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# Cross-Cultural Relationships: The Work of Canadian Artist Mildred Valley Thornton

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A Thesis in The Department of Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

September 1999

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# ABSTRACT

Cross-Cultural Relationships:
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An exploration of Thornton's work reveals an attempt by a woman to push the boundaries of her own creativity, as well as the limitations and restrictions embedded in a society that sought to delineate the space between aboriginal and Euro-Canadian people along racial lines. Her written and visual material read together provide an example of an alternative to traditional iconography and stereotypical representations of Native people. Yet, her work cannot be removed from the context of art production by Euro-Canadian artists of the early 20th century, who were interested in "salvaging" aboriginal traditions and customs through their brushes and palettes, sometimes with total disregard for the actual people. This multi-faceted and conflicting process is what defines Thornton's work, and provides an opportunity to explore issues of cultural appropriation as well as the complexity of human relations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has been as much about the personal as it has been about researching, learning and writing. It is also about myself and my family, and how we have worked together to gather information, exchange ideas and retell a story that belongs to all of us. I would like to acknowledge those friends, family members and colleagues who offered their insight, their time and their expertise, which have made this thesis possible. For her unending support and the incredible perspective and focus she brought to my analysis, I would like to thank Dr. Joan Acland, my thesis supervisor. I would also like to thank my thesis committee, Dr. Janice Helland and Dr. Jean Belisle, whose interest and encouragement also helped sustain my will. One of the most important and fulfilling aspects of the Master's Program at Concordia has been the friends I made. I want to thank Lynn Beavis, Karen De Lutis, Cathy Mattes, Rhonda Meier and Terry Provost.

When I began this project on Mildred Valley Thornton, I went to the first archivists I knew, those who had kept pieces of the family history alive: my Grandmother and Grandfather, Monica and Tom Evoy; my Great Uncle and Aunt, Gord and Audrey Stinson; my Uncle, Dale Evoy and my cousin Jack Thornton. I am eternally greatful for their patience, care, trust and understanding. Thank you. I also want to extend a special thanks to Reg Ashwell and Anthony Westbridge, who both understood and encouraged me in my work and believed, as much as I did, how important it was to explore Mildred Valley Thornton's work. Finally I would like to thank my Mom and Dad, Ann and Lance Evoy, and my sister, Natasha. I have always been able to count on them for anything. I love them and thank them.

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This thesis is in loving memory of my Grandmother,

Monica Claire Evoy

# Introduction

> She is recomposing, reaffirming a lengthy, told story, recalling it; calling it back.
>
> Jane Urquhart, *Away* (1993)

This thesis is centered on the artist Mildred Valley Thornton (1890-1967), a prolific painter, writer, art critic and community activist. As I travelled across Canada researching this project, visiting public archives, libraries and museums, sifting through old letters, newspaper clippings and historical documents, I realized how little I really knew about this woman, who was after all my great great aunt. I had heard many stories and anecdotes about "Aunt Millie" from family members, and had the privilege of viewing several of her paintings up close. I had always been very curious about her life, and asked myself: Why did she decide to become an artist and leave her home in rural Ontario? Why did she choose to paint Native people?[1] Fortunately, information was available, and with a little time and effort a story began to unfold, revealing a life full of meaning and hardships, joys and disappointments.

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[1]Many terms have been developed to refer to the aboriginal peoples of Canada. The changing terminology -from "Indians" to "First Nations people"- reflects the changing political and economic reality of Canada from the arrival of Europeans on the North American continent to Canada's emergence as a modern nation-state, as well as the progressive and persistent demands of aboriginal peoples for self-government. I am using the terms First Nations people, Native people, aboriginal people, First Peoples, and indigenous people throughout this discussion to include all the people who are identified as such under the Indian Act and who self-identify as Native, including the Métis.

This project is the retelling of a story, pieced together with the help of many people. As is the case with many women artists, Thornton has been effaced, or written out of art historical accounts.[2] My intention in this study is to contribute to the many efforts made in the last few decades to rewrite women and other marginalized art producers into a more inclusive history of art in Canada, and provide a glimpse of certain aspects of Mildred Valley Thornton's unique work. I will focus in particular on her representations of Native people and how these were influenced by and perpetuated colonial discourses and popular Euro-Canadian[3] allegories about aboriginal people.

Originally from a small farming community in South Western Ontario, Thornton also lived in Regina and Vancouver. She spent forty years as a professional artist and was continuously engaged in the development of viable and vibrant local artistic communities. She became art critic for the *Vancouver Sun*, a position she held from 1944 to 1959, and was involved in numerous artistic and public organizations, including the Women's Art Association of Saskatchewan, the Vancouver Poetry Society, and the Canadian Author's Association.

Despite Thornton's long artistic career, there have been no comprehensive

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[2]See for example Griselda Pollock, Rozsika Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Routledge and Kagan Paul, 1981); and Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[3]I have chosen the terms Euro-Canadian and Euro-American to refer to White people of European descent living in North America. These terms also have their limitations, since they exclude people who were neither of aboriginal nor European ancestry from the discussion. However, for the sake of convenience I will limit the terminology to these "incomplete" references.

texts produced about her work, and what little published material does exist is sporadic and difficult to locate. I hope to begin to rectify this through the publication of an extended bibliography, including references to primary source material, such as old newspaper articles, Thornton's personal correspondence and unpublished documents. Publications including visual material are also scarce. Aside from her book, *Indian Lives and Legends*,[4] there are only a handful of catalogues which provide images of her work. One notable exception is the catalogue *Mildred Valley Thornton (1890-1967)*, published by Butler Galleries in Vancouver.[5]

Thornton became interested in the lives and cultures of First Nations people at an early age, travelling across Western Canada on numerous occasions, producing hundreds of portraits of the people she encountered, as well as paintings of the places she visited. She also wrote about these experiences in newspaper articles and her book, *Indian Lives and Legends*. She advocated a recognition of the contributions First Nations people and their ancestors made to Canadian society at a time when government and much of the rest of the Canadian population were ignoring Native communities struggling with endemic poverty and arduous social conditions. Thornton's self-appointed role as scribe and visual "recorder" of the histories of First Nations people led many non-Natives to view her as a spokesperson for Native people, and an "authority" on their cultures and traditions. Thornton assumed this role willingly, and over time her work became more of a vocation, and an attempt

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[4]Mildred Valley Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1966).

[5]*Mildred Valley Thornton, FRSA* (Vancouver: Butler Galleries, 1985).

to document the lives of Native people in Western Canada.

Many North American artists, of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, whose work focused on depicting aboriginal people, were attracted to what they perceived as "exotic" subject matter. White artists and their audiences were mostly interested in romanticized, nostalgic representations, that portrayed Native people through popular stereotypes. In recent years, many First Nations artists, writers, academics and political activists have raised arguments about cultural appropriation, and the importance of re-examining historical accounts in order to unveil power relationships, issues of oppression and exploitation, and the silencing of voices of First Nations people.[6]

Thornton's representations of Native people can be interpreted from different perspectives. They invite different readings. On the one hand, they can be described as perpetuating stereotypical preconceptions Euro-Canadians held towards aboriginal people, such as the perception that Native cultures were "primitive," or "savage." On another level her work can be read as an attestation that Native people were actively struggling to preserve their cultures and communities by adapting to social and economic changes, and the challenges of co-existing with Canadians of

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[6]There have been many important texts written by First Nations writers, scholars and artists on these issues. See for example Loretta Todd, "Notes on appropriation," *Parallelogramme*, 16.1 (Summer 1990): 24-33; Gerald McMaster, Lee-Ann Martin, eds, *INDIGENA: Contemporary Native Perspectives* (Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992); Gerald McMaster, *Edward Poitras: Canada XLVI Biennale di Venezia* (Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1995); and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "If art is the answer, what is the question? -some queries raised by First Nations' visual culture in Vancouver," *RACAR*, XXI.1-2 (1994): 101-110.

European descent.

An examination of Thornton's work, offers the possibility of a break with the specular structure of dominant narratives and their scopic economy. It can be interpreted as being, neither completely outside of, nor entirely within the boundaries of hegemonic discourses. Thornton remains on a trajectory across variable praxis of difference, her location, or unlocation, is necessarily the shifting and contextual interval between arrested boundaries.

bell hooks describes this location between boundaries as the "margin."[7] Marginality is identified as more than a site of deprivation, it is also the site of radical possibility; a space of resistance. hooks talks about these locations (or radical standpoints) as a place where women and other marginalized groups can participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practices and begin the processes of re-vision and transformation.[8]

To suggest that Thornton was producing representations of First Nations people which differed from the stereotypical imagery of other Euro-Canadian artists of the period does not mean that she should be withdrawn from discussions on cultural appropriation, nor does it mean that issues, such as colonization, imperialism and racism need not be addressed. On the contrary, the challenge has

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[7]bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990) 149.

[8]hooks 145. It is important to note that hooks refers to this site of resistance in the context of struggles faced by Black women and men in particular. I have borrowed hooks' definition of the margin to refer to the possibility of a reading of Thornton's work which is situated outside of dominant paradigms.

been to bring these aspects together in the same discussion.

The methodological approaches I have chosen to work with are feminist criticism and postcolonial theory. Both have shaped the research process and provide the framework for this exploration of Thornton's artistic production and contribute to an analysis of the social and historical contexts she was working in.

A feminist paradigm offers a specific location from which to study the production and reception of art. Feminist critiques of the discipline of Art History problematize notions of the self, of woman, of the subject, arguing that these are not essences, the pre-social sources of meaning, but constructions in social and psychic space.[9] Some feminists are interested in the historical recovery of data about women producers and aim at piercing cultural and ideological limitations, revealing the biases and inadequacies not simply with regard to the question of women artists, but in the formulation of an understanding of the discipline as a whole. Art historian Griselda Pollock writes:

> [F]eminist interventions in the spaces of representation have begun to qualify and differentiate the feminine bodies fabricated in culture's interfacing hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality and age... The freedom here is not imaginary self-realization within the confines of the canvas, but the register of concrete struggles on and beyond the battlefield of representation.[10]

I believe that the production of texts and analyses concerning women producers is

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[9]Griselda Pollock, "Painting, feminism, history," *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, eds Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992) 145.

[10]Pollock, "Painting, feminism, history" 153.

vital, not only as a means of understanding the significance of the processes by which women's art is dismissed and undermined in Western[11] society, but also in order to provide people with alternative images to traditional iconography.

Certain Western feminist perspectives evolving out of the early feminist movement in the 1960's and 70's have been criticized by Black women and Native women for essentializing identity categories such as "woman," which is talked about as an all-inclusive, homogeneous category, yet has traditionally been defined according to the ideals and conditions of White middle-class women. These ethnocentric biases by Western feminists failed to take into account the specificity of race and class in their analyses of women's oppression. These approaches ultimately limited the scope of feminist debates in Western circles, excluding issues specific to women from the developing world and visible minority groups. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has written that she perceives the object of her own investigation of feminism and critical theory to be not only the history of "Third World Women" or their testimony but also the production, through great European theories, often by way of literature (she cites both Marx and Freud sa examples), of the colonial object.[12]

Postcolonial theory is the other methodological approach which has framed

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[11]By "Western" or the "West" I am referring to European and North American industrialized countries, which are frequently placed in opposition to "Eastern" regions, generally defined as the "Orient," the "Third World," "non-industrialized" or "under-developed" countries.

[12]Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 81.

this discussion of Thornton's work. Homi K. Bhabha defines postcolonialism in these terms:

> By postcolonial we mean a social criticism that bears witness to those unequal processes of representation by which the historical experience of the once colonized comes to be framed in the West.[13]

Postcolonial theorists emphasize the importance of maintaining a critical awareness of colonialism's ideological effects, and the creation of readings and counter-discourses which question not only dominant narratives, but also the concrete ways colonialism and oppression affected people's daily lives.

Postcolonialism describes a remarkably heterogeneous set of subject positions, professional fields, and critical enterprises. It addresses issues of representation and interpretation, colonization and imperialism, racism, sexism, poverty, marginalization, dislocation and appropriation. Postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha, Spivak, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Stuart Hall and Cornel West, profoundly question essentialist thinking by pointing to the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts. They suggest that what are presented as historical "truths" (by many Western artists and writers), are in fact inherently partial and incomplete stories (fictions), which silence incongruent voices, or translate the reality of others. In the essay "The new cultural politics of difference," author Cornel West describes the emergence of what he terms a new politics of difference, which alludes to some of the major focal points of postcolonial analysis. He writes:

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[13]Homi K. Bhabha, quoted in *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*, eds. Duran and Duran (New York: State University Press, 1995) 107.

> Distinctive features of the new cultural politics of difference are to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular; and to historicize, contextualize and pluralize by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing.[14]

Shaped by postcolonial and feminist approaches, my intention is to explore Thornton's work, in particular her representations of First Nations people, and how they raise issues of cultural appropriation and illustrate the dynamics of power relationships between the artist and aboriginal people.

On a personal level, the following quote by Jeanette Armstrong encouraged me to explore several of my own motivations and assumptions about aboriginal art and cultural expressions. Armstrong wrote:

> Imagine how you as writers from the dominant society might turn over some of the rocks in your own garden for examination... Imagine writing in honesty, free of the romantic bias about the courageous "pioneering spirit" of colonialist practices and imperialist process. Imagine interpreting for us your own people's thinking towards us, instead of interpreting for us, our thinking, our lives and our stories. We wish to know, and you need to understand, why it is that you want to own our stories, our art, our beautiful crafts, our ceremonies, but you do not appreciate or wish to recognize that these things of beauty arise out of the beauty of our people.[15]

The first chapter outlines the historical context Thornton was working in, and her relationship to traditional art historical narratives. The effects of

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[14]Cornel West, "The new cultural politics of difference," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990) 19.

[15]Jeanette Armstrong, quoted in McMaster and Martin 17.

colonization and the ensuing entrenchment of stereotypical preconceptions about First Nations people are examined through the art of other North American artists, George Catlin (1796-1872) and Paul Kane (1810-1871), also producing representations of Native people. Thornton's work is discussed in relation to the art production of these artists, pointing to issues of power dynamics between artist and subject matter, the ownership of cultural imagery and First Nations resistance to White artists self-appointed role as cultural custodians of their heritage.

The second chapter focuses more particularly on Thornton as a writer, community organizer and public figure, and how these occupations influenced her approach and her work as an artist. Thornton's experience is presented as an alternative approach to traditional notions about art production. The analysis is framed within a feminist paradigm which seeks to unveil the reality of the circumstances Thornton and other women art producers such as Emily Carr (1871-1945) were working in, and how they struggled to obtain legitimacy in an environment that was often hostile to women artists.

The final chapter explores Thornton's artistic production, focusing on her "Collection" of paintings of Native people, encompassing over two hundred and fifty portraits, water colours and other works. A discussion of Thornton's lifelong project examines some of the motivations surrounding the creation of what she considered to be a visual record of aspects of aboriginal cultures and Native elders and leaders from various communities across Western Canada. Thornton's unique approach to her work and the development of her on-the-spot painting technique

are described through the examination of several of Thornton's portraits. Issues of appropriation, as well as an exploration of notions of hybridity are also woven into the discussions around the portraits.

# Chapter I

## History and Interpretation

> What is produced, written about, talked about, painted and described, adds up to being a story; an open-ended narrative that fluctuates and is transformed depending on who is doing the talking as well as who is listening.
>
> Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989)

In this chapter I situate Mildred Valley Thornton's art practice within the social, economic, and political contexts of the early 20th century. Examining ideological conceptions and social values of that period infuses her work with particular historical meaning. Thornton is mostly recognized for her paintings of aboriginal people. This theme was taken up by many Euro-American and Euro-Canadian artists, and was extremely popular in the 19th century and the early 20th century. Native people were thought to be part of a "vanishing race," which artists attempted to "capture" on canvas. Artists such as American George Catlin and Canadian Paul Kane, were primarily interested in what they perceived to be "romantic" and "exotic" subject matter. Both were referred to as "authorities" on Native cultures and traditions. They produced hundreds of paintings, sketches, and written accounts about their travels to Native communities, and collected samples of Native art. In recent years, First Nations artists and writers have raised questions about issues of cultural appropriation, forcing art historians and others to re-examine the roles of White artists who claimed a form of ownership over the cultures of

aboriginal people.

History involves interpretation. The way historical events are talked about, illustrated and envisioned are based on subjective, and often self-serving interpretations, which are embedded in power relations. In other words, historical "truths" are influenced by who has the power to recount a particular version of history.[16] In the West, culture is often presented as enduring, traditional and edifying, rather than contingent, disputed, syncretic and dynamic. For example, Paul Kane's popular text *Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America*,[17] recounts his travels to Native communities across Western Canada. It was written from the stand-point of the artist himself, yet was interpreted by White readers as an important historical archive on the lives and cultures of First Nations people.[18]

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[16]Michel Foucault described his own interpretation of history as fiction. In other words, his analysis disturbed what was previously considered immobile; fragmented what was thought unified; showed the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself (reference in Lynn Hunt, *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 8). Other contemporary writers and historians have also defined their analyses and (hi)stories along these lines. See for example Lynn Hunt's work previously mentioned; Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Gilane Tawadros, "Beyond the boundary: The work of three black women artists in Britain," *Third Text* 8\9 (Autumn-Winter 1989): 121-150.

[17]Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America* (1859; Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1996).

[18]Many Western historians and anthropologists relied on the written and visual representations of Euro-Canadian and Euro-American artists such as Paul Kane for their studies of aboriginal people. Their renditions were often interpreted to be more "authentic" and "accurate" than accounts by First Nations people themselves. See for example Marius Barbeau, *The Downfall of Temlahan* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1973). Barbeau refers to the work of artists Emily Carr, Langdon Kihn and Edwin Holgate. See also Diamond Jenness, *The Indians of Canada* (1932; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), which uses Paul Kane's work to illustrate the different aboriginal peoples of Canada.

Homogenizing interpretations of historical events such as Kane's, present a contained and controlled version of the past. It is important that these historical versions be revealed as partial truths and incomplete stories. It should be possible, through analysis and political practice, to revisit history and retrieve stories and people that have been marginalized and forgotten, while simultaneously exploring the social, political, economic and ideological factors which have contributed to their exclusion. There has always been resistance to dominant ideological paradigms; a plethora of heterogeneous voices which represent multiple testimonies and experiences. George Erasmus, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations between 1986 and 1991, stated:

> It's really time for some change. It's really time that the European people and their decendants, and the rest that are here, that are now Canadians, seriously begin to address the basic relationship they have with this land and the people who were here first... Why can we not have a situation here where Native people have enough land, and enough control over their lives, that they can have some dignity?[19]

Revealing the complexities and fragmentation of historical accounts is a means of exploding traditional art historical discourses and practices whose exclusionary criteria have denied marginalized art producers access to forums of discussion, thereby limiting the scope of serious debates about art and art practices. Many artists, including Native artists, have been discriminated against, refused recognition and denied access to resources and financial support because of their race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or other "differences." These limitations have

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[19]George Erasmus, quoted in McMaster and Martin 8-9.

worked to alienate these individuals or groups, contributing to a sense of isolation and frustration. A means of reversing exclusionary structures imposed by the dominant canon is through an interrogation of the ways contemporary economic, political and ideological processes, as well as historical factors, such as colonization and imperialism, have sustained particular social divisions between dominant and marginalized groups. Once this is understood, it then becomes possible to move beyond the limitations of these forms of thinking and imagine new ways of describing and interacting with one another.

Mildred Valley Thornton is an historical figure who has been marginalized in art historical accounts. She was a well known and respected artist in the mid-20th century, particularly in Western Canada, with important ties to the art communities in Regina in the 1920's and 30's, and in Vancouver in the 1940's and 50's. She worked as a free-lance journalist, and as full-time art critic for the *Vancouver Sun* between 1944 and 1959. She was also a member of numerous artistic and cultural organizations: she was on the Board of Directors of the Community Arts Council in Vancouver (c1940), and was a member of the Art Historical and Scientific Society under which the Vancouver Museum was operated. Yet, she has been excluded from texts and discussions about Canadian art producers.[20]

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[20]Canadian art historians, Dennis Reid and J. Russel Harper have written important historical texts on art production in Canada. Their works are frequently relied on as references by scholars and researchers. Neither Reid's book, entitled *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), nor Harper's, entitled *Painting in Canada: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966) mention Thornton's work. Maria Tippett's study on Canadian women art producers, called *By a Lady: Celebrating Three Centuries of Art by Canadian Women* (Toronto: Viking Books,

There are different opinions and reasons given for Thornton's absence from art historical accounts. The first, is the fact that she was a woman producing art during a time when women were discouraged from undertaking what were considered to be "male" oriented professions outside of the home. Many women artists had to struggle for scant recognition, which, more often than not, did not extend beyond their death.[21]

Secondly, Thornton was interested in First Nations cultures, which is reflected in the hundreds of portraits she produced of Native people. As I outline in chapter three, her imagery of Native people did not sit comfortably within the confines of the romanticized, exotic representations of aboriginal people that traditionally appealed to Euro-Canadian audiences of the early 20th century. At the same time, although Thornton benefitted from the support of both Native and non-Native critics during her lifetime, transformations within Canadian society would eventually open up the political spectrum to an increasingly vocal aboriginal population, intent on representing themselves. For instance, the Second World War introduced a change in attitudes towards aboriginal people, who, despite the fact that they did not enjoy the same voting privileges as other Canadian citizens, enlisted in proportionately higher numbers than any other segment of the general

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1992) does not refer to Thornton either.

[21]Many (feminist) art historians have documented the absence of women artists from traditional (art) historical texts. See for example Pollock and Parker; and Pollock, "Painting, feminism, history," in *Destabilizing Theory*, where she discusses how leading modern art critic Clement Greenberg dismisses artist Helen Frankenthaler's influence on American avant garde painting in the 1950's and 60's (162).

population.[22] By 1960 all aboriginal people were granted the right to vote,[23] and in the 1970's and 80's, Native communities were gaining strength through political and legal battles with the Canadian government over land claims and issues of self-government. Aboriginal artists and cultural workers, such as Alex Janvier (b.1935) and Daphne Odjig (b.1919), were becoming increasingly recognized as agents and representatives of their own cultures within Euro-Canadian society, rendering Thornton's representations increasingly problematic.

I want to emphasize that Thornton's work can be read in many different ways. Through an exploration of Thornton's approach what will hopefully become apparent are the complexities and multiple layers of her work and the realization that she cannot simply be slotted into existing discourses of art.

Postcolonial writers have devised subversive strategies aimed at displacing hegemonic narratives. These include the incorporation of multiple voices, as well as the adoption of non-traditional literary and discursive methods.[24] Language, especially written language, has frequently been identified as an important site of struggle by marginalized groups. Within Western culture, the written word has been described as the ultimate, normal terminus of thought, regarded by many as the most credible and authoritative expressive act, dismissing other forms of expression,

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[22]Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992) 329.

[23]For a description of segments of the Native population who had voting rights before 1960, see Dickason 400.

[24]For a beautiful example of this see bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

such as oral histories, dance, art and rituals, as inadequate or less accurate means of transmitting experience and knowledge.[25] Anthropologist James Clifford claims that in Western culture spoken words and deeds are assumed to be transient, whereas writing endures. He reminds us that in the West "the passage from oral to literate is a potent recurring story of power, loss and corruption."[26]

Interweaving both poetry and theory in the text, a strategy employed by many postcolonial theorists, is a way of renegotiating what are considered to be acceptable theoretical practices.[27] Creating new spaces from which to speak is an effective way of subverting dominant narratives and acknowledging the contingency of meaning. Theory loses its dogmatic quality once it is used along with different forms of writing (poetry, fiction, storytelling, songs and so forth). A radical questioning of the world can begin with the writing process itself. Author and film-maker Trinh T. Minh-ha writes:

> I see the interaction of the theoretical language and poetical language as capable of creating a new space from which to speak. Narratives can shift back and forth between being informational, reflective or analytical, and being emotional, trivial, absurd or anecdotal.[28]

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[25]Jamake Highwater, *Dance: Rituals and Experience* (New York: Dance Horizons Books; Princeton Book Company, 1978) 21.

[26]James Clifford, "On ethnographic allegory," *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 118.

[27]For an example of this, see Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[28]Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed* (London: Routledge, 1992) 172-173.

The incorporation of multiple voices into the text offers a more comprehensive understanding of issues being addressed, by displacing the image of "author as God." The authority and presumed objectivity of the author (the "I," in this case myself) is thereby questioned and undergoes a form of scrutiny by the reader.[29] In its place arises a "sentence-thinker"[30] or storyteller, who draws on the experiences and resources of the people s/he is writing to/about.

My own reformulation of the practices of postcolonial writers involves the reconstruction of a story, the story of the life and work of Mildred Valley Thornton, described through the incorporation of illustrations, photos, articles, poems, interviews and quotes, which in many ways speak for themselves. I like to think of this study as being analogous to a "scrapbook"; bits and pieces, scraps, brought together, eventually forming a broader picture, yet never quite filling in all the voids and gaps. Inevitably, this story will be retold, as it has already been recounted in the past, perhaps drawing on very different sources. A scrapbook can always be modified, new images added to existing ones and covering up others. This method illustrates the possibility of a story being told in different ways. The

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[29]For an interesting example of a more transparent approach, see Jane Miller's chapter "Imperial Seductions," in *Seductions: Studies in Reading and Culture* (London: Virago Press, 1990) 108-135. Miller uses divergent voices in order to introduce and explain issues such as imperialism, racism, historical and material oppression, sexism, and so forth. The text shifts from the voice of Emily Brontë, to Edward Said, and finally Toni Morrison. All the while interspersed with observations by Miller herself, as well as other theorists (Gramsci, Lacan and Bakhtin, to name a few). The author's subjectivity is never hidden behind an "objective," unifying discourse.

[30]Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other* 17.

outcome, ideally, is the creation of a collage comprised of a multitude of perspectives all pointing to different meanings.

