



PROJECTIONS

The Paintings of Henry Speck, Udzi'stalis

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BY KAREN DUFFEK & MARCIA CROSBY

Chief Henry Speck, or Udzi'stalis (1908–1971), was born in the Tlawit'sis (Kwakwaka'wakw) community of Kalugwis, on Turnour Island, British Columbia, to parents John Speck and Wadzidi Harris. He attended the Boys' Industrial School in Alert Bay for only two years, and at age fourteen was initiated as a Hamat'sa dancer through his uncle, the artist Bob Harris. At nineteen, he married Lily Harris. He went on to become a respected community leader, teacher, and cultural practitioner, both in Kalugwis and then Alert Bay, while working as a fisherman. Still remembered today by his nickname, Galidi'y, he was noted for his abilities as a ceremonial speaker and composer of songs and dances, as well as a painter of dance screens and numerous community commissions. By the 1930s he was also becoming recognized within and outside his community for his modern paintings on paper, rendered in vibrant colours and textures. When he met the antiques dealer, Gyula Mayer, in 1961, this art was brought to greater public attention through exhibits, a series of silkscreen-print reproductions, department-store promotions, and a catalogue, Kwakiutl Art by Henry Speck (ac Indian Designs Ltd., 1963), written by anthropologist Audrey Hawthorn.

In the following dialogue, curators Karen Duffek and Marcia Crosby discuss the ideas behind their exhibition, and the questions that Henry Speck's work provokes today.

Karen Duffek (KD): In researching the life and work of Henry Speck, I think we've been surprised, and yet not, with the fact that his inventive paintings have slipped from view—that they do not have a foothold in the prevailing discourses of 20th-century Northwest Coast art history, or mid-20th-century modern art more generally.

Speck's art was individualistic, but carried a collective function. "It was in my blood," he said; "I alter [the style] to suit my own needs."¹ His paintings on paper, created through the 1930s to the late 1960s, brought forward a new way of picturing Kwakwaka'wakw ritual dances and mythological characters. His subjects came from his own, lived, contemporary experience in the potlatch as a ceremonial singer and dancer, and he sometimes depicted supernatural beings mapped onto the landscape features of Tlawit'sis territory. His work shows a spontaneity and painterliness that may be surprising to people more familiar with the Northwest Coast silkscreen prints—especially those with northern-style, formline imagery—that came to institutional and market prominence in the 1970s.

Marcia Crosby (MC): I don't think Speck and his work "slipped away" so much as the genealogy of "modern art" by Aboriginal artists cannot account for such qualities as their traditional, metaphysical referents, or their seemingly positivist focus on form. Both the Austrian artist and theorist Wolfgang Paalen in 1939,² and Haida artist Bill Reid in 1964,³ recognized that Speck's vision of space and form was deeply related to his firsthand knowledge of "Kwakiutl" cosmologies. I wouldn't position his work as an "alternative modernity," rooted in a traditional past, in order to authenticate it. Speck, like many of his contemporaries, also produced his work in contexts other than museums and galleries: the community halls, sports days, "Indian Days," parades, and social organizations in which Aboriginal people gathered.

KD: Whether or not Henry Speck self-identified as a "modern artist"—in the way that Bill Reid and other 20th-century Aboriginal artists, such as George Clutesi, Ellen Neel, and Judith Morgan, did—he was

fully engaged in the politics, economies, and cultural practices of his time. He succeeded his father as a hereditary chief; he was a fisherman and a Christian; he maintained his ceremonial roles throughout and beyond the period of anti-potlatch legislation (1884–1951). And as his son John Speck told us, Henry Speck worked in his village of Kalugwis to organize the building of a church, power plant, dam for a water source, school, and a community hall.⁴ He was a modernizer. Was he also a modernist?

