

FIRST NATIONS WOMEN CARVERS:  
CELEBRATING CREATION AND CREATIVITY

by

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# **First Nations Women Carvers: Celebrating Creation and Creativity**

## **Abstract**

This thesis represents my journey of discovery to learn about the role of First Nations women carvers in today's First Nations societies in the Northern Northwest-Central region of British Columbia. It is based on learning about the creative world of five First Nations Women carvers: Pauline Allan of the Carrier Nation, Valerie Morgan and her sister Virginia Morgan, born into the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation and Gitksan on their father's side and by marriage, Dale Campbell of the Tahltan Nation, and Victoria Moody of the Haida Nation. When I set out I expected my research would illustrate disparity and gender biases within the tradition of carving. What I learned from these women illuminated the concepts of what is traditional and what is contemporary and taught me that my queries about exhibitions, sales and success were coming from a very Western perspective. I use the words the women told me to show their perception that being a First Nations woman is not about breaking down barriers of gendered roles but a means for them to revitalize their traditions. Success for these women was not about gallery sales as their words demonstrate; they considered themselves successful when they had expressed their culture through their carving, and when they introduced this art to youth and people of all ages as a contribution to the cultural resurrection of their community.

## Table of Contents

Abstract		ii
Table of Contents		iii
List of Figures		v
Acknowledgments		vii
Chapter One	First Nations Women Carvers: Introduction and Methodology	1
	• Introduction	
	• Methodology	14
Chapter Two	What Has Been Written: A Review of Relevant Literature	23
	• Oral Traditions	
	• Crest Poles, Crest Art and Potlatches	25
	• Traditional, Contemporary and Authentic	30
	• Crossing the Gallery Floor	34
	• Female Carvers in History	38
	• The Holistic Power of Creation and Creativity	47
	• The Salon des Refuses and Contemporary Native Art	48
	• Creative Experiences of First Nations Women Artists	51
	• First Nations Women Artists in the Literature	54
Chapter Three	Revealing the Story One Layer at a Time: Experiences of First Nations Women Carvers	55
	• Historical Traditions of Carving and the Presence of Female Carvers	56
	• Carving as a Creative Outlet	59
	• Traditional, Contemporary, and New-Traditional Carving	66
	• Artist, Woman, Daughter, Wife, Mother, Sister, Niece	83

	• Individual Successes	95
	• Community Perceptions	104
Chapter Four	I Listened and This is What I Learned	111
Bibliography		120

## List of Figures

Most of the photos were taken with permission by interviewer, Catherine Siermacheski.  
All other photos were provided by interviewees with permission for reproduction.

Figure Number	Descriptions of Figures	Page Number
Figure 1:	<i>Pauline Sadie Allan, Carrier</i>	4
Figure 2:	<i>Valerie Morgan, Kwakwaka'wakw - Gitxsan</i>	5
Figure 3:	<i>Virginia Morgan, Kwakwaka'wakw - Gitxsan</i>	6
Figure 4:	<i>Dale Campbell, Tahltan</i>	7
Figure 5:	<i>Victoria Moody, Haida</i>	8
Figure 6:	<i>T'annu Pole</i> at Qay'lnagaay, Haida Gwaii. Totem pole that Vicki Moody worked on.	67
Figure 7:	<i>Salmon Woman</i> transformation mask carved by Virginia Morgan.	70
Figure 8:	<i>Frog Spirit</i> mask, carved by Virginia Morgan.	73
Figure 9:	<i>Wind Spirit</i> mask, carved by Virginia Morgan.	74
Figure 10:	<i>Beaver crest</i> paddle, carved by Pauline Allan.	75
Figure 11:	<i>Human Face</i> mask, carved by Pauline Allan.	75
Figure 12:	<i>One Horned Goat</i> , carved by Valerie Morgan.	77
Figure 13:	<i>Raven Rattle</i> , carved by Valerie Morgan.	78
Figure 14:	<i>Human Face with Labret</i> mask, carved by Dale Campbell.	79
Figure 15:	<i>The Man Who Married the Bear</i> , mask, carved by Dale Campbell. <a href="http://www.coastalpeoples.com">http://www.coastalpeoples.com</a>	80
Figure 16:	<i>Frog Moon Mask</i> , A work in progress, Dale Campbell.	81
Figure 17:	<i>Lower figure on T'annu pole</i> , Vicki Moody	88
Figure 18:	<i>Beaver Amhalait</i> , carved by Valerie Morgan	98

Figure 19:	<i>Wolf transformation mask</i> – created for Disney Studios by Valerie Morgan.	100
Figure 20:	<i>Carved Doors</i> at Prince George Tourism Center. Pauline Allan worked on as part of a team under Ron Sebastian.	103
Figure 21:	Vicki Moody clearing bark off a giant cedar log which eventually became the T'annu totem pole.	107
Figure 22:	Shaman Woman Mask, carved by Dale Campbell	110

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“To an uneducated eye a masterpiece of art may look like whimsical strokes of the painter’s brush. The mind not attuned to the love of God does not see the meaning of the anomalies of His creation...the inner harmony that is the very heart of all manifestations”. (Paramahansa Yogananda 2004: From the *Water Reflections Calendar*, Roaring Brook, Baxter State Park, Maine.)



## **Chapter One – First Nations Women Carvers: Introduction and Methodology**

### **Introduction**

While there are numerous First Nations women carvers in northern British Columbia, they are not as common or prominent as First Nations male carvers. I set out to learn whether the women's lack of prominence was the result of factors such as remoteness from major urban centers, patriarchal art institutions, colonial induced gender divisions for art making or traditions of their own communities. The Western art society has generally seen traditional First Nations women's art as bead work, button blanket making, weaving or pottery – craft rather than Fine Art (M'Closky 1997: 116). However, these lines of definition between craft and Fine Art and indeed the gender lines of what is men's and women's art are becoming blurred as First Nations women's art is stepping out of the margins in both the commercial First Nations art world and in their own societies.

As a woman, an artist and a student I strive to maintain a balance in the gendered roles of being a wife, mother, daughter, and sister in contemporary society and I was drawn to learn how northern Northwest Coast First Nations women artists have balanced these roles today. I wanted to learn how the members of their culture have maneuvered their traditional gendered roles through the impact of colonialism and patriarchy, and to learn how this has impacted First Nations women artists (Anderson 2000). I wanted to learn more about the role of women in the arts in traditional Northwest coast society, and their role in contemporary Northwest coast society. To do this I gathered the stories of five First Nations women who are doing what Western art proponents and some First Nations people would deem to be 'men's art,' more specifically carving (Slade 2002, Blackman 1982). The important place that art holds in the lives and cultures of these five

women became a means for me to explore women's creativity and a site to deconstruct the roles of mother, wife, sister, daughter and artist in my own life, through an examination of the role of carving in the lives of these contemporary First Nations women.

My research interest was brought to light during a class in First Nations Art and Technology offered through the auspices of the College of New Caledonia in Prince George, BC. It was taught by First Nations artist Brenda Crabtree who was a visiting instructor from the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver, BC. The class included several First Nations elders and a mixed group of women from both the Native and non-Native communities. As we learned cedar weaving, drum making and other arts we became a community of women talking about our shared experiences in raising families, working outside the home and maintaining our holistic wellness through our enjoyment of art. Several of the women brought in examples of their own art as well as cherished pieces handed down from their mothers or grandmothers. One of our classmates, Pauline Allan of the Carrier Nation, brought in a carved mask that she had done. It opened my eyes to a whole new way of seeing; I had not even imagined that women carvers existed. Northwest Coast carving is recognized in the Western art world as an example of First Nations Fine Art and it commands a high market price. I had only ever seen the work done by First Nations male carvers and was not aware that women also participated in this form of art. Through discussions with the Elders and several of the other First Nations women in the class I learned that there were in fact several women engaged in this form of art making but that they were not as recognized or publicized as the male carvers. They persuaded me to do my Masters research on First Nations women

carvers to bring these women into a more prominent light. I thereby discovered that locating women carvers was a research challenge in itself.

Through my dear friend Georgina Hill of the Tsimshian Nation I was given the name of Dale Campbell of the Tahltan Nation a carver living in Prince Rupert, BC. After contacting Dale she provided the name of another woman that she had done previous art shows with, Valerie Morgan of the Gitxsan Nation. Valeria and I communicated by email and phone and she agreed to participate in my research. She also gave me the name of her sister Virginia Morgan in Hazelton who agreed to participate in this project as well. Virginia Morgan and her sister Valerie Morgan were both born in the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation and are now both married and adopted into their father's Gitxsan Nation. I felt I needed representation from as many northern Northwest Coast Nations as possible and by contacting my friend and former classmate Lee Edenshaw of the Haida Nation I obtained the name of a woman carver in Skidegate, Haida Gwaii named Victoria Moody. My last contact was actually the first woman carver I had ever met, Pauline Sadie Allan of the Carrier Nation, residing in Prince George.

I applied for and received the Bill Reid Award which allowed me to travel and interview the five women artists in all their different communities between Prince George and Skidegate on Haida Gwaii. It was fitting that the award I received was in honor of the First Nations artist Bill Reid who was Haida on his mother's side, and that it was being administered by his wife. My research trip included stops along the way to visit with Judith P. Morgan, of the Gitxsan Nation, who is an accomplished artist and retired teacher, as well as Adam Gagnon of the Witsuwit'en Nation and his talented family of musicians, all living in Moricetown. I was privileged and honored to spend some quality

time with renowned First Nations carver Dempsey Bob who regaled me with stories of the late Frieda Diesing, a Haida woman, carver and teacher from whom he learned carving and whom he holds in the highest regard. I gathered insight and learned from each and every one of these people and they have become new found friends. Let me introduce and give a brief biography of each of the five First Nations women carvers I have learned from based on how they introduced themselves to me.

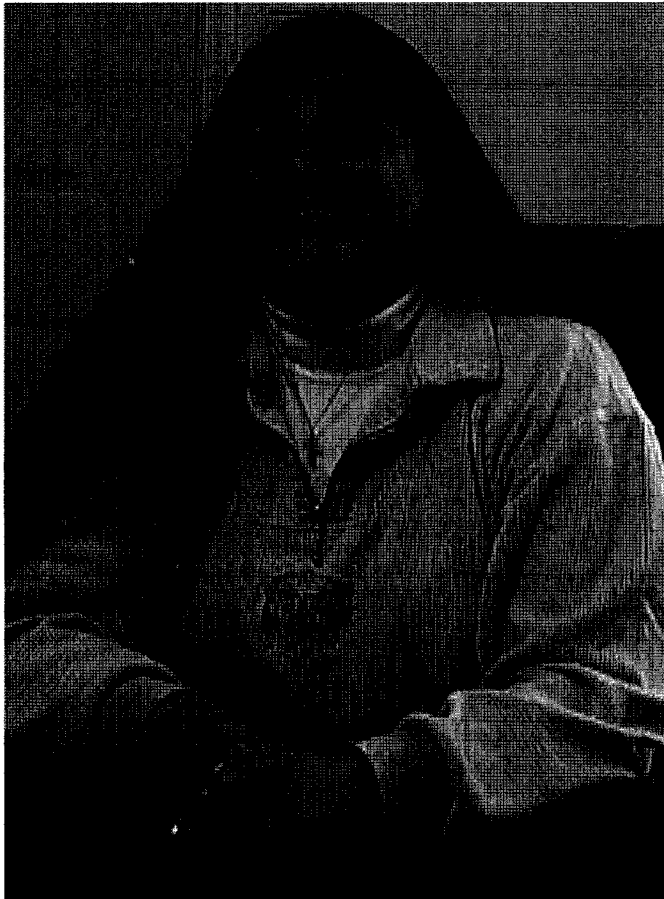


Figure 1: Pauline Sadie Allan

Pauline Allan was born Nadleh Whut'en and married into the Stellako band. She is a wife and mother from the Frog clan of the Carrier nation. Her husband Bruce Allan is from the Beaver clan and the Frog and the Bear are her grandma and grandpa's crests respectively. She comes from a long line of artists in her family. Pauline holds dear the birch baskets that were made by her great grandmother and the woven baskets done by

her grandmother Agnes George. She also speaks highly of the bead and moose hide work done by her grandmother Evelyn Louie. Their influence in maintaining their cultural arts is something that she holds close to her heart in all that she does (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004).



Figure 2: Valerie Morgan

Valerie Morgan is Kwaguilth/Kwakwaka'wakw from Alert Bay, on her mother's side and Gitksan from Kitwanga on her father's side. She is currently married to Gitksan artist Ken Mowatt and they reside in Kitwanga with their two daughters and a "grand-dog." Valerie divides her time between carving and her fashion design business. Valerie is a soft spoken and insightful woman with many stories to tell. She has been adopted into the Gitksan Frog clan though her heart remains in her home community of Alert Bay of which she still has fond memories that sustain her soul; "... every once in a while, I get this overwhelming smell of salt air, and this little warm air that comes over and right

off the bat I'm in Alert Bay by the water, watching the waves come in, and everything is really calm. So, I always know where I come from, that will always be with me" (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004).



Figure 3: Virginia Morgan

Virginia Morgan, Valerie's older sister is a mother of four and a grandmother of seven. Virginia is a school teacher who has taught at both the elementary and secondary school levels. She also attended the Kitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art for three years to learn carving and design which is where her husband, the Gitxsan artist Vernon Stephens, currently teaches. She is Kwaguilth/Kwakwaka'wakw from Alert Bay. When Virginia was five years old her family moved away from Alert Bay. Her mother is Mary (Cook) Morgan who is the daughter of Agnes and Herbert Cook of Alert Bay. Her

father is Howard Morgan and he is the son of Martha and Wallace Morgan of Kitwanga. All four of her grandparents were high status hereditary chiefs. Virginia states that she was born into a rich heritage and that she is also Scottish and English. “Even as a young person I knew that my culture was important...with both parents being from different nations, I always asked questions about who I was and where I came from” (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004).



Figure 4: Dale Campbell

“My name is Dale Campbell, and my Indian name, which was given to me at birth, is Tahlthtama, and that’s Tahltan for Tahltan mother. I’m from the Wolf Clan. Both my parents were born in Telegraph Creek and they were raised up there, which makes us Tahltan and we have Tlinget blood on my father’s side of the family, way back. My dad’s from the Raven crest and my mom’s the Wolf. I was born here in Prince Rupert and was raised here basically” (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). Dale decided that

she wanted to learn everything about her parent's culture, so she has made many visits to Telegraph Creek and has learned to cut salmon for drying, salting and canning and also hunting, skinning and snaring. She spoke of how on her visits there was no electricity; family and friends would just sit and have tea and tell stories for entertainment. Her great uncle Willie Campbell used to mush the mail between Telegraph Creek and Atlin. Dale is a successful carver, a devoted wife and mother, and she holds a black belt in karate (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004)..

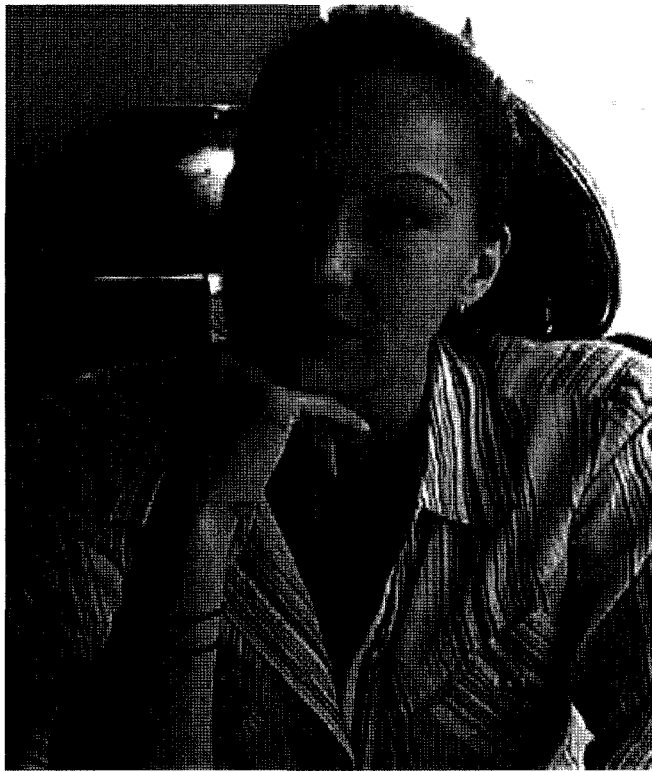


Figure 5: Vicki Moody

Vicki Moody was born and raised in Haida Gwaii. She has two names; Skigoywa which means Mother Goose and McDollie Llama. "In the old language to say Victoria was a very difficult word and they came out with McDollie and when they were traveling to Victoria they would sing the McDollie song. I also had seven Llamas in my yard because I was interested in their wool and I liked animals too so it just sort of came out



McDollie Llama” (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). As a young child she spent a lot of time with her father, uncles and grandfather on their fishing boats, traveling all around the island. Vicki learned about all the different villages and saw many totem poles decaying on the ground. “I got to see a lot of looting of graves and a lot of beautiful, beautiful land that was logged” (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). Vicki was married at twenty-one and two years later she started her family which now consists of two boys and a girl ranging in age from twelve to nineteen years old. She puts her family before all else and all that she has seen and experienced in her life as a daughter, granddaughter, mother and wife has shaped the woman and artist that Vicki has become today (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004).

My study consciously examined the encultured gender divisions in First Nations society and the western patriarchal constructs of gender and art, which discriminate between crafts (placed in a female category) and Fine Art (largely a male domain). Functional crafts such as weaving and button blankets have not been considered a Fine Art by the Western patriarchal art society, although this is changing (Berlo & Phillips 1998: 33, Jensen and Sargent 1986). Is the distinction between arts and crafts solely related to art created by the ‘other’ or in the case of this research First Nations art? From a First Nations perspective all artistic creations whether carving or button blankets are considered to be worthy creative endeavors and objects of beauty. From the Western art history perspective the delineation of art and craft initiated in Europe. M’Closkey says that the creation of art as a separate concept from craft or other like activities occurred in Europe during the Renaissance and that art produced by women was further marginalized by eighteenth century aesthetics (M’Closkey 1997: 113). Language played a key role in

defining these differences. M'Closkey quotes Eric Wolf: "The ability to bestow meaning – to 'name' things, acts, and ideas – is a source of power. Control of communication allows the managers of ideology to lay down the categories through which reality is to be perceived" (M'Closkey 1997: 113). This ability to name, give meaning or restrict value of different types of art is an act of hegemonic disempowerment by European civilization. The ruling class empower themselves by the simple act of naming, or categorizing art based on their own preconceived assumptions. For Westerners, meanings are defined by those that possess literacy and thus power as in the case of the early missionaries. Art history purveys acceptance of certain art forms as being 'Fine Art'; all other forms of creativity fall into the category of craft. Prior to the late 1880's, Native art objects obtained through trade by explorers and traders and brought to Europe were seen as curios rather than art, "...trinkets, fetishes and idols fit only for travelers' souvenirs...of interest only to eccentric collectors..." (De La Croix, Tansey and Kirkpatrick 1991: 500, Macnair 1993: 47). Totem poles and many items of crest art were viewed as pagan or non-Christian and were rejected by the missionaries. M'Closkey states that, "...the term artist was denied to all Aborigines [both male & female] because they created functional articles in media categorized as crafts" (M'Closkey, 1997: 125). When First Nations women's art is seen through this lens shaped by colonialism, it has led to the loss of First Nations women's power and thus upset the balance of culture within their communities. In later periods the term artifact was applied to the collected art works as they were stolen from First Nations communities and locked away in museums as evidence of a dying people (Ames 1992). While it is true that in most aboriginal languages there is no actual word for art as we know it in the Western sense, Haida artist Bill Reid states that it is

ridiculous to assume “...that if there is no word for art in Aboriginal languages, ‘the people of the past’ had no appreciation of the “formal” elements of their creations, that they had no aesthetic criteria by which to distinguish good work from bad, that they were not moved by excellence and beauty” (Ames 1992: 70).

In the book *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii, Bill Reid’s Masterpiece* by Ulli Steltzer, Robin Laurence defines carving as the recorded “... origin stories of moieties, clans and families, [that] symbolized the inherited properties and privileges of groups and individuals” (Steltzer 1997: 14). Carving is about clan and house identities and that is very important for First Nations women and men. It is perhaps of even greater importance to First Nations women in matrilineal societies: the five women interviewed all reside in matrilineal northern Northwest Coast communities. I learned that there are distinct differences in the carving styles of the northern Northwest Coast and the many other Northwest Coast communities. Through my research I discovered that despite the historical references to the renowned Kwakwaka’wakw woman carver Ellen Neel, the Kwakwaka’wakw nation still favors male carvers even in this generation. This research sought to determine whether there were women carvers in the history of the nations of the five women carvers and if modern First Nations women carvers participate in carving for both ceremonial purposes as well as the non-native market where their art helps the Western public appreciate First Nations culture. Through the interviews I explored the question of whether those women who choose to carve are afforded the same attention as the male carvers in their communities. I wanted to know if carvers were mostly or always male in the past. I also wanted to know if the traditions surrounding carving ceremonial items exclude women now and in the past.

Florence Edenshaw Davidson stated that she had once assisted in the painting of a crest on the prow of a canoe but was not comfortable doing this: "I just painted once, on that big canoe. I never tried to carve; I thought it was meant to be for men. No women carved or painted during my time; they were all weaving" (Blackman 1982: 40). It is interesting to note here that Florence Davidson was the Aunt of the Haida carver Freda Diesing through the marriage of Diesing's Uncle, Robert Davidson. Diesing states that her Grandmother and her Grand-Aunties were capable carvers and often did their own bowls or bentwood boxes or assisted their husbands when needed (Slade 2002: 137). These two Haida women, Diesing and Davidson were born 29 years apart; Davidson was born in 1896 and Diesing was born in 1925 and in their lifetimes the changes in the agency of First Nations women artists and specifically carvers was taking place.

