

## **Salish Weave Box Set II Essay**

### **Dylan Thomas**

Since the modernist movement swept through the world of art in the early twentieth century, artists in all mediums have been (in the words of the poet Ezra Pound) trying to “make it new.” Modernism promoted limitless artistic growth and exploration, and this brought a sense of freedom to the sphere of visual art, which gave rise to the careers of revolutionary artists such as Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp. The modernist movement forever expanded the definition of fine art and created styles, forms, and techniques that would have been unimaginable a century earlier. This sense of freedom has continued to expand and evolve well into the twenty-first century, and this has offered contemporary visual artists a boundless imaginative range to explore while creating their artwork.

But contemporary indigenous artists working in the realm of traditional art occupy an interesting space in the creative world by trying to simultaneously draw equal inspiration from the future *and* the past; like a cedar tree growing in the rain forest, parts of their spirit digs deeply into the rich and nutritious soil of their artistic heritage, which allows the rest of their spirit to grow and reach towards the infinite possibilities of the open sky. This blending of deep history with infinite possibility is epitomized by the current state of Coast Salish art.

During the formation of Canada, colonialism (through government policies of forced assimilation) almost succeeded in eradicating Coast Salish art, but through the resilient efforts of my Coast Salish elders and ancestors, the art form survived and has begun to flourish in the contemporary artistic landscape. The same forces of colonial expansion that once almost destroyed Coast Salish art have now, through globalization, allowed worldwide artistic movements and styles (both indigenous and modern) to inspire a new and thriving generation of Coast Salish artists. Thanks to the fearless creative exploration by pioneering Salish artists such as Susan Point, contemporary Salish art keeps broadening its artistic borders and its growth seems to have no limits. In contemporary Coast Salish art, one sees the influence of the ever-expanding definition of fine art through the artists’ experiments with modern colors, design techniques, and mediums, which are tailored to accentuate the inherent beauty of traditional Coast Salish art.

The new mediums available to contemporary Coast Salish artists have allowed the art form to expand from traditional woodcarving into new and exciting forms – none of which have become more important than silkscreen printing. *Salish Weave Box Set II* is a collection of contemporary Coast Salish silkscreen print editions that are vivid examples of the artistic blending of modernity with indigeniety.

Through all nine designs in *Salish Weave Box Set II*, one sees the synthesis of a modern medium with traditional Coast Salish elements and forms. All of these print editions use and adapt traditional Coast Salish design fundamentals to dig deep into the rich soil of tradition as well as reaching high into the open sky of progress. By skillfully drawing inspiration from both the future and the past, these artists are able to “make it new,” while still honoring the artistic history of their ancestors.

The most prevalent and notable form of artwork in traditional Coast Salish culture is the carved spindle whorl. Used to spin wool that was made into traditional dress and blankets, the Coast Salish spindle whorl was comprised of a wooden disc with a hole at the center, where the spindle rod went through. The disk was usually decorated with animal, and/or human, and/or floral forms, and these designs are primarily where contemporary Salish art derives its traditional styles and motifs. In traditional spindle whorls, one frequently finds the essential elements and shapes that make Coast Salish art distinct from other types of Northwest Coast art: the concentric circle and oval, the crescent, and the trigon (a triangle with rounded sides). Spindle whorl designs are still extremely popular in contemporary Coast Salish art, but they have mostly shifted into a new medium: while wooden spindle whorls are still carved today, most contemporary spindle whorl designs are found on silkscreen prints that are circular in shape with a circle at the center representing the hole for the spindle rod; this contemporary adaptation of the spindle whorl can be seen in four of the prints in *Salish Weave Box Set II: Middle Point, tHeirs, Eagle Nest, and Mandala*.

