

NAVIGATING FIRST NATIONS IDENTITY THROUGH PORTRAITURE, THEN AND NOW

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Within the holdings of Library and Archives Canada are an extraordinary number of paintings and photographs of and by First Nations individuals. The images collected for this exhibition explore how identity is perceived and portrayed in portraits of First Nations subjects. The juxtaposition of older examples against more contemporary portraits and self-portraits sheds light on how carefully constructed these images can be. We can also attribute the conflicted role of the portrait subjects to the unique way the makers of the images have chosen to portray the individual within. A defining thread among the portraits collected for this exhibition has to do with the image-makers themselves and what they hoped to accomplish. By looking at the intention behind the image, we learn more about how these artists and photographers thought they could use the image of First Nations individuals as a mean to their specific end.

The idea of a ‘vanishing race’ is one that appears in the older portraits in this exhibition, which are also conveniently made by non-First Nations artists or photographers. This concept, in the late 19th and early 20th century, was the other side of the coin from the mass extermination of First Nations people across North America. “(This) generation believed that (racial prejudice) was a legitimate aspect of science or ‘natural history.’ If... science made clear why Indians had to die... science must preserve what Indians had been like for the benefit of future generations.”¹ This notion lingered in a watered-down form throughout the

early 20th century. This was the case even throughout the life of Canadian icon Grey Owl (1888-1938), a portrait of whom is featured in this exhibition, who was held up as an emblem for the lasting importance of First Nations culture, despite the fact that he was an Englishman posing as an Ojibwe man, and beyond that, simply one man among thousands.

More contemporary examples in this exhibition have less to do with the collective identity of First Nations, and focus more on the self. Among other issues such as the importance of heritage and status, the role of the family in forging identity is significant in these artworks; perhaps a consequence of residential schools, where families were often permanently separated. These artists realize that selfhood is something that is constructed on multiple levels from multiple sources and influences, as opposed to the more monolithic idea of First Nations identity that earlier examples of portraits seem to portray.



A Hesquiat Woman, 1916

Edward Curtis (American, 1868-1954)

Photograph

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 3195148

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3195148

In 1906 Edward Curtis (1868-1954) began a photographic series called *The North American Indian* that ended up comprising over 1500 photos (of the 40 000 from 80 different tribes he originally took), and was published in a series of books of the same name. He regarded his portraiture as a sort of scientific study and a way to preserve the memory of First Nations culture, which he feared would disappear. He used a particular pictorial style popular at the time, which consisted of “strong interest in the picturesque, careful attention to pleasing composition, and... blurring, soft focus, retouching.”² *Hesquiat Woman*, featured here, is a typical example of the kind of image that was featured in *The North American Indian*. A singular dimension of his work is the fact that many of his portraits of First Nations people were elaborately staged with costumes and other elements.³ The result is that the subjects stand in for the monolithic idea of Indian-ness that was popular in the day, helping to cement an already popular stereotype. The presence of her face peeking out from behind the blanket disrupts any connection that could be made with her. Despite Curtis’ close vantage point to the subject, the rough texture of the blanket and her deeply creased face keep us at a distance, and emphasizes the difference between the subject and the viewer. This image, however, is less staged than some of Curtis’s other photographs but still works to create a photographic archetype of the First Nations subject. Curtis costumed Geronimo in a similar way for the sake of a photograph: “wrapped in a blanket, his wrinkles accentuated and facial details softened, Geronimo seems a relic of the past, a poster boy for the vanishing race.”⁴



Demasduit (ca. 1796-1820) also known as Mary March, 1819

Lady Henrietta Martha Hamilton (British, ca. 1780-1857)

Watercolor on ivory, 7.7 x 6.5cm

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 2837325

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2837235

In the wake of post-colonial theory from the late 1970s on, *The North American Indian* has been criticized for being overly dogmatic and playing into the stereotype of the ‘vanishing race.’ We can compare Curtis’s portrait of a Hesquiat woman to the only known portrait of a subject from the Beothuk, a now-extinct Newfoundland tribe. The miniature portrait, a style typically painted by women like the artist, Lady Henrietta Martha Hamilton (ca. 1796-1820) is called *Demasduit*, and was taken from life. Demasduit (ca. 1796-1820) and the Beothuk tribe actively defended their land and rights and the portrait by Lady Hamilton was painted after provincial authorities had captured Demasduit because members of the tribe had stolen a boat.⁵ The image is deliberately constructed to push the image of Demasduit as a subdued prisoner, de-emphasizing both her wild back-story and Indian-ness, offering “a somewhat different example of miniature portraiture at the service of colonialism.”⁶ Her costume, despite being made of fur, doesn’t have a specific tribal look, and the setting is non-descript. The image is done in a painterly, almost pointillist style.