In 1985 renowned Haida carver Bill Reid included a woman carver by the name of Nancy Brignall on his team while creating his large commission titled *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* (Steltzer 1997: 32). The first casting was given a glossy black patina similar to the traditional argillite carvings of the Haida people and was installed outside the Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC. in 1991. In the context of Florence Edenshaw Davidson's words on the roles of men and women in Haida art making, Nancy Brignall's participation in this carving project represents a change that has taken place in the agency of Native women artists since the colonization of Edenshaw Davidson's youth. The original smaller carving done by Reid was reproduced in a larger carver by a team for the eventual casting. Aside from the contemporary process of the team reproducing Reid's work, does the inclusion of a woman in the carving of *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* indicate that this piece is non-traditional or does it indicate a return to the older tradition? Is the

creation of the piece for a non-Haida audience part of what allows for this alteration in traditional roles? Some may note that this carving can be classified as both traditional and contemporary; it depicts a Haida creation story as told in sculpture by Bill Reid using traditional forms and figures in the carving of the design; a representation of a traditional Haida story, but it appears in a non-traditional context. Nahwooksy, using Western parameters, differentiates between these traditions: "Contemporary arts are individual expressions appreciated on a primary level as objects of beauty that engender emotion through visual excitement, while traditional arts are forms that continue to play a role in the maintenance of culture" (Nahwooksy: 1994, 88). The *Spirit of Haida Gwaii* would seem to combine both these elements. While Reid's work continues to inspire younger Haida carvers as a traditional piece, it sits on a contemporary stage to inspire and instruct non-Native people as well. The second casting, which has a blue-green patina similar to British Columbia jade, is displayed in the Vancouver International Airport. Robin Laurence describes it as "...a vessel crowded with Haida tales and traditions, silently speaking to travelers from many other tribes, travelers on this other crowded vessel, this blue-green canoe, the planet Earth" (Laurence in Steltzer 1997: 16). To Newhouse it would be a representation of "retraditionalization" in a modern society: "Native art has become a distinct discipline where Aboriginal artists are continually reinterpreting the world and creating new ways of seeing it" (Newhouse 2000: 406). Contemporary First Nations women's participation in carving is also part of this retraditionalization.

Other researchers such as Emily Auger (2000), Margaret Dubin (1999) and Ruth B. Phillips (1999a, 1999b), to name only a few, have addressed female Native artists, but only in terms of what was considered to be women's art, such as weaving, pottery or

blanket making. Joan Jensen notes that there is often a distinctive content in art created by men and women; that they differ even when producing the same type of art such as carving (Jensen 1995: 4). This is the reason I sought to ask if the female artist was conscious of being a woman/wife/mother/sister/daughter/niece and did it influence her creative process and make her carving subtly different from men's carving?

I have become aware of my own academic biases when it comes to the patriarchal art society as I was formally trained at the Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design, a Euro-Western art school that prior to my departure in 1995 had no First Nations art courses in their calendar. It has since introduced a number of courses in First Nations art. My European based art biases learned through my western art education there provided barriers to opening my mind and recognizing the success of Native women carvers on their own terms. These barriers were successively eroded with each interview. I gained an education on the differences of valuing art by my Western aesthetic ideology based on a market oriented perspective and by the holistic ideology of First Nations cultures. Through the voices of the five First Nations women carvers I endeavored to learn whether they felt that the current gender based division of art was the result of colonial influences, and whether gendered differences were or are part of northern Northwest Coast First Nations culture and if these influences had any bearing on women carvers of this generation.

### **Methodology**

The path to research in First Nations communities is open to non-native explorers like myself, and each female carver had a different story to tell, as did each nation and each community within that nation. I had only to listen to discern the differences and

similarities in their stories. I have always been fascinated by the overlap and differences between my own culture and the many other cultures I have come into contact with as I grew up in the multi-cultural community of Vancouver, BC. In recent years my education in First Nations history, culture and art at the University of Northern British Columbia and most especially my interest in the roles of women in First Nations culture have given me plenty to think about. I grew up sitting around a kitchen table with a cup of tea listening to the stories of my older relatives. In my mother's home village of Cape St. Charles, Labrador, sitting around the table with a cup of tea and telling stories about community and family is still a part of their daily lives.

Orality is a method of transmitting knowledge in any culture but it is the primary method of transmitting knowledge in all First Nations including the Northwest Coast First Nations (Frey:1995). The written word is part of the colonizers' European traditions; and to combine orality and written text is difficult because it is important not to lose the meaning of the speaker by filtering it through the preconceived interpretations of the listener or writer (Sarris 1993). It is therefore important to record the words and stories exactly as they are spoken and to limit interpretation. As I attempted to decolonize my research and honor the First Nations tradition of orality, I recorded the words of the women carvers as they were spoken. I was not concerned about whether their words were censored by any past or present issues of colonial interpretation as we established a strong rapport before our actual meeting which carried over into our interview time while we shared stories of children, family and being an artist. I appreciate the importance (and humor) of retelling life experiences in an informal setting; and the importance of the oral traditions of recounting the sacred stories of creation, the

histories of men and women and the link to the powers of the supernatural beings and animals. I have come to know something of how these oral traditions relate to the spiritual dimension of First Nations both through my courses in First Nations Studies and through the stories that the five women carvers shared with me. Joan Jensen (1995) noted that while early ethnologists asked the Pomo women in the Lake Mendocino and Sonoma regions of California about their basket designs, they seldom asked them to explain or interpret this design. However collectors were more interested in *what the women had to say* and thus they also collected a number of oral histories about the origins of basket making (Jensen 1995: 16). This exemplifies the richness of data that can be obtained when oral stories are listened to; in the case of this research the stories are those of the five women carvers.

Locating and then interviewing women carvers in several different communities throughout North Central BC was a logistical challenge and contributed to the decision to limit the number of women who participated in this study to five. Once the women agreed I arranged to go to their community to spend time with them in their home and creative space and to interview them there. They agreed to both video and audio recording of the interviews, and I used digital photographs to document the experience as well. All transcriptions of the interview were shared with the artist for feedback and clarification as needed.

The interview process of qualitative research allows the voice of the participants to be heard. My principal goal is to present my findings with as little bias as possible, removing myself from the role of the traditional omniscient observer. Though I share the roles of artist, woman and mother with each of these five women artists, I learned that I



had come into this research with certain preconceived or Western notions of artistic success. I have decided to limit the inclusion of my own experiences as a woman and stained glass artist to concentrate on the experiences of the five women carvers and I have tried not to weave my conceptual baggage throughout the thesis. In *Experience, Research, Social Change; Methods from the Margins*, the authors state that:

Conceptual baggage is a record of your thoughts and ideas about the research question at the beginning and throughout the research process. The researcher becomes another subject in the research process and is left vulnerable in a way that changes the traditional power dynamics/hierarchy that has existed between researcher and those who are researched (Kirby and McKenna 1989: 32).

Leaving behind the baggage is a post-modernist relativist approach which deconstructs the ideologies and discourses that interpret other cultures in terms of one's own. By placing the female carvers at the core of the research I am giving them the power to participate in creating their story: to share their lived experiences. However recognition of the role of researcher is key to the phenomenological approach which acknowledges the importance of the interaction between the researcher (myself) and the five women carvers. Thus the women's story unfolds in this thesis through central themes which came forward from each interview and from each participant in relation to questions I brought to the interview process. The connection between the five women and myself was based on our mutual roles of women, artists, and mothers and the interactive phenomenological process was an exciting and emotional experience. The questions that I used varied in order to respect the flow of the story as the women were telling it. I found that these questions were merely tools to initiate conversation and to prompt the women to enlighten me with more of their stories. Although our connection brought forth many different aspects in our conversation, I eliminated the more personal

exchanges we shared and included particularly the words that were relevant to my research. The questions that I started with are as follows:

1. Is there a history of female carvers in your family?
2. Why have you chosen carving as one of your creative or artistic outlets?  
What percentage of your time is spent carving?
3. What is the difference between traditional and contemporary carving?
4. What are your experiences as a First Nations female carver?
5. How conscious are you of being a woman/mother/wife/sister/daughter when you are creating your art? Does it impact or influence your art making?
6. How would you define success for yourself as an artist?
7. How does the community perceive your work? Is their perception influenced by your gender?

I feel that although I was not able to formally pursue the full list of questions with each woman, in a rather strange and holistic way, the answers to all the questions seem to have made it into the interview transcriptions from each of these five First Nations women carvers. I have chosen to group their stories into like themes in chapter three in an attempt to answer my original list of questions. The question of “authenticity” was not included in my list; however some of the women chose to address this issue in their discussions with me regarding traditional and contemporary carving. Phenomenological methodology describes the meaning of lived experiences of the participants; in this research it is the answers given by the five First Nations women doing carving in our interactive and thought provoking interview experience that has become the core of the

thesis and the women's style of presenting themselves has radiated out into the style of the whole thesis.

Creswell lists eight reasons for conducting qualitative research in his book *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, and of these the last one stands out as the most important for doing research with First Nations communities; "...employ a qualitative approach to emphasize the researcher's role as an *active learner* who can tell the story from the participants' view rather than as an "expert" who passes judgment on participants" (Creswell 1998: 18, italics by Creswell). This research is based on a phenomenological ethnographic approach, which is the study of particular cultural groups or individuals in those groups employing participant observation and interaction. This interactive methodology decolonizes the research and in this way it puts the storytelling into the hands of the experts; the five women carvers who taught me.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith decolonizes research methodologies to include the community (not subjects) in the research and to share the findings (not assumptions) of that research with the community members (Smith 1999: 142-161). I used her book *Decolonizing Methodologies; Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) as a guide to working within First Nations communities and interviewing the women carvers. First Nations communities have been subjected to numerous researchers who have done their research within the parameters of western research, maintaining the distance of "objectivity." Indigenous worldviews do not objectify anything and therefore distance from or objectivity is not a priority; everything is interrelated spiritually or physically:

Research 'through imperial eyes' describes an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings.

It is an approach to indigenous peoples which still conveys a sense of innate superiority and an overabundance of desire to bring progress into the lives of indigenous peoples – spiritually, intellectually, socially and economically. It is research which from indigenous perspectives ‘steals’ knowledge from others and then uses it to benefit the people who ‘stole’ it. Some indigenous and minority group researchers would call this approach simply racist. It is research which is imbued with an ‘attitude’ and a ‘spirit’ which assumes a certain ownership of the entire world, and which has established systems and forms of governance which embed that attitude in institutional practices (Smith 1999: 56).

Shawn Wilson concurs with Smith and describes a decolonized way of research as an Indigenous research paradigm which is distinctive because it is based on an Indigenous worldview:

The notion that empirical evidence is more meaningful or sound permeates Western thought, but alienates and dissociates many Indigenous scholars. Rather than their cultural knowledge being seen as extraintellectual, it is denigrated. It is the notion of superiority of empirical knowledge that leads to the idea that written text supercedes oral tradition. If indigenous ways of knowing have to be narrowed through one particular lens (which they certainly do not), then surely that lens would focus on relationality. All things are related and therefore relevant (Wilson 2003:161).

Wilson is Opaskwayak Cree and a professor in counseling at Brandon University. He is a researcher as well and introduces the above paradigm in Indigenous research to his students at the university. Marie Battiste states: “There is the further need, for those who have the most say about what counts as culture, to *use* their knowledge and professional institutional status to *help change* the dominant definition and understanding of Aboriginal knowledge” (Battiste 2000: x, Italics by Battiste). I have benefited from learning what the women had to say and this has changed my perspective on viewing First Nations art and artists. Their words have brought new decolonized definitions to First Nations art and specifically to the carving of First Nations women. Western

definitions have marginalized First Nations art (Dubin 1999: 161-162) and most especially the art produced by First Nations women (Miller and Chuchryk 1997: 8).

James Clifford describes ethnography as an interdisciplinary phenomenon: “Its authority and rhetoric have spread to many fields where “culture” is a newly problematic object of description and critique” (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 3). Clifford states that ethnographic writing can use literary devices such as metaphors, figuration or narrative in presenting research findings (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 4) in contrast to the quantitative or scientific method of presenting data. Transcribing from the oral interviews into written form greatly influenced my writing style. The ethnological approach of writing described by Clifford is employed not only in chapter three where I detail the findings of my research and most importantly the words of the five women carvers that I interviewed but throughout this thesis.

Knowledge of the differences between the individual ideologies of the four culture groups or nations that the women belong to, helped me to understand that gender roles in regards to carving and artistic achievement had not always been affected by colonialism (Slade 2002, Blackman 1982, Anderson 2000). Through my literature review of Northwest Coast art and researchers such as MacDonald (1990), Jonaitis (1999), Phillips (1999a & 1999b), Stewart (1984) and Slade (2002), I found out that some communities have had female carvers in their past, and some have always seen carving as a male role. Through the interviews and stories collected in the interview process I obtained a more holistic view of First Nations women carvers in today’s society.

It is my intention to help fill the gap in the existing literatures on defining the role of female northern Northwest Coast carvers today, within their communities and in their

relation to the Western art community as well. Success as an artist in Western society is measured differently, and I gained an understanding of these differences through learning how these five First Nations women artists defined their own success. I learned that the women I interviewed are crossing traditional gender constructs and establishing themselves as capable and gifted carvers in both their communities and the gallery system.

## **Chapter Two – What Has Been Written: Relevant Literature and Discussions**

The Western story goes that if you haven't read you haven't learned. Academic culture is based on reading texts written by other scholars in the pursuit of gaining a learned education and passing a bibliography of these texts to students to learn from as well. This story is a little different for First Nations people with their tradition of orality. They say that if you haven't listened you haven't learned. My listening skills were put to the test in the field, although to prepare myself for this I gathered a collection of readings that I felt was relevant to the topic of my thesis. I wanted to spend my time listening and learning from the five women carvers, viewing their art, and listening to their stories about their carving. I hoped to further enhance the knowledge I had obtained from reading and to gain an understanding of whether it is possible to categorize their carving as traditional, contemporary, new or neo-traditional. Before heading into the kitchens and studios of the First Nations women carvers I needed an understanding of northern Northwest Coast First Nations art both traditionally and in a contemporary context, and more specifically the history of carving and the significance of orality in order to more fully understand and appreciate the stories that the women would tell me.

### **Oral Traditions**

The tradition of orality is reviewed in Greg Sarris's book *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* (1993). Sarris states that "...in an oral exchange there is much that is unspoken – the histories and varying perspectives of speakers and listeners which may or may not be evoked verbally in the exchange itself or in continued exchange" (Sarris 1993: 40). It has always been my understanding that in an oral exchange whether it is a simple conversation or a research interview each participant brings his or her own history and

beliefs to the conversation, which contributes to the translation and comprehension of the parties involved. The history of each conversant is sometimes known only to them and therefore leaves interpretation of their words to the listener. Sarris elaborates on this further:

...in oral discourse the context of orality covers the personal territory of those involved in the exchange, and because the territory is so wide, extending throughout two or more personal, and often cultural worlds, no one party has access to the whole exchange. (Sarris 1993: 40)

The history of any one person is tied to their particular landscape, and this applies in a most relevant way to First Nations. In a review of *The Social Life of Stories: Narratives and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*, by Julie Cruikshank, Michael Marker of the University of British Columbia states that Cruikshank has learned from First Nations elders, "...that stories come from real places where they both define and are defined by the landscape" (Marker 2000: 1). The landscape referred to by Marker is physical; however the metaphysical landscape is always a consideration in writing about First Nations orality and their connection to the land. In *Stories That Make the World – Oral Literature of the Indian Peoples of the Inland Northwest*, Rodney Frey states that there is a difference between oral literature and oral traditions in relation to historical events connected to the landscape:

Oral literature is a form of literature that involves elements of drama such as heroes or tricksters, and unexpected turns of events. "In the oral presentation, I participated in the story. The characters were alive. They danced before me...I became part of the story" (Frey 1995: xiv).

This differs from oral history, which is directly tied to historical events, places or people. It is a recognized means of recording history within certain cultures, such as the First Nations culture. Although both oral history and oral literature are often interrelated, the distinguishing feature of each is the measure of truth contained within. "Oral history is to



historical truth as oral literature is to aesthetic and spiritual truth.” (Frey 1995: 11)

Charlotte Townsend-Gault in her article titled *Northwest Coast Art: The Culture of the Land Claims*, discusses what she calls Native mythologies and the way they influence art and how both the stories and the art are directly related to the dependency on the land and the spiritual order (Townsend-Gault 1994):

The theme of transformation between the human realm and the realm of the animals and spirits, which is the foundation for many stories of many family histories, tells of an imaginative closeness between species based on an understanding of the absolute dependency of the human species on the others (Townsend-Gault 1994: 445).

Although the artistic frame of reference has changed throughout time, influenced by the Euro-American art market and environmental and political issues, First Nations artists today continue to rely on the oral traditions from their heritage while expressing their concerns with the issues of today. I looked forward to hearing about the traditions behind the carvings from each of the five different women representing four different territories in Northern British Columbia.

### **Crest Poles, Crest Art and Potlatches**

The history of carving and the tradition behind it is at the center of the debate on whether certain carved pieces are considered traditional or contemporary and even more so if those pieces are carved by a women in a community that has had a history of male carvers. The totem pole is one of the symbols that has roots extending back to pre-contact times: “For more than a hundred years [the totem pole]...has held a status rare among Native art: it is an attraction tourists wish to see, a commodity they desire to purchase, and a symbol of the region to which they travel” (Jonaitis 1999: 104). The carvings on totem poles represent the crest stories and tribal traditions of a particular kin

group of a particular nation. Some northern Northwest Coast people refer to totem poles as crest poles as “totem poles” is an inaccurate name for the crest pole. At the end of the nineteenth century the totem or crest pole represented antiquity and authenticity to the Western viewer: “As timeless monuments made by genuine Indians, they stood in opposition to those Natives in Western clothing whom tourists judged inauthentic and thus uninteresting...”(Jonaitis 1999: 112). Even today the dilemma of what is authentic or inauthentic is still being debated in academic halls and journals, art galleries, tourist shops, and also in Native galleries and communities. While Jonaitis does not address individual carvers or their work, the history and understanding of how totem or crest poles became a tourist attraction and thus a re-saleable commodity is important to the understanding of the relevance of carving today and how the distinction between tourist craft and traditional carvings began.

Carving for the Northwest coast communities existed long before contact. In the foreword to *Totem Poles, According to Crests and Topics* (1990), Dr. George F. MacDonald of the Canadian Museum of Civilization corrects a previous edition and adds his own research to that of Barbeau’s. Macdonald states that in this earlier edition published in 1950 Barbeau stated that that pre-contact there were no totem poles as the Native people did not have the necessary tools or leisure to create them (MacDonald, citing Barbeau 1950: Vol. I, p. 5, in the introduction of the reprinted and updated version of 1990: vi). MacDonald corrects Barbeau’s former findings and notes that although Barbeau had studied John Bartlett’s journal titled, *A Narrative of Events in the Life of John Cartlett of Boston, Massachusetts, in the years 1790-93, during voyages to Canton*

*and the North-West Coast of North America*, he did not acknowledge the evidence presented:

We went ashore where one of their winter homes stood. The entrance was cut out of a large tree and carved all the way up and down. The door was made like a man's head and the passage into the house was between his teeth and was built before they knew the use of iron..." (MacDonald in Barbeau 1990, Vol. II, P. 803).

This narration by Bartlett was accompanied by a drawing showing the fully elaborated totem pole at the entrance of a house in a Tsimshian village. MacDonald furthers his argument by stating that earlier explorers of the late eighteenth century did not usually see the totem poles of the villages as they were only sailing past the outer coastal routes and witnessing the temporary summer sites:

The villages found there were temporary summer sites and they contained none of the elaborate monuments found in the permanent winter villages. For example, most of the Coast Tsimshian villages were in Prince Rupert Harbour, which was missed by all the eighteenth century explorers, including Captain Vancouver (MacDonald in Barbeau 1990: Vol. II, p. vii).

Therefore totem poles were rarely seen and recorded and thus were not recognized until later fur traders, explorers and missionaries ventured into the winter villages of the northern coast of British Columbia.

Although Barbeau erroneously thought that carving did not exist until the introduction of European tools such as axes, adzes, or steel knives, his research has since been refuted by archeological studies as stated by MacDonald in the foreword to the second edition of Barbeau's work: "...it is now clear that steel tools were not a prerequisite to carving totem poles. Thousands of shell-edged blades have been excavated along the coast by archaeologists" (MacDonald in Barbeau 1990: Vol. II, p. vii). This also speaks to the existence of carving for ceremonial events long before contact. That

totem poles existed pre-contact is also corroborated by archeological studies which have dated excavated carvings as far back at 3000 years ago (MacDonald 1990: viii).

In 1958, Wilson Duff and Michael Kew representing the Provincial Museum of British Columbia and the British Columbia Totem Pole Preservation Committee met with the people of Kitwancool to discuss the removal for preservation of several totem poles. It was agreed that new or replicated poles would be put in the place of the removed ones. As agreed with the chiefs and people of Kitcancool Wilson Duff documented the oral histories of the poles:

...that their histories, territories, and laws were to be written down, published, and made available to the University for teaching purposes (Duff 1959: 3).