MC: Maybe the questions are: How did his work as a "modernizer" overlap with his work as an artist? What, where, and when is modernism for Henry Speck's art? Two major modernization projects in Alert Bay were linked to his art practice: the formation of the Kwakwaka'wakw Arts and Crafts Organization in 1964, and the community bighouse, completed in 1965, for which James Sewid invited Speck's support as an artist and cultural leader. Sewid's account of these projects includes many references to his and Speck's membership in the Native Brotherhood of BC (NBBC).⁵ Speck may not have self-identified as a "modern artist" in the same way as did other artists of his time. But all of these individuals aspired to be part of "modernity" in terms of their politics and common support of the NBBC's goal: equal access for Native peoples to the "modern" world, as self-reliant Canadian citizens. Modernity, however, was temporally and spatially located "elsewhere" in relation to where and who they were.

KD: When we look at the responses that Henry Speck's paintings received in the media, there is a constant disjuncture between the entrenched hierarchies and binaries of modernism: between the "Indian" as past, and the modern present; between the way Native art was marketed as primitive, and the lived and aspired-to modernity you describe. Why, when, and where did a "modern condition" define the mid-20th-century lives of artists like Speck, while the "modern" was not widely seen as describing their art?

When Speck had his 1964 show at the New Design Gallery in Vancouver—one of the few galleries then dedicated to contemporary art in Canada—his paintings represented the first intervention by Kwakwaka'wakw cultural production and experimentation in that edgy space. It isn't surprising that the media reception of Speck's paintings offered paternalistic descriptions of the un-cosmopolitan Native, and described the art as "fitting into this modern life...as a focal point of decoration in the home."⁶ Such responses call to mind what you have discussed as the restrictive modern/traditional paradigm of Northwest Coast art history, which Speck's art actually complicated.

MC: Northwest Coast art was not then part of the break with late modernism, which was the primary focus of the New Design Gallery. The Vancouver Art Gallery's 1967 exhibition, *Arts of the Raven*, positioned Northwest Coast cultural objects—both traditional and contemporary—as "modern art."⁷ The idea that something of "Indian descent" could be modern was as radical as were some of the VAG's contemporary-art exhibits. The difference was that new-media and performance-based works were now being viewed as a *break* from modernism's "medium purity," whereas Northwest Coast art was being *inserted* into a longer lineage of modern art, albeit through humanist comparisons of Northwest Coast "masterworks" to other "great" historical works.

KD: Bill Reid reinforced that view of Aboriginal-modernity-as-binary in the CBC-radio critique he gave of Speck's 1964 show, calling the work "an art which really has no business to be in existence at all. For

it was born of a culture which has now almost entirely disappeared..." He went on, "His drawings are imaginative in their concept, often going far beyond anything attempted before in Kwakiutl art... And yet... I felt that something was very wrong... On a house wall forty feet long, a painted beast could be awe-inspiring. In a 19- by 24-inch picture frame, it looks trapped and desperate rather than fierce."⁸

Meanwhile, within Speck's own Kwakwaka'wakw community, his "trapped beasts" remained meaningful despite their commodification. Not only did they depict subjects reinforcing—for the present, not the past—family histories and rights, but his works on paper and dedication to teaching inspired a new generation of Northwest Coast artists who saw, and still see, in these vibrant and textured forms a possibility for the creative renewal of the painted art.

MC: At the same time, Speck was one of a number of Aboriginal artists who had been exhibiting their work publicly since the 1940s, and who by the 1960s had yet to establish a sustained, commercial market for their work: they needed more significant support from the academy and institutional markets. Some "Indian moderns" had begun to secure a recognized place in "Indian art" history on the west coast; but for the most part, each had to rely on his or her own devices and networking systems in order to survive. The growth of Speck's and other artists' practices on the coast relied not only on the exchanges and intersections between the clichéd binaries of Native and non-Native worlds, but also on those between the groups and individuals who acted as their go-betweens, and the events that became intermediaries in the development of contemporary Aboriginal art. Tragically, Speck died too soon; despite the hundreds of paintings he created, he did not experience the academic and institutional supports that were emerging in the late 1960s, nor was his work integrated into the art-historical discourse.

