

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Lelooska: The Life of a Northwest Coast Artist. By Chris Friday.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/05c8m8j9>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 28(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Hawker, Ronald

**Publication Date**

2004-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

account Ishi's preferences. In all fairness it could also be concluded that all of the choices that existed for Ishi in the 1910s were more or less bad, but this was hardly the fault of Kroeber and company.

Not that the actions of Ishi's scientist friends are entirely above reproach. After Ishi's death some blamed each other for working him too hard as an informant, although it is difficult to imagine that this caused or exacerbated tuberculosis. Saxton Pope, Ishi's friend and a university physician, insisted on the autopsy and removal of Ishi's brain for study. Pope also coaxed Ishi into leaving his sickbed to pose for one last photograph, which seems a remarkably callous act. Ishi's brain was never studied and was eventually stored at the Smithsonian Institution. Happily, the brain and Ishi's cremated remains were finally repatriated to California Indians, who interred it in a secret location in Ishi's homeland.

The book also presents some new analyses of the data collected from Ishi, especially in the field of linguistics. This is meant to show the continuing scientific value of Ishi's work with Berkeley anthropologists. More moving, there is a new account by Fred H. Zumwalt Jr., a friend of Ishi's. Zumwalt was a child who lived near the museum and met Ishi by chance. They became good friends, roaming the neighborhood and nearby parkland. Through Zumwalt we gain a new appreciation of Ishi's gentle humanity.

When I first read *Ishi in Two Worlds* many years ago I was moved by the simple human story of Ishi and provoked by Kroeber's history of the near destruction of Indian California. That experience inspired me to study California Indian history and to try to tell the story of some of the many unknown Ishis about whom history had been silent. The book under review reminds me of the power of a single human story, of the many questions and many truths embedded in such stories. As with so many other stories, the retelling of Ishi's story by a new generation reveals new questions and new truths. This book is worth reading for what it tells about Ishi and his friends and about our own time.

*Albert L. Hurtado*  
University of Oklahoma

**Lelooska: The Life of a Northwest Coast Artist.** By Chris Friday. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003. 283 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

When I was growing up in Vancouver and Victoria in the 1970s, rumors of the name Lelooska floated over from Seattle like a faint wisp of cloud in a dense fog bank. After all, Northwest Coast art was undeniably Canadian. Newly carved totem poles lined the main highways. The Hunt family dominated the jewelry business in Victoria through their Arts of the Raven shop. I remember, still vividly today, John Livingstone, who used to staff the store, showing me Mungo Martin's tools sitting proudly in a glass cabinet. You could buy the work of the new Northwest Coast Indian Artists Guild in a basement store in Victoria's Bastion Square. Everyone knew Bill Reid. We read Christie Harris's

*Raven's Cry*, illustrated by Reid, in elementary school. Robert Davidson was a Haida meteor, a rising star, a standard-bearer for a new generation. Roy Vickers's designs adorned the Commonwealth Games in Edmonton in 1978. The University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology was a temple dedicated to the conceptualization of Native ritual objects as art. We had the *Legacy* exhibit. We had Ksan and the Kitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art.

So, who was Lelooska? A Cherokee artist carving Northwest Coast masks seemed presumptuous. I was never exposed to any of his work up there. There were no major exhibitions that I recall, no glossy catalogs. I never saw his work in any of the Native American art classes I took at the university.

It was with great anticipation, then, that I read Chris Friday's *Lelooska: The Life of a Northwest Coast Artist*, hoping that a beam of light was about to penetrate the fog bank. I must admit I was immediately disappointed that the only color photograph of Lelooska's work was on the front cover. Old habits die hard, and I was hoping for yet another sumptuous paean to a heroic artist. This, after all, is a major part of the recipe for success for contemporary Northwest Coast artists in Canada. Friday does not describe Lelooska's style in painstaking detail, following the formalist definitions codified by art historian Bill Holm, which has been a typical characteristic of books on Northwest Coast art. Holm does make an anecdotal guest appearance but only to be duped by Lelooska's mastery of traditional form into believing that one of Lelooska's carvings dates to the late nineteenth century—a sly way of legitimizing his technique. Chapter 7, "Producing Art," gives an artist's account of carving methods, but throughout the book there is no exhibition list and little iconographic discussion.

