



## Essays / Marcia Crosby

# ***Making Indian Art “Modern”***

When Nuu-chah-nulth artist George Clutesi became well known in the late 1940s as a modern Native artist and a champion of “Indian” tradition and culture, his newfound public recognition was often linked to at least four prominent British Columbia figures—Emily Carr, Ira Dilworth (CBC Chief Executive in Vancouver), Lawren Harris (Group of Seven modernist painter), and Anthony Walsh (Inkameep, day school teacher and arts instructor).[1] According to Clutesi, his career as an artist began when Walsh introduced himself in 1942, encouraged him to show his paintings (twenty watercolours at the time), and arranged for an exhibition of his works in Victoria and Port Alberni. From the exhibit at the Provincial Museum in Victoria in 1944, the director, Dr. Carl, took Clutesi to meet Emily Carr and brought some of his paintings to show her. The work was also shown at the Port Alberni Art Exhibit, which was opened by Lawren Harris, President of the Federation of Canadian artists. Clutesi’s auspicious beginnings included a series of one-man shows at the provincial museum in Victoria and the Vancouver Art Gallery, which would continue to travel across Canada as far east as Toronto by 1945. By the 1960s, Clutesi had become well known, in so far as contemporary aboriginal art was making a mark in the public sphere. In a lengthy 1962 overview of Clutesi’s lifework in the *Beaver*, oratory was named as the strongest of Clutesi’s art practices. In my consideration of the performative aspects of his work—from painter of images that depict oratory performance, radio announcer of Nuu-chah-nulth oral histories, cultural dancer and singer (1940s–60s), published author of *Potlatch* and other books of historically spoken knowledge, to acting

in film and television after 1971—oratory seemed to consistently inform his art and political work over time. When he stopped painting at the end of the 1960s, he continued to use language in political performance through film and newsprint to fight racism and inequality, and to educate the public about aboriginal peoples.

Clutesi was one of several self-identifying “modern artists” from diverse backgrounds who joined with others to address the contradictions of “modernity” and “Indianness.” They either lived in or came to Vancouver to show and market their work. Some were by the 1960s “older” or mature artists, such as Ellen Neel, George Clutesi, Judith Morgan, Francis Baptiste, and Henry Speck. Each of these individuals had known (or known of) each other since the late 1940s. Some of them shared similar cultural practices, philosophies, politics and spaces. They and many of their contemporaries lived rich and multi-layered lives. While struggling to make a living as artists, they also served as artist-educators and as board members of emerging social and political organizations. Their reputations as artists included their roles as community and political leaders. Through their art practices, they created a *living* aboriginal public identity as far away as Europe, as opposed to the archival, anthropological one that existed in local, urban museums.

Young people, such as twenty-year-old Pat McGuire (Haida painter and carver), came to the city in the early sixties, and would have known of them, perhaps through Haida merchant Minnie Croft, who bought and sold the work of many such young artists in her Vancouver Indian Arts and Crafts shop. McGuire, like the other modern artists, drew on, and applied in varying degrees of proficiency, western art forms. Some painted in watercolour, oils, and murals. Others were print makers, colorists, and did figurative drawing: they mixed crest-styled images with painterly landscapes, combining western forms with the traditional visual and performing practices of woodcarving, design,

dance, oratory, singing—each set of practices informing the other. Some began exhibiting their works nationally and internationally as early as the 1940s and presented their works to both dignitaries and celebrities, not only to promote their own work, but also for reasons linked to aboriginal and Canadian cultural nationalism and to raise awareness of aboriginal people as modern artists.

Historian Bill Anthes broadly describes such artists in *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting 1940–1960* (2006) as those who were trained, or not, each responding to radical changes in his or her community, and many part of or affected by migration to cities. They used western styles and media, depended on non-Native patrons, and adopted the western notions of the “art object.” Native modern artists emerged on unstable ground, where they produced and mobilized new emblems of cultural identity in a new context, for their own purposes. However, what complicates the application of Anthes’s definition to artists in Vancouver and BC is the slippage between their self-identification as modern artists and the non-modern aspects of reserve life and urban poverty. In this context, we can ask further questions of ‘what is modern?’ Nestor Garcia Canclini asks, “What did it mean to produce modern art in a society where the old and the new coexist at conflictive levels, indifferent to each other?” and “What was the nature of the modernism that developed there?”[2] The artists who entered into the 1960s had a history of fighting to gain social, economic, and political equality in “modern” Canadian society, but there had been extremely limited access to anything like it until 1947 in BC when aboriginal people secured the provincial vote, and then in 1960 when the federal vote was granted. At that point they at least had representation in government, and a possible platform from which to speak more broadly about their concerns as artists and cultural leaders.

