

# NATIVE IDENTITY AND CHRISTIANITY: JANE ASH POITRAS' *HEAVEN AND HELL*

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(see images after text)

This essay explores the meanings of Jane Ash Poitras' mixed media work *Heaven and Hell* (2004), and its elements representing Native culture, assimilation, and Christianity. Poitras is always critically engaged with Aboriginal cultures, traditions and histories, trying to evaluate past events, and explore how they affect present Native identity.

An important Christian element in *Heaven and Hell* is the stamp from the Democratic Republic of São Tomé e Príncipe, a nation island in Central Africa, depicting Rembrandt's *Descent From the Cross* from 1634. The scene shows Christ being taken down from the cross after his crucifixion, and is the thirteenth of a total of sixteen events from the Passion of Christ, that precedes the Resurrection. The stamp has been glued onto a text written with Cree syllabics, which symbolizes Christianity's power over Native populations. Another element from this work that references Christian subject matter is the serpentine composition of the main photograph, formed by the mother holding the baby, who is interacting with the puppy. This composition mirrors Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* from ca. 1508. This painting features the Virgin Mary, sitting on her mother's lap, Saint Anne. The Virgin Mary is trying to hold an infant Jesus, while he is playing with a lamb, a symbol of his Passion and future suffering. In contrast to the significance of the lamb, the symbolism of the dog is positive in Native cultures. Dogs have been living with Native peoples for time immemorial, protecting

their homes, helping them hunt, and pulling heavy loads. Therefore, the presence of a puppy in this photograph from *Heaven and Hell* emphasizes the home environment, and the happiness and comfort related to it. Another work by Jane Ash Poitras including a photograph of a child and puppy is *Shaman's Pup*, an indicator of the closeness between Native peoples and dogs.

Both compositions in *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* and the central photograph in *Heaven and Hell* are fairly tight, and serpentine, forming a pyramid. Both Native and Christian mothers have a nostalgic look on their faces, as if anticipating their child's future suffering. In the case of Poitras' work the child's future suffering was the loss of a leg, and forced assimilation into European-Canadian Christian culture. Thus, the boy in these photographs is becoming a Native Christ, physically and psychologically tormented by Christian religion and European colonizers. Another work where Poitras deals with the forced assimilation process of Native communities into the western culture is *If Only We Could Have Our Stories Told* (2004). In this work, the main photograph is again a group picture of Natives, the women wearing residential school uniforms.

The main focus of *Heaven and Hell* is the central photograph of a mother with a child in her lap. Poitras painted over this large photograph, making the colors more vivid. The image is framed by various Native patterns, such as zig-zags, numerous dots, straight lines, and squares. These decorative forms had specific meanings in the past; for example, the zig-zags signified fire flames.<sup>1</sup> On the right side of the photograph is a blue strip with Arabic characters. Connecting the main photograph to the one at the bottom are figurative patterns: on the right triangular shapes reminding the viewer of teepees, on the left are two simplified drawings of igloos, and a

person. Overall, the effect of this frame is to strengthen the Native identity of the mother and child in this central image.

In contrast, the black and white group photograph of Native people and a Caucasian man and woman in the center is delineated by a simple golden frame. This image seems to be from the first half or the middle of the twentieth century, when Aboriginal peoples were forcibly experiencing a massive process of conversion to the Christian religion. Poitras drew a red “X” on the missionary’s forehead, connecting him to the young boy on the left of the photograph, with crutches, and whose face she circled with red paint. Missionaries were part of the process whereby children were taken from their home environment, and assimilation was forced onto them in residential schools. It is at this point that the depressing history of Native peoples surfaces in Poitras’ *Heaven and Hell*, in the juxtaposition of these two anonymous photographs. Moreover, contrasting these two images is the key to why the artist chose this title. Heaven is at home, where mother and child are together, while hell is colonization and forced assimilation. While the notions of heaven and hell exist in the Christian religion, they do not in native spirituality. Therefore, the title has a religious meaning, but, most importantly, it references the colonizing experience of Aboriginal peoples. Indicators of the specific identity of the Native people depicted in these two photographs are the anoraks worn by some men in the smaller image, this clothing being typical of Inuit people. Some of the women in this picture are wearing the same western dress, which indicates their presence in a residential school, where everybody wore the same uniform.

