

**A Man from Roundup:**

**The Life and Times of Bill Holm**

**Lloyd J. Averill**

## About the Author

Lloyd J. Averill, a faculty colleague at the University of Washington, and longtime friend of Bill Holm, is also the co-author (with Daphne K. Morris), of *Northwest Coast Native and Native-Style Art: A Guidebook for Western Washington* (University of Washington Press, 1995), and (with Steven C. Brown) of *Sun Dogs and Eagle Down: The Indian Paintings of Bill Holm* (University of Washington Press, 2000), as well as of 11 other books on higher education, religious history, and sociology, and one novel.

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**This book is dedicated to  
Marty, Carla, and Karen Holm,  
and to that larger family  
of unnumbered women and men  
around the world who honor  
Bill Holm  
as exemplar and friend**

## Acknowledgements

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Otherwise unattributed direct quotations are drawn from the tape-recorded interviews.

Many other people, who also have had a significant relationship with him, might have been included, but time is a stern taskmaster and sets difficult limits.

Even with all of this assistance, I am solely responsible for the accuracy of the facts and the appropriateness of the judgments in what follows.

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## Foreword

The research that informs this tribute to Bill Holm was done in the course of preparing his biographical chronology and bibliography for *Sun Dogs and Eagle Down: Bill Holm's Indian Paintings*.<sup>\*</sup> For years the University of Washington Press had wanted to do a book on Bill, but he wouldn't consent to it. Quite characteristically, he was sure that it would be much ado, that nobody would be interested. Even if there might be some interest in his paintings and drawings, he was absolutely certain nobody would care about his biography.

Over time, several of us began what we hoped would be a softening-up process, trying to persuade him that, indeed, there would be interest not only in his art but in himself as an artist.

Finally, perhaps just to have done with the matter once and for all, he relented. His friends rejoiced. Private person that he is, he's probably still wondering if he did the right thing.

In spite of his misgivings, Bill gave complete cooperation in repeated conversations, face-to-face and on the telephone, and proved many times over the point, made in the "Mentor" section that follows, that he is eminently interruptible.

Having done the research and having entered at some depth into the life of this remarkable teacher-scholar-artist, it seemed to me that, as useful as a mere chronology of the artist's life might be, it was hardly enough. His friends and admirers deserve to have access to the larger story. Dr. George MacDonald, Director of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, agreed and proposed publishing it on the Museum's website as a feature of its new Bill Holm Center for the Study of Northwest Coast Art.

Here it is.

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\* Steven C. Brown and Lloyd Averill. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.

## 1

## A Defining Moment

**It was the summer of 1934.** Nine-year-old Bill Holm was looking for something to fill the spare hours on a periodic family visit to Grandmother and Grandfather Gerntholz, who lived with two adult sons and a daughter at their farm home in North Dakota. A devoted reader at any time, Bill found his way into the room that housed Uncle Albert's library and, browsing, came upon an arresting title: *Two Little Savages, Being the Adventures of Two Boys Who Lived as Indians and What They Learned. With Over Three Hundred Drawings.*

Taking it from the shelf, he read the first sentence: "Yan was much like other twelve-year-old boys in having a keen interest in Indians and in wild life...."<sup>2</sup> In fact, Yan was much like Bill himself, who had been photographed in a store-bought "Indian" tunic and headdress two days after his fourth birthday, and whose interest in wild life had been nurtured early under the big sky of his small-town, south-central Montana home.

Hooked--identified--by that first sentence, the nine-year-old read on to the end of the 550-page book, absorbed by the adventures of Yan and Sam, the two Canadian white boys of Ernest Thompson Seton's title. He visualized himself imitating what Yan and Sam imagined Indian life was like--raising tipis, making bows and arrows, drums, and other artifacts, stalking and hunting animals, learning to live on the land--and was eager to get on with that imitation. In fact, before leaving the North Dakota farm, Bill went out into a nearby grove of trees and made a tipi out of sticks and blankets. Seeing Bill's enthusiasm, Uncle Albert made him a present of the book--he still has it--and it became the initial traveler's guide to a world of increasingly serious preoccupation through all of his subsequent years.

In fact, to the outside observer there seems to be something remarkably prescient in the opening words of the book. Bill Holm, while acknowledging a direct continuity from that 1934 moment to the active present, is too sober an interpreter to put it quite that way. Here, so that the reader may judge, is a full account of its opening paragraph:

*Yan was much like other twelve-year-old boys in having a keen interest in Indians and in wild life, but he differed from most in this, that he never got over it. Indeed, as he grew older, he found a yet keener pleasure in storing up the little bits of woodcraft and Indian lore that pleased him as a boy.<sup>3</sup>*

And where has that 1934 moment led? To this biography as only the most recent among many testimonies to the remarkably multi-faceted and distinguished career of a man from Roundup, Montana, who, at an early age, was captivated by the Native American culture and "never got over it."

## 2

## Life in Roundup

**In the 1920s and '30s**, Roundup, Montana, had a population of about 3,000. As Bill Holm's twin sister, Betty, remembers it, there was a certain sweetness in that small town. Everybody knew everybody else, which gave youngsters like Bill and Betty an identity and a sense of security and support larger places wouldn't have afforded. Bill describes those early years as "altogether untroubled."

Their parents were visible in the town. Oscar Holm was an electrician and the proprietor of Holm Electric, a shop that offered electrical services, supplies, and appliances, along with such oddments as magazines, guitar strings, harmonicas and kazoos, and radios. Oscar Holm was a clever man, able to turn his hand effectively to almost any manual task. Whether or not that practical versatility had any direct influence on young Bill, Steve Brown, a long-time collaborator, has commented on Bill's "engineering" skills, from fashioning tools and designing the mechanics of a transformation mask to the raising of totem poles.

Oscar Holm was an outdoorsman who hunted and fished. Bill was introduced to the use of firearms by his father, and he first owned his own gun when he was 10 or 11. Never much interested in fishing, as a youngster he hunted small game--prairie dogs and jackrabbits. Family camping was a regular experience.

Martha Holm, unmarried when she first came to Roundup, taught then in the elementary school. After she married Oscar and the twins arrived, she substituted occasionally in Roundup's elementary classes. In spite of very real affection for their mother, Bill and Betty did not look forward to the occasions when she was assigned to their classroom. Eager scholars that they were, with the regular teacher they had their hands in the air, ready with a comment or the answer to a question related to the lesson of the moment. But sensitive to the need for pedagogical impartiality, when Martha substituted she seldom called on them.

Of unusually active temperament, but somewhat limited in his physical activities by chronic respiratory allergies, Bill developed other preoccupations with strong parental support and encouragement. He became a devoted reader, especially of books about Native life and culture. Betty says that she and Bill learned to read upside-down before they learned to read right-side up, as they followed along with their father who sat across from them while reading the Sunday comics aloud. The small public library in Roundup was supplemented

by regular family visits to the Billings library with its much larger collection. The habit of periodical reading was encouraged by the availability of magazines carried in their father's shop.

Early on, Bill learned to improvise, very much like Yan and Sam--to make or adapt what he needed, especially in creating Native-style artifacts. Another photograph shows ten-year-old Bill wearing a war bonnet, made with eagle feathers he had found on a dead bird back in the hills, and a brow band he had made with beads taken from a disused lamp shade.

Perhaps this was the moment when yet another line from the Ernest Thompson Seton book began to move toward life-long fulfillment in Bill's experience. In the story, Yan had set about to build a crude shanty to house his activities.

*Thus, after weeks of labour, his woodland home was finished. It was only five feet high inside, six feet long and six feet wide--dirty and uncomfortable--but what a happiness it was to have it.*

*Here for the first time in his life he began to realize something of the pleasure of single-handed achievement in the line of a great ambition.<sup>4</sup>*

Later visits to the ten-cent store in Billings provided Bill with a more conventional source of beads and other materials. He describes himself as a "serious hobbyist" by the time he was 10 or 11.

Roundup had once been a cow town and there was still ranching all around; but by the 1920s its primary business was the mining of coal. The Holms lived on the edge of town, near pines and cottonwoods and a literal stone's throw from sage and sandstone bluffs. Though a century before this had been a place where Crow and Blackfeet territories met and buffalo were hunted, in the '20s and '30s there was no active Native presence, the reservations having been located to the north and the south of Roundup. Bill saw Native people on visits to Billings, which was near the Crow Reservation. And on the anniversary of the Custer battle, when Oscar Holm went with the Drum and Bugle Corps of the Roundup American Legion Post to play for festivities at the Custer Battlefield, the rest of the Holm family went, too. There Bill saw old-time Indians wearing traditional garb and performing traditional dances. An intense interest in Custer, and in the wider clash between Plains warriors and the U.S. Cavalry, was to appear years later in his paintings and drawings.

Like other children of his age and generation, Bill and his friends played at being Indians--and, as he later said, they had great country to do it in. Sandstone outcroppings, caves, and crevices within a half-mile of the house offered an imaginative setting. Among the "tribe" of four or five playmates, Bill was given the name of "Howling Sunrise," commemorating a particularly severe sunburn he had suffered. Although the actual Native

presence was remote, the Native influence was palpable in the land, giving a realism to play that was denied to urban fantasists.

In the spring of 1937, when Bill and Betty were twelve, a family decision was made to move from Roundup to Seattle because of Bill's asthmatic condition. Summers were particularly hard on him, and there was fear that he might not survive another summer season. The family physician advised that the climate in Seattle, and the medical resources available there, would help to alleviate Bill's threatening respiratory allergies.

Before leaving Roundup, Bill and Betty were baptized in the Methodist Church. When they were born on March 24, 1925, Bill had been named O. William Holm, with the "O" undesignated by his parents and left to Bill's choice at a later time. When, in the baptismal ritual, the officiating minister asked by what name the candidate was to be known, Bill replied proudly, "Oscar William Holm," his father's name. But, with the exception of an occasional subsequent bureaucratic intransigence that insisted on the formal "Oscar W. Holm, Jr."--the military, and alumni records at the University of Washington, chief among them--he has been "Bill Holm" from the beginning.

## 3

## Early Seattle Years

**The move to Seattle** was initially difficult for Bill. The landscape was strikingly different from Montana, and he felt physically and psychologically hemmed in. As he recalled some years later,

*You couldn't just walk out of your back yard and be in the sage brush and yucca or cross two streets from your front yard and start climbing tumbled sandstone cliffs topped with jack pine and junipers. Seattle was too big, and when you did get out of town the trees were so huge and the brush so thick that you couldn't see to the next hill, supposing the view wasn't blocked by fog or rain.*

The location of the family's new Seattle home--in the lower Woodland Park-Green Lake neighborhood--was chosen by Martha and Oscar Holm to assure easy access for Bill and Betty to libraries and, by bicycle or bus, to the University of Washington campus. Martha took Bill on his first visit to the Washington State Museum (later the Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum) on the campus of the University. On subsequent, increasingly frequent visits, he enthusiastically went alone.

The Museum was an impressive sight for this boy from small-town Montana. Bill himself has described it as "a great white temple fronted by an enormous Ionic colonnade," with a grand staircase inside that led to its Asian Pacific collections.<sup>6</sup> The building, left over from the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909, was in growing need of replacement at the time Bill Holm arrived there in 1937--although it lasted until 1959, when it closed for three years to prepare for the opening of the new Burke Museum in 1962.

Bill soon made the acquaintance of the Museum's director, anthropologist Dr. Erna Gunther, and of her son, Kit Spier, who was Bill's age. Later on Saturdays, Bill and Kit would make horn spoons and Plains pipe stems in the Museum's workroom. It didn't take Dr. Gunther long to become aware of the remarkable seriousness of this youngster about the Northern Plains Indian culture to which he had been exposed in Montana, and as a result she soon gave him unlimited access to the Museum--including permission, astonishing by today's standards, to borrow artifacts from the collection. Much later, reflecting on his friendship with Erna Gunther, Bill wrote, "I learned [from her] that a curator or a museum director can respect and encourage the sincere interest of a person lacking scholarly credentials, even if he is only 12."<sup>7</sup>

A part of Bill's broadening was the discovery, in the Museum, of Native cultures other than those of the Plains. The Tlingit Room contained artifacts collected in the 1880s and 1890s by Naval Lt. George Thornton Emmons during his tours of duty in Southeastern Alaska, home of the Tlingit people, and Bill began to spend increasing amounts of time there.

Two other influences were even more important. As a ninth grader, he was asked by a teacher to serve as "technical adviser" to a seventh-grade art class production of a Northwest Coast-based play called "Tuteka and the Bear." In preparation for that advising, he made a number of drawings of Northwest Coast Native objects from the Museum, along with idea sketches, that had relevance for the story. He also borrowed a canoe and a mask or two, with Erna Gunther's support. That advising, says Bill Holm, "was really the beginning of my interest in the Northwest Coast." He adds, with a smile, "It was my first professional act as a Northwest Coast scholar."

More than that, Erna Gunther introduced Bill to her Makah friends, who lived at Neah Bay on Washington's Olympic Peninsula. And when she took some of her University students to visit a Salish Spirit Dance, held in the Swinomish smoke house near LaConner, she invited the junior high school student to go along. He returned many times later. At the dance, Bill also established a friendship with Harry Smith, a boy near his own age with contacts among the Lummi, a Salish people whose reservation is near Bellingham. Even when Harry was a high school student, Bill now says, Harry was doing graduate-type ethnography among the Lummi. Later he became a primary figure in the world of avant-garde animated film makers, and was among the first American artists to exhibit at the Louvre.

Subsequently Bill attended Spirit Dances at Lummi and at a British Columbia Salish community in Malahat.

Recalling those Spirit Dance experiences, Bill says, "It was very moving to me. It wouldn't have taken a lot to push me over the edge into being a Spirit Dancer. When you're in that house, with those sparks and those flames and those dancers all painted up, with their hair headdresses and the drums that lift you right out of your seat--and the songs are very powerful--when you're there, it's very easy to leave the modern world behind." That's a remarkable acknowledgement from the customarily unemotional scholar, and it suggests the depth at which a shift toward interest in the Northwest Coast was occurring.

At the same time, he did not lose his passion for the traditions of the Plains and Plateau. On one occasion, Martha took Bill to a Plateau dance performance at the Green Lake School by Roger Ernesti, his wife Avis, and Bill Young, a Yakama man known as Chief Rainbow. Ernesti, a graduate student in anthropology at the University and a staffer at the Museum, had made friends widely among the Yakama, Plateau people in eastern Washington, and had danced with them regularly at their celebrations. In recognition of his respectful interest in their traditions, and of his authentic costumes and stylish dancing, Roger had been inducted into the Toppenish

longhouse and given a Yakama name. Bill introduced himself to Roger at the school performance. Very quickly the teenager became a protégé of the young graduate student, and was soon joining Roger and Avis in their dance performances. Roger provided Bill with materials for making Native artifacts--once even some eagle feathers. At the Museum, he gave Bill access to its library collection and helped with Bill's research projects. Over time Roger introduced Bill to his Yakama friends, from whom Bill eagerly learned more about authentic Plateau-style dancing.