## Historical Constructions

> If culture is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal and emergent. Representation and explanation -both by insiders and outsiders- is implicated in this emergence.
>
> James Clifford (1986)

Mildred Valley Thornton laboured for over thirty years, compiling a written and visual narrative of First Nations traditions and cultures from the Northwest Coast of British Columbia and Southern regions of the Prairies. She produced over two hundred portraits, mainly of Native elders from various communities, as well as large oil paintings and watercolours depicting ceremonies and rituals she had witnessed. She wrote countless articles in journals and newspapers, eventually publishing a book based in part on the stories and family histories transmitted to her by the people she painted, and about her experiences travelling to different Native communities. She set out to produce what she believed to be a "lasting record" or archive of the histories of Native people in Western Canada. Thornton wrote: "I am filled with gratitude that I was privileged to do this work at the last possible time that anyone could do it, recording a colourful phase and era of

Canadian history which is all but over now."[31]

Thornton's representations of aboriginal people are considered here in the context of existing Euro-Canadian perceptions and beliefs about the place of Native people in Canadian society. For example, why were so many North American artists, such as George Catlin and Paul Kane, as well as Thornton, interested in creating a pictoral record of the lives of indigenous peoples?; and, as writer and artist Gerald McMaster asks: "What were the effects of colonialism in the construction of the identity of self and Other?"[32]

## Colonization

> The first group to be racialized and subordinated in the colonization of Canada was the Native people.
>
> Roxana Ng (1993)

Colonization involves the domination, or attempted domination, of one group over another, through the implementation of a wide range of unequal social, economic and political relationships. In the Canadian context the colonizing forces were the French and later the British, who imposed a power structure based on their own economic and political needs. Typically, indigenous populations saw large proportions of their lands expropriated, and colonial administrations facilited the

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[31]Thornton xiv.

[32]McMaster 22.

commercial enterprise of fellow expatriates at the expense of local populations. Contemporary Canadian historian Sarah Carter notes:

> [T]he fundamental features of colonialism were clearly present in the extension of the power of the Canadian state and the maintenance of sharp social, economic and spatial distinctions between the dominant and subordinate population.[33]

Colonial rule was extremely varied in administration and impact. The colonizing powers in Canada did not recognize Native people's right to the land. They justified their colonizing practices on the basis that aboriginal people were not organized into official states, and could not be classified as inhabitants with a recognizable title to the land.[34] Many indiginous people led a relatively mobile existence, therefore they could not be classified as citizens according to European laws and the principles of "private property." Furthermore, the French and the British believed that their claims to sovereignty were sanctioned because they were Christian powers and therefore held certain rights and privileges over non-Christian peoples. Roxana Ng points out that the ideology of European superiority rooted in the notion of private property, agricultural production and Christian morality, and the deployment of this ideology for the subordination of aboriginal people, had a material base. She writes:

> As the colonial economy evolved from mercantilism to industrial capitalism, agricultural development to provide food for England and Upper Canada

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[33]Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) 19.

[34]Dickason 100.

> became a priority. Later, Canada's westward expansion by railways and roads also necessitated securing parcels of "free" land. If the Native people's nomadic way of life had been incompatible with the fur trade, it was more so with an agrarian-based economy and the exigencies of the modern nation-state.[35]

Relationships between European and aboriginal people did not remain static throughout centuries of co-habitation. For example, in the early stages of European arrival in North America during the 16th and early 17th centuries, First Nations people such as the Iroquois (who inhabited the St. Lawrence Valley), were viewed by the French as military allies and economic partners. Negotiations ensued between Iroquoian and French representatives, and economic and political alliances were forged. As historian J. R. Miller writes:

> The encounter of Indians and Frenchman at Gaspé in July 1534 contained many of the elements of early relations between natives and intruders. This epitome of early relations was all the more remarkable because it brought together dramatically different peoples with contrasting societies that would nonetheless cooperate successfully for centuries before relations deteriorated into conflict and confrontation.[36]

Although Miller's statement that relations between the Iroquois and the French remained cooperative for centuries is perhaps an overstatement,[37] I draw attention to this initial contact period as a way of illustrating that relationships

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[35]Roxana Ng, "Racism, sexism and nation building in Canada," *Race, Identity and Representation in Education*, eds Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (New York: Routledge, 1993) 54.

[36]J. R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*, revised edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 3-4.

[37]See for example historian Olive Patricia Dickason's interpretation of early colonial encounters between the Iroquois and the French (Dickason 149).

between aboriginal people and Europeans are complex, dynamic and have undergone many changes over time. Although racist assumptions and discrimination have often plagued these relationships, I think it is important that perceptions of contact between Native people and Europeans not be simplified or reduced to a "victim/oppressor" dichotomy. An oversimplified, binarist view of relationships between European and aboriginal peoples does not allow for the possibility of meaningful mutual exchanges between them, nor does it reveal resistance to oppressive measures by aboriginal people, who continued to struggle for control over their own lives throughout centuries of contact with Europeans.

In the 19th century European colonialists began to expand their influence and settlements further westward. Increasing demands for land and resources, racist government policies, the effects of wars between aboriginal populations and the Canadian state, diseases, forced relocation and the attempted assimilation of Native populations led to significant transformations in relations between Europeans and First Nations people. The real social, economic and political effects of colonization were acutely felt within Native communities across Canada. For example, after the unsuccessful Riel Rebellion of 1885, the Canadian state took a hardline position towards its leader, Louis Riel (who was hanged for treason in 1885), and the Métis and Cree communities which had participated in the uprising. Cree leaders, including Big Bear and Poundmaker, were imprisoned (both died within several years of their prison sentences), others had perished during the Rebellion. Ottawa's motives were clear, as historian Olive Patricia Dickason writes:

> [T]he Cree now found that even their remaining chiefs were under attack: Ottawa wanted all those who had not given unwavering support to the government to be deposed... The goal was the destruction of tribal forms of government, the atomization of Amerindian communities. The number of Indian agents were heavily increased and the NWMP [North West Mounted Police] was strengthened. The once friendly relations between police and Amerindian cooled as attitudes hardened.[38]

Policies put forth by the Canadian government, such as the one outlined above, contributed to the establishment of clearer boundaries between Whites and Native people. These parameters were constantly shifting, often in relationship to who was granted access to the means of production (land and resources) and who was excluded. For example, the fewer people who could lay claim to their Native ancestry meant the fewer people the Canadian government needed to negotiate with over land claims and the sharing of resources.[39]

Drastic measures were adopted by government officials, in the hope of assimilating Native people into mainstream society. Children were separated from their families and communities and sent to residential schools, which were favoured over day schools because they were believed to "accelerate the process of assimilation."[40] Once there, children were prohibited from speaking their Native languages and forced to adopt European lifestyles and beliefs. Missionaries and government agents put pressure of the state to curtail certain religious and cultural

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[38]Dickason 314.

[39]See for example Dickason and Miller who both talk about conflicts between Native people and the Canadian government over protracted issues such as land titles and the right to self-government.

[40]Dickason 333.

ceremonies, such as the potlatch, practiced within many Northwest Coast communities. Potlatches were elaborate feasts and gift-giving celebrations organized to mark significant occasions, such as weddings, funerals, and so forth. They were banned between 1884 and 1951, by officials from the church and state who hoped that these measures would undermine the strong cultural traditions present in these Northwest Coast communities. More importantly, Native people could not meet in groups and organize politically until after the 1951 repeal. As one author notes:

> Indian society was atomized. By the mid-1890's, the government took the final step in destroying the Indians' ability to live in their traditional manner, by making them subject to measures that deprived [them] of their leadership, social organizations, religion, their children, and their old sources of livelihood. The government sought to prevent reserves from becoming Indian homelands and used them instead as devices of assimilation.[41]

Euro-Canadian representations and perceptions of Native people, in art and literature, were linked to real struggles taking place in Canadian society during this period. These representations, which purported to depict subjects realistically, reflected more accurately underlying assumptions, needs and values of the artist, his or her patrons and the viewing audience themselves.

During the latter part of the 19th century and into the beginning of the 20th century, Euro-Canadians and Euro-Americans were struggling to establish a sense of national and cultural identity, distinguishing them from their European roots. The "Far West" became a symbol and integral aspect of an American sense of national

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[41]J. L. Tobias, "Indian reserves in Western Canada: Indian homelands or devices of assimilation?" *Native People, Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit and Métis*, ed. Bruce Alden Cox (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991) 151-152.

identity (part of the collective consciousness). This occured in Canada as well, yet perhaps to a lesser extent. The "West" was thus constructed in a particular way in Euro-American and Euro-Canadian historical accounts. Whether depicted as the land of opportunity, inhabited by frontiersmen, cowboys and Indians, or illustrated as a foreboding, untamable and exotic region, popular representations of Western Canada and the United States ignored the lives of Native people.

Western expansion in both the United States and Canada was closely tied to an increased demand for land and resources –such as forestry, fishing, hunting, trapping and mining rights– by growing numbers of European settlers. The glorification and romanticization of European expansion in the West silenced the oppositional voices of aboriginal people, who were seeing their land bases eroded and resources depleated. Their histories and concerns were pushed to the margins of political debates. When spoken about at all, Native people were often described or depicted according to familiar stereotypes, which fixed their identities in the realm of "Other"; i.e. non-European, non-Christian. In other words they were perceived to be inferior or savage. The following quote, published in a Chicago paper in 1867, expressed a popular belief of the period:

> All conquering civilization will be borne upon the wings of steam to the uttermost parts of the western plains, preparing the way for safe and rapid settlement by white men, and compelling the savages to either adopt civilization or suffer extinction.[42]

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[42]Quote in Brian W. Dippie, "The moving finger writes: Western art and the dynamics of change," in Jules Prown et al. *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, Yale Univesity Art Gallery, 1992) 99.

North America was changing rapidly in the late 19th century. Industrialization and urbanization were increasingly replacing subsistance agriculture and rural living. People in Eastern Canada and the United States were moving into large cities such as Montréal, New York and Boston, and finding employment in the growing industrial sectors. These populations craved an escape from the drudgery of their confined urban existences. The "Western Frontier" held a mystical and alluring quality, despite the fact that by the late 19th century governing bodies in Canada and the United States had extended their influence to its furthest reaches.

Many ideological and moral arguments were used by Euro-Canadians and Euro-Americans to justify Western expansion and the exploitation, assimilation and oppression of Native people. These ideological assumptions and moral debates found their way into the art and literature of the period. For example, John Gast's painting *American Progress* (1872) (see ***figure 1***), which was also widely circulated as a chromolithograph,[43] depicts a mythical interpretation of Western expansion. It portrays an angelic-like figure in the sky representing the spirit of "Civilization." She holds a schoolbook under her arm and is stringing telegraph wire as she leads a procession of European settlers westward. The colonists walk calmly on, displacing Native people, herds of buffalo and other animals scrambling out of the way. Industrial activity and the locomotive, symbolizing European technological advancements and Western expansion, are contrasted with a rural setting. Historian

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[43]A chromolithograph is a picture printed in colours from a series of lithographic stones or plates. A common practice in the 19th century.

Brian Dippie describes the painting as an account of the meeting of past and present, with a look towards the future and a celebration of the "progress of civilization."[44]

A popular assumption in Europe and North America in the 19th century, and for many years to come, was that First Nations people were part of a "vanishing race." Their "disappearance" was assumed to be inevitable in the face of "progress" and "civilization," attributes believed to be associated with European cultures and technologies. The following quote by American painter George Catlin typifies popular assumptions of the period:

> I started out in the year 1832, and penetrated the vast and pathless wilds which are familiarly denominated the great "Far West" of the North American Continent... [i]nspired with an enthusiastic hope and reliance that I could meet and overcome all the hazards and privations of a life devoted to the production of a literal and graphic delineation of the living manners, customs, and character of an interesting race of people, who are rapidly passing away from the face of the earth –lending a hand to a dying nation, who have no historians or biographers of their own to pourtray with fidelity their native looks and history; thus snatching from a hasty oblivion what could be saved for the benefit of posterity, and perpetuating it, as a fair and just monument, to the memory of a truly lofty and noble race.[45]

The gradual loss or deterioration of traditional cultural practices, languages and social structures within Native communities was perceived by Whites as the "natural," or acceptable outcome of their contact with Europeans. This attitude was influenced by racist, Eurocentric ideologies, and connected to 19th century Enlightenment thinking in Europe. Enlightenment thinking emphasized rationalism,

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[44]Dippie 96.

[45]George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the North American Indians* (1841; North Dighton, MA: JG Press, 1995) 3.

empiricism and positivist methodologies, and favoured the notion of an evolutionary progression, whereby cultures were classified hierarchically in accordance to their degree of "sophistication" and technical "advancement." The ideals of Enlightenment thinking and European imperialism were closely linked. Colonized cultures were assumed to be "inferior" or "less advanced" than European cultures. They were accordingly catagorized as "prehistoric" or "primitive," and placed at the bottom of a post-Darwinian social scale. James Clifford writes:

> For a bourgeois experience of time –a linear, relentless progress leading nowhere certain and permitting no pause or cyclic return, the cultural islands out of time (or "without history") described by many ethnographers have a persistent prelapsian appeal.[46]

Inversely, European cultures were considered to be situated at the top of the social pyramid, and therefore "superior" to non-European peoples and cultures. The following quote, published in 1908, in the leading British Museum Journal makes these assumptions very clear:

> The progress of colonization and commerce makes it every year increasingly evident that European races and especially those of our own [British] islands, are destined to assume a position in part, one of authority, in part, one of light and leading, in all regions of the world.[47]

White representatives ended up "speaking for" Native people, who were defined as "primitive," "non-literate" or "without history," and assumed to be

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[46]Clifford, "On ethnographic allegory," 111.

[47]Taken from the *Museum Journal*, 1908, quoted in Annie Coombes, "Museums and the formation of national and cultural identities," *The Oxford Journal* 11.2 (1988): 65.

incapable of representing themselves. They were talked about as if they were not involved in the present. Their societies took on an ephemeral quality; at the time they were recorded they were seen as "doomed." This created a sense of urgency. George Catlin, along with many other Euro-Canadian and Euro-American artists, felt that it was imperative to document the "fleeting" history of First Nations people before it was too late. The rhetoric employed was one of necessity of "conservation" and "preservation" in the face of "extinction." The notion of a "vanishing race" was a means of validating the recording of these cultures. Hence, despite centuries of contact and the changed conditions of the lives of Native people, anthropologists, ethnographers and artists continued to describe and picture the "real" Native person as the one before contact or during the early contact period. As Jennifer Brown states:

> The white man's feathered, stock Indians are comfortable, familiar images, enticingly primitive or romantically wild, yet safely domesticated as long as the real thing remains relatively invisible and distant. Entrenched for centuries they are not readily dislodged by the voices of [First Nations people].[48]

James Clifford suggests that accounts about the persistent and repetitious "disappearance" of social forms at the moment of their ethnographic representation demands analysis. He claims that ethnography's "vanishing" object, in this case aboriginal people and their cultures, is a rhetorical construct that legitimizes representational practices and the development of "salvage" ethnography. Clifford

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[48]Jennifer Brown, "Exorcizing the white man's Indian," *Robert Houle: Indians from A to Z*, ed. Robert Houle (Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1990) 4.

writes:

> Historical worlds [are] salvaged as textual fabrications disconnected from ongoing lived milieux and suitable for moral, allegorical appropriation by individual readers.[49]

Euro-Canadian and Euro-American representations of aboriginal people did not portray its subject realistically, but perhaps depicted more accurately the perceptions and imagination of North Americans themselves.[50] They were self-serving interpretations infused with powerful symbolism. In his book *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, Robert Berkhofer, Jr. has written that the underlying narrative of most Western representations is not about Native people at all, but about Euro-Canadians and Euro-Americans moving to a new country and remaking it in their own image.[51] Sometimes it is a story of progress, sometimes of loss, but always it is about the projection of human desire onto resisting but yielding land. Native people took on a symbolic quality in the popular imagination of Whites, resembling fictional, mythical figures, such as the "noble savage" or the "evil savage," instead of real people. Artists were creators of fiction, and perpetuated the myth of the "Imaginary Indian."

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[49]Clifford, "On ethnographic allegory," 114.

[50]Jules David Prown, "Introduction," in Prown et al. *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, Yale Univesity Art Gallery, 1992) xi.

[51]Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 28.

## The Imaginary Indian

> The romantic aura conjured up by Indians and the unknown spaces worked like a powerful magnet. Buffalo herds, plains Indians, and wild mountain scenery were exciting beyond the wildest stretch of the imagination. The Canadian Indian had always been of interest to artists.
>
> J. Russell Harper (1966)

White audiences were mostly interested in romanticized, nostalgic representations, that collapsed the wide diversity of aboriginal peoples into the notion of one overarching "primitive" race, portrayed alternately as noble or ignoble. These stereotypical images fixed Native people's identity in a visual vice, that cultivated simultaneously a sense of the availability and the containability of the people represented. Images portraying "colonized subjects," captured these potentially dangerous and different people and reproduced them in a "safe," contained and accessible way. Native people became "Other" (exotic, romantic), yet entirely knowable and visible, because representations corresponded to existing stereotypes being circulated in Euro-Canadian and Euro-American culture (through the press, government documents, popular fiction and so forth).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Euro-Canadian and Euro-American artists depicting indigenous populations, were influenced by the ideals of Neo-Classicism and Romanticism. The Neo-Classical style emerged in Europe in the 18th century, and was represented most clearly through the works of French painter Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). Neo-Classicism symbolized a revival of interest in the ordered and rational forms of antique art, emphasizing serious subject matter,

clear and precise form, and idealized beauty. Romanticism evolved in Europe in the early 19th century. Romantic ideals accentuated overpowering emotion and hightened sensibility, which were aptly suited to the rugged, uncharted and seemingly untamable landscape of North America. Artists of this period, were interested in painting contemporary topical events, not only as a depiction of that particular event, but also as an exploration of the passionate emotions and truths that underlay it. For instance, American artist John Mix Stanley (1814-72) painted *Last of Their Race* (1857) (see ***figure 2***) as a sort of "memorial" to the disappearing Native "races" of the New World. The painting consists of an eclectic and exotic group of people, perhaps the remnants of various nations, which Stanley illustrated through differences in clothing and other apparel. The large body of water bordering them on one side places them at the very edge of the Western Frontier. They appear to be about to be pushed into the Pacific ocean. Stanley even added buffalo skulls, drawing a parallel between the experience of Native people and the disappearance of the large buffalo herds of the Plains. The setting sun emphasizes the closure of an era when Native people lived in their traditional ways, yet the people portrayed are passive and non-threatening. Stanley has "immortalized" Native people by rendering them impervious to change. He has transformed a contemporary tragedy, the dispossession of land and resources from aboriginal people, into something monumental and heroic: the tragic, yet inevitable fate of these people.

These stereotypes are part of a paradigm of polarity that lies at the heart of

minority or race relations and assumes uniqueness for Whites as classifiers and Native people as the classified. This type of imagery often obscured the complexities of Native people's true identities and served as ideological weapons in their subordination. Author Homi K. Bhabha writes:

> It is the force of ambivalance that gives the colonial stereotype its currency: ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed.[52]

Bhabha explains that it is the ambiguity and repeatability of the stereotype that makes it difficult to work against. For example, the stereotype can shift between the "Indian" perceived as noble or evil, friend or foe, and so forth. However, it never moves beyond this circle of recognition, remaining within the boundaries of the identifiable, contained and visible. This denied Native people an identity outside of that which was defined within Western colonial discourses and discursive patterns. Colonial discourse relied on the limited and controlled binding of differences to inform political practices of racial and cultural hierarchies.[53] Increasingly, aboriginal men and women became visible only through these limited stereotypes. The rest of the time, they were invisible.

According to Edward Said, people in the West internalize the stereotype by

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[52]Homi K. Bhabha, "The other question: Difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism," *Cultural Studies*, eds. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992) 71.

[53]Bhabha, "The other question," 72.

distancing themselves from the marginalized person or group, thereby accentuating the notion of "difference." Said's important work *Orientalism*, looks at colonization and imperialist discourses, tracing a genealogy of European\Western notions of the Orient.[54] "Orientalism" is described as a figurative term and form of thinking based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the "Orient" and the "Occident."[55] Orientalism is a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European experience. The Orient is seen as the contrasting image, idea, personality and experience of the West. These two (geographical and ideological) entities supported and reflected each other. Said claims that European culture gained in strength and identity by opposing itself to the Orient, depicted as a sort of surrogate and even inferior self. The "Other" (the Oriental or non-European) was transformed into a figure that belonged to a definite image-repertoire and incorporated into the European imagination. Said writes:

> Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient -dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.[56]

One of the issues Said raises is the unquestioned authority of many European

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[54]Edward Said, along with many other postcolonial and feminist theorists, has relied on the work of Michel Foucault and other deconstructionists. Foucault's work privileges the study of textual archives and the sites through which the discursive practices of a society are constructed. For an introduction to Foucault's approach see *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

[55]Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 2.

[56]Said 3.

or Western commentators on the cultures and societies of colonized people. Artists, scholars, writers, politicians, and many others, became "specialists" on colonized people's cultures and identities, often portraying them as static; unchanged since the pre-Columbian era. Attempts to describe cultures as static involve simplification, exclusion, the construction of self-other relationships and the imposition of a power relationship. As author Gail Valaskakis writes:

> Drawn from the image of the savage as noble or evil, neither representation allows [non-Native viewers] to identify native peoples as equal, to recognize them as real inhabitants of the land.[57]

Euro-American and Euro-Canadian artists contributed to the persistence of such stereotypes, by chosing to focus primarily on traditional aspects of aboriginal cultures, which were assumed to be in danger of "vanishing" in the face of European expansion. Focusing on the innovative and challenging ways aboriginal communities adapted to, or influenced, European settlements, would have meant acknowledging their knowledge base, endurance, sustainability, and their capacity to portray their own histories. Instead, North American artists creating written and visual narratives about aboriginal people enlisted among the ranks of "specialists," collecting information, news and art. These artists were also referred to as "amateur ethnographers" and "authorities" on the lives of First Nations people.

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[57]Gail G. Valaskakis, "Postcards of my past: The Indian as artefact," *Relocating Cultural Studies: Developments in Theory and Research*, eds. Valda Blundell, John Shepherd and Ian Taylor (London: Routledge, 1993) 161.

## Amateur Ethnographers

The disciplines of anthropology and ethnography emerged in Europe and North America in the 19th century, and were closely tied to evolutionary theories. Anthropology is defined as the science of "man," or a study of the nature of the human species. Ethnography is concerned with the study and systematic recording of human cultures. Within these disciplines, comparative and evolutionary systems of classification were the chosen taxonomies throughout this period.[58] Annie Coombes claims that in the 19th century the value of anthropology and ethnography was placed on their ability to trace "the gradual growth of complex [European] systems and customs from the primitive ways of [their] progenitors' through the use of material culture from extant peoples (all of whom were colonized)."[59] Students of anthropology and ethnography described their observations of other people and cultures as the collection of "scientific data," and were thought to be purveyors of certain indisputable "truths." However, the precision and objectivity associated with scientific practices becomes problematic when attempting to discuss human behaviour. As contemporary anthropologist Stephen Tyler notes:

> The urge to conform to the canons of scientific rhetoric has been an illusory realism, promoting the absurdity of "describing" nonentities such as "culture" or "society" as if they were fully observable, and all in surety that the

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[58]Coombes 61.

[59]Coombes 61.

observers' grounding discourse is itself an objective form sufficient to the task of describing acts.[60]

Both George Catlin and Paul Kane were referred to as "amateur ethnographers," because of their written and visual "records" of Native cultures. Their observations presupposed an objective, detached standpoint. As "recorders" they were presumed to be located outside of the arena of study; looking at or objectifying a given reality.[61]

George Catlin (1796-1872) is perhaps the most well known "Indian portrait painter" or "Western Frontier artist" from the 19th century. His experience provides insight into the motives for producing, what he hoped would be, a lasting "archive" of the histories of indigenous inhabitants of North America. Catlin travelled to Western regions of the United States painting Native people, their villages and ceremonies. He also collected Native art and recorded information on the cultures and traditions of Native people he encountered, eventually publishing a book in 1841, entitled, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians.*

Schooled in law rather than art, Catlin was entirely self-taught. He was not particularly renowned for his artistic abilities and struggled for recognition as an

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[60]Stephen A. Tyler, "Post-modern ethnography: From document of the occult to occult document." *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 130.

[61]James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial truths," *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography,* eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 11.

artist until he began painting Native people. Notable French writer and art critic Charles Baudelaire wrote:

> When M. Catlin came to Paris... the word went around that he could neither paint nor draw, and if he had produced some tolerable studies, it was thanks only to his courage and his patience... [T]oday it is established that M. Catlin can paint and draw very well indeed... M. Catlin has captured the noble expression of these splendid fellows in a masterly way.[62]

Both Catlin's paintings and his book won him critical acclaim with White audiences in North America and Europe. He organized a large exhibition, known as the "Indian Gallery," which included over 400 paintings and artifacts brought back from his travels. It toured throughout the United States and Europe, and was an extravagant and grandiose public display that tapped into European and American viewers' curiosity about the supposed appearance and customs of Native people. One of Catlin's most successful paintings was his portrait entitled *Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, head chief, Blood Tribe* (see ***figure 3***), which he submitted to the 1846 annual exhibition at the Paris Salon. The image is a bust of a noble and solemn looking warrior, dressed in elaborately decorated jacket and feather roach, holding an embellished pipe stem. Curator Ann Davis described the painting in the following terms: "[The piece] is a psychological study, conveying the wisdom and pride of a doomed people through such features as the stillness of the pose, the grandeur of the dress and pipe stem, the strength of the countenance, and, most particularly, the

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[62]Charles Beaudelaire quoted in Ann Davis, "Indians' historians: George Catlin and Paul Kane," *A Distant Harmony: Comparisons in Painting of Canada and the U.S.A.* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1983) 60.

power of the inward-looking eyes."[63]

Catlin was not the only artist to exploit the exotic appeal of Native people to promote his own career. Many Canadian artists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries became famous for their historical and visual "records" of Native people. Paul Kane (1810-71) is perhaps the best-known Canadian artist to take up this subject matter. Kane produced numerous portraits and elaborate compositions, portraying Native people taking part in particular ceremonies and riutals.

As a young man, Kane was a struggling artist, who found it very difficult to make a living through his art. In 1841, he was able to afford a trip to Europe to study painting, which was a common practice for North American artists during this period. It was in London, England, that Kane heard of George Catlin's already acclaimed "Indian Gallery." Kane, perhaps inspired by Catlin's success, decided to embark on a similar endeavour in British North America. He wrote:

> The principal object of my undertaking was to sketch pictures of the principle chiefs and their original costumes, to illustrate their manners and customs, and to represent the scenery of an almost unknown country.[64]

Under the patronage of Sir George Simpson, governor and head of the Hudson's Bay Company, Paul Kane travelled for three years, between 1845 and 1848, across Western Canada and down into Oregon State, sketching and documenting information on the aboriginal people he encountered. His experience

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[63]Davis 61.

