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An Artist's Vision

By Sue Coleman

Introduction

My husband Dan was out of work and I discovered I was pregnant with my daughter and unable to work when I turned to painting for an income. I offered to teach at the local senior center and in doing so discovered my own unique abilities. I always knew I could paint but looked upon it as a hobby, believing it was something that anyone could do if they were taught properly. In teaching, I soon discovered that we all see the world differently and not always in perspective. It was quite an education.

Joanne was born early the following year and I had to give up teaching. I remember Joanne's first Christmas. Money had been tight but in November I had entered a small local craft show and had painted about thirty miniature watercolours. My husband had watched me painting them, in between motherly duties, and asked me whether I thought I would really sell them all. I said I didn't know but they were all different and I was having fun doing them. They all sold on the first day and I spent the rest of the weekend painting as many more again. I was thrilled that people seemed to really love what I painted. It was not long after that when I had the idea of painting native art.

I was in another of those small art shows sitting next to a Native Carver. We talked and my curiosity about the shapes in his carving and their meaning led me to ask for explanations. I found it fascinating, so much so that I asked him if I could come to one of his classes. He looked me in the eye and asked 'Why?' I said I didn't know, but I wanted to learn more about the native art. Then he asked me, "What are you going to do with it?" This was an odd question, but again I said I didn't know. He then told me he couldn't teach me as I was Non-native and wouldn't understand.

I was shocked. Coming from Europe, I had never experienced racial prejudice before, although I had heard of it, but certainly never in art. I had always thought that art was a freedom of self-expression and no one had ever told me what I could or could not paint. We were driving home that evening when I commented to Dan that if I was going to really make it in the art field I had to come up with something different. I liked painting animals, but Robert Bateman painted animals, so there was nothing new about that. I liked painting boats but a local artist, Harry Heine, was a master at marine painting, I enjoyed painting the local scenery but so did hundreds of other artists. I was even interested in doing Native art but I wasn't allowed to do that. In frustration I said, "I should chuck the whole lot in one painting and be done with it. You know if I stick a native eagle with a real eagle I could be an interpreter. Then I wouldn't have to be a native"

Dan laughed and said, "What are you going to do, float the Indian Art in the sky?" Without a second hesitation I said "Yeh, that'll work." Things didn't go smoothly with the idea. At first I was excited and

painted four designs in a flurry of creativity. Then I sat back and looked long and hard at what I had done and realized that I had to do a lot more research. The idea was good, but my knowledge was lacking where the native art was concerned. If I presented these pieces at any show I would probably be drawn and quartered.

I was lucky in that I lived close to Victoria, the capital of British Columbia and home to the provincial museum and archives. I started back at the beginning and redrew those early pieces, took trips into Victoria and borrowed every book from the library that I could lay my hands on. Six months later I was finally happy with the pieces and decided to show them to a couple of galleries. That's when I really hit a brick wall.

1. I was not native, so my abilities were questioned.
2. I was self taught, sorry we have a full slate of artists already.
3. I didn't have a sales record.
4. They had never seen art like it before, so they didn't know if it would sell.

On and on went the excuses. More and more I began to get paranoid that another artist might see and copy the idea. Finally, after a year of rejections I rented a small gallery space in partnership with a close friend who did glass etchings and put the pieces up for sale. It was heartbreaking to see the reaction. Every new visitor went straight to the pieces and were mesmerized by what I had done. I knew they were going to sell and suddenly after two hours I couldn't take it anymore, I walked over and slapped NFS on the pieces and offered to print them. I had orders immediately. By the end of that one-week show I had enough orders to pay for the printing of my first Limited Edition print. We have never looked back.

This seems so much of a rags to riches story that I feel embarrassed to tell it. There were so many emotional things that pushed me onto the path of art. Getting to the point of publishing my art in a book was another rocky climb, with so many pitfalls the journey would honestly fill another book. I hesitate to say my art healed us at the time, but it certainly pulled us up from a very dark hole.

