

Culture



Marjorie M. HALPIN, *Jack Shadbolt and the Coastal Indian Image*, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, June 17 through November 30, 1986 : three reviews by Ann K. Morrison, Doreen Jensen and Joan Ryan

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MARJORIE M. HALPIN, *Jack Shadbolt and the Coastal Indian Image*, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, June 17 through November 30, 1986.

Art and Museum Review Editor's Note:

Not since the late nineteenth century has anthropology taken such an interest in the activities of museums. This long absence and the development of the discipline necessitates that the contemporary anthropological community learn to recognize what museums are all about intellectually. One form of recognition is to critically examine one aspect of the work of museums, i.e. the production of exhibitions. The art of exhibition review within the anthropological context is yet to be developed. The three reviews offered here are a contribution to that process. They are by an art critic (Ann K. Morrison), a Git'ksan artist (Doreen Jensen) and an anthropologist (Joan Ryan). These reviews provide fuel towards a critical discourse about exhibitions and in turn will further develop exhibitions, museums, and anthropology.

By Ann K. Morrison

This exhibition provides the viewer with the rare opportunity of "putting on the shoes" of the artist. As curator, Dr. Marjorie Halpin has brought together twenty-seven of Shadbolt's major paintings and drawings which relate to North West Coast Indian imagery, as well as seventeen of the specific masks and artifacts referred to in these works on display. Installed in tandem, the paintings and carvings give the possibility of comparing the subject with its interpretation. Through this placement, one can begin to understand the kinds of decisions made by the artist, the extent and character of his improvisation, and the overall development of his involvement with the native cultural expression.

Under such circumstances, a direct relationship and close ambience would be expected to emerge, but a curious dichotomy persists. In spite of dealing with the same visual ideas, it is the differences in intention and in aesthetic language that are emphasized, and the works separate into two parallel exhibitions. This unease poses some questions about Shadbolt's fascination with the native art and his appropriation and absorption of its imagery into his own. His attempts to reach through the cultural barriers are not always successful, and it becomes clear how deeply embedded are the concepts of European and

American modernism in his thought-processes. Although this is only one aspect of Shadbolt's prolific production, these works which include North West Coast imagery date from the 1940s to the present, and thus form a kind of overview of many of the changes within his career.

Jack Shadbolt sees himself in the metaphorical role of shaman, in touch with unseen spirits and demons, but able to weave a kind of magic through his painting to contain those irrational and fearful forces. In his description of the "act of painting", Shadbolt has written that the process of coming to terms with his own released emotions, fears and psychic energy is a highly charged experience (Halpin, 1986:30). As artist and shaman, he wrestles to control his innermost feelings, to allow the strong images from his memory bank to come forward, and "to learn the language of the orchestration of art" (Watson, 1985).

The "act of painting" became a familiar phrase during the 1940s and 1950s, when the Abstract Expressionists were looking for new imagery to replace those associated with pre-World War II social and political structures. In the search for a raw energy to shape, the probings of the Surrealists during the 1920s which explored the world of the subconscious mind promised a wealth of possibilities in dream imagery. Automatic painting, an offshoot of automatic writing, was seen as a way of breaking down the control of the conscious mind over emotions and intuition. The conscious will which suppressed and ordered the internal turmoil was considered restrictive of creativity, and freedom became associated with the release from this mental and behavioural structure. Primitivism, with its realization of the power of the abstracted imagery of ancient artistic expression, influenced many artists in their yearning for a more primal yet universal visual language, capable of mystical power and of cross-cultural conceptual exchange. The artist, living on the edge of society, was seen as an example of a free being who was able to break through these structures, and, by contact with the interior world of the imagination, to bring society a vision through art.

Jack Shadbolt places himself on this edge, where he feels he can act as spiritual shaman, exploring the inside and outside worlds of man and of nature. In these images we find his fascination with primitivism and its exotic sensuality in the form of the native culture located in the place he has chosen to live and work.

The use of recognizable subject matter in the paintings and drawings on display tends to restrict the use of a consistent integration of paint with image, and by choosing objects which have been encountered in a museum setting rather than in their own matrix, the formality of the relationship of subject to interpretation is increased. It becomes clear that the momentum built in the release of internal feelings during the "act of painting" is negated to some extent by the presence of the object and its need for identity in the painting. As well, the aesthetic system at work in this personal release has little to do with the approach used by Native people in their carvings.

