

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

LESLIE DAWN, *National Visions, National Blindness: Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006, 446 p., index.

Norval Morriseau (1932-2007) was an Ojibwa shaman known as Copper Thunderbird. In the Canadian art world he was Picasso of the North. He led an unusual, if not always charmed, life and died in a Toronto hospital of complications arising from Parkinson's disease on 4 December 2007. He had not painted any new work since 2003 and had lived with his adopted family, Gabe and Michelle Vadas in Nanaimo, British Columbia, for the last dozen years. His passing is mourned by family and friends and many others from within both the Native and non-Native cultural communities.

Morriseau achieved national attention by changing the way Canadians looked at Native art. His first solo exhibition was held at the Pollock Gallery in Toronto in 1962 and was followed by a major mural for Expo '67. His artwork was unconventional in these early years because it was secular but drew inspiration from traditional Native spirituality. This iconoclasm drew much censorship from Native elders. He received the Order of Canada in 1978, established the Thunderbird School of Shamanistic Arts and founded the Woodland style of painting in 1979, and was honoured as the only Canadian painter exhibited at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris for the celebration of the French Bicentennial in 1989. Most recently, in 2005 and 2006, the National Gallery of Canada held retrospectives of his work, which have since travelled to the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City. Morriseau was the first Native Canadian painter to achieve national and hence international recognition. Leslie Dawn's narrative helps explain why this was so. While the story originates with colonialism, Dawn begins his saga in 1920 with the formation of the Group of Seven.

There are clear protagonists and antagonists in Dawn's story. The battle is between Native groups in British Columbia and Alberta who were struggling to maintain their lands and heritage in the face of and behind the back of a hostile and colonizing Canadian state. Dawn's main protagonists are the Gitksan from the Upper Skeena River Valley of British Columbia, and the Stoney from the foothills of Banff's Rocky Mountains. Their antagonists are formidable. All held key positions within Canada's emerging cultural field. They include Eric Brown, director at the National Gallery from 1910 until 1938/39; and Duncan Scott, Deputy Superintendent at the Department of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1931. Of

Scott during his tenure, Dawn remarks that he wanted “to eliminate anything that could be defined as Indian in Canada as well as to fight unresolved land claims and to reduce the allocations of reserve lands” (118). Dawn claims that Brown’s mandate was to “underwrite a unique national art founded in landscape ... (and that in so doing he) ... took a concentrated interest in the painters who would later officially form the Group of Seven in 1920” (11). Scott, who was also a poet of some repute, often collaborated and funded the research of the ethnologist Marius Barbeau. Barbeau was trained at Oxford and joined the Geological Survey of Canada under Edward Sapir in 1910. Barbeau and Sapir were the first full-time anthropologists in the country. There is a large supporting cast of artists (e.g., Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Emily Carr, Langdon Kihn), and business interests at the Canadian Pacific Railway (e.g., John Murray Gibbon) and the Canadian Bank of Commerce (e.g., Bryon Edmond Walker), among many others. There is a wealth of detail on all of them.

The structure of the narrative is organized around eleven chapters, which are both free-standing case studies and inter-related vignettes on the entire period that runs from 1920 to 1932. The main topic, viewed from different angles, is the attempted exclusion of Native peoples and their arts and culture from the mainstream of Canadian life by the Anglophone dominated post-colonial cultural community and state administration. The opening three chapters describe Eric Brown’s orchestration of the rise to prominence of the Group of Seven. This part of the story is both familiar and strange. Rather than trotting out the old refrain of how the Group’s painting of Canada’s “empty” wilderness was innovative and the truly first movement of modern art in Canada, Dawn shows how this was a social construction engineered by Eric Brown. The next four chapters form the core of the book. Here Dawn demonstrates how Brown, Barbeau and Scott manipulated and encountered resistance to their overlapping and sometime contradictory schemes. In chapter nine, Dawn’s story comes to a climax. The National Gallery launches the “Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern” exhibition in 1927. Native art now begins its ascent, while the Group’s work goes into eclipse, and Emily Carr is “discovered.” Chapters ten and eleven are devoted to Barbeau and Carr. At the end of the era, Native land claims are being heard, Barbeau returns to documenting and defending Quebecois folklore and culture, Scott retires in 1931, and Brown dies in 1938. And so, with World War II on the horizon, Leslie Dawn’s rendition of this first stage of Canadian cultural history comes to a close. In conclusion, Dawn suggests that there are two important and the unintended consequences of this period: the recognition of the continuity of Native cultures, and hence the creation of a more inclusive and pluralistic notion of Canada.

National Visions, National Blindness is a mix of cultural anthropology, social and political history and art history and charts new territory by bringing together previously autonomous discourses and empirical data. It is a transdisciplinary study that is bedevilled by the weakness of all such studies: specialists in any one of the research areas might find some of the coverage cursory or littered with significant gaps. For those willing to overlook such issues, Dawn’s contribution is a meticulous documentation

of the injustices of the time as well as a highly plausible challenge to the accepted canon. He is well placed to make such an argument as his intellectual history, MA in the History of Art and PhD in Art History, mirrors the transdisciplinarity of the text. *National Visions, National Blindness* is a well researched, sensitive, unconventional and thought-provoking kaleidoscope. Norval Morriseau would be very pleased.

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