The Work



The Eagle – *This is one of the first pieces that I painted and took around in my portfolio for over a year. The eagle was an easy one to interpret, as there are so many examples of the native art portraying eagles. To find the common similarities and to create my own design was time consuming at first but the stories of this proud bird are so many that it certainly wasn't boring. And, yes, I did float the native art in the sky.*

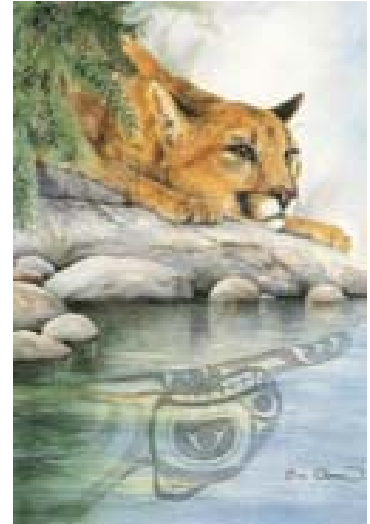
Since the publication of my hardcover book "An Artist's Vision" in 1989 a great deal more has happened in my life and the direction of my art. Artist Vision was an accumulation of the first eight years of my work and covers most of the basic, well-known, native symbols for the different animals indigenous to the Pacific Northwest coast.

A lot of opportunities have arisen over the years, from a trip to Tokyo where my art was on display as part of a British Columbia trade show in the Canadian Embassy, to the Canadian Pavilion at the Epcot centre in Disney World. My daughter enjoyed it when I insisted on taking the family on a repeat trip to the world of Mickey Mouse. Not many kids from Vancouver Island have received a complimentary 10-day pass to Disney!

The Cougar

Although it is fairly easy to research many of the animals and birds in British Columbia, others can be very difficult and the cougar was possibly the hardest. I had asked many local carvers and artists about the cougar and all I received was a very odd reply. "We don't like cougars." It was after seeing a shaman's staff carved with the head of a cougar on display at a cultural exhibit, that I decided to paint my translation. About three weeks after the release of the print I finally discovered that the cougar was the shaman's guide and it was because the shaman were secretive that a cougar was never portrayed on a totem pole.

I also learned that before the white man came a nomadic tribe lived on Vancouver Island, I liken them to European Gypsies, except they were cannibalistic. They followed the teachings of the cougar and were feared which explained the statement, "We don't like Cougars."



Twelve years of traveling on a cruise ship to Alaska every summer also added to the experiences and gave me the chance to study the Tlingit art first hand. Listening to the many Anthropology lectures on board the Cruise ship and getting to know the anthropologists personally, expanded my knowledge and opened up even more opportunities, such as spending time with Martine Reid and visiting Bill Reid in his studio and workshop on Granville Island. When I later visited the Queen Charlotte Islands, and took an exciting trip down the waterways of the archipelago exploring the ancient village sites, the insights that Bill had shared with me added far more meaning to the trip.



Night Owl

Several years ago I did a pen and ink sketch of a couple of owls in a tree. It wasn't a native piece, just a small study that I did for my own pleasure. The owl at the top of the tree had his eyes wide open and the owl lower down in the branches was squinting. I do have a bit of a sense of humour and it suddenly struck me that the bottom owl looked as if she was saying "Not tonight dear". I had that piece hanging in our bedroom for a long time.

When I decided I wanted to do an Owl with a native translation I found it hard to not go back to that early drawing although the owl in this piece isn't squinting quite as much as the one in my initial sketch.

Over the years, not only have I come to realize what a gift that initial idea of translating the native art was, but I also have come to recognize the fact that if had I been born in this country and gone to school here in B.C. the idea would never have entered my mind because there is prejudice even in the field of art. Many believe that a non-native person is unable to understand the true meaning of the native art, or its form lines, and therefore should not create it. There is a firm belief that Native art is for the Native people.

Butterfly

I really like painting water. An extra challenge is painting rocks in watercolours so that look as if they are under the water. This requires painting the rocks, putting a wash over them, risking a blurry mess, then painting them all over again accenting the dark shadows between the stones. It can be quite time consuming. The butterfly is one of my favourite pieces. Being so close to the marshes with an ample supply of willow we have a lot of Tiger Swallowtail butterflies in the summer. I have an unlimited number of models to paint from. To watch a beautiful butterfly emerge from it's cocoon never ceases to amaze me.



My art stirs up many emotions. I have had many different reactions to my work; as in most art you either like it or hate it. However, few artists get their birthright questioned. Surprisingly, the authenticity of my vision and work has not been criticized by the native people themselves but by educated professors, fine art teachers and galleries. Bad enough I enjoy painting wildlife, a no-no to many Canadian art critics, as this apparently makes me an illustrator rather than an artist, but I also 'dabble' in the art of another culture and have the audacity to combine images from two cultures in the same painting. I can't wait to see what they say about the new approach I have taken by putting the life force lines into the landscape!