Bill's interest in languages led him to learn Chinook jargon, the polyglot trade language that had been used up and down the Coast. For him and classmate Dave Richardson, Chinook jargon was their private or secret language.

While at Lincoln High School Bill was part of a small group that did Plains and Plateau dance performances, which were presented on invitation at the school and elsewhere in Seattle during the early 1940s. Costumes worn by the young dancers included some authentic Native regalia, with other items made by members of the group. When asked recently how he learned some of the dances themselves, he said, "From seeing Native dancing--at the Custer Battlefield, on the Yakama reservation, and elsewhere. From books. Some of it came from my imagination--and some of it was pretty hokey."

## 4

## War Intervenes

**Like most young men** who graduated from high school in 1943, Bill Holm was subject to active military service, and as a high school senior, he had taken a special test designed to determine, in preparation for their induction, which recruits might be qualified for specialized training. In the summer of 1943 he was ordered to report to Fort Lewis, Washington, to be inducted. From there, he was sent to Texas for infantry basic training and was assigned to a battalion made up entirely of men who had scored high on the special test. His first preference following basic training--to be sent to language school--was frustrated by his discovery that that assignment carried a prerequisite of two years of college-level language study. In spite of his practical cleverness, his last preference was for engineering, largely because he had never liked mathematics. And so, with the military's customary careful matching of preferences, Bill was assigned to an accelerated Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP)--in engineering!

The pleasure of being located, for that training, on the campus of Pomona College in southern California did not entirely mitigate his dislike of the subject matter, and there Bill earned the lowest grade in his entire academic career--a C in chemistry.

The Army Specialized Training Program at Pomona was closed after only three months, because Allied armies were massing for the assault on Europe and all possible manpower was being shifted to the ground forces. Bill's first reassignment was to a tank battalion, where he spent weeks running tank targets and doing KP duty. Eventually he was sent to join a new battalion of artillery observers that was assigned, after a period of training, to the front lines in France. Observation was a vulnerable business. Only lightly armed, observers were placed ahead of the artillery, whose targets they were to locate and whose effectiveness they were to assess. Bill's awareness of being exposed was intensified by news that a unit like his own, captured at Malmédy by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge, had been lined up and summarily executed!

Some frontline dangers were real, some were imagined. A very real one occurred a month before the war in Europe ended. A convoy in which he was riding near Grossrinderfeld, Germany, was attacked by half a dozen Messerschmidt 109 fighters, with machine guns and 20mm. canons aroar. He bailed out of his jeep and took one long step over the bank of the road into a field sloping down to a creek. "I really believed that it was the end," he says, "and when I saw the planes climb skyward, I expected them to circle back and go at it again. But the attack was over. None of our party, and neither of our

vehicles had been hit, but a truck between our jeeps was badly damaged and its machine gunner was wounded."

Some "dangers" were less consequential. Bill writes,

*We had an observation post in a dugout on the Spicher Heights overlooking the city of Saarbrücken, Germany, in mid-March, 1945. I was sitting, in my sleeping bag, behind our azimuth instrument, peering out into the hazy glow of clouds illuminated by searchlights, which we called "artificial moonlight." The dugout was roofed by planks covered with sandbags, leaving a low, narrow window for observation. Suddenly I was aware of a figure standing on the brink of the hill sloping off toward the Saar Valley. In the half-light I could barely make out the distinctive flat-topped helmet and long overcoat of a German soldier. I was sure he was part of a patrol looking for my observation post. As I watched, he slowly moved across the hill in front of the post. He stopped again, perhaps listening for any sound that might give away our location. Then he moved slowly up the slope toward me. Again he stopped. My pistol was on my belt inside the sleeping bag, and I carefully drew it and prepared to shoot should he come close enough to roll a grenade into the dugout.*

*As I moved, I was aware that he moved at the same time. I moved my head and he moved again. I moved--he moved! I finally realized that the very graphic "German soldier" was a tiny, dry leaf hanging from a scrubby bush just in front of the observation post, and just lined up with the brink of the hill. The artificial moonlight had made it impossible to focus clearly, and the details of dress and equipment were my subconscious interpretations of the fuzzy outline of the leaf.*

*Had I shot, with the target within inches of my pistol's muzzle, I would have obliterated it, and to this day would fully believe that I had thwarted a real attack on my observation post!*

One of Bill's tasks as an observer was to do panoramic sketching, designed for the reliable location of distinctive landmarks and of German units in terms of distance and elevation, so that this information could be passed on from one shift of observers to the next as a guide for artillery bombardment. He used a simple but effective device for accurate measurement, comprised merely of a piece of string, with one end held between his teeth, and the other end attached to a ruler with a hole in it. The string was held straight in front of the observer, the ruler held either horizontally or vertically, and deviations in terrain measured by calibrations on the ruler on either side of the center. Later Bill wrote a manual designed to train artillery observers in the art of panoramic sketching, using this device.

Nor was this the only wartime activity that connected him with his own earlier talents and associations. He kept an occasional journal of his army life in the form of a sketchbook, and he drew cartoons for publication in the unit's newspaper. The illustration of his encounter with a Messerschmidt, reproduced here, is taken from that sketchbook. He and his high school friend, Dave Richardson, crossed paths once in a frontline area. Dave wrote a parody of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam* (which he was translating into Esperanto), chiding Bill as an artilleryman from an infantryman's perspective, and Bill illustrated Dave's verses with cartoons. Later (1971) Dave wrote *Pig War Islands*, an account of a nineteenth-century boundary dispute between the United States and Great Britain involving the San Juan Islands, for which Bill did the cover painting.

A dramatic incident occurred just a few days before the end of the war. A report circulated within his unit that there was, nearby, a brewery that held both live prisoners and dead bodies. Bill and some of his buddies decided to investigate. They climbed the fence that surrounded the "brewery" complex and found former German prisoners clearing away the dead with the help of an advance group of American liberators.

This was Dachau. The report that the place was a brewery had resulted from a misreading of the sign, "Waffen SS. Lager." Someone unacquainted with German thought "Lager" had something to do with beer. Instead it meant "camp," a prison operated by elite SS. troops.

As Bill and his friends climbed back out of the compound, they saw a large crowd of ex-prisoners surrounding two men in white coveralls with the red SS. lightning-bolt logo painted on their backs. A few American soldiers stood idly by. Every few seconds someone in the crowd would press forward to assault one of the two men, leaving the other largely untouched. Bill surmised that the two men had been SS. guards, one of whom had probably been a tormentor and the other a fairly decent warder. He doubted that the first man was alive by the end of the day.

The European war over, Bill returned to the States on "H.M.S. Queen Mary" and was immediately sent home on leave from Fort Bragg, North Carolina. On the conclusion of the leave, he was to return to Fort Bragg for retraining and reassignment to the Pacific war theater. But when his train reached Spokane on that first trip back home, newspaper headlines announced the bombing of Hiroshima. He did return to Bragg, went through some training activities, and was given more leaves. But soon the war in the Pacific was over, too, and he was finally mustered out at Fort Bragg with the rank of Master Sergeant, just in time to enter the University of Washington, with the assistance of the G.I. Bill, for the term that began in January, 1946.

He faced a brief dilemma in choosing between anthropology and art: between the strength of his eight-year association with the Washington State Museum, and his even longer and, as it turned out, stronger interest in

painting. The turmoil of faculty politics in anthropology at the time resolved the dilemma for him, and he enrolled in the School of Art.

He won election to Phi Beta Kappa--no one has ever seen him wear his key--and graduated *magna cum laude* in 1949. No one who has ever asked Bill a question and received a remarkably detailed and extended answer has been in any doubt about his astonishingly retentive mind. Betty says that when Bill was teaching, he called his mother one day and asked her to find a book citation for him. He told her the title and author, the approximate page it was on, and that it was on the right side about half-way down the page. Yet it had been ten years since he had last seen that citation!

After completing his baccalaureate degree in painting, he went immediately into the Master of Fine Arts program, also in painting, completing it in 1951, and followed it with the Provisional General Teaching Certificate in 1953, and the Standard General Teaching Certificate in 1958.

On first being mustered out, Bill had joined the Army Reserves and was given an officer's commission, but after a short tour of duty he resigned, having decided--as the above accomplishments attest--that there were other things he wanted to do with his time.

Dancing was one of those, and he joined a small group of friends who performed Plains, Plateau, and Northwest Coast dances regularly around the Puget Sound area. The group called themselves the Ikpoos, a made-up name that suggested their light-heartedness. In contrast to some ultra-serious hobbyist groups that had graduated ranks and regulations for achieving them, they had only one rule: "All Ikpoos are chiefs!"

Another was the re-establishment of his friendship with Roger Ernesti. They became even closer friends than before, sharing an interest in hunting as well as in the Native cultures. Bill joined Roger's group to perform at a sportsman's show in Seattle's Civic Auditorium. Donn Charnley, one of Bill's fellow dancers, says that publicity for the event in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* described Bill as "a muscular, full-blooded Indian from Hardin, Montana." Said Bill, "In fact, I was an anemic, half-blooded Swede from Roundup. Montana was the only part they got right!"

Bill and Roger also danced at powwows in Eastern Washington. And as a result of Roger's sponsorship, a "giveaway" was arranged in Bill's honor. He was inducted into the Toppenish longhouse and given the Yakama name, "Shiakla," which meant "Scout," or "Sees the Enemy," in recognition of his wartime experience as an artillery spotter. Bill is still called "Scout" by some older Yakama people. After he and Marty were married in 1953, they danced frequently in Yakama powwows until about 1960.

Bill also joined a group of University of Washington students, put together by Gordon Tracie, founder of Seattle's Scandia Club, that toured Sweden in the summer of 1950 doing American folk dances. Bill performed Indian dances in the program and met, for the first time, some of his Swedish relatives.

## 5

## The Teacher

**While Bill was a graduate student**, his love of books led to a part-time job at Shorey's Book Store in downtown Seattle. He kept very little of his income from the job. Among other things, Shorey's had a quality collection of used books, and Bill often took his earnings out in trade--hard-to-get copies of the *Bulletins* and the *Annual Reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology* from the '20s and '30s, for example. Bill Todd, Shorey's owner, thought to make a professional bookman out of Bill, but in spite of a pleasant experience there, Bill was not attracted to the life of a businessman, not even of a bookman.

It was an employment counselor who first suggested to Bill that he get a teaching certificate and prepare for public school teaching. He discovered that he could complete the requirements for a provisional certificate in three quarters, having a great many extra credits from his graduate work, so he entered upon it in 1952. Some of the courses he found stimulating--psychology, for example, with an exemplary professor. Others he found barely tolerable. He took a studio art course that included ceramics--as it turned out, the only formal exposure he ever had to that craft.

Bill completed his certificate courses in June of 1953, and by that time he had an invitation to join the art faculty of Lincoln High School in Seattle, from which he had graduated just ten years earlier. In August he and Martha (Marty) Mueller were married--they had been fellow counselors at a summer youth camp in the San Juan Islands, and Bill had courted her with traditional Native songs that he played on an Indian flute--and he began his teaching in the fall of 1953.

Although Lincoln was the largest high school in the State, it had only one art teacher on its faculty until Bill was added. In his first year of teaching, he had one art class, which met at 7:45 a.m.--a craft class that included ceramics, to which he had only the slightest introduction the year before--four study halls, and one free period. His teaching day was over by lunch. He describes those early teaching years as a good time, even though he was teaching only one art course. He liked the students in the study halls, related to them in a positive way, and was ready to try to be helpful to them--which became a permanent hallmark of his teaching style from then on. When students brought him problems they had encountered in their study, he tried to help them whether or not he knew anything about the subject-matter. He could at least say, "Try looking in the index in the text-book." Often that solved the problem.

His positive record as a study hall teacher even led to an assignment to substitute for another teacher whose hard-line style was in danger of provoking a riot--before riots were in the air. Bill comments that he left high school teaching in 1968, just at the point when the disruptions of the late '60s and early '70s were beginning to touch secondary institutions.

Gradually his art teaching increased as enrollments grew, and eventually there were three full-time teachers in the art department. In time he was free to teach pretty much whatever he preferred. At various times he taught painting, drawing, sculpture, and print making. There were also some challenges to his ingenuity and adaptability. When an architectural drawing teacher went on leave, he taught "Lettering." The stated curriculum included a course in "Fashion Design." Bill knew nothing about such design, so instead he taught a course in "Fashion Illustration."

As a kind of extra-curricular activity, he did a great many other things at Lincoln that stretched his imagination and gave him great satisfaction. Painting large sets for dramatic productions was one of those. He designed covers for student publications, did silk-screen prints beyond counting for student activities, and organized student art fairs.

During faculty meetings in the school library, Bill would regularly doodle, drawing what he would later call "ovoids"--a bilaterally-symmetrical oval shape, slightly flattened or concave at the bottom, which is one of the fundamental design elements in Northwest Coast Native art. In the end he had about 100 of the sketches--still has them--drawn in different combinations of forms, different shapes, different proportions. He swears that he also kept abreast of what was being discussed in the meetings.

During the Lincoln years, Bill had kept up his contacts in the University of Washington Art Department, and was frequently at the Burke Museum as well, working on his own research especially in the art of the Northwest Coast. In the 1967-68 school year, Bill received an invitation from Spencer Moseley, once a classmate in the School of Art at the University and by now the director of that School, to teach a course on Northwest Coast Indian art in the late afternoons, after his teaching day at Lincoln was over. As it happened, the position of Curator of Education was open at that time at the Burke Museum. Spencer Moseley conferred with George Quimby, new director of the Burke, and instead of the single course proposed by Moseley, they offered Bill a joint appointment as curator at the Museum, lecturer in the Department of Art History, and adjunct lecturer in the Department of Anthropology. Bill accepted the invitation and moved from Lincoln to the University in the fall of 1968.

As daughter Carla remembers it, Bill's change from high school teacher to university professor was also the occasion for a sartorial transition. "Out went white short-sleeved shirts and dark thin ties. In came striped, open-collar shirts and striped slacks that later gave way to jeans. And he also stopped wearing a crew cut. Cowboy boots happened at retirement."

