

THE WORLD IS AS SHARP AS A KNIFE

Meaning in Haida Art

1. The Raven Screen

open with quote from Bill Holm

- a) History. Description.
- b) What does it "mean"? (nobody asked)
 - i) iconography: Raven
 - ii) but what else? So much seems to be going on.
- c) Duff suppositions
 - i) iconography: Raven. 4 in the set, arrangement, etc.
 - ii) Edenshaw. Therefore part of his whole search for meaning.

2. Aim of paper: to try to describe the aspects of meaning in this painting, and at the same time trying to reconstruct the sequence of thinking that went into the evolution of Haida art to this point, as I have discerned them intuitively.

3. Subject: Raven. We are not without some cognitive guidelines to set the topic into context and say in a wider sense what the painting is about.

- a) it is an icon, a part of Haida iconography
 - i) the limitations of Haida iconography
 - ii) a helluva strange way to draw a raven
not faithful to nature, simplified, pictographic, unbeautiful per se
structure-analysed, disproportionate, standard parts, extraneous
parts, corrupt and lazy iconography.
- b) it is an ideograph rather than an illustration.
- c) it stands for a species, a special semantic unit:
noun, a class itself including all its individuals, but also a unit,
potentially a member of a larger analogic class.
- d) it is a metaphor (quote dictionary definition of metaphor: transfer of meaning from one noun to another by implicit analogy)
We know it is metaphoric (totemic) of a grouping of people, and the implicit relation that makes the metaphor is of dividing all animals (people) into "species", creating human social groupings. The topic is therefore the Haida and their social relations.
- e) it is a subject without predicates. Artistic problem: how to attach predicates?

4. The Problem of Predicates.

- a) what is a predicate in cognitive terms?
- b) qualities of predicates: they deal with behavior, change, attribute, etc.
 - : they are dependent on subjects
 - : they generalize only by analogy
- c) visual predicates and how to find them: parts, attributes.

d) what meanings can visual predicates convey?

i) what subjects do they refer back to? Ravens? No. People? yes.

VISUAL PREDICATES REFER ANALOGICALLY TO THE SAME SUBJECTS THAT THE VISUAL SUBJECTS (ICONS) REFER TO METAPHORICALLY.

They are "about" Haida social conduct.

ii) How do they say it?

By the "behavior" of visual predicates: parts, relationships.

LINE IS CONDUCT. The path of a line is the path of conduct.

PRECISION OF LINE AND RELATIONSHIP OF ELEMENTS is the most important predicate element in Haida art. It and the ovoid are the two most central cognitive elements. The super-human beauty of both must be conveyed.

This very precision is evidence of a basic commitment to the idea that it conveys meaning. To codify meaning in such an analogic medium requires supreme precision. Compare the four levels of stress in light-house keeper.

iii) What sorts of things do they say?

Holm described the patterns and elements, now we will try to explain them

-invention of formline segment

-standardization and segmentation of design

-quality of conduct (semi-angularity etc of steered curves)

-relations of rank (primary-secondary, etc)

-relations of status (junctures of formlines, etc)

etc, etc.

5. Raven by Roberts Rules of Order, the end result, so far.
Analogy of committee meetings.

A structural analysis of subject-predicate, metaphor-analogy, etc. so far.

6. By-products. Realizations from the exercise of improving or drawing visual predicates.

a) It is possible to "draw" attributes other than iconographic (visual appearance). This raises the question: is it possible to draw things singly or in classes on the basis of how they are (act) rather than how they look?

Can you draw an image of a set of analogous things by drawing their shared attributes or predicates?

b) Is this a way of showing how behavior begets form? Does man's behavior affect the shape of the world?

7. Drawing Analogies.

a) the concept of a composite image, generic visual analogy. Is it possible to "draw" a generalization? Just because you can draw individual attributes, give them partial form, does it follow that you can put a lot of these together and get a gestalt, a presentational image. Choice of attributes is OK: choose analogous attributes. But conceptual problem is to find a unifying principle of form. Solution: find the least specific, most general cosmic form in the world, and start

from it. What is the most generalized form?

b) INVENTION OF THE OVOID PRINCIPLE

Contents

Inscription: The world is as sharp as a knife.

Frontispiece: Charles Edenshaw, 1907.

Preface:

2½ years of intuition. Laura Greenberg and structural symbolism.
Bill Reid and his drawings. Bill Holm and his descriptive vocabulary.
Inverarity, etc. and the critical mass. CE as teacher.

Introduction:

The bankruptcy of the idea of representation. How come it wasn't found out sooner. The area it covers, and the time.

1. The End Result.

Four works by Charles Edenshaw, 1940-1920.

Raven comport	Myth of Raven creating QCI.
Raven's mother and father	
Chest with Raven creating mankind	Myth of clamshell creation of man,
Plate of Raven getting female	Myth of genitalia hunt.

A corpus of images and myth themes to refer to and culminate with, by the man who was heir to the whole tradition, knew it all, and deliberately demonstrated it in slate. I acknowledge my debt to him.

