

SEEKING THE SPIRIT WITHIN

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(see images after text)

The portrait sculpture *Our Future* (2005) by Woodland Cree artist Leo Arcand (b. 1951) is an example of First Nations sculpture that effectively mixes native and European artistic traditions to produce a hybrid style. Arcand is from the Alexander First Nations reservation in Northern Alberta. While Leo has always sketched and drawn from a very young age, soapstone did not become his medium of choice before 1991, when he was introduced to the art of stone carving. Arcand is deeply spiritual and this aspect of his character is visible in his approach to sculpture. He believes that there must be balance in life, a harmony between man and nature reflected in all things. In his own words, Arcand says: “I do not produce art, nor do I create it. I discover the spirit of each stone and together we decide its message.”¹

The Elders of his community and Woodland Cree traditional culture are the sources of his spiritual beliefs. *Our Future* draws inspiration from the Aboriginals’ long standing relationship with Mother Earth. The sculpture speaks of how Arcand wants “to learn something everyday, to be better today than yesterday, not just as an artist, but as a person.”² His holistic vision of life has led him to make few distinctions between art and life. For Arcand, both are in relation so that the traditions of his community can be passed on through his sculptures, just like his Elders passed on to him the Woodland Cree traditions and legends.

In North America, the Cree are one of the largest groups of Aboriginal people. From the beginning of European colonization, they participated to the fur trade, which explains their

westward migration over time, assisting hunters in their quest for fur. By the 18th century, the Woodland Cree were considered to be the principal middlemen between European settlers and the western tribes located past the prairies. As a consequence, the Woodland Cree culture has been substantially influenced by European culture over the centuries, adapting their clothing and other aspects of their lifestyle. As a people, they were always open to inter-tribal marriage which explains their large number today.

In Arcand's *Our Future* the left side of the face is a detailed carving of a man's features with one closed eye and long white hair made from horsehair hanging down the side of his head. In contrast the right side of the face is a flat recessed surface with a little piece of marble in the shape of a fetus in the hole of an open eye. On the top, as if emerging from the man's forehead, an eagle is perched, its beak pointing downwards. While traditionally Woodland Crees have recognized the spiritual relation between hunters and the spirit of each species they hunt, there is no established tradition of woodland Cree portraiture. The anthropomorphic nature of Arcand's sculptures comes from his own artistic direction rather than out of an evolving practice of portraits by Cree artists. The eagle is not an animal often represented in their culture, which mostly features animals they hunt such as deer and moose, but it is a recurrent element of his sculpture as can be seen in *Strength of Spirit*, another portrait with the top of the head morphing into an eagle. Generally speaking the eagle is often associated with the ability to see hidden truths, rising above the material and looking at the spiritual realm, his wings bringing protection and carrying prayers.³

Since Arcand uses the stone's original shape to determine the final result of his creation, it is interesting to relate his work to the traditional two phases of portraiture. The dual process of portraiture involves: the preparatory phase which consists of studying the subject and searching for ideas and inspiration; and the second phase which begins after the moment of inspiration and consist of the work's execution.⁴ Aspects of representation, such as stylistic or schematic decisions are influenced by the distortion and abstraction of the features. Arcand interestingly combines both phases by using the original shape of the stone as his inspiration; his schematic decisions originate not solely from his creative mind, but are instead mediations between himself and the raw material.

In this and other sculptures of the human face, Arcand distances himself from representational portraiture and departs from reality as modernist artists like Picasso, Brancusi or Miro did before him. Here, Arcand takes an interesting stand on the debate on the importance of external stimuli in a work of art.⁵ Arcand creates his portraits without referring to a live model, but his sculptures nevertheless have distinctive features since each piece of soapstone is different in shape. Therefore the stone itself acts as his model and his imagination determines the degree of abstraction and distortion of the portrait's features. Normally the model's features are the source of inspiration for the modification of the schema but for Arcand it is the raw material that is the source of his ideas, creating a collaborative work between nature and himself.

The meaning of the title *Our Future* remains somewhat obscure. There is however a clear reference to the passage of time. The fetus seems to symbolize the generations to come whereas the elder man depicted on the other side is the one who passes down the traditions to the younger

generation. Both are under the wing of the eagle, itself a symbol of spiritual truth. Together they represent a kind of trinity perhaps influenced by the Christian belief in the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Arcand's sculpture, until its acquisition by the Portrait Gallery of Canada, had little public viewing as his works have not been purchased by galleries or museums, despite their availability on the art market. Its presence in a national public collection provides the opportunity to discuss the meaning and significance of Leo Arcand's work and its relationship to First Nations art and culture.



Our Future

2005

Leo Arcand (Canadian, b. 1951)

Steatite, marble, horsehair, and steel, 51 x 23 x 35 cm

http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3932528.



Leo Arcand

<<http://aboutcanada.ca/store.html?showProdByArtist=1&artistId=245>>.



Strength of Spirit

Leo Arcand

Soapstone, 16 x 10 x 4 Inches

Bearclaw Gallery

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¹ Bearclaw Gallery, 26 Nov. 2011

<<http://www.bearclawgallery.com/SculptureCategories.aspx?SculptureCategoryID=11>>.

² Bearclaw Gallery.

³ James Hall, *Dictionary of subjects and symbols in art*, 2nd Ed., Boulder: Westview Press (2008): 71.

⁴ Vladimir J. Konecni, « Portraiture: An Experimental Study of the Creative Process, » *Leonardo* 24:3 (1991): 325.

⁵ Konecni, 327.