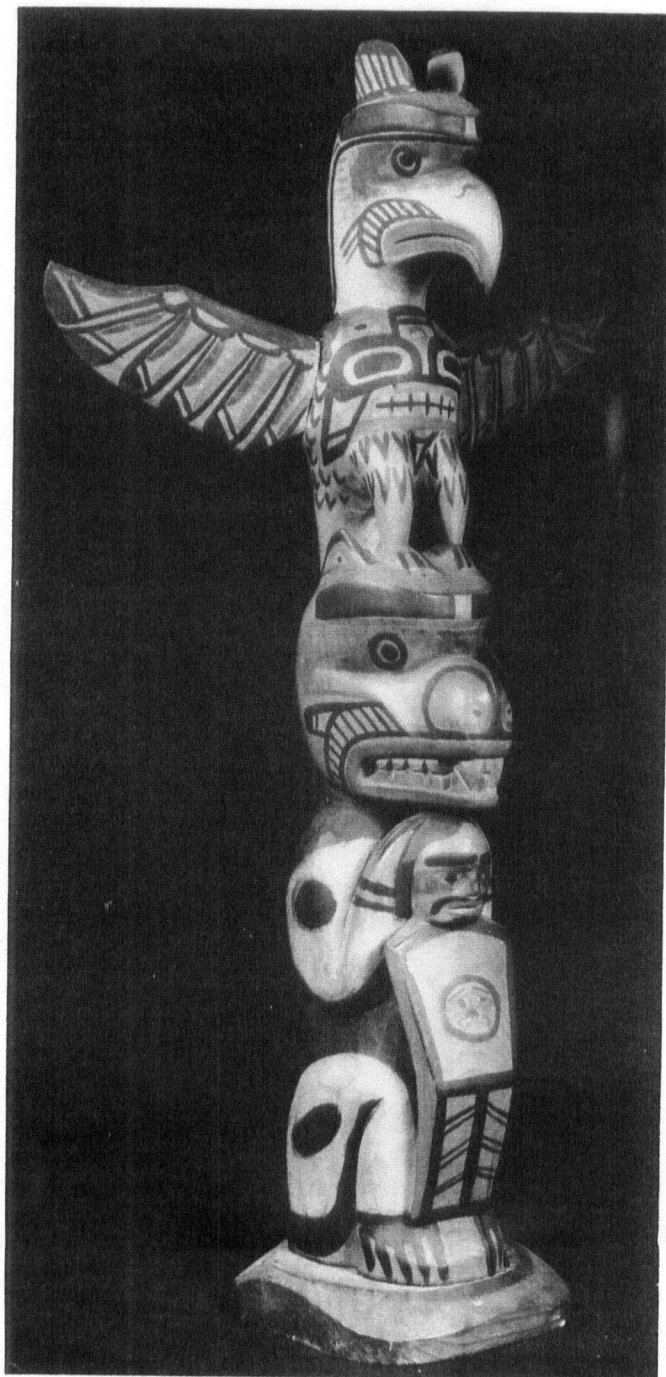
Totem Pole carved by Charlie James, c. 1925, standing today in Memorial Hall, Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria, British Columbia. (Nuytten, 21)



Plate: 27

**Figure 20**

Model totem pole carved by Charlie James, c. 1920s. (Nuytten, 17)



*Plate: 16*

**Figure 21**

Kwakwaka'wakw Killer Whale Mask from Alert Bay, with example of "kenning" device, undated. (Audrey Hawthorn, plate XV B)



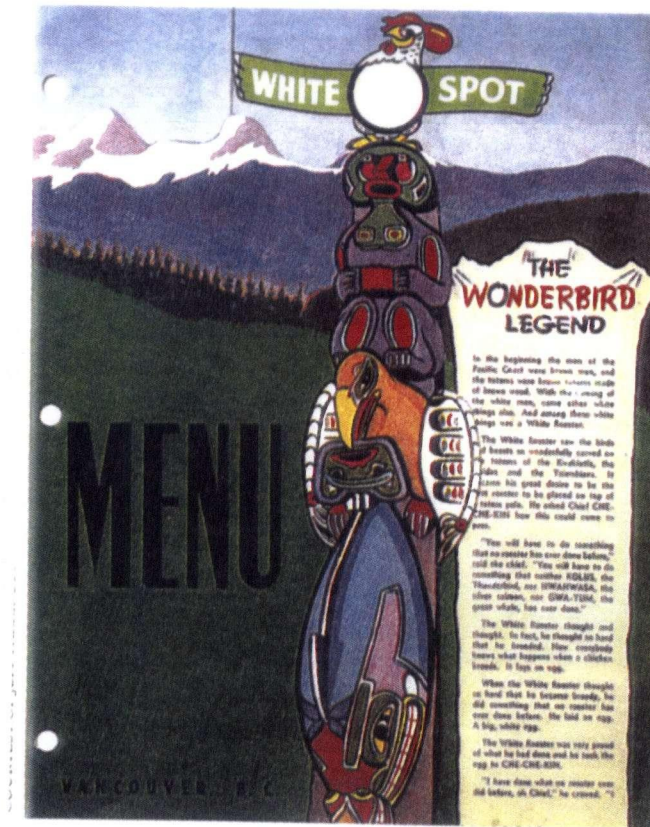
**Figure 22**

White Spot Totem Pole, designed and carved by Ellen Neel, 1953, standing today in the foyer of the Delta White Spot. (Brissenden, frontispiece)