The background of *Heaven and Hell* is composed of two color fields, one that is predominantly red, and the other purple-blue, representative of modernist abstract influences on Poitras' work. The upper dark red color field with streaks of green and yellow has a balancing effect on the overall composition, because the block formed by the two photographs is not perfectly central. On the left side the viewer can observe a minimalist depiction of a seal, whose shape mirrors the one of the bird on the right side. Creating a visual connection between the two color fields is a brown deer. The purple-blue color field is dominated by various creatures, such as a yellow chipmunk, and a turquoise-blue scarab on the right side. The scarab, or dung beetle, an ancient Egyptian symbol, representing the rising sun, is associated with a protection against evil.<sup>2</sup> A yellow owl and a blue deer are depicted on the left side of the canvas. Inside the owl is drawn another creature that seems to be holding the main photograph of the mother and child. The owl is a powerful symbol in Native cultures. It is believed to possess superior wisdom, being a spirit bird that sees everything.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, there is a third drawing of a yellow star and red sphere, reminiscent of the sun/star symbol of the Mesopotamian deity Shamash, the god of the sun.<sup>4</sup> Shamash had the power of light over darkness and evil, becoming known as the god of justice.<sup>5</sup> This stencil-like drawing might also represent spirits of Native culture: the sky beings, like the star gods, the Sun, and the Moon.<sup>6</sup>

*Heaven and Hell* may also be explored from a biographical perspective, indicating Poitras' search for her Native identity. Considering Ernst Gombrich's notion of "likeness," this mixed media work is not just a portrait of the Native people featured in the photographs, but of the lost and found identity of Aborigines, like Poitras herself. According to Gombrich, "likeness" in portraits refers to compositions that form identity conceptually. Furthermore, a portrait is not just

a representation of a person but also a reflection of the artist in his or her art.<sup>7</sup> Orphaned at the age of six, when her Cree mother died of tuberculosis, the artist was adopted by an elderly German woman, of whom Poitras speaks dearly. However, her connection to the Cree community was completely severed, and she grew up in a western Catholic environment, reconnecting with her Cree relatives when she was thirty years old.<sup>8</sup> Poitras too was tormented by this assimilation process, and experienced verbal abuse because of her Native features: “Other kids,” the artist recalls, “threw stones at me, calling me ‘dirty Indian’.”<sup>9</sup>

However, as in most of Poitras’s works dealing with the colonization and assimilation of Native peoples, there is something overwhelmingly positive about *Heaven and Hell*. The vivid colors and joyful animals representing spirit helpers indicate the hope of renewal of Native people, who have been ravaged by western diseases, religion and lifestyles. In Native communities, shamans have spirit helpers, also called guardian spirits, usually taking the form of animals, who help them to connect with the spirit world.<sup>10</sup> In *Spirit Dogs* for example, Poitras depicted dogs as spirits together with a shaman. She posits artists as “modern-day shamans that (...) are used as mediums to communicate truths and visions,” believing that art can heal.<sup>11</sup> The artist explains: “artmaking (...) can be used to regenerate the spirit, the mind;” “as artists we act as visionary healers, bringing a psychic calm and confidence to the community by revitalizing and intensifying the notion of the world.”<sup>12</sup>



