

## READINGS AND RESOURCES

### READINGS

“*Altering the Goods*” article by Gerald T. Conaty—included in this package

“*Connections and Complexity*” article by Gerald T. Conaty – included in this package

### WEBSITES

Alberta Curriculum Standards: [education.alberta.ca](http://education.alberta.ca)

Historical Artifact-Based Learning: Student Process Guide. [www.glenbow.org/mavericks](http://www.glenbow.org/mavericks),  
Glenbow Museum, 2010.

Historical Photograph-Based Learning: Student Process Guide. [www.glenbow.org/mavericks](http://www.glenbow.org/mavericks),  
Glenbow Museum, 2010.

### PRINT

Boehme, Sarah. *Powerful Images: Portrayals of Native America*. University of Washington Press; 1<sup>st</sup> edition. May 1998.

Carter, Beth; Conaty, Gerald T.; Hoang, Quyen; McDonald, Frederick R. *Honouring Tradition: Reframing Native Art*. Glenbow Museum, 2008

### LINKS TO COLLECTIONS

*To locate the remainder of the collections not provided in this package, please use the following link:*

[http://ww2.glenbow.org/search/collectionsResults.aspx?XC=/search/collectionsResults.aspx&TN=OBJECTS&AC=QBE\\_QUERY&RF=WebResults&DF=WebResultsDetails&DL=0&RL=0&NP=255&MR=10&QB0=AND&QF0=Audience-mediator2&QI0=Main21cHT](http://ww2.glenbow.org/search/collectionsResults.aspx?XC=/search/collectionsResults.aspx&TN=OBJECTS&AC=QBE_QUERY&RF=WebResults&DF=WebResultsDetails&DL=0&RL=0&NP=255&MR=10&QB0=AND&QF0=Audience-mediator2&QI0=Main21cHT)

# Connections & Complexity

Gerald T. Conaty

“Art has always been an integral part of Native People’s lives. It was interwoven with the production of tools, the construction of dwellings and the manufacture of clothing. While European cultures separate art as a practice that is distinct from most aspects of daily life, First Nations people have a more holistic understanding of the world. Visual art has always been integrated with song, dance, ceremony and oral traditions. In these cultures it is not possible to speak of *art*; art is a part of everything. And yet, many non-Natives have an implicit belief that the development of an artistic tradition is the foundation for cultural progress and “civilization.” For this reason, it is important to acknowledge the merit of visual art produced by First Nations people, even though we do so in a context outside of their own cultures.

Traditionally, this art was concerned with identity and connections. Stylistic variations of clothing, shelter and design motifs enabled individuals, families, clans and nations to identify themselves. The meanings behind these media and images embodied the connections between human beings and non-human beings within their universe, and embodied the principles of harmony and balance that bring about a successful life. This art was found on clothing, shelters, tools and on the landscape within which people lived.

Contemporary artists continue to be concerned with connections and the ideals of harmony and balance. For them, the modern world presents formidable challenges that make it difficult to maintain ancient cultural and spiritual connections as the balance and harmony of earlier times is disrupted by environmental change.

## **Art Integrated in Culture**

It has been suggested that there were over 500 different cultures in North America when Europeans first arrived on the continent. Art was, and continues to be, an integral part of each culture. And yet, understanding this art is not an easy task.

Each of the Native cultures in North America has its own beliefs and its own way of understanding its place in the universe. Generalizations about these beliefs are likely to lead to cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes. We developed this project with people who are knowledgeable about their traditional culture, and were struck by their reticence when presented with First Nations items other than their own cultures, some ideas emerged that are important for understanding both “traditional” art and its contemporary expression.

First, human beings are an integral part of the environment and exist in a world in which almost everything is animate, with a spirit and a vital presence. The non-human or Other Beings each have unique gifts that they have used to help humans survive. Through this aid, human beings have developed a network of connections with all elements of the universe. This network includes plants, animals, rocks, stars, the sun and the moon.

Second, human existence depends on maintaining these connections. A balanced and harmonious life creates the appropriate atmosphere for these connections. Many of the ancient motifs represents the Other Beings (with whom humans coexist) and, therefore, are ways of honouring the connections through which these Other Beings help humans exist.