In *Middle Point*, lessLIE designs a contemporary Coast Salish spindle whorl by using 4-fold rotational symmetry to complete a circle comprised of four salmon heads. The rotation of the design gives the print the stunning dynamic of circular

motion, which emphasizes its connection to the spindle whorl's traditional use of spinning wool. The black portion of the salmon's eyes are not centered – instead they are positioned towards the top of each salmon's head, giving the eyes an upward glance; this adds animation and character to the salmon figures, and gives the design additional movement. The four salmon heads cleverly combine to create a floral form – each head looking like an individual flower petal. The use of rotational symmetry and the depiction of both animal and floral forms are elements seen in many traditional Coast Salish spindle whorls.

lessLIE uses both extreme and subtle color contrasts to give this design a very distinctive color scheme. The tonal distance between the color of the salmon heads (dark brown) and their inner eyes (black) is very muted, which gives the salmon heads a subtle but powerful color difference. But in sharp contrast to the eye and heads' subtlety, the tonal distance between the color of the center circle (red) and the salmon heads (dark brown) is extreme which works to draw the viewer's eyes towards the center of the print. This use of both subtle and extreme color contrasts works beautifully to give the print another layer of artistic distinction and contemporary character.

*tHEIRS* is a spindle whorl print design by lessLIE that uses reflective symmetry, both horizontally and vertically, to depict two circular human faces placed at the top and bottom of the spindle whorl. The center circle (where, in a traditional spindle whorl, the spindle rod would go through) is skillfully used to form the shared mouth of both human faces. These faces each appear complete on their own, but also combine to make a larger figure-8 form, which is the focal point of the design. At the sides of the design, a shape is created to fill the space outside the faces and complete the larger circle; these shapes resemble an overhead view of a small bird's head and spread wings.

The background color of the design is beige, which mimics the color of deer hide, because *tHEIRS* is a design originally painted on a drum. The faces are black, and the bird-like shapes at the sides are ochre red – giving this design a very traditional color scheme, because these are colors that were available to traditional Coast Salish people. Through this design, lessLIE blends two traditional art mediums with a contemporary medium; the traditional drum and spindle whorl are

combined with the silkscreen print to create a powerful contemporary Coast Salish design.

In *Eagle Nest*, Andy Everson uses 2-fold rotational symmetry to create a spindle whorl design with two eagle figures that swirl and fit perfectly together to complete the outer circle. Much like *Middle Point* by lessLIE, the rotational symmetry gives the design the dynamic of circular motion. The two eagle figures have inverted colors – one having black form with white interior shapes, and the other having white form with black interior shapes. The inversion of black and white, along with the swirling nature of the two figures, alludes to the ancient Chinese yin yang symbol. This blending of a Coast Salish design with a traditional Chinese symbol is a beautiful example of cross-cultural artistic synthesis.

Outside the edge of the eagles, on the border of the design, Andy Everson uses a vibrant turquoise blue to contrast the black and white, but the turquoise is not uniform; it is a gradient blend that is created by a printing process called a bleed run, which smoothly mixes multiple colors of ink. The vibrancy of the turquoise combined with the shifting color of the design adds a contemporary dynamic to the traditional form of the spindle whorl.

Much like *Eagle Nest*, *Mandala* also combines the Coast Salish spindle whorl with an ancient Eastern symbol: the Mandala. Mandalas come from Hindu and Buddhist cultures and are complex circular designs that represent the Universe, usually comprised of symmetrical geometric forms. Dylan Thomas' *Mandala* is formed using a series of concentric circles and squares, with each square being rotated 45 degrees as the design moves towards the center. The design is fractal in nature, which means that it exhibits a repeating pattern that occurs at every level of size. Within each square and circle, there are symmetrical Salish shapes that get smaller and simpler as they move towards the center. These mathematical elements combine to give *Mandala* 8-fold reflective symmetry. The blending of Salish and Eastern design concepts and the use of fractal patterns make *Mandala* an interesting contemporary interpretation of the traditional spindle whorl.