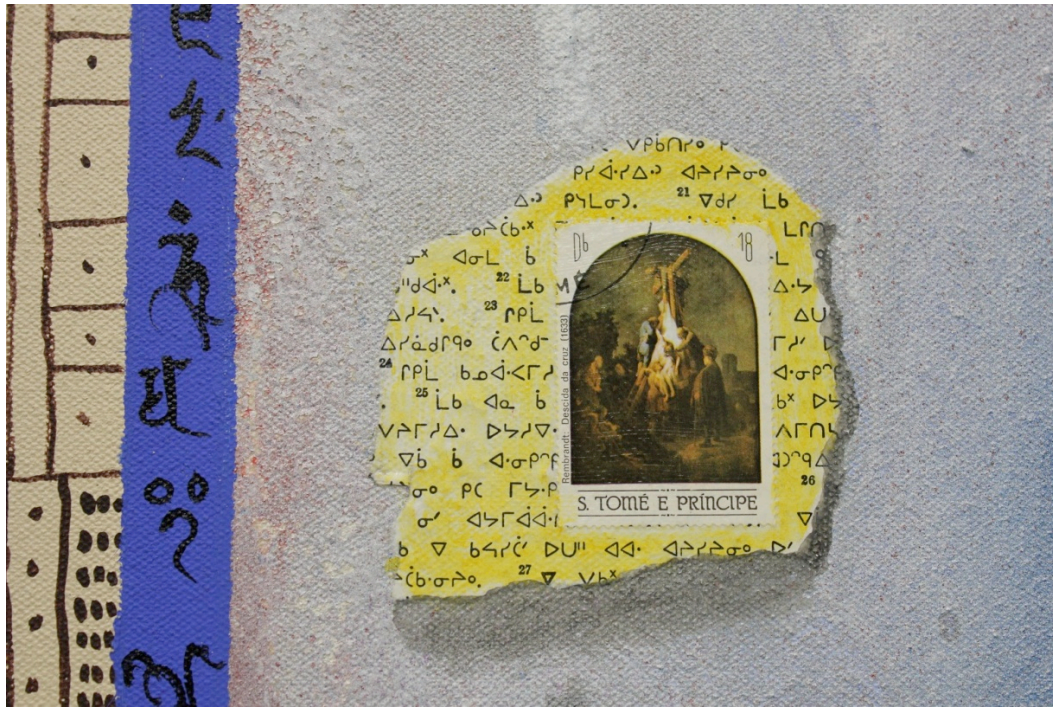
Heaven and Hell, 2004.

Jane Ash Poitras

Mixed media: printed papers, stamp, oil painting, guache and acrylic on canvas, 91.5 X 76.3 cm.

Potrait Gallery, Canada.

Photograph by Eliana Stratica-Mihail



Detail: Heaven and Hell, 2004.

Jane Ash Poitras

Mixed media: printed papers, stamp, oil painting, gouache and acrylic on canvas, 91.5 X 76.3 cm.

Potrait Gallery, Canada.

Photograph by Eliana Stratica-Mihail





The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne, c. 1508.

Leonardo da Vinci

Oil on wood, 168 X 112 cm.

Louvre, Paris.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:La\\_Vierge,\\_l%27Enfant\\_J%C3%A9sus\\_et\\_sainte\\_Anne,\\_by\\_Leonardo\\_da\\_Vinci,\\_from\\_C2RMF\\_retouched.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:La_Vierge,_l%27Enfant_J%C3%A9sus_et_sainte_Anne,_by_Leonardo_da_Vinci,_from_C2RMF_retouched.jpg)>.