[64]Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992) 17.

was similar to Catlin's. Upon his return, he gained immediate recognition from the Canadian public. He produced over 500 sketches during his trip, which he eventually transformed into a series of canvases.[65] In 1859, he published a book about his travels entitled, *Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America*, which was translated into French, Danish and German.

Paul Kane, along with other North American artists, declared himself the purveyor of "accurate" and "authentic" information on Native people. Closer scrutiny of his work reveals a mixing and matching of elements from various Native cultures, such as the inclusion of clothing, jewelry and weaponry which were not even part of the subject's traditional cultural background. A comparison between Kane's preliminary sketch and portrait of Cree chief Kee-a-kee-ka-sa-coo-way

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[65]To Kane's chagrin, the Canadian government commissioned only twelve canvases (he had intended to sell the government one hundred paintings). Kane had hoped to produce a collection of paintings representing a permanent memorial of the Native people of Western Canada and worthy of preservation by the nation. Kane's second major patron was George William Allen, a wealthy Toronto lawyer and Member of Parliament, who purchased one hundred canvases and numerous artifacts Kane had collected on his travels. Kane was not interested in reproducing literal transcripts of the sketches he had produced on his trip. Rather, his sketches were used as studies for larger, more elaborate compositions, which he conceived as more "monumental." Kane was catering to his patrons and viewers taste for the "exotic" and "pituresque." Kane himself seems to have been more interested in producing grandiose themes rather than more realistic representations of Native people, emulating the style and work of certain European artists he would have seen while in Europe, including Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) and Théodore Géricault (1791-1824). The bulk of Kane's paintings are located in two major collections. The Allen family collection, along with a group of sketches in pencil and watercolour, belong to the The Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. The Lutcher Stark Foundation in Orange, Texas, possesses over two hundred watercolour and oil sketches. For a more indepth discussion of Kane's work see J. Russell Harper, *Paul Kane's Frontier* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada; Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1971). For an interesting critique of Kane's approach see Heather Dawkins, "Paul Kane and the eye of power: Racism in Canadian art history," *Vanguard* (September 1986): 24-27.

provides an interesting example of his enhancement of the "romantic" and "exotic" appeal of the subject he was depicting. Kane's watercolour study of Kee-a-kee-ka-sa-coo-way was produced on the spot while he was travelling (see ***figure 4***). He concentrated on the subject's face, adding only the merest suggestion of the man's bare torso and the ornamented wolf-skin thrown over his shoulder. The canvas, entitled *Kee-a-kee-ka-sa-coo-way (The Man that Gives the War Whoop)* was painted in Kane's studio circa 1850 (see ***figure 5***). Considerable modifications have been made between the preliminary sketch and final painting. The subject is no longer a rough, determined, somewhat hostile figure, but a groomed and contemplative chief. The painting is an amalgamation of elements from the portrait study and some additional props, in particular an eagle head pipe-stem and a decorated jacket. However, despite these "embellishments" and historical inaccuracies, Kane's paintings were used by many anthropologists and historians as ethnographic records of Native peoples.[66]

Many contemporary anthropologists and postcolonial theorists such as Clifford, Tyler and Trihn T. Minh-ha underline the importance of questioning ethnographic accounts which are presented as "objective" or "authentic," where the author becomes the recorder of someone else's culture and identity, often neglecting to recognize the provisional nature of his/her presentation. Certain anthropologists have suggested that ethnographies be called "fictions"[67] or "evocations."[68] These

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[66]See footnote 18.

[67]Clifford, "Introduction," 6.

[68]Tyler 123.

terms help to illustrate the partiality of cultural and historical accounts; the ways they can be systematic and exclusive, often silencing incongruent voices. James Clifford writes:

> It soon becomes apparent that there is no "complete" corpus of First-Time knowledge, that no one –least of all the visiting ethnographer– can know through an open-ended series of contingent, power-laden encounters.[69]

Trinh T. Minh-ha has criticized 19th century anthropological and ethnographic approaches that attempted to transpose scientific practices onto the study of human behaviour, transforming the indigene into an object.[70] Trinh also points out that the anthropologist's task of verifying the activities and beliefs of a particular society became more important than promoting communication between peoples of different cultures.[71]

## Cultural Appropriation

While artists such as George Catlin and Paul Kane lamented the fate of Native people, their success was predicated upon it. This was also the case for Mildred Valley Thornton, who earned a certain notoriety for her representations of Native people. She was often referred to as the "Indian painter," or the "woman

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[69]Clifford, "Introduction," 8.

[70]Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other* 59.

[71]Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other* 57.

who paints Indians" in the popular press.[72] Recently, many First Nations artists, writers and political activists have vocalized their concerns over issues of cultural appropriation and the ownership and control of symbolic capital. They have been involved in struggles to assert control over the production of images and histories of their own lives and experiences. Métis filmmaker Loretta Todd provides a description of appropriation:

> [Appropriation occurs] when someone else speaks for, tells, defines, describes, represents, uses or recruits the images, stories, experiences and dreams of others for their own. Appropriation also occurs when someone else becomes the expert on your own experience and is deemed more knowledgeable about who you are than yourself.[73]

Todd also asks why artists, writers and anthropologists who claim to be genuinely interested and supportive of struggles within Native communities, also appropriate their practices and theories?[74]

In an article published in 1994, author Charlotte Townsend-Gault talks about the importance for First Nations people of "taking back control" over their knowledge, languages, cultures and traditions, which is crucial to the ensurence of the integrity of their societies.[75] These demands are part of a broader political agenda, which includes debates over land claims, inherent rights and repatriation.

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[72]See for example "Indian culture now recorded on canvas," *Victoria Inverness Bulletin* [Truro, N. S.] 3 August 1949: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[73]Todd 24.

[74]Todd 26.

[75]Townsend-Gault 102.

Townsend-Gault underlines the significance of Native people affirming their right to represent their own cultures and articulate their own identities. She writes:

> With such assertion of cultural ownership comes the right to extend unilaterally what lies within any definition of culture. Controlling ownership includes controlling authenticity.[76]

Townsend-Gault points out that resistance, adaptation, translation, transformation, protection and reinvention have been integral to First Nations formulations of their own cultural identities.[77] Material culture and artistic production are being used by Native artists, writers, politicians, and others, as a counter-hegemonic strategy and as a way to reshape their own social worlds. A quote by Gitksan carver Doreen Jensen expresses this clearly:

> As aboriginal artists we need to reclaim our own identities through our own work, our heritage, and our future. We don't need to live any longer within others' definitions of who and what we are. We need to put aside the titles that have been imposed on us and our creativity, titles that serve the needs of other people. For too long our art has been situated in the realm of anthropology by a discourse that validates white artists, curators and writers.[78]

I think the questions raised by Doreen Jensen, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, and Loretta Todd should remain at the surface of discussions about Thornton's work, and the work of other Euro-Canadian artists producing representations of First Nations people. Their critical viewpoints are a reminder that the imagery of

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[76]Townsend-Gault 103.

[77]Townsend-Gault 104.

[78]Doreen Jensen quoted in Townsend-Gault 107.

these artists needs to be examined within the specific historical context they were produced in, and that aboriginal people today are laying claim over their right to speak on behalf of their own heritage.

# Chapter II

## Recreating a Story, Retelling History

> I think often and deeply about women and work, about what it means to have the luxury of time –time spent collecting one's thoughts, time to work undisturbed. This time is space for contemplation and reverie. It enhances our capacity to create. Work for women artists is never just the moment when we write, or do other art. In the fullest sense, it is also time spent in contemplation and preparation.
>
> bell hooks (1995)

This chapter looks at Mildred Valley Thornton's experience as a woman artist in Canada in the first half of the 20th century, and her struggle for recognition. Her experience is also compared to that of another prominent woman artist from the West Coast, Emily Carr. Thornton was involved in the budding artistic communities of Regina and Vancouver. She also wrote poetry, was art critic for the *Vancouver Sun* (1944-59), and remained engaged in various artistic and cultural organizations over the years, such as the Labour Arts Guild (1944-46). Thornton is recognized primarily for her portraits of Native people, but she was also a successful landscape painter and produced several commissioned portraits of leading political figures in Canada. She conducted a series of lectures, organized by the Association of Canadian Clubs, discussing her work on Native people, and gaining a reputation among non-Native's as an advocate for better living conditions and rights for aboriginal people.

## Feminist Readings

The importance of documenting Thornton's life stems from the fact that there are very few historical accounts that document the lives of women artists, particularly those living in Western Canada. Artists such as Thornton, who were deeply engaged and committed to their work and to the promotion of artistic and cultural organizations in their communities, are scarcely mentioned in historical texts. This is changing, especially in the last decade or so, with the publication of indepth studies of women's lives and popular representations of women.[79]

## Biography

Mildred Valley Thornton's maiden name was Stinson. She grew up near Dresden, Ontario. Her mother, Valley (Valentina) Longman, came from an English Loyalist background, her family having immigrated from the United States. Thornton's maternal grandfather, Edwin Longman, was a painter, and her aunt, Evelyn Beatrice Longman, was an acclaimed American sculptor and the first woman

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[79]See for example Sarah Carter, above cited. She has documented the manipulation of cultural imagery and the creation of hierarchies of gender and race in the Canadian Prairies in the late 1800's. Maria Tippett's, *By a Lady,* documents women artists in Canada, although it is considered problematic by some feminists and other critics due to its non-critical examination of the traditional art historical canon and the way it tends to exclude women from serious discussions about art.

to be admitted full membership to the National Academy of Design.[80] Thornton once wrote:

> As as small child I was preoccupied with drawing. My maternal grandfather was an artist and he used to present his children with some of his work for Christmas and on their birthdays. I suppose ours was the only house for miles around with a number of fine original paintings on the parlour walls.[81]

Thornton's father, Edward Stinson, was a farmer of Irish descent. The Stinson household was comprised of fourteen children. Mildred (or Millie, as her family called her) had always been artistically inclined. She decided at a very young age to pursue her studies in art, and her parents supported her through her initial schooling at Olivet College in Michigan, around 1910. This was quite exceptional for that period, as women in rural Ontario would not have been encouraged to undertake an artistic or professional career outside of the home. They were expected to get married and raise a family and contribute to the upkeep of the family farm. Thornton described her early years in the following words:

> In my teens I went to Olivet College, Michigan, to study art. It was a tradition that my mother's people should be educated at Olivet. Two of my uncles and an aunt –the noted sculptor, Evelyn Beatrice Longman– had preceded me. Aunt Evelyn had gone from Olivet to the Chicago Art Institute. I was the only one in the next generation to follow in her footsteps (even to study later at the Chicago Art Institute) and people expected me to walk worthily therein.[82]

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[80]Reg Ashwell, "Mildred Valley Thornton," *Arts West* 4.3 (May-June 1979): 28.

[81]Mildred Valley Thornton, "unpublished forward," *Indian Lives and Legends* (c1966) 2. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[82]Thornton, "unpublished forward," 2.

Thornton also studied at the Ontario College of Art, where she worked with renowned Canadian artists George A. Reid (1860-1947) and J. William Beatty (1869-1941).

Thornton spent most of her adult life in Western Canada, moving to Regina alone as a young woman (around 1913), where she taught art classes and began painting professionally. Her decision to move west was a brave one, she would have been twenty-three years old. In the following passage Thornton described her decision to move away from home:

> Everybody was talking about the West, so I decided to go and see for myself what it was like. I bought a ticket to Moose Jaw, visited my uncle at Briercrest for a couple of months, and had such a good time (the Irish) that I lost the return end of my ticket and had to stay, because I wouldn't let the folks back home know I had been so careless (the proud English). I never did find it.[83]

Mildred Valley Stinson married John Henry Thornton, a businessman from England, in 1915. Their twin boys, John Milton and William Maitland, were born in 1926. The artist and her family lived in Regina until 1934, when the Depression and difficult economic circumstances obliged them to move to Vancouver. Between 1934 and 1960, Thornton became increasingly involved in the burgeoning art world on the West Coast, and focused her own art practice on the production of her Collection of paintings of Native people. After her husband's death in 1958, which was a devastating loss to the artist, Thornton went to live in England with her son, but came back to Vancouver in the early 1960's. The years preceding Thornton's

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[83]Thornton, "unpublished forward," 3.

death on July 27th, 1967 were very difficult. She struggled with a debilitating blood disease akin to lukemia, which left her embittered and drained of energy.[84] Yet she continued to paint and compile documentation for her book *Indian Lives and Legends*, published in 1966, a year before she died. This is how Thornton described her experience in the unpublished Forward to *Indian Lives and Legends*:

> It was not my intention to say anything in particular about myself in this book. There is very little to tell and nothing out of the ordinary, unless it be my tenacity in following, despite many obstacles, the path which opened up before me. Perhaps it was the stubborn English which I inherited from my mother, or it may have been the fighting Irish which was my father's legacy, or a combination of both which enabled me to accomplish my ends.[85]

Thornton was a well-respected artist during her lifetime. She was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts in 1954. Her work was shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including the 1930 Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto. Her work was also exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery (1941, 1942, 1949), the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, London, England (1959, 1961), the Masters Gallery, Calgary, Alberta (1979), and the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta (1997).[86] Some of her paintings are now located in major public collections in Canada, including the Glenbow Museum; the McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario; the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario; and the

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[84]J. M. Thornton, "unpublished personal notes" (1985) 3. Mildred Valley Thornton's illness was never properly diagnosed, however her symptoms were similar to lukemia.

[85]Thornton, "unpublished forward," 1.

[86]See APPENDIX I for a more extensive exhibition history, including private and public venues.

Vancouver Art Gallery.[87]

Through her work as art critic for the *Vancouver Sun,* from 1944-59, and her involvement in several artistic and community organizations, she also became an influential figure in the arts community in Vancouver. She was president of the Vancouver branch of the Canadian Authors Association (1948); vice-president of the Vancouver Poetry Society (1949); a member of the Canadian Women's Press Club and the Soroptomist Club -which was dedicated to the economic advancement of women. She was spokesperson for the Labour Arts Guild between 1944 and 1946, an organization with socialist ideals set up after the Second World War that worked at rendering art more accessible particularly to working class people. Thornton was also on the board of directors of the Community Arts Council and a member of the Art Historical and Scientific Society, under which the Vancouver Museum was operated... and this is only a partial list of the organizations she was involved in.[88] However, despite Thornton's extensive involvement in various artistic communities across Canada, she has been subsequently written out of art historical accounts. For example, there is scant published material available on her today and very few historical sources have chronicled her experiences. Her work remains relatively unknown, as is the case with many other women art producers in Canada.

Feminist paradigms offer a specific framework from which to examine some

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[87]See APPENDIX II for a list of public institutions that possess Thornton's work.

[88]While living in Regina, from 1913 to 1934, Thornton was equally involved in the small arts community there. She belonged to the Regina Sketch Club, Canadian Authors' Association, the Poetry Group and the Saskatchewan Women's Art Association.

of the ways women artists have been marginalized: historically they were removed from discussions about art, denied access to economic and political resources and the power to name, or voice, their own opinions and concerns. A feminist art history aims at exploring the artistic and cultural contributions of women producers, as well as the concomitant deconstruction of the discourses and practices of traditional art historical approaches, which generally fail to acknowledge the accomplishments of women artists. Author Jane Miller writes: "Feminist readings are inevitably critical readings: readings, that is, which expose in texts what is suppressed by them as well as what is visibly contestable in them."[89] Feminism is not a singular approach, but a broad encompassing term that includes a variety of positions and strategies amongst women involved in the production and reception of art.[90] Feminist art critic Katy Deepwell writes:

> The persistence of discrimination against women, the marginalization, containment or tokenistic attitude to women artists and the absence of considered published debate on women's art practice in the mainstream press,

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[89]Miller 135.

[90]I think it is more appropriate to talk about feminisms: a plurality of feminist voices and approaches, and not reduce everything to one generic point of view.
It is not possible to refer to one homogeneous, all-encompassing feminist agenda, a viewpoint that was particularly advocated by White, Western, middle-class feminists in the early stages of the feminist movement. This perspective undermined the complexity and diversity of feminist struggles. I tend to agree with writers such as bell hooks, who argues that it is in fact the involvement of women of colour that has accounted for a broadening of the definition of feminism to incorporate race and class analyses for example. For a more detailed analysis of these issues see Spivak, Tawadros, bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, (Boston: South End Press, 1984); C.T. Mohanty, A. Russo and L. Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

remain key issues [for feminists].[91]

Black women, Native women, and others have contributed to feminist debates in many ways. They have been particularly vocal, raising awareness and providing insightful analyses around issues of marginalization and discrimination due to race, class, sexual orientation as well as gender.[92] Drawing on Stuart Hall's analysis, Gilane Tawadros has talked about the importance of questioning (Western culture's) universalist character and its transcendental claims to speak for everyone. Tawadros advocates a positive conception of ethnicity of the margins and, as she states: "A recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture without being contained by that position."[93] Trinh T. Minh-ha points to the limitations of "reformist," rather than "revolutionary," feminist approaches, which, by focusing on the improvement or enlargement of existing identity enclosures, fail to acknowledge the limitations of these definitions, and do not attempt to break down these barriers. She writes: "The point is not to carve one's space in identity theories that ignore women, but patiently to dismantle the very notion of core and identity."[94]

Because of the economic, social and political effects of sexual (racial, class)

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[91]Katy Deepwell, *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) 2.

[92]For a critique of traditional feminist approaches, see hooks, *Feminist Theory*; Mohanty, Russo and Torres; Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other*.

[93]Tawadros 123.

[94]Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other* 96.

differences and discrimination in Western patriarchal culture, women have been relegated to the margins; their experiences ghettoized, or dismissed as "less important." This does not mean that women have been passive or indifferent observers in their own lives. Women have continuously (re)negotiated their positions; publically, through their work, their art and social activism, as well as privately, in their own families and personal relationships.[95]

In the early 20th century there was tremendous pressure on women who sought employment outside of the home, to continue to fulfill their duties as housewives. The way Thornton was discussed in the press illustrates this clearly. Her "domestic" prowesses were often recounted with the same level of enthusiasm as her artistic achievements. Most of the articles about Thornton, written between 1920 and 1960, also discuss her role as mother and housewife. The following passage is a typical example:

> Mildred Valley Thornton, Regina artist, can do other things than paint pictures. She can bake, wash, iron, and mix angel cake; she can write a poem before breakfast, and *throw* an exhibition of her paintings after tea; she can appreciate the work of other artists and take the time to tell them so. When she isn't engaged in the duties of a housewife, she can turn her hand to the *polite* occupation of painting pictures.[96]

Many of the newspaper articles I unearthed on the artist, which have provided scarce but valuable information, were written by women journalists. I

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[95]For example, neither Thornton, nor Emily Carr were deterred from pursuing artistic careers despite a general lack of support and recognition from critics and Canada's artistic and cultural institutions.

[96]"People who do things," *Saturday Night* (6 October 1934): n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

speculate that this was because women could identify with and appreciate some of the challenges Thornton faced. Their efforts have translated into important archival (re)sources, without which there would be very little documentation on Mildred Valley Thornton available today. There are frequently undercurrents of admiration and/or disdain in the texts, which emphasize Thornton's abilities both as artist and housewife, attributes talked about as being somehow separate and contradictory. Admired for her artistic contributions and professional dedication, Thornton also transgressed acceptable norms of femininity, which many authors attempted to reinforce in their articles. The following quotes express this tension, and provide an indication of what was considered acceptable social behaviour for women in Canadian society during this period:

> Mildred Valley Thornton, then is a well mixed combination of artist and woman.[97]

> Besides painting, Mrs.Thornton also writes and lectures, showing kodachromes of many of her Indian portraits. Moreover she makes a home for her husband and her twin sons –young men now– and has always done all her own housework.[98]

The feminine stereotype is a product of Western patriarchal culture, which constructs male dominance through the significance it attaches to sexual difference. The use of the feminine stereotype to describe all that women have done serves to

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[97]Margaret Ecker Francis, "She gives the past to the future," *Canadian Home Journal* (May 1947): 16.

[98]Mary Elizabeth Colman, "Painter of Indian life," *The Native Voice*, 4.12 (December, 1950): 14.

separate women's art from "Art" (reserved for male artists), and to accomodate the contradiction between the reality of women's activities (which involve producing art: writing, painting, and so forth), and the myth of male cultural creativity. "Successful" women artists such as Mildred Valley Thornton and Emily Carr (1871-1945) were often transformed into legends; "exceptional" women, atypical of their sexe because of their artistic abilities. In their important work *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock note that the notion of individual genius, prominent in discourses on Western art, was an ideology that defined artists as exceptional beings, and women artists as exceptions.[99] They go on to discuss the significance of the process by which art by women has been seperated from the dominant definitions of what constitutes art. They write:

> The title "Old Mistress," as opposed to the reverential term "Old Master," alludes to the unspoken assumption in our language that art is created by men. When cast in the feminine form –old mistress– the connotation is altogether different.[100]

Western bourgeois ideologies of femininity, evolving in the 19th century, determined that the natural essence of womanhood was sustained and reproduced through the location of women in the home, and the identification of women with domesticity. Pollock and Parker write:

> We cannot simply annex women and women artists to mainstream views of art history. Any argument that proposes that "art has no sex" ignores the differences of men's and women's experience of the social structures, of class

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[99]Pollock and Parker 29.

[100]Pollock and Parker 6.

> and the sexual divisions within [Western] society, and its historically varied effects on the art men and women produce.[101]

Women and the activities they have traditionally performed have been characterized as the antithesis of cultural creativity, making the notion of a woman artist a contradiction in terms. This apparent "contradiction" is an issue which was often raised by critics discussing Thornton's work as an artist, as the following passage indicates:

> An interviewer, armed with a list of [Thornton's] accomplishments, comes humbly to her door, expecting a smocked, untidy artist in the hodge-podge of art studios the world over. When Mrs. Thornton opens the door, it's the housewife of her dual personality that is uppermost. She wants first to make you a cup of tea and give you a piece of one of her famous cakes, heaped with gooey icing.[102]

I find it revealing that Thornton was talked about as devoting considerable time to her housework, especially when sources close to the artist have claimed that, although she took her role as mother and wife very seriously, housework was not, in fact, one of her primary concerns. In her own words, Thornton once claimed:

> I believe you can find time for anything you really want to do, without neglecting responsibilities. It's a matter of putting first things first, then fitting in the small things as best you can. Many things which I used to think had to be done, I now find can be eliminated without harm to anyone.[103]

Many women artists meshed domestic and professional obligations (as they

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[101]Pollock and Parker 48.

[102]Margaret Ecker Francis 97.

[103]Lillian D. Millar, "Have these busy women the magic formula," *Saturday Night* 64 (12 April 1949): 30.

still do today). Thornton did not have the freedom or opportunity to devote all of her time to producing art. She was engaged in many diverse activities and had important commitments elsewhere. She transgressed traditional boundaries of feminine behaviour and defied popular definitions of what it meant to be an "Artist." Balancing her numerous responsibilities was not an easy task, and Thornton continually struggled to reconcile her commitment to her artistic production and the wide array of organizations she belonged to, with the multiple responsibilities of a wife and mother. She wrote:

> As the children grew older, my husband managed somehow to do double duty to fill the gap at home while I was away. Despite all this I was forever torn between two loyalties --the inevitable fate of a married woman with both a family and a career to serve. Often now I look back and wonder how I did it.[104]

Thornton was called upon at different times throughout her career to defend her originality and capabilities as an artist. One article stated: "With a sureness of touch which art critics say is exceptional in a woman, [Thornton] is able to immortalize her subject on canvas in an hour or less."[105] Another frequently cited quote was: "No woman has the right to paint with such power."[106] Some critics credited her artistic achievements to her earlier instruction, and the direct or indirect influence of noted artists such as William Beatty (with whom she had studied at the

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[104]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* xiv.

[105]P.W. Luce, "This artist makes Indian portraits her field," *Saturday Night* 61.5 (4 May 1946): 5.

[106]Westbridge Fine Art, "Mildred Valley Thornton FRSA (1890-1967)," *Newsletter* 2.2 (October 1990): 1. [Quote originally from an article in the *Seattle Post Intellegence*, c1940.]

Ontario College of Art). In a letter to the editor of the Regina *Leader Post*, written in 1932, Thornton corrected an assumption made by an unnamed journalist, who claimed that she had been assisted by Beatty while painting the portrait of Prime Minister Arthur Meighen. Thornton wrote:

> Will you kindly allow me a little space in your paper to correct a very obvious misleading statement appearing in the columns of the late issue concerning the portrait I recently painted of Rt. Hon. Arthur Meighen, former premier of Canada. The article in question stated that I "had received valuable instruction in my recent work from Mr. J.W. Beatty, R.C.A..." It is a matter of common knowledge among those who are interested that any success I may have achieved has been won at the cost of years of constant and untiring personal effort and I strongly resent the inference above. It is my own individual and original interpretation of my subject and was executed apart from the influence of anyone whomsoever.[107]

Thornton was not the only female artist of this period to struggle for acceptance and recognition. Emily Carr, who also lived in British Columbia, is probably the most well known Canadian female artist today.[108] However, she was obliged to abandon her art practice on different occasions and worked as a landlady to support herself. Both Carr and Thornton painted similar subject matter, although Carr was more interested in interpretations of the landscape and Native cultural symbols, such as the totem pole. Thornton focused on individual people, painting mostly portraits and was interested in cultural and historical aspects of First

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[107]Mildred Valley Thornton, letter, *Leader Post* [Regina] 12 August 1932: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[108]For more complete bibliographical information on Emily Carr, see Robin Laurence, *Beloved Land: The World of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington State, 1996); Doris Shadbolt, *The Life of Emily Carr* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin; Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1979); Maria Tippett, *Emily Carr: A Biography* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1979).

Nations.

Like Thornton, Carr followed in the footsteps of Paul Kane, determined to become a "documentary" artist, making a visual record of the landscapes of British Columbia and what she perceived to be a "condemned" people.[109] Carr organized painting excursions to Native communities on the Northwest coast of British Columbia, and wrote several books describing her experiences painting and visiting Native communities. *Klee Wyck*, written in 1941, won the Governor General's award for literature that same year. Her written accounts are descriptive and informative, relaying legends, stories and histories. Native people are often depicted as "exotic," and living outside of mainstream society. Author Robin Laurence claims that Carr was attracted to what she perceived to be a greater freedom and unconventionality for women in Native societies.[110] Her rebelliousness was perhaps a projection of her own sense of alienation from her family, and the strict Victorian ideals imposed on women in British Columbian society at the time.