Third, every individual is responsible for helping to maintain the balance and harmony of life. This is done through ceremonies and prayer for all the Other Beings with whom humans share the earth. Images of these Other Beings were applied to clothing, shelter and a variety of utilitarian tools to remind human beings that their existence depended on harmonious relations. In this way, art was incorporated into all aspects of life. Every individual was expected to show respect for all forms of life by creating art.

### **Art Before the Europeans**

The earliest art recorded in North America is found on tools used for sustenance. For example, stone projectile points were used as spear or arrow tips to hunt game. These were made by carefully removing small flakes from a larger cobble; they really are miniature sculptures. The forms of these tools go well beyond mere function, and their manufacture required considerable knowledge of the material and stone-working techniques. The forms and styles of these tools varied greatly in different areas and at different times. Unfortunately, we understand very little about the reasons for these differences.

Pottery, usually made from locally available clays, was shaped into many different forms and decorated with a wide variety of motifs. Archaeologists suggest that the forms reflect the function of the vessel and serve as a cultural identifier. The designs, whether painted on or inscribed into the surface, seem to indicate the culture or family to which the potter belonged. The designs may have other meanings that have been lost to us.

Throughout North America, images that embody the interconnection between humans and their world have been painted on or carved into rock surfaces. To those from other cultures, this art is perceived as images whose significance is recognized but not understood. But for people whose ancestors created this art, the symbols remain understandable and important to their present life. The art itself is often highly stylized. Simple lines create minimalist figures

and convey powerful images. However, stone is a difficult and unforgiving medium and the artists had no margin for error. "Mistakes" could not be corrected.

The landscape itself was sometimes integrated into artistic traditions. Across the northwestern plains, and especially in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan, large boulders were arranged in effigies of bison, turtles and human forms or in large circles with concentric rings or radiating arms. The localities where these were constructed are often associated with ancient stories that explain how human/non-human connections were made and how these relationships can be maintained. As well, these monuments are often situated near important resources, such as medicinal plants. Once again, the art form is a reminder that human existence depends on integration within the world and not governance over it.

Unfortunately, little remains of the long tradition of Native art created with organic materials. Some desiccated articles of clothing have been found in caves in Nevada and Utah, and items continue to be collected from the surface of melting glaciers in the Yukon. However, the artistic details are largely lost.

Some of the oldest works that have survived were collected by European fur traders and explorers who visited the plains and subarctic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many of these men were accomplished artists-or were accompanied by artists-and they created important documents recording how clothing and other items were also used as media for artistic expression. Unfortunately, these explorers or traders were seldom aware of the complex concepts that underlay this art, and their depictions of motifs were seldom rendered carefully or accurately.

Still, we are left with an impression that items created by Native People were highly decorated. Paints came from mineral deposits (ochre) or animal parts (a yellow paint came from the bison gall, for example) with fat used as a fixative. Porcupine quills, grass and hair were coloured with dyes derived from plants. These were then woven into designs and held in place with thread made of sinew.

### **Art After the Europeans**

The arrival of Europeans enhanced the variety of art supplies. Glass trade beads, small bells, brass tacks, copper cones and thimbles were used with-or instead of-quills and hair. Commercial paints and dyes came in brighter and more vibrant colours that did not fade as quickly as earth paint. Red and blue trade cloth was a more colourful canvas than white or brown buckskin, so artists integrated an expanding palette of bead colours with new background colours. Cloth was also cut and integrated within pieces, creating a collage effect.

The genocide wrought on Western Canadian Native People in the nineteenth century by disease, near-extinction of game and expansion of Euro-Canadian settlement profoundly affected the nature of Aboriginal art. In older times, art was fully integrated with all aspects of culture and everyone was expected to be a competent artist. European-based cultures separated art as a unique practice with little or no applicability to practical items. Enforced culture change led some Native People to experiment with western media (paints and canvas) and motifs (realistic representations). As people were forced onto reserves, and as the traditional economy disappeared, the production of western-style art emerged as a viable economic pursuit.