The pattern of teaching Bill began in the fall of 1968 he continued throughout his seventeen years in the University: a sequence of three courses annually, consisting of two-dimensional Northwest Coast art, three-dimensional art, and the dramatic, or ceremonial, arts of the Northwest Coast. These were enriched from time to time by advanced seminars in one or another specialized aspect of the Native American art, not always of the Northwest Coast. His first class, held in a small auditorium in the School of Art, had an enrollment of some 75 persons. Enrollments grew over time to 250, requiring teaching assistants and classes that were held in the large auditoriums of the newly-constructed Kane Hall.

Robin Wright, Bill's long-time teaching assistant and now his successor at the Burke Museum and in the School of Art, says that, in addition to regularly enrolled students, who later became artists and art historians--Robin herself as an undergraduate; Cheryl Samuel, weaver and later art historian; and the late Tlingit artist James Schoppert, among a great many others--there were always people sitting in on his classes. More often than not, they were artists and aspiring artists, both Native and non-Native, many of whom have since made a career of Northwest Coast Native art. Among them were Robert Davidson (Haida), Joe David (Nuu-chah-nulth), and Jack Hudson (Tsimpshean),\* and non-Natives Duane Pasco, Peter Hilgefورد, Loren White, Barry Herem, Jay Haavik, Peter Dunthorne, and Tom Speer. Commenting on his response to what he saw and heard in those classes, artist David Stephens has said, "It was like standing under a waterfall!"

Marvin Oliver (Quinault/Isleta Pueblo), now a master artist in Northwest Coast styles, University of Washington professor, and a curator at the Burke Museum, took all of Bill's lecture classes and special-topics seminars as an M.F.A. candidate, after returning to Seattle from undergraduate work at San Francisco State. Although he had been acquainted with the Pueblo traditions of the Southwest through summer visits to his mother's family, he had seen little of the Northwest Coast arts until Bill's courses, and the ceremonies Bill directed in the Indian house at Camp Nor'wester on Lopez Island, opened them up to him. Says Marvin Oliver, "Bill Holm is the most inspirational person in my life when it comes to my career. He gave me the indispensable foundation."

Bill's teaching in other settings extended his influence. It was while conducting a workshop for artists in Haines, Alaska, that he first met Tlingit artist Nathan Jackson. Until then Jackson, who had been trained in Santa Fe and was teaching block printing at the time, had seen little of the art produced out of his own Native heritage, and Bill's slides opened to him a fresh world of possibility. He credits Bill with setting him on a new career path. When

\* While Native people in northern mainland British Columbia are identified by the generic term Tsimshian, a group that migrated from Old Metlakatla, B.C., in 1887 to form the new community of Metlakatla on Annette Island, AK, prefer the variant Tsimpshean.

his son showed an interest in Native art, Nathan's first thought was to find a way to bring Bill and the boy together.

Over time, Bill's role as a curator at the Burke Museum shifted from Education to Northwest Coast Native Art. Within eight years of his 1968 appointment as a lecturer, he had achieved a full professorship in art history, and was adjunct professor of anthropology as well, this in spite of his lack of an earned doctorate. Although his well-known modesty would never permit Bill to draw a parallel between himself and Professor George Lyman Kittredge of Harvard, the parallel has been enthusiastically drawn on his behalf by others. Kittredge was the foremost American Shakespearean scholar in the early decades of this century, but he lacked the Ph.D. When asked why he had never taken that advanced degree, Kittredge replied, "Who would ask me the questions?"

Four graduate students received their own Ph.D.s in art history under his chairmanship. Kate Duncan (on Athabascan beadwork), now teaching at Arizona State University; Joy Bell (on Northwest Coast petroglyphs), now at Canada's Lethbridge University; Barbara Loeb (on Crow beadwork), now at Oregon State University; and Robin Wright (on Haida argillite carving), now at the University of Washington. In addition, Barbara Iliff, subsequently at Western Michigan University, began her doctorate (on Tlingit shamanic art) under Bill and, after he retired, finished under Robin Wright. Bill chaired at least four M.A.'s in art history and served on doctoral committees in anthropology for Criska Biewert and Ed Wade.

Bill retired early from University teaching, at age 60, in June of 1985 to pursue his first love, painting, the field in which he had taken both his B.A. and his M.F.A. On retirement, he was appointed Emeritus Curator, and Emeritus Professor of both Art History and Anthropology.

**6****The Camp and the Native Connection\***

**One of the most significant** influences in Bill Holm's life has been a summer camp in Washington's San Juan Islands. Serving youngsters from age 8 or 9 through age 16, it offered two four-week sessions, with activities oriented toward outdoor skills and crafts. Originally located at Wescott Bay on San Juan Island, Washington, it was closed there at the end of the 1945 camping season and moved by owners Frank and Lucile Henderson to Sperry Peninsula on the east shore of Lopez Island, where it was scheduled for opening in the summer of 1946.

Bill's first contact with the camp had occurred in his late high school years. In preparation for the 1942 season, Frank Henderson was having a difficult time finding male counselors, since most young men of appropriate age were going into the military. He decided to consider younger candidates, and one day he noticed a newspaper story and picture about hobbies that were being pursued by Lincoln High School students. The story said that a student named Bill Holm, with a few friends, was putting on Indian dances at the school and in the community.

Henderson called Bill, invited him to join the counselor staff for the 1942 session, and Bill accepted. While the experience was a good one, Bill decided not to return to the camp for the 1943 season. He knew he would be going to the Army shortly, and he wanted to spend the summer with his cousin, riding on horseback through the Montana hills that he loved. But shortly after arriving in Montana, he received an emergency call from Frank Henderson, who was desperately in need of someone to run the camp's craft program. Bill agreed to go.

Three years later, Bill was fresh from overseas, the camp was in a new location on Lopez Island in Washington's San Juans, and he helped to get it ready. That was the start of a series of summers and part-summers at Henderson Camps, later renamed Camp Nor'wester, that, except for his 1950

\* Kwakwaka'wakw is the term used to identify Native people whose traditional lands are on the northeast end of Vancouver Island, the mainland opposite, and the islands between. Kwakiutl, the name by which they were commonly known in earlier anthropological literature, is a distortion of the name of only one band within that culture. Most bands now prefer the more inclusive term Kwakwaka'wakw, which means "the speakers of Kwakwala," their common language, and that term is used here throughout, except where the source requires Kwakiutl. The Kwakwala words in this text are spelled in the orthography devised by the U'mista Cultural Society in Alert Bay, B.C.

summer in Sweden, stretched unbroken from 1946 through 1996, when the camp once more faced the need to relocate.

The camp has been, in fact, a literal extension of Bill's family. In 1949 he met camp counselor Marty Mueller there. They married in 1953, and their two daughters, Carla and Karen, became annual campers beginning at age seven, and later camp counselors. When Bill and Marty no longer spent entire summers in residence, Carla and Karen--by this time thoroughly imbued in their father's ethnographic lore\*\* and in their own direct contacts with Native people--took on the responsibility for training the "Kwakiutl Choir," a group of counselors who did the singing and dancing at the "play potlatch" which had come to be the climactic event of the camp season, and later organized the "potlatch" itself. It was also at Henderson Camps that Bill met Donn Charnley, one of his oldest and closest friends, as well as others with whom he has had friendships that have been sustained over half a century.

When Bill was recently asked why his Northwest Coast interest began to focus, in the early '50s, on the *Kwakwaka'wakw* people, he said it was because there was lots of information about them, with a great many of their masks to be seen in collections, and that it was therefore the most accessible culture to become involved in. Perhaps so. One also suspects that the peculiar *Kwakwaka'wakw* flair for the dramatic stirred his imagination and admiration, and challenged his own ingenuity as a dancer, a carver, and an "engineer."

An instance of challenged ingenuity was found in the "play potlatch" at the end of a 1954 summer session at the camp. There had been an elaborate program around the camp's outdoor fire circle, with Marty Holm doing a traditional *Kwakwaka'wakw* "toogwid" dance. The blanketed and hemlock-adorned dancer moved mystifyingly around the circle four times, carrying a sword-like staff. At the end of the fourth circuit, she threw her "power" toward the fire, and out of the darkness behind the fire there soared a *Sisiutl*--a mythical, two-headed sea creature of enormous power. The dancer swung her sword, and the creature split in two while still floating overhead. One final swipe and it came back together again, then disappeared above in the blackness of the surrounding trees.

In testimony to the dramatic reality of the scene, a woman spectator stood spontaneously and said in a loud voice, "Where did that damn thing go?" apparently fearing that it was a predator let loose upon an unsuspecting island. It was, of course, only a demonstration of Bill Holm's remarkable capacity to mimic the *Kwakwaka'wakw* talent for clever inventiveness, the

\*\* And not only in his lore but also in his practical and creative turn of mind and hand. When Carla (now Martens) interrupted her day's routine in Brussels, Belgium, to provide information by e-mail for this biography, she had been in the midst of tanning a sheepskin and making candles out of wild boar tallow. She is now a full-time homemaker. And for several years, Karen and her partner marketed their hand-made panniers and other cycling equipment of such superior quality that they won rave reviews in national cycling magazines. Karen is now teacher an elementary school teacher. Carla majored in art at the University of Washington, Karen in art history at Smith College.

mythical figure having been rigged to move, with Marty's gestures and at his command, on airplane cable stretched between the trees above the fire circle. After this event, a movement to build a "big house" at the camp in which to hold future "play potlatches" gathered momentum. Such a place had been built recently at Victoria's Provincial Museum by Mungo Martin, a distinguished Kwakwaka'wakw artist and hereditary chief, who was working as the Museum's chief carver. It was the first such Kwakwaka'wakw house to be built after the elimination of the anti-potlatch laws in Canada in 1951, and it had been visited by Henderson Camp staffers on their days off.\* The house was opened in 1953 with a potlatch hosted by Mungo Martin--the first legal potlatch since 1884. Although the opening night of the celebration was for Native people only, Bill and Marty had also been invited to attend by Wilson Duff, a well-known anthropologist and curator of Victoria's British Columbia Provincial Museum. It was the first time Bill had seen authentic Kwakwaka'wakw dancing. The opening of the Victoria house, along with the aforementioned events at the camp, led to a decision by Frank Henderson, the camp's owner, to clear a site for the camp's own "big house," which would provide an authentic setting for its future "potlatches."

In the winter of 1954 Donn Charnley, Dick Conn (later curator of the Denver Art Museum), and others went to Lopez, set up temporary "pavilions," and carved four totemic posts to support the main beams of the house. The house itself was erected in the summer of 1955.

During this process, visits of camp staff to Victoria, and to the carving shed behind the Provincial Museum, increased, and with them contacts with Mungo Martin. As they visited with him informally, they would mention that "We've built a house like this on Lopez Island." Bill and Marty had met Mungo's son David at an art event in Seattle, and David suggested they come up to Victoria to meet his father. They did, and in 1957, after they felt their acquaintance with Mungo had proceeded far enough, they invited him to come to a "play potlatch" in the new house at the camp. Says Donn Charnley, "I felt as if we were inviting Michelangelo to come and look at our charcoal drawings!" But Mungo was immediately responsive. He had Godfrey Hunt demonstrate for Bill the Hamsamala--a masked dance that is at the heart of the Kwakwaka'wakw winter ceremonial. What songs do you need? he wanted to know. Do you have a tape recorder? Get one!

Bill did, and Mungo immediately made recordings of Kwakwaka'wakw songs on his own tape machine and sent them on their way to Seattle. Bill and Marty proceeded to learn the songs, a not inconsiderable challenge, given the unfamiliar Kwakwala words and the distinctive rhythms of Kwakwaka'wakw song and dance. Arriving at the camp, they began to

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\* Although this was the first Kwakwaka'wakw house built after the elimination of the anti-potlatch laws, because it was in Victoria it was built in traditional Coast Salish territory. A house built by a family of joint Kwakwaka'wakw and Salish heritage was later built in Comox in 1959, also on Salish land. The first big house to be built on Kwakwaka'wakw land was in Alert Bay in 1965.

teach the songs to the "Kwakiutl Choir," and arrangements were eagerly made for a real Kwakwaka'wakw dedication of the new Lopez house, with Mungo Martin as the central figure.

As chief carver at the Provincial Museum, Martin worked for curator Wilson Duff and had to ask for time off to attend the Lopez ceremony. Speaking of Bill's invitation, he said to Duff, "I'm going back to my old way. When a Chief calls, I come."

And so he did. On a Friday evening in August of 1957, Bill had gone to the ferry to pick up Mungo, his wife Abayah, Abayah's granddaughter Helen Hunt, and other family members, and when they all returned to the camp it was dark. Donn Charnley, the master fire-maker, had stoked the flames to an eight-foot height. Mungo came in, looked deliberately and carefully around the house--at the dirt floor, at the great fire with its sparks wafting up to the smoke hole, at the four massive Kwakwaka'wakw-style houseposts, and at the painted dance screen with the singers' bench in front of it--but he said nothing. The silence seemed interminable, though it probably lasted less than a minute. Finally, Helen Hunt whispered to Bill, "Do you know what you're doing to the old man? He can't believe his eyes, that what he sees here is actually happening. Just like in olden times."

All that Friday evening, Mungo worked with Bill and Donn and other camp staffers, indicating which songs should be used with which dances, and the way the dances should be done. His coaching continued through the day on Saturday, until finally the hour for the "potlatch" came and the ceremony was performed with Mungo as the lead singer. During the course of the evening, he gave eloquent speeches in the traditional Kwakwaka'wakw style. He was afraid, he said, that the old Kwakwaka'wakw traditions were being lost. "I will be ashamed to go back home and tell what you are doing here on Lopez Island, while my own young seem not to be interested in learning their traditional ways."

Happily, Mungo's pessimistic view was not fulfilled. His appeals were heard, the traditions did go on, and they have enjoyed great vitality in recent years.

Before that first evening was over, Mungo gave Bill one of his grandfather's names, *Namsgamuti* (He Speaks Only Once), and Abayah gave Marty the name *Naxwil* (Light in the House).

Others, who were to become among the best-known British Columbia cultural leaders and artists, followed Mungo's example in coming to the camp from time to time. Peter Smith, a Kwakwaka'wakw elder, was one of those, and in the Indian House he gave names and dance privileges to Donn Charnley and to Paul Jordan, another friend who had been involved in dances at the camp, and their families. Gloria Cranmer Webster came, who later won distinction as director of the U'Mista Society in Alert Bay, as a recipient of the life-time achievement award of the Native American Art Studies Association and of an honorary doctorate from the University of British Columbia. Over time, artists who came included Joe David and Art Thompson (both Nuu-

chah-nulth), Roy Henry Vickers (Tsimshian), Jack Hudson (Tsimshean), Nathan Jackson (Tlingit), and Robert Davidson and Bill Reid (both Haida), among others.