The outer border of the spindle whorl is black, the circular shapes are blood red and the squares are neutral grey; all the internal Salish shapes are white, which

allows them to stand out against every other color. This color scheme, while not being quite traditional because of the vibrant tone of the red, is quite common in Northwest Coast art: many early Haida prints by artist such as Bill Reid made this color scheme popular decades ago. And although colors schemes have greatly diversified since then, it is still commonly used today.

Two other designs in *Salish Weave Box Set II* are circular in shape but don't contain the center circle that would make them a spindle whorl design:

*Thunderbird and Killer Whale* by Luke Marston and *Devotion* by Susan Point. Both of these designs have a beige background (like *THEIRS*) giving the prints a drum-like appearance.

*Thunderbird and Killer Whale* by Luke Marston is one of only two designs in *Salish Weave Box Set II* that does not use any formal symmetry; instead the design free flows according to the shapes of the animals with smooth curves that give the design a rhythmic appearance.

The color scheme is very traditional with black and ochre red, but in contrast, the flowing isolated forms are very contemporary. In this design, the main focus is the black thunderbirds face stretching diagonally across the drum, with its beak at the right and its horn curling at the left. The horn is important when identifying the thunderbird – because eagles and thunderbirds, in Northwest Coast art, can look very similar; but when the horn is present, one can be certain that he or she is looking at a thunderbird. The face of this thunderbird is a very beautiful and traditional structure: it has a sharp curved beak; a mouth with two crescents and a trigon running from its back point; a trigon with a half circle front on its beak to represent the nostril; an eye that is made of two conjoined trigons; and a large trigon for the length of the horn with a circle to show the end hook.

Below the face, near the bottom left of the design is the thunderbird's arm and circular claw. Luke uses the line between the arm and the claw to form a mouth and places an eye above it to create a second face in the design; this is likely intended to represent the lightning snake. In Salish culture, the thunderbird lives symbiotically with the lightning snake under its wing – and when one sees lightning, that is a thunderbird and lightning snake hunting large game such as killer whales.

The whale in the design is more subtle than the thunderbird. The face is hidden, but between the eagle's head and leg there is a smooth long shape resembling a dorsal fin, and above the thunderbird's face is a long flat shape that resembles a whale's tail. All these elements flow skillfully together to create a stunning contemporary Salish design.

*Devotion* by Susan Point also uses a circular beige background, but (unlike *Thunderbird and Killer Whale* and *tHEIRS*) it does not have a closing border color; the beige is free standing in the middle of the white print, which gives *Devotion* an appealing floating effect.

Within the circle, Susan places a 2-fold symmetrical image of a bear holding a tree frog, which is constructed using individual floating shapes that work together to form the bodies of each animal. The skillful arrangement of these floating shapes gives the design a three-dimensional dynamic. The bear is brown and the frog is green, but unlike most Salish designs, it is the outer forming shapes that have color and the interior of each animal is left open.

The outer form of the frog, which nests inside the bear design, works perfectly to define the bear's arms and legs. The arms of the bear run down the design and fold inward to hold the frog, while the arms of the frog fold upwards towards the chest of the bear and create its upper arms. The frog's legs fold downwards and its feet flare outward to define the shins and feet of the bear. While nesting the bear and frog together flawlessly, Susan manages to keep both bear and frog remarkably anatomically accurate to their living counterparts. And then within the frog, Susan nests a subtle Fleur-de-lis, which helps define the frog's face and body.

While *Devotion* looks like a very contemporary Salish design, there are elements that are quite traditional. Both bear and frog are found in traditional Salish design, but even more interestingly, most of the floating shapes that define the frog and bear's body are modified trigons and crescents: some are angular, elongated, or placed together, but most have the fundamental features of these traditional Salish elements.

Three of the print editions in *Salish Weave Box Set II* are square designs: *Salmon Cycle* by John Marston, and *Spa Eth* and *Wuhus* by Maynard Johnny Jr. This shape ventures from the spindle whorl and is a slightly more contemporary layout, but it lets the artist utilize more of the paper space for various interesting effects.