In 1948, Clutesi claimed his art practice as a platform for ensuring that the old would not be totally sublimated to the new. He expressed his belief that “as long as paint exists on canvas, [my people’s] dances and legends will not be lost.”[3] His reasons for emancipating his specific cultural practices from their place of origins into the expanded public sphere of art, radio, film, and print was to preserve what he felt was valuable through the secularization of culture while adapting to “modern Canadian society”. This was something he and many other Native people believed they would have to do in order to survive. This included having the support of non-Native individuals who were affiliated with significant institutions and practices in the arts. Such support was obviously instrumental in his emerging recognition as a modern artist, as would be the acquisition of seven of his paintings in 1948 by the new chair of anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Harry Hawthorn. [4]

In an interview with *The Sun* newspaper, Dr. Harry Hawthorn confirmed the value of Clutesi’s paintings, both in terms of salvage and modern art paradigms of the time. He described them as “an authentic record” of the stories told by the father of the “Nootka” artist, and as an “artistic expression of a man who knew and understood intimately the ways of his people ... [and who expressed] in an art form foreign to his culture the exact ideas and feelings of his people—at a time when many experts feared ... [they] might be lost for want of a competent and inspired chronicler.”[5] Hawthorn spoke of Clutesi as salvaging an almost lost past, when only four years earlier, Clutesi spoke of the older people as “rich in memory” and some of his pictures as “the definite property of certain families,” as were the songs and dances. Using them, he said, required the family’s consent because “it is a copyright in the eyes of the Natives.”[6] As an artistic bridge to the past and the future, Hawthorn situated Clutesi as one of the “first” modern Native artists whose works were “artistic,” “original,” and “inspired expressions.” A different newspaper writer noted his use of “graphic media” to portray a traditional past, also pointing to an important criterion

for modern art—innovation, new materials and forms attached to the old. Clutesi, as one who paints the “last” of his people’s culture, is described in a way that mirrors the primitive/modern binary. Clutesi’s mentors held similar ideas: Lawren Harris encouraged Clutesi to “retain his own characteristics and individual style, *no matter what the critics might say*”[7] and to change the size of his canvas so that the work could not be mistaken for mere illustration. (Clutesi would later say that the critics “tore me to pieces”.) Walsh encouraged him to “concentrate on Indian legend subjects”. [8] In those early years, Clutesi described himself as a self-taught artist who used public galleries as his “school”. This description overlaps with the stereotype of Indian art as naïve or childlike, if not as primitive, then as outsider, admittedly unschooled, his images of animism complemented by communal values. These commonly held ideas also gave his work value: the old and the new coexist at conflictive levels. His work is, on one level, at odds with a modernism that is executed exclusively in terms of formal innovation over the particularities of content. Clutesi’s modern paintings are ascribed value in terms of the medium and materials, and for their content or subject matter as “salvaged” anthropological documentary of the past.

By the late 1960s, Bill Holm’s formalist language and criteria for “mastery” of Northwest coast “fine art” gained preeminence in the discursive field of “Indian art” on the Northwest Coast as part of the longer historical shift of “artifact to art”. [9] Aboriginal art in the museums and galleries made a significant turn through the 1967 *Arts of the Raven: Masterworks of the Northwest Coast* exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery. It focused on form and aesthetics, mostly in the Northern styles, in Northwest Coast material culture rather than its social context or cultural meanings. In the post-1967 revival discourse and modernist paradigm that positioned “uncontaminated” traditional work as modern art, all the contemporary work that preceded it was relegated to the past—whether it was what had previously been called “artifact,” tourist art,

curio, or work such as Clutesi’s legends on canvas or Ellen Neel’s carving. Historian Aaron Glass says that Holm “provided the vocabulary with which artist scholars and collectors ... engaged with Northwest coast objects and their histories.... We are now confronted with the politics of representation and identity, the negotiation of treaties and repatriation. Holm’s somewhat problematic position within the contemporary discourse of Northwest Coast art is in some ways a testament to his success at helping to encourage it in the first place.”[10]

Certainly there has been a more recent shift in contemporary discourse. But other studies reveal that the issue of “the politics of representation” in aboriginal art can be located in the 1930s and 40s. Artists such as Nuuchahnulth Clutesi engaged in the plastic and performing arts to publicly educate both Natives and non-Natives about aboriginal cultural and political history, and to instill pride in Native youth. This included performances for the news media by Coast Salish carver Mathias Joe to bring attention to aboriginal rights and title.[11] In a later example of aboriginal dissent, the hierarchy of Northwest coast art practice and discourse was challenged as it overlapped with issues of territory and identity. Coast Salish leaders engaged in public performance in relation to the 1966 project, “Route of the Totems” (poles erected along the new Vancouver Island highway and at ferry terminals). They sought to counteract the increasingly populist idea that totem poles were indigenous to *all* First Nations, and the race-based idea, shared by Holm, anthropologist Wilson Duff, and Bill Reid (and others) that Northwest coast aboriginal arts were most advanced in the north, descending to the most primitive in the south. A Coast Salish intervention in the centennial celebration at the ferry terminal was the result of “careful intra-community negotiation about protocol” in which leaders engaged in political “performance” to redefine the site as Coast Salish territory. [12] Clearly, protest has been consistent over time.