What Friday provides instead is something more complex and subtle. His is an ethnographic exercise on the nature of identity in the life and work of an individual artist, and he carefully foregrounds his position as both an anthropologist and a lifelong friend of Don "Lelooska" Smith, weaving in his own observations with two years of taped interviews before Lelooska's death from cancer in 1996. The result is an intimate book, organized in ten chapters, full of black and white family photographs and stories seemingly told around the dining room table over coffee and a cigarette. The cadence may be familiar, but Friday still touches on a series of important and difficult issues, not the least of which is Lelooska's experience as a nonstatus Cherokee born off reservation and immersing himself in an art form embedded in a complex frame of inherited prerogatives and status.

Lelooska was born of mixed parentage in Sonoma, California, in 1933, his sense of self shaped by the stories of a network of kin and friends, particularly through his grandfather, which "plunged him into a pan-Indian world" (60) that resided off the reservation. This notion of pan-Indianness fuels Lelooska's monologues and Friday's narrative frame. There are tensions between the two, but Friday's self-consciousness as an anthropologist and his desire for Lelooska to tell the lion's share of the story subvert the disembodied anthropological voice of authority. We hear through Lelooska's own words how his maternal grandfather rode in the Buffalo Bill Wild West show; how his

grandfather brought with him a revolving cast of Arapaho and Lakota friends eager to educate Lelooska about their ways; how the family's roadside museum in Hubbard, Oregon, grew into a full-fledged educational program; how Lelooska's contact with the Rasmussen collection at the Portland Art Museum generated a spiritual epiphany from which he embarked on an artistic journey. We hear how Lelooska was encouraged by officials from the Indian Arts and Crafts Board in the early 1960s; how he opened a family gallery in Ariel, Washington; and, climactically, how he, as a nonstatus individual, was profoundly affected by Congress's 1990 Indian Arts and Crafts Act, which "required anyone producing art labeled as Indian or Native American to be an enrolled member of a federally recognized tribe or to be registered with one" (212).

This requirement is at the heart of the debate about what Native art is and how it might be distinct from mainstream art. It has a complex history of its own mired in the emergence of North American modernity and the nation-state's dilemma of how to construct a national identity on one hand and absorb the peoples it colonized on the other. James Clifford famously summarized the construction of "traditional" art within this modernist and highly politicized context as shifting between the diametric poles of authenticity and inauthenticity (see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* [1988]). The rigid expectations of what is authentic have enormous consequences for the individual artists who do not fit comfortably within its paradigm. Lelooska's own response to this seems almost too easy:

My argument to the ones who say "Well, Cherokee shouldn't be doing Northwest Coast art" is: "Well good grief, the whites do not fetter themselves with the idea that theirs is the only culture in the world. Why else would we send people off to Venice and to France and all the places where great art can be found in the world?" It enriches you and it makes you better when you do finally find your particular niche. I think I've done pretty much the same thing that the white people are doing all the time, only I didn't go to Venice, I went to the Northwest Coast because this was the richest, deepest art tradition in North America. . . . It was the one place in North America where you had artists working as commissioned artists with patrons, great chiefs, who came to them . . . to produce works for display on the great occasions that they wanted to mark their life climaxes. (145)

Since the political conditions of modern art as it developed in Europe were so radically different from what occurred in North America, it is a difficult comparison to make. The intention of much modern art is universalist in its focus on pure form, whereas group styles in Native North America have nationalist overtones, representing identities, laws, spirituality, and territoriality that preceded European colonialism. Buy it or not, Lelooska's perspective is one affected individual's view, and it is refreshing to hear without the intellectualized rhetoric of identity construction.

The prickly issue of how specific masks, stories, and characters are owned, inherited, and publicly ritually legitimized in a society to which Lelooska was an outsider is addressed through a chapter in which Lelooska recounts his work for James Sewid, a Kwakwaka'wakw of high-ranking lineage who played an active role in persuading the Canadian government to repatriate objects seized in the 1921 Cranmer potlatch to the Kwagiulth Museum and Cultural Centre in Cape Mudge and the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay in 1979–80. Friday argues that Lelooska played a role in this historically significant event by providing Sewid with “a chance to establish what amounted to a Kwakiutl colonial outpost in the United States” (149). Lelooska states more simply but no less revealingly, “When I made the masks for Jimmy’s family, that was when I felt, as the Hindus say, that I had paid my teacher’s reward or price” (150).

