

## **CONTINUITY OF FORM AND FUNCTION IN THE ART OF THE EASTERN WOODLANDS**

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### ABSTRACT/RESUME

The author compares contemporary Woodland Indian fine arts with the artistic traditions of the Eastern Woodland region in prehistoric times. She suggests that the notable similarities of subject and form stem in part from the position of art in both periods as an element of cultural revitalization.

L'auteur compare les beaux arts des autochtones contemporains de la région boisée aux traditions artistiques de la région boisée de l'est à l'époque préhistorique. Elle suggère que les ressemblances remarquables entre sujet et forme proviennent en partie de la position que l'art occupe dans les deux périodes comme un élément du renforcement culturel.

Could the paintings of 20th century artists such as Norval Morrisseau and Daphne Odjig have much in common with Native American art produced two thousand years ago? Do they? Odjig and Morrisseau are members of the so-called "New Woodland School", a Native fine art movement which developed in the late 1960's in western Ontario. The movement "came of age" in 1983 when the Art Gallery of Ontario mounted a show devoted exclusively to works by this group. The show was spectacular. Its rich imagery and formal strength was as brash and sophisticated as any group show of contemporary fine art. At the same time, fundamental relationships to ancient artistic traditions were also unmistakable with similarities in form, content, and iconography. These relationships provide evidence of an ancient and ongoing artistic tradition that continues to serve both the individual and the community in very direct ways. Furthermore, this continuity suggests that at least some aspects of the cultural tradition and world view which supported ancient art in the Eastern Woodlands are as vital and active today as they were two thousand years ago.

Still, it is difficult to imagine what those acrylic paintings and graphic arts could have in common with ritual artworks produced so much earlier. Of course, all of the artists involved are or were Native North Americans. But the training, lifestyles and creative motivation of contemporary Native artists are radically different from those of their ancient counterparts. So are the media employed, the channels of distribution and the economic and subsistence realities associated with the production of "fine art". Nevertheless, comparison reveals some remarkable points of contact in content, form and historical context.

There are also important relationships between contemporary Woodland art and the traditional arts of the last two or three centuries. These similarities are undeniable and have been discussed frequently in the literature (see for example, MacLuhan and Hill, 1983:49-55). This first historical link established, it is perhaps less incredible that some aspects of the modern tradition might have an even longer history. Understanding the ways in which art functioned in Native societies during the post-contact years is a complex problem, however. The influence of European trade and the pressures towards acculturation were so pervasive that it is difficult to separate wholly traditional structures from those altered by European influence. To understand the purely traditional contexts within which art operated, one must explore the nature of art produced before European contact and the ways in which it functioned. Those earlier traditions will be the focus of this discussion.

It is easiest to document similarities in subject matter. Three main categories of representational imagery, other than human, appear on ritual



**Plate 8:** Saul Williams,  
*Homage to Morrisseau* 1979-80.



**Plate 8:** Couch shell: 13 ½" long. Spiro Mound  
Le Flore County, Oklahoma, U.S.A.

artworks from the prehistoric periods: 1) large carnivorous animals (bears and panthers); 2) snakes; and 3) raptorial birds (especially hawks and eagles). Other naturalistic subject matter occurs but is relatively uncommon. Often references to these creatures are combined with human representation, especially in the last centuries before European contact (Plate 7). Imagery involving these same three categories abounds in the art of the New Woodland School (Plate 8). The range of subject matter is, of course, much broader today but references to birds, large carnivores and snakes in the modern tradition are too frequent to be merely coincidental. Suggestions of transformation or simultaneity of being are also common in the modern corpus, as for example Norval Morrisseau's large diptych, *The Storyteller: the Artist and his Grandfather*, 1978. A similar combination of abstract animal and bird references is commonly found in pre-contact ritual material done almost two thousand years before. The composite bird and human imagery in Morrisseau's *Thunderbird Man*, 1962 and a work by Daphne Odjig with the same title (Figure 1) is strongly reminiscent of the human/bird images engraved on copper and shell from the Southeastern Woodlands (Plate 11). Another example of contemporary composite imagery is Tim Restoule's *My Grandfather the Bear*, 1981 (Plate 9). The Wray Figurine, a small Hopewell sculpture, presents a very similar idea (Plate 10).