Although many young artists such as Pat McGuire increased their knowledge of the formal aspects of Northwest coast art from Holm’s text, not all practicing artists surrendered to the homogenizing influence of the text’s prescriptive modernist approach. Contemporary painter Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun says that painter Henry Speck “broke the form line,” and further explains, “When he drew hair onto the surface, he went over the form line, making what was a stylized two-dimensional image into a pictorially three-dimensional one. I remember seeing his small catalogue in my father’s library: it was new, on paper and in color. He used new inks, new materials—it was modern. His influence on me was colour, because then there was more black and white. Colour was his signature. He had a certain style that other artists would try to copy.” Speck also was recognized by his contemporaries for the quality and style of his work: “Indian Art expert Bill Reid in a CBC talk in 1965 called his (Speck’s) work ‘an almost unbelievable phenomenon’.”[13] Phenomenon or not, making a living was still a concern for aboriginal artists at the time. Speck made prints for a tourist art market, as did other artists such as Bill Reid. Speck signed his prints at The Bay in 1964 during the week of his “World Premiere” opening at the New Design Gallery, and Reid carved for the public at Eaton’s in 1967 during the opening of *Arts of the Raven* at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Unlike Reid and Ellen Neel, Speck mostly worked out of his own village of Alert Bay and was instrumental in the mid 1960s in the formation of a society for the creation of objects for the art market. Unlike the Northwest Coast Culture Club (formerly the Coqualeetza Fellowship Club) in Vancouver, this Society was exclusive to Indians.

In the city, Kwakwaka’wakw carver and printmaker Ellen Neel, like George Clutesi, was an orator and spokesperson for aboriginal and human rights. Both were active supporters of one of the largest fishing unions on the coast, the Native Brotherhood, which had been committed to political and social change

since its formation in B.C. in 1933. Through the Brotherhood’s newspaper, *The Native Voice*, modern artists such as Neel and Clutesi were put forward both as significant leaders and artists. In this newspaper Neel clearly self-identified as a “modern” artist who was committed to new tools, mediums, and art forms, even though she was renowned for her totem poles. According to a tribute after her untimely death in 1966, “she was known in 1955 as the most famous totem carver on the west coast.”[14] Taught from childhood to carve totem poles, as a skill that would allow her to make a living and maintain cultural knowledge, Neel was propelled into a capitalist marketplace that eventually took her to Vancouver. There, she mentored her own family in the making of poles, as she had been mentored by her grandfather, Charlie James. She became known as an advocate for women who “worked shoulder to shoulder with men” as a carver and businesswoman who embarked on many political and cultural ventures with civic, provincial, institutional, and aboriginal leaders. However, her bold embrace of what was “modern” in terms of business, politics, and art in the 1940s and 50s would lead to her exclusion from the 1960s discourse of tradition, aesthetics, and connoisseurship in Northwest Coast art. Her artwork was the sole source of income for her disabled husband and her children, and she made objects that guaranteed the income they so needed. Nevertheless, the work she made to sell to tourists did not detract from what she learned from her grandfather and what she continued to learn and accomplish in the course of her art practice.

Charlie James (1870–1937) lived in the early days when aboriginal cultural practices were criminalized (1882–1951) and subsistence economies were increasingly curtailed, resulting in a choice between independent production or turning to labor jobs in seasonal economies on the coast. This situation allowed for mobility between the workplace and traditional ways of life in home villages. In the case of carvers, such as Charlie James, Neel, and Martin, some kind of balance between independent production and their traditional cultural ways of life was maintained. Like other notable artists, Charlie James turned



to making art for a living after suffering physical injury: he began carving for tourists in 1925, about the time he began to teach carving to members of his family. His new enterprise included “making the [Kwakwak’wakw] art form more understandable to non-Indian people.... [He] introduced at least one new color ... [and] moved closer to factual representations in his carved figures.[15] James changed the medium and the form for very pragmatic reasons having to do with his economic and cultural survival. Charlie James was characterized as a prolific carver, a movie buff, and a frequent traveler between Alert Bay and Vancouver.[16]

Nestor Canclini says that we “must distinguish between *modernity* as an historical stage; *modernization* as a social process that attempts to construct modernity; and *modernism*, those cultural projects that take place at several points along the development of capitalism.”[17] There have been too many aboriginal artists to mention in this short essay who can be distinguished as engaged in the cultural projects of modernism. What complicates any exploration of this historical stage is the situation in which artists and others struggled to become modern. Before the mid 1960s, there was no sustained economic or/and institutional or private support from patrons (including collectors of contemporary aboriginal art), nor an established intellectual discourse to create value for “modern Indian” art. Clutesi, Speck, Neel and others’ vision for a modern integrated artist was still a hoped-for outcome as they entered the sixties, their art practice an invocation of upward social mobility that would not be realized until later, with the successful integration of the formalist discourse of Northwest coast “fine art” into both museum and art galleries, which paradoxically eclipsed many of these early artists and their histories.