In fact, Bill Reid later wrote that his enthusiasm for Kwakiutl art was

*enhanced by my having been privileged to see on two occasions superb examples of masks and costumes displayed as they should be, as part of the winter dances. These were not original, but sensitively conceived re-enactments by Bill Holm and his dancers in the appropriate firelit setting of a Kwakiutl house and Kwakiutl "audience" for whom these dances are still a living part of existence.<sup>9</sup>*

In the late '50s and up to Mungo's death in 1962, Bill and Marty Holm visited Mungo and Abayah often, and through that friendship the range of their personal acquaintance with Kwakwaka'wakw people widened--especially with Tom and Emma Hunt in Victoria, Peter and Alice Smith in Kalugwis, and Dan and Agnes Cranmer in Alert Bay. Their involvement with ceremonial life also grew steadily. Over time, Mungo Martin recorded some 100 songs for Bill, and gave names and songs individually to Bill and Marty. In a potlatch at Turnour Island in 1959, Mungo brought Bill out as "Hamatsa," a high-ranking dance privilege among the Kwakwaka'wakw, with a name he had previously given him: *Hamtsi'stesalagalis* (Unrestrained Hamatsa Everywhere). This name came to Mungo through his marriage to a daughter of David Hunt, who was given it at the time of his father George Hunt's marriage to a noblewoman of Blunden Harbour. In fact, Bill was sometimes referred to as "Mungo's Hamatsa." One song, composed for him, says, "I am the only Hamatsa beyond the edge of world," meaning across the international boundary.

At this same time Mungo gave Bill the name, *Ho'miskanis* (Plenty of Everything, literally, Surplus Food from the River), the name by which Bill is called at Kwakwaka'wakw potlatches. Still another of his names is *Tlalelitla* (Continually Inviting), given by Chiefs Bill Scow, Henry Bell, and Joe Seaweed at the dedication of Chief Scow's father's reconstructed house at Seattle's Pacific Science Center in 1971.

Marty Holm, who in her own right had won the affectionate respect and regard of the Kwakwaka'wakw people, and who had become a highly skilled dancer, was given one of Abayah Martin's Winter Dance names, *Heligaxstegalas*, which means "Taming (the Hamtasa) Everywhere." At the 1959 Turnour Island potlatch Mungo gave Marty the name, *Dładławikagilakw* (Ready to Stand Up [for her family in potlatching])." Another example of that high regard occurred in 1983 at a ceremony honoring the late Willie Seaweed, one of the Kwakwaka'wakw master artists. His grandson, Henry Seaweed, was to dance as Hamatsa, and Henry asked Marty Holm--whom he always called "Sis"--to dance at its conclusion in the place that would traditionally have been taken by his mother, who was physically unable to participate.

Mungo also gave a name, *Tseketlakw* (Ready to Give the Winter Ceremonial) to Carla Holm. Karen received the War Dance privilege and the name, *Sabalkel* (Copper Sound in the House), from Mrs. Peter Smith, and Carla was given the Princess Platform privilege with its accompanying song and its name, *Lalxsandalaokwa* (Copper Breaker Woman), by Helen Knox.

These names are among the Holms' most treasured possessions. Such privileges are never casually given. The most important wealth of Native people is not in material goods, as in the West, but in their cultural patrimony—the names, songs, stories, dances, and crest figures which are the peculiar possession of individuals within a clan, which can be obtained only when that right is conferred by the one who owns it.

When British Columbia Provincial Judge Alfred Scow, Kwakwaka'wakw elder, was asked recently why such privileges were given to Bill Holm, he said, "He has been a respectful student of our tradition, who took pains to learn Kwakwala. He is a very thorough art historian." The Judge's father, hereditary chief Bill Scow, became Bill Holm's patron, taking him to villages near Alert Bay to visit with their chiefs. Bill Scow once asked Bill Holm to carve a replica of a valued mask that regrettably had been sold by a family member. That copy now hangs in the Judge's living room. Said the Judge, "When Bill carves anything, he studies it thoroughly. He is very meticulous. The detail has to be just right."

Perhaps the most intensive contact with Kwakwaka'wakw country and its people came during November and December of 1962. During the two months preceding, Bill had visited museums in the United States and Canada to study and photograph some 200 masks used in the Kwakwaka'wakw Hamatsa ceremony. Then, from a base in Alert Bay, for two months Bill and Marty took the photographs to the nearby villages and asked dancers, carvers, and chiefs what they knew about the masks. "It was pretty exciting," Bill says of those months. In commemoration of this research, another Hamatsa song was composed for Bill: "The Winter Dance masks were put on me when I went all around the world seeking supernatural power."

When Mungo Martin came annually to the Indian house at the camp on Lopez, he had always brought with him a carefully selected group of the Kwakwaka'wakw. When Mungo died in 1962, Bill expected that the visits would end. Instead, the size of the group grew, sometimes to nearly 50, since the limits that had been imposed by Mungo were no longer in effect.

The camp on Lopez played a significant role in Bill's practice of the Northwest Coast Native arts, both two- and three-dimensional. In addition to carving houseposts and painting the dance screen for the inside of the big house, there was also a frontal pole to be carved for it, a number of free-standing poles scattered about Sperry Peninsula, where the camp was located, and flat designs painted and carved extensively on walls and doors throughout the buildings of the camp. Authentic costumes and masks were fashioned over the years for the annual "potlatches," which also became a major annual

venue for dancing. One of his largest projects there was the carving, spreading, and launching of his own 35' Haida-style canoe in 1968, the second of four Northwest Coast canoes he has carved.

Although he had known of Haida master artist Bill Reid at a distance--Reid was generally regarded as the dean of British Columbia Native artists and a quite singular influence on the recovery of the Native traditions there--Bill first met Reid by chance at a sale in Seattle when he noticed that Reid was staring at a Northwest Coast-style bracelet Marty Holm was wearing. That led to conversation and the discovery that they knew about each other and had a great deal in common. Over the years they met many times, sometimes in each others' homes, sometimes at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation studios in Vancouver, where Reid was then earning his primary living as an announcer-disk jockey. They would talk about the Native arts between Reid's platter spinning. "That Swedish-American Indian down in Seattle," Reid sometimes called Bill Holm.

Bill Reid had an idea that together they ought to identify the 100 most distinguished pieces of Northwest Coast Native art. The project never came off, but Ted Carpenter, anthropologist and son-in-law of arts patron Dominique de Menil, invited the two to sit down in the presence of the distinguished de Menil collection of Northwest Coast Native art in Houston, to talk together about individual pieces, and to have their conversation recorded for publication. The result--first published in 1975 as *Form and Freedom: A Dialogue on Northwest Coast Indian Art*, and then reprinted in 1976 as *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics*<sup>10</sup>--if not of the 100 most distinguished pieces, is nevertheless a commentary on some of the finest extant. Some consider the book to be the single best introduction to Northwest Coast Native art, containing as it does a remarkable combination of expert knowledge and passion.

Although Bill's contact with Native persons and artists, and the honors he received, were most often related to the Kwakw̱aka'wakw, it is important to note that his learning from and, reflexively, his influence ranged among all of the Northwest Coast cultures. Tangible evidence of that was provided on June 5, 2002, when the Sealaska Heritage Institute publicly presented him in Juneau the following citation:

*Sealaska Heritage Institute  
on behalf of  
Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian People  
recognizes and honors  
Bill Holm  
in appreciation of his contributions to  
Northwest Coast Art*

## The Hobbyist

**Bill Holm has been creating** objects inspired by the Native cultures since before his tenth birthday. Like Yan, who in Ernest Thompson Seton's story was only slightly older, at a very young age Bill "began to realize something of the pleasure of single-handed achievement in the line of a great ambition," and, as noted earlier, he never got over it. By all estimates, he is now among the authentic masters of the classic arts of the Northwest Coast, the Plateau, and the Plains.

Yet, in spite of his acknowledged accomplishments, in that work he has always referred to himself as a "hobbyist," a term, with its connotation of dabbling and inexpertness, that it would never occur to anyone else to apply to him. His first publications--"Making a Blanket Capote" (1956)<sup>12</sup>, "Plains Indian Cloth Dresses" (1958)<sup>13</sup>, "Crow Hair Styles and Hair Ornaments" (1959)<sup>14</sup>, and "Crow Breechclouts" (1959)<sup>15</sup>, were all published in the *American Indian Hobbyist* magazine. A scholar of his present eminence might well have decided not to list those early efforts in his *curriculum vitae*, appearing as they do in an academically unstylish periodical; yet there they are, along with later citations from the *American Anthropologist* and The Smithsonian Institution Press.

He is quick to point out that many important scholars of Native American material culture have also published in the hobbyist magazine, including among others Norman Feder (who founded and edited *American Indian Hobbyist*), Richard Conn, Theodore Brasser, William Powers, and Colin Taylor.

Nevertheless, to refer to himself as a "hobbyist" is typical of the sensitivity and circumspection with which he has comported himself as a non-Native working with the Native arts. Except for a period in his student days, when he made silver, copper, and antler jewelry in the Northwest Coast style, and a few later commissions, Bill has avoided participating in the market for Native-style art. Two painted panels, made as exhibit backgrounds for the Seattle World's Fair in 1962, found their way by a circuitous route to a gallery thirteen years later, and a large housepost commissioned for SeaTac International Airport gained a similar entrance to the commercial market.

That's about the only way any of his Native-style work ever gets into a sales gallery. He makes it for his own use, for trade with other artists, on commission for private and public collections, and on commission from Native friends for use in potlatches and other ceremonies, but not for the general gallery market.

In calling himself a "hobbyist," Bill expresses his high estimate of what he regards as a disciplined and wholly serious activity by persons whose work can make--indeed has made--important contributions to understanding, motivated entirely by a love of the Native arts. The German hobbyist/scholar Georg Barth is just such a person. His book, *Native American Beadwork: Traditional Beading Techniques for the Modern-Day Beadworker*,<sup>16</sup> probably the most authoritative guide to authentic Native beadworking techniques available, is that kind of contribution. So is the work of the late Norman Feder, who lacked formal training in art history or anthropology but made major contributions to both fields as curator of American Indian art at the Denver Art Museum, as the author of numerous books and articles, among them his *magnum opus*, *American Indian Art*.<sup>17</sup> Steve Brown, sometime curator of Northwest Coast Indian art at the Seattle Art Museum, editor and author of catalogs of major collections and exhibitions, has made similar contributions.

The later preeminent work of trained anthropologists William Powers, Richard Conn, and the late James Howard, was influence by their early, intense, personal involvement as hobbyists with the Native American material culture.

Bill first became involved in doing the Native arts, stimulated both by the example of Yan and Sam in Ernest Thompson Seton's story, and equally by his innate curiosity about how things work. But there is also a basic epistemological conviction in this activity: that one cannot claim to understand a thing who has not also done it. On that conviction, there is scarcely a technique or material, in use from the Northern Plains to the Northern Coast, with which Bill has not experimented. When Karen Holm was asked whether, as a youngster, she thought of her father as an artist or a professor, she said she thought of him as a "frontiersman," because he was always making things: tools for his various crafts, tanning hides,\* making moccasins and capotes, carving bowls and silkscreening Christmas cards, and on and on. "It's what we grew up with," Karen says. Just as Bill, from an early age, had been encouraged by his parents to paint and draw, so Carla and Karen received the same encouragement. With the help of templates Bill prepared, Karen at age seven or eight was helping to paint formline designs on paddles for the Native-style canoe Bill had carved. "It was a great environment to be a kid in," Karen said recently.

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\* The Holm household must have seemed exotic to Carla and Karen's school friends. Karen recalls that theirs was the only home in the neighborhood with the head and hide of a buffalo in its basement freezer. When the buffalo at the Woodland Park Zoo died, the body parts were kept for a time in the freezer at the Burke Museum, and when that space was required for some other purpose, Bill Holm brought the head and hide home. In due course he thawed the skin and staked it out to dry and scrape, taking most of the small lawn space. From time to time, cow's brains were boiled on the kitchen stove in preparation for use in tanning a hide. Karen says that she and Carla never went through the standard teenage rebellion against their parents. There was just too much intriguing stuff going on at home, too many interesting people to meet, too many fascinating places to visit.

Since the early '70s, Bill has done his work in a studio, located adjacent to his home, constructed in the post-and-beam style of a traditional Haida house. In keeping with the "engineering" talent which permitted him to do things "in the simplest, safest, and most efficient way" (Steve Brown's description), the house was built, during summers and on weekends, over a period of two or three years, with help from Marty, Steve Brown, Duane Pasco, and James Bender, among others. With lines and block and tackle, and using nearby trees, Bill and Steve managed by themselves to set the corner posts and to lift the heavy beams into place. Unlike the traditional Haida house, this one is fitted with skylights, and with full-spectrum artificial lights in the ceilings for Seattle's gray days. The elaborate, formline-design dance screen inside the house was carved by Bill and Steve.

Bill is constantly doing, an example that must have been set from his earliest years. Daughter Carla says,

*I don't know how many different media my Dad's parents worked in. My grandmother had a (Holm-made) kiln in the basement, a darkroom, and a loom. She knitted, crocheted, sewed, tatted, embroidered, cooked, and gardened. At one time she painted on china, and made salt and pepper shakers out of plastic that she cooked in the oven. Her mother knitted socks and sweaters for the North Dakota winters while reading the newspaper aloud to her family. My grandfather had a woodworking shop in addition to his work as an electrician.*

There can't be many empty spaces in Bill Holm's day. He is always at work in his studio on some project or another, often more than one at a time. In fact, he is at work wherever he is: making a pencil sketch of his next carving project while waiting in the ferry line on Lopez Island; doing porcupine quillwork on a flight from Seattle to Indianapolis; or drawing ovoids during faculty meetings at Lincoln High School.

His skill with improvisation, with adaptation, with making do with what he has and with making what he lacks, enhances Bill's hobbyist productivity. As we have already seen, when as a ten-year-old he wanted to make an Indian brow-band, he adapted some beads from a disused lampshade. Later, before many birds were protected, says daughter Carla, there were stops at road kills to pick up tail feathers. There are still stops to gather porcupine quills, carefully collected in rolled-up socks!

Bill's adaptation and experimentation has given him, not only an immediate internal sense of the fit and fitness of an object and its elements, but a literal feel--what he has called a kinesthetic relationship--between the object and its intended use. So he has written about carving,

*I, myself, have derived a certain physical satisfaction from the muscle activity involved in producing the characteristic line movement of this art, and there can be little doubt that this was true also for the Indian artist. To say that there may be a kinesthetic relationship between this movement and dance movement is not to say that there is any visual or spatial similarity, although there may be, but to a lesser degree. Because of the purely sensory nature of the suggested relationship, it is difficult, if not impossible, for one who has not personally participated in both activities to be aware of it.<sup>18</sup>*

Because he has participated in both activities, and that for a very long time, his understanding has unusual depth.