The entire publication edited by Duff and published by the Provincial Museum, is a transcription of the eight chiefs of the Wolf and Frog clans who had the important task of recounting the histories, traditions, social organization and laws through the assistance of their selected transcriber and translator, Mrs. Constance Cox.

To the First Nations people of the northern Northwest Coast, carving of house crests and totem or crest poles is a representation of their history contained in their oral traditions. The focal point of the northern Northwest Coast culture is the potlatch or feast system. Dr. Antonia Mills explains the relevance of the feast system for the Western Carrier or Witsuwit'en people located adjacent to Gitxsan territory in the north central part of British Columbia; "From ancient history to the present day, the feast system stands as the central structure of Witsuwit'en society" (Mills 1994: 41). A similar system is used by many of the northern Northwest coast nations. The importance of carving is ever present in the feast house in everything from the carved house poles, feast bowls and

spoons, to the bentwood boxes used for storing beautiful button blankets, dried salmon and other prized items. Family crests, house posts, totem or crest poles, and masks carved to tell stories of kin groups are put on display by all families. Berlo and Phillips elaborate the role of the feast regarding carving for the broader Northwest Coast area:

Feasts were and are occasions not only for lavish hospitality and eating, but also, and importantly, for the production of visual art of all kinds – from masks to rich clothing, to the decoration of the interior, and the making of gifts to present to guests” (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 27).

Again, early explorers did not always see these events as they took place in the winter months. As a result the recorded collections of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were often not accurate or complete:

The collections and descriptions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries do not, however, present a complete record of the visual culture of the Northwest Coast because the traders were often not present during the winter when the most important ceremonial cycles took place, and most therefore missed the masked performances and displays of crest art presented at that time (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 182).

Early expeditions yielded drawings and water colors of house interiors, and the items of visual art that were intertwined in the First Nations every day life, such as woven baskets, carved storage boxes and houseposts (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 181). But these examples of visual arts and the trading and sharing and gifting of these objects came to the attention of the strict Victorian politicians and officials in the 1800's:

Missionaries as well as government officials mounted direct attacks on the potlatch because Victorian society disapproved of the munificent displays and (apparent) wasting of wealth that was required to maintain the prestige of the great families. In 1885 the Canadian Government outlawed the potlatch, thus threatening with a single act the system that guaranteed the survival of indigenous political authority, oral history, and traditional art. It was not until 1951 that this ban was effectively dropped (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 201)

Despite the 1885 ban, many First Nations peoples continued the tradition of potlatching in secret (Cole and Chaikin 1990) and thus continued to keep the traditions and stories of the crest art alive. The renaissance of northern Northwest Coast art through the period of the abolition of the potlatch, the ceremony that traditionally propelled and commissioned Northwest Coast carving, speaks to the resilience of First Nations perceptions of the centrality of their oral histories passed on through the potlatch. Master artist Willie Seaweed (c. 1873 – 1967) of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation continued to carve throughout the prohibition period:

Not only were his pieces prized instruments of the Winter Dances, as an integral part of the elite Kwak'waka society, they also made 'political' statements in a broader sense. Throughout Seaweed's productive career Kwak'waka ceremonies were denigrated and suppressed by white authorities. Regalia were at one point seized by the Crown, and owners threatened with imprisonment if they did not renounce potlatching. Seaweed, along with others, continued to produce and to participate in ceremonies, frequently in remote, secret places like so many resistance fighters. Some of his finest works, the magnificent monster bird Hamatsa masks, were made during the 1930's and 1940's, years 'following the most active oppression of the potlatch and the Winter Ceremony when it was widely believed that both institutions were dead' (Holm 1983: 109 in Ames 1992: 75).

Seaweed created art which could be viewed as both an artifact in the context of his culture and as visual art that was also political, but more important was his commitment to continue to carve masks for the ceremonial uses of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation during the time of prohibition.

### **Traditional, Contemporary and Authentic**

My literature review included texts that addressed issues of what is "traditional," "contemporary," and "authentic" First Nations art. Most literature about contemporary female First Nations artists outside of the Northwest Coast places the emphasis on new

innovative work done in contemporary materials or themes with the artist speaking of their traditional background and training. Sometimes the artist uses their art to speak to the effects of colonization and the stereo typifying of the authentic 'Indian.' This is the case in the book *The Trickster Shift*, by Allan J. Ryan. He says of the photography of Mohawk artist Shelley Niro: "...Niro skillfully combines and then undermines the stereotypes ..." (Ryan 1999: 62). Niro addresses First Nations women's issues through her photographic art work, an art form relatively new in the Western and First Nations worlds. Although it is important to recognize the contemporary art of First Nations women both in its own right and in terms of the issues they are addressing, it is also important to note that there are First Nations women artists doing art that is considered culturally significant in their community, but that was not always considered traditional for women, such as carving. Their contribution as traditional artists speaks as loudly as Niro's work in regards to their roles as women in today's Aboriginal societies. But do artists like Niro define their work as traditional, authentic or contemporary?

Fisher states that authenticity is a category of Euro-American invention; it is a means of commodifying and selling First Nations art. She questions whether Native art is reducible to our "...commodifying systems of signification" (Fisher 1992, 6). Can contemporary carvings be categorized as non-authentic? Does purpose define whether the piece is traditional or not? In other words is there a difference between carving done for galleries and carving done for ceremonial, traditional, house or clan business? Who defines authenticity in contemporary or traditional art; the carver, the First Nations community, or the non-Native audience? Does a contemporary depiction of an old story in a carved mask make the piece any less authentic? Abbott states that;

Artists of all media desire to depict their own experiences and not be burdened with representing what Indian art is supposed to be. Indian art is not a monolithic entity, contemporary artists insist, but reflects the differences among personal, community, and tribal experience.

As Native artists gain control over their image-making and create the art that is valid for them, the supposed distinction between traditional and modern art (which exists mainly in the minds of non-Indian critics) appears to be put to rest. There is also a recognition that contemporary art can have a traditional intent, and that is to order and explain the world. (Abbott 1998: 98).

Despite Abbot's enthusiastic support for contemporary artists, Alfred Young Man (Plains Cree) states that contemporary Native art is still not widely accepted in public or private gallery spaces and Native artists regardless of their qualifications, may still find their most receptive audiences in anthropology museums:

Mohawk artist Rick Glazer Danay from Caughnawaga (now Kanehwake) Ontario, was one such example. He holds an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, but this was of no concern to the Museum of Mankind in London, England, in the 1980's which chose to exhibit his work alongside that of ancient Aztec artifacts. Glazer Danay is a full professor at the University of California, Long Beach, but obviously his degree had neither conferred upon him automatic status as an artist nor membership in the exclusive club of "civilized" artists. To look at it another way, how many Euro-American artists with MFA's have you seen exhibiting in ethnographic museums lately? (Young Man 1998: 25).

Although the term "primitive" is seldom used today in defining First Nations or Native American art, Young Man is referring to an instance where the delineation between civilized and primitive art has been applied. Glazer Danay's art was defined as artifact rather than art and thus displayed alongside ancient artifacts from another culture.

Nahwooksy delineates traditional and contemporary art in a simple manner: "Contemporary arts are individual expressions appreciated on a primary level as objects of beauty that engender emotion through visual excitement, while traditional arts are



forms that continue to play a role in the maintenance of culture” (Nahwooksy 1994: 88). Although this may sound fairly straight forward, how does it address the artist that uses contemporary materials to create a mask based on a traditional story, which addresses contemporary issues? Does he also mean that traditional art forms such as carved masks or head pieces for chiefs are not “...objects of beauty that engender emotion...” (Nawooksky 1994:88)? In *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, anthropologist Michael Ames criticizes art galleries that support the position that contemporary Native art is not traditional:

Recent works are written off as deviations from scholastically defined traditional standards and not considered suitable for important art galleries. Contemporary Native artists who try new media or new forms are criticized for abandoning their traditions or for catering to the money market. If Native art is to retain its purity, its acceptability in wider society, it seemingly must remain parochial, unchanging, and exotic, that is ‘primitive’. Evolution of form and style, like freedom from cultural embeddedness, is a privilege reserved for [western] white art. (Ames 1992: 73).

I agree with Ames’s critique of the gallery system. I feel that the continuance of tradition is carried on even through contemporary works. If the tradition is to carve a mask to dance or illustrate a story, what matter is it if the story is about current environmental or community wellness issues? Ames states that, “...any art style is capable of working out (or being worked out) of its original social milieu and constructing a history of its own, and perhaps even subsequently returning to its roots to redefine and resuscitate the society from which it sprang” (Ames 1992: 73). Perhaps this steps into the realm of “retraditionalization” in a modern society as addressed by David Newhouse: “Native art has become a distinct discipline where Aboriginal artists are continually reinterpreting the world and creating new ways of seeing it” (Newhouse 2000: 406).

## **Crossing the Gallery Floor**

What are the barriers if any that need to be overcome for First Nations women and men carvers to get their work shown in Western galleries and to have them accepted as Fine Art? Phillips quotes Dinah Hall in her article titled *Art, Authenticity, and Baggage of Cultural Encounter*: “When does ethnic art become the much disdained ‘souvenir’?” (Phillips 1999b: 19) Northwest coast art reaches out to western viewers who do not know the oral traditions behind the work, and draws them in with the sense of power and spiritual significance of the piece, yet the western viewer may still remain ignorant of the significance of the piece of art. To a viewer without the knowledge of the story or traditions behind a First Nations piece, the carved mask hanging in a gallery is just an object of art or in some cases a souvenir of another’s civilization. In contrast, carving done for ceremonial use such as in the potlatch is typically based on a traditional story belonging to a chief of the clan and that story would be known by those attending the ceremony or feast. This exemplifies the power and history of oral traditions and First Nations art.

John Berger states that what we know or believe affects how we see things and further: “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves...” (Berger 1972: 9). This relates to the aesthetic gaze that Fisher refers to when discussing how Native art is viewed (Fisher 1992:6). Every time we look at something our perception depends on our own way of seeing which is based on our cultural knowledge or education. How we define or evaluate art is all encompassed in how we see. Emily Auger addresses the way of seeing Native art through western eyes in the gallery space. Auger writes of how art spaces are now more often being shared by

both western and non-western art forms, such as hand-made quilts and Native carved masks alongside “fine art” paintings and sculpture. However she makes the point that while re-contextualization is an indicator of cultural change, she feels that the quilt will always be considered “low” art as will the carved mask:

This point has been made with regard to the removal of Native masks from their original ceremonial contexts and their re-categorization as fine art. This is not to say that these objects are not aesthetically worthy of being called fine art, only that such a categorization may not be fully indicative of either their functional or aesthetic value (Auger 2000: 89).

While I agree with the author that the carved mask is still a work of fine art whether it is displayed in a gallery or danced in a feast hall, the Western way of seeing demands a context and assigns a value for the piece. Dubin concurs with Auger and states that to include non-western art forms in a Euro-biased gallery removes the object from the field of ethnology and places it within the visual reach of the Western art critic; a means of cultural colonialism. The author states that some critics feel that the “...non-western objects need their context to stay meaningful” (Dubin 1999, 156) to the people who created the work. To these critics this would mean that to remove a carved mask from the feast hall and place it in a western gallery would also remove its meaning or poignancy. This concept separates each form of art into western or non-western without allowances for crossing over. However, I agree with Auger when she says that crossing over into other boundaries sometimes makes a bolder statement for the object of art than segregating them into their own spaces. Traugott states that First Nations artists “...can salvage parts of the dominating culture – as well as of their own culture – to further their own identity, in opposition to the influence of the dominant culture” (Traugott 1992, 36). This decolonizes the art space and the limited definition of fine art.

To use the symbology of the western world in First Nations art can add another layer of meaning and decolonization or a means of telling a story from a First Nations perspective. Art Wilson ('Wii Muk' willixw) is a hereditary chief of the Gitksan people. In his book titled *Heartbeat of the Earth* (1996) Wilson decolonizes western assumptions and gives a strong First Nations political message through his art work. "By using the traditional symbolism and style of his Northwest coast heritage and by appropriating the genres, images, and icons of the European Fine Arts tradition, he is sending a clear message of resistance" (Siermacheski 2003: 1). One of the images in Art Wilson's book is titled *Mockery*. It depicts an evil faced bee hive burner and a saw blade cutting into a totem pole alongside a sign post which has the words "Totem Road" written on it. Wilson incorporates the recognizable symbols of wealth and progress from the logging corporations and depicts them using the traditional Gitksan colors of red and black. Wilson states that the mill has been asked to change the name of their road, and as yet they have not done so. "I asked the company...to take the signs down because the name is a mockery of totem poles when all one sees are dead trees being further mutilated" (Wilson 1996: 36). By using these symbols against the colonial or non-native viewer and telling the story from the point of view of his people Wilson is enacting a method of resistance (Siermacheski 2003: 8). Eurocentric interpretation dominates western society, in the educational system and the world of art. Therefore both the printed word in books and the painted image in western art work are controlled by the dominant culture; thus the ideology of the oppressor continues to be proliferated. Wilson reclaims the stories of his people and with a subtle trickster twist he uses both words and art to turn the images back onto the colonial viewer (Siermacheski 2003: 2).

Artists in the margins of society throughout time have used their work to appeal to and enlighten the viewer on issues of public or political concern. Incorporating a symbol of western society such as a golf ball, Gitksan artist Ya'Ya Ts'itxsap Chuck Heit carved a house pole he titled *The Oka Golf Classic (He fell out of a tree and shot himself)* in support of the Mohawk peoples fight to prevent a golf course from being built on sacred land (Ryan 1999: 235). First Nations artists and carvers who display their work in galleries and classrooms both Native and European can use their art to speak from the margins and be heard.

Yet there is still the question of what is regarded as main-stream and how the margins are defined. Gerald McMaster explains the current ideology in regards to First Nations artists in the mainstream or western art community:

Meanwhile, the mainstream itself has undergone major ideological shifts, fuelled in by part by artists outside the dominant Western canon and in part by the growing recognition of pluralism and difference as leading indicators of change. These changes include notions of cultural identity, an artist's relation to community, and the questioning of individualism. This is the so-called postmodern moment when boundaries are blurred and more permeable, when communication and economies are becoming globalized, leading to a kind of creative confusion. Furthermore, we are witnessing artists physically and psychologically moving about. Greater numbers of aboriginal artists are pursuing an education in fine arts or art history, being exposed to new ideas, and asking new questions. They question the mainstream and their role within it. Indian artists also question their identity as Indian – can they continue to be “Indian”? - and its value in a changing world. (McMaster 1998: 29).

McMaster states in his introduction to the text *In the Shadow of the Sun, Perspectives on Contemporary Native Art*:

During the past number of years, I questioned the success of Native art in its marginality to the mainstream Western art world, and its stodgy defensive posture; but now we know that that hegemony is crumbling beneath its own ignorance and hypocrisy (McMaster: 1993, xi).

McMaster states that “there are centers in margins and margins in the center – the idea of the mainstream remains problematic” (McMaster 1999: 83). If we state that Native art created by males is in the margins of the Western gallery, then by McMaster’s definition there are even degrees of acceptance within *this* margin. To follow this theory further, female carvers would fall even farther to the outside edge of this margin just as in the Euro-centered galleries, the male artist dominates the center and the female artist sits in the margins of this center. Female artists in general represent a smaller portion of the population of artists; sometimes this is because they are sharing their creative time with raising families or caring for their family’s home or perhaps they have found it difficult to breach the barrier into the gallery space. The National Academy of Design quotes a membership number of only 20 percent women in their ranks despite the fact that this artistic academy has more or less welcomed women since shortly after its founding in 1825 (Johnson 2003: 31). In the gallery space First Nations women artists hold an even smaller place as they are a smaller number in population, and until the second half of the twentieth century there were gender delineations in art making: “...the medium in which a male or female artist worked was largely regulated by convention. Men carved and painted, while women wove and sewed (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 206). Even though McMaster makes no delineation between a First Nations gallery and a Euro-gallery, these rules will vary dependent upon the gallery space.

### **Female Carvers in History**

Much of the history of art written prior to the 1970’s contained biases with regards to the gender roles in art making. According to the Eurocentric and patriarchal analysis of Native art at that time, men’s art was “...often valorized as sacred and

individualistic, growing out of personal visionary experiences...items made by women and used in daily life...were not seen to be connected to spiritual or political power..."(Berlo and Phillips 1998: 33). This obvious Eurocentric bias lends power to the western gender division of art making. The idea that men were more powerful and thus created more meaningful art was passed on to generations of First Nations men through western and Christian indoctrination. However, more recently this has been corrected in ethnographic studies of both male and female artists which indicate that both gain their creative inspiration from powerful insights, dreams or visions (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 33) and female artists are crossing gender barriers and creating inspired pieces of art (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 207). With all this centuries-old tradition comes the understanding that the male and female complement each other, so therefore they each contribute in their own way. Historically, the carving or painting of clan crests which define affiliation or lineage was left to the male artists or carvers. Margaret Blackman in her book titled *During My Time, Florence Edenshaw Davidson, A Haida Woman* notes the Haida position on gender roles in producing crest art as held in the early 1900's;

In aesthetic specialties there were marked male/female differences. What is normally regarded as Haida "art" was traditionally a masculine art. The painting or carving of mythological or crest figures were male prerogatives. Zoomorphic and anthropomorphic crest designs were not a woman's domain, and this division of aesthetic labor has persisted well into the twentieth century. Button blankets, for instance, were and are designed by men, though cut and appliquéd by women (Blackman 1982: 39-40).

Blackman doesn't clarify the role of the male in the creation of the early Chilkat blankets however, Berlo and Phillips state that men and women always collaborated in the creation of their art with men designing and women executing Chilkat blankets:

Charles Edenshaw painted the finely woven clan hats made by his wife Isabella, while male painters designed the pattern boards used by virtuoso female weavers in the creation of the Chilkat blankets (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 206).

More recently, Haida artist Robert Davidson works together with Haida fashion designer Dorothy Grant; he creates the formline designs which she integrates into her contemporary fashions.

Although there is still gender division in the world of carving it is not unheard of for these boundaries to be crossed. Hilary Stewart refers to women carvers in her book titled *Cedar*: “Men and, occasionally women, often with apprentices at their side, carve crest poles and canoes, make baskets and steambent boxes, and create masks, drums and rattles (Stewart 1984: 19). Berlo and Phillips note that:

In Native North American societies, artistic and technical knowledge is a form of property or privilege, which can be transferred from one individual to another as a gift or financial transaction. If an uncle sees fit to bestow such property on his niece, her rights of ownership abrogate the ‘rules’ of gender which usually define artistic practice (Ibid 1998:35).

Historically, the fore-mothers of contemporary women carvers were Kwakwaka’wakw carver Ellen Neel (1916 -1966) and Freda Diesing, a renowned Haida carver (1925 – 2002). Townsend-Gault mentions that Neel: “...was an innovator in as much as she was an important woman artist in the man’s world of wood carving...” (Townsend-Gault 1994: 6). In the book titled *Solitary Raven, Selected writings of Bill Reid*, Reid states that earlier on in the Queen Charlotte Islands carving was all but obsolete except for some bracelet making and slate carving by a few elders including his grandfather Charles Gladstone (Reid 2000:162). Reid singles out Ellen Neel as “...the only person I knew who was making an attempt to keep the art alive and make a living from it...” (Reid 2000: 162). In the chapter notes, the editor Robert Bringhurst elaborates



on Neel's contribution to carving during a time when potlatching and the creation of First Nations art for ceremony was prohibited:

Ellen Neel (Qaqaso', 1916-1966) was probably the first woman on the Northwest Coast to carve a totem pole. Trained by her grandfather and her uncle, Mungo Martin, she was reputedly an able carver by the age of twelve. In this respect, she represented to Reid the power and effectiveness of the old, indigenous educational system – yet in the new, colonial world, the only outlet for her skills was the tourist market (Bringinghurst in Reid 2000: 171).

During the first half of the twentieth century traditional imagery was used to create miniature or model totem poles for the souvenir trade and Ellen Neel entered into this arena: "Ellen Neel's (1916-66) model poles...heralded the taking up of traditionally male art forms by women artists" (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 204). Neel opened a studio and souvenir store in Stanley Park, Vancouver in 1946. One of her poles (originally carved for a shopping centre in Edmonton, where it suffered considerable damage) is now in Stanley Park (Bringinghurst in Reid 2001: 171). While Neel relied on her traditions and her training, she created carvings for the commercial market to satisfy the tourism hunger for the authentic and brought the culture of the Northwest Coast out into a wider public. Neel spoke eloquently of the art of the Northwest Coast people at the first conference on Indian Affairs held at the University of British Columbia in 1948. Her speech was printed verbatim and in its entirety in Slade's dissertation as Appendix E. Neel said:

This point of mine which I shall endeavor to illustrate deals with an idea that the native art is dead art and that efforts should be confined to preservation of old work. To me, 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. Whereas to me it is a living symbol of the gaiety, the laughter and the love of color of my people, a day to day reminder to us that even we had something of glory and honor before the white man came. And our art must continue to live, for not only is it part and parcel of us, but it can

be a powerful factor in combining the best part of the Indian culture into the fabric of a truly Canadian art form (Slade 2002: 472).

As a result of this conference, Neel was asked by the then curator of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Audrey Hawthorne, to restore a number of totem poles at the museum site which had deteriorated with time and weather.

