

Culture



Carol SHEEHAN, *Pipes That Won't Smoke; Coal That Won't Burn, Haida Sculpture in Argillite*, Calgary, Glenbow Museum, 1981

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“Some might think”, he writes, “that what is lost is what anthropology is all about”(6). For while structural linguists went on from Saussure to transcend the opposition of history and system, structuralism entered anthropology “with its theoretical limitations intact”. Sahlins argues that one can determine structure in history and *vice versa*.

I am somewhat puzzled as to why Sahlins, distinguished scholar that he is, devotes such excellent data and critical analysis to an argument demonstrated by K.O.L. Burridge in his *Tangu Traditions* well over a decade ago. In his 1969 monograph about a New Guinea highland people, Burridge writes about “the putting on of the new man” and explores social change by “entering a conversation” between Tangu narratives and other aspects of their culture. “And since a conversation implies a dialectic, such is the pattern of presentation and argument” (xviii). Nor was Burridge the pioneer in this effort to incorporate structure and history. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, in *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (1949), wrote what he described elsewhere as “one of the few genuinely historical books written by an anthropologist” (1961: 13). Indeed, that statement appears in a paper called *Anthropology and History* in which the author outlined the importance of incorporating the historical perspective in anthropological analysis.

Surely Sahlins knows all this. Perhaps he feels that the point has not yet been driven home and that another concrete example will help us to see the familiar anew. Whatever the case, I think that Sahlins, like Evans-Pritchard and Burridge before him, is making a strong case for a method to *describe* structures of *subjective* orientation to the world in order to better *explain* features of the *objective* world. In other words, he is presenting an argument, unwittingly perhaps, for incorporation of a phenomenological perspective in anthropology. (Evans-Pritchard’s writings, in general, reflect such a perspective and I suspect that Burridge is an undeclared phenomenologist.) And such an argument would indeed be a welcome one. For while the debate about structure and history has been more or less resolved, there is still much to be said about what might be gained from a phenomenological anthropology.

Carol SHEEHAN, *Pipes That Won’t Smoke; Coal That Won’t Burn, Haida Sculpture in Argillite*, Calgary, Glenbow Museum, 1981.

By Donald H. Mitchell
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Carol Sheehan has given us a handsome exhibit catalogue that agreeably manages to be much more than a simple guidebook. It is, in fact, a beautifully presented study of the evolution of a remarkable Northwest Coast art form —Haida argillite sculpture— from its probable beginnings at the start of the 19th Century to the present.

The study owes much to Wilson Duff’s insightful and creative mind as Sheehan tells us at the outset. From the title (reflecting his fascination with paradox) to the periodization of style developments (stages of “sense” and “non-sense” in the art), this debt is strikingly evident to any who knew Wilson or his work. But Duff wrote none of the text and we have Sheehan to thank for so faithfully and successfully conveying his imaginative interpretation of the art.

The comparatively brief and rapidly-changing argillite carving tradition of the Haida is presented as four distinct style segments, the first three of which are after Kaufmann (1969). Apart from a fourth, recent period, what is added to Kaufmann’s thorough exploration of style development is historical context for the observed changes.

The four periods (the existence of some overlap suggests they are really “stages”) are identified and described as follows:

Period One (1800-1835): Haida Non-sense. The carving on objects (mainly ornately worked pipes of various forms) largely conforms to the conventions of Haida sculpture but “images on these pipes resist interpretation by classical Haida iconographic conventions” (p. 79). It is argued that the articulation of traditional figures and other elements does not make sense because this was from the start a trade or souvenir art, not produced for the Haida themselves.