Bill also has a remarkably perspicacious eye. From early on, he has been able to look at an object, to see its several components, to observe their relationships, and to discern the nature of their working together, without physically taking the object apart. It was this acute analytical skill that permitted him to get inside the Northern Native arts in an unprecedented way in preparation for his first book, *Northwest Coast Indian Art, An Analysis of Form*. In a review, George Swinton, of the University of Manitoba, called this analytical capacity "sensitive yet scientific," a combination that permitted Bill to come "firmly to grips with elements of the art which often have been considered intangible." Swinton thought that art criticism has been based far too often "on rationalizations of purely subjective value judgments." He concluded that "Scientific analysis can never be a substitute for sensitive understanding but could certainly help in attaining it. Bill Holm's book makes an excellent point in this regard."<sup>19</sup>

It surely must be Bill's acute eye that permits him to create the art itself with such authenticity, and to discriminate, in the work of others, between what is really fine and what is merely ordinary. Artist Barry Herem says that, among his strengths, Bill Holm has not been influenced by a century of miserable standards in the world of modern art!

And there may be one other characteristic which contributes to his acknowledged artistic mastery. In that first book, he observed that Kwakwaka'wakw artists work "directly on the finished surface, with no sketching or visible planning"; and then he added,

*It seems impossible that the elaborate and superlatively refined designs on old chests, for example, could have been planned without benefit of preliminary sketches. [Anthropologist Franz] Boas' statement (referring to North American Indians generally), 'Perhaps the artists have greater eidetic power than most adults among ourselves [i.e., Euro-Americans], may be well founded.<sup>20</sup>*

By "eidetic power" Boas meant the capacity to see things whole in the mind's eye of the artist, and then to reproduce them in their proportioned wholeness.

That sounds very much like an observation made by Bill's sister Betty: rather than making a preliminary overall sketch of what he wanted to draw, Bill, as a boy, would begin, say, with a gun, to which he would then attach a hand, to which in turn he would attach a body, all in proportion and perspective as the image grew to completion.

If "eidetic power" is a cultural characteristic, as anthropologist Boas was inclined to assume, Bill has a kinship with Native people deeper than the conferring of names and induction into dances and longhouses.

That kinship has been recognized in the Native communities themselves since the very early years of the revival in the Coastal arts. Carl Heinmiller and four associates purchased the U.S. Army's old Chilkoot barracks near Haines, Alaska, and set up a school to teach Natives from Haines, Klukwan, and other Tlingit communities in the indigenous arts they feared were in danger of being lost. In 1961 Bill Holm was invited to teach at Port Chilkoot and continued periodically until 1966. Nathan Jackson, originally trained as an artist in Santa Fe, came fully into his Tlingit heritage in that program. In 1968 Bill was asked to come to 'Ksan, Hazelton, B.C., to teach in the newly formed Kitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art, where some of the most well-known Native artists received their early training, among them Freda Diesing (Haida); Walter Harris, Earl Muldon, and Vernon Stevens (all Gitkasan). In more recent years he has conducted workshops for artists in Alaska, most especially in Ketchikan, working, among a great many others, with Tlingits Rick and Mick Beasley and Nathan Jackson, and Tsimsheans David Boxley and Jack Hudson.

## 8

## The Artist

**Bill Holm has been drawing** as long as he can remember. More than any other, that activity is the thread that creates a living unity out of the separate elements of a life.

A photograph from 1930 shows the five-year-old artist, white-shirted and bow-tied, seated at a table intent on drawing the image of a toy elephant that sits before him. It is almost as if, from an early age, he had anticipated what he later read in *Two Little Savages* and what was to become the standard practice of his adult life. Yan had learned

*how wise it is to draw everything that he wished to observe or describe. It was accident, or instinct on his part, but he had fallen on a sound principle; there is nothing like a sketch to collect and convey accurate information of form--there is no better developer of true observation.<sup>21</sup>*

Bill still has lined-paper notebooks, going back to his pre-school days, containing illustrations of knights, cowboys, and airplanes. Most of his drawings had a narrative character. They were little stories of somebody doing something with someone--for example, of a soldier giving a flower to his girl friend. "I was pretty much a literal illustrator," he now says of that early work.

When, in the early days of the family's move to Seattle, Martha Holm was looking for ways to widen Bill's world, she took her 12-year-old to visit a local center of art instruction, in hope of getting him accepted in a course that would further enhance his apparent talent for drawing. They took with them some of Bill's recent sketches to demonstrate his artistic promise. After looking at the sketches, the center's representative pronounced Bill unacceptable for their program. The drawings were "too perfect," she said. "Might as well take a photograph!"

There was certainly no question about the precision of Bill's artistic eye and mind,\* his ability to conceptualize and to translate concept into form--however unfashionable those talents may have been at the art center. Recall his sister's observation that, rather than making a preliminary overall sketch of what he wanted to draw, he would begin with one detailed element in the

composition, gradually adding other details, all in proportion and perspective as the image grew to completion.\*

He took the standard art classes through his elementary years in Montana, and when he got to Lincoln High School in Seattle, his natural talents were complemented by formal training in perspective, form, and anatomy. During these school years, when he was given the opportunity to choose the subject-matter of his drawings and paintings, they often reflected Indian themes; but that early predisposition was now broadening by contact with a larger aesthetic world. In the ninth grade he developed a fascination with the arts of Egypt, going to the Seattle Art Museum library, reading *The Book of the Dead* and gathering as much information as he could about hieroglyphics and the canons of Egyptian art. The art department at Lincoln had a remarkably good library of its own, and Bill immersed himself there in works on Japanese art, intrigued especially by the romantic image of the Samurai. It was in that library that he came upon a book on the collections in the Berlin Museum and saw for the first time something of the riches of Northwest Coast Native art that were to be found in places far from its heartland.

During the years as a student at Lincoln, Bill regularly published drawings and cartoons in the student newspaper. Because most of his male classmates were facing military service on graduation, he created a cartoon character named "Commando Cuthbert" as commentary on that anticipated experience. [For the fiftieth anniversary reunion of his class, he resurrected "Commando Cuthbert," carrying him from his army discharge, through the hippie years, and into middle age and retirement.]

As an undergraduate major in painting at the University of Washington, Bill took the basic art training that was given, at the time, with a heavy emphasis on abstract styles of composition and technique. It was not what he would have chosen on his own, he now says, but he enjoyed it and learned from it. His long-standing interest in narrative painting was shaped under these influences. In one assignment, he was invited to select a book and to illustrate incidents described in it, and he chose Mari Sandoz's *Crazy Horse, The Strange Man of the Oglalas*. Even his paintings of Spirit Dances were done, at the time, under abstract influence. He thinks that perhaps his most successful effort in combining the abstract and the representational was in a painting of Long Beach, near Tofino on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Although less evident in his more recent work, he thinks the positive influences of that period are still present in his use of color, light, and composition.

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\* Another instance of Bill's early passion for precision and his capacity for mental adaptability: being required by a teacher to maintain a one-inch margin on the right side of papers handed in for assignments, and to run his name right up to that margin, he wrote "Bill Holm" backwards, *cursively*, beginning at the right-hand margin and moving left!

He proposed a series of four paintings of scenes from the Northwest Coast for his M.F.A. thesis--sea, mountains, forest, dance--a project for which he managed to get the approval of his committee in spite of the fact that his style of realism-cum-abstraction was not personally congenial to any of its members. When he had finished the work, the committee met to go over the thesis paintings. After some not wholly supportive discussion, Walter Isaacs, who was the chair of the art department, finally said, "Well, I'll take a chance on Bill!" and signed the approval form. The others followed.

As we have already seen, he was an active artist during his teaching years at Lincoln High School, producing screen prints and sets for dramatic productions. The most significant effort resulted from his divided attention in faculty meetings, ears attuned to the matters under discussion but mind transferring imagination to the sketch paper in front of him. As he looked around the library where the meetings were held, he imagined the possibility of a large mural that might be painted for its west wall, oriented toward the Olympic Mountains. For subject-matter, he envisioned Captain George Vancouver's ship, the *Discovery*, anchored in 1792 off Restoration Point (on what is now Bainbridge Island in Puget Sound), surrounded by Indian canoes.

The librarian and some of the students heard of this idea--though when it reached the librarian, she thought the subject-matter was to be the young life of Abraham Lincoln! Two student graduating classes asked Bill to create the Vancouver mural as their departing gift to the high school. He made a maquette of the scene, photographed it, and projected it on the wall of the auditorium stage so that students could see it during an assembly and decide whether or not to proceed with it. They did, with enthusiasm.

Bill painted the scene on one long canvas, 5' by 30'. He hinged the frame, so that it could be transported through the irregular corridors from his studio to the library. It was installed on the wall over the bookcases, and remains there today, even though the building is no longer used as a high school. It is the largest painting he has ever created, excepting the stage sets, which were temporary.

Bill's drawings and paintings began to appear in print during the years of his high school teaching: "Kwakiutl Canoes," a cover for *The Beaver: Magazine of the North* (1951), published by the Hudson's Bay Company, in an issue that included his article on canoe carving; "Nez Perce Scout" (1956), and "Cow Trailing Horses" (1958), covers for *The Western Horseman* magazine; and drawings to accompany his articles in *American Indian Hobbyist* (1956-59)

There were few major projects from that early productive period until his retirement in 1985, but drawing and painting on a smaller scale continued to give continuity to an active life. It was during his junior high school years that Bill began a practice he has continued from time to time throughout all of the ensuing years: sketching a pen-and-ink or watercolor scene on the left half of a #10 envelope before mailing the enclosed letter to a friend. He had taken the original idea from the famous Montana artist Charlie Russell. Bill's

subjects were almost always Native American, reflecting first Plains and Plateau persons and scenes, and then, as his interests grew, the Northwest Coast. During the war his envelopes reflected the life of a G.I., and on his 1950 visit to Sweden, letters to his family illustrated his trip. Sometimes he even found a way to incorporate the stamp in the drawing.

Not all of these envelopes fared well. On one occasion, after he had completed a drawing, he took the letter to the post office because he wanted to send it by air mail. When Bill presented the envelope to the postal clerk, before Bill's startled eyes the man blithely took his large inked "AIR MAIL" rubber stamp and planted it directly on the face of the drawing!

Bill's good friend, the late Norman Feder, was perhaps the most frequent addressee on these illustrated envelopes, having received 160 of them over the years of their friendship.

Bill was recently asked if the decision to retire from University teaching and curatorial work in 1985 to devote himself to painting was a difficult one. Not difficult at all, he said, because he wasn't really severing his association with former students, the University, and the Museum. He had carefully considered the change for some time; and as much as he had enjoyed teaching (except for grading!) and curatorial work, he finally decided that if he were ever to do some of the other things he wanted to do, he would just have to start. He says he hasn't been as productive as he'd like to be, and that he is easily distracted--hardly surprising in view of constant invitations to write, lecture, and consult.

Always eager to learn, in 1993 he took time out to attend a painting workshop in Texas conducted by Howard Terpning, whom Bill considers to be the finest Western illustrator. It was an experience of tuition he had never had before and would have benefitted from had it come earlier, he thinks. Still, since the 1985 retirement he has quite remarkably produced more than 50 paintings and drawings of varying sizes and characters, almost all of them representing aspects of nineteenth-century Plains, Plateau, and Northwest Coast life. That productivity was exhibited in one-man shows, first at the Burke Museum, and then somewhat later, with more canvasses completed, at Seattle's Stonington Gallery, where he continues to show paintings as they appear. As of this writing, five of his paintings have been reproduced and marketed as limited-edition prints.

## 9

## The Scholar

**When Bill Holm first began** to look carefully at Northern boxes and bowls and bracelets in the late '50s, there was no such thing as an organized field of study, an academic discipline, called Northwest Coast Indian art history, and there was no art historian who specialized in that art, says the University of Washington's Robin Wright.

Before that time, most of the work on the art had been done by ethnographers, both amateur and professional. James Gilchrist Swan's *The Indians of Cape Flattery, at the Entrance of the Strait of Fuca, Washington Territory* (1870)<sup>22</sup>, and *The Haidah Indians of Queen Charlotte's Island, British Columbia, with a Brief Description of Their Carvings, Tattoo Designs, Etc.* (1876)<sup>23</sup> are early examples of the former, while Franz Boas' 1897 study, *The Decorative Art of the Indians of the North Pacific Coast*<sup>24</sup>, and his influential 1927 work, *Primitive Art*<sup>25</sup>, are examples of the latter.

But for all of their importance, ethnographers are interested in the art as conveyor and purveyor of culture, as artifacts of class and clan, rather than in the art *qua* art. Robert Bruce Inverarity was an exception. Both an anthropologist and an artist in the plastic and graphic arts, his 1950 work, *Art of the Northwest Coast Indians*, made an important beginning in stylistic analysis, though it was brief, undocumented, and left undeveloped.<sup>26</sup>

It wasn't until the 1960s that the Native arts came fully to be valued for themselves as fine art rather than as ethnographic curio, exhibited in fine-art galleries rather than in natural history museums along with birds, bones, and fossils. One of the earliest exhibits that presented Native American art as fine art took place in 1939 at the World's Fair in San Francisco. The earliest show that dealt exclusively with Coastal fine art, "Indians of the Northwest Coast," was created at the Taylor Museum in Colorado Springs and subsequently travelled to the Seattle Art Museum in November of 1951. "The Image of Primitive Man, Tribal Arts from Oceania, Africa and the Americas," at the Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas City, and "Northwest Coast Indian Art" at the Seattle World's Fair, followed in 1962, with "The Arts of the Raven, Masterworks by the Northwest Coast Indian," at the Vancouver Art Museum in 1967. Doris Shadbolt saw the change clearly when, in the "Arts of the Raven" catalog, she wrote that the exhibit represented the "shift in focus from ethnology to art."<sup>27</sup> Since then the status of the art has indeed been well established and exhibits have followed in the U.S. and Canada almost on an annual basis.

Bill Holm entered the scene when this development was still in its relatively early stages. While completing his Standard General Teaching Certificate in 1958, he wrote a paper for a graduate research course with Erna Gunther in which he laid out his informal observations of the structures of Northern Coastal art. She was impressed enough to send a copy to an editor at the University of Washington Press, who sent it in turn to Robert Bruce Inverarity. Both were favorable but felt it needed more work. Bill himself recognized that his ideas needed documentation, so later, when urged by a friend to get them in shape for publication, he set about the systematic process of examination that ultimately became *Northwest Coast Indian Art, An Analysis of Form*, published in 1965 by the University of Washington Press, and by the Burke as the Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum Monograph No. 1. To date it has passed through seventeen printing—without need of revision!