Slade's biography of Freda Diesing reveals an interesting turn of events:

She [Neel] restored four poles that summer [1949], but decided that she could not undertake the rest of the project because it did not pay well enough, and because it kept her from developing her own artistic vision at a time when her creations were becoming in high demand. Accordingly, she arranged for the UBC committee to meet with Mungo Martin at her house, and he willingly took over the project (now revised, through discussions with Neel, to be a replication project), that was to bring him much renown (Nuytten 1982). The totem pole project, which helped make Mungo Martin and his successors Bill Reid and Douglas Cranmer famous as carvers, is widely mentioned in books and articles,[see Berlo and Phillips 1998: 205] and of course at MOA [Museum of Anthropology]. But the significant contributions of Ellen Neel – what mention do they get? The story is now one of a group of male academics interacting with a self-chosen selection of male artists (Slade 2002: 119).

Over the next several years, this team of male carvers applied for and received Canada Council grants to create a Haida village at the MOA (Duff 1964: 85 in Slade 2002).

Slade states that Neel did not receive this recognition despite her career as a recognized carver:

In 1963, Ellen Neel successful in both tourist and commissioned art, and popularized for almost two decades as Canada's only woman Native carver, made her first application for a Canada Council grant. She was rejected. (Nuytten 1982: 71). She dies, destitute, just two years later, at the age of 50 (Slade 2002: 119).

Haida carver Freda Diesing saw Neel, "...as another Native artist who had found a successful commercial niche – her gender as a carver was unimportant" (Slade 2002: 120). While Diesing did her first commercial carving when she was 42 years old Neel

started carving for the commercial market when she was only 12 years old during the time when potlatches were outlawed. These two women were of almost the same generation; Diesing was born in 1925 and Neel in 1916, but they both took completely different paths in learning to carve. Slade explains these differences:

Neel's artistic training was all traditional, and she took those traditions out to educate a wider society that still banned the cultural practices associated with the potlatch, and saw Indians as, at best, quaint. Diesing's training was Western – although there had been outstanding carvers in her family, they were before her time. Due largely to early missionary influence, and continuing acculturative pressures, Diesing had not even seen much NWC [Northwest Coast] artwork until she came to Vancouver. By then, the ban on the potlatch had been dropped. Ellen Neel became much more famous in her time than Freda Diesing, but not more financially successful (Slade 2002: 120).

Diesing took part in informal carving classes at K'san around 1966 before there was an official school. Carvers such as Duane Pascoe, Bill Holm both non-Native artists and Robert Davidson a Haida artist would come and do carving on site and Freda and other carvers would participate and learn. The Kitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art opened within the K'san village site in 1968. While Freda worked at the museum site doing various tasks such as tour guide, screen painter and prop maker, she took one formal class in carving at the new school when it opened and recalls Doreen Jensen and one other woman in her class. During her teaching days in Prince Rupert and Kitsumkalum, Diesing had several women in her classes and she commented on their skilled participation:

There were a lot of girls in those classes too,[Prince Rupert] but the girls never really got known like the guys did. The work of some of the girls was really good too, and some of them did sell things for awhile, and some still do. But it's different for the girls – their circumstances are different. Even with the classes in Kitsumkalum – they were mostly women and some of them were very good, better than the guys. But the thing is, up north, they can work on the canneries or do something else, so they have

jobs. And they have families, so there's always work there, and less time. The ones with kids, it's hard for them to raise little kids and carve too (Diesing in Slade 2002: 323).

Diesing states that she never taught classes at K'san but she has taught carving at various other northern communities such as Prince Rupert, in Alaska, and Kitsumkalum (Slade, 2002:322).

Although Diesing has been recognized internationally for her art her emphasis was always on teaching an understanding of First Nations culture. Slade states: "More important to Diesing however, than the personal recognition she has achieved is the cultural recognition and understanding she has helped to perpetuate and spread through her teaching of Northwest Coast artforms and their interrelationship with the cultural practices of the people who have created them" (Slade 2002: 10). As a result of her commitment to teaching an appreciation for Northwest Coast culture Diesing was awarded both an Aboriginal Achievement Award in 2002 and an Honorary Doctorate at the University of Northern British Columbia, on May 24, 2002. Diesing passed away in 2002.

Slade quotes Freda Diesing on whether women did carving in her grandmother's time:

Granny was still young when she married her first husband, Norman Skiltees. They used to have arranged marriages, and this man was a canoe maker and he made lots of money and that was a thing that made him a good candidate to be her husband. But Skiltees was old and he had TB (but they didn't know at that time), and he wasn't very strong...her children were real small so they weren't much help. But she used to help him with the canoes, because she was young and she was strong...Granny knew how to use an adze, and how to use a knife – all kinds of tools. She knew how to make bowls, and even boxes. ...the Grand-aunts...when they'd go out and they'd make boxes, they used to soak the cedar boards in the creek to make them soft for a long time. And they could all use

tools, they could use knives. When they all went out picking berries or doing stuff, well, they would just make those things they'd need, bend the boxes and just tie them up with ropes, not peg or anything, 'cause they were in a hurry. So Granny could make all those things, and her sisters. People forget those things, they don't talk about them much and you don't read it in the books. After the missionaries came, they wanted the women to be like white women, and just do sewing and other 'womanly' things. So the Haida women usually didn't say they did anything, because if they did it was like it was kind of a sin or something for women to do men's things. And the missionaries had a lot of power – they even had their own little jails they could lock someone up if they broke the missionaries' "laws"! (Diesing in Slade 2002: 136-138).

Diesing cites another example of the wife of a man called Captain Brown who assisted and eventually did all the finishing of her husband's carving as he was slowly going blind: "That's how they made their money so she had to do it. People did whatever they could to get 'cash money' like they called it then. In the museums, they say Captain Brown was the carver, but they don't mention his wife's work!" (Diesing in Slade 2002:142). So even though women participated in carving the things they needed and assisted their husbands when needed in carving canoes or totem poles, they had come to hide these skills for fear of retribution from the missionaries. Prior to missionary contact the division of labor was balanced, as both men and women participated where they were needed for the overall good of the community. In her dissertation, Slade states that Diesing "steadfastly argues that carving was not a gendered activity for Native peoples 'until anthropologists made it so,' and that other Native carvers saw her only as another carver – gender irrelevant" (Slade 2002: 122). Other than Slade's dissertation on the life of Haida artist and carver Freda Diesing, I have been unable to locate any research specifically on First Nations female carvers that clearly indicates whether the gendered divisions of art making existed previous to contact or whether it was a colonially induced state.

Ellen Neel and Freda Diesing both brought their carving into the public eye in an effort to educate non-native art patrons on the value and beauty of Northwest Coast artistic traditions. Neel plied the tourist trade with symbols of Native culture and carved commissioned poles for public venues. Diesing taught carving and also produced commissioned works for various public venues such as the museum in Prince Rupert. Diesing and Josiah Tate (Norman Tait's dad) carved a reproduction totem pole [1974] for the Prince Rupert Museum, as well as several other totem poles in Terrace and Kitsumkalum. Diesing also held several exhibitions of her work throughout her career. Their carvings of totem poles and masks stand as reminders today that the attempts to decolonize and keep the traditions of art alive have been going on from at least the time of Diesing's grandmother, when totem poles for potlatches were officially disallowed. As women they pursued the tradition of keeping their culture alive through their art work, and they both chose to do this through carving, which due to the influence of the colonial missionaries was considered to be men's art (Slade 2002:122). Thus the agency of the First Nations woman artist has altered to allow her to regain a previously lost power in disseminating the knowledge and stories of her culture. These women set the standard for today's women carvers; to promote their culture through teaching their art to younger generations and to reestablish the balanced role of men and women in First Nations society in continuing their culture through future generations. It can be seen as an act of resistance against the colonial forces that created this imbalance in their lives (Anderson 2000: 142-144).

## **The Holistic Power of Creation and Creativity**

Native scholar Kim Anderson (2000) discusses the loss of female voice and thus power within Native communities all as a result of colonial influences. Her writing covers everything from First Nations women as storytellers of tradition and culture, to the current trend towards reclaiming women's roles in Native societies. In the section on "Acts of Resistance," Anderson writes about creativity as a source of strength and identity:

The need for creative expression as a means of healing and identity recovery is crucial...Some women have had to fight for their right to express themselves creatively in their private lives. The resistance comes when they begin to do it anyway, and for many this is the beginning of a journey of discovery about their Native womanhood. It is also a journey to reclaiming their voice in the private and public spheres" (Anderson, 2000: 142).

Creativity and creation are valuable tools of power in the ongoing struggle to decolonize and reclaim Native identity. Simona Arnatsiaq of Nunavit remarked in an interview: "How can we have self-government without joy, without art? You can't have a building spring up one day – a government house with a whole bunch of politicians running around – without pride. You have to have arts. You have got to reclaim your identity" (Anderson 2000: 144).

Carolyn Bereznak Kenny also explores the role and importance of art and creativity to First Nations people. "Art" is viewed as a lived experience and part of a holistic lifestyle. The author quotes several chiefs and elders that understand that art is the essence of First Nations living. Chief Leonard George (1997) of the Burrard Nation is quoted in this article as saying, "I believe that our song, dance, art, carving, basket making and other art forms can provide the foundation for our autonomy, solidarity, self-

determination and the means for keeping our spirit alive” (Kenny 1998, 77). First Nations women may choose to create for different reasons one of which may very well be self-healing from the impact of colonization, residential school syndrome or other related issues.

Holistically speaking, the healing ability of the creative process involves the power of art in bringing out the psyche. The holistic value of creativity in terms of the physical being and the sense of worth within a community are important for any First Nations artist. For female First Nations artists these values are compounded by their responsibilities as women within their own families and communities. These are important issues that are reflected in their art making, whether consciously or not. This research will uncover what these women have to say on their roles as women and mothers in society and how it affects their artistic creativity and also how it impacts their creative process. Kenny (1998) explores the special feelings of achievement, involvement and sustenance that all come from self expression and the creative process.

### **The Salon des Refuses and Contemporary Native Art**

There is a prevailing thought in the western artistic hegemony that art is created by the artist as a form of self-expression (Vastokas 1987: 9). Therefore any art that is produced within cultural contexts and traditions by a social group such as a First Nations community is not self expression and therefore is not art: “Given the perceived anonymity of native art production, it is clear that this concept of art as self-expression has inhibited the very acknowledgement of Native art as art” (Vastokas 1987:9). I will digress here to my European art history education and state that if we follow this line of reasoning by Vastokas, the early European painters who all painted the same themes as



guided by patronage and the schools of that day were not really showing self-expression and therefore were not artists either. Nevertheless it was considered high art. Yet because Native art forms were traditionally and culturally determined by their social group it was excluded in the categorization of art. Yet, even then, patterns were changing in Europe. Vastokas' reasoning is flawed in that during the mid-nineteenth century, one particular group of European artists from the Impressionist era were shunned by the formal Salons in Paris because of their *refusal* to adhere to the acceptable style of the Salon painters with their smooth brush strokes and careful finishes and their depictions of landscapes full of light (Honour & Fleming 1982: 521). The Salons were started in 1737 by the Academy in France, who began to stage annual Salons, or exhibitions, open to the public. The Salon des Refuses was opened in 1863 in Paris to hold independent exhibitions of these Impressionist painters. Artists like Manet, Renoir, and Monet were thus exhibiting self-expression and should therefore have been called true artists; however, because they were painting in the margins they were not included in the Fine Arts Salons (Honour & Fleming 1982: 521). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the European Impressionist artists were dealing with the Salons, First Nations artists were confronting assimilation policies, the banning of the potlatch in 1884 and the general categorizing and removal of their work by ethnographers who were gathering cultural artifacts and collectors who designated all First Nations art as functional. The history of First Nations art has shown where the power of naming comes into effect by those that are in power:

Among these was the notion, formulated in the aesthetic theory of Immanuel Kant, that functionality limited the 'highest' capacity of a work of art to achieve formal beauty and to express ideas. For this reason they assigned most Native American arts, which often adorned 'useful' forms such as pots, clothing or weapons, to the inferior category of 'applied art' or craft" (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 15).

Today's First Nations artists face the results of this history of naming. When First Nations carvers display their carving in a Native gallery and stay within "the traditions" they are accepted as Native artists and their work is considered to be authentic. If they display a more contemporary version of a traditional carving, would they still be included in the Native gallery? The answer of course is a resounding yes, as is demonstrated at the Coastal Peoples Gallery in Vancouver, the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, the Alcheringa Gallery in Victoria and especially the venue of the Vancouver International Airport where Bill Reid, Dempsey Bob and many other First Nations artists' work is displayed. If these same carvings were in a Euro-gallery as examples of an artist's self expression alongside painted portraits, would they be considered works of art or would they again be placed in the margins outside the line metaphorically painted on the gallery floor? Ironically, the European Post-Impressionist painters like Paul Gauguin drew their inspiration from the land and people of the colonized territories, such as in Tahiti; they were looking for a simpler time, a less "civilized" or tainted way of life to depict in their work. Few patrons of that day understood or appreciated the "primitive" inspiration in the art of the post-impressionist artists so therefore some artists were rejected by the Salons.

Self expression is made up of who we are as a person, where we live, and how we have been educated or taught by life's experiences. Each and every mask, rattle, headpiece or totem pole that is carved by these artists is based on their own artistic self expression as well as their tradition, so even by Vastokas' definition these pieces should qualify as Fine Art. It should be noted however that to most First Nations artists this is not a category or goal they strive to achieve; they are motivated by much stronger

cultural and spiritual goals when creating their art. Traditionally the name of the totem or crest pole reflected the origin story, not the name of the carver.

### **Creative Experiences of First Nations Women Artists**

The western privileging of naming Native art such as button blankets, Chilkat weaving, or beadwork created by women as craft or women's art assigns them ultimate power over these objects of creativity, which thus allows them to decide how or if they should be recognized and when and where they should be displayed. Ruth B. Phillips discusses the "...ocular centrist bias in western culture that has for centuries privileged a strictly delimited form of visual experience..." (Phillips 1999a: 98). This bias places Native art outside the narrow field of Euro-defined fine art and further places the work of female Native artists even farther into the margins of this limited field of vision. Jensen, speaking of women artists in general rather than First Nations artists, states that in order for women to make their creativity economically worthwhile, they need the following; "...ideology that valued their creativity, cultural support that sustained their creative lives, a market or exchange system that provided a demand for their cultural products, and an audience that understood, criticized and kept their cultural traditions alive" (Jensen 1995: 4). Jensen states that while men created these environments they frequently left women out to fend for themselves. First Nations women's creative experiences and successes have been different from First Nations men's: "Sometimes that separateness has been embodied in different arts, sometimes in a distinctive content within arts practiced by men and women, and sometimes in a unique voice within an art dominated by men" (Jensen 1995: 5). First Nations women carvers are a truly unique voice within an art dominated by men. Despite past environments established by males

in the art- making business, women artists today are finding ways to overcome the barriers and claim their space on the gallery walls. I submit that if the Eurocentric belief that power exists in male carvings has been absorbed unconsciously within Native society, that the younger generation of women artists who are pursuing this carving tradition are doing so to attempt to regain the female's traditional power lost through colonial contact and to regain the sense of male-female balance within their communities.

While my research investigates the notion of gender equality within First Nations arts and the forward momentum of regaining the role of carving for women, Patricia Monture-Angus argues that the preoccupation of the Western world with defining equality is an obstacle for First Nations people in obtaining self-determination: "Respecting difference cannot be guaranteed by formal equality, but rather, from an Aboriginal location, must be understood as creating relationships of balance and harmony (or peace)" (Monture-Angus 1999: 31). In support of her argument Monture-Angus quotes from an essay titled *Patriarchy and Paternalism: The Legacy of the Canadian State for First Nations Women* written by Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond (1993):

Equality is simply not the central organizing political principle in our communities. It is frequently seen by our elders as a suspiciously selfish notion, as individualistic and alienating from others in the community. It is incongruous to apply this notion to our communities (Turpel-Lafond 1993 in Monture-Angus 1999: 32).

I will examine whether for some women carvers the act of pursuing carving as a creative outlet is a measure of decolonization or 'retraditionalization;' a taking back of what once was a shared task between a husband and wife or between an uncle and niece. I will ask whether for other women carvers it is a means to further secure the tradition of carving for her matrilineal culture and insure that it remains.

Berlo demonstrates how a group of Inuit women have taken the lead in an emerging Inuit art movement. "The author examines this preponderance in terms of artistic genius, economics, self-determination, traditional decision making and southern marketing techniques" (Berlo 1989, 293). Art Co-ops created by the Inuit people were based on the traditional values of consensus, limited hierarchy, and group effort; in this way they are self determined in that they are stepping away from the western cash-based evaluation systems (Berlo 1989: 304). Although there are not as many women stone carvers today as there were in the pre-Hudson's Bay era, several women pursue active careers as carvers. One example would be Ovilu Tunnillie who was trained under her father (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 166). In Yuka Izu's thesis titled *What Do Inuit Drawings Mean to Nisga'a Children?* (2002: 55) she quotes Marie Bouchard as saying, "In Inuit culture the aesthetic experience exists as part of an integrated whole and is not segregated into a separate category as in Western forms of classification" (Bouchard 2000: 14-15 in Izu 2002). For the Inuit, art is "a great living tradition practiced, and continually evolving through centuries" (Bouchard 2000:17 in Izu 2002).

Anderson states that: "Whether at the individual level or the national level, creative expression is essential for the recovery of our identity" (Anderson 2000: 144). The First Nations women carvers today are expressing self-determination and traditional decision making in choosing the art forms that they do. Through their art, and their roles as First Nations women they are the purveyors of culture for future generations. This is an important role for First Nations women and one that is recognized by many First Nations female artists as being more important than recognition within the gallery system.

## First Nations Women Artists in the Literature

Literature on the specific topic of First Nations women carvers is scarce. However there are a few publications that address First Nations women artists in general such as Doreen Jensen and Polly Sargent's *Robes of Power* (1986). They describe the current tradition of button blankets which have largely replaced the woven Chilkaat blankets made before and also after contact. This publication speaks to the arts in terms of what Westerners consider to be crafts such as weaving or button blanket making. The book is a tribute to the history of the button blanket and the contemporary continuance of this art today. It is interesting to note that the publisher, UBC Press (2004) noted on their web site that "The traditional crest-style robe is the *sister* of the totem pole" (UBC Press website 2004: my italics). There are more than a few examples of publications on First Nations artists in general that detail both the art of the First Nations male and the craft of First Nations women. In twentieth century publications there are examples of contemporary printmaking and painting done by First Nations women, but I did not find any texts which referenced a crossover in gender roles of art making except Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips' collaboration on *Native North American Art* (1998). This book details all forms of First Nations art making of both men and women across North America and they note that gender roles in art making are not as strictly adhered to today: "There are male potters in the Southwest, and female wood carvers on the Northwest Coast" (Berlo and Phillips 1998b: 22). First Nations women artists are pursuing all forms of creativity in their art making and several have chosen to pursue carving as one of their creative expressions.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Revealing the Design One Layer at a Time: Experiences of Five First Nations Woman Carvers.**

So every layer that you chip away you see another layer or color...it's like you're chipping away at time. (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004)

Each layer of wood reveals something different either in grain or color. What I learned from these five carvers is that the beauty of the wood is revealed as each of these layers is carved away. You can't look at a log and see the final product in its truest form. In interviewing the female carvers in this research project I had to leave behind any of my implied interpretations, to see and hear the stories of the art as told by the artists. After all, it is not just the art itself, but the creative process of the artist that lends meaning to the finished carving. As I met each of these women I discovered that as each question was raised and answered I learned more and more about the artist hidden beneath many layers. So I will reveal these layers to you in six careful stages; I have learned that if you take away too much in one layer you can ruin the overall design of the carving. I will begin with the history of carving in each woman's family and the presence of female carvers in their family history. The next layer reveals why these women chose carving as a creative outlet. Still another rich layer in the diverse responses has to do with whether they consider their carving to be traditional, contemporary or new-traditional and how each of these women defines these categories. The next layer reveals how they balance the roles of artist, woman, daughter, wife, mother, sister and niece. The finishing of this piece involves a discussion of understanding their individual definitions of success as a First Nations woman carver and how their community perceives and accepts their work.

The finished piece reveals all the beauty of a fine carving; rich with expression, color and stories.

### **Historical Traditions of Carving and the Presence of Female Carvers in the Five First Nations Carvers' Families.**

Carving is not an art form normally associated with the Eastern Carrier people, as they are located east of the cedar growing areas of British Columbia, but Pauline Allan decided to study under Ron Sebastian to learn the northern Northwest Coast style. Sebastian (Gwin Butsxw) is from the Gitxsan and Witsuwit'en First Nations where the red and yellow cedar grow in abundance and carving is a tradition. The Witsuwit'en are also known as the Western or Bulkley River Carrier, who have intermarried into the Eastern Carrier and the Gitxsan since time immemorial. Pauline's only remembrances of carving in her home territory were pictographs on rock, and a totem pole in Stellako which she feels was brought in from outside. The regalia for her people didn't consist of carved masks, but rather beautiful moose hide beaded items and intricately woven baskets. She comes from that part of the Carrier nation that does not have cedar trees. So here is a Carrier woman interested in learning carving despite the lack of tradition in her family for this type of art form. Undoubtedly Pauline is aware of the carving done in the Western Carrier or Witsuwit'en and Gitxsan communities. This is not surprising as Pauline is a diverse artist who explores all avenues of art making and is currently accepted into the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. Pauline stated that one other relative, a cousin in Nadleh Whut'en, does carving although she's not sure of her style as she hasn't really studied her pieces (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004). Despite the lack of male or female carvers historically in her nation and the definite absence of



familial female carvers, she chose to learn this form of art. I daresay that she is opening the doors to female youth within her community to explore this medium for themselves. Intermarriages amongst different nations has lead to the mingling of traditions in a family and as a female she feels it is imperative that the cultures of both families be learned and passed along to the younger people whether it be through the arts or through storytelling.