Sarah Carter's book, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West*, examines aspects of the history of Western Canada in the 19th century. She claims that the identities of Native and White women were constructed in opposition to one another. White women were projected as "civilizing agents;" the pure and virtuous agents of salvation for White men, the "civilizers" of the new Canadian nation. Native women, in contrast, were regarded

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[109]Laurence 11.

[110]Laurence 8.

as dangerous and sinister; the promiscuous agents of ruin.[111] This polarization contributed to the establishment of clear boundaries between aboriginal and White women, and by extension between Native and European cultures. Carter notes:

> Ideas about the vulnerability of white women helped to create and sustain concepts of racial and cultural difference, to legitimize tough action against indigenous people, and to convey the message of the neccesity of policing boundaries between different people.[112]

Actual behaviour might have deviated from the established norm, but the public discourse did not lose its importance in consequence. It mapped out what was permitted and what would be repressed.[113]

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes identities as culturally and historically constructed categories of meaning. He suggests that we think of identities as a "production," which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.[114] People's identities are fluid and dynamic, not static or essentialized. Hall writes:

> At different places, times, in relation to different questions, the boundaries [of identity] are re-sited... Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialist past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and

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[111]Carter xi.

[112]Carter xiv.

[113]Carter 10.

[114]Stuart Hall, "Cultural identity and diaspora," *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 393.

position ourselves within the narratives of the past.[115]

For Hall practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write. The questioning of fixed identity categories can dislocate binarist views inherited from Western forms of thinking, which create the illusion that there exist separate and mutually exclusive identities (for example, one racial, the other sexual).

The work of Emily Carr and Mildred Valley Thornton is expressive of their own experiences. They produced representations of Native people, particularly of Native women, which tended to undermine limited, constructed perceptions of their identities. Furthermore, I think both artists challenged the ideological and physical limitations placed on women during this period. They were able to project their own identities and experiences through their work, blurring the lines drawn by dogmatic identity enclosures. They transgressed barriers in their own lives, and in their depictions of Native women and men.

Although Thornton placed a great deal of importance on her Collection of paintings of Native people, she also worked in various other fields. Through her work as art critic and journalist for the *Vancouver Sun,* and as a member of numerous cultural and artistic organizations, Thornton was deeply involved in the growing art world of Western Canada. In the next section I would like to explore some of the other activities Thornton was engaged in, including her interest in

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[115]Hall 394-395.

poetry and writing; her role as art critic; her participation in local artistic and cultural organizations, such as the Labor Arts Guild; other painting forms such as her landscape painting and commissioned portraits; and her cross-country lectures dealing with her art work and aspects of Native cultures.

**Thornton's work and other projects**

What is it my soul is seeking?
That my heart cannot express
What is it that beckons and lures me
Illusions in myriad excess
Groping with teardimmed eyelids
I would grasp them for my own
But even fact surrenders to fancy
The bright winged vision is flown
So 'tis in the brightness of youthtide
So 'tis is the mellow eve
We are madly to pursue but fleet phantoms
That a veil of mystry weave
Peace, sad soul, cease complaining
Take heart from thy efforts vain
For as sure as thou losest thy phantoms
So sure will they come again.

*Phantoms*, poem by M.V.Thornton,
written in her High School Composition Book, 1908

This was the time in her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell. They became half her world. She sat at the night table, hunchedover, reading...

Michael Ondaatje (1992)

As a child, Mildred Valley Thornton discovered an interest in writing poetry.

Valley Longman, Thornton's mother, seems to have been the person responsible for introducing young Millie to poetry and English literature. Thornton wrote:

> My mother knew the value of her books of poetry, which she cherished. I can remember sitting on the floor as a small girl in the seldom-used room, reading Byron, Moore, Tennyson, Bryant and loving every word. I read Burns too, Marie Corelli, George Elliot, Lord Lytton and others, but none of them interested me so much as poetry.[116]

As Thornton grew older, poetry remained an important feature of her life. She continued to write poetry herself, and when in Regina, was chairperson of the Poetry Group (1934), as well as a member of the Saskatchewan Branch of the Canadian Authors' Association. She organized conferences and poetry readings, and participated in developing local talent and resources, as the following article stated:

> As chairman of the [Saskatchewan] Poetry Group, [Thornton] deserves all credit for the recent successful provincial poetry competition (the first undertaken by the Branch) and for the publication of the first poetry year book.[117]

Thornton's experience in Vancouver was very similar. She became vice-president of the Vancouver Poetry Society (1949), and was a member of the British Columbian Branch of the Canadian Authors' Association. She also worked as a reviewer of literature, poetry and art, and became a feature writer for the *Vancouver Sun*.

Her feature articles, written primarily between 1940 and 1960, focused on aspects of First Nations cultures, art practices and living conditions in Native

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[116]Thornton, "unpublished forward," 2.

[117]"People," n.pag.

communities. Thornton based these articles on her travels to various regions, including communities on the Queen Charlotte Islands, Vancouver Island, and in the Okanagan Valley. The articles were informative, reporting historical information as well as personal anecdotes. Thornton frequently voiced her concern for what she perceived to be the "loss" of traditional aboriginal cultural practices. In an article entitled "Totems fall, but Haidas thrive: Haida arts dying out," there is a photo of noted carver Andrew Brown, whom Thornton painted in 1946 as he was being interviewed by Canadian anthropologist Marius Barbeau. The caption underneath the photo read: "Slate carving is still carried on by Capt. Brown, but his art will die with him."[118] Thornton recognized that aboriginal people from communities along the Northwest Coast were coping and adapting to significant changes in their communities. Speaking of people living in Massett and Skidigate on the Queen Charlotte Islands she wrote:

> Here Indians of a new generation and with a new outlook on life are adjusting themselves to the modern pattern. Comfortable, attractive homes, some of them with electric light and water service, stand beside grassgrown excavations where the old community houses used to be.[119]

However, she was disturbed by what she perceived to be a lack of enthusiasm from younger people in learning traditional cultural and artistic practices, which she was concerned would lead to their eventual erosion. These problems were of particular

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[118]Mildred Valley Thornton, "Totems fall, but Haidas thrive: Haida arts dying out," *Vancouver Sun Magazine Supplement*, 31 January 1948: 10.

[119]Thornton, "Totems fall," 10.

concern in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as Native children were sent to residential schools, away from their families and people who could impart these traditions to them. To aggravate the problem even further, governing officials clamped down on traditional ceremonies, such as the potlatch, for which much of the Northwest Coast traditional art was produced. Thornton wrote:

> At Masset is Captain Brown, the only Indian left who is carving the black slate totem poles. ..It is a great pity that these distinctive arts are not being developed by the younger people, as hobbies if for no other reason. It would be a grave cultural loss should they disappear.[120]

Interestingly enough, Thornton painted the portraits of many First Nations artists, people such as Andrew Brown, Mungo Martin (see ***figure 6***) and Ellen Neel. The latter were Kwakwaka'wakw artists, whose own art practices were proof that Native art was continuing to evolve and flourish during the mid-20th century despite warnings of the contrary by concerned White citizens. Author Hilary Stewart remarks:

> Mungo Martin, Willie Seaweed and many others were actively carving, dancing and singing from the late 1940's to the 1960's, maintaining the old traditions and customs. Charlie James also taught his young granddaughter Ellen [Neel] how to carve in cedar, and by the age of twelve she was making little totem poles to sell to tourists.[121]

In the late 1940's Ellen Neel was employed to repair some of the damaged and decayed totem poles belonging to the University of British Columbia's Museum

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[120]Thornton, "Totems fall," 11.

[121]Hilary Stewart, *Looking at Totem Poles* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1993) 21-22.

of Anthropology. Her uncle, Mungo Martin, a high ranking chief and respected elder from Fort Rupert, took over the project after Neel's departure in the early 1950's. He was responsible for training a whole generation of young artists, who worked at replicating old totem poles, and creating new ones to commemorate special events. For example, in 1953 a totem pole and Kwakwaka'wakw house were erected in Thunderbird Park, Victoria, British Columbia. The event was celebrated by a three day potlatch, held by Mungo Martin. A notice for the occasion read that the event marked "the first time this ancient Indian ceremony has been staged in the open in British Columbia since the Canadian government banned the practice in 1884."[122] Although Thornton wrote about Native cultural traditions "dying," her articles can also be read as a testimony to the continuing efforts of First Nations artists to uphold and pass along traditional artistic practices and their cultural heritage.

Thornton continued to write when she was well into her seventies. She published her only book *Indian Lives and Legends*, in 1966, at the age of seventy-six. The book is a collection of notes and observations compiled over her career, and an account of her painting experiences and her travels to Native communities in British Columbia. She described her objectives in the Forward of her book:

> I made a point of searching out old people who had been a part of the early history of the province, and who could remember many of their ancient customs and traditions. Always I talked to them as I worked, to put them at their ease, and in this way obtained much valuable information first-hand. At the earliest opportunity I wrote it all down so I would not forget it in

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[122]Stewart 105.

crowded events which might follow.[123]

Some of the written narratives about people she painted are accompanied by a portrait of the person. The stories compliment the images, providing the reader/viewer with personal and historical information on the person represented. An example of this is Thornton's account of her experience painting Chief George of Sechelt, British Columbia (*figure 7*) She described approaching Chief George, who was sitting on his veranda carving wood, and asking him if she could paint his portrait. He agreed in exchange for Thornton purchasing several of his carvings. She wrote:

> I always try to make my subjects as comfortable as possible before starting to work, so George was delighted when I said that I did not want him to part with his trusty pipe and his old slouch hat.[124]

Thornton observed that Chief George seemed to be amused by the experience. She was unsure what amused him about the situation, but sensed that she was somehow the source of his beguilement. She wrote:

> Perhaps he was amused at this white woman who would go to so much trouble and expense to immortalize his features on canvas. At any rate I had the feeling that he was secretly laughing at me all the time. And not so secretly either, come to think of it... [O]ther Indians watch[ed] the strange proceedings that were afoot on George's veranda. Occasionally, they would address a remark to George in their own language and then laugh hilariously, while George strove vainly to keep a decorous expression.[125]

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[123]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* xiii.

[124]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* 182.

[125]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* 183.

Thornton claimed that she couldn't help participating in the merriment with the people around her, and that she enjoyed the experience. She wrote:

> I was not surprised when I looked at my work later, to discover that the genial countenance of Chief George smiled back at me from his portrait with a warmth of suppressed humour which was delightful.[126]

Thornton's description of her experience and Chief George's reaction to having his portrait painted, add a further dimension to the painting. The viewer is provided a glimpse of the artist's impressions about the portrait, and Chief George takes on real characteristics: expressing weariness when initially approached, and using humour to deal with an uncomfortable situation. Both he and Thornton become more human and tangible to the viewer in the process. Thornton's portraits can be viewed on their own, without the additional information presented through her stories and descriptions. Yet, her writing imparts a supplementary layer to the interpretation of the portrait, broadening the viewers understanding of her work by providing comments from the artist or the person she had painted and other information such as where the person lived, what conditions he or she was living in, and so forth.

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[126]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* 183.

## Art Criticism

Thornton became art critic for the *Vancouver Sun* in 1944, a position she held until 1959, when she decided to leave Vancouver and live in England for several years. In an article describing Vancouver's visual arts community after 1939, contemporary art critic and curator Jill Pollack writes:

> It was a time when the art community took itself very seriously. There were enough art critics around, paid and unpaid, to offer up their comments in a way which was felt befitting a city of growing artistic importance.[127]

As Pollack describes, Vancouver was becoming an increasingly diverse and vibrant arts centre. For example, the British Columbia Society of Fine Arts,[128] a group of professional artists, had been established since 1909 and was holding exhibitions on a regular basis; the influential Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts was founded in 1925; and the Vancouver Art Gallery opened its doors in 1931. Although the Gallery's founding collection consisted primarily of European art, regional art was exhibited periodically by local groups such as the British Columbia Society of Fine Arts.

The art criticism of the early 1940's expressed moral, as well as aesthetic values. It tended to focus on the artist rather than the art, reflecting more accurately

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[127]Jill Pollack, "Trying to clutch water," *Step* (May-June 1991): 98.

[128]The British Columbia Society of Fine Arts changed its name to the British Columbia Society of Artists in 1950.

the critics personal, rather than critical comments.[129] Certain critics, however, made concerted efforts to present serious discussions about art to their readers. Lorna Farrell-Ward, author of "Tradition\transition: The keys to change," in the catalogue *Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931-1983*, commented:

> In the local papers, current art issues were energetically debated. Although anecdotal and larded with regional pride, art criticism (by Bernard McEvoy of the *Province*, and Mildred Valley Thornton and Delisle Parker of the *Sun*) reflected an intense feeling that art mattered, that it questioned the values of life and could have some influence.[130]

Thornton was a well-respected art critic in her day, despite the fact that her outspoken criticism towards the proponants of modernist art seemed to run in opposition to the growing enthusiasm for the movement. She held strong opinions about certain issues, which tended to alienate her from other people. In 1936 Thornton wrote a long article in the *Canadian Spectator* outlining her view on modern art. She noted the nuances and subtleties of the movement and the influence of "social, political, scientific, philosophic and religious conditions" on the artist's work.[131] She made a distinction between modern art and what she termed "ultra-modern" art (which was in fact avant garde or abstract art). This differentiation and her critique of non-representational art became more pronounced as she grew older. She wrote:

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[129]Pollack 98.

[130]Lorna Farrell-Ward, "Tradition\transition: The keys to change," *Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931-1983* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983) 25.

[131]Mildred Valley Thornton, "Modern art," *Canadian Spectator* (18 April, 1936): n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

> In writing of Modern Art I am not referring to the ultra-modern work with its weird sensationalisms and its complicated abstractions, which find expression in the kind of picture that looks just as well upside down as right side up, and requires the beneficent aid of explanatory notes in a guide book in order that the uninitiated may enjoy its distortion and enjoy its mysteries.[132]

By the 1950's modernism and an appreciation for modernist art was well established in intellectual and artistic circles in Vancouver. Scott Watson writes: "[In Vancouver] modernism was received and supported not only by artists, but institutions, such as the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Vancouver School of Art, and the University of British Columbia."[133] Watson describes changes in the aims and policies of the Gallery, after 1951, which limited access to local artists who were interested in exhibiting their work. The Gallery was now interested in exhibiting only the "best" examples of regional art, and, as Watson notes: "The *best* art was art which was progressive and modern."[134] Doris Shadbolt was hired by the Gallery to begin an education program. Both she and her husband, artist Jack Shadbolt, along with notable Group of Seven member Lawren Harris, were leading proponants of the modernist art movement in Vancouver. Jill Pollack observed that Thornton's interest in aboriginal cultures and the important narrative componant of her own work, marginalized her from influential artistic circles in Vancouver. Pollack writes:

> Her passion [for Native cultures] made her an oddity in the art world. As an

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[132]Thornton, "Modern art," n.pag.

[133]Scott Watson, "Art in the fifties: Design, leisure, and painting in the age of anxiety," *Vancouver: Art and Artists 1930-1983* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983) 72.

[134]Watson 82.

> art critic, Thornton was a solid writer who continued in the chatty style of Palette [Delisle Parker], but without his ironic wit. While some of her statements may seem facile today, her writing was neverthless among the best alongside Palette's. She liked to contextualize an artist's work, giving background or historical information, as well as discussing the art. She tried to support everyone's efforts, sometimes going to great lengths to find a positive comment to make.[135]

Thornton remained concerned throughout her career about the level of accessibility of artistic institutions, for local artists and the general public. She argued that it was important that public spaces, such as the Vancouver Art Gallery, not alienate people, and discourage them from participating more actively in cultural and artistic processes. Through her writing at the *Sun*, she encouraged the non-initiated reader to explore the Gallery, despite any initial misgivings they might feel. She wrote:

> There is a rendez-vous in the heart of Vancouver. It is not a secret or mysterious place and you need go through no dark, devious byways to find it... If you are downtown when the inspiration takes you, you will walk west along Georgia Street and certainly know the gallery when you come to it. You may, however, suffer momentary betrayal by the white facade of a funeral parlor whose only resemblance is external... Perhaps you never had a real paint brush in your hand in your life and you may not have even a speaking acquaintance with Chinese vermilion, but something within responds to your surroundings. To be sure you may not be pleased with all you see. There are things that might seem queer, even distorted, but who, I ask you, has ever yet attained to the full perfection the vision which appears before their eyes?[136]

By the 1940's and 50's Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven had already

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[135]Pollack 98-99.

[136]Mildred Valley Thornton,"Vancouver's art gallery oasis of beaty, vision," *Vancouver Sun*, n.date 1940: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

made a significant impact on the development of an artistic style and subject matter that reflected a sense of Canadian national identity.[137] However, Thornton (along with many other Canadian artists) was concerned with what she perceived to be a general lack of interest and enthusiasm for national and local arts by Canadian art collectors and the public in general. She once stated: "Canada is brimful of tradition, and it is regretable that people interested in creative art do not make use of what they have instead of seeking stimulus in foreign fields."[138]

Through her work as art critic and curator, Thornton supported local artists such as Ellen Neel, Dorothy Kennedy, Irvine Adams, Tom Moses and Cheif Mathias Capilano by reviewing their shows in her column, and helping to organize exhibitions celebrating local talent. She provided local artists with a credibility and visibility essential to the development of an audience for their work. Thornton's art criticism reflected her own struggle for credibility and recognition as a local artist in an indifferent, and at times hostile, environment. Yet her observations and commentary moved beyond her own personal needs as an artist to reflect the diversity of art practices existing at the time.

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[137]For a discussion of the work of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, see Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1995); Anne Newlands, *The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson* (Willowdale, Ontario: Firefly Books, 1995). For an interesting interpretation of the forging of a Canadian national identity, analyzed through the work of the Group of Seven and contemporary Canadian artist Jin-me Yoon, see Brenda Lafleur, "'Resting' in history: Translating the art of Jin-me Yoon," *Generations & Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996): 217-227.

[138]Mildred Valley Thornton, "Artist speaks," *Globe and Mail* 26 March 1947: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

## Artistic and Cultural Organizations -Labor Arts Guild

From the time that Thornton arrived in Regina in 1913, she was actively involved in numerous artistic and community organizations. She was also part of a group of women that decided to form the Women's Art Association of Saskatchewan in the 1930's, set up to foster the "encouragement and advancement of painting and allied arts in the province."[139] When she first arrived in Regina she taught private art classes, later joining the Regina College, where she eventually became head of the art department. This is what one author wrote about Thornton's initial years out West:

> This intense-faced white woman, in the rough clothes she wears on the trail, is a far cry from the conventional young lady in her teens who set out from her home of Dresden, Ont., to see the world... The little money she had took her as far as Regina. Stranded, she supported herself by giving art lessons until she was appointed to the staff of the Regina college.[140]

Once Thornton moved to Vancouver, her involvement with various artistic and community organizations increased. Her interest and influence crossed artistic, cultural and political spectrums, ranging from the British Columbia Society of Artists to the Women's Press Club and the Labor Arts Guild. Her involvement in the Guild between 1944 and 1946, will be discussed at some length. The

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[139]"Art association organized in city," *Leader Post* [Regina] n.date c1932: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[140]Robert Francis, "She treks thousands of miles to paint Indian life," *Toronto Star Weekly*, 22 November 1947: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

organization maintained a strong social agenda and was highly politicized. Thornton's association with the group seemed unusual to me at first, and was perhaps the outcome of her concern that artistic and cultural institutions not exclude or alienate the general population in favour of an elite.

The Labor Arts Guild was founded in Vancouver in 1944. The Society was defined as a community effort on the part of workers in industry, business and the various arts, whose aims were to "bring into closer relationship the work of all artists with that of the organized labor movement."[141] It also attempted to "promote, develop and encourage [the] arts as democratic forces in social, educational and cultural progress through association, participation and enjoyment of all people, irrespective of race, creed, class or color."[142] John Goss was president of the Guild. He was a Marxist who admired the Soviet model and promoted Social Realism in the arts, as he once stated: "The artist should look to the labor movement, of which there is some form in every society, for his inspiration and sustenance."[143] Members of the Guild's executive committee also included architect Ross A. Lort (who designed the new Vancouver Art Gallery in 1950), poet Dorothy Livesay, artist Una Bligh Newman and Claude Donald (who worked for the National Film Board).[144]

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[141]British Columbia, Certificates of Incorporation, *The B.C. Gazette*. Victoria: Provincial Government of British Columbia (7 June 1945): 994. [British Columbia Archives 97-2902.]

[142]*The Arts and Our Town*, eds. Community Arts Survey Committee (Vancouver: Keystone Press, 1946) 39.

[143]John Goss quoted in Watson 73.

[144]Watson 73.

Social Realism, influenced by the development of Socialist Realist painting in Russia, evolved as an important art form in Canada in the early 20th century and remained an influential movement until the early 1950's.[145] Canadian artists such as Miller Britain (1912-68) and Frederick Taylor (b. 1906), were influenced by the principles of Social Realism and focused on themes related to industry and the working class.

Supporters of Social Realism favoured social commentary and strong political themes in art production; subjects reflecting the everyday realities and struggles of working class people. For example, Miller Britain and Frederick Taylor were interested in producing an art "for the people;" art which was accessible to the average person, and which reflected their struggles and everyday lives.[146] These artists felt a strong political committment towards working class struggles (and the struggles of other oppressed peoples). However, Lorna Farrell-Ward claims that in Vancouver very few artists were involved in what may broadly be called Social Realism, and when they were it took the form of documentation.[147] This movement grew out of overwhelming social and economic problems in Canadian society in the early 20th century. The Depression had severely affected living conditions for

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[145]For a more extensive discussion of Social Realism, see for example Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). For a discussion of its influence on Canadian art practices, see Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974); Frederick B. Taylor, "Impressions of art in the Soviet Union," *Canadian Art* 9.2 (Christmas 1951): 83-85.

[146]Taylor 85.

[147]Farrell-Ward 27.

working class and farming populations, and labour movements were pressuring governments for better working conditions in industrial sectors. Many other sectors of society, including intellectuals, artists and professionals, were intent on transforming exploitative economic and social structures, and were engaged in some form of political activism. Art became a means of communicating some of these politically motivated ideals.

Thornton was spokeswoman for the Labor Arts Guild. She helped organize an exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery called *British Columbia at Work*, which took place between November 21st and December 10th, 1944.[148] Professional and amateur artists alike exhibited their work. The show consisted of 150 works from various media, and the criterion for inclusion was subject matter alone –a celebration of labour. Thornton, and other organizers, viewed the exhibition as an opportunity to dispel the impression that the art gallery existed to serve the interests of the privileged few.[149] The rhetoric surrounding the event promoted the value of Socialist Realist representations and the realistic handling of social themes, seen by organizers to be in opposition to the ideology of modernism, which promulgated a more personal language of experimentation with abstract forms.[150] Thornton

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[148]A second and final exhibition entitled *British Columbia at Work* was organized by the Labor Arts Guild and held at the Vancouver Art Gallery in November 1945.

[149]Interestingly enough, it was members of the Gallery's exhibition committee, notably Lawren Harris, Jock Macdonald, and W.P. Weston, who approved the project on these grounds. See the *Vancouver Art Gallery Bulletin*, 12.1 (September 1944), cited in Watson 73.

[150]Watson 74.

described the importance of the exhibition in an article she wrote for the *Vancouver Sun*:

> Organized by the Labor Arts Guild, this is one of the most significant exhibits ever held here being strongly reminiscent of Russia's Art for the People policy. It has the live, breezy, robust quality of things that are both democratic and popular. It is a matter of great pride that the relatively small population of this province can produce so much work of genuine power and ability. Artists who subscribe to the various 'isms' can do absolutely anything and say that it is what they saw, but here the element of truth cannot be flouted.[151]

The demise of the Labor Arts Guild occured in 1946, with the onslaught of the Cold War. Many Canadians were persecuted for their interest or association with Socialist or Communist organizations and political parties, including John Goss, who was a member of the Labour Progressive Party. He was arrested in New York by the F.B.I. in 1949, and deported to Canada. When he returned to Vancouver he was blacklisted as a Communist, and eventually moved back to England in 1950.[152] The end of the Guild symbolized a shift in artistic activity in British Columbia. Realistic handling of social themes was abandoned for a more personal language of experimentation with abstract form. By the late fifties few artists were concerned with representing social issues in their work.[153]

Thornton's association with the Guild does not appear to have led to the

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[151]Mildred Valley Thornton, "Labor Arts Guild shows how exhibition can succeed," *Vancouver Sun* 23 November 1944: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[152]Watson 74.

[153]Watson 74.

same kind of persecution John Goss experienced. However, she remained sceptical of the modernist movement in the 1950's-60's, at times criticizing it publically in her reviews. This led to confrontations with influential proponents of avant-garde approaches in the Vancouver arts community. The following passage is drawn from a letter to the editor, published in the *Vancouver Sun*. It questions some of Thornton's commentary about the Vancouver Art Gallery's political agenda:

> I was pleased to learn from Mrs. Mildred Valley Thornton's article in your paper that there is nothing personal in her criticism of the Vancouver Art Gallery Regime. Rather she is the spokesman of a large group of malcontents... However, she should not let her enthusiasm overcome her respect for facts. The membership of the gallery has shown a steady increase each year and now has some 600 more members than a year ago... Are all these hundreds of people the "clique" which she claims Mr. [Lauren] Harris dominates? Certainly criticism, jealousy and back-biting alone never have culminated in this much-needed contribution to the cultural life of Vancouver.[154]

Despite differences of opinion, Thornton had a great deal of appeal and support from the public during her lifetime. She was extremely pro-active and committed to her work, and her frankness, curiosity, and respect for others were attributes that people seemed to recognize and appreciate.