Shadbolt's concept of abstraction is based in Cubist ideas developed by Picasso and Braque in the early 1900s. A complex, intellectual system, Cubism challenged the illusionistic space and modelled forms familiar since the Renaissance, and broke the form into facets, spreading the flattened fragments over the surface of the picture plane. Spatial relationships were changed as the internal dynamic was provided by the interaction of the rearranged elements to one another. In an interview in 1980, Shadbolt claimed the secrets of abstraction were revealed to him when he first encountered the bombed and shattered buildings of London after the blitz (Thom, 1980: 8-9).

This fracturing of form into fragments, which are then reassembled into another image, is essentially a collage process. Each part is imprinted with a "memory" of the original form and becomes a symbol of its former existence in its transformed state. The parallel can be drawn in the breaking down of structured consciousness to release and rearrange the suppressed internal energy of the individual artist.

The attitude to form implicit in this process is very different from the approach used by the North West Coast artists. Presented in this exhibition as isolated sculptures, these carvings are immediately identified as fine museum pieces, and as such are perceived as experientially "loaded" objects, evoking in the mind the visualization of the rituals during which the wearer of the mask would take on the role of the spirit depicted in the mask. Even though these carvings have been cut off from function and cultural milieu, their potential for psychological power can be sensed. Dramatically lit and framed behind the glass of closed display boxes, each mask and artifact is silent evidence of the compelling force of the concept of transformation.

Much of the hypnotic quality of these Indian carvings and artifacts stems from the holistic image presented. Here is an abstraction process which is essentially reductivist, paring down and refining the

image of the face to its most minimal form, eliminating all unnecessary descriptive details, but making sure those features which will give the mask its required identity are emphasized and clearly stated. Intensifying the dramatic effect through the addition of colour and decoration, the form and its surface are kept in fine balance through the careful integration of all the formal elements. The use of the formline design system pulls into play a symbolic calligraphy, but is always in proportion to the sculptural form on which it rests, and subordinate to recognition of the mask identity.

Perhaps it is because the exhibition is in the Museum of Anthropology and those North West Coast Indian images from which Shadbolt's work springs are so familiar, that the curator seems to treat the Native artistic expression as the given. It is an interesting situation when an artist makes a work of art from a work of art. The two systems of abstraction do, however, provide a revealing comparison: on one hand, the Native art is dramatically contained and focussed, emphasizing the clarity of form with its implied meaning, and, on the other hand, Jack Shadbolt's paintings are spread, volatile and often ambiguous, full of personal expression and energy. In subsuming the Native imagery Shadbolt has had to decide whether or not to retain the modelled form, to use the decorative aspect for recognition, or to break up the form and its surface, flatten the fragments and thus change the meaning of the carving. This struggle with the illusion of the third dimension can be found throughout the exhibition as a formal problem, but its importance as an indicator of attitude to the object is more profound.

The paintings and drawings are hung in roughly chronological order, beginning with several from the 1940s. The early series of drawings with watercolour including *Killer Birds*, *Sea Cave* and *Bird Skeleton* date from 1948, and explore the combination of Hamatsa Cannibal Bird masks with the skeletons of birds, juxtaposing two symbols of death. Finely rendered, these studies are suggestive of an interest in taking the museum objects further into a narrative, but because they have a delicacy of touch in the handling of the materials, there is no sense that these creatures are ominous or frightening, but rather that they are vulnerable, completely stripped of their cover.

Of a very different order is *Red Knight*, painted in 1947, and one of the boldest and most brilliant works on view. Shadbolt incorporates a Numahal mask into the more universal idea of a warrior's head, wearing a helmet/mask as a protection against evil. In this absorption, he has added his own ornamentation, but has included the intense gaze of the copper eyes, and has taken the idea of mask beyond the specific, culturally identifiable carving.

The use of the non-specific mask which is interchangeable with spirit is most successfully interpreted in the mixed media works *Guardian Spirit of Owl* and *Guardian*, painted in 1971 and 1972 respectively. Frontally placed over two panels as if part of a totem pole, each of these works bristles with fierce disguise and allows no identifying background to place it in time and space.