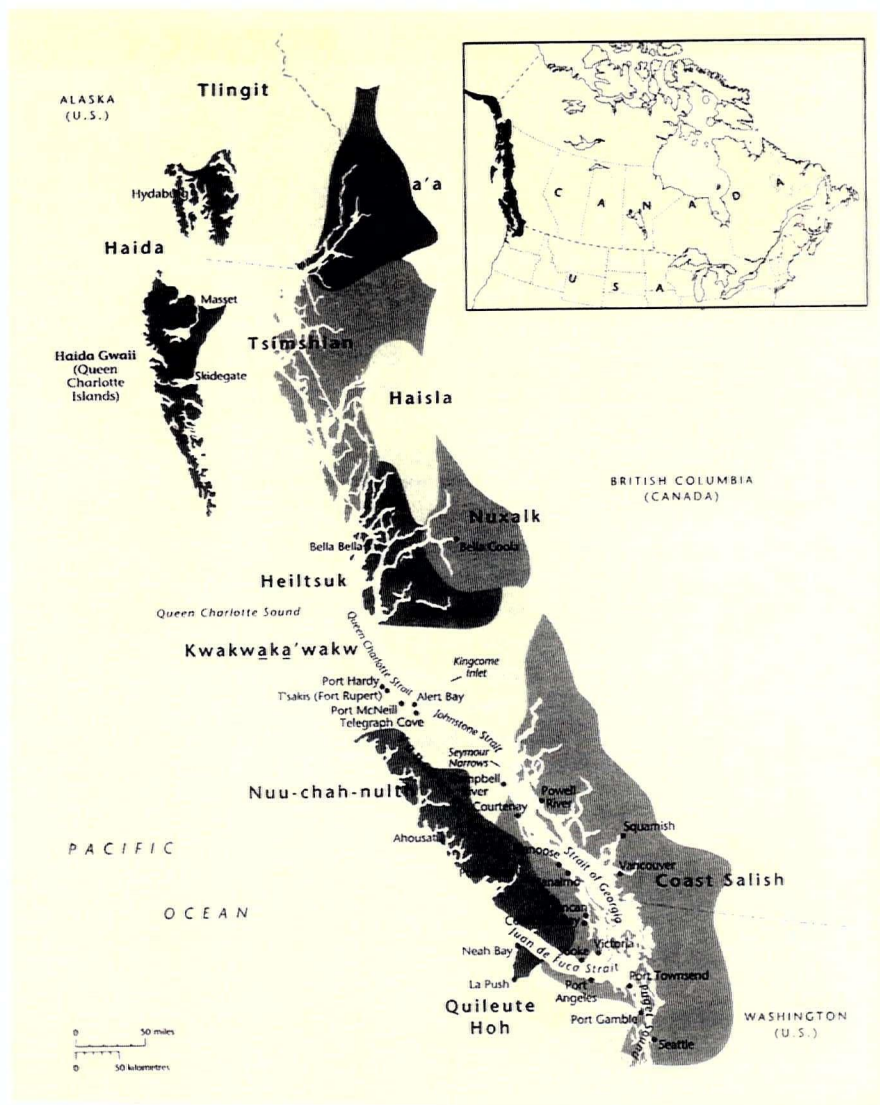
**Figure 23**

White Spot Menu featuring a drawing of Ellen Neel's White Spot Totem Pole, 1955.  
(Brissenden, 64)

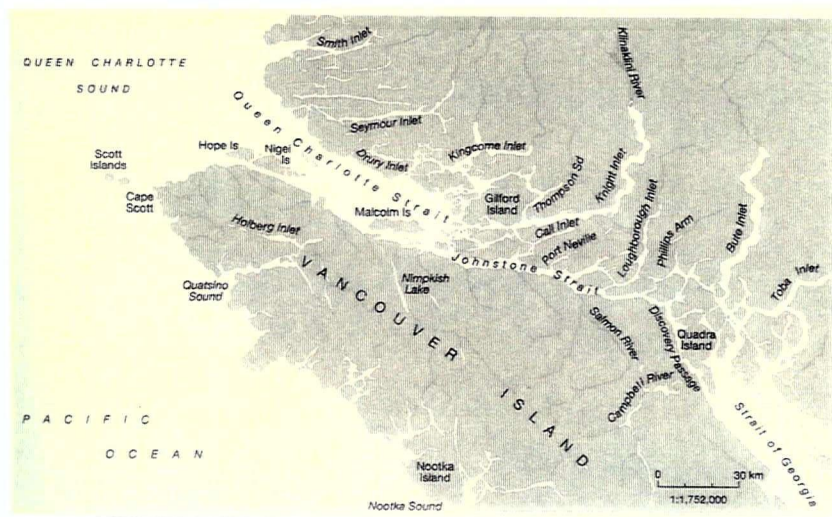


**Figure 24**

Map of the First Nations of the Northwest Coast. (Bracken, preface)



**Figure 25**  
Map of Kwakwaka'wakw territory. (Bracken, preface)



**Figure 26**

Photograph captioned "Neel Family Totem," photographed by Jim Ryan. From top: Ellen, Ted Senior, Bitty, Theo, Dave, Ted Jr. and Bob Neel, White Rock, BC, c. 1959. (Nuytten, 66)