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[154]Mildred G. Caple, letter, *Vancouver Sun*, n.date c1958: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

## Other Painting Forms: Landscapes and Commissioned Portraits

Though Thornton is known primarily for her paintings of Native people she also produced landscape paintings in oils and water colours and commissioned portraits. Thornton's landscapes were popular with art collectors, and she sold many of them during her lifetime. The artist often referred to these as her "bread and butter,"[155] since they were the only paintings she agreed to sell to support her artistic career. ***Figure 8*** is a landscape painting in the collection of Mildred Valley Thornton's son, J. M. Thornton. He described his mother's painting in the following terms:

> Though my mother's primary interest was to 'paint the Indians' she was also an accomplished landscape painter in both oils and watercolours and her work became much in demand. Her style has frequently been described as "magestic, powerful and bold." Vivid colour –particularly in her watercolours– became an earmark of her work. She was tremendously prolific and was often compared to her near-contemporary Emily Carr (much to my mother's annoyance) and frequently identified with the Group of Seven.[156]

During the *41st Annual Exhibition* held by the British Columbia Society of Artists in 1951, including sixty artists living and working in British Columbia, Thornton's painting *Okanagan Landscape*, was one of only four paintings selling for over $300.00.[157] Private galleries and auction houses continued to buy and sell her

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[155]Margaret Ecker Francis 97.

[156]J. M. Thornton, "personal notes," 1.

[157]Vancouver Art Gallery, *41st Annual Exhibition of the B.C. Society of Artists* (Vancouver: The Gallery, 1951): n.pag. [Files on fiche, National Gallery of Canada,

paintings throughout the 1970's, 80's and 90's.[158] For example, the 1981-82 *Canadian Art Sales Index* indicates that Thornton's oil painting entitled *Prairie Town*, sold for $2000.00.[159] Thornton's landscape paintings tended to fetch a higher price than her portraits on the art market. The same 1981-82 *Canadian Art Sales Index* notes that Thornton's portrait entitled *Chief Dan Kennedy*, sold for only $600.00. Several collectors I spoke with in British Columbia, including Anthony Westbridge, current representative of Thornton's estate and owner of Westbridge Fine Arts, a private gallery in Vancouver, and Reg Ashwell, private collector and friend of the artist, claimed that many people who acquired Thornton's paintings tended to be passionate about her work and were reluctant to part with it.[160]

Thornton also painted commissioned portraits early in her career, virtually abandoning this practice later on. In the 1920's and 30's Thornton painted several leading political figures, including Prime Minister Arthur Meighan (1932), Sir Frederick William Gordon Haultain (c1933), one-time Premier of the Northwest Territories, and Chancellor of the University of Saskatchewan, and Dr. W. D. Cowan (c1930), Member of Parliament from Saskatchewan and Mayor of Regina. She also painted prominent female political leaders such as Nellie McClung (c1934)

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Ottawa, Ontario.]

[158]Anthony Westbridge, *Canadian Art Sales Index 1981-82* (Vancouver: Left Bank Publications, 1982): 103. The Westbridge Fine Arts Gallery in Vancouver also represents Thornton's work.

[159]Westbridge 103.

[160]Reg Ashwell, personal interview, 22 October 1997; Anthony Westbridge, personal interview, 21 October 1997.

and Tilly Jean Rolston (c1945), the first woman Member of Parliament in British Columbia.

A comparison between the painting of Kwakwaka'wakw leader Maggie Frank (see ***figure 9***) and the commissioned portrait of Sir Frederick Haultain (see ***figure 10***), and current prices for both portraits reveals an interesting development. It has been pointed out by several art dealers, including Anthony Westbridge, that generally portraits depicting chiefs wearing elaborate ceremonial headdresses and other adornments, or well-known historical figures, such as chief and carver Mungo Martin, sell for higher prices than portraits of people who are relatively unknown outside of their communities and are dressed in regular everyday clothing. Perhaps, this is because art collectors are less interested in purchasing unromanticized portraits of Native people; it would be like having a picture hanging on the wall of someone they did not know. For instance, in the fall of 1997, a private art dealer in Victoria was attempting to sell Thornton's portrait of Maggie Frank for $7500.00. Frank is featured in profile, close-up. The work has high chromatic value and patterning detail on the surface. The figure is wearing a ceremonial headdress adorned with layers of ermine fur and a carved and painted Eagle crest frontlet. Draped around her shoulders is an elaborately decorated and colourful button blanket. She was from a prominant family, and was a well-known elder from Comox, British Columbia. The portrait hung in the shop next to Thornton's painting of Sir Frederick William Gordon Haultain, which was selling for a mere $3500.00 in comparison. Haultain, who may be described as a relatively obscure

historical figure today, is portrayed in three-quarter view seated in a chair with his legs crossed. Stylistically, the portrait is fairly reserved, with a predominance of dark drab colours, and less expressionistic brush strokes than the Frank picture. What is interesting is the assumption that the portrait of Maggie Frank would be more attractive to potential buyers in 1997, hence the difference in price with the Haultain painting. Further probing could lead to other questions, such as: "Is the price discrepancy between the Frank and the Haultian portraits simply a reflection of aesthetic differences in the works and particular notions of public taste at the time in which the sale was taking place, or was it related to changing perceptions of First Nations people and their relationship to mainstream Canadian society?" Another question is whether Thornton felt a greater freedom when painting aboriginal people, enticing her to experiment with colours and formalist elements? For example, the fact that Haultain was paying for his portrait, gave him some control over the representation. He may have been a mediator of the style of the painting, and had the power to influence the work, by accepting or rejecting what did not please him.

## Public Lectures and "Championing the Indian Cause"

> As I came to know more about [the Indians] I realized how much more important our similarities were than our differences. Gradually I became convinced that the differences are only in degree, not in kind –that the Indian is capable of achievement in any field as the white man. I felt too that our native races had often been misinterpreted in the history books, and that they are much misunderstood today.
>
> Mildred Valley Thornton (1950)

The Association of Canadian Clubs invited Thornton to give a series of lecture tours about her Collection of paintings of Native people to their members across Canada. Thornton took advantage of these venues to raise public awareness about the social and economic conditions of Native communities in Western Canada. She also attempted to demystify the members' perceptions about First Nations people. In one article she claimed: "If I can create a better understanding of the Canadian Indian, I feel that I have done my part towards eliminating racial prejudices towards these noble people."[161]

The lecture tour schedules were gruelling affairs. On one particular tour that took place in March and April, 1947, Thornton travelled by train from Vancouver to Ottawa, visiting twenty-one cities in forty days, sometimes giving more than one presentation on the same day. Her lecture for this tour was entitled, *Indians As I Have Known Them*. She would present slides of her portraits and other paintings,

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[161]Thornton quoted in *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, 7 March 1947: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

and talk about the stories and family histories people had transmitted to her during her travels. She also discussed social and economic conditions in Native communities. Thornton believed that relationships between First Nations people, the Canadian government and the rest of the Canadian population needed to change. Some of her suggestions were interesting, such as providing Native children with increased access to basic and higher education, encouraging economic development in Native communities, and underlining the importance of Native communities holding onto traditional cultural practices. For example, in an article published in the *Edmonton Journal* entitled "Urges better education for Indians, greater interest in their cultures," Thornton stated:

> If Indians are to lead successful lives they must be given more opportunity to succeed. An important factor in this respect is education. They should be educated as far as possible in the same way as the white people.[162]

However, the paternalistic and authoritative tone of Thornton's advocacy was also striking. For example, in the same article Thornton warned that "the beautiful arts and crafts of the Indians would pass away" unless non-Native Canadians took an "active role and helpful interest in such things."[163] She claimed: "It is to awaken such interest that I am making this tour of Canada."[164]

Thornton seemed intent on "devoting her life to preserving Indian culture in

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[162]"Urges better education for Indians, greater interest in their cultures," *Edmonton Journal*, 4 March 1947: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[163]Thornton, "Urges," n.pag.

[164]Thornton, "Urges," n.pag.

oil paintings," as one journalist described her actions.[165] In an article in the *London Free Press*, entitled "Pleads cause of Indians with fellow Canadians," the author claimed: "Not lightly has Mrs. Thornton undertaken to plead the cause of this great silent company of original Canadians, to whom we are so ignorant"; and that the artist urged her listeners to "think of [Indians] as people."[166] Thornton is quoted as asserting: "They are people brave enough to fight for us [during the Second World War] and good enough to share with us all the great Dominion offers."[167] Thornton went even further in her actions. While in Ottawa, she set up an appointment to discuss "Indian matters" with a joint committee of the Senate and the House of Commons, in an attempt to revamp the Indian Act.[168]

Her role as "message bearer" or "spokesperson" for Native people was problematic; her voice was heard over those of First Nations people themselves, who might have defined issues concerning their communities in very different terms. For example, Chief Dan Kennedy-Ochankugahe, a college graduate and writer for the Regina *Leader Post* in the 1950's, was a friend of Thornton's. He wrote about the importance of his own education, but also described some of the dehumanizing experiences he went through at residential school. He wrote:

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[165]"Mildred Thornton, city artist, dies," *Vancouver Sun* 27 July 1967: n.pag. [National Gallery of Canada Archive, Ottawa, Ontario.]

[166]"Pleads cause of Indians with fellow Canadians," *London Free Press*, 27 March 1947: 12.

[167]Thornton, "Pleads cause," 12.

[168]*Vancouver Sun*, n.date April 1947: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

> In 1886, I was roped into the government school at Lebret. They cut off my braids, threw me in the washtub and put the white man's clothes on me. They then took me to the office to enroll me and through an interpreter asked me for my name. I told them Ochankugahe. Six months later I picked up enough English to get by and when they were addressing me as Dan Kennedy, I asked: "Who are you calling?" It was only then that I knew that they stole my name and gave me a Pale Face name.[169]

The notion of Thornton, a non-Native person, "championing the Indian cause" raises important questions, such as: "Why did she feel the need to speak for Native people?" and "Why weren't Native people themselves being listened to by the rest of the Canadian population?" These questions are important and I will come back to them in the third chapter.

Thornton did have the support of friends and acquaintances she had met over the years. As the following quote indicates:

> Mrs. Thornton's Indian friends have expressed their appreciation of her efforts in many generous and delicate ways. For her Canadian Club lectures she wore a beautiful costume of white doeskin, beaded and fringed. This was loaned to her by Mrs. Dan Kennedy of the Assiniboine Reserve in Saskatchewan.[170]

Chief Dan Kennedy-Ochankugahe once referred to Thornton as an "ambassador of good-will to the white people." He and Thornton corresponded regularly, and she collected articles he had written for local newspapers. Kennedy-Ochankugahe's wife loaned Thornton a doeskin dress that she had made, adorned with elaborate

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[169]Dan Kennedy-Ochankugahe, "Will Saskatchewan Indians be granted, will they accept the provincial vote?" *Leader Post* [Regina], 8 August 1956: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[170]Colman 14.

beadwork. She loved to wear this outfit during her lecture tours and for special occasions. ***Figure 11*** is a photograph of Thornton wearing the dress. ***Figure 12*** is a picture of Mrs Kennedy's daughter in the same dress, taken circa 1940. The following is an excerpt of a letter Dan Kennedy wrote to Thornton from the Assiniboine Reserve in Montmartre, Saskatchewan, after her lecture tour across Canada in 1947:

Dear Mrs. Thornton

> Congratulations for your successful tour of the Dominion in the interests of Art and our cause. You have done a magnificent job as our ambassador of good will. I have watched your progress, as the press dispatches traced your progress like a meteor across the Dominion.
> Our only regret is that the dress is unfinished –it would require another three or four weeks to finish the beadwork on the sleeves above the fringes.
> If you would ship it back to us, my wife will put the finishing touches on it.
>
> With the best of wishes
> Sincerely, Ochankugahe (Dan Kennedy)

Thornton's interest spilled over into many different fields. She was extremely active and vocal on Native issues, as well as in many other areas. These activities sometimes took her away from her own art practice, but she remained profoundly committed to her work as an artist and to her Collection of paintings of Native people in particular.

# Chapter III

## The Collection

> There is no art in the past. Art is something you can reactualize. It involves rememberance and building in objects other kinds of memories."
>
> Joseph Adande (1992)

This chapter will take a more in depth look at what Thornton referred to as her "Collection" of paintings of First Nations people. This body of work had a special significance for the artist, who refused to sell any individual works during her lifetime in the hope that one day all of the paintings would be exhibited together in a public gallery. Thornton believed that the Collection represented a visual and historical "record" of important aboriginal leaders and elders in Western Canada, and documented aspects of First Nations cultures. The urgency of her mandate stemmed from the prevalent 19th century Euro-Canadian belief that Native cultures were "vanishing," and Thornton wished to chronicle their histories before it was too late.

Throughout her career she maintained a very hands-on approach, travelling all across Canada, visiting people in their communities and in their homes, painting their portraits directly on the spot. Her approach to painting can be described as a process, beginning with the importance of gaining information and experience first hand by talking with people, exchanging news and ideas, and developing relationships through renewed visits. Thornton cultivated these relationships over

the years and developed a technique, adapted to the environment she was working in and the time constraints of the people she was painting. Several of Thornton's portraits will be closely considered, as a means of understanding her approach and some of the outcomes of her undertaking.

## Beginnings

> Whatever place the future will asign to Mildred Valley Thornton as an artist cannot be predicted now, but never will she be denied the distinction of being a Canadian woman who during her lifetime accomplished one of the most difficult tasks of all -that of reconciling the instincts of a wife and mother with her yearnings towards creative artistry. In achieving success, she has undoubtedly enriched the life of her family and the storied records of her country.
>
> Margaret Ecker Francis (1947)

In 1926 Thornton gave birth to twin boys. She was thirty-six years old. This must have been an important period of change in her life, for it was several years later, in 1929, that she began to focus her own art production on painting Native people, an endeavour which would become a life-long project, central to her artistic career. When asked what circumstances led her to undertake such a project, she usually replied by telling a story about the first portraits she painted at the First Nations encampment on the Regina fairgrounds. She wrote:

> When I was a young woman, living in Regina and the mother of twins, I saw in the evening paper where an Indian baby had been born [at] the Fair Grounds. How I should love to see it, I thought –a brand new little

papoose![171]

This romanticized image of a new born child in a "papoose" incited Thornton to head to the fairgrounds. She brought her two young boys, because, as she put it: "Baby-sitters are a modern innovation, then unheard of –you took 'em or you stayed home."[172] She approached the spot where the baby had been born, yet was not sure what to do next. She wrote:

> I hesitated outside the teepee, not wishing to intrude but someone spoke to me and I said how much I should like to see the new baby. Instantly, the flap of the teepee was thrown open with a gesture of welcome. It was clean and sweet and cool inside. Men and women were sitting in quiet conversation. Stretched across the teepee from pole to pole was a tiny hammock in which the baby lay, snug and warm.[173]

She then described people's surprise and delight with her own children: "Two of a kind, dressed exactly the same, and looking as much alike as could be."[174] She felt that both her curiosity about the baby and people's interest in her twin boys was a fair exchange. The day after this event, Thornton returned to the fairground with her paint box, hoping to paint the portrait of certain people she had made the acquaintence of on her previous visit. She ended up painting the portraits of Peter Weasel-Skin and Strong Eagle.[175] These are her impressions of that first experience:

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[171]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* viii.

[172]Thornton, "unpublished forward," 3.

[173]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* viii.

[174]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* ix.

[175]Unfortunately, I was unable to locate images of these first portraits.

> These first two Indian portraits established the pattern for all the work that followed later on. I painted Indians wherever I found them, in whatever they were wearing, with an absolute disregard of formality and prearranged plan. The legends, the art, the history, the way of life and spiritual concepts [of these people] first commanded my attention and then my enduring respect.[176]

What began as simple curiosity transformed, over the years, into genuine interest and a more complex understanding of First Nations cultures. Thornton spent thirty-five years devoted to her project, accumulating an extensive Collection of paintings of people from over twenty-five communities across Western Canada.[177] Later on in her life she reminisced about those initial years when she began her work, writing:

> How could I know that I was committing myself to a task that, through many long years to come, would never let me go? How could I guess that these people, the first inhabitants of our beloved land, could so creep into my heart as to possess it utterly, and the one compelling urge of my life should be to record as much as I could of their fleeting history? In time, no effort would be too laborious, no sacrifice too great, to achieve this desired end.[178]

Thornton travelled on numerous occasions to Native communities all across Western Canada. During most of these trips she travelled alone, by boat, train, bus, car, horseback, foot, and whatever other means available, seeking out people she wished to paint. Thornton had to transport enough paints, canvases and supplies,

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[176]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* x.

[177]Thornton made a point of representing people from different communities. She made slides of her portraits that she used during her lecture tours. They were organized according to the nation the person belonged to, for instance Blood, Cree, Okanagan, Tsimshian, and so forth.

[178]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* x.

including a slide projector and slides of her paintings, for periods of up to eight weeks.[179] She talked about these excursions as being exhausting. They demanded weeks of preparation beforehand. She once stated:

> What you needed mainly was physical endurance. I usually returned home with every canvas used and as much improvised material as I could acquire as well. I would have crowded six months' work into a month or so of effort, but it sometimes took me nearly six months to recover from the orgy of expended energy. Then I was ready and eager to set out again.[180]

Reg Ashwell accompanied Thornton to Vancouver Island, when she was in her seventies. She wished to paint renowned Nuu-chah-nulth sculptor Jimmy John. Ashwell explained that Thornton was determined to undertake the expedition despite the fact that she was "not long back from the hospital, after being knocked out again by the blood malady that plagued her."[181] He described loading up his little car with Thornton's paints, paint brushes, canvases, as well as her projector and slides of her paintings. Attempting to locate Jimmy John was no easy task, and when he was finally found he initially refused to have his portrait painted, being busy in his workshop. Thornton eventually persuaded him to sit for her, by showing him slides of other portraits she had painted, and offering him money to compensate him for the time spent away from his own work. Ashwell provided a

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[179]Thornton usually ran out of canvases on these excursions, that is why many of her paintings were done on bristol board, cardboard, wood and any other flat, hard surface she could get her hands on.

[180]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* xiii.

[181]Reg Ashwell, "Tribute to a lady who painted Indians," *Vancouver Sun*, 8 April, 1971: A5.

description of Thornton's painting style:

> With a few sure lines from a piece of charcoal, Mildred sketched an outline of the face. Then out came the paints and brushes. After 25 minutes Jimmy announced firmly and in no uncertain terms that he would pose no longer. The speed with which Mildred worked was nothing short of amazing, as her brush fairly flew over the canvas. The perspiration was actually dripping from her face, no doubt because of the extreme effort of concentration.[182]

Ashwell, and other family members, were concerned that Thornton's determination in pursuing her work when she was older and not well, may have aggravated her illness. However, despite these hardships, and the difficulty of leaving her family behind for extended periods to travel to remote areas, Thornton enjoyed meeting with people and learning about their lives. She is quoted as saying:

> When I go on the trail, I drop all my cares, physical and mental. I accept the Indians on their own ground, and no matter how hard the trip, I always return refreshed in mind and body.[183]

Reg Ashwell has also written about visiting Thornton's old home, on Comox Street in Vancouver (which is no longer standing). He described it as a sort of museum, with art work from First Nations artists exhibited throughout. Her house was also full of her own paintings, which hung everywhere or were stacked against the walls, one behind the other, due to lack of space. Ashwell provided a vivid description of Thornton's home:

> What I saw in these rooms is almost past accurate description. Small totem poles, and other Indian carvings of every description were everywhere. They covered the window ledges and table tops, and the larger ones, including a

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[182]Ashwell, "Tribute," A6.

[183]Colman 7.

> fine Kwakiutl ceremonial paddle carved from yellow cedar, stood on the floor, or leaned against a wall... But what really captivated me was the color and vigor of Mildred's paintings. They were even more numerous than her collection of native art. Some of the many canvases were landscapes, [however] the Indian paintings were the most numerous of all.[184]

Thornton eventually moved out of her family home in the mid-1960's. She placed her paintings in safety deposit vaults for safe-keeping,[185] and sold a portion of her collection of Native art to the Royal British Columbia Museum, being unable to house all of these objects in her small apartment.[186]

Thornton's "Collection" was comprised of a series of approximately 270 paintings, including over 215 portraits of Native men and women, which she considered to be the core of her work. She also used oils and water colours to depict aspects of traditional Native cultures, festivals and other ceremonial events. For

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[184]Ashwell, "Tribute," A3.

[185]Elizabeth Forbes, "Artist believes 25 year-old dream could come true," *Victoria Daily Times*, 26 August 1958: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[186]The Museum purchased over forty art pieces, such as masks, small carved totems, root baskets, decorated aprons, and so forth, from at least six First Nations, including the Bella Coola, Haida, Coast Salish and Nuu-chah-nulth. The Museum also has in its possession Thornton's portrait of noted Kwakwaka'wakw carver Dan Cranmer, and a beaded buckskin dress that Thornton would sometimes wear during her lectures, which had belonged to poet Pauline Johnson. Pauline Johnson was born on the Six Nations reserve near Brantford, Ontario. Her father was Mohawk and her mother was English, yet she proclaimed herself "wholly Indian." Her success as a poet and performer was predicated on her allegiance to her aboriginal identity. I find Thornton's interest and connection to Pauline Johnson very interesting. Gerald McMaster has written about issues of mimicry and how non-Native people frequently masqueraded as "Indians" (McMaster, *Edward Poitras* 28). He claims that mimetic display may well describe those who desire "perverse alterity;" the idea of being or becoming an Other, like an "Indian." This mimetic act may project the imitators fantasy, and involves exoticism and fetishism. Taking on a temporary "Indian" identity could mean real or imagined freedom, notoriety or popularity.

instance, in ***figure 13***, entitled *Mask Dance of the Bella Coolas*, Thornton has portrayed people dancing, and others seated or standing observing the ceremony. Several of the people standing are wearing ceremonial atire, such as masks or woven blankets draped over their shoulders, and appear to be taking part in the activities. In 1953 Thornton was invited to take part in a celebration of dances, songs and festivities, held by the Bella Coola Nation.[187] One author described the gathering as a "convention," where the "old-time dances that had not been performed for many years" would take place.[188] The celebration coincided with the recently lifted government ban on potlatches and other First Nations cultural celebrations.[189] I believe it was during this occasion that Thornton produced the painting *Mask Dance of the Bella Coolas*, or at least the sketches for the painting. The author of the article "Cross-country chat" stated:

> The first night the big ceremonial dances will be performed, the next night Mrs. Thornton has been asked to show slides of the pictures she has done of Bella Coola Indians... Indians from villages round-about will come to Bella Coola for the festivities and while they "festivate" Mrs. Thornton will be busy making paintings to round out her collection of paintings of the Bella Coola Indians.[190]

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[187]The Aural History Department of the British Columbia Archives have in their possession a series of audiocassettes of songs by people from the Bella Coola and Kwakwaka'wakw nations. The tapes were recorded in 1945 by Thornton with the collaboration of various people from these communities, including Mungo Martin, Maggie Frank, Alex Pootlas and Mrs. Dick Snow

[188]G.J. Tranter. "Cross-country chat," *Canadian Antique Association* (Spring 1953): 28.

[189]Anti-potlatch measures were repealed in 1951.

[190]Tranter 28.

Thornton was invited to numerous potlatches and other celebrations, where she would sometimes sketch or write down what she had witnessed. Some of the sketches were transformed into paintings, and the written material published in journals or newspapers.

Thornton's Collection needs to be examined in the context of art production in the early 20th century. Many Euro-Canadian artists, including Thornton, Emily Carr and Edmund Morris (1871-1913), were interested in creating a "record" of Native cultures, and fused artistic and ethnographic approaches.[191] Therefore, a discussion of Thornton's Collection would have to include not only her paintings, but also written documentation such as newspaper articles, her book and personal notes that accompanied her visual material.[192] Thornton chose to highlight historical experiences and traditional cultural practices in her writing, instead of current day political and economic struggles. These latter issues surfaced at times, but were buried under romanticized appraisals, blatent stereotypes and patronizing language. In the following quote, Thornton explained why she chose to represent these particular issues in her work. She wrote:

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[191]For a discussion of Edmund Morris's portraits of Native people see Jean S. McGill, *Edmund Morris: Frontier Artist* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1984); *The Diaries of Edmund Montague Morris: Western Journeys 1907-1910*, transcribed by Mary Fitz-Gibbon (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1985).

[192]I found quite a selection of this material in papers, notes, letters and newspaper articles that Thornton had kept. Before her death she had intended to publish a second manuscript on her experiences painting Native people from Alberta and Saskatchewan. The notes for this document are in the possession of her son J. M. Thornton, who has contacted various publishing houses over the years in an attempt to get the manuscript published.

> It was many years ago, when I was living in Regina, I began to realize how fast the Indians were losing their old cultures, including to a very large extent, their ancient arts and crafts. Even the colorful costumes are rarely worn, except on a few ceremonial occasions... It was the elders of the tribes I usually sought out and asked to pose for me.[193]

When Thornton exhibited her work she carefully inscribed the person's name, nation and region they were from. Often, attached to the painting, was a card providing further information about the painting or the people in the painting. One author noted:

> Not one of her portraits could be entitled simply "Indian Chief." It is, "Chief Billy Assu of Cape Mudge, that fine old man who is one of the most respected personalities on the Coast." Or, "Chief Isaac of Kispiox."[194]

During her lifetime she published feature articles in local newspapers on particular individuals and her travels to Native communities. She also gave lectures and talks on her work, which frequently involved descriptions and stories about the people she painted. Whether Thornton intended written and visual material to be exhibited together is unclear, yet read together they provide a broader and more indepth understanding of attitudes and relationships between Native and non-Native people of that period.

In one article, typical of Thornton's writing style, she chronicled her encounter with a Cree man named Manitouwassis and his wife, who were from Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan (***Figure 14***). She described Manitouwassis as being over a

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[193]Ashwell, "Tribute," A5.

[194]Colman 7.

hundred years old, and noted his participation in the buffalo hunts of the Prairies in the early 19th century. These were her impressions upon entering their home:

> I found the two of them sitting on the bare floor of their tiny one-room dwelling, just as they had been wont to sit in their teepee years before. Between them, without the formality of dishes, were hunks of bread and the remains of wild fowl. Two cots, a stove and a single chair comprised their furniture.[195]

Thornton required the assistance of a young neighbour when attempting to communicate with the couple, since she did not speak Cree.[196] She did not learn any Native languages over the years, and was aware of the limitations this placed on her ability to communicate with people. However, she did not perceive this as a problem. In response to an enquiry into how she came to represent people whose languages and cultures were so different from her own, she answered:

> Many have asked if I have learned any of the Indian languages. Since I have been continually going about among different tribes who spoke totally different languages (and often many dialects within the same language) it would have availed me little to learn any of them. I discovered early in my travels that there was one tongue all could understand -the language of the heart, and that would take you anywhere.[197]

After Thornton explained her intentions to Manitouwassis, she described

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[195]Mildred Valley Thornton, "He hunted buffalo on Western Plains," *Vancouver Sun* 9 May 1942: 10.