The forced settlement on reserves brought with it radical cultural changes imposed by the government. Travel was restricted. Responsibility for education was taken away from the family and given to Christian religious authorities, ultimately leading to the removal of children to residential schools. All decision-making was placed in the hands of a government-appointed, non-Native Indian agent. The government, churches and police combined in their efforts to eradicate all vestiges of traditional Native cultures and replace it with European-based tradition and values.

Within this context, art became an avenue of resistance and a way to preserve traditional life. Hongoeyesa, from Carry the Kettle's people in Saskatchewan, used paper and paints supplied by the government agent to record important events in his peoples' lives. Among these is the arrival of a steamboat and scenes from a holy ceremony. Curing the 1920s, White Wolf, and aged Kainai, recorded his exploits on a canvas that was hung in the Prince of Wales Hotel in Waterton Lakes National Park. The hotel owners saw this as a means of enhancing the "western" experience of their guests. White Wolf may have seen this as an opportunity to retell his personal history and encourage young people to continue the Kainai traditions of bravery and cultural pride.

The history experienced by Native People is not well understood by most Canadians. And yet, it is a shared history that continues to shape our relationships with each other. People of Native ancestry are among the fastest growing components of the Canadian population. Many of these people grew up in an urban environment, far removed from their "traditional" culture and the close ties to the environment that their ancestors knew. However, there is an expectation, by both non-Natives and many Natives themselves, that they should have these connections and understandings. Many contemporary artists continue to use their work to comment on the ongoing inequality and injustice faced by Native People. This contemporary art resists these stereotypes while reclaiming the ways in which these connections can be retained in our world.

## Honouring Tradition

The *Honouring Tradition* exhibition and companion publication illustrate the challenge of defining Native art. In traditional cultures art is a part of everything in life; it is not a separate entity. When we speak of “Native art” we are imposing a Western sensibility on other cultures. While this takes the art out of its cultural context, it acknowledges the importance of these works to our common history.

Yet, even when we recognize the work as “art” we do not easily understand the continuity and connections that span the generations. Too often this art is separated into the archaeological, the ethnographic and the contemporary. The temporal distance of the archaeological leads to analysis that removes the human element. It is often assumed that there is no connection with living cultures and living people. Ethnographic collections are considered to be craft, historical or the art of other (“primitive”) cultures and lacking in sophistication. Inevitably, it is implied that if the art lacks sophistication, so does the culture from whence it came and the people who produced it. This stigma is ahistorical and is applied equally to the creators of the art and to their descendants. Contemporary Aboriginal works often suffer the inverse criticism. Because the work does not conform to stereotypes of Native art, critics dismiss its connections with older forms. As the connections to the art are denied, so are the connections among the artists.

*Honouring Tradition: Reframing Native Art* celebrates this artistic tradition in all of its complexity. The more ancient expressions are concerned with a world in which human beings understood their role in the universe and the nature of their environment. Contemporary works show an understanding that the environment has been phenomenally altered; these artists are struggling to understand their new situations and to find ways of belonging.

This project features a variety of ways to understand this art. We are especially concerned that Native People have a forum in which to talk about their culture and history as they understand it—not as non-Natives have interpreted it.

We asked Frederick McDonald to work with us to select items from the Glenbow’s collection and to help frame the context in which these items could be understood. Fred is a Cree from Fort McKay in northern Alberta. He was raised in a family who trapped, fished and, generally, pursued a traditional “bush” lifestyle. Fred is also an accomplished artist and has lived and worked in Calgary for over 20 years. His viewing of our ethnographic “traditional” art transcended art variations. Some items brought reconnections to his community, others were aesthetically interesting. In many instances, Fred’s selection criteria was very different from a museum curator’s eye; his criteria embodied a much different perspective on what makes a work of art “interesting.”

Knowledge of the art featured in *Honouring Tradition* is often culturally specific and sometimes even individualistic. The layered meanings of pieces may not always be widely understood. We invited people from other Native cultures to view the selections and to offer their comments. Mekwun Awisi (Joe Deschamps) brought a Plains Cree perspective and Allan Pard provided a Blackfoot view. Rosie Firth, who visited Glenbow in 2005, reviewed our Gwich'in material. Their conservatism and willingness to discuss only what they knew and not to speculate is in sharp contrast to many "expert" opinions. We have also asked artists to comment on their work. Unfortunately, not all of the artists whose works are found in the exhibition could be included in this book.