## Footnotes

01. *Native Voice*, September 1948, n. pag.

02. Nestor Garcia Canclini, “Modernity after Postmodernity,” in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995), 20–51.

03. *Native Voice*, September 1948, 3.

04. Audrey and Harry Hawthorn were hired by UBC to establish an anthropology program and expand their collection of cultural objects. Audrey Hawthorn, *A Labour of Love: the Making of the Museum of Anthropology, 1947–1976* (Vancouver: Museum of Anthropology, 1993).

05. Ernest G. Perrault, “Indian Legends Live on Canvas,” *Vancouver Sun Magazine Supplement*, August 21, 1948, 2, 3.

06. *Victoria Colonist*, May 21, 1944, n. pag. He also stated in another interview that before he began to paint he went to “great trouble to get the facts authentic. Many of our people are rich in memory and I paint their tales.” *Stratford Beacon-Herald* (Ontario), July 15, 1944, n. pag.

07. *Vancouver Sun Supplement*, August 21, 1948, 3.

08. *Victoria Colonist*, May 21, 1944, n. pag.

09. Marcia Crosby, “Haidas, Human Beings and Other Myths,” in *Bill Reid and Beyond: Expanding on Native Modern Art*, eds. Karen Duffek and Charlotte Townsend-Gault (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004), 108–132.

10. Aaron Glass, “Sun Dogs and Eagle Down: The Indian Painting of Bill Holm,” *BC Studies* no. 130 (Summer 2001): 122.

11. Ronald W. Hawker, “Mathias Joe, Mungo Martin, and George Clutesi: ‘Art’ as Resistance,” in *Tales of Ghosts: First Nations Art in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003). See Chapter 7 for a discussion of three artists’ works in relation to their intention to 1) assert the claim of aboriginal rights, 2) gather non-native support for legislative reform, and 3) instill pride in aboriginal youth.



12. Susan Roy, “Performing Musqueam Culture and History at British Columbia’s 1966 Centennial Celebrations,” *BC Studies* no. 135, *Perspectives on Aboriginal Culture* (Autumn 2002): 55-90.
13. “Chief Speck’s Parade of Wonderful Beasts,” *Gazette Canadian Weekly*, July 3–9, 1965.
14. “Tribute to a Great Artist: Carver, Ellen Neel Mourned,” *Native Voice*, February 1966, 3, 8.
15. *Native Voice*, February 1966, 3. See Paige Raibmon, “A new understanding of things Indian: George Raley’s negotiation of the residential school experience,” *BC Studies* no. 110 (Summer 1996), 69–96, and Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). For three Northwest coast case studies re: balancing various forms of wage work with cultural priorities, practices, and art work, see Danièle Bélanger and Martin Cooke, “Migration Theories and First Nations Mobility: Towards a Systems Perspective,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 43, no. 2 (May 2006): 141.
16. Carolyn Butler Palmer, Renegotiating Identity: “Primitivism” in *20th Century Art as Family Narrative*, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* Volume 29, Numbers 2 & 3, 2008, 195, 205.
17. Canclini, “Modernity after Postmodernity,” 20–51.



## Author Bio

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Writer, art historian, educator. Marcia Crosby’s work interrogates mainstream representations and historical narratives of First Nations peoples and cultures. Crosby has a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Arts and English (1990), and a Master of Arts in Cultural History (1993), and is currently pursuing a Doctorate of Philosophy in Art History, all at the University of British Columbia. Since 1996, Crosby has taught English literature and First Nations Studies at Vancouver Island University (previously Malaspina University College). She acted as guest curator and writer for her exhibition, *Nations in Urban Landscapes* at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver (1994). One essay in the catalogue considered the works of Shelly Niro, Faye Heavyshield and Eric Robertson, and the other is an investigation of how the geo-political discourse between Canadian and First Nations governments over land issues have shaped cultural practice in museums and galleries. Since 2001, she has added to her publications a number of essays on contemporary art history on topics as diverse as the myth of Bill Reid, the sculptural works of Dina Gomez, an Argentinian artist living and working in Vancouver, and aboriginal performance art, which included two recently published essays on the multi-media works of Rebecca Belmore. Her work for this website is the first step in framing her PhD dissertation on ‘self-identifying modern Indian artists’.