[196]Most of the young people living on reservations at the time were fluent in English and could assist with translation.

[197]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* xi.

how his wife[198] climbed a ladder leading to a loft above their living quarters and descended with a dunnage bag, which contained a beautifully beaded garment and other objects, such as a peace-pipe. Thornton painted Manitouwassis dressed in this outfit, smoking the pipe. The starkness of the surroundings is contrasted with the bright colours of the beading and the calm and contemplative expression on Manitouwassis' face. The attention of the viewer is drawn to the man seated. What is not explicitly expressed by Thornton, yet can be read into the painting is how Manitouwassis and his wife preserved these ceremonial garments over the years. Many Native families were obliged to sell skilled beadwork and other family heirlooms of considerable personal and historical value to make ends meet during dyre economic periods. In this case, despite the poverty this couple was subjected to, they decided to hold onto their cherished belongings, even though they would have undoubtedly fetched an important sum from collectors. Thornton ended the article saying: "Only the picture and the memories remain for me as a record of one of my most interesting experiences and as a link with the romantic past."[199] This meeting obviously had an important impact on the artist. I think this can also be observed from the portrait she painted of Manitouwassis, yet she chose to emphasize and remember the "romantic" past of this man, side-stepping the seemingly larger and more pressing economic issues facing this couple at that period.

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[198]No name was provided by Thornton and as far as I know her portrait was not painted.

[199]Thornton, "He hunted," 10.

Thornton's written accounts, such as the story of her encounter with Manitouwassis and his wife, tended to construct homogenous, romanticized ethnographic representations, which limited an understanding of the complexity of Native cultures. Loretta Todd has written that the appropriation of Native cultural expressions begins with the question of who has the power to name.[200] Many Euro-Canadian people felt that traditional structures within Native communites had broken down in the early 20th century, and that Native cultures were no longer essentially oral cultures, and therefore that Native people's authority over their cultural expressions either did not exist, or was not relevant.[201] Thornton greatly esteemed and respected the Native elders she met and painted, and attempted to "preserve" Native cultural expressions through her paintings and writings, some examples include the depiction and description of ceremonial dances, such as the *Mask Dance of the Bella Coola's* (***figure 13***) and examples of Native art work, like the beadwork on the front of Manitouwassis' jacket (***figure 14***). But inherent in her project was the danger of fetishizing Native people, who in turn became mere objects of consumption for the Euro-Canadian viewer. Loretta Todd writes:

> [U]ltimately, the valorization of peripheral cultures is frequently undertaken through acts of cultural appropriation. In an extension of the concept of property and colonial conquest, the artists do not value or respect cultural difference, but instead seek to own difference, and with this ownership to increase their worth. They become image barons, story conquistadors and merchants of the exotic.[202]

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[200]Todd 26.

[201]Todd 26.

[202]Todd 30.

Thornton's written material served documentary purposes. It was also used by other Euro-Canadian journalists and writers as a reference and source of understanding of First Nations cultures, dispossessing Native people of their ownership over cultural expressions. For Loretta Todd, cultural appropriation disavows history and denies aboriginal people a place as exercizers of cultural autonomy and self-determination. She writes: "Cultural autonomy signifies a right to cultural specificity, a right to one's origins and histories as told from within the culture and not mediated from without."[203]

## Thornton's Painting Approach

Another important and interesting feature of Thornton's project lies in the painting experience itself. The artist practiced a common sketching technique that she perfected over time, which included working directly on the spot with an astonishing rapidity. Thornton had received the conventional training of a professional portraitist through her studies at the Ontario College of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago, and was indeed commissioned to produce several portraits of prominent political figures such as former Prime Minister Arthur Meighen. Although the narrative component of Thornton's work remained consistent, even static, throughout her professional career, the formalist elements of her work were

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[203]Todd 24.

what she constantly struggled with. In many ways Thornton's work fits neatly into early modernist artistic trends in Canada, her work retained some elements of expressionistic brush strokes, Fauvist colour application and exotic subject matter. However, these were not consistent. Her work bridged different schools of painting, including the Group of Seven, Fauvism, traditional Canadian portrait painting of the early 20th century, and even American Realism of the 1920's and 30's.

Thornton's interest in portrait painting grew out of a well-established tradition in Euro-Canadian art production. Portraiture evolved as a prominent art form in Europe and was brought over to North America in the early 17th century, with the arrival of the first European colonists. Portrait painters traditionally relied on commissions by wealthy patrons for their subsistance, and the ruling classes of the newly established French and later British colonies provided artists with the opportunity to practice their profession. Portraits were generally reserved for the elite –wealthy merchants, the nobility and political, military or religious figures– in other words, those who had the means to commission artists. Portraits often "glorified" the sitter, identifying them as an "exceptional" person, or serving to denote an important historical figure. For instance, ***figure 15*** is a portrait of Mohawk leader Joseph Brant (1743-1807), a statesman and an ally of the British, who encouraged the conversion of the Iroquoian people to Christianity.[204] The

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[204]Joseph Brandt has been described in the literature as being Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, Huron, Shawnee, Cherokee and "Half-breed" caucasian. See for example Harvey Chalmers, *Joseph Brandt: Mohawk* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1955); Isabel Thompson Kelsay, *Joseph Brandt 1743-1807: Man of Two Worlds* (Syracuse University Press, 1984).

artist, William Berczy (1749-1813), has portrayed Brant in the Neo-Classical style, reminiscent of a statue of a Roman orator. He is depicted standing in a landscape, his horn pipe strapped across his chest, holding a rifle, signaling him as an important military leader. His totem or clan allegiance (considered a "pagan" symbol by Europeans, and inappropriate for the representation of a Christian convert) is barely visible on his pipe bag.[205]

Most portrait painters worked within the confines of their studios, developing elaborate and studied sketches of their sitters before producing the final canvas. Curator Dorothy Farr noted that notable Canadian portrait painter Lilias Torrence Newton (1896-1980) generally began a portrait with quick pencil sketches and then an oil sketch before the final oil painting in order to search the personality in the features of the sitter. Sometimes, it could take up to fifteen sittings to complete a work.[206] Torrence Newton described her approach in these terms:

> It's impossible to jump into a portrait. It takes time to make up my mind about the best, most attractive pose, and as I sketch, my subject becomes natural, more unconscious, and I catch an impression I may have missed at first.[207]

The contrast with Thornton's approach is striking. She usually painted people in under sixty minutes, paying particular attention to facial features; the eyes,

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[205]Lisa Gaye Henderson, "Emblems of identity: An introduction to the painting of Indian portraits in Canada," Masters Thesis, Concordia University, 1991: 20.

[206]Dorothy Farr, *Lilias Torrence Newton 1896-1980* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1981) 19.

[207]Lilias Torrence Newton quoted in Farr 19.

the lines of the face, the expression. Thornton adopted this technique in the early 1930's, when she shifted the focus of her work to concentrate primarily on painting non-commissioned portraits of Native people. She began meshing modern techniques, such as impressionistic and highly chromatic brush strokes, with realist principles and criteria on subject matter. For instance, the portrait of Pat Cappo (*figure 16*), was painted in 1929, early on in Thornton's career. Both the configuration and style of the painting are extremely conventional. Cappo is shown in profile wearing a very elaborate headdress. The brush strokes are blended and smooth, giving the painting a formal look. He wears a very distinguished and serious expression, befitting a "noble warrior." I presume that this portrait was completed in Thornton's studio, which would attest for its polished, studied finish. In contrast, *figure 17* is a portrait of Denny Jim, painted in 1940. There is a marked difference between the two paintings. Jim is shown from the front, and appears to be slouching somewhat. He looks very unassuming, wearing an old cap and jacket. Thornton chose broken, uneven brush-strokes, which accentuate the lines and wrinkles in Jim's face, and a give him a sort of dishevelled look. Thornton painted this portrait on the spot, without "touching it up" or reworking it in her studio, giving the portrait a very spontaneous and expressive quality.

Thornton adapted her art practice to her own needs, using a technique which involved quick execution and elaborate draughtsmanship. She wrote:

> I never posed the Indians -just watched what they did naturally and that is what I painted. If I got two hours for a sitting I was lucky. Much more frequently I had to be content with one hour, and sometimes with less than that... When I was painting [someone] wearing an elaborate costume I

> concentrated on the face, making hasty indications of colour and design in the clothing which I would finish later. Rarely did I ever touch the face again and then only to my peril. There is absolutely no substitute for working directly from the subject in portraiture.[208]

Thornton paid less attention to clothing and accessories, simply outlining garments and patterns and identifying colours to be completed later. ***Figure 18*** illustrates this clearly. It is an unfinished portrait of a Cree woman named Harriet Yellowmud Blanket, painted in 1948. Thornton has focused primarily on her face, which is rendered in detail. Her garments have been outlined, with rapid indications of colours and motifs, which would have been completed at a later date. Thornton usually painted people in their homes, or in public places such as community halls, or during public events, where there were many distractions, including the presence of other people watching her work or wanting to talk to her. I found several black and white photographs of people Thornton painted in her personal files, which may have been used to complete particular works. For instance, ***figure 19*** is a photograph of Chief Shot-On-Both-Sides, taken c1943. He is shown in profile, seated on a chair outdoors, with a vehicle in the background, presumably his own. ***Figure 20*** is Thornton's portrait of Chief Shot-On-Both-Sides, painted in 1943. The pose and demeanour of the subject are practically identical in the photograph and the portrait. Thornton could have used the photograph to complete or touch-up her

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[208]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* xii.

work in her studio.[209]

In exchange for people sitting for her, Thornton would offer them money or buy art work or other crafts they produced. She painted both women and men, signalling that the contributions they made to their communities carried equal weight. Most of her portraits focused on people with first-hand knowledge and experience of traditional cultural and religious practices; such as political leaders, midwives, artists, healers, crafts people and so on.

Thornton placed a great emphasis on creating a rapport and developing relationships with the people she painted. Some of them went on to become friends, and would drop by her home in Vancouver. Thornton's accounts of some of these visits are described in her book, and were obviously important to her. For example, she described sitting around the supper table talking with Kwakwaka'wakw Chiefs Charley Nowell and Herbert Johnson. She wrote:

> Over a quiet meal in my home they discussed with me the old days and the old ways. Chief Charley spoke fluent English, but Chief Herbert was not entirely at ease except in his own language. We talked at some length about the potlatch.[210]

The three of them discussed how both men held potlatches of their own despite the

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[209]I also found several portraits Thornton had painted of notable historical figures, such as Chiefs Crowfoot, Poundmaker and Red Crow, all of whom had passed away by the time Thornton began her project. I found photographs of these individuals in her personal archive. Thornton used these images as studies for her own canvases. J. M. Thornton has indicated that his mother was interested in producing images of these people because of their particular historical significance, despite the fact that they were dead or that she had never met them. J. M. Thornton, personal interview, 5 October 1997.

[210]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* 8.

fact that they had been banned by the Canadian government since 1884. These friendships extended to Thornton's invitation to potlatches and other ceremonial events over the years, as one journalist noted: "Mrs. Thornton admitted with a twinkle in her eye, that she has been present at these potlatches in Indian villages."[211] Potlatches were important cultural and religious occasions that were generally reserved for people within the community. The fact that Thornton was welcome to participate in some of these meetings is an indication of the mutual trust and respect that existed between the artist and members of various communities. Certain people loaned Thornton family heirlooms, such as masks, dresses and jewelry, that she would wear during her lecture tours.[212]

Thornton was given several titles or names by people. She considered this a great honour, interpreting these gestures as tokens of recognition and respect. In 1942, while painting on the One Arrow Reserve near Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, she was given the name Owas-ka-ta-esk-ean, by Con-con-pee-te-qua, an elder in the community and the mother of Chief Stanislaus Almighty Voice. Thornton's translation of the name was: "Putting your most ability for us Indians." Chief Charley Nowell gave her the name Ah-ou-Mookht, which, roughly translated, meant "The one who wears the blanket because she is of noble birth." He also made her a member of the Eagle clan, which permitted her to wear the family's crested

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[211]Margaret Francis, Robert Francis, "Keeper of a culture," *Vancouver Sun Magazine Supplement*, 6 January 1951: 5.

[212]Chief Dan Kennedy-Ochankugahe and his family loaned Thornton a beautiful beaded doeskin dress for her cross-country tour of the Canadian Clubs in 1947. See ***figure 11.***

button blanket on special occasions –such as her lecture tours– and partake in ceremonial rituals such as the potlatch. Thornton was greatful for the recognition she received from people within First Nations communities, an acknowledgement she sought but was often denied by members of her own immediate entourage.

Thornton was careful to point out people's reactions to her work in her writing, and, in certain instances, their influence on the outcome of a particular painting. Some people chose to be painted in ceremonial costume, others not, or asked that the artist paint a family member or relative, as well as their own portrait. Some individuals agreed to be painted only on the condition that the focus of the canvas be on a family heirloom –such as a family crest, mask, personal adornment or family relic. A great example of this is described in an article Thornton published in 1942, about painting a man named Chief Fish-Wolf-Ofe (***figure 21***). In the article, Thornton recounted going to the Calgary Stampede and discovering "several fine luxury cars" which were owned by people who had driven up from the Blackfoot Reserve in Northern Montana. She recalled being lured to a "tall fine-looking man" who attracted her attention, and she "engaged him in conversation," eventually asking him if he would be willing to pose for her.[213] She described the process in the following terms:

> I liked the way this man posed. He was obliging, good-natured and courteous. He had a deep husky voice that sounded like the rustle of tissue

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[213]Mildred Valley Thornton, "Chief Fish-Wolf-Ofe," *Calgary Herald*, 24 October 1942: 11.

paper, only more musical.[214]

Thornton noted that Chief Fish-Wolf-Ofe liked the portrait once he saw it, but observed: "He called attention to the fact that I had omitted something of great importance to him. It was an enormous claw suspended from a ribbon round his neck which had been hidden in the folds of his yellow shirt so that I had overlooked it. Carefully, I painted it in to his intense satisfaction."[215] The claw had been given to him as a boy to ward off illness by prominent Chief Big Bear, and meant a great deal to him. Thornton has noted numerous instances, such as this one, where people have requested that certain aspects of her painting be altered, and elements added or omitted. A more humorous, and perhaps natural request was by a man named Andrew Wallace, who asked that some of his wrinkles be taken out to make him look younger.[216]

This interplay and negotiation between the artist and the people she painted is interesting and problematizes the creative process. Post-structuralist theorists have scrutinized the relative power of text and context in the production of textual meaning. Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the notion of "polyphonic" texts; the understanding that texts, including art as text, can have multiple meanings. In the Bakhtinian vocabulary "polyphony" means simply 'many voices'. Adopting such a view implies that the reader or viewer is in a position of unprecedented

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[214]Thornton, "Chief Fish-Wolf-Ofe," 11.

[215]Thornton, "Chief Fish-Wolf-Ofe," 11.

[216]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* 42.

power over the interpretation of texts. Mieke Bal talks about a method of reading images, or a procedure that has in common with ordinary reading the following elements:

> [T]hat the outcome is *meaning*; that it functions by way of discreet visible elements called *signs* to which meanings are attributed; that such attributions of meaning, or *interpretations*, are regulated by rules, named *codes*; and that the subject or agent of this attribution, the reader or viewer, is a decisive element in the process. Furthermore... each act of reading happens within a socio-historical context or framework, called *frames*, which limit the possible meanings.[217]

One of the ways the reader\viewer can undermine the dominant ideologies of the text concerned is by inserting her/himself, as well as other voices, in the 'gaps and silences' of the text itself. Locating the voices of the people Thornton painted within the text (the painting) is one way of creating multiple reader-text positionings. It is important to point out, however, as Stuart Hall does, that "polysemy must not be confused with plurality."[218] In other words, although the text may be comprised of many voices, this does not mean that it does so without preference or discrimination. For example, despite Thornton's description of Fish-Wolf-Ofe's comments and reactions to her work, she remained in the privileged position of "translator" or "voice-giver." She did not quote Fish-Wolf-Ofe, or other informants, their comments and ideas are transmitted to the reader/viewer through

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[217]Mieke Bal, "Reading art?" *Generations & Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996).

[218]Stuart Hall quoted in Lynne Pearce, "I the reader: Text, context and the balance of power," *Feminist Subjects, Multi-Media Methodologies*, eds. Penny Florence and Dee Reynolds (Manchester University Press, 1995) 168.

her own subjective interpretations. This becomes problematic, as James Clifford remarks:

> [T]he story of a passage from the oral/aural into writing has been a complex and charged one. Every ethnography enacts such a movement, and this is one source of the peculiar authority that finds both rescue and irretrievable loss – a kind of death in life– in the making of texts from events and dialogues.[219]

Feminist theorist Lynne Pearce acknowledges that it is the text that initiates the relationship between reader and text: In Thornton's case, it would be her paintings that initiate the relationship with the viewer. However, Pearce points out that the reader must take responsibility for negotiating the terms upon which s/he is to proceed. Therefore, as she writes: "Even as the text positions me, so may I (re)position my relationship to it."[220] What is now theoretically innovative and politically crucial, as Homi Bhabha points out, is the need to "think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments of process that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences."[221] In other words, the terms of cultural engagement (or in this case, the terms of viewership of Thornton's paintings), whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively (as the viewer looks at the paintings in his or her contemporary context). Bhabha writes:

> It is in the emergence of the interstices –the overlap and displacement of domains of difference– that the intersubjective and collective experiences of

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[219]Clifford, "On ethnographic allegory," 115.

[220]Pearce 169.

[221]Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 1.

nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negociated.[222]

An interpretation of Thornton's text extends beyond the artist herself, to include the people she painted, I, the writer, you, the reader/viewer, and so on as the layers unfold. It is through these multiple engagements with Thornton's work, and people's own understandings/experiences, that meaning is negotiated. Writer and community activist Brian Murphy quotes Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. He writes:

> Piaget said "to learn is to invent." He believed that people do not learn by acquisition, by being taught what others know, but that each individual develops understanding only by inventing knowledge anew, personally. And it is not the wheel that is important –it is the invention. It is not the answer that is important, but the question itself.[223]

I do not share the empiricist's confidence in the knowability of a "real" history outside of my own subjectivity or the context I am writing in. Rather, as Brenda Lafleur suggests, I wish to disrupt, amongst other things, a particular narrative of reality which presents itself and is articulated as the normative one.[224]

## What happened to the Collection?

> I have never sold any of the [Indian paintings] during all these years, hoping that Canada would acquire them –the entire collection– as a historic

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[222]Bhabha, *Location* 2.

[223]Brian K. Murphy, personal interview, 7 June 1999.

[224]Lafleur 226.

> documentary. Despite many petitions from interested cultural groups, both to Ottawa and the Western provinces, they do not show an interest, so I shall probably [have to] sell the collection elsewhere, or break it up, though it would be like disposing of something that is a part of my very self.
>
> Mildred Valley Thornton (1960)

Thornton's Collection of paintings of Native people was kept intact by the artist throughout her lifetime, in the hope that one day it would be exhibited in a public gallery in Canada and accessible to the general public. According to her family, and references in her personal letters, Thornton was adamant about this point. She refused to sell any paintings individually during her lifetime, despite interest for particular works from private collectors and major art institutions in Canada. Thornton also hoped that the Collection would remain in Canada, as part of a "national" heritage, despite offers to purchase the works from collectors in England, Germany and the United States. As the following article reported:

> Canada is in danger of losing the most comprehensible collection of Indian paintings in existence. [T]here is a keen interest in the purchase of them in England and in Germany, where one of the finest B.C. arts and crafts exhibits in the world is located.[225]

The artist frequently exhibited works from her Collection publicly, however, these works were never for sale. For example, in 1954, during the annual British Columbia Society of Artists exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Thornton exhibited the painting *Bella Coola Indian Mask Dance*, which was marked "Not For

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[225]Cathy Hassard, "Canada may lose rare Indian art collection," *Vancouver Sun* 3 August 1961: 30.

Sale."[226] A journalist once enquired into why the artist steadfastly refused to break-up her Collection or sell her paintings separately. Thornton explained:

> I would like to see my paintings placed in a permanent collection in this province. I have waited 25 years. I can wait a little longer. Sometimes I wonder why I keep them, and I'm sure my husband wonders too. But I have a feeling that I have really captured a part of our history with my paints and that I have a responsibility to hold it intact.[227]

Thornton believed that something crucial would be lost by separating her works. Her portraits generally focused on Native elders, people born in the 1800's. She recognized that these people had been witnesses to the rapid changes in their communities, and the arrival of an increasing number of European immigrants, prospectors and industrialists in Western Canada in the latter half of the 19th century. They were also responsible for teaching their histories and cultures to younger generations in their communities. Perhaps Thornton felt that she had documented a fragment of history: this struggle to adapt to change, yet hold onto fundamental values and cultural traditions. For example, in her book she recounted the experience of Ethel Wilson, the daughter of Chief Hemos Johnson, from the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation. She wrote:

> [Hemos Johnson's] eldest child, a daughter, was trained to succeed him in his high position. As a little girl she was taken to the woods by the elders of the tribe and taught the ancient songs of her people, but when she was sent away to the Indian Residential School these things grew dim in her memory...

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[226]Vancouver Art Gallery, *44th Annual Exhibition* (Vancouver: The Gallery, 1954): n.pag. [Files on fiche, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.]

[227]Elizabeth Forbes, "Mildred Valley Thornton," *Victoria Daily Times*, 26 August 1958: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

> After the chief's death she inherited all her father's rights and tribal honors, and felt it was her duty and privilege to hold the customary funeral potlatch for the father she adored, despite the fact that the potlatch had long since been out-lawed by the government.[228]

Ethel Wilson and Hemos Johnson's experiences broached different eras and symbolized a transition in Canadian society. The history of their community, like the histories of many Native communities, was generally omitted from standardized history books. Thornton retells a history of First Nations people in Western Canada through her paintings and writings, albeit from her own Eurocentric perspective. Yet she believed that she was providing a much needed visibility and voice to Native people. She stated:

> The older Indians are becoming very keen that I should preserve their native arts in my paintings, that I should help them prevent their old customs from dying out. And of course that's just what I want to do.[229]

Thornton was familiar with Paul Kane's paintings of aboriginal people located in the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum and the National Gallery of Canada. She also knew of Edmund Morris' works, commissioned by the Art Gallery of Ontario. Perhaps she was influenced by these factors, and felt that her paintings should also be included in a major public collection. She declared:

> I don't know that anyone since Paul Kane, who travelled across Canada in 1845 recording the Indian characters and their costumes, has gone so thoroughly into collecting this information [as I have]. Even then, I doubt whether he had time to be as thorough as I have been. Other artists have

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[228]Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends* 29.

[229]Margaret Ecker Francis 95.

> painted Canadian Indians, but only a handful at most, and with a view to selling their pictures on a commercial basis.[230]

Thornton was not interested in the commercial component of this type of art production, even though she was frequently approached by collectors interested in purchasing individual works. She had difficulty imagining selling the portraits of Native people she had known and painted. As she once stated: "At first, after I'd talked to an Indian and painted him, I couldn't part with the canvas. It seemed a part of me."[231]

Thornton had many supporters of her project. They included elected representatives, fellow artists, journalists, and members of the general public. Several people approached federal and provincial funding agencies, cultural ministries and artistic institutions on numerous occasions in an attempt to convince authorities to purchase the Collection. For example, in 1963 , a Vancouver citizen, Margaret Fornataro, wrote to Dr. Miriam Dorrance, the provincial representative of the Canada Council, in an effort to encourage the Council to support the acquisition Thornton's Collection. Fornataro wrote:

> There are many eminent people in the art world of Vancouver such as Mrs. Flora Kyle, art critic of the "SUN" who would speak very highly of Mrs. Thornton's work. Mrs. Thornton hopes her collection of some 300 paintings will belong permanently to Canada. As the Berlin Museum has shown a very keen interest in buying several of these historic documents of our Indian past, I am prompted to arouse the interest amongst Canadians who may not be aware of this. My husband joins me in this venture, and we know of

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[230]Thornton quoted in Margaret Ecker Francis 97.

[231]Mervyn Johns, "Owas-ka-ta-esk-ean," *Vancouver Daily Province* 6 June 1942: 8.

> many others who would support any such venture as securing the collection as a worthy Centennial gesture.[232]

During the last years of her life Thornton lobbied extensively, using all of her influence and contacts, in an attempt to get her Collection into a public institution. She had the support of Barry Mather, Member of Parliament from New Westminster, British Columbia. Mather wrote a letter to the artist just weeks before her death in July 1967, claiming:

> Further to our correspondence regarding my hope to promote the purchase of your collection of Indian paintings... I lunched yesterday with Senator MacKenzie and we discussed what might be done toward getting either public or private sources to buy your works...)
> We are sure that many efforts have been made in the past, but we think enough of the worth of it to try again.[233]

Barry Mather also indicated that he did not think the suggested figure of $200 000.00, that Thornton was requesting for the purchase of her Collection, "would be possible of attainment."[234] Mather was not the only person to consider Thoronton's estimation unfeasable. Mather received a letter from Willard E. Ireland, librarian and archivist at the British Columbia Archives in Victoria, Ireland wrote:

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[232]Margaret Fornataro, letter to Dr. Miriam Dorrance, 19 October 1963. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[233]Barry Mather, letter to Mildred Valley Thornton, 14 July 1967. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[234]Mather, letter to Thornton. Sources close to the artist, such as friend Reg Ashwell, have claimed that Thornton probably would have been willing to reduce her price considerably had she been convinced that a particular institution was seriously considering purchasing her collection. This figure only surfaced in later years, after a lifetime of failed negotiations with federal and provincial authorities.

