

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Spirit Faces: Contemporary Masks of the Northwest Coast. By Gary Wyatt.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7zc3h253>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 24(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Brown, Steven C.

Publication Date

2000-06-01

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/>

Spirit Faces: Contemporary Masks of the Northwest Coast. By Gary Wyatt. Vancouver/Seattle: Douglas and McIntyre/University of Washington Press, 1994. 135 Pages. \$24.95 paper.

Mythic Beings: Spirit Art of the Northwest Coast. By Gary Wyatt. Vancouver/Seattle: Douglas and McIntyre/University of Washington Press, 1999. 144 Pages. \$22.95 paper.

Contemporary Northwest Coast Native art is a very creative and interesting field, with an ever-growing number of artists coming forward with high degrees of skill and craftsmanship. Some observers see two sub-fields of contemporary First Nations arts, which could be termed *traditional* and *non-traditional*. These books endeavor to illustrate the more traditional sector of the field, that which emulates the ethnographic and historic record of Northwest Coast carving and design, as opposed to paintings on canvas, installation art, and so on from the contemporary, or non-traditional, art fields. Some of the artists included in these works go well beyond emulation, however, and create art with great originality that expand the field of so-called traditional arts. Even these retain their visible ties to historic tradition through imagery or style or techniques, and so the distinction of traditional-style work still applies.

The book *Spirit Faces* was produced through the Inuit Gallery of Vancouver, well known as a highly visible center of quality work by some of the most successful artists. The primary author, Gary Wyatt, was curator of the Northwest Coast collection at the gallery since 1987. Wyatt has since separated from that enterprise, along with some of his co-workers, and founded the Spirit Wrestler Gallery, also located in the Gastown area of Vancouver. This newer gallery has established an equally high reputation for the quality of artworks available, the professionalism of its staff, and its standing among the community of artists.

The new release from this author, *Mythic Beings*, was produced and copyrighted by the Spirit Wrestler Gallery, and was also published by Douglas and McIntyre, with US distribution by University of Washington Press. Both these publishing houses are well-known as leaders in the field of Native American and particularly Northwest Coast art books.

Spirit Faces, the 1994 publication, begins with a page-listing, by title, of the seventy-five masks included in the book. The list and the book are divided into three sections: Narrative Masks, Clan and Crest Masks, and Transformation Masks. These designations are somewhat arbitrary, as the three groups, culturally speaking, are not mutually exclusive. The preface, which should really be titled Acknowledgments, precedes an eight-page introduction, which serves to lay out the general background of the people, the geography, and the cultures of the Northwest Coast for the reader. This section includes a very thorough chronology of Northwest Coast art exhibitions, beginning in the mid-1920s. This is perhaps the book's most scholarly contribution. The introduction is, in places, a bit too general for the subject area, and tends to suggest the universalization of concepts and practices among Northwest Coast

groups that are really more varied and individual than they are represented therein. It is clear from the style and subjects covered in the introduction that it is intended as a primer for art consumers rather than a study that adds something significant to the depth of knowledge and understanding about the subject matter. As such a primer, though, it does its job fairly well.

Then follow the three illustrated sections of the book, each with a brief explanation of the designations. These descriptions of three-to-four sentences could be called impressionistic rather than deeply informative, as they are broadly generalized. Each mask is featured in a single full-page image, and is accompanied by its title and description laid out in art-museum label format: title, maker's name, tribal affiliation, materials, dimensions. One of the most frustrating aspects of this book is that the mask photos and the captions thereof are not always adjacent to one another, or even in any consistent pattern. The full-page format for the pictures is excellent, but the book design leaves some masks facing one another with the captions for each on previous or following pages. The most problematic situations place the captions for previous photos next to masks whose actual captions follow on another page. It is very easy for a reader to be misled by these varying juxtapositions. By a count, at least one-third of the captions are on a page other than that with its correct photo, making for some seemingly unnecessary searching and correlating that the designer should have made easier.

The photographs vary in quality from merely competent to truly great. Some of the pictures exhibit real mastery of light and shadow, while others tend to flatten out the artwork. Three photographers are named in the preface—Kenji Nagai, Trevor Mills, and Robert Keziere—though their individual photos are not credited, so we don't know who shot which.

Also accompanying each mask is a section of text produced by the artist of the work. Some of these address the imagery and style of the carving, or the myths and stories behind the masks; others talk of the artist's experience in making the work. These are by far the most interesting reads in the book, as they have an immediacy and relevance to the depicted masks that the general introduction does not. They are succinct, and vary nicely in voice and narrative style.

As a final critique, it appears that the standard of quality and the contributions of the individual artworks included in *Spirit Faces* vary to a great extent. Some of the masks featured in this book are far below the level of the best works. These pieces, which will be apparent to many viewers, should not have been included in what is called on the book's endleaf "an outstanding collection."

The "sequel" to *Spirit Faces* is *Mythic Beings*, which from the outset is of a slightly different focus and arrangement. This new book successfully rectifies several of the shortcomings of the previous release. The book is in much the same format as the first, though it features a wider variety of carved and even woven objects in addition to the masks that were the focus of the earlier work. The second release maintains the Canada-centric point of view, as neither book offers any works by Native Alaskan or Washington State artists.

