

Pucon

INTRODUCTION *to book on Late Charles Edenshaw.*

The time has not yet come for a definitive book on the life and works of the last great artist-philosopher of the Haida, Charles Edenshaw (1840-1920). We have not yet assembled enough of his works, and do not yet understand enough of their meanings. In distant museums and private collections there are still undiscovered masterworks in argillite, silver, and gold. And there are still a number of earlier forms such as horn spoons, headdress frontlets, masks, and painted boxes, in which we do not clearly enough recognize his hand. The meanings in his art, which I think we are just beginning to glimpse, seem to be conveyed in a strange and powerful Haida mode of discourse which is doubly difficult for us to understand. And I think that I can already see that his was an intellect so audacious that we may find ourselves incapable of comprehending it fully.

But at least we can make a start. If nothing more we can revel with him in the supreme craftsmanship that resided in his hands. Look closely again at the curved lines on one of his silver bracelets or one of his argillite plates. No other man, perhaps, has engraved lines of greater purity. He well knew the artistry that dwelt in his hands. I have been told by his daughter of the deep affection he had for his only son, and of how he used to say, "If only I could leave you my hands, but I don't know any way to leave you my hands". (Robert - Ginawan - drowned at the age of 18 in 1895.)

At least we can begin to ponder the meanings which he silently poured into his late works in argillite. For we have a very long way to go, and we have not yet learned fully enough how to find them. The determined efforts

of Boas, Barbeau, and other anthropologists to interpret his representations as family crests and as episodes from Haida myths have yielded a little of the truth, but in retrospect seem to have been inordinately frustrating. It is simply not enough to see that one of the figures on a pole represents Beaver, one of his crests, or that a design on an argillite plate represents Gonaqadet, a sea monster from a myth. Such a view still retains vestiges of the old image ^{the} of/simple primitive, striving to create pictures of the creatures of his imaginary world.

We are the ones who are thinking at too primitive a level when we bring to Haida designs the premise that their only purpose was to "represent" things (and usually things which can be identified by specific nouns, like beavers). We have not realized that Boas' relentless question, "What does it represent?", which was the bending of the twig in the study of Northwest Coast art, was capable of reaching only the first level of meaning, only the beginning of the truth. To be sure, Haida art is partly about things; but mostly, I have come to believe, it is about relationships. The key meaning in a Haida work of art is not the specific noun that it represents, nor the specific verb, but the set of relationships which is embodied in the whole, and what that configuration implies in the present instance. The structure is the ^{"code"} meaning, and the implication is the ^{"message"} meaning.

It might be said that Haida art conveys its meanings in much the same way as our proverbs do: "A stitch in time..." is about many things, the least of which involves a needle and thread. Or as our parables: to Jesus the Shepherd the least of worries was sheep. But that would miss an essential difference in the structuring of the thought. The only Haida "proverb" which I know (and perhaps one was enough) is "The world is as sharp as a knife". I think that its

meaning, like the meanings in Haida art, ^{are} is to be found by looking at its structure as well as its message. Or to put it another way, half of its meaning is in what it says, and the other half is in what it is. The one half seems to be a manifest absurdity, the other half to be a self-contradiction, but the whole is seen to be an equation of a more ^{doubtly} complex kind. Its overall structure is the structure of paradox. Haida thinkers seem to have been masterful manipulators of the logical paradox.

I do not want to get deeply embroiled in problems of meaning too soon. However there are some relevant lines of thought which I want to at least introduce, because they are foreign to our ordinary thought and therefore difficult for us to comprehend. The first of these has to do with the matter of thinking in paradoxes, which I believe to be the dominant mode of thinking in Haida art. The logical paradox, even in the form of a simple declarative utterance, is to us a mind-wrenching thing. For example, the assertion "This statement is a lie" says one thing and is another, which is its opposite. It is one thing that is two opposite things at the same time. It exists. It is right, and it is wrong, and it is both. Such a line of thought can lead to the Holy Trinity. In Haida art, below the surface on the metaphoric level, the logical paradox sometimes takes the ^{sexual} form of a lingam which claims to be a yoni, and is therefore a lingam-yoni. Art is after all a limited medium of communication, and has difficulty in finding ways to make ultimate statements, or even to create equations, or to "speak in sentences". If it must limit itself to a single such form of utterance, perhaps the logical paradox is the most powerful one to choose. At least that seems to be the tacit conclusion of the Haida artists.

A second unfamiliar idea involves the nature of the symbols used in Haida art, such as the "salmon-trout head" motif in graphic design and the Frog sculptured on an Edenshaw totem pole. These do not seem to be simple metaphors,

each standing for one other class of things, such as "eye" or "those who use Frog as a crest". They seem instead to be capable of use as open metaphors referring to particular configurations of structure. Like the much simpler "iconic signals" used in Australian aboriginal sand drawings, they seem to have "multiple reference" (Leach, 19 , p. 223). As with our proverbs, their meaning seems to embrace all things of like configuration. They apply, by analogy and implication, to every other thing or circumstance that shares the same set of relationships. That being the case, they can be symbols of great power, capable of knitting together the material, social, and cosmic realms by the use of those configurations of relationship which make the best sense of things to the Haida mind. But we are at a double disadvantage, because we do not yet know what particular sets of relationships are being used, nor the vocabulary of images in which the configurations are clothed. To return to my two examples, I have come to believe that the "salmon-trout head", in addition to being a particularly pleasing unit of visual design, could be taken to mean all things analogous to a hatching salmon, a growing nephew, and one-half-of-perfection; and that Edenshaw's Frog took some of its attributes from the creature in nature, and did serve as a family crest, and also on occasion (when the art was being used for thinking) acted as a stand-in for an exceedingly complex concept whose structure was something like that of "the square on the hypotenuse...".