Figure 1: *Daphne Odjig, Thunderbird Man 1973.*



**Plate 9:** *Tim Restoule, My Grandfather the Bear, 1981*





**Plate 11:** *Shell gorget. Dallas Culture. Late Mission A.D. 1300-1500*



**Plate 12:** *Spaghetti style shell gorget. Dallas Culture. Late Mission A.D. 1300-1500*

Another prominent theme in both the New Woodland School and in ancient Native arts from the Eastern Woodlands is the symbolic depiction of spiritual interaction or combat between both animal and human entities. Two more works of the same name, *Conflict Between Good and Evil*, 1975, by Carl Ray and Daphne Odjig, offer fine examples of this type of imagery. It is also significant that although these two Native art traditions share relationships in subject matter, there is obviously no direct copying or specific reinterpretation of the ancient pieces. In fact, many of the ancient works are neither widely published nor well known. Areas of similarity reflect a common approach to, and interpretation of, subject matter more than nostalgic reinterpretation, an important indication that an ancient and ongoing tradition may form the basis for at least some of the art of the New Woodland School.

Neither the significance nor the formal rules governing the complex design traditions of prehistoric Woodland artists has ever been successfully explained. Specific characteristics of the tradition have been identified, nonetheless. The tendency to elaborate stylized naturalistic form with non-naturalistic designs is a pervasive trait in ancient Woodlands art. This is especially true of the treatment of the eyes in both human and animal

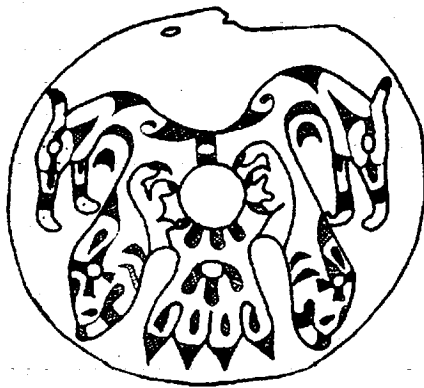


Figure 2: *Shell gorget. Crab Orchard Spring Mound, Kentucky, U.S.A.*

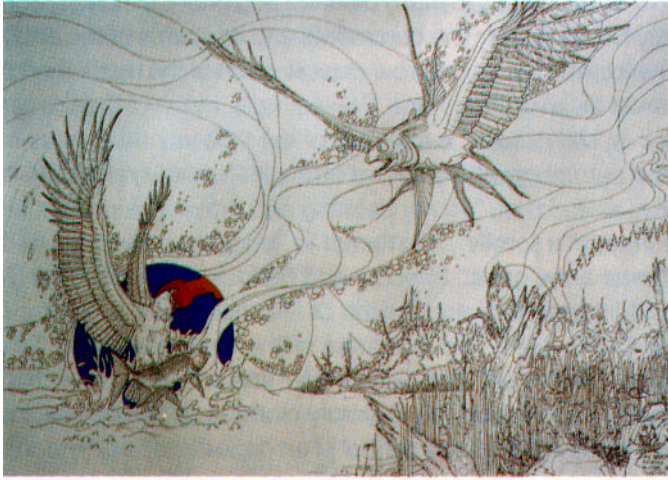
representation (Figure 2). A similar tendency is also common in the naturalistic imagery of the New Woodland School (see Plates 8 and 9). One of the most common characteristics of prehistoric Woodland design is the use of inconsistent (often confusing) relationships between figure and ground (Figure 2). This trait is so pervasive in the ancient art tradition that it is probably fundamental to the symbolic system. Similar inconsistencies are apparent in many modern works from the Eastern Woodlands, although, once again, the formal devices in use are far more varied than they were in the ancient corpus (Plate 13).

This common tendency to be indefinite in the description of positive and negative space is particularly intriguing. It was so basic to the ancient Native tradition that it probably reflects the alternative ontological structures and classification systems of the cultures that produced the art. If so, similar ambiguity in modern Native art tradition suggests the persistence of those alternative approaches, despite considerable acculturation.

