

Fall 2015

7: Professional Native Indian Artists Inc.

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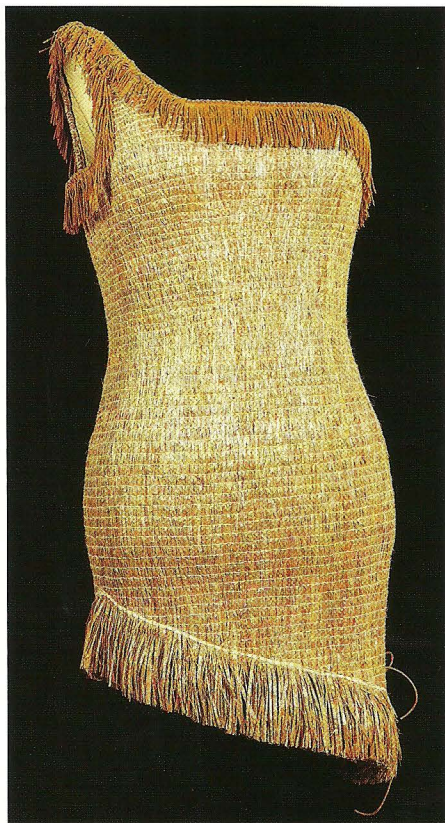
Issue No. 8, Fall 2015

\$8.99US \$9.99CAN

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Lisa Telford (Haida), *PocaHaida*, cedar bark dress, collection of the Burke Museum #2014-50/1. Photo: Richard Brown. Image courtesy of the Burke Museum.

and contemporary statement on how a cash economy has replaced coppers as the currency, or how gaming is affecting tribal nations today. One has to be “in the know” to grasp why this smart piece is funny, even though on the surface, the dinner-plate-sized tin.áa with its one-dollar bill face is impressive on its own.

This past year, I taught a hybrid Native art class at the University of Washington. The class, entitled Indigenous Knowledge Visualization, explored the many layers of historical, spiritual, ecological, genealogical, and scientific knowledge embedded in each piece of Native art. My students and I visited the *Here & Now* exhibit several times, and each student chose a piece to explore. For their final, I asked them to research the context of the pieces—what community they came from and their cultural role in that community—and they were asked to research the message or story being conveyed by the artist. Most of my students were non-Native, and very few had any prior contact, let alone deep knowledge of Natives or Native art.

The class was a success, and the research done by my students showed

they were able to decode some of the messages in the pieces. They began to understand and appreciate the vast amount of knowledge in each piece and noticed more with each visit to the Burke. Local gallerists in Seattle have noticed that their clients who visited the *Here & Now* exhibit return to buy Native art with an enhanced understanding about the historical role of the piece they are buying, and a renewed appreciation for the art process itself.

My original question about the purpose of museum collections is clear in this case: The works in the ethnographic collection at the Burke Museum are living a second or third life, acting as teachers for this generation of Native artists and Native art researchers. Bill Holm opened the doors of the Burke collections for Native artists 40 years before the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 obliged museums to tell us what they had.

Holm studied and consulted with Native carvers, weavers, and artists, and he built relationships with Native peoples up and down the Northwest Coast. Regardless of where one stands in the muddy cultural politics of white guys making and teaching others how to make Native art, it’s hard to argue with the fact that Bill Holm’s legacy of access to museum collections places him squarely in the realm of ally. That makes the *Here & Now* exhibit a tangible manifestation building on that legacy of access. The exhibit is a tribute and a celebration of what can happen when we as Native people and major museums work together. —Miranda Belarde-Lewis

Toronto

7: Professional Native Indian Artists Inc.

McMichael Canadian Art Collection

THE PROFESSIONAL NATIVE INDIAN ARTISTS INC. (PNIAI) emerged from contentious events and experiences surrounding Montreal’s 1967 International and Universal Exposition (Expo 67) and the 1969 Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, otherwise known as the “White Paper.”

Visitors to the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67 were greeted with the now-famous dictum, “You have stolen our native land, our culture, our soul ...”—explosive truths that sought to challenge status quo ideology while responding to crooked policy reforms of the White Paper that further weakened Indigenous rights in Canada.