> Your letter... has come back to me for reply, as for years the problem of the paintings of Mrs.Thornton has been raised with me... This collection has been up for consideration time and time again through a variety of intermediaries and our decision has been pretty consistently in the negative for a number of reasons.[235]

He goes on to state that he would be prepared "to spend some money to acquire sample paintings, so at least her work would be represented in our collection."[236] However, his department was unwilling to purchase the Collection as a whole. Ireland indicated that he considered Thornton's evaluation of the Collection to be "excessive," stating that neither the Museum nor the provincial government had in hand sufficient funds to acquire the paintings.[237] He ended his letter with the following opinion:

> What is more to the point on a more sensitive point is the truly artistic, cultural or historical significance of the paintings themselves. This is a question open to a variety of reactions and a sensitive point to be considered. Here I feel I must disagree with the opinion you and Senator MacKenzie hold, for frankly we have had several experts advise us as to their anthropological significance and artistic merit, and the reports have never been as such as to encourage our acquisition.[238]

I have not come across any major criticisms, in newpaper clippings, reports, or any other documents, of anthropological inaccuracies in Thornton's visual or written accounts. I have, however, come across several critiques based on the artistic

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[235]Willard Ireland, letter to Barry Mather, 9 August 1967. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[236]Ireland, letter to Mather.

[237]Ireland, letter to Mather.

[238]Ireland, letter to Mather.

merits of her work. I believe this is what Ireland is referring to at the end of his letter. A recent example of this criticism can be found in art critic Jill Pollack's article entitled "Artist's historical importance outweighs her artistic impact." Pollack is appreciative of Thornton's work on the whole, but writes:

> [D]espite her good intentions and passion for her chosen subject matter – native cultures– she did not bring a developed technical skill to her work. One reviewer noted that she painted with bright colours which were "gutsy." She did not, however, either have a fine brushstroke or a style which can stand the test of time. We are left with a volume of paintings which, as paintings, are of little artistic merit, but enormous historical value.[239]

People held differing opinions about the value of Thornton's Collection of paintings of Native people. One of the main points of contention for museums and galleries appears to have been their unwillingness to purchase the entire Collection, when they were only interested in specific paintings. Reg Ashwell claimed that Thornton intended to use the funds received from the sale of her Collection to set up a trust fund for young students from First Nations communities in British Columbia. He quoted Thornton as stating:

> I have kept the whole collection intact all these years, hoping for an offer from the government. Its become a kind of dream of mine to see the Indian series housed in a public gallery. The money I received would go into a fund to be used for scholarships and bursaries for B.C. Indians.[240]

Despite repeated pleas by the artist and her supporters, Thornton's

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[239]Jill Pollack, "Artist's historical importance outweighs her artistic impact," *Vancouver Courier* 7 November 1990: 12.

[240]Ashwell, "Tribute," A5.

Collection was never acquired by a public institution. This led to disillusionment, and on June 12th, 1967, just a little over a month before her death, Thornton wrote up a codicil to her will requesting that certain steps be taken in the event that her Collection had not been sold while she was alive. She wrote:

> The other alternative is to get a truck to pick up all my paintings... They are to be taken to the city dump, gasoline poured over them and all burned. If 35 years of devotion to my country means nothing while I am alive it is better that no record of it remain after I am gone.[241]

Thornton's codicillary was not properly witnessed and her family was able to salvage her works.[242] They renewed attempts to interest a public institution in her legacy, but felt obliged to break-up the Collection to attract potential buyers. In a letter to Eric L. Harvie, of the Glenbow Foundation, written in 1975, J. M. Thornton wrote:

> My mother was always very insistent that the entire collection should stay together. We feel, however, that this was the main stumbling block in her failure to sell the collection during her lifetime. It is our intention to divide the paintings into three groups (BC, Alberta and Saskatchewan) and to further reduce each group by culling out those paintings with little historical value, thus creating more "saleable packages."[243]

The paintings were appraised by Torben V. Kristiansen, of the Art

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[241]Mildred Valley Thornton, codicil to her will, 12 June 1967. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[242]J. M. Thornton does not believe that his mother would have requested that her paintings be destroyed had she been well during this period. He claimed that in the last few weeks before her death she was confused and lapsed into a coma a few days before passing on. J. M. Thornton, personal interview, 5 October 1997.

[243]J. M. Thornton, letter to Eric L. Harvie, 24 October 1967.

Emporium, a private art dealership in Vancouver, and subsequently sold off piece by piece on the private art market.[244] What was once "The Collection" is now dispersed. Her work can be found in a few public institutions, including the Royal British Columbia Museum, the National Gallery of Canada, and the Glenbow Museum. However, the bulk of her collection is located primarily in private collections across Canada and the United States.

An interesting development over the last ten years, has been the purchase of Thornton's paintings by several First Nations communities. For example, the Squamish Band Council in North Vancouver possesses nine portraits of elders, family members and other individuals who lived in their community. The portraits are exhibited in the offices of the Band Council, located on the wall as you climb the central spiral staircase. Several are also hung on the second floor, in the employees office. The way they are hung creates an encircled feeling, like the people in the paintings are part of the daily goings on, watching over the people working in the office.[245]

Thornton enjoyed widespread popularity and appeal with the average

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[244]Torben V. Kristianson made several appraisals of Thornton's work. In 1972 he sent a memo to J. M. Thornton indicating that in his "considered opinion" a total of "330 large and 300 smaller original oil paintings and watercolors by Mildred Valley Thornton... have a present replacement value of $269 800.00." Kristianson is quoted in a letter to J. M. Thornton, 1 January 1972. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, British Columbia.]

[245]This is one of the the only locations where I have seen several of Thornton's portraits exhibited together. The effect is impressive, one is drawn to each work in order to study the person's face and read their name on the identification label. It is interesting that it is in the offices of the Squamish Band Council that Thornton's works are presented in a way that was closest to what she had hoped for.

Canadian art goer, which is illustrated through people's comments on the artist and her work (as seen through old newspaper clippings, for example). The following passage was written by Carolyn Burr, a resident of Burnaby, British Columbia, in a letter to the editor, published in the *Vancouver Sun* in 1971:

> Mildred Thornton was apparently a very gifted artist whose paintings are not only beautiful, but unique. She had kept every work of art in hopes of putting them in a public gallery. This collection should have been a part of the heritage of B.C. How simple it would have been for the provincial government to have provided the money for a small museum. This would have been something for B.C. to be proud of.[246]

The difference of opinion between Carolyn Burr, a member of the general public, and Willard Ireland, a cultural "representative" within a major Canadian institution raises the issue of who is responsible for defining what constitues art in our society; art which is valued, treasured and considered of historical significance? Thornton's paintings may be analysed, scrutinized, and interpreted in various ways. The incredible legacy of her life's work draws attention to colonial discourses of the early 20th century, issues of cultural appropriation and power relationships between Whites and aboriginal people. It raises important questions about the possibility of communication between people of different cultures, and how important this is if we are to understand and support one another in a meaningful way.

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[246]Carolyn Burr, letter, *Vancouver Sun*, 21 April 1971: n.pag. [MVT personal archive, Brentwood Bay, BritishColumbia.]

## Conclusion

Mildred Valley Thornton believed that her work entitled her to "represent" Native people to a wider Canadian public through her paintings, her writings and her lectures. This self-appointed role proved to be problematic, since the desire to present the objects and ideas of other people's cultures by appropriation denied any effective reciprocity of representations. Artist and curator Gerald McMaster writes:

> It is the discursive practices of art that have consistently denied aboriginal artists any kind of self-representation; instead, they are considered marginal, insignificant, or nonexistent. European representational technologies and discursive practices virtually eliminated the ability of aboriginal peoples, including artists, to represent themselves, and in turn created new and perverse representations of the Other.[247]

Therefore, although Thornton was successful in breaking down certain barriers, between herself, her viewers and the people she painted, her ability to collaborate and work effectively with Native communities was circumscribed by real limitations, such as engrained preconceptions and stereotypes about Native people, that served to hold some of those very barriers firmly in place.

Changing people's attitudes about racism and other forms of discrimination is an ongoing process. First Nations cultural practitioners, as well as representatives from other groups that face discrimination, have forced these issues to the forefront of political debates, and demanded that they be recognized and dealt with.

Thornton's work may, on one level, have perpetuated entrenched colonial

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[247]McMaster 24.

representations of Native people, yet on another, it also challenged popular notions of the early 20th century by providing a more complex interpretation of Canada's First Peoples. For example, Thornton's portrait of Isaac Jacobs (***figure 22***) is very different from the generic representations of Native people typical of other painters of the early 20th century. Many Euro-Canadian artists such as Maynard Dixon (1875-1946), were not interested in portraying individual people. Dixon's figures were symbolic, representative of romantic ideals. In ***figure 23***, entitled *The Enemy's Country* (1942), there is a group of people riding on horseback across a Prairie landscape. The central figure has very generic features, he wears a very impassive or solumn expression. The figure directly behind him is even more mysterious, his features are barely distinguishable. No names are provided (the men are nameless). Their presence is purely symbolic, aimed at awakening a Euro-American nostalgia for a bygome era when Native people roamed the Plains, subsisting on the buffalo. Thornton's portrait of Isaac Jacobs painted in 1943 provokes an altogether different reaction. This man's identity is more complex than Dixon's generic "warriors" He was a Squamish minister of a Shaker Church, who lived on the Capilano Reserve, in West Vancouver. Read from a postcolonial perspective, Thornton's representation of Isaac Jacobs challenges traditional Euro-Canadian perceptions of Native people, adorned in feathered headdresses and belonging to a "vanishing" past.

The erection of social and spatial boundaries between Native people and White people was part of the colonization process, which defined each group as part of a different community. Sarah Carter notes that by the latter part of the 19th

century a heightened sense of national identity among Euro-Canadian's defined them as members of a particular community increasingly segregated from indiginous people as boundaries clarified and racial categories sharpened.[248]

The notion of borders, or border cultures is an interesting one. Cultures have always co-existed in Canada. They frequently overlapped and meshed with each other, as people shared and exchanged information and resources, developing friendships and family bonds. These practices continued with the arrival of Europeans. However, colonizing practices and the increased demand for land and resources by a growing European population, required the containment and assimilation of Aboriginal populations. Loretta Todd writes:

> The term [border culture] has different meanings depending on what side of the border you are on. In this country called Canada, the borders of the dominant European culture are defined by colonialism in the past, present and future: they are historically rooted in imperial relations with borders of other cultures, marked by a history of invasion and intrusion.[249]

At the same time borders between people and cultures are never permanently fixed or definable, they are constantly being shaped and transformed. These borders are continuously shifting and are relocated depending on a number of factors, including historical contexts, personal relationships, and so forth. Therefore, when I speak of borders, I am referring to two things. One is the transgression of boundaries: i.e., the appropriation of other people's cultures and identities. The

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[248]Carter xi.

[249]Loretta Todd, "Imagination at the borders," *Territories of Difference*, ed. Renée Baert (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1993) 20.

other is the crossing of borders, or cultural hybridity; the meeting and blending of diverse cultures or traditions, a coming together, a mutual exchange. Martin Heidegger claimed that a boundary defines not that at which something stops, but rather that from which something begins its prescencing.[250] Therefore, it is in fact along these ambiguously defined border lines that it is possible to explore and connect with other people –individually and collectively. Homi K. Bhabha provides an insightful perspective on this space. He writes:

> [A] willingness to descend into that alien territory... may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation, may open a way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity.[251]

These notions are important when looking at Thornton's work. It may be possible to glimpse at a process of negotiation and dialogue between the artist and the people she encountered and painted. Instead of being perceived as powerless bystanders, the people Thornton talked about in her writings, or depicted on canvas, take on a participatory and formative, albeit mediated, role in the construction of their stories/images. While some of the cultural fusion and overlapping can be interpreted as relations of domination and exploitation, it can also involve mutual exchange. As Richard Fung acutely observes:

This is the contradictory reality of using the voice, sound, image, dance, or

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[250]Martin Heidegger quoted in Bhabha, *Location* 1.

[251]Bhabha quoted in Coombes, "Inventing postcolonial," *New Formations: Hybridity Special* 18 (Winter 1992) 39.

> stories of another: it can represent sharing or exploitation, mutual learning or silencing, collaboration or unfair gain, and, more often than not, both aspects simultaneously.[252]

This paper begins to explore Thornton's "legacy" and some of the issues and questions her practice raises. If the criteria for "great" art includes its ability to connect with its audience, not only on aesthetic grounds, but also in terms of the issues it raises and how these relate to people in a contemporary setting, then certainly Thornton's work needs to be re-evaluated and considered as an important window onto interpretations of Canadian history, relationships between Whites and aboriginal people, and the notion of a Canadian identity itself. I view the exploration of Thornton's work as part of my own learning process and as an opportunity to remember and retell a portion of (a) (hi)story. This "historical account" can be interpreted as part of a collaborative endeavour to re-visit the past. The emphasis is on the plurality of voices working together to develop a collective memory, which will ideally lead to a more balanced interpretation of the past. I am hopeful, as bell hooks writes, that "as we critically imagine new ways to think and write about visual art, as we make spaces for dialogue across boundaries, we engage a process of cultural transformation that will ultimately create a revolution in vision."[253]

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[252]Richard Fung, "Working through cultural appropriation," *Fuse Magazine* 16.5-6 (Summer 1990) 21.

[253]hooks *Art on My Mind* xvi.

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London Public Library, London, Ontario
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Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, Montréal, Québec
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario
Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, British Columbia
U'Mista Cultural Centre, Alert Bay, British Columbia
University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver, British Columbia
University of British Columbia Museum of Antropology, Vancouver, British Columbia
University of Calgary, Arts and Humanities Library, Calgary, Alberta
Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia
Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba

## APPENDIX I: EXHIBITION HISTORY

*Solo exhibitions

1930 Hotel Saskatchewan, Regina, Sask.*
Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, Ontario
1931 Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, Ontario
1932 Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, Ontario
Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Toronto, Ontario
1933 *61st Annual Exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario
1934 Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Toronto, Ontario
1936 *5th Annual B. C. Artists Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1938 *7th Annual B. C. Artists Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1940 Frederick & Nelson Auditorium, Seattle, Washington*
*9th Annual B. C. Artists Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
*Christmas Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1941 Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Toronto, Ontario
Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.*
*10th Annual B. C. Artists Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1942 Provincial Museum, Parliament Buildings, Victoria, B. C.*
Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.*
*32nd Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1943 Vancouver YMCA -Spitfire Fund, Vancouver, B. C.*
*33rd Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts,* Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
*12th Annual B. C. Artists Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1944 *34th Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1945 *35th Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
*14th Annual B. C. Artists Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1946 *36th Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
*Jubilee Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1947 Eaton Fine Art Gallery, Toronto, Ontario*
*16th Annual B. C. Artists Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.

1949 Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.*
*39th Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1950 *40th Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
*19th Annual B. C. Artists Exhibition*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1951 *41st Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1952 *42nd Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1953 *43rd Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1954 *44th Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1955 *45th Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1957 *47th Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1958 Hudson's Bay Company Auditorium, Vancouver, B. C.*
Hudson's Bay Company, Douglas Room, Victoria, B. C.*
*100 Years of B. C. Art*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
*48th Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1959 Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, London, England*
*49th Annual Exhibition: B.C. Society of Fine Arts*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1961 *Mildred Valley Thornton: The Canadian Indian and Other Paintings*, Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery, London, England*
1964 Oakridge Auditorium, Vancouver, B. C.*
1965 T. Eaton Company, Vancouver, B. C.*
1970 Art Emporium, Vancouver, B. C.*
1971 *Saskatchewan Art and Artists*, Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Sask.
1974 *Contemporaries of Emily Carr in British Columbia*, Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, B. C.
1977 Art Emporium, Vancouver, B. C.*
1978 *Early Canadian Watercolours*, Uno Longman Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1979 Masters Gallery, Calgary, Alberta*
1980 Gallery of British Columbia Arts, Vancouver, B. C.*
Keenlyside Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.*
1985 Westbridge Fine Arts, Vancouver, B. C.*
Butler Galleries, Vancouver, B. C.
*British Columbia Women Artists 1885-1995*, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B. C.

The Art Gallery of South Okanagan, Penticton, B. C.
1986 The Pagurian Gallery, Toronto, Ontario*
1988 Westbridge Fine Arts, Vancouver, B. C.*
1989 Assiniboia Gallery, Saskatoon, Sask.*
1992 Westbridge Fine Arts, Vancouver, B. C.*
1995 *Early British Columbian Women Artists*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
1997 *Women's Work: Art by Women in the Glenbow Collection*, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta

## APPENDIX II: PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Arthur Meighen Club, Regina, Sask.
British Columbia Archives, Victoria, B. C.
Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, B. C.
Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta
Hotel Vancouver, Vancouver B. C.
Koerner Collection, Vancouver, B. C.
Lipsett Collection, Vancouver, B. C.
McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario
Ravenhill Collection, Vancouver, B. C.
Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, B. C.
Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B. C.
Women's Press Club, Vancouver, B. C.

*Figure 1.* John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872. Oil on canvas. [Jules David Prown et al., eds., *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts*: 97.]

*Figure 2.* John Mix Stanley, *Last of Their Race*, 1857. Oil on canvas. [Jules David Prown et al., eds., *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts*: 102.]

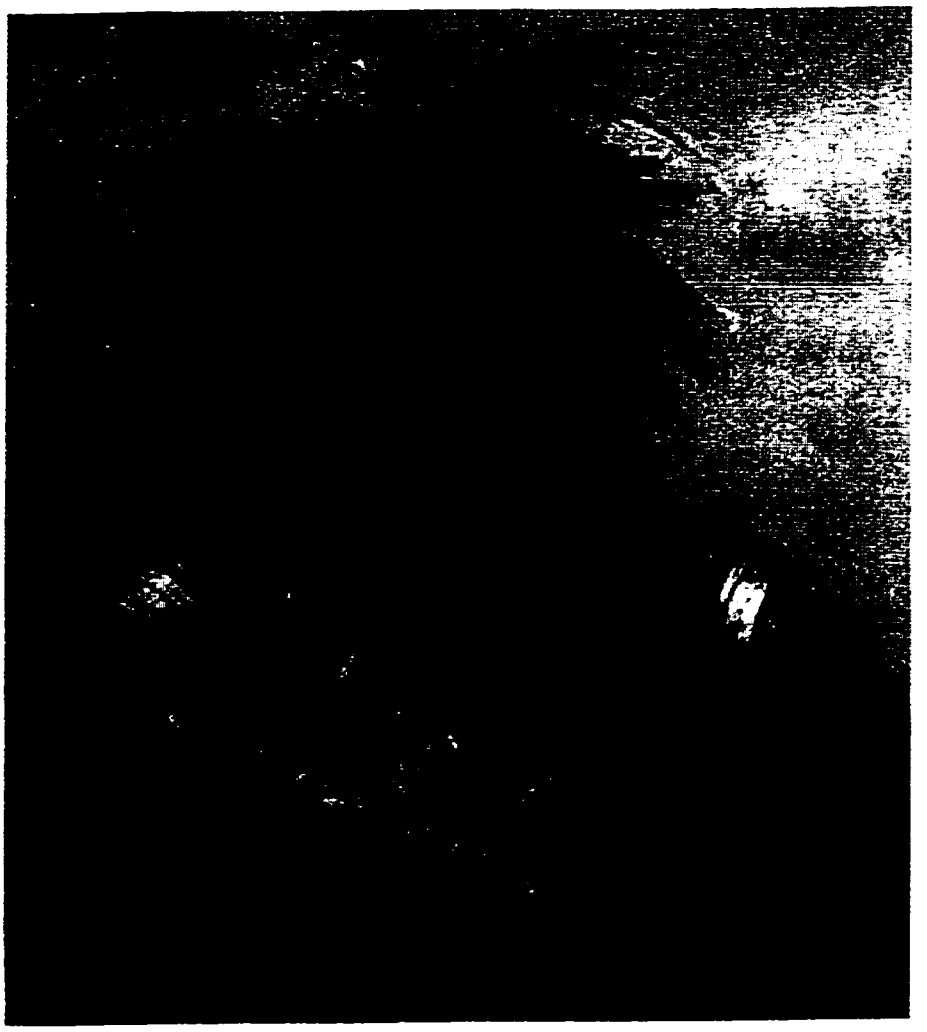

*Figure 3.* George Catlin, *Buffalo Bull's Back Fat, Head Chief, Blood Tribe*, 1832. Oil on canvas. [Jules David Prown et al., eds., *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts*: 7.]

*Figure 4.* Paul Kane, *Kee-a-kee-ka-sa-coo-way* (sketch), c1844. [J. Russell Harper, *Paul Kane's Frontier*: 201.]

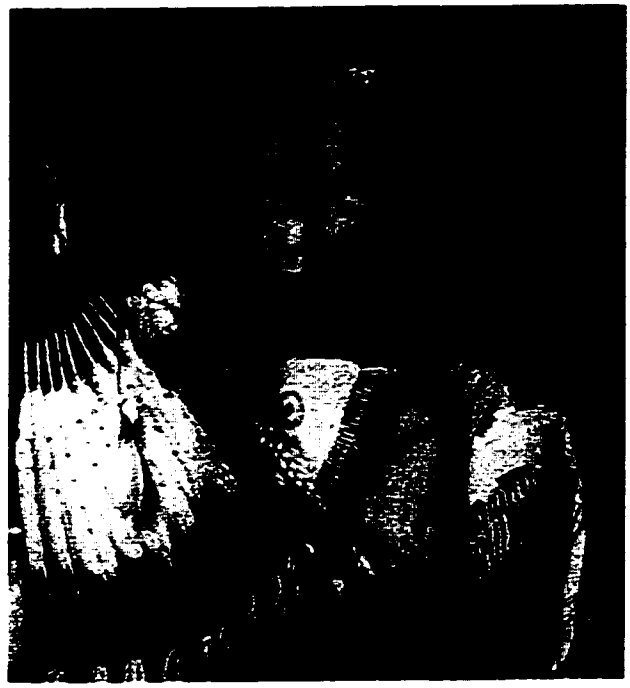

*Figure 5.* Paul Kane, *Kee-a-kee-ka-sa-coo-way (The Man that gives the War Whoop)*, c1850. Oil on canvas. [J. Russell Harper, *Paul Kane's Frontier*: 201.]

*Figure 6.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Mungo Martin*, c1950. Oil on canvas. McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario.

*MVT Notes:* Mungo Martin, from Fort Rupert, age 80 years. Famous carver and singer of old songs. Have some records of his songs.

*Figure 7.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Chief George, Sechelt, British Columbia,* 1940. Oil on canvas.

*MVT Notes:* Chief George, Sechelt, painted outside his home 1940.

*Figure 8.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *No Title (B.C. Landscape)*, c1945. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

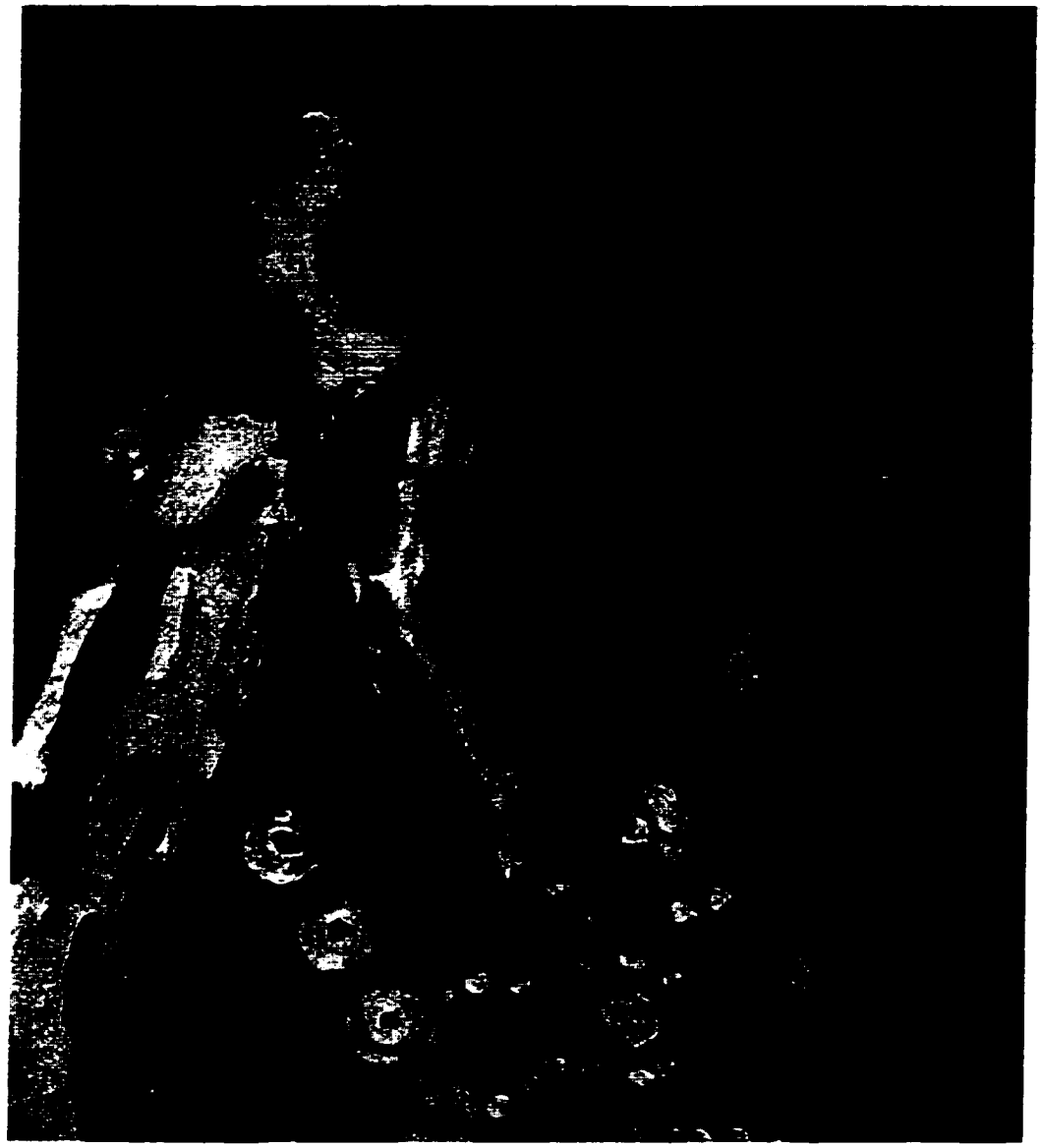

*Figure 9.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Maggie Frank*, 1952. Oil on panel.
*MVT Notes:* Mrs. Andy Frank, Comox, British Columbia. Kwakiutl Indian woman born at Fort Rupert. One of the highest ranking women on the coast. Painted 1952.