Although the similarities identified above are important, other relationships between ancient and modern art in the eastern Woodlands are more fundamental. The most significant connections between contemporary Native art and the pre-contact tradition lie in the essential character of the art produced and the historical contexts in which it functions. There is as much disagreement about the nature and definition of ancient Woodlands art as there is regarding definition of the modern school. Archaeologists and art historians, critics and patrons argue continually about the character of both art traditions. A primary focus in popular and scholarly commentary on the New Woodland School is the attempt to define the precise nature of the school itself; whether it should be considered an essentially ethnological tradition or "fine art"; whether its content is primarily didactic and cultural, or distinctly personal. A related controversy revolves around the identification of the audience for this art: is it produced for Native people or Euro-Americans? The content of these discussions is less important for the purposes of this study than the fact of their existence, although the debate includes plausible and, in some cases, very fine scholarly examination of both sides of these issues (as, for example, in Phillips and Blundell, 1983). It is the debate itself which links the art of the New and the ancient Woodland schools. Precisely the same questions arise throughout the scholarship on Native North American art, regardless of historical context. Is it art or is it craft? Luxury or necessity? Elitist or communal? Ritual or mundane? Whether ancient or modern, Native arts consistently defy traditional academic classification.

The multifaceted character of so much of the art of the New Woodland School provides equally valid arguments for each side of the controversy.





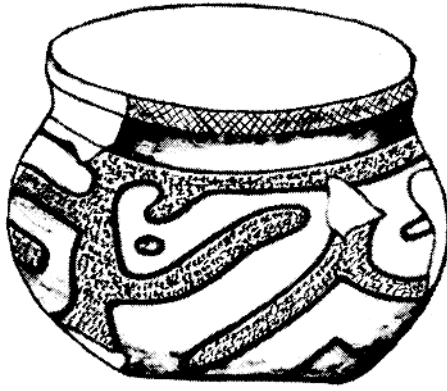
**Plate 13:** Micheal Robinson: *My Greatest Enemy*, 1980.



**Plate 14:** *Jar, Havana Zoned, terra cotta, Havana Culture. Middle Woodland period. Reproduced by permission of the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma.*

On the one hand, many products of the school represent a vital modern school of art, as sophisticated and individualistic as contemporary Euro-American fine art. On the other hand, the tendency of much of this art to play many roles and speak to many different audiences simultaneously gives it a distinctly Native flavor. The comments and concerns of the artists themselves make it clear that any narrow classification of the nature and purpose of this art must be an arbitrary one. For example, much of the imagery in the work of Norval Morrisseau, a member of the Ojibway tribe, is as intensely personal and autobiographical as that of any 20th century artist. On the other hand, he has stated that, "All my painting and drawing is really a continuation of the shaman's scrolls", an attempt to "bring back the pride of the Ojibway which was once great" (Sinclair and Pollock, 1979:45). This duality of purpose and interest is characteristic of the movement as a whole as exemplified in Dunn, 1981. The products of the New Woodland School are neither simply "Native art" nor exclusively "fine art", any more than an exquisitely beaded bandoleer bag is simply clothing or belongs exclusively in a museum. The new Woodland school of art defies traditionally narrow classification systems just as most Aboriginal art traditions do. Many other aspects of the style are also clearly nativistic. However, that does not mean that the art is essentially ethnographic, artifact rather than "fine art". Examination of the historical milieu of the movement and those of earlier Aboriginal traditions in art help to explain why this new school of Aboriginal art must be appreciated and understood as a fine art movement, albeit one established largely within Native communities.

Before Europeans arrived, the three richest periods of artistic activity in eastern North America developed about 1000 B.C.; between 300 B.C. and A.D. 300; and from A.D. 1000 to A.D. 1400. These cultural and artistic manifestations are referred to as Adena (Figure 2), Hopewell (Plates 10 and 14, Figures 3 and 4) and the Southern Ceremonial Complex (Plates 7, 11 and 12), respectively. Artwork from all three periods has been presented above as examples of the ancient corpus. Analysis of the art produced by these groups suggests that those bursts of artistic and ritual activity developed in response to cultural crises. In pre-contact times, those crises were apparently brought on by changes in climate and other challenges to traditional subsistence modes (Trevelyan, 1987). A.F.C. Wallace (1956) refers to such developments as "revitalization" movements. His model is an open-ended, essentially structural one based upon detailed study of post-contact ritual and evangelical response to cultural crisis among Aboriginal North Americans. According to this model, revitalization and related artistic expression were vehicles for cultural self-preservation in the face of severe social and economic stress.



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**Figure 3:** Woodland pot. Bynum Mound, Mississippi, U.S.A.