This is not the case with many of the later paintings in which Shadbolt includes a landscape horizon over which the mask tries to float, but is compositionally fixed. Canvases such as *Waiting* (1986), with its closed and open transformation masks separated by a horizon, *The Valley Beyond* (1985) with its confusion of spatial definition and *Grieving Spirit* (1985) with its personalized mask again fixed above a landscape, all suffer from this formal problem.

Over the forty years covered in this exhibition, Jack Shadbolt has changed his approach from the realistic renderings in the first drawings through the explorations into modernist abstraction, and now back to a more representational imagery in the recent works. The precision of image contributes to the lack of fluidity and, in overview, it is his ambiguous paintings with their blurred and mobile edges that are most forceful.

Outstanding in this regard are the two canvases *Into Totem* from 1982, and *Toward Totem* which was painted in 1982 and reworked in 1986. Rather than referring to specific Native objects with their identifying forms and decoration, he here displays great energy in using his chosen approach to abstraction. The totems are sensed rather than described, and their upward thrust becomes an accumulation of wheeling fragments pulled together as if by some magnetic field of memory. There is the feel or the spirit of totem, and a consistency in treatment of all the parts, using strong, confident colour.

The split in the exhibition between Shadbolt's paintings and the masks and artifacts is understandable, given the strength of the two aesthetic traditions. However, the most recent paintings separate from the others, going into another phase which is more self-conscious in its message and more confused in its transmission. As he had known about the exhibition for the last two years and painted about a third of the works during that period, one wonders if Shadbolt would have chosen this particular subject otherwise.

There is clearly a profound personal concern for the political and cultural survival of the Native people expressed, and this cause seems to have changed his attitude to his paintings and to the masks. Instead of generalized symbolic images, the carvings in the paintings take on the expression of an

individual's face which is responding to felt emotion. This use of the mask no longer conveys the original meaning for which it was intended, and it becomes another kind of appropriation.

The most successful integration of image to idea to mask is found in one area of the exhibition in which the *Coast Indian Suite* of 1976 is displayed. Here the rounded room holding the twenty-panel work encloses both the viewer and four of the masks in the drawing. Freeing the carvings from their wall boxes and placing them on plinths allows their tangibility to be more easily understood, and with the large-scale images surrounding them, there is an amazing interchange. The push and pull of charcoal and coloured crayon gives the perception that the drawn images come right into the rounded space together with their inspirational source, and the viewer is included as participant.

In the catalogue essay, Jack Shadbolt's development in terms of his awareness of the Native people and their culture is stressed, perhaps to include the last works as an empathetic statement. However, by changing the intention behind the creation of the paintings, the artist is no longer shaman, but has taken the tole of speaker. In so doing, he must be careful not to relinquish his own considerable strength and understanding as an artist, and the possibility of mediation. As Picasso suggested,

Painting isn't an aesthetic operation; it's a form of magic designed as mediator between this strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing the power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires (quoted in Lindberg, 1978:2).

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Communication, that two way mirror which allows us to convey a thought, an idea or emotion, is only accurate and clear when the receiver of the message sees the same reflection sent from the other side of the mirror. 'Art' has been described as one of the most powerful and enduring mediums of communication throughout time, a medium that can evoke emotion, share thoughts and raise questions.

Jack Shadbolt and the Coastal Indian Image indeed fits the parameters of that definition. When, as an Indian person and an artist, I was asked to comment on the relevance or significance of this exhibit to Indian people, an overwhelming array of ideas surfaced. As I worked to arrange these into a cohesive whole, I realized that all I can reflect with integrity and accuracy is a personal interpretation influenced by my values, beliefs and understanding of Indian culture.

The disappointment, anger and confusion I felt upon first view of the exhibit and reading of the text diminished greatly as I understood that both Shadbolt and Halpin could only communicate their personal interpretations, which are influenced by their cultural values, beliefs and understanding; their mirrored perceptions of Indian culture.

There was excitement and anticipation in my heart and mind when I heard that an internationally acclaimed artist was going to have his work exhibited in a museum. For too long there has been a division that has placed 'contemporary art' in galleries and historical artifacts and 'ethnographic works' (like Indian art) in museums. My expectation was that this work being shown in a museum would shatter the conception that museums only display dead or static art.

Killer Birds is the title of the painting which heralded the opening of the exhibition. It shocked and disappointed me because I was looking to this exhibit as a turning point in the art world's perception of Indian art and culture. Instead, what I saw was what looked like the remains of something. It was not until I read Shadbolt's acknowledgement that this image marked his first intense relationship with Indian Art immediately after his war experience that I could understand why it was used for the opening of the dialogue.