Valerie Morgan feels very strongly about passing her knowledge on to the Gitxsan youth. She comes from the Kwakwaka'wakw and Gitxsan First Nations and carving is a strong tradition in both of these Nations. Her father was a carver and her husband is a carver. There is a strong tradition of carving in her mother's family and Valerie's birth place of Alert Bay. Valerie shares a family love of carving with her sister Virginia Morgan of Hazelton. She feels a terrible sense of loss when she returns to Alert Bay and the galleries there won't buy her work because she is no longer a resident there and the carving tradition in Alert Bay is currently male oriented. In fact I found it very difficult to find any listing of a female carver in that area other than the historical references to Ellen Neel.

Dale Campbell stated that the Tahltan carved very little; soap berry spoons, or mountain goat spoons were the only items that Dale remembers seeing carved in her family. There were no totem poles or masks. Currently her brother has taken up a form of carving as a jeweler and she states that on the Tlinget side of her father's family there may have been carvers. So in this generation she is the only wood carver of either sex who is known in her nation. However, carving is prevalent in Prince Rupert where she was raised and lives today.

This contrasts with the stories of Virginia and Valerie Morgan who have a rich heritage of carvers in their family both on the Gitxsan side and the Kwakwaka'wakw side. Their father Wallace Morgan was a hereditary chief and some of the totem poles of the Gitxsan belong to his house. While recovering from TB in a hospital for eleven long years he carved miniature replicas of these poles. Virginia and her sister Valerie are in the first generation of female carvers in their family. Virginia recognizes both Freda Diesing of the Haida nation and Doreen Jensen as carvers from the previous generation, but states that carving in previous generations was done mostly by men; "Only men were hired by the chiefs to carve for them" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). Yet Virginia notes that times have changed: Virginia has been asked by chiefs to do a chief's rattle, a head dress and a mask. She sees a resurgence of the use of regalia and she states that the Gitxsan people realize the importance of this in retaining and revitalizing their culture. "I feel that we (women) have come a long way, and so have the men, as far as appreciating the artistic abilities that we have and share" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). To be asked to carve these pieces is a high form of recognition; to be a woman in this position is telling of the changes taking place in this society.

Vicki Moody from the Haida nation was selected from a group of applicants to work with Ron Wilson on a large project which involved the carving of six totem poles. She was the only woman working on the site. Vicki appreciates the opportunity given to her to express herself as a woman in a huge way, "... I don't know, in Skidegate anyway, of any other women carvers other than an elderly lady, her name is Melanie and she's ninety and she used to drive a truck on the dirt roads and carve argillite" (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). Vicki's husband Garner Moody was hired as a

master carver on the same project. When I asked Vicki if the other male carvers were accepting of the fact that there was a woman carving with them she laughed a bit and stated that she recognized it was uncharted waters for them and that everybody was curious as to whether she could pull it off. She is a relatively small woman and had to straddle the pole and climb all over it to do her carving work. There are many artists in her family, including her husband who is a master carver and her oldest son who is currently carving bracelets with a fine and detailed hand. In Haida history, Freda Diesing has been the only notable female carver, although she was more recognized outside her community as she lived on the mainland and traveled and taught throughout the Northwest Coast during her career.

### **Carving as a Creative Outlet**

Pauline Allan expressed her love for carving by saying; “Carving, hmmm, I like carving because you can express your feelings on a piece of wood” (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004). To me wood seems to give the appearance of being a hard and unforgiving material in which to carve out your creative expression but Pauline states that working in yellow cedar is like carving in butter. She’s done a few projects, such as a mask, a paddle and a jewelry box, and she also worked with a group of eight carvers under the direction of Ron Sebastian to create two door panels which were commissioned by the Prince George Tourism center. Pauline was the only woman on the team and recognizes the odds in that percentage. As she pursues her continuing education in visual and fine arts at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver, BC, Pauline will continue to use her carving skills and hopes one day do jewelry design as well. Although carving is not an Eastern Carrier tradition, with her training in the northern Northwest

Coast style, Pauline feels that she will soon develop her own style. No matter what art form she is working in at the time, Pauline adheres to her grandmother's philosophy and words, "... 'keep busy, don't stay still, keep working...bead if you have to or do something'. She did a lot of beading. Every time I saw her she was working on a jacket or something. Same with my Aloo, my great grandma, she was always doing her baskets...it's a part of our culture" (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004). Having a creative outlet has allowed Pauline to overcome difficulties in her life that she says we all have; she deals with them by keeping busy and keeping her mind occupied and creating something of significance and beauty.

When Haida artist Vicki Moody first started doing her art, she did it as a healing process to rid her life of the problems related to alcohol and drugs. She put forth two large creative projects in the year 2000; a cedar woven cape and a totem pole. It took a full year to carve, paint, and erect the totem poles at Qay'llnagaay (Second Beach) at the current site of the Haida Gwaii museum. Vicki worked on the T'aanu pole which honors her grandfather and she remembers many an hour of contemplation working on the pole:

I really have a love affair with that totem pole but at the same time have such great respect for it, it almost frightens me with the power of it...your mind goes into the space and time of how long that tree has been alive. So every layer that you chip away you see another layer or color...its like you're chipping away at time. (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004)

Since then Vicki has found herself grounded from any means of creativity by the onset of Fibromyalgia, a disorder that seems to be more common in women. Ironically, while Vicki Moody chose art as a form of healing initially, the large projects that she undertook may have contributed to the onset of her Fibromyalgia. However, being the insightful thinker that she is Vicki feels that this is meant to be. As a part of her creative process

she will now use this time to learn more about herself as a woman. Although her life as a woman with Fibromyalgia right now is interfering with her being an artist, she accepts this stage in her life as all part of her creative process. While art has taught Vicki to sit still, being ill has taught her how to meditate and to go into another stage. But she is anxious to move on with her art, "...the feel of it is still there, it's very strong, but the strength isn't there, the endurance isn't there, and I know deep down in my heart that it's going to be my art work that will be my salvation..." (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). Vicki wants to carve another pole and has marked two trees, each over forty feet high, and she hopes that they will still be there when she is ready. It is physically tough and grueling work to carve a totem pole. The wood demands your full attention and respect and you need to be focused on what you're doing at all times. At one point she was sent home from the site because her mind was not on her work. "...you could easily make a huge error if you were to go in too deep and knock a chunk off and make a huge hole; which really gets you thinking about where you stand and how much you do know" (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004).

Dale Campbell recalls her high school days where girls were not permitted to take anything other than cooking or sewing. As she already knew how to do that, she wanted to take metalwork but it was not allowed. Dale soon started her carving training at a school started by Dempsey Bob and Freda Diesing in Prince Rupert at the back of the Lahaine store in the evening. There were only about sixteen or seventeen students and they did drawing and learned how to make their own carving tools. Later on she said she "got to work with Dempsey for about three years on a one to one basis and I really value that a lot" (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). For Dale, carving is a full

time career which occupies her time Monday to Friday and occasionally on weekends. After getting her son off to school in the morning she starts her work day. She works through one piece at a time until she has it finished to her high standards, before she moves on to another piece. Dale has carved several masks which are shown and sold through galleries and has worked on a thirty foot totem pole with her brother which was gifted to the people of Hong Kong by the government of Canada. She has also worked on two other poles; one thirty foot pole which she worked on with two other team members that stands outside the longhouse carving shed in Prince Rupert adjacent to the Museum of Northern BC, and one other smaller one she believes may be in the Museum storage at present. As a carver and a First Nations woman, Dale was selected for a National Native Role Model poster and along with that she became part of a group of role models to travel to communities to speak to youth, do workshops on carving and sometimes even a little workshop on karate. Carving is her creative release and her only artistic endeavor at present.

Not so for Valerie Morgan who divides her time between carving and her First Nations fashion designing. She admits that carving is not her primary focus at the moment as she is getting her fashion design business off the ground. When asked why she chose carving as one of her creative outlets her response was quite different from the other women; “Well, that’s the thing. It’s not something that you choose. I don’t feel you choose carving because you are born with it” (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). Valerie feels that it’s who she is, not only what she does and that today such a gift is treated differently than it was in times past:

You were born with a gift; people accepted it and you were hired to do certain things. Today if you haven’t done your five years of college,

university, and ended up after thousands of dollars in the hole with one piece of paper stating who you are, then you don't count for anything. People want your work but they want you to knock off prices if you don't have your papers. (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004)

Valerie has carved many pieces for galleries and is disillusioned by people who don't take the time to understand what the piece is really about. As an artist she puts a lot of time and thought into a piece and each one reflects a different aspect of who she is and where she was in her life at the time it was created. To her, it's all part of the creative process:

If you ever took the time and sat with that carver and listened to the story behind it and the feelings that went into it, and where they were at the time they were putting it together, then you would realize the connection...that there was something going on with that person somewhere along the line that connects them with that piece. That pulls it all together (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004).

Val stated that to understand the art, you have to listen to the story that the artist tells about her or his work and how a particular piece was created in the surroundings and happenings of the artist's everyday life (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). She walked away from the gallery system when it became clear that her work was not being respected for its cultural significance, and the meaning behind the work, and for the time and creative effort all which were very important to her as a First Nations woman artist. Fashion designing consumes most of Valerie's creative time these days and she shares this work with her daughter. In contrast to Haida artist Dorothy Grant, who has Robert Davidson draw the designs for her fashions, Valerie draws her own designs for her fashion work. Expressing the culture and stories through her Gitksan inspired fashion designs gives Valerie the creative and spiritual release that she feels is needed to

complete herself as a First Nations woman and an artist and it provides her people with garments that express their pride in their cultural tradition.

Virginia Morgan shares her carving time with teaching, quilting and writing a children's book which will bring a Scottish dragon to Gitxsan territory. Carving is her main artistic outlet as she thoroughly enjoys working with the wood: "I love carving portrait masks, mostly because of the different facial features. Carving comes from your soul, it is a matter of bringing out what you think and see from within. The end product allows others to see what you see and feel inside" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). During the school year she teaches a small group of high school students basic First Nations design and carving as she works on projects alongside them. This gives them an opportunity to learn by observing her in the carving process; this is how young carvers learned before there were schools and classrooms. On the two school breaks at Christmas and in the spring, Virginia spends as much time as she can at the carving shed. Summer is a different story: "If I have any time I carve in the summer. You would think that this is when I would do the majority of my carving. It gets quite busy in the summer. We are out on the river fishing, then we get busy in the smoke house" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). Carving is only one part of the many cultural activities that engages Virginia's time.

Carving was chosen as a creative outlet by each of these five women, although each did so for a somewhat different reason. Valerie Morgan felt that carving was not just something she did, it defined who she was; she is a carver, and felt that she was predestined to be a carver. She admits that carving has taken a back seat to her current love of First Nations fashion design, but she won't let it go completely. Besides recognizing



its cultural significance for the Gitxsan people, Valerie enjoys being a carver and when she can carve for the simple sake of carving she will return to this medium. In the meantime her First Nations fashion designs supply her people with clothing that expresses Gitxsan clan and crest identity.

Virginia Morgan studied carving at the Kitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art at K'san and it became her primary source of creativity. She has a strong sense of the cultural significance of carving and she uses her carving to spread the message of the Gitxsan culture. Her love for sharing the stories behind the carving will keep her involved in this medium of creative expression for a long time.

Dale Campbell wanted to do metal working as a teenager in school and later took classes from Dempsey Bob and Frieda Diesing in carving which started her on a lucrative career as an accomplished carver. It is her sole source of artistic creativity at this time and it provides her with both her creative and artistic release while also allowing her to be in the enviable position of every artist; she does it for a living.

Pauline Allan loves the beauty of carving and the expression brought out in the wood. Her creative outlets are varied as she is a student of the visual arts and enjoys many different mediums but carving is always something that she wants to return to.

Vicki Moody chose art as a healing tool in her life as her artistic soul was demanding release. She has since found that cedar gives her the creative release that she desires whether it be in carving or cedar bark weaving. She was awed by the immensity of the totem pole carving project and yearns to do another. Carving is one of the creative outlets that allows her creative expression while cedar weaving provides another means

for her to express herself in a cultural and spiritual fashion. Both result in creative outlets that satisfy her need to emphasize the Haida cultural traditions for her family.

### **Traditional, Contemporary and New-Traditional Carving**

The difference between traditional and contemporary native art work is still debated in the current journals such as in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, or the *Art Journal*. Each of the women interviewed had their own way of delineating or differentiating these categories, with Vicki Moody adding a catch-all category she called new-traditional.

When talking about the tradition of carving, Vicki recognizes that few if any women were carvers a hundred years ago. She puts this down to the division of tasks within the community and the time involved in each of these such as hunting, berry picking, weaving fresh mats, or fishing. “I find that with our culture everybody had their spot. If you were a carver then you were naturally a carver. It was the way you were born, something showed in your ability and that’s how you went forth, which is the way it should be” (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). This applies to the skills of weaving or fishing or any other skill needed for the nurturance of the family and the community.

With regards to carving, Vicki experienced a first hand education on the differences in understanding traditional and contemporary carving when the time came to paint the totem poles at Qay’lnagaay. The controversy within the community stemmed from the use of a turquoise color on the poles. It was a tough time for the artists working on the poles; “First of all for people to actually come to the artists and actually say to your face, ‘you guys should not be using that because it’s not traditional’ ” (V. Moody,

Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). Vicki knew that the color had been used as she had seen it in pictures of her grandmother's family, a high ranking family in the Masset area. "They are the Niku people and they are famous for their color...there were hats that were done in that turquoise color" (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004).

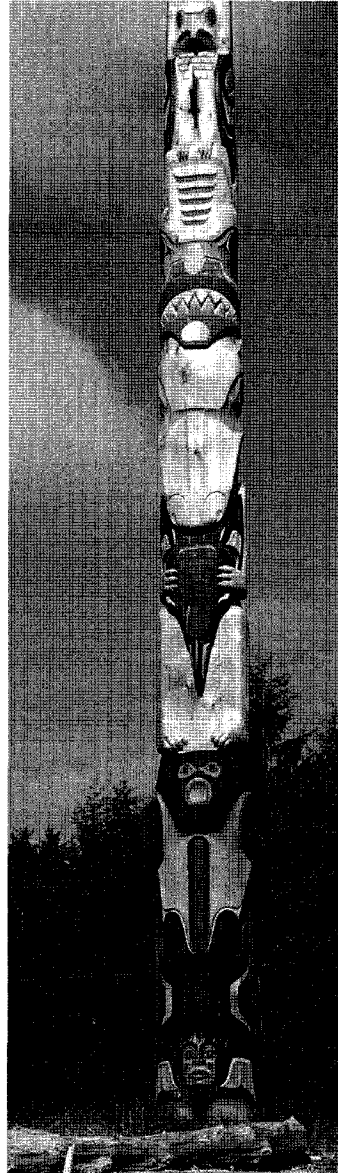


Figure 6: *T'annu Pole* at Qay'llnagaay, Haida Gwaii. Totem pole that Vicki Moody worked on.

Ron Wilson, the project leader, took it upon himself to research this use of color and he found the actual stone on Haida Gwaii and the historical information on how the color was processed and used. Even though it was a traditional color, it had not been used for a long time and thus it had been forgotten over the generations. Vicki argues that if she were an artist a hundred years ago she would have set her palette from whatever colors were available; “What I’m saying is naturally they would have used more colors if they had it and because there’s proof of it being around that far back it was mind boggling that it was so controversial” (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). As the painting on the poles progressed, more of the other master carvers decided to integrate the color into their own work. “It was kind of a magical surprise to see it all unfold and see it go on the other poles. It sounds like such a small thing, but it was such a huge, huge, thing” (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). There were, and still are skeptics about the color, but Vicki has come to terms with the controversy in true artistic fashion:

I think the actual process of being an artist is a controversial thing in the first place; taking chances and breaking rules or changing something to make it uniquely yours has always been something. That paint...that paint is something that will probably always make a big statement. (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004)

To Vicki, all Indigenous art is changing and evolving with the times. “Change is inevitable, and to be a new traditionalist, you can see the changes in people; younger generations of artists are coming forward and throwing in something else to the art, and yet keeping to the guidelines or rules...”(V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). By ‘rules’ Vicki means the traditions of the art itself, such as the purposes and the stories. Young artists are changing and adding to those traditions, given their own experiences and their space in time. Traditional and contemporary are intertwining. What once was

contemporary is now traditional and the contemporary of today will become the traditional of tomorrow. Time marches on.

Virginia Morgan feels that there is a subtle difference between traditional and contemporary carving: “To do a traditional ceremonial piece, you have to stay within the confines of the art form, and within the instructions given by the chief. A contemporary piece is taking a story or an idea and illustrating it, staying within the confines of the shapes, but stretching the imagination and carving something outside the confines of the art” (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). As an example Virginia showed me her Salmon Woman mask. She states that it is not a traditional transformation mask as it does not have an outer mask that opens to reveal the inner mask. This mask has one side which is a human face representing the woman and the other side is the salmon, representing the salmon before transforming into a woman. Virginia told me the story of Salmon woman which is an *andamatlasxw* in the Gitksan oral traditions. Virginia stated that these Wheget stories are community stories that are used to educate. Heather Harris states that:

Andamatlasxw usually refers to stories about Raven, called Wii Gyet (Great Man) by the Gitksan...*which serve* two main purposes: one is to provide cosmological explanations about the formation of the world as we know it and the other is to provide moral lessons regarding greed, envy, impatience, and other forms of human folly and excess” (Harris 2004: 10 my italics).



Figure 7: Virginia Morgan. *Salmon Woman* transformation mask.

Salmon Woman, she was a salmon but she was able to transform into a human being. She ended up marrying Wheget and Wheget was also able to transform from Raven to human. They married and she was quite happy and she always loved calling the salmon out of the water and so he always had food, she always had the smokehouse warm and everything. One day she was combing his hair, as she always kept his hair beautiful, just the way hers was radiant, and he started mistreating her. Then he went into the smokehouse and wanted the salmon and he ended up getting caught up in his hair and he threw the salmon to the ground and started cursing it. So, his wife Salmon Woman called the salmon and she went back into the water and left him and he was back to being all by himself. (Vi. Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004)

So when I did that piece I wanted there to be a little bit of a transformation, so on one part I have Salmon woman or just the woman features, and on the other side I've got the salmon coming out of the face. That to me is more of a contemporary piece. It wouldn't be a piece that you know, would have been done a long time ago. Some of them [masks on her walls] are just portrait faces or portrait masks with different expressions on there for different reasons (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004).

Virginia stated that for feast bowls the instructions given by the chief are adhered to and the carver stays within the confines of the art form. The bowls are symmetrical; what ever is on the left is also on the right. If you were to do a contemporary feast bowl it would be a piece that you imagine: “You would still be using the ovoids, u-shapes and l-shapes, but it does not necessarily have to be symmetrical” (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). So even when she carves contemporary pieces Virginia is still using the traditional shapes within her design. “It is quite a process, because I am staying within the confines of the art form, but carving a piece that portrays a story or idea in a totally different manner” (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). In her carving traditional is not only the form but also the subject matter which comes from the oral traditions.

Story telling is something that Virginia uses in her classroom to enhance the curriculum: “I love telling the story of the ‘Frog Spirit’ to children because I do a follow-up lesson that involves learning about the eco-system, and how what we do today could affect what happens in the eco-system tomorrow” (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). The frog spirit mask is a contemporary piece with a human face on one side representing the beautiful woman in the story and on the other side a frog is carved on the forehead and continues to the cheek area. There is also a frog in the mouth. The story that accompanies this piece is an adaa’ox or oral history. Harris states that: “The elders treat these stories with great reverence. The stories are told to educate young people about their family history and they are told as part of the process of maintaining ownership of family territories” (Harris 2004: 9). To the Gitxsan people an adaa’ox is

owned exclusively by a house group. Virginia is a member of the frog clan and was therefore able to share this story with me:

A long time ago, in a village not too far from here, a young prince and his friends were asked to go out and gather food. The village would surely starve if they did not do this. The prince and two friends left the village in their canoe. They had almost reached the place where they would rest over night, when the prince noticed an enormous fish swimming under the canoe. The prince had them slow down the canoe. He raised his spear and waited for the fish to appear again. The prince thrust his spear into the side of the fish and fought it aboard. They carried on to where they would camp.

His friends gathered driftwood and started a fire. The prince laid his fish on some hemlock branches and a frog leapt onto it. The prince was startled, but became angered at the frog. He took his spear and poked at the frog, and then pushed the frog into the fire. The frog tried to crawl from the fire but he held it there with his spear. He laughed at the frog as the skin began to peel. The frog eventually died. The sun was going down, and fog loomed over the camp. It was eerie and sent shivers down their spine. They were all afraid, but managed to fall asleep. The following morning the fog had lifted and the sun's rays were warming the beach. They gathered their belongings and loaded their canoe. As they paddled away from shore, they could hear an eerie noise. They turned to shore and standing there was a radiant woman. She called to them pleading for them to take her with them. They went back; the prince went to shore, reached out to her and only a frog leapt away. This happened three times. After the third time, the prince refused to go back for her.

She warned them that if they did not go back for her they would die one by one and that the last person would tell the chief what had happened and he too would die. And as she had said, they all died, one by one. When at last the third person reached home, he told the chief and the villagers what had happened and he too fell over and died. The chief knew that this had happened because of the actions of the prince. And he knew that it was a warning to others in the village not to mistreat creatures of the earth. So on those evenings when fog covered the beach, people of the village could hear eerie noises. They were always reminded of the prince and his lack of respect for the power and responsibility that he had to his people" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004).