**Figure 4:** Woodland pot. Marksville, Louisiana, U.S.A.

Conditions within the Native cultural milieu at the inception of the New Woodland School corresponded in many ways to those associated with pre-contact revitalization movements. Other scholars, notably Phillips and Blundell.(1983:124), have also discussed affinities between the cultural milieu of the New Woodland School and Wallace's model. Four crucial aspects of the revitalization process, interpreted in conjunction with pre-contact archaeological data, bear important relationships to contemporary developments. The interpretation which follows represents a combination of A.F.C. Wallace's definition of "revitalization" and the author's analysis of archaeological and formal data from pre-contact northeastern North America.

1) Revitalization in response to cultural crisis was always initiated by individuals and was strongly associated with the personal visionary experiences of its leaders (Wallace 1956:270). Those leaders developed a devoted circle of disciples who participated in the dissemination of ideas associated with the movement. The movement itself was essentially didactic and, in many ways, evangelistic, generally focusing upon renewing a sense of balance and reciprocity at all levels of existence.

Contemporary Woodland art has also proceeded from the vision of specific individuals. Norval Morrisseau is the acknowledged father of the tradition (MacLuhan and Hill, 1984:20; Phillips and Blundell, 1983:117). His personal vision and intense commitment to his art and his people provided the catalyst for much of the New Woodland School phenomenon. Several other strong leaders have provided crucial input as well. Their art addressed the kinds of crises always addressed by Native revitalization movements - potentially fatal challenges to cultural integrity - and appeared at a time when Native cultural pride was at its lowest ebb (MacLuhan and Hill, 1984:29). Although the modern movement is less religiously oriented, much of the subject matter of the New Woodland School has a decidedly religious focus. The didactic, evangelistic and revitalizing qualities of the new movement are apparent throughout the literature and the works and comments of the artists.

2) Art was always a crucial element in revitalization, as a vehicle for the transmission of new ideas. The art itself appeared as a relatively uniform tradition, often superimposed upon diverse linguistic and cultural entities. The Adena manifestation, for example, is comprised of several categories of ritual art found associated with the remains of societies that were often dissimilar in every other respect. The same is true of many societies which participated in Hopewell and Southern Ceremonial Complex ritual. Within the art traditions of all three there is remarkable similarity in overall subject

matter, yet equally remarkable variation; no two pieces are identical nor are the ritual or artistic manifestations of any two Individual communities exactly alike. In western Ontario today art is, once again, the most visible evidence of what is clearly an on-going, culture-wide revitalization among Aboriginal North American populations. As with the pre-contact corpus, aspects of stylistic and iconographic similarity are striking with the New Woodland School, but the unique contributions of individual artists are obvious and crucial to the character of the movement as a whole.

3) The artistic products of prehistoric revitalization tended to cluster in certain areas, those with large concentrations of population or those associated with particular leaders in the movement. Adjacent groups often appear to be largely unaffected by the proliferation of artwork, but were probably influenced by the less tangible aspects of revitalization. Today concentrations of contemporary Native art cluster much as they did in ancient times, within population centers and around key individuals. The expensive products of the movement are more often seen in Toronto galleries than the villages on Ontario's Indian reserves, but the effects of the revitalization itself are felt in most Native communities.

4) A process of reconciliation was central to early revitalization movements. This is perhaps the most important aspect of revitalization for the developments under consideration here. The art and the message it carried always involved a reconciliation of old ways, symbols, and ideas with new realities. It was a vehicle for the re-education and re-orientation of societies. There is frequently evidence that revitalization provided a catalyst for reconciliation between diverse political and cultural entities (see, for example, Wallace, 1958:121; Hickerson, 1970:39; Howard, 1968:61, 78, 81, 86-87, 137, 145). Other evidence suggests that friction between human populations was believed to be symptomatic of larger problems endangering the cultural survival of all societies (Howard, 1960:218; 1968:52). Under those circumstances, it was certainly important to communicate the new ideas associated with revitalization to all groups, friendly as well as hostile. Thus, a crucial aspect of revitalization ritual and associated art involved formal and symbolic accommodation to render the message both appealing and understandable to all, even traditional enemies. These aspects of revitalization are apparent in much of the art associated with Adena and Hopewell traditions as well as the Southern Ceremonial Complex. Ceremonial ceramics from Hopewell-related groups provide an excellent example of the process, an integration of new symbolism and old techniques (Plate 14, Figures 3 and 4). Although these ceramics come from diverse regions and societies, they

share a remarkable uniformity in style and symbolism. Nevertheless, the actual fabric of each vessel remains faithful to distinct regional traditions. Many have suggested that the art of the New Woodland School is just such a reconciliation of the old and new, of traditional ways and symbols with the realities of Native culture today, a reality that includes much that is recognizably Euro-American.

