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History of Yukon first nations art

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Final Comments

For the last 200 years the art of the Yukon and surrounding areas has experienced ongoing change. This has mirrored the changes in the lives of the Yukon First Nations people: religion, language, lifestyles, political structure, spirituality, etc. The introduction to trade and beads resulted in the first big change: an end to quill work and a decline of the geometric Athapaskan art style. The second change was caused by the Gold Rush and a third by the building of the Alaska Highway. Representation through painting, engraving and bead work lost its traditional meaning and, like many other aspects of life, became part of the western money making society. This resulted in a decline of the earlier, more individual artistic styles and an increase in the easier to make, common bead patterns for mass production and the rule-bound Northwest Coast Indian art styles. In many cases the older geometric patterns, quill patterns and the once popular gopher skin robes have been replaced by Pan-Indian and Northwest Coast Indian art styles. All these changes have resulted in a lost knowledge of traditional art and an acceptance as traditional of recent Northwest Coast and Pan-Indian art and imagery.

It is this cultural void that started my search for my people's art. This dissertation is the first complete overview of the historical art of Yukon First Nations. While I do not believe that the final publication of this thesis will change any of the present day First Nations arts practices, it will become a point of reference for those people who do want to learn what the early art was like. With this thesis I feel I have proven that we, Yukon First Nations people, did in fact have a rich visual culture and unique art form.

In the introduction I give a background on how this thesis was born and the obstacles that I faced at the beginning of my research. In the second chapter I give a very brief cultural overview of the early Yukon First Nations world view. In this chapter I also identify the three artistic periods of Yukon First Nations art history: the Geometric Period, the Beaded Period and the Current Period, and give some insight into the differences between various First Nations groups. In the next four chapters I describe the basic structure of the art. In Chapter Two-Geometric & Decorative Arts, I catalogue the common geometric motifs and give examples of where these motifs are used, especially referring to the Geometric Period. The third chapter I look at the clothing with its style changes. This chapter deals with art from both the Geometric and Beaded Periods. In Chapter Four-Beaded & Floral Designs I discuss the artistic styles that resulted from the introduction of beads in the Yukon. This chapter covers the Beaded period of Yukon First Nations art and I work at identifying regional styles within the Yukon. I try to relay that this is one of the more expressive times in Yukon First Nations art. In the next chapter on Figurative art I divide the images up into stick figures and outlined and silhouette images. I also examine carving and beaded imagery. I think this chapter will go a long way in dispelling the idea that Yukon First Nations people did not have a figurative art.

From analyzing the art I switch to showing where, how and by whom the art was used in the next three chapters. In Chapter Six-Art of Rituals, Shamans & Stories I show the ritual, shaman and story related objects that the art was placed on. In the next chapter I do the same for the tools used in hunting and warfare. I also give a brief overview of the Yukon First Nations style of warfare which is probably different from what people would expect. I leave Chapter Eight-Art of the Potlatch & Death towards the end as it is one of the most artistic visual activities Yukon First Nations people were involved in. I give an overview of the main objects that were used during the potlatch and then show examples of grave art.

The last chapter is related to those art forms that are not traditional in the Yukon. I describe the historical events that gave rise of the Northwest Coast Indian art that filled the cultural gap created by a combination of government policy, western societies' practices and

our own very adaptable First Nations traits. The thesis gives the reader a basic understanding of our traditional art and the changes it underwent till present day.

I hope that with this thesis I spawn some interest in the subject and provide a starting point for further research. I especially hope that my people benefit from this research. I believe we have to “own” our art and culture and become the main, and official, experts. As I mentioned in the introduction, this does not mean that some non-First Nations have not contributed to research in our culture, and I for one certainly have respect for their efforts. However, a change is called for from “being researched” to “telling our own story”. Unfortunately, we don’t have the luxury of time and if we don’t act now, soon enough we become “outsiders looking in”.

The more I discover, the more I learn that I am just seeing the tip of the iceberg. I am coming across more examples all the time, even as I work on the final edit of this dissertation! There are sure to be many more artifacts of early Yukon First Nations art hidden away in many museums and private homes around the world, waiting to be discovered.