Swallow Falls

When I started looking at the scenery for a way to translate the life force in the land I was attracted to the water first. Maybe because I am a Pisces or maybe because I have always loved the sea. The flow of the current, the force of the water that cascades over a rocky bluff has an unstoppable life force of it's very own. Water is one of the elements that I am always drawn to when I want to experience peace and tranquility, even a raging river has the ability to sweep away ones problems.

Several years ago I was asked to do a cover for a poetry book titled "Spirit of the Lake." I was requested to do a painting that reflected the emotions of a poem, which had the same title as the book. The catch was that the author and publisher wanted native artwork in the painting. The poem was mystical and evoked a feeling of peace, but a native spirit mask rising from the mist on a lake was far from that. Most native masks are frightening, and to be faced with one first thing in the morning would not calm my inner soul. As I puzzled over this problem, a stray thought wandered into my head. Bill Reid had referred to the lines in the native art as 'life force' lines. He had told me that all the shapes had to join so that the life force could move throughout the animal freely. I suddenly began to wonder how he would have translated the trees, the islands, the water and the land we walk on. It

all has a life force, a force governed by nature, the magnetic pull of the sun and moon, the winds, and the air we breathe. I started looking into the shadows and slowly began to see the hidden shapes, the life force lines.

In the year 2000 we moved from Metchosin on the west coast of Vancouver Island to the sheltered waters of Cowichan Bay on the eastern side of the island. We are nestled in the middle of a small coastal pocket of homes, completely surrounded by tribal lands. In the summer we enjoy the local longboat races; in the fall, we watch the local male population spear-fishing in the river, and when the wind is blowing in the right direction we can hear the drums in the longhouse beating out their rhythm into the night.



NightWatch

We live on tidal flats. When the tide is in it comes up to the foundation of our house and looking out of the studio window one gets the feeling that you are standing on the bridge of a small ship. Fallen trees often drift down the river and end up on our beaches, especially during spring run off, creating the perfect roost for herons, eagles and kingfishers. From a relatively dry and comfortable perch these patient hunters can wait till an unsuspecting school of perch swims beneath the tree.

We had only been in this home about six months when a traveling chief, whom I had met some years before, came and blessed my house. He and his wife were en route to the Queen Charlottes and had been staying with one of the local elders, where he learned of our move to the area. Arriving in full ceremonial dress, he performed his sacred dance of welcome on my lawn, smudging each of my family in turn and chanting in each room of the house to ward off any lurking evil spirits. Afterwards, over a good old English cup of tea, we traded art and stories.

Up till that fatal day a few years ago when the ferry, "Queen of the North," sank, I had replaced the cruise ship experience with a four- or six- day run on this ferry that used to travel the inside passage from Port Hardy and Prince Rupert. It might not have been quite as luxurious as a cruise ship, and the cabin left a lot to be desired, but every year it presented me with just as many opportunities. I enjoy the chance to share my knowledge with travelers through the telling of legends, and was often pleasantly surprised to find the back row of the seats fill with the local native people from Bella Bella or the Queen Charlottes.

When an elder from Masset placed an order for 400 of my T-shirts for her upcoming potlatch, I was honoured. She saw my art for what it was – a blending of two cultures, a step in the direction of understanding and acceptance bridging diverse traditions, an art form that points to the future instead of being hung up with the past. It wasn't the sale that made the day; it was the pride that comes with the knowledge that 400 of the Haida people would be honouring me by wearing my artwork.

During the many travels I have taken with my art over the past 20 years I have come to recognize one thing above all others, I was given a gift, the gift of an idea that has moulded my whole career. My abilities to be able to use that gift, my eyesight, creative instinct and a natural sense of depth perception, I was born with. But the idea of bridging the gap in the understanding of native art, an important part of the First Nations culture was a gift that went far deeper.

In summary

I have met many people who have expressed the need to understand, who have told me they liked the native art and wanted to know more about it. From Japan to Germany, Australia to Sweden, travelers have come to recognize my art and take copies home for friends and family. My work, a visual translation, steps over the barriers of language and hopefully, in time, the cultures within Canada will learn to live and work side by side, embracing each other's differences, learning and listening instead of isolating and segregating the individual problems. Healing of the soul begins with acceptance and, maybe, a big hug.

Contact

Sue Coleman
Cowichan Bay
British Columbia,
www.suecoleman.ca
Sue@suecoleman.ca



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P.O. Box 76, Bellmawr, NJ 08099

Phone (609) 714-1885 (519) 265-0746

Email: center@ijhc.org Website: <http://www.ijhc.org>

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