In retrospect, the opening ceremony itself reinforced my thoughts about how our two cultures look at each other through different dimensional glasses or mirrors. On what I expected to be a joyous celebration of an exciting event there was a very sombre tone to the opening rituals, bringing to mind that phrase so often used in describing Indian

culture... I felt I was witnessing the remnants of a dead or dying culture.

The first pieces of the exhibition area struck no memorable response in me. However, upon entering the *Coast Indian Suite*, there was a power and presence, similar to when, as a young child, I would peep at the precious belongings of High Chiefs in their grave houses. Generally speaking, the exhibit portrayed to me a dead or dying culture by the repeated use of images which were partly disintegrated, or distorted. That's when it occurred to me that maybe it was because the presenters had a distorted mirror, like a circus mirror. Maybe they had not fully understood the importance of many of the works, the role as visual records of the history and as tools in the ongoing educational process of my people.

Maybe, they weren't fully aware that in spite of all of the repression, the defining of our culture in their own language and categorizations by the academics, our culture and therefore our art lives. It lives, flourishes and adapts even as our culture and our people do. For me, there were immense contrasts between the beauty and life of the 'artifacts' and their enduring meaning and the shadowy glimpses shown by Shadbolt.

There were two exceptions, *Valley Beyond* and *Grieving Spirit* evoked the sense of freedom, aliveness and power that is associated with my understanding of the continuing, enduring role of the masks. Here, for me, it seemed he was communicating with our culture in a true dialogue rather than the monologue of the other pieces. This progression is very positive.

Comments by the patrons were interesting to me. Generally they commented either on the masks or on Shadbolt's work. A few, however, made some connections. One said, "some work was good and some was poor, but it made him understand that something very powerful has been hidden." Another said, "it evoked a sense of being there, albeit being separate."

The catalogue itself attempts to chronologically present the evolution of Shadbolt's work related to the ever changing Indian scene. That it is sometimes confusing is not surprising, given the tremendous complexity of the subject of cultural interpretation and art.

These paintings and catalogue will, for years, make strong statements about Coast Indian people and it is, therefore, critical that they are clearly viewed as a single interpretation made through a mirror that needs to be periodically replaced, if our two cultures are ever to reach the peace and harmony of true understanding.

The really important message of this exhibition and the text is that Indians and non-Indians have an

evolving and complex relationship. That we are different but equal partners in this relationship, and that we can learn from each other, is where continuing dialogue must begin.

By Joan Ryan
University of Calgary

“What,” says Michael Ames, “is Jack Shadbolt doing in the Museum of Anthropology?” What indeed, I reflected, as I walked through the exhibit several times.

Prior to receiving the invitation to do a review of the exhibit, I had never seen any of Shadbolt’s paintings. In accepting the invitation to do the review, I was intrigued by the idea of viewing a two-dimensional exhibit which incorporated the artist’s painting of Northwest Coast masks held in museum collections and the masks themselves. In the end, however, it was that juxtapositioning which overwhelmed me, and created tension rather than the complementarity which I anticipated. The dissonance was painful and I left the exhibit several times to comfort myself with the tradition and peacefulness of the Bill Reid Retrospectives.¹ As the soft lights shimmered on gold artistry, I reminded myself that I needed to free myself from expectations of traditional beauty and the balance of Northwest Coast symmetry and colour; I admonished myself to look for the innovations, the connected and relevant statements.

After several hours viewing the exhibit, I concluded it was an unfortunate decision to place masks and paintings in such close proximity. The paintings do not match the artistry and beauty of the carvings and the comparison leaves Shadbolt the poorer for it. Shadbolt’s artistry can be left to better critics than myself. I was looking for the messages, the connections, the statements which would link the artists, the time, and the art. I sought new definitions of old presentations; I found contortion, violence, emptiness. Little in Shadbolt reflects the images of the time, nor connects them to the present.