As already hinted, we shall also be led into realms of sexual imagery, which may seem surprising since sexual nouns and sexual verbs are almost never shown explicitly in Haida art. Nonetheless, as in most systems of art and thought, sexual images are abundantly present in implicit form. The Yin and Yang, the lingam and yoni, the duality of the sexes and their union into one, seem to lie at the very foundation of man's thought. Even in Christian religious art, forbidden sexuality is a fundamental underlying theme:

In Michelangelo's Pieta, for example, where the virgin bereaved mother and her dead son are manifestly of about the same age our emotions are stirred by latent incestuous emotions of the most complex kind (Leach, op. cit., p. 232).

Human society began when man placed voluntary controls on the sex instinct. He did so by defining certain sexual relationships as taboo, which is to say, sacred. That both European and Haida societies were much concerned with sexual taboos is evident from the surface prudishness of their art. But the matter could not end there, for one of the basic functions of art is to show (or rather, to suggest) the very thing that is taboo, to hint at the very act that is unthinkable (Leach, op. cit., p. 227). It is almost the case that the more sacred the art the more unthinkable the implied meaning. To the Haida the most unthinkable of all sexual acts could well have been that primal act of incest that would give the lie to the myth of the "virgin birth" of Raven. If such is the case, the little pair of argillite sculptures which I call Raven's Mother and Father may well be some sort of counterpart of the Pieta.

Two things which are almost never explicit but almost always implicit in Haida art are sex and the true circle. This is an observation to which we shall return when considering Edenshaw's circular argillite plates.

A knowledge of Haida mythology provides one of the keys to the understanding of Haida art, because the art draws images from the myths, and the two embody parallel systems of logic. One of the functions of myth is to "think through" problems, especially those intractable double-bind dilemmas into which human societies, in attempting to act with consistency and think with logic, place themselves. This "thinking through" is not what the story, on the face of it, seems to be about, for a ^{very} myth ^{also} is a parable that is really about something else. The thinking is accomplished at a deeper level which is at most times unconscious. The "solution" lies implicit in the structure of the parable. In Haida art, I

think I can see, the underlying paradoxes are sought out and made explicit, at least to the eye of the artist. The great works of art are assertions, equations, logical paradoxes - and their intended implications - all at the same time. Haida art can be a deliberate structural analysis of Haida myth. But we are getting in too deep. Let it suffice to say that we shall consider a few of the basic Haida myths, because Edenshaw chose to continue to draw his images from them.

The man who was to become known as Charlie Edenshaw (borrowing, on his baptism about 1890, the Christian name of Bonnie Prince Charlie of Scotland) was the inheritor and, in my view, the supreme interpreter of the entire tradition of Haida thought as expressed in art. His uncle, with whom he lived most of his life, and on whose death in 1894 he inherited the title Edenshaw, had also been the pre-eminent artist-philosopher of his generation (on his baptism he chose the Christian names of Queen Victoria's consort, Albert Edward). These two men, who knew their worth, may be said to represent the end of an ancient, non-literate intellectual tradition which drew upon currents of philosophy more closely related to those of the East than those of the West. They also represent the culmination of a century of intense intellectual and artistic ferment, stimulated by the presence of the white man, during which the Haida world-view had been re-examined and powerfully re-affirmed (not least in the twenty forests of "totem poles" that fronted the Haida towns). Charlie Edenshaw participated in the ending of that era, but he also retained until his death a full command of its accumulated wisdom. He understood full well the meanings of its less remote visual milestones such as the Raven rattle, the copper, and his uncle's carved chest designs and painted murals. What I think I find him doing in his post-Christian art is restating yet again, in even more explicit terms, the prime theorems of the Haida tradition. His argillite caskets, for example, seem to

sort out and restate the levels of structure which lie implicit in his uncle's carved wooden chest designs. I also think I find him turning his art to problems and images reminiscent of Christian themes, and even, perhaps, using the wisdom of the old way to correct what he saw as false wisdom in the new.

For there is still one more dimension we must be aware of in the man, that of Christian philosopher. The art of Charlie Edenshaw as represented by the works in this book was the art of a devout Christian, and, I am sure, a thinking one. The Anglican missionaries who had been close friends and companions since 1876, W. H. Collison, Charles Harrison and W. H. Keen, ^{WE Collison} were well educated and literate men fresh from England. They brought to Masset not just the Bible with its profound associated myths and images (the Madonna and Child, the Crucifixion) but also a direct and continuing tie with the culture of Europe. By 1883 Charlie Edenshaw had papered his bedroom wall with The Illustrated London News, from which he borrowed images for use on his ivory-headed walking sticks, such as Jumbo the Elephant and the hand of Laocoon grasping a snake. In 1913, in a wedding speech, his "cousin" Henry Edenshaw (Albert Edward's son) quoted knowledgeably from Shakespeare and Goethe. It is not at all inconceivable that Edenshaw saw and pondered on illustrations of the Pieta of Michelangelo and the Thinker of Rodin, and gave his responses to them in his art. His latest and greatest works are quite possibly about what their great works were also about: the deepest myths and truths of mankind. It is just that he chose to continue to do them "in Haida".