*Figure 10.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Hon. Sir Frederick William Gordon Haultain*, c1930. Oil on canvas.

*Figure 11.* Black and white photograph of Mildred Valley Thornton, c1940. [Photograph courtesy of J. M. Thornton.]

*Figure 12.* Black and white photograph of Dan Kennedy's daughter, c1940. [Photograph courtesy of J. M. Thornton.]

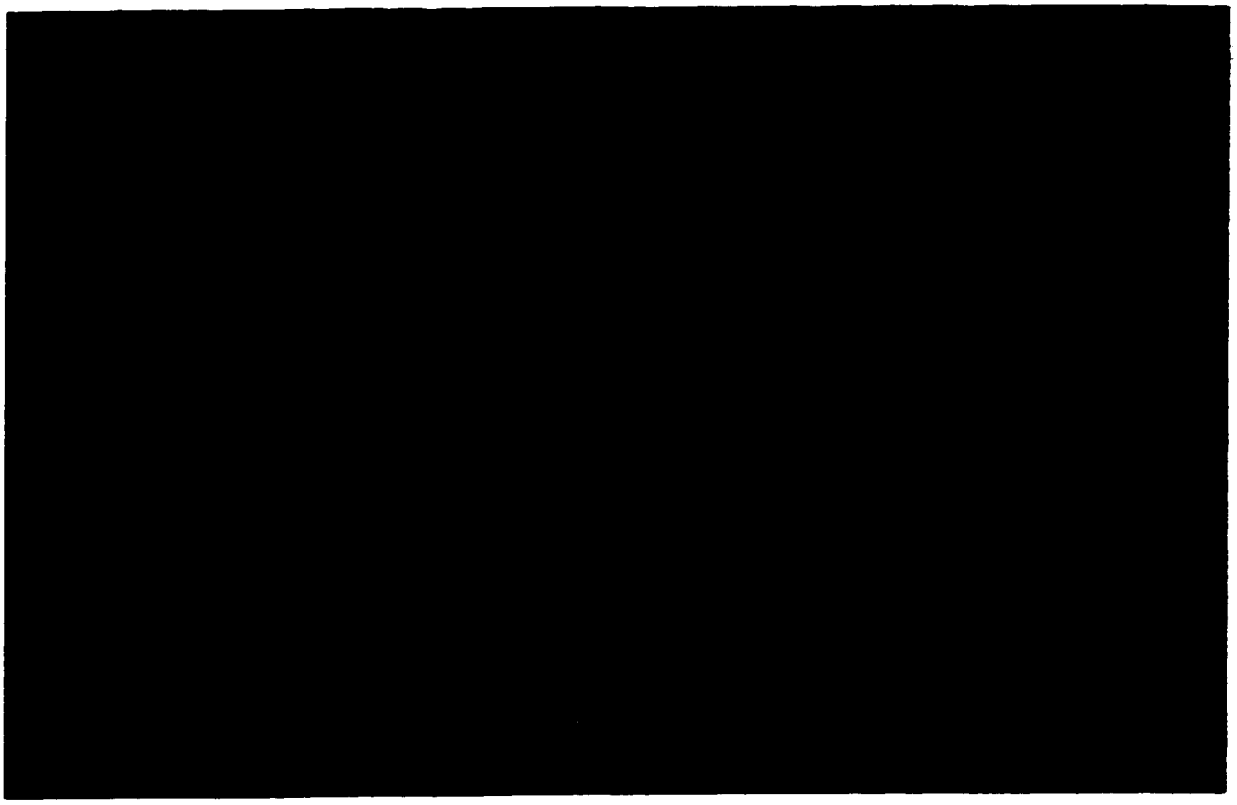

*Figure 13.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Mask Dance of the Bella Coolas*, c1953. Oil on canvas.

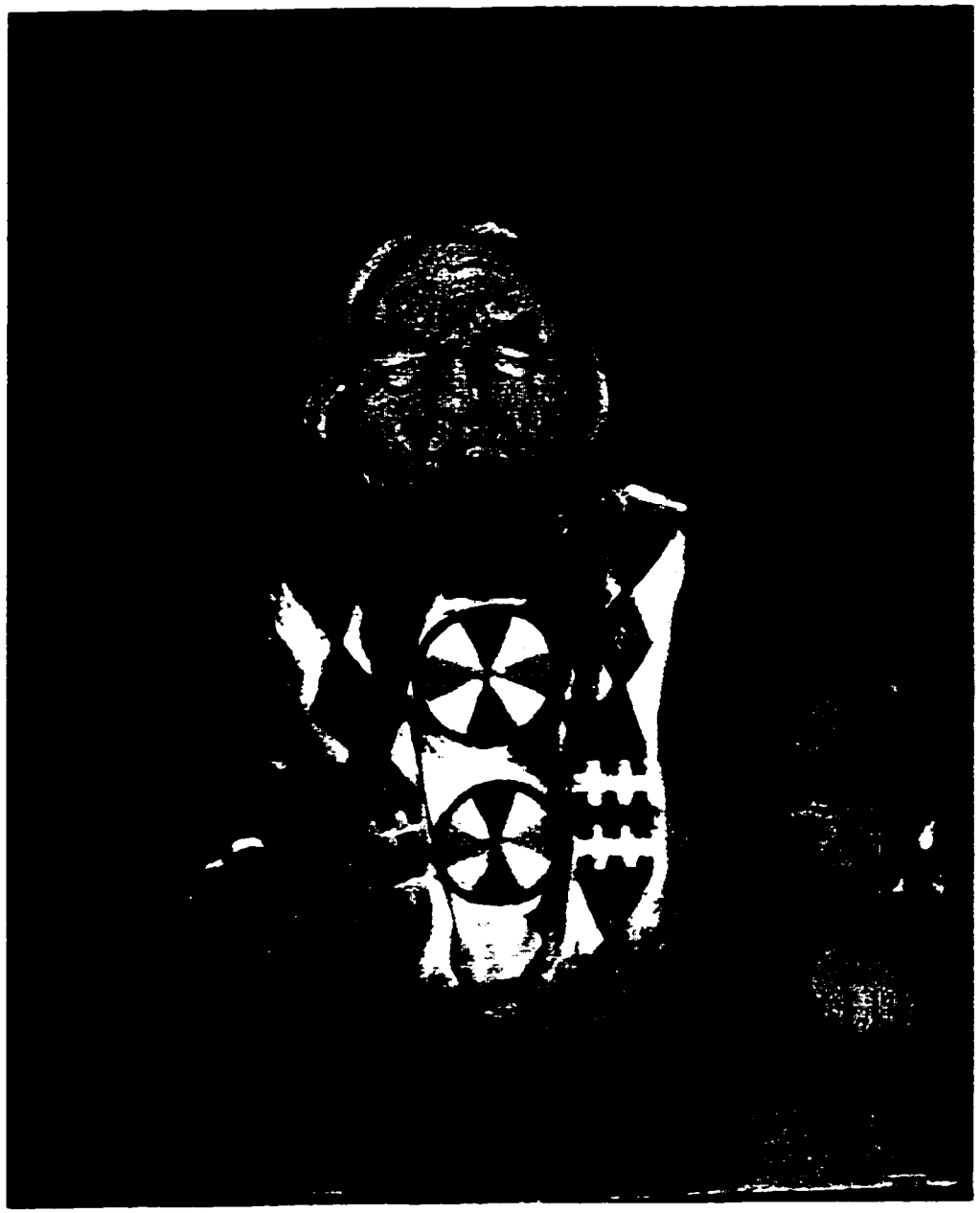

*Figure 14.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Manitouwassis*, 1929. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

*MVT Notes:* Manitouwassis, which means "Child of God." Aged Cree, over a hundred years. Painted him in his home on the Qu'Appelle Reserve [Sask.] in 1929. He and aged wife living on Government rations in small frame house. Nothing in it of value but their costumes which are very valuable.

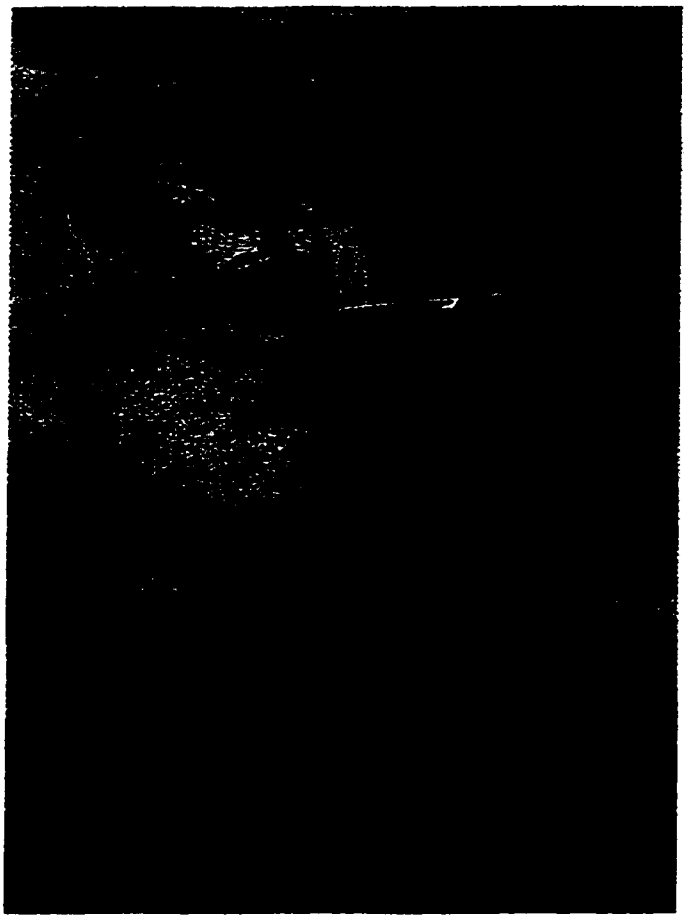

*Figure 15.* William Berczy, *Joseph Brandt*, c1807. Oil on canvas. [Allodi et al., *Berczy*: 209.]

*Figure 16.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Pat Cappo*, 1929. Oil on canvas.
*MVT Notes:* Pat Cappo, Saulteaux from Qu'Appelle Valley, Saskatchewan. Painted at Regina Fair, 1929.

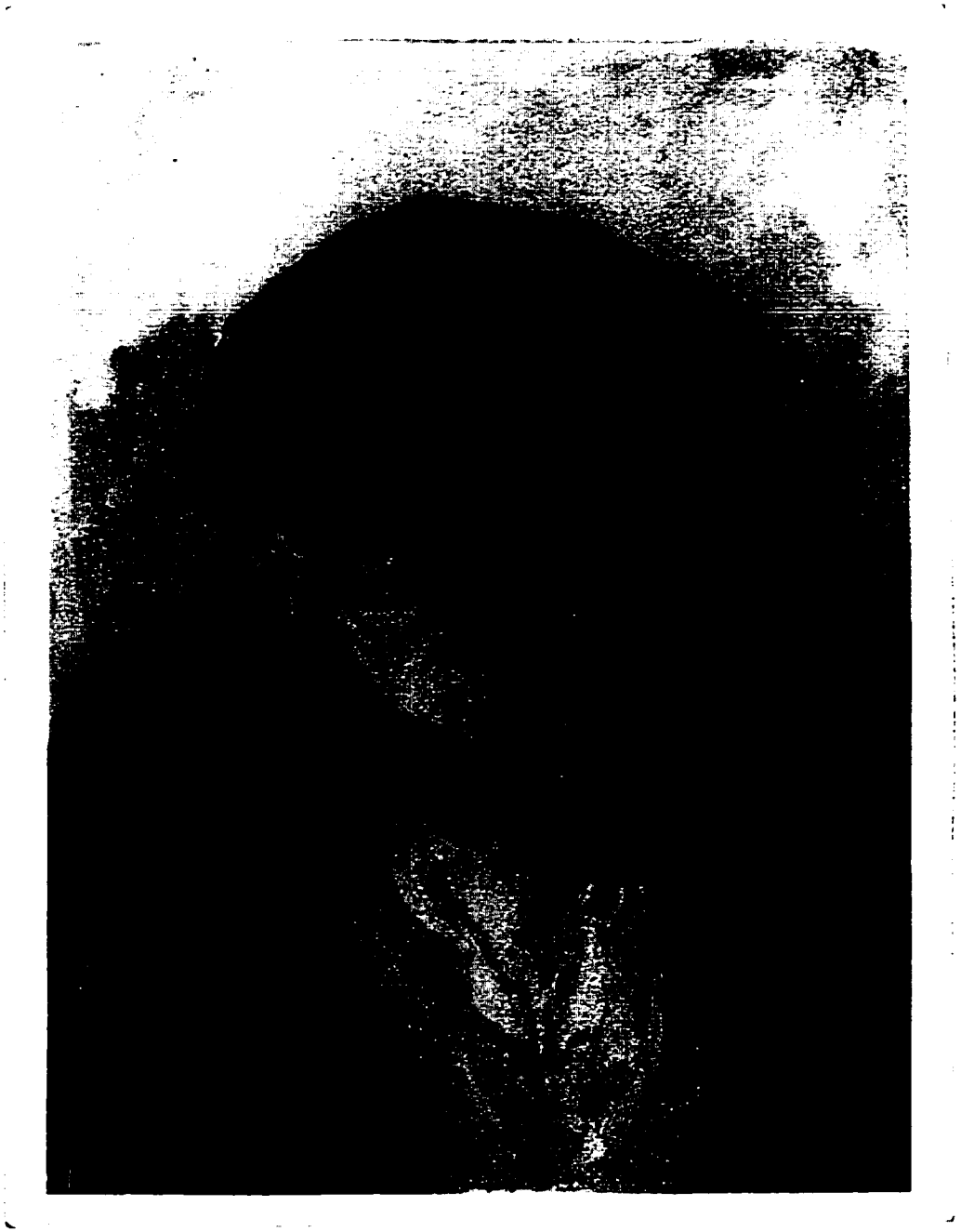

*Figure 17.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Denny Jim*, 1940. Oil on canvas.
*MVT Notes:* Denny Jim, said to be 116 years old. Squamish Indian, North Vancouver Reserve. Many memories of early days. Painted in his tiny home, 1940.

*Figure 18.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Harriet Yellowmud Blanket*, 1948. Oil on canvas.

*MVT Notes:* Harriet Yellowmud Blanket, Cree woman painted on Poundmaker Reserve same day as Joe Peemee. At first said she had no costume, but I finally persuaded her to bring out an old suitcase full of fine apparel, beadwork, feathers, leather, etc... She had vivid memories of the Cutknife affair and the Frog Lake Massacre. July 1948.

*Figure 19.* Black and white photograph of Mildred Valley Thornton painting Chief Shot-on-Both-Sides, Blood Reserve, Cardston, Alberta, c1943. [Photograph courtesy of J. M. Thornton.]

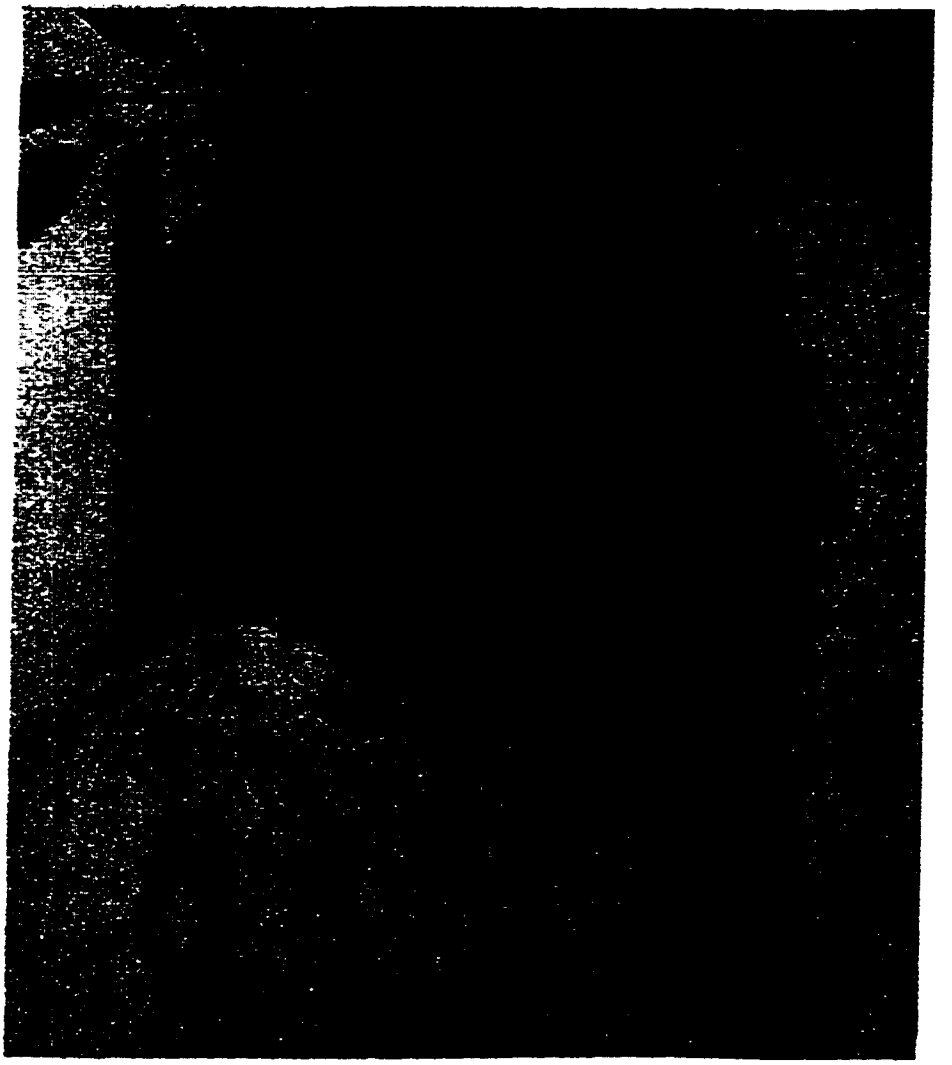

*Figure 20.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Chief Shot-on-Both-Sides*, 1943. Oil on canvas.
*MVT Notes:* Chief Shot-On-Both-Sides, head chief of the Blood Reserve and descendant of Chief Red Crow, who signed the Blackfoot Treaty for his tribe and claimed the land where the Blood Reserve has been ever since. Painted in his home, 1943.

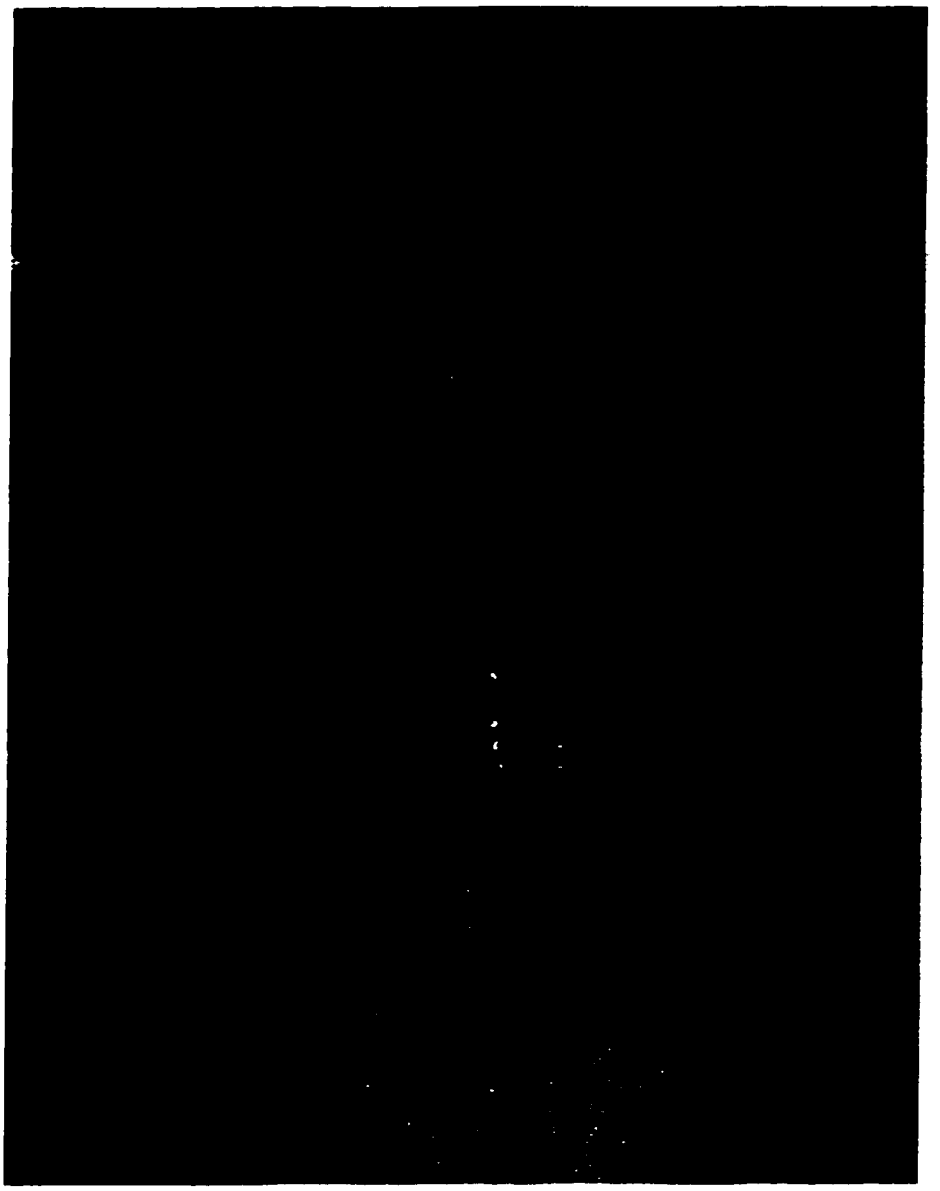

*Figure 21.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Chief Fish-Wolf-Ofe*, c1942. Oil on canvas.

*Figure 22.* Mildred Valley Thornton, *Isaac Jacobs*, c1943. Oil on canvas. Squamish Indian Band Council Collection, North Vancouver, British Columbia.

*MVT Notes:* Isaac Jacobs' Indian name is Ta-chel-kha-new, which means "one who is highly respected by the people." Squamish Indian on Capilano Reserve, painted about 1943. Ordained minister of Indian Shaker Church. Broke away from Catholic religion years ago, built his own church in his own back yard. Wearing his surplice.

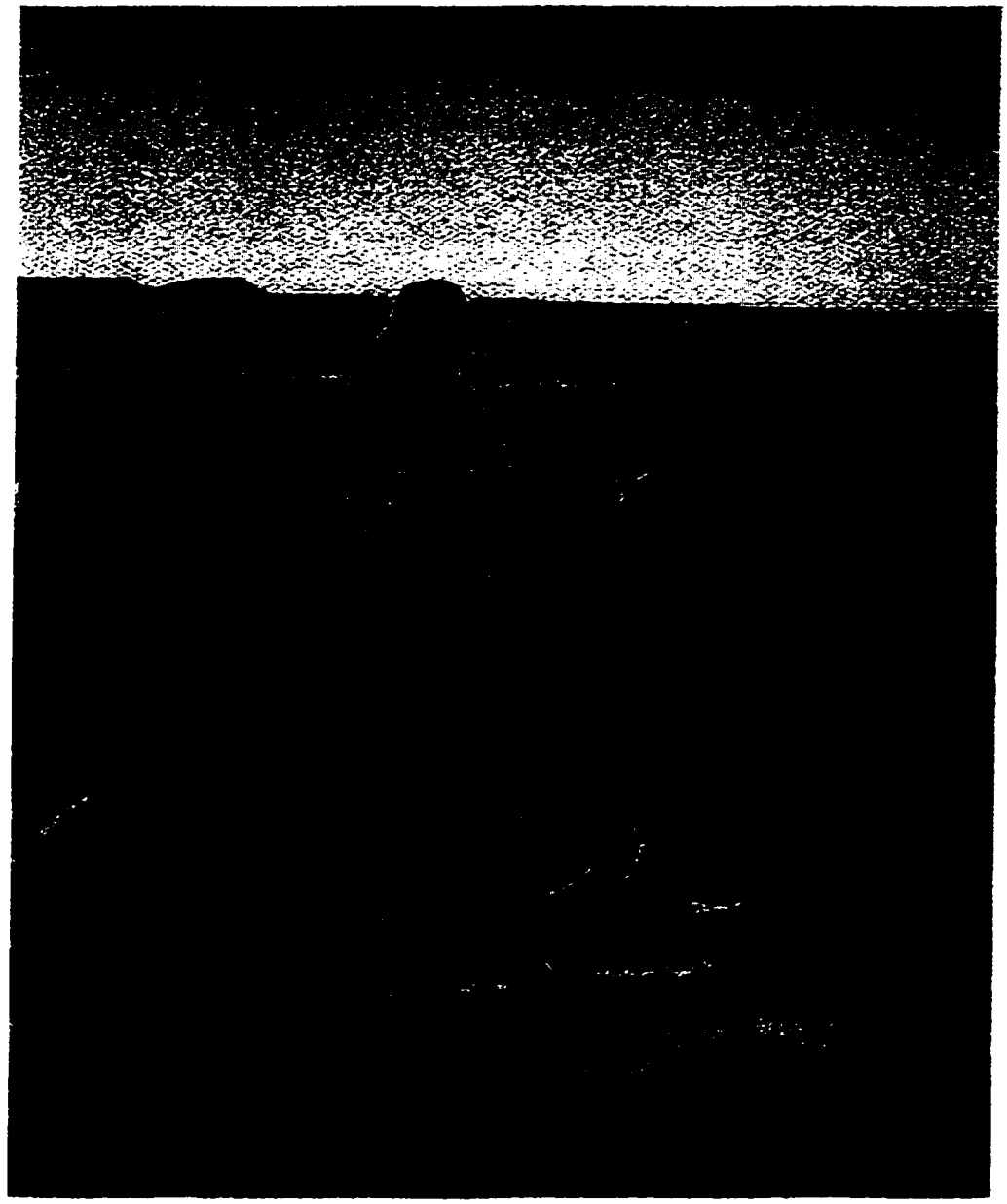

*Figure 23.* Maynard Dixon, *The Enemy's Country*, 1942. Tempera Illustration [Maynard Dixon, *Images of the Native American*: 74.]