

Interview with Charles Elliott

Including Artist Statement for Shamans Vision

Artist: Temosen-thut, Charles Elliott

Cultural Group: Strait Salish

LD: What has been your training, who [have] been your mentors?

CE: As far as training and mentoring, I have basically done for most of my career as a Coast Salish artist. If anybody wants to learn I won't turn them away, but they have to make their own sacrifices. I started with elementary schools, high schools, in shop trainings with groups and individuals. I spent a lot of my learning about the Coast Salish art discipline in museums and private collections. There are people who actually collected old First Nations and Salish art pieces, held on to them, because I was energetically looking for old Coast Salish pieces to study the design, people would refer me to this person or that person like Norman Shadder and other people who was the editor for the American Indian Art. I learned a lot from white people whose collections they held and as well as the archives and museums, when I was allowed to go into the archives. I was able to learn and rebuild and be able to apply the old system, rather than just copying anyone else.

LD: What are your goals when making art? What is your motivation? What are you trying to accomplish?

CE: One of the things that I usually try to do is base my present-day creations on the older ancient art forms, like instead of totem poles, we have a lot of house posts in our culture which is the difference that its flat in the back and it was also a beam carrier for carrying beams across expanses of buildings. I'm trying to make the Coast Salish art with authenticity, so rather than just copying another culture, I'm actually doing my own, and in with the smaller pieces as well trying to do the same thing. I want it to be authentic based on the historical pieces.

LD: What types of materials or mediums have you worked in?

CE: Mediums that I basically worked in is red cedars, yellow cedars, alders, maple, those are traditional woods that we used. Yu wood is another one. Then I got into contemporary things like making prints, and when I make a print it has to be based on something from my culture before I feel satisfied with it. So it says something rather it being just a nice picture. It has to have a meaning to it or significance.

LD: Can you tell me about the piece you did called Shamans Vision? Maybe tell me what it's about?

CE: This particular print that we are talking about it entitled Shamans Vision or Shnam as we say in our language. The meaning for this was actually the canvas was actually a hectigon drum which is part of our culture and deer skin covering on it. I painted the original on the drum and I still have it, here it is, up on the wall. I used acrylic paint which is very contemporary, but I base all my colors on traditional colors, except for the blue that I added into my culture which is now known as Salish blue, where as it was something that I introduced myself. But they had a color close to that which was proper oxide green; it's a bluey green color, so I painted in that. The images on the drum are an orca, a salmon and a face, which should be the face of a Shaman or a Shnam. In our culture, we had people who could see the future, people who could heal the mind, people who could help in different ways. Sometimes are spirit or soul,

whatever you want to call it, is not completely in line with ourselves and they were able to line us up again, so that we are a whole person in line with our spiritual physical side. We had ways of looking into, seeing things and one of them was by using water. Our Shamans and our Medicine people could use water and stir the water, and look into the water and they could see images, they can see things and that's what this is about. On the drum you see the face looking into the water, and this is the face of the Shnam, and the vision is what he sees under water, and if they were trying to help a person align their spirit with their own self again, it would be the smaller face that is in there. There's the main face of the Shaman, the Shnam and the other face which would be sort of a representative of the person they are trying to help, because the Shamans help people by being able to see what other people couldn't and water was used a lot as the same principles as a crystal ball.

LD: What [are] the symbolic meanings of the animals being represented in this work?

CE: They symbolize the struggle, the dance of life. The salmon is part of our survival; it's also another part of the survival of the orca and other creatures in the ocean. It's just what they do; they are in constant play with each other. It is really important for me to do strictly Coast Salish art. Over the years I have made it critically important for myself and to other young artists to make sure that they use Salish designs in proper ways they should be used. A lot of them are using ovals and circles for eyes, tail joints and shoulder joints. We're the first ones that used crescents to outline the mouth or sockets around the eyes, muscles and tendons inside the creature and the backbones. If you put a bunch of crescents along the back of an animal it would jump out at you as a backbone, but if you don't know how to analyze then you would say "oh, that's very nice", but also stomach itself is full of intestines, and so are the animals and the birds, used with circles and crescents emanating out will give the pattern of insides. So, there is proper placements for all things as far as I know.

LD: When did you do this piece?

CE: The drum was created in 1994 and the print was created in 2000.

LD: Would you like to add anything else to your interview, or say anything that will help represent you as being a Coast Salish artist?

CE: I want it to be pure Salish design on there, and it basically has that on there. It's a statement on our Medicine People and their duties and the things that they can do. I hope that all Salish artists practice their Coast Salish art discipline and that it's available and people can find it in a lot of places now, because a lot of young artists who are Salish have learned to apply it properly. I can see the deviations away from by just looking at a piece of work. I appreciate to see the old style coming out. The old style was quite elaborate, now a days I sometimes see young artists only use two or three designs in the whole body of an animal, I says "yeah, you got a dart there and crescent there, but is that it?" The old style was quite elaborate they could take an image and just by placing the designs, like a piece of lace it was so full of design. My wish is that our Coast Salish art brings us to a level playing ground with other First Nations and that people will learn to understand and appreciate what I thinks is really going on actually.

LD: Thank you very much Charles for your time, I really appreciate what you have to say and always enjoy listening to your words. Many, many thanks Charles.