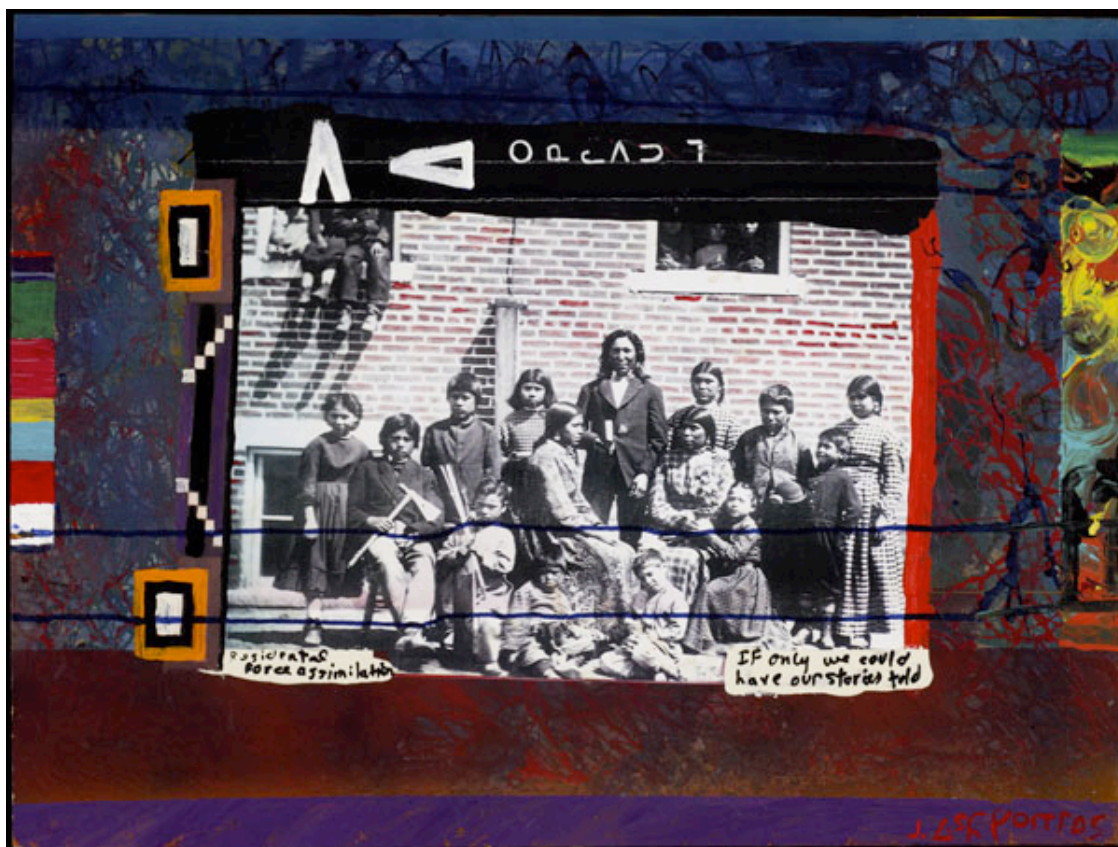


Shaman's Pup, n.d.

Jane Ash Poitras

Mixed Media on Canvas, 61 X 61 cm.

<<http://www.bearclawgallery.com/Paintings.aspx?PaintingImageID=2202&PaintingID=1600>>.



If Only We Could Have Our Stories Told, 2004.

Jane Ash Poitras

Mixed media: composite of photograph and paint on wood panel, 66 X 50.8 cm.

Portrait Gallery, Canada.

<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3949060](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3949060)>.



Spirit Dogs, n.d.

Jane Ash Poitras

Mixed media on canvas, 61 X 50.8 cm.

<<http://www.bearclawgallery.com/Paintings.aspx?PaintingImageID=2201&PaintingID=1599>>.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Leone Letson Kastner, *Spirit-Symbols in Native American Art* (Philomath: Ayers Mountain Press, 1992) 11.

<sup>2</sup> "Scarab," *Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc. (2011) 4 Dec. 2011 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/526649/scarab>>.

<sup>3</sup> Kastner, 12.

<sup>4</sup> This sign is also similar to the pentagram, a five-pointed star within a circle, a symbol of witchcraft with positive connotations, but also freemasons, and other pagan groups. Moreover, it has been employed by various ancient civilizations all over the world.

<sup>5</sup> "Shamash," *Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc. (2011) 3 Dec. 2011 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/538274/Shamash>>.

<sup>6</sup> Hartz, Paul R., Joanne O'Brien and Martin Palmer. *Native American Religions, Third Edition* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009) 24.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Brilliant, "The Limitations of Likeness," *Art Journal* 46:3 (1987): 172; and E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., Oxford, 1977: 122 and 123.

<sup>8</sup> Janet Clark, "Framing the Narrative," *Who Discovered the Americas: Recent Work by Jane Ash Poitras* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Art Gallery, 1993) 15.

<sup>9</sup> Gerald McMaster, "Jane Ash Poitras: An Indian in Paris," *Osopikahikiwak: Jane As Poitras and Rick Rivet* (Paris: Services culturels de l'Ambassade du Canada, 1999) 28.

<sup>10</sup> Shamans, present in Aboriginal communities all over the world, are messengers between the human and spirit worlds, helping members of their community treat illnesses affecting not just the physical body, but also the soul; and Hartz, 34.

<sup>11</sup> Hartz, 17-19; and Janet Clark, "Framing the Narrative," *Who Discovered the Americas: Recent Work by Jane Ash Poitras* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Art Gallery, 1993) 19.

<sup>12</sup> Clark, 11 and 29.

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<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/538274/Shamash>>.