

Salish Weave Collection Box Set I

The Salish Weave Box Set I represents an excellent collection of Coast Salish graphic art rendered through the serigraph printing process (which is also called silkscreen printing). The serigraph printing process is generally executed utilizing an original pencil drawing (as is generally done by Susan Point), or an original painting created with acrylic on paper, canvas, drums, and paddles. This process enables people to collect a work that is not the original, and allows the artists to explore various graphic techniques not possible through the creation of an original painted work.

Although Coast Salish artists such as Simon Charlie and Charles Elliott were producing works within a Coast Salish style in the late 1970s, a pivotal point in Coast Salish graphic work can be dated back to the works of Stan Greene, who created a one color screen-print in 1982. This print was a depiction of a terrified man drowning in the Fraser River who was subsequently saved by giant sturgeon. After creating the screen for this work to be printed, Greene had trouble finding a printer who was willing to print his design; he was told that the works of northern artist were more marketable. Determined that the Coast Salish design tradition was equal to the works of northern Northwest Coast artists, Stan Greene didn't give up on his early work. In the end, a printer in Vancouver printed the design and the prints all sold immediately (Gibson, *The Salish Spirit: The Works of Stan Greene*, 1994).

This experience was probably common in the early 1980's, an era in which Coast Salish graphic work had little or no recognition in comparison to northern and Wakashan¹ works. Inspired by the works of Stan Greene, Susan Point began to create silkscreen prints in the early 1980's, for which a market would eventually expand. Following in the lead of Susan Point, the 1990's saw the emergence of a new generation of Coast Salish artists creating graphic works. This new generation included younger artists such as Joe Wilson, Manual Salazar, Edward Joe, and Maynard Johnny, Jr. This younger generation of Salish artists would encourage and inspire subsequent Salish artists, including Chris Paul, lessLIE, and Dylan Thomas.

Chris Paul's "Swan Drum" is a serigraph that was printed based on a painted drum. The overall design is an excellent example of southern Northwest Coast design, with a geometric design common to both historical Coast Salish and Nuu-chah-nulth art traditions. The colors of the design show an influence from Paul's uncle Charles Elliott, while simultaneously revealing

¹ The Wakashan family consists of the linguistically related Nuu-chah-nulth and Kwakwaka'wakw peoples mainly from western and northern Vancouver island)

the flexibility of colors Coast Salish graphic work, since “historical”² Coast Salish work was predominately a carved art form, which has left a lot of flexibility for contemporary Coast Salish artists (although this is not to say that there are not traditional beliefs about colors within Coast Salish culture). Within Chris Paul’s swan design can be seen the interdependency of humans and animals, since within the wing joint of the swan a human face can be seen. A common design tradition of Coast Salish art is the utilization of concentric circles within the anatomical joints of the depicted beings to show points of connection, and in the case of Chris Paul’s swan, that interconnection is visually expressed as a human face. Aside from this interpretation of humans and animals as being interconnected, the human face and wing joint can also simultaneously be interpreted as visually revealing the human roots of some animals, since in some Coast Salish cultures, the original beings of the world were human, and were transformed by The Transformer into animal forms.

With lessLIE’s “Thunderbird and Killerwhale” and Maynard Johnny Jr’s “Answer to the Call”, we have two renditions of the same Coast Salish legend. In this legend, there was a large Killer Whale occupying Cowichan Bay that was eating all of the salmon in the bay and blocking and preventing other salmon from ascending the Cowichan River. These actions of the Killer Whale caused the Cowichan people to enter into a period of starvation, since no salmon were ascending the Cowichan River. Out of desperation, members of the Cowichan community gathered and decided to call upon Thunderbird for salvation. Like an eagle swooping down on a salmon (and a possible cultural inspiration to First Nations cultures dependent on salmon for sustenance), Thunderbird flew down into Cowichan Bay and grabbed the Killer Whale and flew away with him. This saved the Cowichan people, and salmon were once again abundant in the Cowichan River. An interesting point about this legend is that it is common to many other First Nations cultures. Even within the ethnographic construct of “Coast Salish” culture, this legend varies for different Coast Salish people. For example, thunderbirds also exist in First Nations cultures outside of the Northwest Coast, and visual depictions of thunderbirds clawing or grabbing killer whales have different cultural meanings for different First Nations. So for some Nuu-chah-nulth people, such an image could be tied into observations of eagles grabbing salmon out of rivers and thunderbirds doing the same with killer whales. Since many First Nations learn from nature, and since thunderbirds are symbols of awe and respect for nature, some Wakashan or Nuu-chah-nulth people see the image of Thunderbird grabbing a Killer Whale as where they were inspired and learned to become culture’s subsisting on salmon.

lessLIE’s “Salish Community” is a reflection on pre-colonial and post-colonial senses of

² The term “historical” is slightly Eurocentric, since it only validates colonial means for documenting history and invalidates indigenous oral traditions as a means for documenting the past.

community within Coast Salish First Nations. The design is rendered in a circular form in the spirit of spindle whorls, which symbolizes the creation and distribution of wealth in the form of weavings within Coast Salish communiTIES. The woven blankets created with spindle whorls by Coast Salish women were a form of currency that validated and documented wealth within a community. The validation and distribution of this wealth within Salish communiTIES was a concrete mnemonic device which reaffirmed family and inter village ties. So the circular form of the design represents holism and community cohesion, in stark contrast to the internalized racism, nepotism, corrupt band office politics, traditionalist snobbery, and general division which still exists within some many First Nations communities. The lack of eyes within the human faces is a reflection of blindness to social divisions within First Nations reserves, while simultaneously symbolizing the potential to create a more positive vision and future for Salish peoples.