Figure 8: Virginia Morgan. *Frog Spirit* mask.

When Virginia tells this story to the children with her contemporary Frog Spirit mask she relates it to the eco-system and reminds them of their responsibility to take care of their surroundings, even in their own yard.

Virginia then displayed her Wind mask and explained that with the different dances, they would use masks to portray mother earth such as a sun mask, a moon mask, or a wind mask. This mask has pursed lips and long hair and it is painted in the traditional blue-green color used by the Gitxsan which represents “spirituality and the wholeness of the person or even the culture itself and transformation, how anything can transform from one thing to another” (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004).



Figure 4: Virginia Morgan. *Wind Spirit* mask.

Virginia further explained that even though the blue-green is a traditional and spiritual color it could still be used in a contemporary mask.

When Pauline Allan trained as a carver under Ron Sebastian she learned everything from the selecting and cutting down of the tree to the finishing of the final carved piece. Pauline learned about the different Northwest coast clans and that a mask is usually created with a story behind it. Art is a large component in Pauline's family with her various relatives doing basket weaving, hide work and beadwork and Pauline has many interests in the visual arts as well. She realizes that carving is not a tradition of her people, but for her, it is just another form of expressing herself artistically. When Pauline carved the paddle she did a beaver as her husband is a beaver and she has used this on most of her work as she takes pleasure in how it pleases her husband to see his crest.



Figure 10: Pauline Allan. *Beaver crest paddle*.

The mask that Pauline carved which is a depiction of a human does not have a traditional story behind it, but it does carry the story of her own growth as a carver and an artist.

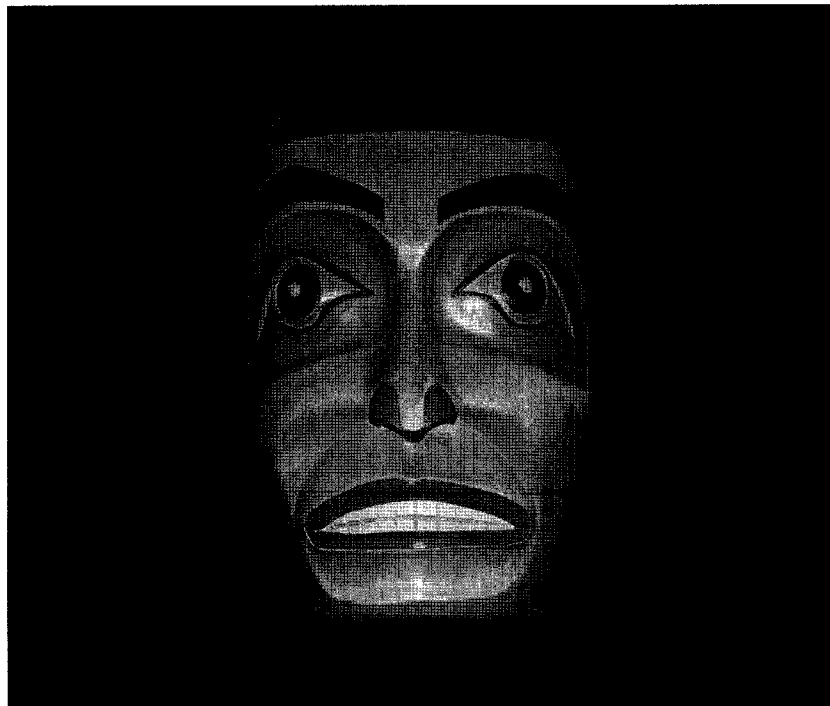


Figure 11: Pauline Allan. *Human Face mask*.

Valerie Morgan feels that defining whether carving is traditional or not falls into the same category as the tourists that come and say, "... 'you know I came this way and were looking for people living in teepees'...you know they're still stuck in that role. And then you ask them, 'why is it we need to stay in this spot for you people instead of moving forward together?'"(Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). Valerie combines her traditions with today's knowledge and creates beautiful art. She does recognize that carving ceremonial pieces requires more attention to the traditions:

There are certain people that have names that have been around for ever, and those names have their own stories that have been carried on from a long time ago and there are certain ways that...if I was going to do a design they'd say, 'the head has to be down or has to be tipped' and you have to know exactly the place the design will be (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004).

Valerie carved one ceremonial mask of the One Horned Goat that is a story from her father's house. Controversy surrounds this piece as a number of families are laying claim to the story. Although the piece was supposed to be presented at a feast, it was not acknowledged in the feast hall because of all the arguments over who owned the story. She feels that the stories need to be shared and not kept in a "closed box," otherwise "they don't really stay alive" (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). Keeping the culture alive is one of the reasons Valerie carves.



Figure 12: Valerie Morgan. *One Horned Goat* mask.

One particular piece that she carved is a rattle. Unfinished as yet, it holds a part of her heart inside it; the rattle contains all her children's baby teeth, a piece of abalone from Alert Bay, and a piece of a blue rock from Arizona which she feels has a spiritual connection to her in some way. The carvings on the rattle feature the Raven stealing the sun, and two frogs; one represents her as her mother's house in Alert Bay is the Thunderbird which there is considered the same as the frog; the other frog is her husband Ken Mowatt who is a frog in the Gitksan nation. The rattle also depicts the human images of her husband and herself as well. Valerie states that normally a rattle would be done in birch wood as it is a very hard wood and produces a clear sound for a rattle but she has chosen to use alder for this piece. This piece will not leave her home for a very

long time as it holds too much importance to her both emotionally as a mother and artist, and spiritually as a First Nations woman:

A lot of the stuff that we are is the power of our soul and the way that we connect with another person and go into who they are and pull out the bad stuff and use this (points to the rattle)...and we use our animals and we're really in tune with the animals, we work with them and there is a respect between them and us. When I went up to the sweat, I took this piece in with me and worked through an issue as far as my mother went, because she left me when I was thirteen, she passed on. Not a good age to be left. I accepted her leaving and I put that to peace and everything is fine. Then I had a niece that passed on and she's really young, really energetic and really sad inside, and always was here. So I sang a song to her when it was my turn and I used this (the rattle) and when the sweat was finished there was this little frog inside the sweat lodge that they removed. So she was there and she let me know she was there cause she's a frog...I sang the frog song for her. When everything was all finished, then I took what I was carrying, which I worked on for a little over a week...I carried something that was meant for her and I carried something that was meant for my mother...when I was there I worked through it and I gave it over to them in the sweat and when I was finished I went over to the fire and I put it into the fire and it went up to where they were. So then they took it with them and they...and the feeling that I put into that is with them now...and I can't take it back it's gone...and if you accept that it just makes you a better person it makes you a better person and stronger. So that's why it's really important for people to take moments out of their life and try and work on stuff. So that's why this piece will never be finished and this one will stay with my kids as long as it stays like this" (Interview (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004).

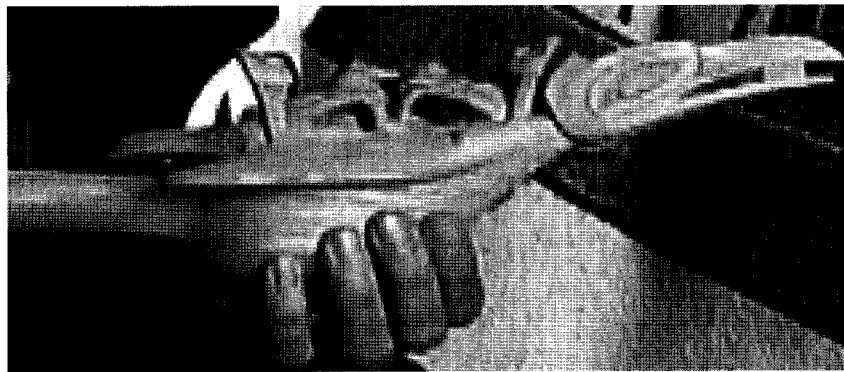


Figure 13: Valerie Morgan. *Raven Rattle*.

I'm not sure whether Valerie would even acknowledge a difference between traditional or contemporary when defining this rattle, although she does acknowledge the spiritual power that it holds. To Valerie her work is all traditional, and yet it is also contemporary as it is being produced in today's world. One thing I am sure of is that it will never be sold in a gallery. Her statements demonstrate that the traditional and the contemporary art creations overlap and both are grounded in a deep spiritual tradition.

Dale Campbell defines traditional carving as keeping within a definite set of rules when creating a design, and staying within that context.



Figure 14: Dale Campbell. *Human Face with Labret mask*.

She considers herself to be a traditional carver because she isn't a mass production type of artist; she takes time and care with her work and keeps within the traditional rules

while still incorporating some of her own style. When asked if adding a touch of her own style to a piece is putting a contemporary edge on it she agreed. Her carvings are inspired by the stories of her Tahltan and Tlingit heritage.



Figure 15: Dale Campbell. *The Man Who Married the Bear* mask.

None of her masks have ever been danced in a feast as using carved masks is not a tradition for the Tahltan, who are her mother's people. As stated before, Dale and her brother carved a thirty foot Killer Whale totem pole that she designed and it was gifted to the people of Hong Kong by the Canadian government. While they were in Hong Kong they carved another eight foot pole for the Canadian embassy. The thirty foot pole was raised traditionally in Kowloon Park: "We had a group of dancers, my Mom came, and drummers, singers and we all did the dance around the pole. First the artists danced around the pole with button blankets on, then everybody else got to dance" (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). Dale was in the process of carving a new mask which is depicted below.



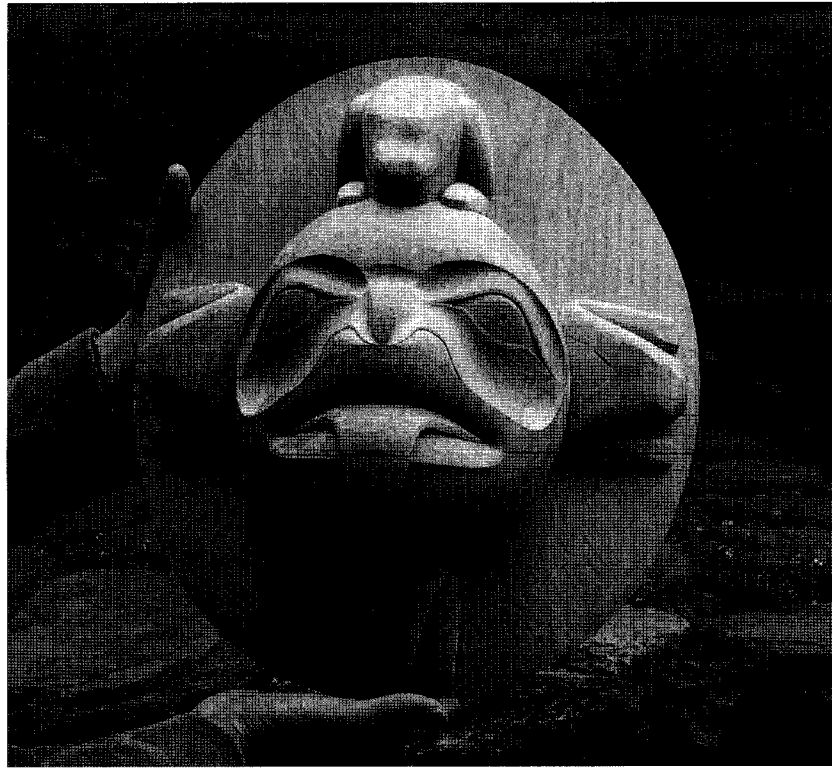


Figure 16: Dale Campbell. *Frog Moon Mask*, work in progress.

She completed the mask over the summer and sold it to the Coastal Peoples Gallery in Vancouver, BC. The main face is the mother of the frog children. The frogs on the rim of the mask are the frog children. It is carved of red alder and the finished mask has abalone inlay on the eyes and on the rim. It has some red and black paint and the rim is painted a light blue color. A picture of the completed mask should be available on the Coastal Peoples Gallery website in the near future.

From all of these women I have discerned a common thread of discussion and agreement. Purpose does not define whether the piece is *traditional* or not. Traditional carving is defined by its strict adherence to the basic design principles as established in northern Northwest Coast art forms, such as the use of ovoids and U-shapes.

Contemporary pieces make use of these same traditional principles but allow the artist a

freedom of creative expression in her choice of materials, different finishes or artistic touches. When carving pieces requested by chiefs for ceremonial purposes, there is little room for creative license, as the chief will decide exactly what he wants and he will want it depicted just as it has been in his family for generations. So although there is a difference between carvings done for the gallery which allow for more creative freedom and carving done for ceremonial purposes, such as House or Clan business which tends to adhere to the wishes of the chiefs who are ordering the pieces, all the work is done in the traditional design style. All these women are creating 'authentic' carvings whether they are for commercial galleries, classroom storytelling, or ceremonial feasts, and as their words demonstrate they would not appreciate being asked whether their work was authentic. Yet to the uninformed buyer of First Nations art, authentic equates to traditional. As Valerie Morgan stated, sometimes these buyers come looking for the artists who are still living in teepees as they feel this makes the work 'more' traditional or 'authentic' (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). Yet even when ignorant of Northwest Coast or other First Nations traditions, the buyers often are attracted to the piece because art speaks across cultures in a language that transcends words.

While there are some pieces created by these women solely for the gallery space, some of these same pieces could very easily be used for ceremonial purposes. Although all the women recognize the significance of carving a ceremonial piece such as one requested by a chief, each of the women also notes that while there are certain rules that pertain to the story of the piece being carved, there is always a little bit of today in the piece and thus it is also contemporary. As Val Morgan states "...my work brings our

traditions and today, and puts them together” (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004).

**Artist, Woman, Daughter, Wife, Mother, Sister, Niece.**

When Dale Campbell first learned to carve she enjoyed the challenge of working with the wood and as well “...being a woman, because not very many women were doing it then” (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). Dale had the good fortune and honor to be trained under one of those few female carvers; Haida artist and teacher Freda Diesing. Although Dale recognizes that there are more women carving now, she also notes that acceptance of female carvers is different for every nation. She felt the apprehension from other artists and heard the funny remarks when she first started, but she didn’t feel threatened in any way. “...they would say, ‘well you know before women weren’t allowed to carve’...right...and I’m just thinking and saying well that was before, this is now” (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). So how does being a woman affect her art making? As for most women with families there are the daily responsibilities of children and all the tasks that are involved in making a safe and happy home for them. Dale is no different in this regard as her day starts out with getting her son off to school and her husband off to work. As she works from her home Dale settles into her carving straight away, and finds that her work day is often interrupted: “I got to stop and make lunch, and stop to make dinner and do the dishes, and do laundry or clean the house” (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). Despite all these non-artistic responsibilities that can sometimes take her away from her creative train of thought, Dale is happy with her end product. She is a perfectionist in her work and sets a high standard of quality for herself: “I’m trying to get this done, and oh it doesn’t look

right, and oh I got to change this...It seems to go on forever and ever, but it turns out the way I want it to turn out. I'm happy with it and that's what's important" (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). As to the look of her finished carving Dale feels that being a woman has an influence on her style; she has heard comments such as "oh I could tell this was done by a woman because it's much more refined and it's much more finished." Overall Dale does not feel as though her gender has held her back in her carving, in fact she feels that it has sometimes helped her. Dale has participated in an all-woman show called *Vision Keepers* at the Alcheringa Gallery in Victoria, BC with fellow artists Valerie Morgan, Susan Pointe and Isabel Rorick. She thought the concept of an all woman show was exciting and leading edge because in her words, "there are hardly ever any all-woman art shows, and I don't know if it's because they think their work won't sell or I don't know what it is..." (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). Dale had dealt with another gallery in Vancouver with a woman owner who offered to pay her more for her carving because she was a woman carver. So being a woman has not held Dale back in any way. Through her brother she heard that she has influenced other young women to become artists through her role model activities in various communities. "I just thought that's why, that's why everything worked out that way and I would end up going and talking to all these kids on reserves and stuff. It felt like I had found the purpose in my life, to go out and to be inspirational to young kids, teenagers, with my art work..." (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). As a First Nations Woman who has established herself internationally as a renowned artist and carver, Dale is definitely a role model for young First Nations women who aspire to be artists and carvers themselves.

Inspiring youth is important to Valerie Morgan as well as is teaching them the different art forms important to their culture. Valerie feels that you should teach the children all that you can and make sure that you leave them with some of this knowledge. “You don’t want it to die,” Valerie said (Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). She has taken up cedar weaving, pine needle weaving, Chilkaat weaving, carving and clothing design and she shares all of this knowledge and skill with her children and any other members of the community who want to come to her home and learn: “I work with a lot of youth in Kitwanga and I work with a lot of the ladies, young women with kids, and I’ve opened up my home downstairs where they can come around and they sit and they sew” (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). This provides opportunity for the young people to sit with other women and share stories and experiences. Valerie remembers her grandmother sharing stories when she was young:

It’s through their stories that will continue to keep us as natives strong, as women especially because we are the women that will carry on the generations through having our babies...So that makes us even more powerful. To go through the pain of giving birth is just a small portion of all the things that we go through in our life and struggles...sit back and count them...what we go through all adds up to who we are today (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004).

Valerie continues to emphasize the importance of this power and how combining it with your artistic gift can produce a very powerful statement. She makes this strong statement of women’s power through her carving. Valerie is aware of the differences in her carving to that of male carvers:

When I had my stuff in the gallery and people would come through and view it, and they’d notice themselves; “there’s softness” they’d say and then they’d find out it was by a woman and they’d say that’s why. To see even some of the men carvers and you look at their piece and you see something, you get a feeling that there’s a little softness but not, then that’s their female side coming out and working with their male

side...instead of all that hardness and being that macho man...(laughing). Where as women we were born to be soft, we were born to be there and be who we are and be very accepting, and nurture and take care, so you put all that into your carving. (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004)

Valerie states that as women we are required to grow up faster and be ready for whatever comes our way:

The only reason why is because you are put into a position where along comes this child and the guy, well he's not going to be sitting there breastfeeding. It's got to come from somewhere, so you've got to think quickly and you've got to accept fast, and work with what you've got. So that's what we are, as women we have to grow fast. So I think when you put the sister, the mother, the daughter, everything together, and all that goes with that, and then your life from when you were small and bring it all the way up to where you are today and what you've learned; you look at all those pieces and you see a lot of feeling goes into those and you can put it up on the wall, a piece that comes from the heart. (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004)

In terms of recognizing work that is done from the heart and soul of the artist and work that is "...just a chopped up piece of wood sitting on a wall" (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004), Valerie feels that there is a difference in the art buying public. Some select their art to match their furniture and they don't really care to take the time to know what went into the piece. Others just want it to put on their wall so they can say "...oh you know, I support those people" (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). She feels that you may find one out of a hundred people that will connect with a piece because they have taken the time to understand and get to know the piece. Valerie puts herself as a woman of both Kwagwiltz and Gitksan heritage into each of her pieces; from her rattle to each of her beautiful carvings sold in galleries. As a woman she feels the strong sense of responsibility in passing on her knowledge to the youth:

As a woman carver and it's not just the carving cause as a woman in general in order to be able to touch other people in a certain way and if

you really want to reach other people, then you have to know more than just the one medium. So what I've done hopefully, if there are other women out there, is to learn as much as you can learn and don't stop learning and then it doesn't matter who is out there if they're willing to come to you there's a way that you're going to find out how to help them because you will have a lot to offer. Through all the arts that I do, I've always found, even with the younger ones, is they don't have very much patience, but if you can work with them and their interests, they find themselves as they are working on pieces, they're working out little things and letting them go. All I do is that much (indicates with fingers a small amount) for a person and then they'll remember someday down the line what did work for them and then they go back to it. That's good enough...just some helping tool...cause that's what's helped me get to where I am today. (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004)

Valerie feels that women have the power to create life and to pass their gifts of creativity on to the youth so that they can continue to keep their culture alive and healthy in their communities.

Vicki Moody of Haida Gwaii has learned the art of carving, and she has a special gift for cedar weaving. She wants to pass her knowledge to her children when they are ready. Vicki takes her role as mother very seriously. When she applied to work as a member of the team doing the totem poles she noted on her application form that she was a mother and that came first for her above all else. Because of this statement, Vicki did not feel they would invite her to join the group, but in fact they did. She was surprised, happy and thankful to be given the "...opportunity as a woman to express myself in a huge way" (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). While working on the pole Vicki was very aware of the spiritual aspects surrounding her. There were a lot of deaths surrounding this project, involving family members of the artists that were carving and also the knowledge that the site they were working on had previously been a village. While clearing the site they found bones and Vicki could feel the presence of spirits at times, especially when she was working alone. Vicki lost one set of grandparents, Annie

Mill and Nathan Young “who was a chief of T’annu, which was very significant to me because I had the honor of working on the T’annu pole” (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). Vicki worked through her grief while carving on the pole and in fact at the bottom of the T’annu pole is a human image in a state of grief and Vicki stated that it represented her.



Figure 17: Vicki Moody. Lower figure on *T’annu Pole* at Qay’Il’nagaay.

The labor of the pole was very physically taxing and time consuming. She stated that she could understand why women didn’t do this back a hundred years ago: “If we went back a hundred years ago before the metal [tools] came, I can see why. There’s also the time involved; women had to be getting things ready at a certain time of the season like berries or fresh mats or other things they had to do,” (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). There is a season for everything and a time for everything and for now Vicki is contemplating her roles as a woman, an artist, and as a family member and she is



wondering where her next journey will take her while she battles Fibromyalgia.. “What I’m going through, I’m going through for a reason in that I’ll be able to touch people a different way, not just through my art, so I think in some ways I look forward to coming out of it, but it’s a rocky road that has been pretty bumpy all through” (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004).