KD: Speck did succeed in transforming Kwakwaka'wakw images through the media and painterly interpretations he chose, and of course through their re-contextualization. In this exhibit, we're releasing his "trapped beasts" from their frames, projecting them digitally within an expanded concept of "media," and on a scale closer to the dance screens that he and others painted for community use. Just as the traditional screens define spaces of performance and transformation in the bighouse, this gallery may be a space for considering the routes, and the intersections, that Henry Speck's paintings have taken on their still incomplete path through a modern (art) history.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ "Potlatch," Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) interview with Henry Speck, by Norman Newton, 1968. BC Archives AAAC0129.
- ² "The Indian as Artist, Program 2: Problems of Style," CBC interview with Henry Speck (and other artists), by Norman Newton, 1965. BC Archives AAAC0115.
- ³ When Speck was around 30, one of his paintings of a killer whale was picked up by the former Surrealist painter and theorist Wolfgang Paalen, who famously toured the Northwest Coast in 1939, collecting artifacts and seeking an understanding of myth and totemism as part of his attempt to develop a new approach to art and modernity. The painting is featured on the cover of Paalen's internationally circulated art journal *OVN*—its 1943 "Amerindian Number"—where it is mistakenly attributed to a "James Speck."
- ⁴ Bill Reid, "Ozistalis, A North American Phoenix," a commentary delivered as part of the CBC radio program *Critics at Large*, 24 March 1964.
- ⁵ Personal communication with John Speck, Campbell River, BC, 16 April 2012.
- ⁶ James P. Spradley, *Guests Never Leave Hungry: The Autobiography of James Sewid, a Kwakiutl Indian* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1969).
- ⁷ Nikki Moir, "Indian Paints his History," *The Province*, 21 March 1964, p. 29.
- ⁸ Vancouver Art Gallery, *Arts of the Raven: Masterworks by the Northwest Coast Indian* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1967), n.p. See also Marcia Crosby, "Indian Art/Aboriginal Title," Unpublished Master of Arts thesis (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1994).

⁹ Bill Reid, ibid.

FRONT COVER

Henry Speck, detail from *Kli-un zis (Tlixandzis, or Great Sea Lion)*, c. 1940–1965. Pencil on paper; 22.1 x 29.7 cm. Collection of U'mista Cultural Centre, Alert Bay, BC. Acc. 86/01. Photo: Trevor Isaac

ABOVE

Henry Speck, *Sea Monster Dance Mask*, c. 1964. Watercolour on paper; 35.4 x 42.4 cm. Collection of Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Canada. R53-381

BELOW

1. Henry Speck (right) with dealer Gyula Mayer and dignitaries, New Design Gallery, Vancouver, 1964. Photo courtesy Suzanna Mayer
2. Henry Speck, *Father Forgive Them*, 1958. Watercolour and ink on paper; 35.6 x 42.6 cm. Collection of Vancouver Art Gallery; VAG Acquisition Fund, 98.29. Photo: Trevor Mills, VAG
3. Henry Speck at Alert Bay, 1964. Photo courtesy the Thomas and Mildred Laurie collection, #A033146. Audrey and Harry Hawthorn Library and Archives, MOA
4. Henry Speck, *Wasp Dance Mask*, c. 1964. Watercolour and ink on paper; 35.4 x 42.4 cm. Collection of Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Canada. R53-423
5. Henry Speck, *Moon Mask Dancers*, 1962. Gouache on paper; 35.6 x 42.9 cm. Collection of UBC Museum of Anthropology. A8003

PROJECTIONS: THE ART OF HENRY SPECK, UDZI'STALIS was organized by the UBC Museum of Anthropology and shown at the Satellite Gallery, 560 Seymour Street, Vancouver, British Columbia (July 14 to September 15, 2012). The exhibition was curated by Karen Duffek, MOA Curator of Contemporary Visual Arts & Pacific Northwest; and Marcia Crosby, writer, scholar, and PhD candidate, UBC Department of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory. Exhibition design and media by Skooker Broome, MOA Exhibit Design/Production. Poster design by Debbie Cheung.

GILAKAS' LAI

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