It is our hope that those who experience this art will acquire a new-or a renewed-appreciation for the multifaceted nature of these works. Clothing, for example, becomes performance art when it is worn and connects with contemporary dance and video works. All the works are about survival, resistance, pride and identity. There are links to the distant past as well as the future. Throughout it all, there is a continuing coexistence with all the beings of this world-with the Other Beings as well as other cultures.

This art is about all of us."

# Altering the Goods

By Gerald T. Conaty

When people of different cultures exchange goods, these items are often altered and used for purposes which are very different from the original intention. Furs collected by Canada's First Nations had been used as blankets, coats and other articles of clothing. The pelts had been minimally tanned and the fur was barely altered at all. In the hands of the Europeans, these same pelts were transformed. Garments lost all animalistic form and some pelts were made into felt and sewn into a variety of men's dress hats. These changes are to be expected, given the tendency for western industrial cultures to collect raw materials and transform them radically into new objects. It is more surprising to find European goods altered by so-called "non-industrial" societies to form objects which are useful or meaningful to them. Many of these changes indicate that the assumptions about the superiority of western technology need to be questioned.

Wool blankets have become a trademark of the Hudson's Bay Company and records of all the early fur trading companies reveal their popularity as items to be traded for furs. Many of these blankets were used for purposes other than bed clothing. They were cut and sewn into long, hooded coats known as capotes. Other blankets, worn by men, were draped around their shoulders as formal dress. Among the Plains peoples, these replaced buffalo robes and were often decorated with elaborate beaded panels.

Much has been made of the trade musket's popularity. Yet muskets may have been more of a hindrance than a help to the natives. Muskets required constant supplies of shot, patches with which to pack the shot into the muzzle, and quantities of dry powder. All of these could be obtained only from the Euro-Canadian trader. It was difficult to shoot accurately with the early flintlock muskets and a hunter rarely had a chance for a second shot if he missed his prey for the noise would frighten away the animal. The bow and arrow could be made and repaired with locally available material and with no expense other than the effort of collecting stone and wood and shaping new parts. If the first arrow failed to kill, others could be shot without alarming the game. The metal arrow tips were probably of greater advantage for hunting than muskets.

It is not surprising that many of the muskets were altered to make them more useful. Some had the barrel sawn off close to the stock. These foreshortened firearms were easier to maneuver while astride a horse. Unfortunately, the short barrel made the gun even less accurate and increased its tendency to explode when fired.

The metal gun barrels that were cut off were often flattened and serrated at one end. These tools were shaped very much like traditional hide scrapers made of moose or deer leg bone, but kept a sharp edge longer. These scrapers were used to remove the fatty tissue from the underside of the hide. Similar tools are used today by women who continue to use traditional tanning practices.

Copper pots were a very useful European introduction. Traditional cooking methods required that hot stones be put in liquid filled birchbark baskets. These stones eventually brought the liquid to a boil, but

left behind a grit residue. Some people made fragile ceramic pots which could be placed near the fire. These, however, broke easily during travel. Copper pots were durable and could be heated directly over the fire. Furthermore, if they wore out, they could be flattened, cut, and rolled into tinkle cones for clothing decoration, made into hinges, or hammered into arrowheads.

The trade items preferred by the native peoples, and the uses to which they were put, suggests that peoples of the First Nations viewed trade very differently than their Euro-Canadian counterparts. The native peoples found some items (such as metal blade and copper pots) to be superior to their traditional material. Other items, such as guns, were very cumbersome and not very useful in the bush, far from the trading post. Natives often demanded scarves, beads, and jewelry which were worn with great display and highlighted the success and status of the individual. Fur trade posts also became known as sources of provisions in hard times. These trading patterns reflected ancient attitudes which pre-dated the arrival of Europeans.

As missionaries and settlers began arriving, many native peoples were drawn into settlements where they became dependant upon the supplies and technology of the white man. Still, patterns of traditional use persist: automobile springs are sometimes converted to hide scrapers; blankets and capotes continue to be worn on ceremonial occasions and are often presented as gifts.

#### FURTHER READING

Janes, Robert R. *Preserving Diversity*, Garland Publishing, New York, 1991