Vicki’s surviving grandmother had a hard life tainted with the realities of residential school and colonial encroachment, and when Vicki was eighteen she was having a hard time understanding her grandmother’s acceptance of all that had happened in her life. Her grandmother closed any further discussion on the matter with these words, ““That time in my life was something that had to happen and it was meant to be, and things would not be the way they are today if that had not happened,’ that was it, and I was dumbfounded: she wasn’t complaining, so what gave me the right to complain? She was fine” (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). Vicki stated that her grandmother is a role model to her and she is perhaps closer to her than her own mother. “...with your mother it’s still...you’re her child, her first born. You can easily talk to someone that’s your own age and carry on a conversation and things will just glide off like nothing, but when you talk to your own mother, there is emotions that are connected, that one thing that can trigger you,” (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). All of these issues that Vicki is dealing with as a woman, a mother, a granddaughter, and a daughter will eventually come together in another creation that will be truly amazing. I can’t wait to see where her creative journey leads her next.

Pauline Allan is on a creative journey that has led her to study visual art at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. As an Eastern Carrier woman carving is not part

of her cultural upbringing. When it comes to her knowledge of carving in the Northwest coast tradition she recognizes that there are few women. What is important to note is that Pauline feels that there are more male artists in general than female artists, not just carvers. "I think probably because, like what's the statistics for people even being artists...I think it all has to do with passion" (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004). Overall she feels that being a woman is a big enough job without being an artist but that if you manage your time you can be successful at both. Raising a family and finding time to commit to your art making can be difficult: "I think that, you really have to work around those things. So you know we tend to the kids that day and then they're down for a nap or whatever and you're able to have time to do stuff like that or even when they're in bed...that's what it takes" (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004). I wondered if it was these challenges or hurdles that allowed more men to partake in the art world.

Pauline had her own theory on this:

I think woman let men...you know... go do your thing (hand gestures away)...and that's what it's like. Because it's in us, our family comes first of course, then your husband, or your spouse and then your kids, you know it's always the woman putting herself last. But that's in us, any woman, we're just caregivers, and we just want to do and feed other people and usually we come last. (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004).

Pauline feels that whether consciously or not women take on the role of caregiver, and she states that that's how she is but, "...it's like a juggling act especially if you have your husband and your children" (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004). For her Grandma, art in the form of beading or basket making was a way to keep creative and busy and Pauline states that this is part of her culture. As a woman with the trials of raising a family, sometimes a little carving or a little beading can give your hands

something to do while your mind thinks through the problems of the day. Pauline has kept a number of birch baskets made by her grandmother and recalls following her grandma around as a young girl:

I used to follow my grandma around everywhere like berry picking and just doing all the traditional stuff and I would just sit and watch her cut fish and she would just talk and cut. I remember when I was learning to cut fish and I wasn't doing a very good job and my grandpa would get mad, he'd say I was wasting. But my grandma would say 'let her go, she has to learn'. (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004)

The importance of women passing on traditions by watching and learning is something impressed on Pauline from her time with her Grandma. In the Carrier culture, the women contribute heavily to the Balhats; "the more you contribute the more it shows your standing of where your place is" (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004). Women also hold some of the big names in the family. Pauline's Grandmother had a big name in the family and when she passed on her Auntie Rose took that over along with another name. Pauline also remembers the other contribution of midwife made to her family by her Grandma:

She delivered every one of my aunts and uncles except Sheboom, Martin, and Nelson. Can you imagine, just go out and have your baby? Women are like the backbone of the family I believe. And I'm sure like yourself you can express all this in your art work of how strong a woman can be, you know. It's good to have a man, but a woman is like...just powerful. (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004)

Pauline states that she notices this difference in the art work of men and women. "...not to say that men don't get touched but I think that women have deep down feelings, and I'm sure men do too; but I've always noticed a difference" (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004). As Pauline was growing up she was taught to value the men as hunters and providers, so they were important and to this day "...when we had a big get together

of some sort men were served first, so I think it was to do with way back when, that when they used to go out and trap and take care of the family” (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004). Along with the teachings of her grandmother to put her family first, Pauline has found the time to be a carver and an artist. She has strong words to pass on to any First Nations female artist in her position:

I think it’s important to know that if you have a lot of good talent that the lord has given you, don’t feel afraid to express your feelings through your work, your art work. I encourage all the women who have any kind of artistic ability to just keep on going with it, because you never know you could be famous even though you didn’t mean to be. Just keep up what your passion is in your heart, to always try to go forward no matter what was behind you and to never look back. That would be good. (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004)

Virginia Morgan recognizes that there are very few women carvers but that this is changing. “I feel that there are many women born with artistic abilities, and that they are now encouraged to enhance those abilities and gifts. I think it is the fact that we can carve, and that we are becoming recognized for the work that we do, that more women are getting into the carving field” (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). As a woman her art is influenced by a lot of things. She is a wife, a sister, a mother and a grandmother and all these roles have played out in her life and can be seen in her art. She feels it is important for her daughter’s son to know where he comes from. “His grandmother on his dad’s side (Nuuchahnulth) exposes him to their style and I expose him to ours” (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). She is currently working on a Wolf mask for him as that is his dad’s crest and clan. The Nuuchahnulth are a patrilineal society as opposed to his Gitksan heritage which is matrilineal. During a visit

last summer, Virginia experienced a reinforcement of why it is important for her to carve, and to share her culture with her family:

Last summer, my daughter and two of our sons came to spend some time with us. While here, my grandson Xavier used all of my animal masks in a dance called the 'Animal Kingdom' dance. It was just awesome. He brought the masks to life through movement, and that is what those masks were meant to be used for. He sung the song with his deep voice; I had a lump in my throat and tears of joy in my eyes. It was truly amazing. I was honored to have him wear my masks, and perform a dance that comes from his Nuuchahnulth culture. I am carving a Wolf head dress for Xavier...it will be in the Gitxsan style as I feel it is important for Xavier to know where he comes from. (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004)

The importance of women sharing their culture with their children and grandchildren is at the forefront of this story, but it also relates to an experience that will become a part of the mask that she will carve. As Virginia states, "Every piece is different, and there are pieces of my life going into each of them" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). For her son Nathan, Virginia carved a mask that has his hair on it. She cut his hair when he was five and saved it:

The mask itself is titled 'Sma'win' meaning maggots. It was a name given to his father at a feast. It is quite a high name. Long ago, the shamans would use maggots on people who had open wounds. The maggots would eat the dead, decaying flesh, and then they were removed. So, the white, cross-hatched area represents the maggots and the abalone in-lay represents the healing powers. (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004)

Virginia's masks have a little bit of her heart and soul in each piece. The facial expressions on her human masks come from her memories of people that have passed on and some of her masks are just an expression of her children or grandchildren. She feels that her work has a different look from that of a male carver, softer with color washes instead of bold colors, "I find that I am looking for a gentler look, something more

feminine, it's not a bold statement. The finishing touches are quite different. It might come from within. Females have always been taught to create art or trinkets that look feminine. Males have been taught that bold is beautiful" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). Even the use of cedar strips for hair is treated differently by male and female; Virginia spent hours pounding her cedar strips until they were thin and fine so the fibers looked more like hair. "I have seen guys just take the cedar, and bend it over and sew it on. You look at it and think what the heck (laughing)...but I can't say all of the guys are like that. I have seen some phenomenal pieces carved by men and the finishing touches are exquisite" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). Virginia feels that even if a piece was carved with the same story in mind the carvings would look very different. As a woman and an artist Virginia creates with her heart and soul but "I need to think with my head in order to imagine, to design, and to carve. I use my heart to direct and guide me. The things I have learned and witnessed all play a part in who I am and where I come from. This all comes out in my art" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). Despite her knowledge of history and assimilation, legislation and residential schools, Virginia has chosen not to include politics in her work. "Some artists do, their art becomes politics and politics becomes their art" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). Virginia is contributing to the resurgence of the Gitksan traditions. For her it's all about the stories that she has grown up with and remembering the people that have been and still are in her life. As a woman, an artist and a teacher in the Gitksan community she shares these stories with the youth and encourages them to learn their culture.

To be a woman and an artist is a picture with many different meanings. If you include motherhood, family and community into this picture you create a beautiful

mosaic, rich with experience, tears, joy and pain. Each of these women has experienced the pain and joy of childbirth and child rearing, and all have said that it has impacted the way they do their art. From the look of the end product to the different interpretations of a story, these five female carvers have stated that their work is substantially different in look and feel than male carvers. In each of the different cultures of these women there is a trend that predates colonial contact; women have an important spiritual role in nurturing and caring for their family. It is this role that makes it difficult at times for them to immerse themselves in artistic creativity; however they each have found a way to balance their lives as they feel that part of their nurturing role is sharing the art forms of their culture with the youth in their community and family just as their mother's and grandmother's did before them.

### **Individual Successes**

Success is defined differently for everyone and to judge one person's success by a single or Western measure such as a portfolio or resume of shows and sales would not reflect these women's concept of success accurately. Each of these women has articulated their individual feelings of success from gallery sales to family involvement.

Dale Campbell has sold many carvings through galleries in the major urban centers. She considers carving to be full time employment and she devotes what most people would consider to be an average work day to her carvings. She defines success for herself as just being able to do her carving. She feels a sense of accomplishment when she completes a piece and it gets out to the gallery, and as much as she'd like to be faster at her work, she will not sacrifice quality. She admits that she would probably feel more successful if she could speed up her process but in reality " ...as long as I keep

working I don't have to worry about success, because the people see the work and they love it and it just goes on its own. That's the way it's been for me; so I don't have to worry about success" (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). Being a National Aboriginal Role Model was also a successful endeavor for Dale as she traveled to remote communities and provided inspiration to young artists. In her words, "I found that the purpose in my life was to go out and to do that, to be inspirational to young kids, teenagers, with my art work and Karate" (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). As a female carver, Dale exudes the confidence of an artist that knows they are successful.

Valerie Morgan defines success for herself as an artist with being happy with herself. "If I can be happy with who I am, then everything else that is produced through me will be just fine" (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). She doesn't worry too much about her acceptance as a woman carver, but feels that if her work is good then word of mouth is really powerful. When the people that buy or promote her carving in the galleries get more involved in the money than the carving, that's when Valerie backs away. "That's why my carving is somewhat on the back burner right now; it turned more into a money thing than anything else" (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). She relates a story of a headpiece or Amhalait that she made that turned her away from the gallery scene for a while:

I did a Beaver Amhalait. The reason why I did that was, there was this guy that came to the door and he had a beaver in a garbage bag, the skin, because he's a trapper. He was out on his trap line and he happened to see this beaver along the water and he shot it and it was closer in, so when he shot it, it was a big beaver, he went closer to grab the beaver and it opened its mouth and grabbed hold of his foot. It wasn't ready to die; it wasn't his time to die. For that reason, I decided to do an Amhalait of the beaver. My thoughts that went into it, when doing something like



that...you're taking the animal, with respect to the animal, and with what you know, putting a lot of energy, positive energy into the piece and when the person wears it, when a chief wears this Amhalait, and he dances with the animal and the eagle feather down is coming out from the top then the beaver has passed on into the animals parallel and he's still alive, so he continues on. I had it here for a long time and Alcheringa gallery had asked for it and I sent it down. Then I got this phone call that this man was very interested in it in Utah, and he wanted it, he had a place for it and he wanted it. But she said we'll have to take off all of the quills off the top, we can't use eagle feathers so you have to change over and send turkey feathers down, I'm a little worried about the abalone and...from that moment on I decided that this had devalued my whole piece into what is today. (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004)

In a feature article in *Artichoke Magazine*, Yvonne Owens described the piece as follows:

The Beaver Amhalait is a frontlet of carved, stained and painted birch wood inset with iridescent abalone shells, surrounded by ermine tails and red wool melton cloth, and crowned with quills and beaver fur" (Owens,1999: 20). It was discovered that the beaver was sixteen years old, an Elder, and Valerie decided that she should make a Chief's Bonnet to honor the beaver's spirit.

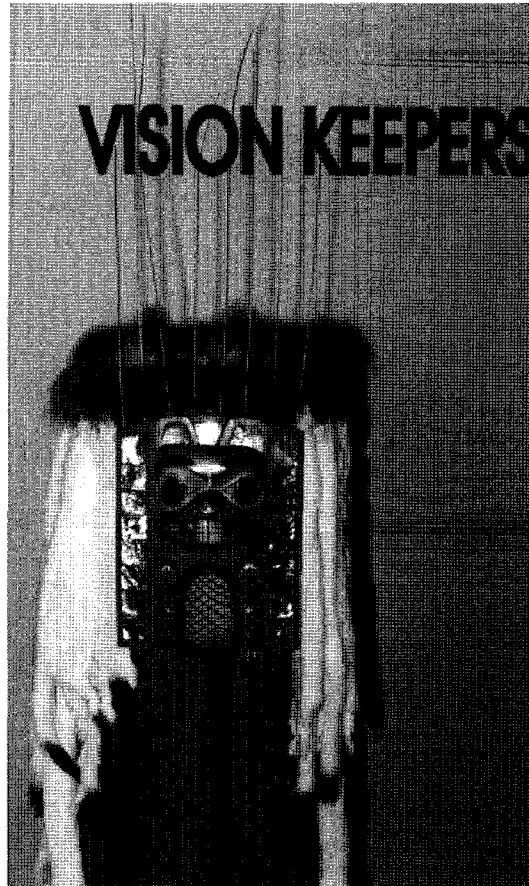


Figure 18: Valerie Morgan. *Beaver Amhalait*.

Some of the elements of the piece could not be taken across the border, so Valerie decided that if they couldn't go across the border the way they were, then they would not go at all. She felt that she had put this head dress together in such a way that it held meaning and showed respect for the spirit of the deceased animal:

So all the feelings that went into that piece just got taken apart, and so then I figured if I can work my way up to a level where I don't have to worry about the money situation, then I can go back to my carving and produce what I feel. Until then I don't want to put out something that I have put all my energy into and where someone may not appreciate it. (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004)

It was this incident that turned Valerie towards the full time career of First Nations fashion design for a while. Before this happened Valerie had experienced many successes in the gallery world and in one other unusual area. Disney came calling,

looking for a carver to do props for the set of *White Fang II*. At first Valerie thought it was a hoax and demanded proof of who they were. They informed her that they had heard about her by word of mouth. Valerie asked that when her work was complete they give her a letter stating that she had worked for them. The letter gave her the highest accolades and stated that all of her pieces were auctioned off at the end of the movie because they were beautifully finished pieces, not your typical roughed out props. They then asked her to create a transformation mask for them to rent from her as well. Valerie had a very short time in which to do this piece and she started out with a big piece of green wood. The traditional way to dry the wood would be to cover it with brown paper and keep rotating the paper until the moisture is all sucked out of the wood. "...well today if you move along with the times you run all over the countryside looking for the biggest microwave, because a microwave will suck the moisture out evenly. So, this was supposed to be a little bit bigger than it is, but I couldn't find a microwave big enough" (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). As a result the mask had to be taken down a bit in the back so it would fit, but the end result was still fabulous. Valerie described the scene in the movie where the mask was used:

...when they danced around the fire then they stopped, and the person that was wearing this piece...they zoomed right in and this piece looked right into the screen and then they slowly opened it up...the whole piece was showing on the screen. I just had goose bumps all over me. (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004)

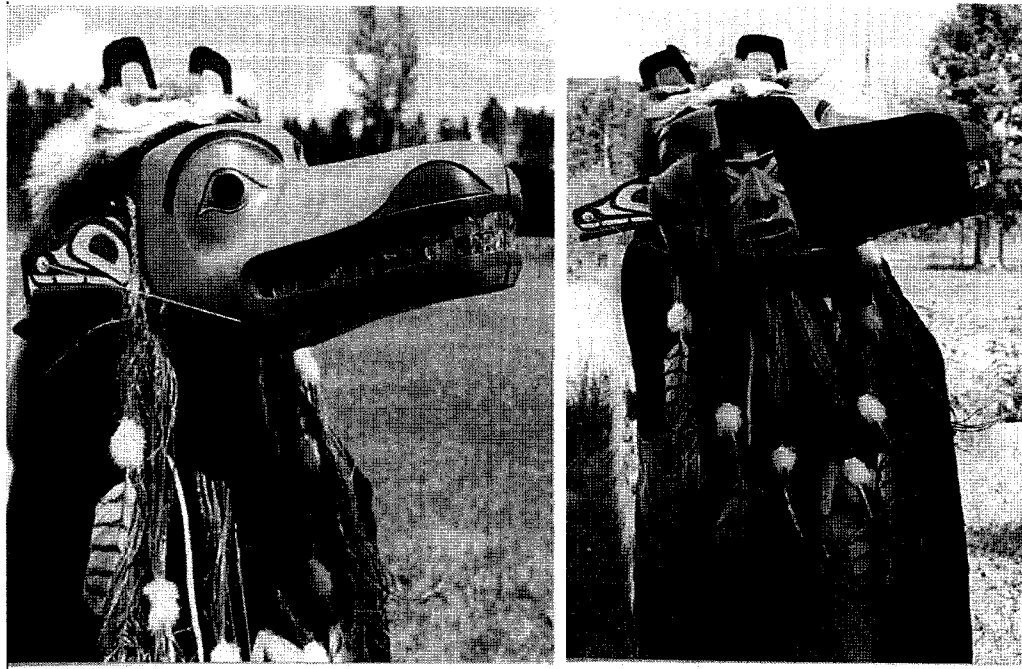


Figure 19: Valerie Morgan. *Wolf Transformation mask* created for *White Fang II* Movie, Disney Studios.

For Vicki Moody, the completion of the totem poles at Qay'lnagaay (Second Beach), gave her a sense of accomplishment and success. I looked the site up in the Haida Gwaii tourist guide and it talks about the museum and the poles but Vicki's name was not listed amongst the carvers. Her response was revealing:

I might as well tell you this part about me right now while it has jumped out there because I never went into my art work for money or fame or anything like that. Like I said it was a healing tool at the beginning. I didn't know I was actually going to make myself ill or become ill from being awfully attached to something that ended up being so explosive. (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004)

The controversy surrounding the color use on the pole took its toll on all the artists, including Vicki. Along with the family deaths that she had to deal with and the grueling physical labor, Vicki was eventually physically struck down with Fibromyalgia. Before her work on the pole, Vicki learned the art of cedar weaving and produced many beautiful items one of which is a full cape or robe, of which the likes has not been seen in

her territory for over two hundred years. Woven with mountain goat wool and cedar her 'Transition Robe' is destined for a show in New York in the fall of 2004. As an artist, Vicki is talented and devoted; but I think that Vicki would measure her own success in terms of whether she had been a good mother, wife, daughter and granddaughter. The health of herself and her family and whether she has done what she can to further promote Haida culture is the means by which Vicki measures her success as a person and an artist.

Virginia has sold some of her work to galleries but finds the whole process very impersonal. Although her name is carved into the inside of the piece, the gallery owners will not give out addresses or phone numbers and therefore Virginia never gets to meet the buyer and talk to them about the piece. She has pieces in Europe, the United States and Canada. Selling out of her home is Virginia's preferred method; she enjoys it when people come to visit. "They get to know me as a person, and an artist. They have the opportunity to ask questions, and gain a better understanding of my work" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). She also likes the opportunity to get to know the people who are taking her pieces home. Virginia has refused to sell her pieces if she isn't comfortable with the buyer:

It is when they come across as being arrogant, or not caring about the piece, but still want it, that I have turned them away. I have also turned galleries away when they treat my work as a commodity and not art. So in that respect, I don't really care for my pieces to be in a gallery. I would rather have tea with the person that would like to take my work home. (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004).

For this artist the money is not the reason she does her carving. Success for Virginia is when she has sold a piece to someone who has taken the time to get to know her and her

work, and that they leave her home with enough knowledge to really appreciate and enjoy her work:

My success comes in knowing that I have achieved one of my life's goals, although I know that there is still so much to learn. My success comes from knowing that our chiefs recognize my work. My success comes from getting to know people who take a part of me to their homes. My success comes from knowing that my work is being used to promote the understanding of our stories and culture. My success comes from knowing that I am passing on knowledge to my children and grandchildren of such a rich heritage. (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004).

Pauline Allan hasn't had the opportunity to carve enough pieces to establish a gallery showing, but she would like to eventually. However, she feels that her focus would be the mainstream or Euro galleries rather than the First Nations galleries. It's going to be a while before Pauline has completed her education in visual arts and she would also like to try her hand at jewelry making. For now her success as a female carver is on display at the Prince George Tourism office. Under the tutelage of Ron Sebastian a set of carved and painted cedar doors stands as testimony to her skill and the skill of the seven other carvers in this collaborative project. Sebastian also carved the totem pole that stands outside the Two Rivers Art Gallery in Prince George. Pauline attended the ceremonies for the pole raising: the most easterly of any cedar totem poles.