2. The Subject is a Predicate (Haida art demonstrates relationships)

It not only depicts things, it demonstrates relationships.

It does so by constructing equations, using

- a) structural oppositions of the artifact, and
- b) iconographic oppositions

Simple Haida equations:

-the model: a # b (opposites are equal)

-dagger paradigm, slavekiller, old Tsimshian clubs

3. The Subject is a Paradox

The first singularity: one thing that is two opposite things.

The world is as sharp as a knife. This lingam is a yoni.

4. The Object is a Quaternity

It strives for the degree of complexity of two interlocked paradoxes.

It is quadratic. One thing trying to be four.

Hand maul paradigm.

Sould Catcher

Spoon paradigm

5. And You Are Part of It

Art and artifact are related, and so is its use and user. It makes an implied statement about the user, who is an element in the equation.

Raven Rattle

Myth of Raven and Light

date of emergence

Rattle paradigm

The most potent bundle of NWC iconography. Describe to a point (like CE things in Ch. 1., and leave the rest until later)

6. Alter-egos and Singularities

Alter-egos, 2 that are as 1

- the many kinds of alter-egos (head-body, end-end, share a part, etc.)
- alter-egos are iconographic Haidaquations.

Singularities, 1 that is 2, or 3, or 4, noun and verb at same time, both-neither things, and acts of intertransformation.

-exhausting the logic of singularities:

- a. double-ish things: of single thing, of doublish things.
- b. half and other-half things: "Hawk"
- c. neither but implied singularities
- d. double negative but implied singularities.

The ultimate aim: the implied ultimate singularity. 1 that is 5?

7. The Copper (?) :

As singularity: 1 that is nothing but its 3 parts.

As structural groundplan.

Its origin:

8. The Copper Box (AE chests) In which, the Halait

Koerner Chest

Bella Bella Chest

Later explanations of the origin of the copper, by AE.

An introduction to chest iconography: Gonaqadet and Mighty Mouse.

9. The Raven Screens (an introduction)

The Dragonfly Screen (an introduction)

10. The Chilkat Blanket

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THE DEEP AGENDA OF NORTHERN ART

Is found embedded in the style, associated with the controlling symbols, stabilized in artifact types, and built upon visual armatures.

(Style, in the broadest sense, includes all the above. The total is Kubler's "shapes in time" and also "connecting ideas".)

Armatures:

- 1. Bilateral symmetry
- 2. Triunes:
 - a. The human figure (or face) as individuum.
 - b. Soul catcher
 - c. Copper
 - d. The chest, the house (outside front=inside rear)
 - e. Front-(back), frontal part-whole reversal, metaphor as symmetry.

Controlling Images+ Symbols:

- 1. Lingam-yoni, which became beak-mouth (can be conceptually condensed to vagina dentata and toothed phallus). Can be ^{metaphorically} transformed into any tube which is inside (mouth) at one end, outside (beak or penis) at other.
 - 1a. Twin (or Split)
- 2. Human individuum
 - as twin: neither male nor female, both youth and age (ie child-adult and first gasp-last gasp)
 - as triune: child-mother-father
 - as quaternity: male-female-birth-death.
- 3. Self-swallowing Bear (can be conceptually condensed to vagina dentata).
- 4. Raven (can be conceptually multiplied to toothed phallus)
- 5. Cannibal (the other face of 2.)

Basic Problems:

- 1. Creation, the generative act, death and transformation, rebirth by cannibalism.
- 2. Transformation of opposites, equation as balance, the very logic
- 3. The creative act, the transcending transformation. 4. Beauty.

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Art is wish. Its method is to "turn the problem around", show the wish as fulfilled, and then try to show the circumstances that would bring that about. It takes as "given" the state it wants to create, then diagrams the concomitants of that state. It is, after all, an act of human volition, and it is human to hypothesize a first premise: "Let opposite be the same" (bilateral symmetry). Art is hypothesis as well as wish. And it only takes two hypotheses to calm the deepest human anxieties:

1. Let opposite be same (therefore end is beginning, death is birth).
2. Let the individual (me) be the individuum (foetal parent).
(Therefore I span death).

In other words, grant me that one can be two, and that one can be three, and I'll take it from there.

The armature of the first is the twin (condensed to bilateral symmetry); the armature of the second is the triune (human individuum, copper, soul catcher). Armatures are also wishes, man-imposed premises.

Beauty is the intensity of the wish, the power of the bribe. Beauty is style: as manner, right down to the smallest detail (formline segment); as proportion; as armature; as total composition; as "dealing with the real problems". The real problems, as Thass-Thienemann tells us if we need the telling, are birth, sex, and death. In fantasy we mix these with eating; and a by-product of that false logic, empowered by our fear of death, creates the ritual act of cannibalism. In ritual, the cannibal spirit is shown as Bear (Nane) or Raven (Skimsem, Qoaxqualanixsiwae Crooked Beak).