*Salmon Cycle* by John Marston is the second design that doesn't use formal symmetry. The design has a black border that uses long, flowing featherlike shapes to complete the outer square. These shapes are filled with various crescents, trigons and ovals. Within this border is a free-floating inner circle that is ochre red and comprised of many animal forms. Although the two shapes don't directly interact, the juxtaposition of the two forms works beautifully together, much like a frame that accents a painting.

Although the inner circle's border is not complete, with some spaces left blank, the circle is implied and filled in by the viewer's eye through John's skillful crafting of the design. Within the circle, there are many animal forms all flowing and fitting together to fill the entire space with movement. Birds, wolves, and salmon are all represented in the design, along with many tight fitting trigons, crescents, and ovals. The shapes are all nicely spaced to give the circle perfect balance.

The interior shapes and animal forms in *Salmon Cycle* are all very traditional but their tight fitting arrangement and the layout of the design is very contemporary. John breaks from the spindle whorl and drum design to create an original layout that uses two separate shapes to create a striking cohesive design.

*Wuhus* is a square design by Maynard Johnny Jr. that uses 2-fold symmetry to depict a frog's face and front hands. The print utilizes the full region of the paper and nicely spaces all the shapes to give the design a perfectly balanced arrangement. Most of the print is green because the design is framed much like a close up on the frog's face.

The main focal point of *Wuhus* is the frog's large white and black eyes, which are concentric ovals, with an accenting crescent at the center of each; these

large eyes give the design a playful appearance. Below the eyes is the red tongue that hangs from the center, depicting the frog's ability to stretch its tongue when hunting. At the bottom of the design are the frog's front feet. The feet smoothly rise from near each bottom corner, upwards and inwards, towards the frog's lips, and then sharply swoop downwards to meet at the center bottom of the design, and the space between the front feet nicely mimics the shape of the hanging tongue. All of the lines in the print are nicely rounded, giving the shapes a soft and smooth flow.

Much like *Devotion*, *Wuhus* might appear completely contemporary at first glance, but Maynard does use many traditional crescents and trigons – as well as modified ones: the space between the toes and above the frog's head can be interpreted as modified crescents, and the spaces behind the frogs hands, reaching up to the lips, can be interpreted as modified trigons.

*Spa Eth* is a design by Maynard Johnny Jr. that uses a similar style as *Wuhus* to depict a bear: both are symmetrical front shots that frame closely on the animal's face and front feet.

In *Spa Eth*, the bear's paws split at the middle, shooting upwards and then swerve smoothly towards the sides of the page. The line created by the movement of the paws allows the bear's face to fit perfectly into the remaining space of the page.

Unlike the frog's playful look in *Wuhus*, the bear in *Spa Eth* has a stern, powerful look; the eyes are small and focused and the brows swoop down towards the middle of the face. The snout is placed directly at the center of the page and has a closed mouth, which adds to the intensity of the bear's look. At the top two corners, the ears are formed using split-u shapes. Under the chin of the bear, Maynard uses a line with a sawing motion to give the chin the texture of fur. A combination of elements gives this design a realistic feel: the accurate anatomy of the face, the textured fur, and the soft brown color of a grizzly. But although this design is more realistic than traditional, Maynard still uses multiple crescents as accents – which can be seen under each eye, to divide the toes, and to define the paws: again blending traditional elements with a contemporary form.

The diversity of the nine designs in *Salish Weave Box Set II* is a testament to the vast possibilities of Coast Salish art. All of the artists involved have used the

traditional elements of their ancestors as vehicles to venture down new and exciting creative paths. And as styles and technologies continue to evolve, there is no way to predict where Salish art will move in the future. But it is evident that the art's potential is infinite: just as a single spindle whorl can produce unlimited wool as long as it keeps spinning, Coast Salish tradition can produce infinite threads of creative direction if Salish artists continue to carry their heritage into the future.