In 1973, Jackson Beardy (Anishinini, 1944–1984), Daphne Odjig (Odawa-Potawatomi), and Alex Janvier (Dene Suline-Saulteaux) found themselves together as part of a group exhibition called *Treaty Numbers 23, 287, 1171* at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. The title of the exhibition stood as a direct reference to the numbered treaties of their bands. *Treaty Numbers* was considered a critical success and contributed to a push for including other Indigenous artists into the canon of contemporary art practice in Canada. The colonial philosophy of categorizing Indigenous painting, sculpture, and illustration as “craft” was strongly curtailed in the wake of their presence.

In 1974, Beardy, Odjig, and Janvier joined Eddy Cobiness (Ojibwe, 1933–1996), Norval Morrisseau (Bingwi Neyaashi Ojibwe, 1932–2007), Carl Ray (Sandy Lake Cree, 1943–1978), and Joseph Sanchez (Tewa descent) at an informal meeting at Odjig’s Winnipeg home to discuss ideas, strategies, and directions for the group, and share a few laughs. Following this meeting, the newly founded artists collective sought to make their relationship official (and legal) by incorporating their name as the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. Although they were officially composed of seven, Bill Reid (Haida, 1920–1998) was looked upon as the unofficial eighth member, namely for his camaraderie with the collective and for his participation in several group exhibitions.

In Canada and the United States, the PNIAI is often referred to as the “Indian Group of Seven,” a nickname *Winnipeg Free Press* reporter Gary Scherbain affixed to the group. Indian Group of Seven is an obvious allusion to the Group of Seven, a non-Native artist collective based in Canada, active in the 1920s and ‘30s, who employed the Canadian landscape as the primary subject matter of their work. While popular sentiment in Canada praises the original group, some historians and visual artists, including Kent Monkman (Cree), repudiate them for perpetuating

the myth of Canada as a land untouched by man and therefore void of Indigenous life. Scherbain's correlation between the PNIAI and the Group of Seven points to a numerical similarity only. In effect, affixing the moniker "Group of Seven" to the artists degrades their individual and group accomplishments while strategically positioning them as Other, as non-white, as different. Moreover, it attempts to embed the PNIAI below the Group of Seven in a hierarchy of art from Canada, thus hinting at the presence of systemic and structural racism toward Indigenous peoples during the 1960s and '70s.

While critics and curators often attribute the style of the PNIAI to the Woodland School (a visual language usually identified with heavy black lines, vibrant color palettes, and x-ray perspectives), the artists' individual aesthetics and subject matter are dissimilar, eclectic, and even antithetical. The exhibition *7: Professional Native Indian Artists Inc.* at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection is a triumph of the group's artistic legacy and a celebration of their enduring impact on Indigenous visual culture and social activism in North America. Curated by Michelle LaVallee (Ojibwe) and originally exhibited at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, the McMichael show represents the fourth manifestation of *7: Professional Native Indian Artists Inc.* Until the exhibition at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, the last one that featured all seven members was held at Dominion Gallery in Montreal in 1975. The reunion of these works, and, in several cases, the living artists and their families, emends their life and work in light of new research and fresh curatorial directives.

The work of the PNIAI marked new ways of thinking about, and thinking through, Indigenous visual art in the context of the "contemporary." For many critics, their work appeared as a strange paradox caught somewhere between a culture embedded in tradition and the vanguard of art practice in North America. In the face of such past wrong interpretations, their work speaks for itself as an exultation of Indigenous art and life amid a history of violence, reservization, and cultural loss. Certainly Morrisseau's deceptively somber work, *White Man's Curse* (1969), exists in

this vein of suffering. It's a statement on the Christianization of Indigenous peoples since contact, and the suppression of Indigenous spirituality under their dogmas of "decency." For Morrisseau, Judeo-Christian beliefs held no authority in Native life. He once wrote,

We as natives believe in the following saying:

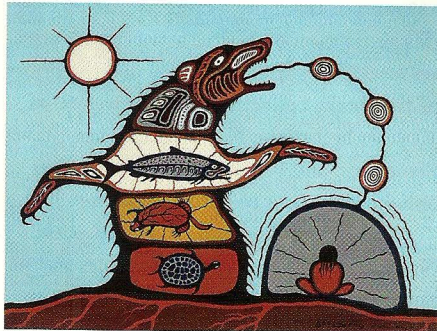
Our God is Native.