It became the theoretical foundation for the new discipline of Northwest Coast Indian art history. Wilson Duff, University of British Columbia anthropologist, wrote that it yields "the most significant new insights since Boas' classic study in *Primitive Art*."<sup>28</sup> Says art historian Aldona Jonaitis, "Everyone who has done anything in Northwest Coast Native art history must understand *Analysis of Form*. Before you start, you have the art and Bill's book, and then you go on to interpret it in whatever way seems appropriate. He has defined the field. Very few art historians have done that."

*Analysis of Form* was the first of five contributions by Bill Holm to the founding of this new discipline.

In her *American Anthropologist* review of the book,\* Frederica de Laguna wrote that,

*while Boas and others have touched briefly on the structure of Northwest Coast art, previous attention [by anthropologists] has been focussed almost exclusively on its representational symbolic aspects or on its functions in tribal life, and rarely on its formal principles. It is*

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\* A survey if critical reviews of Bill Holm's books, undertaken for this writing, shows that they were uniformly favorable and usually enthusiastic—with one exception. That exception was an unsigned review in *Choice*, a journal published to assist librarians in their new-book acquisitions. In the mid-'70s, all reviews in *Choice* were anonymous. The book at issue was *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics* (1976), by Bill Holm and Bill Reid. It made the reviewer unhappy. "We are asked to believe," he or she wrote, "that these two contemporary artists can instinctively pick out the aesthetically significant ancient pieces, and that their speculations about their value and meaning are worth knowing. Actually their cliché-ridden dialogue shows only their preference for the old and neatly crafted pieces, the antiquarian taste of this epoch and culture, but not necessarily that of the Indians of two centuries ago."<sup>30</sup> Bill Holm says that he used to fear reading reviews of his books, but that when this one came out, he carried a copy of it in his wallet for a long time to remind him that he had nothing more to fear!

*the latter that Bill Holm has analyzed....There can be no question that Holm has written something both original and valuable.*"<sup>29</sup>

Bill began with the work he had already done earlier for Erna Gunther. Then he selected for detailed study pieces of art that had originated in the northern two-thirds of the Coast, from Yakutat Bay at the upper end of the southeastern Alaskan panhandle, to Bella Coola on the south-central British Columbia coast. Four hundred examples were examined with his "perspicacious eye," their characteristics carefully recorded on Keysort cards, a rather clumsy mechanical system that predated the micro-chip computer. One-third of the specimens were from the British Columbia Provincial Museum, and others were examined at the Burke and at museums in Alaska, Prince Rupert and Vancouver, Portland, Denver, Chicago, and New York City.

He wrote in the Preface to *Analysis of Form*,

*Ideally, a study of this sort should lean heavily on information from Indian artists trained in the tradition that fostered the art.*

*Unfortunately, I was unable to locate a qualified informant from the area covered....That there may be some still living [at the time of the study] is not questioned, but contemporary work seen from the area reveals a lack of understanding by Indian craftsmen of the principles that are the subject of this study. Bill Reid, perhaps the best Haida craftsman working today, thoroughly understands the art, but he, like the author, has reconstructed the rules from examination and analysis of old pieces. Nevertheless, I am deeply indebted to him for his suggestions and insight.*<sup>31</sup>

As he had surmised earlier, his research now disclosed that Northern two-dimensional art from among the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Bella Bella, and Bella Coola, was highly intellectualized, with fixed aesthetic rules that usually determined the design elements and their internal relationships. If, when he did his study, working artists generally showed "a lack of understanding" of those rules, it was not the result of carelessness, but largely because of the restrictions under which Native communities struggled when, from 1884 until 1951, Canadian law forbade them to conduct the ceremonies for which much of the art was created, thereby suppressing the creation of the art itself.

One of Bill Holm's chief contributions to a new discipline was in creating a vocabulary by means of which it was possible for Native people, artists, and scholars to identify its stylistic elements and converse about the art. He called it the Northern formline system, and it included these elements:

The primary grid of curvilinear, swelling and tapering lines

that delineated the major features of the image, usually in black, he called the **primary formline**.

A subordinate grid, contained within the primary network, usually in red and representing lesser features of the image, he called the **secondary formline**.

Lines and spaces, delineating finer details of the image, he called **tertiary**.

The predominant design element, a flattened, slightly concave oval shape, frequently identifying eyes or joints, he called an **ovoid**.

A shape like a U, with legs that taper where they join contiguous design elements, and which often represent feathers, he called a **U-form**, and when a tertiary line divided the U-shape, he called it a **split-U**.

**Relief, or ground, elements** of various shapes were also identified and named; along with refinements of each of these above features, such as **ultra-primary, sub-secondary**, etc.

Many other details governing the art were also described, among them, the control of positive and negative space, the transition from one design element to the next, the semiangularity of curves, symmetry--all of which were codified in the minds of artists in the classical period, though never written down.

If such an intellectualized system seems limiting, the record shows that these design elements and rules were, and are, capable of infinite combination and recombination, so that pieces governed by the rules constantly appear that surprise by their innovation. These rules are no more limiting to artistic expression--as Robert Davidson has observed--than that our words are formed out of a mere 26 characters is limiting to our verbal creativity.

In fact, Bill Holm demonstrated how many three-dimensional shapes--bowls, bracelets, rattles, hats, ladles, even totem poles--are the result of the flat design of his analysis being ingeniously wrapped around and adapted by the artist to the space available to contain them.

As he studied and wrote, Bill never permitted the rules and analyses to eclipse the art itself. "Whatever the origins of the art may have been," he said,

*it is certain that no system could ever, of itself, produce the masterworks of Northwest Coast art....As in all art it remained for the imagination and sensitivity of some of the most imaginative and sensitive men to give life to a list of rules and principles and produce the wonderful compositions that came from the northern coast. It is*

*precisely because each piece was the creation of the mind of man that it can be analyzed only superficially in terms of elements and principles, while that quality which raises the best of Northwest Coast design to the status of art remains unmeasured.*<sup>32</sup>

Beyond an analysis within Northwest Coast art itself, Bill Holm made possible a further task for the new discipline. As Frederica de Laguna observed in her *American Anthropologist* review,

*There is also the possibility that this type of formal analysis may permit a new approach to comparisons with other art styles that have intrigued us with their suggestive or tantalizing similarities....As long as the latter was understood primarily in terms of its symbolic and representational elements [a la the anthropologists] and of the more obvious ways in which these were employed, only an incomplete comparison could be made with the representational aspects of Old Bering Sea Eskimo and Shang Chinese art, and no adequate comparison could be made with the purely nonrepresentational art of the Ainu, the contemporaries of our Indians across the North Pacific.*<sup>33</sup>

Hence the promise of new comparative and cross-cultural studies by art historians.

Since the early '60s, there has been an amazing growth in the production of Northwest Coast Native art. Two developments, one broadly cultural and one political, have created a climate favorable to such growth. One of the social movements that came in the wake of World War II was an increasing self-consciousness in ethnic minority communities: a passion to recover cultural distinctives and to celebrate cultural traditions. This phenomenon, international in scope, was especially intense in North America where, among other ethnic groups, Native Canadians and Native Americans found new energy for self-expression.

Chronologically coincident with the beginning of this movement was a significant political development. In 1951 Canada's Indian Act was revised, and the provision that had been created in 1884 outlawing the potlatch and associated ceremonies was simply dropped from the revision. The first legal potlatch took place in 1953 at Victoria, hosted by Chief Mungo Martin and held in the big house he had built at the British Columbia Provincial Museum, where he was chief carver. This statutory change opened the way for a rebirth of Native self-expression, and potlatches began to be held with some regularity up and down coastal British Columbia. With the restoration of ceremonial practice, there was increasing reason to create again the essential accoutrements of ceremony: traditional masks, frontlets, rattles, head rings, button blankets, and the like.

There has been some discussion about the role of *Analysis of Form* in this rebirth of the Native arts. Was it a precipitating factor? The precipitating

factor? Would the growth have occurred in the same way even if the book hadn't appeared? Many, especially on this side of the international boundary, are inclined to accord it the pivotal place. In British Columbia, even artists who have a high regard for Bill's work see it as less influential, giving primary place to Native energies that were already at work there. Bill's own estimate is that *Analysis of Form* "came at the right time."

Perhaps the most balanced way to come at the issue is to note that, in the 1950s and '60s, there were two centers of influence on the development of northern Northwest Coast Native art, moving along parallel lines in attempting to arrive at the essential form of that art.\* Haida artist Bill Reid was pouring over books, photographs, and museum pieces, Bill Holm primarily over museum objects. Each was having a direct, personal influence on the other. Bill Holm acknowledged his respect for Bill Reid's independent accomplishment in the Preface to *Analysis of Form*, already cited above. Later in a 1974 tribute to Reid, Bill Holm wrote that Reid "found the dry bones of a great art and--shamanlike--shook off the layers of museum dust and brought it back to life."<sup>34</sup> And reciprocally, Reid has said, "I learned a lot from Bill Holm....He got to know the inner workings of the designs...and set the standards for adherence to the old ways without becoming a copyist." When asked if Holm's creation of a distinctive vocabulary for talking about the art was useful, Reid replied, "It certainly was."

There were important differences between them: Bill Reid modelled his conclusions about the essential form publicly in his own art, but did not offer a systematic account of them; Bill Holm offered a systematic account of his conclusions, but modelled them only privately in his own art. The one fulfilled his calling primarily as an artist and only secondarily as a commentator on the art; the other fulfilled his calling primarily as an art historian and only secondarily as an artist. This is by no means to diminish the importance of those secondary callings but only to note differences in emphasis.

More recently, Bill Reid's artistic influence has been expanded by such Haida artists as Robert Davidson, Don Yeomans, and Jim Hart, and he has influenced the art history that is practiced especially at the University of British Columbia, the Royal British Columbia Museum, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. More recently, Bill Holm's art historical influence has been expanded by such scholars as Robin Wright, Aldona Jonaitis, Allen Wardwell, and Steve Brown, and he has influenced the art that is practiced by

\* There were at least two other centers of influence from which inspiration and example were drawn for the growth of the Coastal arts after 1951. One was a group of Haida argillite carvers—Charles Edenshaw is a distinguished example—who had continued to work in their carbonaceous-shale medium, primarily for commercial purposes, in ways that did not directly contravene the law and that helped to preserve the tradition in the north. Another was Kwakwaka'wakw artists in southern British Columbia—Willie Seaweed, Mungo Martin, Charlie James, among others—who had kept their work going in a quiet way in spite of the law.

such artists as Duane Pasco, Marvin Oliver, Joe David, Barry Herem, and David Stephens.

Not long after *Analysis of Form* appeared in 1965, Duane Pasco, who had been using it as the basis for his own carving and whose work was appearing in some Seattle shops, received a call from Bill Holm, saying that he would like to come and see Duane. When Bill arrived, says Duane, they sat down and Bill said, "I want to get some of your ideas about design. How do you do it?" Duane told him about building a design from a basic ovoid. "Where did you learn to do that?" Bill asked. "From your book," Duane replied. "No, no," said Bill, "you can't learn that from the book. It's not a textbook." "Well," said Duane, "I don't know what else to tell you."

It is clear that Bill Holm intended *Analysis of Form* for art historians, not for the instruction of artists. Recently he wrote to Barry Herem, "*Analysis of Form* would be a different book if I had written it as a teaching manual. I had no idea that that is what it would become!" Intended or not, the fact is that the book has had an enormous influence on practicing artists. There was simply no other printed source from which to derive the fundamental principles of the art. Whether directly from the printed page, or mediated through master-apprentice relationships, *Analysis of Form* has presence in the studios of Native and non-Native artists alike and on both sides of the international boundary. Duane Pasco says that the first time he visited Bill Reid and his then-apprentice Robert Davidson, he found a copy of *Analysis of Form* lying open in their studio.

Michael Ames, former director of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, writes that "The codifications produced by Boas and Holm provide the primary criteria according to which the Northwest Coast artist is judged. Indian carvers themselves learn from the Boas and Holm books, and teach from them."<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps most telling of the book's influence is the fact that when artists, Native and non-Native alike, talk about the art, they use the language Bill Holm invented, whether or not they are conscious of his tutelage even as they speak it.

With the results of his two-dimensional analysis published, Bill Holm made a second contribution to the new discipline of Northwest Coast art history. He turned his attention from flat design to sculpture, and this time not in the northern two-thirds of the Coast only but among the sub-groups along its entire length.

He found common sculptural characteristics among them. Sculpture, he explained,

*generally appears in a somewhat static, frontally oriented pose. The knees are slightly bent or drawn up against the chest and knee caps are frequently flattened. Scant attention is given the feet, which may emerge with a solid base. In contrast, the hands and fingers are usually carefully delineated. The arms are often down alongside the*

*torso, the hands on hips or thighs, although elbows bent and forearms crossing the torso are not uncommon. The head is typically very large in proportion to the body, often equaling the shoulders in width.<sup>36</sup>*

Then, with characteristic thoroughness, he took the masks of the Coast apart--visually. The principle form--the shape of the basic wood block from which a mask was carved, which then gave distinctive shape to the mask itself--was noted: flat oval (Salish), prism (Nuu-chah-nulth), half-cylinder (Kwakwaka'wakw, Northern Wakashan, Tsimshian, Haida, Tlingit), and hemisphere (Bella Coola). Next, the distinctive treatment of their features--forehead, brow, underbrow, temple, orb, side of nose, upper cheek, cheek, forecheek, nostril, mouth, and chin projection--was identified for each group. The total result was a useful and unique ofile for three-dimensional analysis by cultural group.

Thinking to make that analysis more widely available, Bill Holm wrote an article in 1972 entitled "Heraldic Carving Styles of the Northwest Coast," in the catalog for a show at the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis. He was dissatisfied with the result because the Museum declined to publish his own drawings that illustrated the analysis, preferring only to reference pieces from the exhibit. Unfortunately, those pieces were not entirely relevant to his subject matter.

In spite of that limitation, the article was welcomed by other scholars in the field as an important piece of research that modeled yet another set of possibilities for stylistic analysis. More effective was a hand-out Bill prepared for his classes at the University of Washington, which gave graphic and detailed descriptions of these analyses. Although it was privately distributed, over time copies have found their way, influentially, into the grateful hands of other teachers of art history.