I found some of the labels and some of the textual materials offensive and curiously misinformed by “old” anthropological conceptualizations. For example, Halpin states that the objects Shadbolt paints are “frozen in time” (1986: 2), a concept which is disturbing when one recognizes that the masks have a history, are still used in the present, and communicate well their sense of movement, spirituality and being. Similarly, I disagree with Halpin’s further statement that... “the presence of Indian artifacts in museums suggests that the connection with human life has been broken...” (1986: 6). Such disconnectedness may aid museum curators to come

to grips with the collections with which they work. However, I suggest that the very need for such disconnection is a reflection of the very real political and ritual life which is a part of the contemporary Indian societies, even when their historic objects rest in museums. Further, Shadbolt’s own statements, cited by Halpin, indicate part of his own experience was that he “suddenly recognized that they (the masks) were full of force” (1986: 11).

In his painting, *Guardian Spirit of Owl* and the subsequent *Guardian and The Place*, I find symbolized the most offensive distortions in the exhibit. Given the context of the Northwest Coast art forms, spirit masks and spiritual journeys in search of guardians, these paintings communicate little of the nature of such beliefs and activities. It is in viewing these paintings that one realizes Shadbolt’s lack of direct experience with the cultures whose masks he paints. Shadbolt seems not to have any real understanding of the nature of Northwest Coast society. *Guardian Spirit of Owl* caricatures the Northwest Coast Guardian Spirit complexes; as such, it is hardly the “poetic enigma of content” which he claims it to be in his journal (Halpin, 1986: 21).

The *Coast Indian Suite* is the most communicative part of the exhibit, for here we can see the overlapping, the contradictions, the unevenness among Northwest Coast and white cultures. In the round, the overlapping is effective, artistic and interesting. Additionally, the jarring comparisons of the masks and painting is avoided here by presenting the paintings as background and the masks at the core. It is harder, however, to understand why Halpin insists, in her interpretations, on linking Shadbolt to contemporary Indian issues since Shadbolt displays little artistic, or other, involvement in such events. Nor can I agree with Halpin’s reiteration of Tennant’s identification of such events as “the emergence of tribalism” (Halpin, 1986: 24). There was never any serious attention given to “an ideal of the unity of status and non-status Indians and on the tribal group... as a political unit.” Nor, has this subsequently proven to be the case, even though aboriginal land claims continue to date. Interesting as it is, the *Coast Indian Suite* hardly reflects Indian political or cultural realities.

Shadbolt’s own notes are most informative since they lead us to an understanding of where he, himself, makes the connections between his art, his interpretations, and his needs to communicate something of himself. It is here that we can address the dilemma of coming to grips with the “Coastal Indian Image” as interpreted by Halpin and others, and the artistic formation of Jack Shadbolt as a person. Shadbolt seems quite clear on his understanding of what he perceives happening to him as an artist when he says,

“... I knew I had my final clue to releasing my drawing... The Indian mode of expressing things from the inside out, out of deep interior identification with the spirit of the image portrayed, gave me my inventive impetus as well as helping me to my personal mode of abstraction.” Shadbolt is not attempting to portray the Indian Coastal Image, only himself. In showing his work contrastively with that of the unnamed Northwest Coast carvers, he has been done a disfavour and put in a position in which he could only be misunderstood and unappreciated. The further overlay of the discussion about shamanism and ritual action on Shadbolt by Halpin (1986: 33) is unfortunate and inappropriate. Finally, I cannot share Halpin’s perceptions of the “super-real” quality of the most recent Shadbolt paintings, nor do they communicate to me any attitude of “new respect for native forms in Shadbolt’s paintings.” (1986: 42). *Elegy For an Island* is hardly a social statement except perhaps to the artist himself. I was grateful to be able to read Shadbolt’s own journal notes. They were written with insightful analyses and stylistic excellence.

The exhibit raises some interesting questions about exhibits themselves, how they are titled and how they are labelled. One of the difficulties with

viewing this show, initially without a catalogue, was that it did not have a context. To give it Shadbolt’s and Halpin’s interpretation and commentary, one needed the catalogue in hand. Not many viewers buy catalogues and this one is not bound well enough to bend back, fold, mark. The back breaks when it is laid flat to make notations.

In conclusion, I still ask, “what IS Jack Shadbolt doing in the Museum of Anthropology?”

NOTE

1. What, we might ask, is Bill Reid doing in the Museum of Anthropology, rather than in the National Art Gallery?

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Coast Indian Suite — 1976
Jack Shadbolt

Southern Kwagiutl Echomask — before 1914 with echo month attachment

Tlingit Wolf Dance Hat — late 19th century

Photograph: Jacque Gijssen, Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology