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**VISUAL ART**

# The Original Northwest Reserve

SAM goes all-out with a long-overdue Coast Salish retrospective. It's still not enough.

*by Jen Graves*

It's fair to say that the big new show of Coast Salish art at Seattle Art Museum doesn't have to do much to be a success: Its existence alone is an improvement. Although the Coast Salish are the native people on the land that extends south almost to the Columbia River and north all the way to the top of the Strait of Georgia—encompassing the cities of Olympia, Tacoma, Seattle, and Bellingham, as well as Victoria, Vancouver, and Nanaimo, BC—no one in any of those cities has ever organized a major show of Coast Salish art before.

Just look at the distended title to see how difficult this was to pull together: S'abadeb—The Gifts: Pacific Coast Salish Art and Artists. “S'abadeb,” the Salish word for gifts, indicates the need to speak from the point of view of the Salish people rather than to look in from the outside; indeed, SAM curator Barbara Brotherton worked on this show for seven years with the help of 40 native advisers from the 39 sovereign Salish nations who speak two dozen languages and dialects. The words “The Gifts” are gently moralistic, a reminder that Duwamish chief Seattle gave his lands and was rewarded with nothing but punishment and that perhaps we can do a bit better this time around. Adding the words “and Artists” is intended, most importantly, to make the point that the people these objects represent are still alive.

Given the many-layered void this show needs to fill, it's a landmark achievement that it happened at all. Brotherton gathered more than 175 objects going back thousands of years and coming up to a brand new commission by Musqueam artist Susan Point. They came from collections around the world.

“I think it is safe to say,” chief curator Chiyo Ishikawa announced, “that there has never been a more complex exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum.”

Complex to put together, yes. Complexly presented, no. The fascinating strands of the inherent tangle at the heart of the exhibition are left mostly unpulled by the show's five generic themes: Gifts of the Earth, Gifts of Our Ancestors, Gifts of Our Families, Gifts of the Spirit World, and Gifts of Our Artists. The results can be startlingly basic, even condescendingly so. Does it get more elementary than pointing out that native people are invested in nature and ancestry? (Nearly lost in this muddle is an intense room-sized installation recreating a Soul Recovery Ceremony, in which native doctors position themselves in a maze of starkly colored pictographic objects that they use to travel to the land of the dead, battle spirits, and rescue the souls of the sick. This ceremony was once outlawed as evil by whites; in response, Salish people practiced it as pantomime for tourists.)

Instead of following the layout, I suggest wandering criss-crossingly through the show. You have to do the work, but it's worth pushing the door open when the people inside are your neighbors and antecedents. The first thing to know is that Salish culture is introverted, by nature and necessity.

"Our people have preferred to be quiet," Upper Skagit elder Vi Hilbert says, and she could be referring to the contrast between the Salish and the dominant force in Northwest native art—the force that for years was treated as the only Northwest native art: what is called "formline" design, made by tribes situated hundreds of miles north of here. The Haida and Tlingit are the best known of these, and their art has completely overshadowed Salish art. (SAM's own collection of Northwest and Alaskan native art has 500 objects, of which only 100 are Salish, of which 30 to 40 have just been collected in the last couple of years.)

Salish art is simpler, subtler, and looser than the northern style. It is not always symmetrical. It has a muted palette. Dazzlingly colored warrior masks and heraldic totem poles standing outside of homes for anthropologists to gawk at—these are not Salish objects. Salish house posts are installed indoors and bear private meanings. While northerners used objects for decoration, the Salish did not. Weavings, baskets, spindle whorls (for spinning wool), rattles, and drums are

adorned with story iconography but made for ceremonial use. Some ceremonies are too secret for their objects to go on display. The religious practices of Salish people are especially introverted; certain names and experiences are thought to lose power if they are widely shared. All of this means that the Salish—in addition to being ignored or swept aside for 150 years—don't spend a lot of time clamoring for the attention of outsiders, either.

This is the original famous Northwest reserve. In art this principle can be associated with the contrast between surface and volume, two dimensions and three. Northern design appears to be painting-based, according to leading scholar Bill Holm, while SAM's Brotherton believes Salish art is sculpturally rooted. Interiority appears again in late Skokomish elder Bruce Miller's idea that the trigon—a triangle with curved sides that is one of the four main elements of Salish style (there is also outline, circle, and crescent)—has an unseen fourth point, an inner boundary.

But some of the voids in this show are distortions, not representations. The Salish people have been more disrupted than their relatively remote northern counterparts by the near-total urbanization of their lands. (The dispersion of people and information has begun to be redressed: Hilbert remarked that a generation of children is lost; this show, she said, is for the grandchildren.) That means that Salish art has been passed down erratically. In Salish art history, meaning is Rumsfeldian: There are knowns, unknowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns. "The art and material culture shown in this book [and exhibition] may or may not accurately represent Salish cultures of their time periods," Brotherton writes, breathtakingly, in the exhibition catalog.

The exhibition represents loss by making room for absence. Empty, spotlit pedestals are paired with labels that bear angry or despairing comments from native speakers. The pedestals lightly emit recorded sounds made by objects too sacred or secret to be represented. The palpable but silent anger becomes sacred, too.

Other attempts to bring the objects to life include giant video projections. A canoe hung at hip height—a marvel of restrained curvaceousness by John Cheshiahud, late of Lake Union—is backed by a wall of water.

But the way the show progresses threatens to calcify the material. Early sections, devoted to nature and ancestors, are dimly lit natural history–style displays while the last section, “Gifts of Our Artists,” given mostly to European-style “fine” art, is your typical art show: bright lights, objects spaced out. The uncomfortably conventional impression created is that Salish people “evolved” from making primitive, nature-based crafts into sophisticated, commodified art. That’s the story assimilationists want to hear, not the perspective of a culture laboring to keep the ancient and the contemporary in balance.

In terms of visual appeal, plenty of this show’s ancient and utilitarian objects can go head-to-head with the self-consciously arty contemporary art. I especially love a 19th-century wooden spindle whorl from the Chemainus tribe borrowed from the Brooklyn Museum. Carved on it is a loose pile of four whales that look like they’re floating in a vertical row for some kind of quick meeting before they swim off. The irregular pattern implies motion; I wish it were possible to see it spinning. The pairs of mustelids on Quamichan house posts have a similar effect: They’re fat, alive, and on the move despite being chipped and degraded.

Relative looseness, asymmetry, and low contrast have made Salish art less catchy to the tourist eye, but I find myself longing for these attributes in the contemporary art section of the show, where much of the art is bright, high-contrast, and tightly symmetrical instead. Standing out by blending in are Susan Point’s muted, undulating wall installation; Roger Fernandes’s collage drawing juxtaposing ancient Salish pictographs and casino playing cards; and Matika Wilbur’s unfussy photographic portraits. In depicting a raped landscape, surrealist-influenced painter Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun uses nightmarishly fruity color as a weapon.

Look for it.