The Great Deity of the Five Planes is so.

We are neither for nor against.

We speak not of Christ nor of God. We say, 'Let them be.'

We follow the Spirit on its Inward Journey of Soul through attitudes and attentions.¹



Carl Ray (Sandy Lake Cree, 1943–1978), *Medicine Bear*, 1977, acrylic on canvas.

Elsewhere, several works engage the spiritual world through sacred legends, specifically Ray's exceptional *Medicine Bear* from 1977, painted a year before the artist passed away in Sioux Lookout in Northern Ontario. Here, in a state of delirium, *Medicine Bear* siphons an ailment from a seated figure resting inside a *kosapishcikan* (shaking tent). The earth-tone patterns and shapes of *Medicine Bear* and of the land juxtaposed with the sallow blue of the background sky, a visual signature for Ray, confirm a mastery of composition and color arrangement. The intrepid Ray tragically remains one of the most underrated figures in the canon of contemporary Indigenous art in Canada.

Odjig's trademark lyricism and gentleness of spirit is present in pieces such as *So Great Was Their Love* (1975). *Massacre* (1971), an oil pastel work on paper, affirms that the legacies of colonialism should never be far from the collective consciousness. Janvier, too, holds strong to a lyrical abstraction that is both idiosyncratic and captivating. In his piece *Exodus from the Soil* (1978), he pulls from the shadows of existential crisis to ruminate on the loss of spirit. The painting

rests as a watery exegesis of the human condition.

Beardy's famous two-tone yellow and orange is ever-present; so too is his delicate simplification of form harnessed to accentuate both balance and harmony. His dancing curves and circularity of line breathe life into otherwise two-dimensional animals and bodies.

Sanchez and Cobiness were the only members of the group born in America. Sanchez's work flows between windswept abstraction and quiet dreamscapes. His stone lithograph *Ghost Shirt* (1979–80) is one such example. Peering out from what appears to be a cave, a cacophony of sinuous faces and bodies arrested in a topography of ruins return our gaze. The result is a conversation with the specters of the past, a solemn reflection of a death that stays present in the objects that surround us.

It is Cobiness's scenes from daily life or the animal world that offer a visual language predicated on the humble presence of line. These mostly pen-and-ink pictures render not only the minutia of physical details but also the flashlight glimpses of experience itself.

The PNIAI did not produce a manifesto per se; however, they directed their attention toward supporting contemporary Indigenous artists in North America through consultation, dialogue, instruction, and friendship. Their support of emerging Indigenous artists in North America helped to establish a pattern for strong leadership, self-organization, and artistic excellence. While Shirley Cheechoo (Cree), Blake Debassige (M'Chigeeng Ojibwe), and Martin Panamick (M'Chigeeng Ojibwe) were influenced by the PNIAI early in their formation, it could be argued that the work of later Indigenous artists including Rebecca Belmore (Ojibwe), Sonny Assu (Ligwilda'xw), Jordan Bennett (Mi'kmaq), Keesic Douglas (Mnjikaning Ojibwe), and Christi Belcourt (Métis) are descendants of the PNIAI's use of oppositional politics to shatter cultural stereotypes by demanding critical recognition for Indigenous artists as artist-professionals. Theirs is a telling story of self-determinacy, of pushing against a contemporary art world that quietly promotes the status quo while publicly condemning it. —Matthew Ryan Smith

1. Norval Morrisseau, "I Actually Went into the Astral Heaven," in *Extraordinary Experiences: Personal Accounts of the Paranormal in Canada*, ed. John Robert Colombo (Toronto: Dundurn, 2004), 33.