Period Two (1830-1865): White Man’s Non-sense. Pipes continue as the principal items produced, but they are now decorated with themes from Euro-American culture: ships, sailors, tailored clothing, and such exotic animals as chickens, horses, and monkeys. During the period, faithful replicas of western material culture (knives, forks, cups, plates, and flutes) appear, most often decorated with circles, compass roses, or floral motifs. There is an impression that in many cases the white man and his ways are being mocked. (It is certainly tempting to so interpret the panel pipe fragment illustrated on p. 24. In the manner of human figure and bird as conventionally represented on the traditional raven rattles, a sailor reclines on the back of a chicken).

Period Three (1865-1910): Haida Sense. There is a dramatic shift back to traditional carving conventions and iconography that almost seems to remove argillite carving from the souvenir realm and establish it now as art for the Haida people. Carvers depict crest animals and myth episodes on argillite boxes and feast dishes, in figure groupings, and, increasingly, on miniature representations of the wooden crest poles.

Period Four (1910-1981): Haida Sense II. As its designation indicates, Period Four represents a continuation of the characteristics of Period Three, but there was at first, to Duff's eye, a decline in artistic standards. Later experimentation saw carvers conscientious in observing customs of style and, at the same time, innovative in selection of theme and presentation of form.

When the products of Haida argillite carvers are arranged in chronological order it is obvious that stylistic changes occurred. By and large, the stages outlined above represent recognizable divisions of the continuum, although I believe a good case could be made for tacking most of Period Four onto Period Three and considering only the post-1960 carvings as representing a distinctive stage (*Haida Renaissance?*).

Less convincing than the stage divisions are the explanations for style shifts. During the first two periods, Haida carvers produce souvenirs that more and more obviously parody the white man and his ways. The change in emphasis from native to western subjects is seen as a response to the greater familiarity with Euro-American culture that accompanied establishment of fur trade posts in the 1830's and 1840's and the development of commercial whaling. The secure base for Haida culture was then profoundly shaken by the disastrous epidemics of the early 1860's, by missionary activity, and, later, by attempts to ban the potlatch. "Significantly, the subject matter of the carvings shifted dramatically [in Period Three] from poking fun at a foreign culture to recording aspects of their own vanishing traditions" (p. 96). The final vital change appears during Period Four with the rise in the 1960's of the Pan-Indian movement.

The trouble with such explanations, plausible though they may be, is that they are not proven by simple association. Although the study has provided historical context, we must recognize how subjective is the selection of causal factors from that rich setting. Style shifts may be related to fairly local historical events or they may make greater sense when viewed more broadly. Only additional study can provide the answer. It could, for example, be very instructive to place the style changes in the context of changing markets for trade art. Whatever results might be anticipated from such enquiry, we cannot help but feel that Sheehan and Duff have already brought us very close to an understanding of Haida argillite sculpture.

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The Spirit, The Code, and Critical Interpretation

Northrop FRYE, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, Don Mills: Academic Press Canada, 1982. 261 pp., \$19.50 (cloth).

Frank KERMODE, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1979. 169 pp., US \$4.95 (paper).

By Richard J. Preston
McMaster University

Two goals of our discipline are served by these books: the attempt at greater excellence of literary form in our exchanges of ideas or "thick descriptions", and the attempt to take seriously Evans-Pritchard's suggestion that the study of belief will benefit from a better understanding of our own religious traditions. Frye and Kermode have brought the discipline of literary criticism to bear upon the interpretation of Biblical narrative. Most anthropologists, as well as most literary critics, have regarded the Bible and Christian doctrine with manifest diffidence or passive disinterest, and thereby have avoided the intellectually obvious value of making critical inquiry into this rich domain of cultural significance.

Frye and Kermode have now given us a corrective without succumbing to visible pollution or doctrinal adhesions as a result of their efforts. Both authors have the interest and the skills for such a major scholarly task, and they provide us with sustained and clear argument, each set in two parts. The first is a general discussion of problems of interpretation and the identification of a specific approach used by the author. The second is the application of the approach to Biblical narrative. Frye surveys the whole, while Kermode restricts himself to the four gospel books, with emphasis on Mark. Kermode is at once less general and abstract in his discussion of problems of