The story arc of Lelooska’s life draws obvious superficial parallels with Bill Reid. Both were born of mixed parentage, and both chose to explore Northwest Coast art out of personal interest, rather than simply growing up with it. Of course, the reception of their work differs considerably. Since Reid’s mother was Haida, it was easy for him to reinvent himself and assert a sort of self-evident legitimacy for his work through his mother’s ancestral line. This confluence of self-discovery and self-assertion coincided with an institutional fluorescence in multiculturalism in Canada where celebrating difference was a key underpinning of a new national identity. Reid was thus able to access federal and other institutional commissions worth millions of dollars. The lengthy list of references on contemporary Canadian Northwest Coast artists in comparison with the virtual paucity of sources on those from the United States indicates the relative investment in the Northwest Coast art market on either side of the border.

The experiences revealed in Lelooska’s remembrances, though, evoke the disenfranchisement, alienation, and almost subterranean belonging that characterize many Native people’s lives. To make Native art of any kind during the age of assimilation was an ideological statement in and of itself because of these political conditions. My sense is that it is more difficult for non-Native people to understand this. We are so conditioned to the paradigm of authenticity defining the evolution of a market for Native American art—generally since the beginning of the twentieth century and for Northwest Coast art especially in the 1960s and 1970s—that the idea that someone of one ethnicity can work in the visual language of another has become heretical, even illegal. In this sense Lelooska’s story reveals much, not about his contemporary generation in Canada—the Hunts, Reid, Davidson, and the others whose work was most familiar to me growing up—but rather about the previous generation of artists: George Clutesi, Mathias Joe, Ellen Neel, Judith Morgan, and a number of others who worked under conditions similar to what Lelooska experienced and who are now almost completely forgotten.

“Don’s identity was not one of pure imagination,” writes Friday. “He was born into it, suffered discrimination because of it, and triumphed by embracing it actively.” Here, Friday argues provocatively, “Don’s life experiences counter those who argue that modern urban consumer culture strips away traditional culture. All cultures change, and Don’s life reveals the creative

hybridity that embodies being Indian for so many people in the twentieth century" (234). This is where Friday's book as a meditation on the complexity of Native identity is most valuable. While it meanders away from the mainstream recitation of what constitutes traditional art from either iconographic or formal perspectives, it offers a contextualized insider's view of a crucial period in Native American history, artistic and otherwise, and thus offers something of substance to how we might understand Native experiences in the twentieth century. It is, thankfully then, not a traditional art history per se and instead positions Lelooska's life and work within a constellation of concerns, including pan-Indianism and the politics of both group and individual identity, patronage and the development of Northwest Coast art after the Second World War, and what might constitute Native American art, as well as who should define it and why.

*Ronald Hawker*

Zayed University, Dubai

**Native American Power in the United States, 1783–1795.** By Celia Barnes. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003. 250 pages. \$47.50 cloth.

Ample scholarly attention has been focused on aspects of Indian relations with the United States from 1783 to 1795. A. L. Burt, Samuel Flagg Bemis, and Arthur Whitaker have looked at Indian involvement in diplomacy; Francis Paul Prucha has studied the development of Indian policy and the birth of the army; and others have dealt with land speculation. Much of this work, however, was done decades ago. Perhaps the broadest coverage in a recent book is Colin Calloway's study of British-Indian relations between 1783 and 1815. This new book by Celia Barnes, who received her PhD from the University of London, seeks to assess the impact of Native Americans on the United States in that critical period between the end of the American Revolution and the signing of Jay's Treaty in 1794 and Pinckney's Treaty in 1795.

Barnes argues that the United States began with a weak national government which was distrusted by its citizens, who often treated it with outright hostility, and that on its borders this fledgling government faced foreign powers that openly encroached on national territory. The nation faced a precarious existence, which was exacerbated by Native power. She believes that Native Americans influenced the development of the nation to the degree that they deserve a central place in early United States history. They used their power to protect their interests and involved themselves in international disagreements to such an extent that they were able to multiply problems for any who threatened the growth of the American union.

Barnes concentrates on the northern and southern borders, where tribes were involved in British and Spanish diplomacy. The former was an area of Indian resistance where an Indian alliance defeated Josiah Harmer in 1790 and Arthur St. Clair in 1791, the latter causing casualties to two-thirds of the United States Army. In both regions, states and settlers ignored treaties and