Defined as an art of revitalization, this art is all the things its responsible examiners claim it to be. It is intensely personal, a constant in most Native North American art traditions. Yet, much of this art is didactic and full of culturally universal symbolism, albeit updated (again, a characteristic of Native North American art since ancient times). Yet, it is an art born of individual creative necessity, as much "art for art's sake" as any more traditional "western" school of art, but not exclusively so. It is also inextricably tied up in the stark economic realities of Native life today. This, too, is very much a matter of tradition. Aboriginal American art has always addressed subsistence needs and interests.

Despite the fact that this art is emphatically Aboriginal, born of an ancient tradition of communication and reconciliation, it addresses and speaks to the Euro-American in a fully intelligible way: in wonderful, colorful, sophisticated, bold, yet subtle easel paintings, murals and graphics. Just like their ancient ancestors, today's Native artists have developed an art which exists as a visible link between differing cultures occupying adjacent spaces. As part of an on-going, living art tradition with ancient roots, the challenge of today's Native artists has been and is more severe than that of their ancestors. Bridging the cultural gap between Native Americans and Euro-Americans in an attempt to reconcile, re-educate and re-orient both societies, would seem to be considerably more difficult than appealing to fellow Native American groups, however hostile. The successes of the New Woodland School in the Euro-American art market are testimony to the level of their abilities as practitioners of this ancient, yet ever-new, tradition. The irony is that if this art did not appeal as "fine art" in the Euro-American sense, if it did not partake as thoroughly of European artistic training and tradition as it does ancient Native traditions, it would be less truly Native, for it would not include the crucial elements of holistic reconciliation and communication basic to the art of revitalization for thousands of years. The power, appeal and richness of this new art tradition draws its strength, in large part, from the inevitable tension between the dichotomies it links.

All art is, in a sense, the reconciliation of the private intents and needs of the artists and their public expression. All art also exists in a median position between reality and imagination, the ideal and concrete worlds, even if

the artists and their audience rarely conceive of it in those terms. In traditional Native arts, this idea of the reconciliation of opposites, the achievement of balance and reciprocity between disparate aspects of reality is almost always conscious. Whether expressed in the balancing-off of upper and lower worlds as seen in the twined bags of the Northeast (Phillips, 1984), in the deer/bear dichotomy central to so much of traditional Northeastern ritual and art, or simply in the tendency toward bilateral symmetry in design, Native artists have clearly been more conscious of the nature and function of art as a kind of fulcrum around which fundamentally opposed ideas and forces are brought into balance. This approach has traditionally resulted in art as an active entity rather than as a primarily aesthetic experience, hence the old cliché about there being no word for "art" in most Native American languages. Whether or not there is a word for it, the fact remains that Native art is often fundamentally different from European art traditions in this regard.

In its clear relationships to the Aboriginal art of the past, and the artists' significant ties to their respective Native communities, the New Woodland School is in fact fundamentally different from the museum-bound and self-absorbed tradition of European art. At the same time, however, Native artists have availed themselves of the finest in European-style training and tradition. They function and compete equally as well within the galleries and glitz of the Euro-American art world as do non-Native artists. As they reflect upon and express the realities of life in North America they are creating a rich body of fine art, in the most sophisticated sense of the term. Yet, without doing so, they could not be truly traditional either. To participate fully in the ancient tradition of cultural revitalization through art, they must discover and define a new kind of balance between the rich historical depth of Aboriginal history in North America and the economic and political overlay of European culture. The artists of the New Woodland School are doing just that.

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Plate 7: Conch Shell: 13 1/2" long. Spiro Mound, Le Flore County, Oklahoma. U.S.A. #BJ39. Reproduced by permission of KaiDib Films International, P.O. Box 261, Glendale, California, 91209, U.S.A.

Plate 8: Saul Williams: Homage to Morrisseau, 1979-80. Reproduced by permission of Saul Williams, P.O. Box 1703, Sioux Lookout, Ontario, Canada, P0V 2T0.

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