

First: Aboriginal Artists of Newfoundland and Labrador. Jerry Evans et al.

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Volume 17, Number 1, Spring 2001

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds17_1rv01

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Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Goldie, T. (2001). Review of [*First: Aboriginal Artists of Newfoundland and Labrador.* Jerry Evans et al.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 17(1), 91–93.

REVIEWS

First: Aboriginal Artists of Newfoundland and Labrador. Jerry Evans (Researcher and Coordinator) *et al.* St. John's: St. John's Native Friendship Centre, 148 p., text in English, Inuktitut, Innu-aimun or Mi'kmaq; glossary, refs., 23x29 cm, softcover with French flaps, \$75.00, 1996, ISBN 0-9682370-0-2.

TERRY GOLDIE

ON BEGINNING THIS REVIEW I had trouble identifying the "author." There is often a split between the curator of an exhibition and the author of the catalogue and it is difficult to assess what is the creative talent behind the book, but this case is far more extreme. The credit page lists twenty-three names. I have arbitrarily attributed the authorship to Jerry Evans, listed as "Researcher/Coordinator," but an alternative might be Neil Beckwith and Barbara Burnaby, who are listed as "editorial." This uncertain authorship seems to represent the intense collectivity of the project although I have not seen the exhibition: I am reacting only to the catalogue as an object in itself, as a statement on Aboriginal art in the province.

Of course the event itself probably remains more noteworthy. The preface refers to the work of the St. John's Native Friendship Centre in initiating the exhibition: "to celebrate the artists and craftspeople of Aboriginal ancestry in Newfoundland and Labrador, and to work with them to facilitate professional development and create marketing opportunities." In other words, from the beginning the project was political, very much in the small "p" sense, and collective, and resolutely economic, as much or more as it is aesthetic.

Presumably, however, aesthetics were a significant concern as they would be for any art exhibit, as they are in the catalogue. The preface refers to the catalogue

as “an invaluable archival and educational tool” but the physical book is itself interesting. Unlike many catalogues, it is not produced on glossy stock but rather a cheaper paper. On the other hand, it is full of colour throughout, while many catalogues use colour for only the photographs of the art or even are limited to black and white for all. Taking the process many steps further, the book is highly designed throughout. There are at least five colours of paper used and many of the pages have various graphics. The reproduction is perfect throughout, a credit to the designers, Vis-A-Vis Graphics, Inc. and the printers, Robinson-Blackmore.

Yet I wonder if all this fine work is to useful ends. The usual assumption is that the images should represent the art as fully and precisely as possible, the catalogue a servant of the art. In *First*, the photographs by Ray Fennelly are beautiful. In the case of sculptures, he often plays with light in such a way as to give quite amazing volume, especially to the soapstone. Then again, some of the settings for the sculptures are so involved as to make me confused as to where the sculpture ends and where the decor begins, especially pieces made of different materials. This is less of a problem when the form is very traditional, and thus conforms to my expectations, but in the case of Michael Massie’s teapots I had some difficulty figuring out what colour and texture came from the objects and what came from the broken-glass on which they were posed.

A similar effect is created by the design of the page. While Vis-A-Vis Graphics obviously have fine skills they also seem, at least to me, to lack restraint. The book has a photograph of each of the forty-six artists, with an artist’s statement and the photograph of the art. But why the bouncy little graphic of the artist’s initials? The page number is surrounded by five feathers. The feather is generic to representations of First Nations but does it have any direct relevance to the Native cultures of Newfoundland and Labrador? Has it been included as simple “Indian-ness?”

There are six brief introductory essays, most by names familiar to anyone who has followed Native issues in Newfoundland and Labrador. “Ancient Skills Revised and Revived” by Marilyn John, former chief of the Miawpukek Mi’kamaway Mawi’omi, is representative. She considers various craft traditions of the cultures of the region and acknowledges change but emphasizes continuity: “Despite the changes and modern technology that our society has encountered, some of our ancient skills, in a revised form, survive.” According to this, the pieces represented in this volume, regardless of their relationship to the contemporary world, are primarily of interest as survivals of “ancient skills.”

Anthropologist Adrian Tanner’s foreword is more open:

Art is nothing if not innovative, and this applies especially to the work in this book. Several pieces can be seen as expressing both personal and ethnic empowerment, a reaching out to new ideals on the basis of past ancestral strengths, the symbolizing of modern emerging forms of identity. For those Aboriginal communities and individuals facing change, in the midst of a social movement for healing from a period of dysfunction, and undergoing the tentative process of discovering new adaptations of

ancient ways, the need for these kinds of innovation in the process of self-discovery and self transformation is clear. But we see in other pieces a reaching still further beyond those goals.

The mixture of crafts and fine art, while no doubt useful as a contribution to those marketing opportunities, can be slightly off-putting. I am not an expert in either, but for me the blend makes it all too easy to dismiss the former as “just crafts.” Yet, the crafts seem of a consistent quality, produced with a significant precision. On the other hand, some of the fine art pieces, particularly some of the realist paintings, seem amateurish. This made the absence of a possible third category all the more obvious: nothing here would qualify as folk art, that blend of individualism and contemporary life so often seen on display outside of Newfoundland outport homes, including homes owned by Aboriginal people.

There are other possible categories. The Inuit sculptures by David Terriak, Charlie Terriak and Ross Flowers all seem to have that sense of sweep, line and mass which has made Inuit art such an international success. Michael Massie’s teapots are unique examples in the collection, contemporary high art crafts with no obvious references to Native issues. Of the fine art, Brian Lasaga’s realistic representation of crows is striking, although from just one painting it is difficult to judge whether there is a vision beyond the representation, a vision always obvious in the Inuit sculpture. My favourite object of the whole collection is a photograph by Michelle Baikie. Her sense of composition and colour blends with an emphatic yet subtle political statement.

Perhaps the most interesting contribution is Jerry Evans’ lithograph of a dreamcatcher. As far as I know, the dreamcatcher is a Lakota object, although it appears in a number of midwestern cultures. Is the dreamcatcher in any sense *Mi’kmaq*? Perhaps it is but it seems more likely a product of what has been called “pan-Indianism,” the tendency among First Nations to use aesthetic and cultural appropriations from each other in order to increase understanding and political power. While many question any move outside one’s indigenous tradition, others see sharing indigeneity as necessary to ensure a Native presence in modern North America. For them, the feathers of the dreamcatcher are empowerment, no matter where they began.

I hope this book will be its own small contribution to this continuity and development. This would reflect the expansive yet telling comment by Calvin White, former president of the Federation of Newfoundland Indians:

What is art? Would you believe, it is anything and everything, as long as it is done with feeling and spirit. It is discovering and bringing out the life and character of an object, which otherwise appears dead. Art is also a special way of bringing out and preserving culture. It is a reminder, a mirror of the past, and a step into the future.