A third scholarly contribution took a very narrow focus: an attempt to make authentic attributions of previously unattributed works by an identification of the stylistic characteristics of individual master artists. He demonstrated the process in an article entitled, "Will the Real Charles Edensaw Please Stand Up?: The Problem of Attribution in Northwest Coast Indian Art," that appeared in *The World Is as Sharp as a Knife: An Anthology in Honour of Wilson Duff*, published in 1981<sup>37</sup>. In fact, in that article, he took on the daunting task of identifying the distinctive style not of one artist but of six: Edensaw, John Robson, Gwaytihl, John Cross, Tom Price, and an otherwise unnamed artist Bill calls The Master of the Chicago Settee, which refers to a distinctive masterwork in the Field Museum of Natural History. All six are Haida, late-nineteenth century contemporaries, who knew each other and who lived either in Masset or Skidegate, or both, in the Queen Charlotte Islands.

The "signature" of each is in his distinctive renderings of hands, ears, eyes, ovoids, stacked U-forms, stylized faces, formline wing and fin designs,

and other features depicted in his masks, bowls, rattles, bent boxes, argillite platters and model poles, and painted hats.

It is an original, exemplary, and ground-breaking piece of scholarship, which has shown the way to other scholars.

A fourth contribution is of a quite different but equally significant kind. An academic discipline requires an identifiable body of work. Before 1976, there was no comprehensive inventory of Northwest Coast objects. Some items and locations were well known to scholars: Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology; Victoria's British Columbia Provincial Museum; Canada's National Museum of Man; Chicago's Field Museum; New York's American Museum of Natural History, and the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation; the Smithsonian in Washington; and of course the Burke Museum. Abroad there were collections in the British Museum, and museums in Madrid, Berlin, and Leningrad. And beyond those obvious places, there were a great many others, largely lost to scholarly awareness. Some were too small to have a specialized curatorial staff in American tribal art, some didn't know what they had in that field, and even some of the larger ones often made mistaken attributions and exhibited erroneous wall text alongside their displays.

In 1976, Bill Holm was awarded a year-long fellowship by the National Endowment for the Humanities, providing funds for travel to locate and photograph Northwest Coast Native art. He travelled to Britain, throughout Western Europe, to Czechoslovakia, into Scandinavia, and on to Leningrad. Returning to this country, he visited museums in the East and in Canada by rail and air, and then by car through the Central and Western states. In all, he visited a hundred museums, and extensive photographic records--color slides--were made in each place.

His extensive work at locating Northwest Coast objects in North American and European museums laid an indispensable foundation for the subsequent work of other art historians. The fact that, in 1976-77, he had seen and photographed Chilkat blankets and their historical precursors in London, Perth, Bern, Vienna, Helsinki, Leningrad, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Salem, and Portland, gave Cheryl Samuel precisely the start she needed in research that resulted in *The Chilkat Dancing Blanket* (1982)<sup>38</sup> and *The Raven's Tail* (1987)<sup>39</sup>. He put this unique early achievement of Northwest Coast weavers in context with an article in *American Indian Art*, entitled "A Wooling Mantle Neatly Wrought: The Early Historic Record of Northwest Coast Pattern-Twined Textiles--1774-1850."<sup>40</sup>

In the same way, Bill's international inventory gave Robin Wright the start she needed in locating objects for her important research into Haida argillite carving.

That process of identification has continued through subsequent years, supplemented substantially by research photographs taken by Robin Wright, Bill's one-time teaching assistant and currently his successor at the University

of Washington. When photographs by others were added, the combined slide collection numbered some 35,000 images.

Both Bill Holm and Robin Wright have been generous in giving access to the slides, permitting them to be examined and copied by other research scholars. With the assistance of The Ford Foundation, that access reached a new level. In the fall of 1996, after Robins Wright edited the full collection down to 24,962 images of Northwest Coast and Plateau art, those images were reproduced on a laser video disk, which was made available at cost to Native people, scholars, students, collectors, museums, and the public at large.

Those nearly 25,000 images, to say nothing of the full collection, constitute the most substantial single inventory available anywhere, and has delineated the indispensable body of work needed by the academic discipline of Northwest Coast Native art history.

A fifth contribution is to be found in Bill Holm's other books and articles. Says Aldona Jonaitis, "Everything he writes is important. In *Spirit and Ancestor*,<sup>41</sup> for example, he wrote about each of one hundred pieces in the Burke Museum collection. Each short essay is the most knowledgeable and erudite that I've ever seen. He does the research, he knows the material. He's a real scholar." Marjorie Halpin, of the University of British Columbia, called those same essays "exquisite."<sup>42</sup> In reviewing an earlier Holm work, *Smoky-Top: The Art and Times of Willie Seaweed*, Jonaitis had said,

*The value of this book lies as much in the author's extraordinary scholarship and remarkable visual skills as in Willie Seaweed's art. Indeed, Bill Holm, who is by far the most distinguished living interpreter of Northwest Coast art, insists always on accurate, well-documented information and sound scholarship. The text of Smoky-Top contains meticulously researched information on a variety of subjects including linguistics, history and anthropology as they relate to Seaweed's career. Even the footnotes have tremendous value....<sup>43</sup>*

In tribute to his astonishingly encyclopedic range of knowledge, Steve Henrikson, curator of collections at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau, once presented Bill with a printed card that read, "Ask me. I'm Bill Holm!" More than one person has said admiringly, "If Bill doesn't know, it isn't known!"

Not just incidentally, he is ready with an open acknowledgement when what he thought he knew turns out to be wrong. For example, in an article in *American Indian Art* magazine, he wrote about a 1789 description of a precursor of the Chilkat blanket, "Like many of the early describers (and some of the present, including this author), [seaman] Haswell erroneously identified the material [in the specimen blanket] as the wool of the 'mountain sheep' instead of the mountain goat."<sup>44</sup> And when Cheryl Samuel discovered small spindles in some of the museums' Chilkat collections, challenging Bill's established view that only fingers had been used by Chilkat weavers in spinning their yarns, she was able to persuade him to change his view by

showing him that he couldn't spin a weft yarn on his thigh that would work for weaving.

All of which leads to a final comment on Bill's scholarly style. The fact is that he often says, "I don't know." Bill Holm is a positivist in his scholarship. As that term has been used in recent academic philosophy, it refers to a process of analysis--in the case of philosophy, primarily an analysis of linguistic propositions--that insists on the tests of verifiability. Because statements of meaning are inherently unverifiable, positivism excludes them from philosophical discourse. Early analytical philosophers were intent on eliminating an excessive dependence on psychologism as a source of explanation, because they thought it incapable of providing a reliable account of objective reality.

So does Bill Holm. He distrusts psychologistic interpretations and efforts to assign meaning to art objects. This was a point of major but good-natured disagreement between him and his friend Wilson Duff, late distinguished University of British Columbia anthropologist. It would be hard to image a more un-Holm-like statement than the following from Duff. Writing about ancient Northwest Coast stone sculptures--bowls and hammers--Duff said,

*If female sexual symbolism is the unifying concept in the images of "fonts of life" and "vessels of thought" [seated figural bowls], male symbolism is the unifying concept in the "images of power" [hammers]. It is almost as though both concepts are derived from the ancient partnership of the mortar and the pestle; the one vulvic, the other phallic. This imagery seems to run through the entire evolutions of forms, partly as artistic play with the binary opposition of sex, but also as general equations in logic, either in the abstract or in reference to the fundamental binary opposition of life and death.<sup>45</sup>*

Bill Holm doesn't deny the presence of meaning in the art. He is simply unwilling to speculate about what that meaning might be, beyond verifiable evidence, or to impose his own subjective categories of philosophical or psychological interpretation on the material, as Duff, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and others--perhaps mainly anthropologists--have seemed ready to do.

Bill Holm's view is that the assignment of meanings almost always goes beyond the reliable memory of contemporary informants, or indeed of informants whose observations have been recorded in the past. When, therefore, questions of meaning arise, or when questions are asked about how or why this or that art form arose for which there is no historically verifiable answer, his response is always a non-speculative, "I don't know." It's an admirable trait in a scholar who knows so much.

Bill Holm's professional standing has been recognized with major consultancies at, among others, the American Museum of Natural History, the Field Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian, the Peabody Museum at Harvard, the University Museum at the University of Pennsylvania, the Brooklyn Museum, and as a member of the U.S. committee for preparation of the exhibit, "Crossroads of Continents: Traditional Cultures of the Peoples of the North Pacific Rim," jointly with the Institute of Ethnography and the Scientific Council of Exhibitions, Soviet Academy of Sciences.

In 1991, he was honored with their life-time achievement award by his fellow scholars in the Native American Art Studies Association; in 1994 with the Distinguished Achievement Award given annually to an alumnus of the University of Washington's College of Arts and Sciences; and in 2003 with an invitation to give the annual Faculty Lecture, the highest honor given by the University to one of its own. The lecture was entitled "Exploration of Northwest Coast Indian Art, 1774-2003." An audience of a thousand was the largest that ever attended the annual lecture.

## 10

### The Curator

**As a curator** from 1968 to 1985, Bill Holm literally left permanent marks on the Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum. Its teaching function has been enriched by his careful re-creation of exemplary Northwest Coast objects. In front of the Museum are two poles that are fine examples of the differences in totemic art that characterize the cultures in which they originated. The Haida pole, its vertical succession of relatively flat figures ingeniously interconnected, is a copy of one carved about 1870 at Haina (New Gold Harbour) in the Queen Charlottes; while, in contrast, the Tsimshian pole, each figure discrete and more fully modeled, comes from about 1880 in the Nisgaa village of Gítlakhdamks on Northern British Columbia's Nass River.

Two more towering replicas, originally intended for exhibit inside the museum but now installed as the Museum's entrance, were also Bill's work.\* One is a Dzunuk'wa, a cannibal giantess with pursed lips and pendulous breasts, raised originally in the Kwakwaka'wakw village of Gwa'yasdams on Gilford Island in British Columbia. The other, of similar height, is a Tlingit mortuary pole--a bare cylindrical post which bears, at its top, the replica of a bent-corner box with the carved likeness of a deceased chief sitting in its lid. On the original pole, raised in Old Wrangell, Alaska, before 1850, the box was actually the container for the chief's remains.

Bill carved these four sculptures on the Lopez Island beach at Camp Nor'wester during the summers of 1970-72. Once carved, they were floated to a convenient yacht basin in nearby Anacortes on Fidalgo Island, and there placed on a flatbed truck for transport to the University campus and installation at the Burke Museum.

Immediately outside of the Burke's entrance sits the replica of a large killer-whale sculpture, which has been adopted as the Museum's logo. The original was a nineteenth-century grave monument in the Kaigani Haida community of Howkan, Alaska. Bill began his carving of the whale in the '70s but did not complete it, later taking it up again in time to be installed for the Museum's centennial celebration in 1985.

During his curatorial years, Bill Holm's reputation, both as an approachable community resource and as an eminent art historian, attracted gifts to the Burke that enhanced its collection in major ways. Often private collectors would bring him pieces to examine for provenance and authenticity,

or would consult him before making their private purchases. Later some of those same people made gifts to the Burke from their collections, or loaned items for special exhibits.

By far the most significant addition during the Holm years came in the Sidney Gerber collection, over 200 Northwest Coast items given by Anne Gerber in her husband's memory, among them some of the most distinguished to be found anywhere. In 1972 Bill published *Crooked Beak of Heaven*<sup>46</sup>, the catalogue of the Sidney Gerber Collection, and an important addition to art historical literature.

There was a special feature in his stewardship of this growing museum collection. Whenever an artist came to consult with him on a problem, perhaps having to do with the design of a traditional object or the appropriate technique for its creation, Bill would be likely to say, "Let's go back into the storage area and look at some examples of the thing you're talking about." Tsimpshean teacher and artist Jack Hudson recalls how, with Bill's help, he studied "the old carvings in the basement of the Burke," where Bill "drew diagrams [for me] and answered all of my questions." Because of a strong sense of indebtedness to the Native art of the Northwest Coast, Bill Holm felt a special desire to be accessible to its Native artists, and an obligation to make the resources of the museum collection he curated open especially to them.

One of Bill Holm's more unusual and imaginative curatorial ventures involved a long-lost film, "In the Land of the Head-Hunters," originally made in 1914 by photographer Edward S. Curtis. Curtis is primarily known for his 20-volume *The North American Indian*, published between 1907 and 1930. The film, of feature-length, was a dramatic depiction of the aboriginal life of the Kwakwaka'wakw and the first of its kind. But after initial showings in 1914 to some enthusiastic reviews--reviewer W. Stephen Bush wrote in *Moving Picture World* that "this production sets a new mark in artistic handling of films in which educational values mingle with dramatic interest"<sup>47</sup> and compared it to "the musical epics of Richard Wagner"--it was lost to sight.

As a junior high school student in 1940, Bill Holm had found passing reference to the film in Curtis's small book, *In the Land of the Headhunters*, and became permanently intrigued by its mystery and possible importance. In later years, as he moved across the country on his research trips, he routinely asked whether anyone knew of the film's whereabouts. During a 1962 visit to the Field Museum, Bill routinely asked his question of George Quimby, the Museum's curator of exhibitions. To his astonishment Quimby replied, "We have a copy!" Recovering, Bill said, "I have just come from the funeral of one of the most knowledgeable old people of the Kwakiutl [Mungo Martin]. Time is short. If we want to find out what the film is all about, we'll have to get it up there as soon as we can."

When George Quimby came to the Burke Museum a a curator in 1965, he brought the Curtis film with him, and Holm and Quimby agreed on a collaboration to restore it. In the summer of 1967, the Holms--Bill, Marty,

Carla, and Karen--sailed in their sloop into the country where Curtis made the film, carrying with them a 16 mm. copy and a projector. They found many of the exact places where the film had been shot, and met a number of people who had actually participated in, or had been present at, the filming 53 years earlier, showing the film to individuals and groups some 15 times. As Bill wrote later, "Many people recalled amusing incidents during the filming: how a dancer in a canoe fell when the canoe struck a rock, how Curtis paid the men to shave off their mustaches, and how the unfamiliar old style abalone-shell nose rings tickled!"<sup>48</sup> Holm was encouraged to believe, by the ad-libbing of the audience and the singing which began spontaneously as they watched some of the scenes, that a sound track could be made for the film. He asked several people what they thought of the idea and all were enthusiastic.

It was 1972 before funding permitted work to be done on the sound-track addition. At Bill's invitation, a group of Kwakw̱aka'wakw people, three of whom had been actors in the original film, assembled on Vancouver Island to record the sound. As they watched the film, many in the group spoke quite spontaneously, without a fixed script, and their comments were recorded for the sound track. Film maker David Gerth had been retained to direct the recording process.