Figure 20: Pauline Allan. Carved doors at Prince George Tourism center

In summary, success is defined differently for each of these women and it doesn't always come down to a monetary measure. To Dale Campbell, success is just being able to do her carving. "...as long as I keep working I don't have to worry about success, because the people see the work and they love it and it just goes on it's own. That's the way it's been for me; so I don't have to worry about success" (D. Campbell, Personal Interview, May 8, 2004). Pauline Allan aspires to the level of success defined by Dale and without a doubt she will attain her gallery show in the future and establish herself as a successful First Nations woman artist. Valerie Morgan defines success for herself as an artist with being happy with herself. "If I can be happy with who I am, then everything

else that is produced through me will be just fine” (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). Valerie doesn’t worry too much about her acceptance as a woman carver, but feels that if her work is good then word of mouth is really powerful. While she has enjoyed success in Hollywood and within the galleries Valerie returns to the values of her youth when she defines success as when people take the time to understand and appreciate her work. She also feels that as a woman it is important for her to learn as much as she can about her artistic culture to pass this on to the youth. Virginia Morgan is much the same. She shares her stories and carvings with her students and people that come to her home to purchase her work. She too has had success in the gallery world but prefers to sell privately from her home. She enjoys it when people come to visit. “They get to know me as a person, and an artist. They have the opportunity to ask questions, and gain a better understanding of my work” (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). As money is not the deciding factor in her definition as a successful artist, she has turned buyers away if she felt that they were too arrogant towards her work. Vicki Moody is another woman who does not do her art for money. She doesn’t use this as a measure for her success. While she has not sought fame through her art work she has accepted her successes gracefully and acknowledges that both her carving and her cedar weaving are important elements of Haida culture which she wishes to preserve and pass on to her children.

### **Community Perceptions**

Pauline is in the position where carving is not one of the traditions of her Eastern Carrier community, so their perception of her as a woman carver is not something we discussed. She is a gifted visual artist and is also a member of the Louie Family singers,



a traditional Carrier singing group. Her family accepts her as an artist, and encourages her to pursue her artistic endeavors. Pauline states that there was no discussion on the role of women in carving while she was learning from Ron Sebastian, although she was the only woman in the class. However from her own experience within the Carrier nation and within her own family, Pauline feels that the gendered roles of male and female were not a huge issue before contact; "I know that in our Carrier society we got together, we did things together..." and that changed with the coming of the missionaries and the introduction of the hard line rules of which gender was supposed to do what (P. Allan, Personal Interview, May 3, 2004). There are still lines drawn in certain areas of their culture, but Pauline does not seem to be concerned about those lines in her art making.

Virginia's paternal and marital Gitksan community has recognized and accepted her as a carver. She has been asked by chiefs to create a chief's rattle, a head dress and a mask:

Now more than ever it seems that the...I don't want to say just the chiefs...there are many of us that see the importance of being able to express our culture without being ridiculed or put down. The chiefs are using the regalia, whereas, for a long time they couldn't, the government did not allow it. So now the importance of having ceremonial pieces being used in the feast hall is being promoted by the chiefs (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004).

Virginia acknowledges that their acceptance of her as a carver is definitely a token of their appreciation. "I feel that we (women) have come a long way, and so have the men, as far as appreciating the artistic abilities that we have and share" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). Women carvers may be a rare commodity now but there are more women registering at the Kitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art at K'san and learning the skill of carving and Virginia feels that women are looking for ways to

express their ideas and their culture. She feels that there is nothing in this day and age holding women back from being a carver. But while Virginia is accepted within the Gitksan community, in her home community of Alert Bay it is a different story: "It is unheard of there for a woman to carve. Although Alert Bay has been pro-active in teaching the language and culture they are behind the times as far as accepting women in the role as a carver" (Vi Morgan, Personal Interview, May 7, 2004). The perception is that males alone can do the carving for the ceremonies. In the early stages of my research I placed a phone call to the band office in Alert Bay. When I asked if there was any way to get in touch with female carvers in the community, the male on the phone line replied quite brusquely that they had no women carvers, only men.

For Vicki Moody the perception that only men can carve is a barrier she faced when first joining the team to carve the poles. When asked if the men were accepting of the fact that there was a woman carving with them, she replied laughing:

I think it was uncharted waters and that everybody was just curious and I was just as curious but confident that I could pull it off if I was given the chance...there were times when your children are sick and I would be away from the pole for a few days. I would go back and see exchanging looks; you know 'why does she get the pet treatment?' or whatever. Whether it was in my mind or whether that's what they were thinking, the subject did come up a few times with my co-worker and also with my boss. (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004).



This photo was taken from an article in the *SpruceRoots* journal published in Haida Gwaii February 2001. Erica Thompson interviewed Vicki in an article titled *Weaving Art and Politics* which was mostly about Vicki's journey into cedar bark weaving and the beautiful *Transition Robe* she created and then danced in December 2000.

Figure 21: Vicki Moody cleaning bark off the giant cedar log which eventually became the T'anuu totem pole. (Thompson 2001: 5)

At the outset, Vicki felt that she was accepted as a carver but was being observed to see whether she could measure up, and taking time off to deal with family matters definitely caused male heads to turn and question. With the controversy of the turquoise color use on the poles, Vicki felt as though the community was stabbing the artists in the back. "Because what you are doing is something to please people and the people are not respecting the actual unfolding of a beautiful piece. So you know to me it was really quite painful to see the process of a simple thing like one color making such a big impact, and it did" (V. Moody, Personal Interview, May 10, 2004). Does the community accept the color now that it was proven to be used in earlier times? Vicki states that there are still a few uninformed individuals that have not accepted it as yet, but the poles are up and stand majestically on the beach, turquoise color and all.

Valerie Morgan remembers one of her visits home to Alert Bay. As an accepted carver in the Gitksan community she was proud of her work and had brought some for a gallery in Alert Bay. They turned down her work because they said she wasn't from there. Their perception was, that once you move away you are no longer part of the community. As her sister Virginia pointed out, there are no female carvers in Alert Bay, so perhaps this was purely an excuse for turning Valerie away as she is still welcome within the community itself. Within the Gitksan community and outside in the galleries and even in a Disney movie, Valerie's work as a female carver is accepted and highly acclaimed. To Valerie, acceptance is in what you do and who you are. She does not do carving, she is a carver, and she feels it's important to present herself in a respectable way in the galleries. She would never want to be classified as a master carver, "If that's what you are called, then you know everything, but that's not true, there's always room to learn" (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). So, Valerie doesn't wonder where she fits in as a woman carver, she feels it's everyone else out there who has to deal with their own perceptions of who she is.

Dale Campbell lives in the city of Prince Rupert where her work is recognized by that community; she has been written up in the local paper on a few occasions. In 1982 Dale worked as part of a three person team to carve and erect a thirty foot totem pole. It was raised in the traditional manner outside the carving shed longhouse adjacent to the Museum of Northern BC. In 1976 Dale's Eagle design was chosen for the logo of the Museum. Interestingly enough when I arrived in Prince Rupert I went to the Museum to inquire about any work that they might have that was done by female carvers. The two young women at the desk said they did not have any in the museum but more importantly

they did not know who Dale Campbell was or where her totem pole was standing. The two young women at the counter seemed intent on educating me on the fact that only men did carving. I corrected their misconception and continued my city tour. My interview with Dale the following morning led me to where her thirty foot totem pole is erected only to discover that it has been damaged. She mentioned an eight foot pole which she thought was in storage at the Museum of Northern BC. Dale also did a small totem pole for a show in Prince Rupert but during the lunch hour while the show was being taken down, someone stole it from the box it was being packed in. All that remains of it are photographs that she took. Dale does not recall ever getting a negative reception from a gallery due to her gender, but she has thought about the rarity of women carvers or women artists in general, and their acceptance. She has shown work at the Alcheringa Gallery in Victoria, BC, as well as the Coastal Peoples Gallery in Vancouver, BC. Within the gallery world Dale is perceived to be a carver of excellent caliber and her gender has not hampered her acceptance in the least. The following image is of the Shaman Woman carved by Dale in 1994; several of her other pieces can be viewed on the website of the Coastal Peoples Gallery in Vancouver, BC. In the wider world community, Dale and her brother carved a thirty foot Killer Whale totem pole that she designed as a gift from the Canadian government to the people of Hong Kong. It now stands in Kowloon Park. While they were in China, they also carved and raised another eight foot pole for the Canadian embassy in Hong Kong.

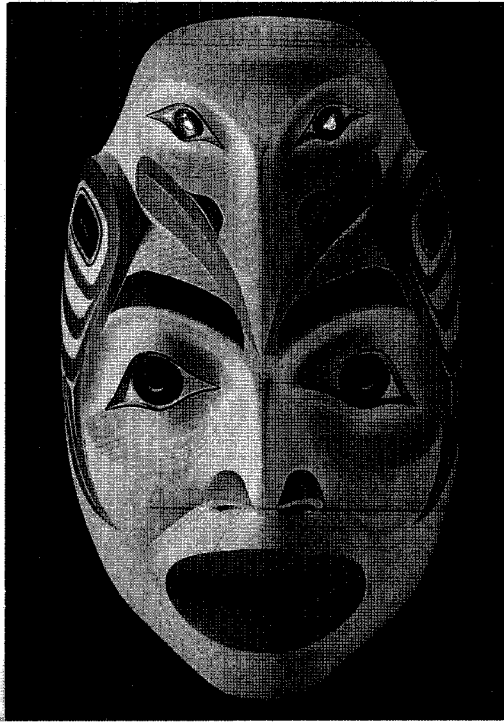


Figure 22: Dale Campbell. *Shaman Woman* mask.

## **Chapter Four: I Listened and This is What I Learned**

It is apparent from the literature I have reviewed that female carvers have not been the focus of any one piece of research, other than the biographical dissertation written by Mary A.B. Slade (2002) on the life of the Haida artist, carver and teacher Freda Diesing. As I pursued my research and interviews I learned that despite the factors such as geographical location or remoteness from major urban centers, despite patriarchal art institutions, and perhaps even despite the traditions of their own communities these women have chosen carving as their creative outlet and each one has been successful by her own measure. My research questions focused on learning about the experiences of female carvers and their knowledge of the history of carving in terms of female participation. Each of these women articulated that female carvers before their generation were basically unheard of with the notable exception of Freda Diesing. I had hoped to illuminate the gender lines that separate male from female in the First Nations world of creativity and to help understand whether these lines have been put in place by colonial influences or if they have always existed. It was not as straight forward as I had presumed. In general, the women I interviewed did not recognize colonial induced gender divisions as factors and thought that it was perhaps due to the generational differences and views of gender equality. Perhaps if I had spoken to First Nations Women from previous generations (grandmothers and great-grandmothers) I may have heard a different story, but these five women were not being held back by perceived gender barriers. The answers I received from the five women articulated the results of colonization, residential schooling and the resultant loss of culture, as well as the strength of their spiritual traditions and sense of self as women. Virginia Morgan stated that

overall the noticeable lack of First Nations female artists was due to colonization and government restrictions with regards to Native ceremonies and ceremonial regalia. Some recognized the colonial impact, while others didn't seem to think it mattered in this day and age; their carving was being accepted both within their own communities and in the big city galleries as well, although none of the women mentioned showing their work in galleries other than First Nations or Aboriginal galleries. In showing their art in only First Nations or Aboriginal oriented galleries, some of these women have chosen to maintain or hold onto their identity as First Nations women and artists while the remaining women have chosen to show their work only within their own communities or homes, thus staying outside the mainstream art world and maintaining their individuality while still being connected to their place or community.

The five women carvers were asked whether their carving was influenced by their gender and overall the feeling was that they felt their work had a softer appearance, and that they brought their experiences as a woman to their carving which often lent a different feeling to the piece. Although some of the women acknowledged that there are male carvers turning out pieces with this same soft finished quality, Vicki Moody articulated that this was perhaps because they were more in touch with the feminine side of their being.

From all of these women I have discerned a common thread of discussion and agreement on defining whether a piece is traditional or authentic. Traditional design is defined by its strict adherence to the basic design principles as established in northern Northwest Coast art forms, such as the use of ovoids and U-shapes and by the content and context of the design. Contemporary pieces make use of these same traditional



design principles but allow the artist a freedom of creative expression in her choice of materials, different finishes or artistic touches. Authenticity is not a relevant factor in defining either of these categories. A contemporary depiction of a traditional story in a mask carved by an artist today does not make the piece less authentic. So contemporary does not equate to non-authentic. However, when carving pieces requested by chiefs for ceremonial purposes, there is little room for creative license, as the chief will decide exactly what he wants and he will want it depicted just as it has been in the family for generations based on the stories and the power of their spiritual traditions. So although there is a difference between carvings done for the galleries or private sale which allow for more creative freedom compared to carving done for ceremonial House or Clan business which tends to adhere to the wishes of the chiefs who are ordering the pieces, all the work is based on the traditional design styles and content which are tied to the deep spiritual traditions of the culture. Each of the women interviewed had their own way of delineating or differentiating these categories, with Vicki Moody adding a catch all category she called new-traditional. She felt that traditional and contemporary are one and the same. What once was contemporary is now traditional and the contemporary of today will become the traditional of tomorrow. To Valerie Morgan her work is all traditional, and yet it is also contemporary as it is being produced in today's world (Val Morgan, Personal Interview, May 6, 2004). Her statements demonstrate that the traditional and the contemporary art creations overlap and both are grounded in a deep spiritual tradition. For all of these women contemporary carvings are both authentic and traditional work and the naming or defining of these carvings is the sole responsibility of the carver. I have learned not to define traditional carving based on process, form or

materials and that the final piece will always be traditional even with the use of contemporary methods or materials in the creative process.

Success as an artist in Western society is measured differently, and I have gained an understanding of these differences in terms of how the individual First Nations women artists define their own success. Success is measured in terms of happiness with self, in the ability to share cultural knowledge with children and art buyers alike, and in being recognized as an accomplished artist. In terms of their success within the larger community of First Nations artists, they each play a key role in the cultural revitalization of suppressed cultural traditions. Nicks says, "Cultural revitalization is manifested in many ways, such as land claims, official recognition of aboriginal languages, issues regarding trade and economic development, and questions surrounding the representation and interpretation of aboriginal culture" (Nicks 1992:87 in Noordmans 1995). Their success as artists is another valuable tool in the ongoing process to decolonize and reclaim First Nations identity through cultural means. For them, success does not equate to having their work shown in Euro-Western galleries as opposed to First Nations or Aboriginal galleries nor does it relate simply to economic gain.

The carvers that I interviewed have all chosen to show their work in First Nations or Aboriginal galleries at one time. This is because this venue allows for a greater understanding and appreciation of the piece; thus the choice of First Nations galleries over Western galleries. However, both Virginia and Valerie Morgan thought that the buyers in a First Nations gallery do not really know the artist or the story behind the piece; therefore it is simply an object of art to grace their wall. In this case, would it matter if the piece was displayed in a non-aboriginal gallery? Aside from issues of

marginalization based on race or gender, within the gallery itself would the piece have any more or less meaning as an object of art to the buyer? Both Valerie and Virginia preferred to sell their work from home and thus be able to talk to the buyer and share the story of the carving with them.

From the gallery contacts that I have made I have discovered that there is much more to the picture of Western versus Aboriginal galleries and the choices of artists about where to display their work. What came out of a majority of the interviews with the carvers was that the story behind the piece is what makes the piece. I visited several galleries in Victoria, BC such as Alcheringa Gallery, which gave me some insight as to why First Nations art is better displayed in Aboriginal galleries; in fact not only the artist is better served by this choice, but also the tourist market is better served when the pieces are entered into this type of gallery. The customers will come away with a bit of knowledge that perhaps they didn't have before. At Alcheringa Gallery it was made clear that the cultural knowledge of the carver was important information to pass on to the buyer and Alcheringa publishes catalogues that include important information about artists' lives and cultural contexts: "In our view, these support indigenous artists' roles as contemporary, individual interpreters of tradition" (Dan Lepsoe, Alcheringa Gallery, Personal communication, July 16, 2004). Each piece is accompanied by an artists' statement which gives the artists' story about the piece. It was further pointed out that this setting is where serious collectors with an understanding and knowledge of what they are collecting would gather to view and perhaps buy the pieces on display. While there is always the issue of tourist style native art stores selling imported replicas, I found a store that sold carvings in the Northwest coast style all done by the owner of the store and self

acclaimed master carver Jack Kerr. He explained that he was not First Nations by descent or family affiliation and claimed that he wouldn't want to be either. I beat a hasty retreat from his premises as I felt he was not open to receiving the lecture on appropriation that I was so eager to deliver (Jack Kerr, Lone Wolf Gallery, Personal Interview, July 16, 2004). The Lone Wolf Gallery does feature other artists on occasion that are First Nations. The Eagle Feather Gallery, which is a First Nations owned and operated gallery, pointed out that there is a market niche for aboriginal art and that galleries that represent only aboriginal or native artists are satisfying this market niche and providing a better environment for native artists (Chris MacDonald, Eagle Feather Gallery, Personal Interview, July 16, 2004).

To juxtapose this position I visited several Euro-Western style galleries and asked why they did not have Native artists represented in their collections. One gallery owner quite boldly informed me that the Native artists that approached her gallery required her to have knowledge of their culture and of the piece that she would be showing. She felt that this was too much work and that they would be better served in a Native gallery. While she was honest if abrupt, the underlying meaning here is true. The context of her gallery or any other Euro-Western gallery would not serve the interests of the Native artist because of the limited knowledge base with regards to cultural knowledge of First Nations people. Ironically this gallery owner had two rock sculptures in her front window which she stated were done by a Native artist. They were not typically native in style, and therefore the average art buyer would not know to look at them that they were done by a native artist. This suited the gallery owner and she felt comfortable having them in her collection; she could sell them simply as art, not Native art and therefore no

background or cultural knowledge was needed and thus it was easier for her. There were no stories behind the pieces that she needed to know: she was comfortable in representing First Nations artists in this way (Caswell Lawrence Gallery, Personal Interview, July 16, 2004).

Acceptance by community is varied amongst the women. While Dale Campbell has enjoyed success within the aboriginal gallery system, carving masks or crest poles is not part of her Tahltan heritage. During her interview she did not make a point of stressing the importance of the stories behind the pieces, although she does hold the Tahltan stories in mind while carving. When her pieces are shown at the galleries there is always an artist's statement of what the piece represents. Dale has been accepted and promoted within the community of Prince Rupert and even though carving is not a cultural trait of her Tahltan people they accept her as the gifted carver that she is. Vicki Moody felt that her role as a female carver on the totem poles was ground breaking at the time, and as she has broken through that gender barrier she would no doubt jump at any opportunity to promote women as carvers and thus promoters of the Haida culture. Pauline Allan is accepted as an artist within her Carrier community regardless of the medium she chooses. Valerie and Virginia Morgan are accepted carvers within the Gitksan nation but are not accepted as carvers by their mother's Kwakwaka'wakw nation in Alert Bay.

First Nations women are carriers of tradition and culture. In centuries past, children learned about their culture at the side of their mothers, grandmothers and aunties as well as around the fires of their uncles, grandfathers, and fathers. Any opportunity to pass this knowledge on today is seen as vitally important. First Nations women carvers

can encourage younger women to pursue their own artistic dreams as a means to further the spread of cultural knowledge in their own communities. Throughout the different cultures of these women there is a motif that predates colonial contact; women have an important role in nurturing and caring for their family. It is this role that makes it difficult at times for them to immerse themselves in artistic creativity; however they each have found a way to balance their lives as they feel that part of their nurturing role is sharing the art forms of their culture with the youth in their community and family.

Valerie Morgan summed up this important task in an interview following the *Vision Keepers* show in 1999 at Alcheringa Gallery in Victoria:

There's a lot of power in getting women together, because it's the women who carry on the culture – through the house groups [clan affiliations], and through teaching. A lot of our elders are passing away and it's really important to teach our kids, so I do all different art forms. And while I work I teach and tell stories. I know that after they're grown, it'll all come back to them (Owens, 1999: 20).

Valerie Morgan of the Gitksan nation sells her work to galleries and even to movie studios as props. Virginia Morgan her sister, uses her carved masks to enlighten the youth in her classroom in Hazelton with stories relating to the earth and environmental issues. Pauline Allan of the Carrier Nations enjoys carving as one of her many artistic outlets and hopes one day to pass her knowledge on through teaching art. Dale Campbell of Tahltan and Tlingit descent carves masks based on the traditional stories of her people. These are only some of the First Nations women carvers who have crossed into the realm of the gallery with their traditionally inspired carving; a realm that formerly represented only the work of men. By placing the female carvers at the core of the research I listened and recorded their words and let them create the story: to share their lived experiences as artists, women, wives, mothers, sisters, daughters or nieces. By

listening to their stories and viewing their art, I came away with an education on the differences of valuing art on a Western based aesthetic ideology and on the holistic and spiritual ideology of First Nations culture. More specifically, I learned that colonial induced gender divisions have little influence on this generation of women carvers and that their communities welcome and accept their work. Although I have only interviewed five women carvers, as I traveled to visit galleries, I have learned of two other women carvers in other nations in British Columbia outside the area that I had chosen; I would like to make mention of them in the spirit of encouraging other young First Nations women to consider this art form. In the Eagle Feather Gallery in Victoria, BC, I was impressed by the ornate carvings of Betty Joe, a Coast Salish woman who has carved out her own little niche in the art market by creating miniature carved masks. At the Hills Native Art store also in Victoria, I discovered the work of Tina Moise, a Cree woman who trained under Cree artist Tim Lafontaine. Recently I learned of Connie Watts who is First Nations descent from three different linguistic groups; Nuuchahnulth, Kwakwaka'wakw, and Gitksan who carved a large Thunderbird for the Vancouver International Airport. The list of women carvers is growing, and more young women are joining in this carving tradition which will potentially enlighten, educate and visually stimulate people and youth in their home communities as well as art appreciators and visitors to galleries. The five First Nations women carvers I interviewed shared with me their desire to convey the spiritual depth and importance of their traditions in a neo-traditional style as a means to foster the strength of their culture and to enable these traditions to influence the youth of today for the strength of their communities tomorrow.

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