Mythic Beings begins with a preface of acknowledgments, which in this case also includes a retrospective look at changes in the art field since the publication of *Spirit Faces* nearly five years previous. The introduction is also more detailed, and contains a range of mythic stories, ceremonial descriptions, and creature introductions from the traditions of various First Nations. The preface credits several Native artists and ritualists with reviewing this text for accuracy, and their input appears to have brought about some positive changes. The information as a whole is less broad and offers more in-depth knowledge to the reader, whether novice or specialist, than the text of the first book.

The sections into which the illustrated material is divided are also more directly relevant to the cultures and their distinctions of such objects. The four units—The Sky World, The Mortal World, The Undersea World, and The Spirit World—are in fact reflective of essentially the same distinctions established in another recent and excellent publication, *Down From the Shimmering Sky: Masks of the Northwest Coast* (1998). This is the catalog of an exhibit mounted by the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) in 1998, which was curated by Peter Macnair, formerly with the Royal British Columbia Museum, Robert Joseph, Kwakwaka'wakw elder, and Bruce Grenville, senior curator of the VAG. The curators selected the four categories to illustrate the distinctions inherent in the traditions of many of the First Peoples. To see the same system applied in *Mythic Beings* is welcome, as it appears to be more appropriate than the categories used in the first book.

Mythic Beings' book design by George Vaitkunas, who did not do the design of *Spirit Faces*, is a vast improvement over the first release. Here, nearly every object is displayed opposite its caption/artist description, and the few exceptions are on closely adjacent pages. The photographs are of consistent high quality in this book, and only one primary photographer, Kenji Nagai, is listed in the preface.

Though there are still three or four objects out of seventy-five that, by my judgment, do not belong among the others in terms of quality, the selections as a whole are representative of the highest quality of work being done today by contemporary Northwest Coast Native artists. This group of artworks, broader by design than the first, includes objects as varied as a comb and a house front, a woven hat and a hat made of blown and etched glass. The wider focus brings in a greater representation of female artists, as well as a spectrum of work as broad as what is being done today. Among the artworks are several that bear special notice: the Raven's claw and Moon rattle by Norman Tait (p. 26); the December Moon narrative sculpture by Tim Paul (p. 33); the thunderbird headpiece by Robert Davidson (p. 38); the house-front painting done for the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology by Lyle Wilson (pp. 62–63); traditional-style weavings by Cheryl Samuel (pp. 34, 96), Dolores Churchill and Evelyn Vanderhoop (p. 51), and Isabel Rorick (p. 67); the Wolf Transformation set of masks and the drum by Art Thompson (p. 79); the argillite chest by Christian White (p. 113); and a Salish-style panel by Nuu-chah-nulth artist Joe David (p. 133). The glasswork of both Susan Point (p. 82) and Preston Singletary (pp. 68–69) also inspire special mention. These highlights illustrate the elevated

level of inspiration and craftpersonship that is found with regularity among First Nations artists today.

Though *Mythic Beings* offers many improvements over the release of *Spirit Faces*, both books serve their audience well as an introduction to and overview of the kind of fine work being created today by some of the most prominent artists in Canada.

Steven C. Brown
Seattle Art Museum

Stands Alone, Faces, and Other Poems. By Patrick Russell LeBeau. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999. 84 pages. \$15.95 paper.

If one is looking for poetry that centers on the traditional, the ceremonial, and the balance of life and death, then Patrick Russell LeBeau's book *Stands Alone, Faces, and Other Poems* is a must read. His style is one that utilizes free verse and fragmented sentencings to present intensely realistic poetry. For the Native American scholar, the images and symbolic references may seem obvious and at times contrived, but the overall concept and circular form of the entire work will redeem it. For the general audience, the poetry clearly presents universal themes through common Native American literary devices, such as circularity, repetition, and animal imagery that are easily recognizable and enjoyable.

What readers will appreciate in *Stands Alone, Faces, and Other Poems* is the variety of topics LeBeau explores, offering tradition in "Pollen, tobacco to feed / the spirit—," mythology in his references to Old Man and Nanabush, and modern concerns that include the always-present alcoholic and cross-cultural questions. *Stands Alone* is interestingly divided into four sections, each referring to a different "man" in the movement through isolation, self-exploration, community, and experience. This separates the poetry by point of reference and allows LeBeau to ponder many past and present issues. The addition of *Faces and Other Poems* further illustrates LeBeau's versatility. Though LeBeau touches on common social issues, as do many other modern poets such as Sherman Alexie, it is the extension beyond these issues that makes his writing engaging and it widens his range of audience to encompass both the Native American scholar and the general reader.

One of the principal strengths of the book is the cycle of life and death that is interwoven throughout. The opening poem, "Deer Dragger," focuses on this cycle as it is once again played out by the hunter and the hunted, offering vivid descriptions of "Red hoof prints— / Bloody snow" and the hunter "[weeping] for the love / of [the deer's] life" (p. 3). The poem incorporates the traditional and the ceremonial through references to the hunter thanking the deer for his life, offering tobacco, and covering the deer's eyes. The cycle continues within other poems as the book progresses and eventually closes with the poem "Sweet Grass and Sun," which is a ceremony unto itself: "Burn sweet grass / rinse your face / with smoke" (p. 83). This final