Susan Point's "Over Black Tusk" depicts a bird with a human face inside the wing. Like Chris Paul's "Swan Drum" print, this design of Point's can also be interpreted as visually expressing the ties between humans and animals through the rendering of a human face inside the wing of the bird. Yet the rendering of the human face is a significant design departure from traditional Coast Salish aesthetics, in that the human face is rendered rather naturalistically and in profile. In most Coast Salish artefacts housed in museums, the faces of humans inside animals is generally rendered from a frontal perspective. This serigraph of Point's in some ways ties the past to the present, by changing the traditionally frontal perspective of a human face to the profile perspective. Yet, despite appearing to be somewhat naturalistic, the profile face is rendered with trigons, split-u forms, and lip forms traditional to Coast Salish design.

lessLIE's "Four Serpents" is also a design created in the spirit of spindle whorls. Since weaving is a cultural practice rarely seen within contemporary Coast Salish communities, and also since Coast Salish concepts of wealth have changed since colonization and the creation of the nation of Canada, this design, as concentric circles was created in the spirit of spindle whorls of the past. This symbolizes cultural perpetuation and change. In the circular design, four serpents are depicted. The circular form and the number four, as within many First Nations cultural beliefs, symbolizes holism and balance. The four serpents allude to Salish shamanic or medicine-person traditions, while also alluding to the contemporary image of serpents as symbols of health. So this image, like Susan Point's "Over Black Tusk" serigraph, is a visual tie between the past and the present.

lessLIE's "Sun, Salmon, Frogs, and Ravens" is a visual reflection of the interconnectedness of life on the circle of the earth. The circular design alludes to the earth while depicting the sun. The sun has a personified face, representing humanity. The visual simplicity of the design belies the complexity of the visual punning within the design.

Interconnected into the personified human face of the sun are two salmon faces in profile and on the chin of the face, a frog is depicted. Continuing this visual punning, on the forehead are two ravens, with the negative space of their mouths simultaneously defining the eyebrows on the personified face of the sun. Since the personification of the sun and moon is common to Northwest Coast art, the personified face in the sun of this design is a reflection of anthropocentrism and a world-view which is too human centered. Aside from this, it also represents the power and responsibility which humans hold on the circle of the earth. So the personified face is a reflection of the human viewer, asking humanity to face its own anthropocentrism and accept responsibility for the environmental well being of the planet.

Chris Paul's "Conservation" serigraph can be interpreted as the conversation of a vital species in British Columbia, salmon. In the design, two profile salmon heads are depicted, with two split-u forms possibly representing anatomical features of the salmon in a very contemporary and visually simple rendering. The simplicity and minimalism of the design evokes humanity's urgent need to ration its consumerism, industry, and species depletion.

Maynard Johnny Jr's "Thunderbird Paddle" serigraph depicts two thunderbirds in a circular form that is simultaneously a spindle whorl design, and a paddle design. The shape of a paddle is suggested through visual punning in between the two thunderbirds. Amongst other things, thunderbirds in Northwest Coast First Nations beliefs are symbols of awe and respect for nature, and this is something that a traditional Coast Salish paddler learns to appreciate while paddling through the Salish Sea.

Collectively, the works in The Salish Weave Box Set I represent the evolution of Coast Salish art from a predominantly carved art form to graphic media. This is unique in Northwest Coast art history because the art traditions of Northern and Wakashan First Nations cultures have had a comparatively long history of graphic work, so the adaptation to silkscreen printing was more natural for such art traditions. Despite this, Coast Salish design, like other art traditions of the Northwest Coast, is a design tradition with positive and negative design principles which easily adapt to the serigraph printing process. As with the other First Nations of the Northwest Coast, the utilization of silkscreen printing has enabled the contemporary Coast Salish artists whose work are part of The Salish Weave Collection to explore contemporary colors and subject matter.

In the past, through traditional Coast Salish culture, weavings were a form of wealth for Salish peoples as well as a document of events within such communities. Weavings served as mnemonic devices to document and aid the oral tradition in creating tangible records within Salish communities. With The Salish Weave Collection, this tradition continues through the medium of silkscreen printing, documenting contemporary Coast Salish culture through the graphic gifts of contemporary Coast Salish artists.

AUTHOR

lessLIE, contemporary Coast Salish artist, Duncan, British Columbia, 2010

WORK CITED

Gibson, Dr. Edward. The Salish Spirit: The Works of Stan Greene. Burnaby: Simon Fraser Gallery Press, 1994.