Then the sound crew accompanied Bill and his associate, Steve Brown, to Camp Nor'wester on Lopez Island where Bill's 35' Haida-style canoe was kept. Under Steve's direction and with the sound crew at the paddles, the canoe was put through all of the maneuvers depicted by canoes in the film, while the tape machines recorded the accompanying sounds of paddling and beach-landing. Finally, technical changes were made in the film's speed, some editing in the sequence of scenes was done, and David Gerth synchronized the sound tracks into a single track which was added to the final film.

The result seemed miraculous. The combination of image and sound maintained the artistic integrity of Edward Curtis the photographer, and the magnificent cultural heritage of the Kwakiutl Indians. The restored film enhanced by sound does have an operatic quality reminiscent of W. Stephen Bush's vision of the movie when he reviewed it in New York City in 1914.<sup>49</sup>

Under the revised title of "In the Land of the War Canoes," the restored film is commercially available on video tape.<sup>50</sup> Curators Holm and Quimby have told the entire story of Curtis's original filming in *Edward S. Curtis in the Land of the War Canoes, A Pioneer Cinematographer in the Pacific Northwest*. It is, in effect, a catalogue for the "exhibition" that is the film.

In 1983-84 Bill Holm busied himself with more conventional curatorial activities. "Busied" is indeed the operative word, because it was in that year that he mounted three major exhibitions, designed to coincide with the biennial meeting of the Native American Art Studies Association in Seattle that fall, and he wrote two exhibit catalogues--simultaneously! With major assistance from Patricia Cosgrove, Bill organized "Smoky-Top: The Art

and Times of Willie Seaweed," at Seattle's Pacific Science Center. As he wrote in its catalogue,

*The idea that artists in non-Western societies could be seen as individuals was not a new one....But very little had been written on the subject and many people, some art historians among them, were still viewing tribal arts as generic works whose makers were not only anonymous, but faceless and indistinguishable.<sup>51</sup>*

"Smoky-Top" was Bill's effort to show the error in that view. Some 134 objects were included, almost all of them by the elder Seaweed, with 16 by his son Joe, whose style was almost indistinguishable from that of his father. The catalogue, published by the University of Washington Press, shows Bill's usual scholarly thoroughness and clarity of written style.

At the same time, "The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art" was on exhibit at the Seattle Art Museum. It provided a privileged access that ordinary aficionados of that art have seldom had, since this exhibit was drawn from the holdings of private collectors. In introducing the catalogue, Bill Holm observed that,

*In western Washington...are treasures that are kept...in the homes of people who prize them for their great beauty, visual power, or ability to evoke the rich native heritage of the Northwest Coast. They were collected, one of them over two centuries ago and some within this year, from every meander on the coast. A great many of these treasures are superior examples and a few are recognized as being among the finest of their kind. To the credit of the owners, no hemlock-needle tricks nor temper tantrums were needed to gain access to their collections and to throw open this great Box of Daylight in the Seattle Art Museum.<sup>52</sup>*

Nothing was needed except that the recruiter was named Bill Holm! More than 200 objects were included in this show, and again the accompanying catalogue was a model of scholarship and grace.

"Prancing They Come," a third and smaller exhibit, was at the Burke Museum and was drawn entirely from the Burke's own collection of Plains and Plateau material.

It is fitting that Bill Holm's last major publication during his active curatorial years was *Spirit and Ancestor: A Century of Northwest Coast Indian Art at the Burke Museum*. At the time of the Museum's centennial celebration, the book presented 100 objects from one of its major collections "symbolizing a century of collection, exhibition, and interpretation."<sup>53</sup>

With some eight thousand objects to choose from, the selection task was daunting. In the Preface, Bill Holm recalled:

*Certain choices were easy. I have been associated with the Burke Museum in one way or another for nearly half of its hundred years, beginning in 1937 when, as a twelve-year-old transplanted Montanan, I first discovered its treasures. I have many old favorites among them, and have over the years seen other wonderful things come into the collection to join those I most admire. The greatest difficulty has been to keep within the allotted hundred. While some wonderful pieces have been excluded, those selected represent well both the rich cultures from which they originally came and the fine public collection of which they are now a part.*

It is also fitting that the tribute to his curatorial work should come from a fellow curator, Marjorie Halpin, of the University of British Columbia's celebrated Museum of Anthropology. In a review of *Spirit and Ancestor*, she wrote:

*It is important to point out that, during these years, Bill's contact with Native persons and artists was not confined to the Kwakwaka'wakw. Holm, an unclassifiable art historian, anthropologist, carver dancer, master teacher, and museologist, first achieved an international reputation with the publication of his Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form (1965), the defining study of northern Northwest Coast formline painting. He is also, as these essays testify, the Master Cataloguer, placing each of his chosen pieces into a cultural, historical, and aesthetic context with felicity, economy, and care. Cataloguing is the primary task of museum scholarship, one all too often undervalued by both museum administrators and other museum scholars, who tend to prefer the most spectacular, and all too often merely clever, aspects of curatorial work. These essays, however, will endure after the theoretical generalisations of lesser scholars are long forgotten.*

## 11

**The Mentor**

**Henri J. M. Nouwen once wrote** about returning to Notre Dame, where he had taught for a number of years, and of meeting again an older and experienced professor who had spent most of his life in that place. "And while we strolled over the beautiful campus, he said with a certain melancholy, 'You know,...my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work."<sup>56</sup>

Of all of the marks of effective mentoring, interruptibility--accessibility--is very near the top. By that standard, Bill Holm is clearly an effective mentor. In interviews conducted for this writing--and the present section of comment is based almost entirely on them--it is an unexceptionable theme running through those conversations. For example:

In 1970, Seattle Weavers Guild member Cheryl Samuel, an undergraduate in anthropology at the University of Washington, had a special interest in the problem of weaving circles. When Bill Holm spoke at a Guild meeting and brought Chilkat blankets with him, for the first time Cheryl saw woven robes that had circles as a main design element. She was so impressed, both with the speaker and with the robes, that she determined to ask him to speak to a weaving class she was teaching at North Seattle Community College. "I was so naive," she says, "that I just went to his office and asked him to do it. And he said, 'Sure, I'll be there.' That's part of the measure of Bill. Anybody can walk in and ask him something, and he's so incredibly generous with his time."

Cheryl switched from anthropology to art history, took all of Bill's classes, and later became the author of the two most illuminating books on the styles and structures of Chilkat weaving.

In the early 1970s, Nuu-chah-nulth artist Joe David, who had been trained in commercial art but was the son and grandson of Native carvers, was living in Seattle and beginning to feel the pull of his tradition, to explore his calling as a carver. On recommendation of Duane Pasco, he went to Shorey's Book Store and bought a copy of Bill Holm's *Analysis of Form*. He says it amazed him. So for two years he audited Bill's art history courses at the University of Washington. "Bill was an immediate friend," says Joe, "personable, accessible, generous, with a mind that never stops."

As a doctoral candidate at Columbia University in the 1970s, Aldona Jonaitis was studying primitive art history with Douglas Fraser. When she

decided to do a dissertation on Tlingit art, Fraser told her the man to talk to was Bill Holm. "As a nervous young grad student on your first visit to the area of your research," she says, "it's nerve wracking just to walk into the office of a man with so large a reputation. But he was the sweetest, kindest, most unassuming, most wonderful human being I had met in a long time--so interested, so knowledgeable, and so willing to help me out. I was captivated by him, and since then I have continued to grow in my admiration of him."

Art historian Jonaitis, formerly a vice president of the American Museum of Natural History and now director of the University of Alaska Museum in Fairbanks, has written authoritative books and articles on the art and ceremony of the Tlingit and the *Kwakwaka'wakw*.

It should be said that not everyone is as charmed as Aldona Jonaitis by a first encounter with Bill Holm. One artist, who has long since become a warm friend, says that, at their first meeting, Bill seemed "cranky." Given a "mind that never stops," a mind that is always crafting some project or solving some problem, a man who dislikes desultory small talk--moreover, a private man who is only one degree of separation away from the traditional reserve of his Swedish forebears--it is possible that distraction may occasionally take on a "cranky" face. But once he is fully focussed on the immediate, the evidence is universal that the visitor is given more than he had any hope of getting. Says one admiring and grateful friend, "Ask Bill a question and you get a seminar!"

When Robert Davidson was preparing to carve his first totem pole, to be raised at Masset in the Queen Charlotte Islands, he says he did "some homework" with Bill Holm. "I went down to Seattle and visited him. I asked him some questions about totem pole carving, what he did, how he carved, how long it took. He was very generous with his knowledge and experience."

Henry Seaweed, a distinguished dancer and the son and grandson of distinguished *Kwakwaka'wakw* artists and dancers, now retired from his work in the Canadian postal service, is spending his retirement years as a teacher of the traditional ways to *Kwakwaka'wakw* young people. When asked recently why Bill Holm was so befriended by Mungo and Abayah Martin, so favored with the gift of traditional knowledge, Henry said, "At that time many people among the *Kwakwaka'wakw* were uninterested in the traditions. The potlatch system was down and people didn't seem to care. They were only concerned with doing their own private thing. Mungo thought, 'Here is a man who can eventually bring this knowledge back to our people.' I always look to Bill. He helps me with a lot of information." Mungo Martin would be pleased at how his protégé has used his gifts.

More than accessibility, an effective mentor must not take himself so seriously as an expert that he is unable to entertain the full selfhood of others less expert than he. If Bill Holm's knowledge is magisterial, his manner is not. He appears to know what he knows and what he is able to do, seems comfortable with that knowing, and feels no need to call the world's attention

to those things, or to demean the accomplishments of others less talented to enhance his own.

That he feels no need to engage in self-promotion at every opportunity is demonstrated in an anecdote told by artist David Stephens. Davey had learned about Indian crafts and lore as a youth in the scouting movement. One of his first projects was making an Indian capote, a long, hooded coat often made from a Hudson's Bay blanket, using the directions that had been provided in an article in a hobbyist magazine. Some years later, after he had arrived in Seattle, he was again interested in making a capote, but he was unable to remember the source of the article. Having begun to audit Bill Holm's courses, it occurred to him that Bill might know of the article, so he went to Bill's office to inquire. After describing what he recalled of the article, Bill said, to Davey's momentary disappointment, "I don't think you'll find that magazine anywhere." And then he added, "But I happen to have one right here." He made a copy of the article for Davey. And it was only as Davey was on his way out of the museum that he glanced at the copy and discovered that he had just been talking to the article's author!

Robert Davidson put the matter directly when he said that when he went to consult with Bill, "He wasn't snobby about his knowledge. He didn't use it to elevate his prestige. He's humble. I have a lot of respect for him, and I admire him for the respect he has for Native people and their art."

His association is with anyone who seriously cares about the Native arts, without regard either to their prior knowledge or their skill. Barry Herem has commented on Bill's patience, and even his apparent enthusiasm, in answering questions from uninformed inquirers that he must have heard a thousand times before. Bill and Marty Holm are the enthusiastic center of a group of some 15 friends who meet from mid-morning to mid-evening once a month for an "Unfinished Projects Day." Many of the individual projects involve creating something in the Native arts--beading, carving, weaving, designing button blankets, making moccasins--and the skill in the group ranges from duffer to expert. Bill gives as much attention to the former as to the latter.

In spite of their own superior artistic skills--for her part, Marty Holm is a talented weaver--this open and accepting attitude was fostered within the Holm family itself. Daughter Carla says, for example, that in the family circle, "there isn't a hierarchy of values based on 'art' versus 'craft.' Around the dinner table, our only discussion of the distinction was how silly it is for people to waste time over it. If you crochet a potholder or carve a totem pole or paint a watercolor or knit a sweater, you are making something with your hands and mind. Maybe we're snobs about something, but not about art."

When invited to assess a piece of work in the Unfinished Projects group, he displays another skill of the effective mentor: the ability to offer encouraging criticism. Patricia Cosgrove, now a museum director, once brought some beadwork to him with the explanation, "I thought I'd do it in the Crow style. What do you think?" In fact, Bill thought it was nothing like the

Crow style, so he said, "Oh, that's great. But you know, it really reminds me of Lakota." She got the point, and her self-esteem remained intact.

Similarly, Tsimshean Jack Hudson says that when Bill looked at his first carvings, "which were not very good, he managed to keep a straight face and tell me what was wrong with them. I could tell right away that he knew what he was talking about." As a result of that affirming criticism, Jack Hudson now says that Bill Holm "has been, and still is, a great technical, motivational, and inspirational influence on both my teaching and my art development."

## 12

### **Curriculum Vitae\***

**On a summer day** in 1934 a nine-year-old boy sat in a grove of trees on a North Dakota farm and read a book called *Two Little Indians*. It was, he now says, the moment to which everything can be traced that has happened since:

his landmark 1965 book, now in its 17th printing, making it one of the all-time best-sellers for the University of Washington Press;

other publications, including authorship or co-authorship of eight additional books, 15 contributions to books edited by others, and more than 40 scholarly articles and reviews;

eminence as an art historian, recognized by invitations to lecture here and abroad, and by formal consulting relationships with the most distinguished museums in this country;

achievement, at the University of Washington, of a full professorship in art history and an adjunct professorship in anthropology, all without an earned doctorate;

intimate acquaintance with the art and culture of Northwest Coast Native people as well as of the people of the Plains and the Plateau, and appointment as a museum curator in recognition of this expertness;

privileges repeatedly given to him by Kwakwaka'wakw people because of his respectful grasp of their traditions and his intimate association with them over the years, and recognition by other cultural groups as well;

acknowledged mastery in the creation of two- and three-dimensional objects in the styles of the 19th century Native masters, and production

\* For a comprehensive record of Bill Holm's published and unpublished publications and paintings, see Steven C. Brown and Lloyd J. Averill, *Sun Dogs and Eagle Down: Bill Holm's Indian Paintings* (University of Washington Press, 2000).

of a distinguished series of realist-style paintings that treat Native subjects in Northwest Coast, Plains, and Plateau culture and history;

legendary influence on a generation of art historians, and on both Native and non-Native artists who create Northwest Coast Native and Native-style art, and

a research center at the Burke Museum devoted to the study of Northwest Coast art dedicated to him.

Not bad for a boy from Roundup who, at an early age, was "much like other...boys in having a keen interest in Indians and wild life, but...differed from most in this, that he never got over it."

### The Polymath

**With knife he shapes the mythic figures of the past  
awakes their image sleeping in the wood.**

**With words he names iconographic elements,  
And places ancient objects where they stood.**

**With brush and paint he limns scenes lost in history's mists  
and brings them stunningly to life again.**

**With dance and song he celebrates deep things, as if  
he had been native-born to them. And then,**

**no hoarder of this wealth, he gladly shares, with those  
who also love it, everything he knows.**

**Lloyd J. Averill**



## NOTES

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