Grey Owl (Archibald Stansfeld Belaney) (1888-1938), February 27, 1936

Yousuf Karsh (Canadian, 1908-2002)

Silver gelatin print, 50.8 x 40.6cm

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 3192426

http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3192426&rec_nbr_list=3192426

Another subject of historical importance is found in Yousuf Karsh's (1908-2002) *Grey Owl*, which provides an especially intriguing example of the idea of a constructed First Nations identity. In his lifetime Grey Owl (1888-1938) was known as an Ojibwe man who wrote extensively about conservation of natural resources. He gained a certain amount of fame and status from his writing, and this iconic portrait was taken before it was revealed that he was actually born to a British family and adopted the Ojibwe name and persona later in life.⁷ This adversely affected his reputation and legacy for a long time, and it wasn't until recently that his conservation work began to be recognized again.⁸ Despite his fictitious beginnings, his writing nonetheless shows a genuine interest and awareness of the environment and of the Ojibwe way of life. He had learned their language, culture, and gained their respect. When including his portrait in an exhibition of images of First Nations artists and subjects, it is useful to look at within the scope of the exhibition's theme of First Nations identity, past and present. Karsh's portrait has some of the same pictorial elements and dramatic light and dark points as Edward Curtis's *Hesquiat Woman* and other photographs. However, this effect may not have been intentional as the close-up portrait of Gray Owl was originally a full-length portrait, and was only cropped in 1963.⁹



Gabriel Acquin (ca. 1811-1901), April 12, 1854

William Smyth Maynard Wolfe (British, 1832-1872)

Watercolour over pencil on wove paper, 61.0 x 42.8 cm (detail)

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 2884826

http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2884826

A more interesting comparison, however, might be to Lieutenant William Smythe Maynard Wolfe's (1832-1872) portrait of Gabriel Acquin (1811-1901). Lieutenant William Smythe Maynard Wolfe, "who painted water-colours of hunting trips with Gabe and other native guides in 1853 and 1854."¹⁰ The portrait is a watercolor depicting Acquin working in front of a fire in the wilderness. The artist first drew him and then filled it in with watercolor in almost monochromatic tones. The gray colour of his clothing makes him almost blend into his surroundings. Slight touches of umber colouring in the foreground are the only warm tones other than his face and hands in the centre of the portrait, with his shock of black hair guiding the viewer's eye to the peaceful look on his face, with his eyes closed and head tilting down. He can be seen as an alternative figure to that of Grey Owl. He was a "Maliseet hunter, guide, interpreter, showman, and founder of the St Mary's Indian Reserve" in New Brunswick, who actually had multiple Maliseet names but came to be known as Gabriel Acquin.¹¹ While Grey Owl's adoption of an Ojibwe persona has only marginally affected his message on the preservation of First Nations traditions, Acquin took up an opposite role, absolutely adapting to the colonial way of life and in the process "abandoning traditional values of conservation...[and contributing] to the demise of the ancient Maliseet way of life."¹²



Mary Jackson (born 1906), Sechelt Tribe, making a basket, 1988

David Neel (Kwagiutl, b. 1960)

Silver gelatin print, 407 x 508mm

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 3352319

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3352319

David Neel (b. 1960) comes from a line of traditional Kwagiutl visual artists on his father's side. In the late 1980s he began a portrait project entitled "*To Speak for Ourselves*": *Portraits of Chiefs and Elders* for an exhibition and book of the same name. His interest in breaking down Native stereotypes through this type of artistic action shows an awareness of the construction as well as concern over the pitfalls of what he calls "'vanishing race' photographs of Native people"¹³. Recognizing that we all live in a time of the created image, so that "if you do not create your own, someone will create it for you," Neel set out to photograph and interview elders, many of whom were the last witnesses to Aboriginal life before cars and gas-operated boats.¹⁴

This portrait of Mary Jackson (b. 1906) was acquired by the National Archives of Canada in 1991. The photograph shows her in everyday clothing, weaving a basket. Many photos in the series feature the subject wearing either everyday clothing or traditional regalia, but this example is special because it juxtaposes the subject's everyday life and routine with a traditional activity like basket weaving. These cultural differences are also accentuated by the Madonna figure tacked to the window frame, which opens out to woods in the background.



Kwagiutl Family Portrait, 1991

David Neel (Kwagiutl, b. 1960)

Serigraph, 71.0 x 56.7 cm

Library and Archives Canada/ MIKAN 2894527

http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2894527&rec_nbr_list=2894527

In Neel's *Kwagiutl Family Portrait* there is another type of juxtaposition between the everyday and the traditional, in that he has used a traditional form to portray himself, his three children, and their mother¹⁵.



Navigating by Our Grandmothers, 2000.

Rosalie Favell (Canadian, b. 1958)

Colour inkjet on cold press paper photograph, 118.5 x 86.7cm

Library and Archives Canada/MIKAN 3930735

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3930735

Rosalie Favell's (b. 1958) work often combines elements that relate to her Métis heritage to pop culture motifs and icons, but her *Navigating by Our Grandmothers* has an introspective quality that comes from her inclusion of family photographs. *Navigating by Our Grandmothers* is a digitally manipulated image that collages these photographs against a starry sky and features the text "my sister and I travelled between worlds navigating by our grandmothers." The relevance of Favell's identity as a First Nations woman is emphasized by her citing her grandmother, as her family did not discuss her Métis heritage growing up.¹⁶ The artist has also stressed that her grandmother "maintained pride in her Métis roots, and enthusiasm for modern life,"¹⁷ an attitude that Favell reflects in her artwork.

NOTES

¹ Lyman 19.

² Kennedy 4.

³ Deloria Jr. 11.

⁴ Sandeweiss 31.

⁵ Story.

⁶ Huneault 99.

⁷ Bethune.

⁸ Smith.

⁹ “Grey Owl”.

¹⁰ Bear Nicholas.

¹¹ Bear Nicholas.

¹² Bear Nicholas.

¹³ Neel 11.

¹⁴ Twigg.

¹⁵ Neel.

¹⁶ “Rosalie Favell”.

¹⁷ Favell.

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