



# THE MARIET

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## THE WELL WROUGHT MASQUE

By MARTIN SEGGER

The paintings presently on display at the McPherson Library are selections from a series of acrylics by Vancouver Island artist Robert Aller. The Indian motif carries through this very unusual approach toward representational expression. The difference between these and

other Totem graphics presently 'in vogue' is that they are not graphic representations, line copies, of older originals; but are an attempt to interpret Indian totem and mask art into contemporary form.

"What I am trying to capture is the SPIRIT of the West Coast native

artist; that aspect which was so much a part of Indian social and religious life." Mr. Aller paints from 'original carvings: totems, masks, feast dishes, rattles, and shamans' dolls. "I believe they are the expressions of the personalities in the native artists," he said.

"It is the artist who originates the personality and carves the final form; in essence then, the artifact is really the externalization of the artists own personality and 'spirit'."

Mr. Aller's method is this: "I look at the mask, or whatever it is, and after studying it, close my eyes and try to visualize it in use at a ceremonial or ritual function." Then he attempts to revive this spirit in his interpretation of the object. He did add however, that if hard pressed he would not guarantee that that is exactly the ratiocination behind it, after all, "It just comes."

His paintings show an obvious love for the characteristic Indian passion for deep, rich colour, and powerful solid form. On coming to B.C., inevitably to Port Alberni where he now lives, Mr. Aller commented that he is attracted by the West Coast life and its closeness to the luxurious forest growth and rugged mountains. It is this very "ruggedness" that he often must find in the Indian carvings, there is a strong hint of this kind of power in many of his sketches. Mr. Aller has spent much time on the extreme West Coast in the Ucluelet-Tofino area, painting and sketching land and seascapes.

The subject of the feature picture, the weeping woman, was discovered by Mr. Aller on a Haida totem. The story behind it is one of deep tragedy; a tidal wave, caused by an Aleutian earthquake, demolished a Haida village in the Queen Charlottes. Partly in mourning, partly in grief, partly in fear and respect, the returning native carver saw fit to eulogize the dead with this moving caricature of the mother, the tears for her dead children stream perpetually for their loss.

Mr. Aller was able to see many of the Haida totems still in their original, Queen Charlotte Island setting. It is evident from this painting that we catch an unusual glimpse at something that must have been close to the soul of the original carver, while Mr. Aller's interpretive technique enables one to feel, through heavy tonality, sombre, yet definite colour, the drawn-in claws and the pouting mouth, a penetrating upward gaze into a face contorted by the passion of sorrow. Thus an ancient drama is reacted in the living art of contemporary style and technique.



WEeping WOMAN

# Indian Masks - Ritual Significance

The Northern Kwakiutl Indian inhabit the rich maritime area of coastal British Columbia from Rivers Inlet north to the upper reaches of Douglas Channel. Though speaking dialects of a single language, the Northern Kwakiutl had no overall political unity. Among them, the essential functioning unit was the local village group (sometimes loosely described as a tribe) which constituted an independent social, political and economic entity. The tribe was further divided into clans or lineages. One such tribe was that of the Bella Bella who inhabited the islands and waterways surrounding the modern community of the same name. Many masks were collected in Bella Bella village in 1893.

## ELEMENT OF UNKNOWN

Little descriptive information about most masks is available. What figures they are meant to portray or what specific function they served in Bella Bella ceremonials is unknown. A single catalogue note indicates one belonged to the dluwulaxa dancing society, one of two such societies found in this tribe.

## SUPERNATURAL SPIRIT

The underlying rationale of these societies as based upon the encounter of a clan founder with a supernatural being during which the founder was possessed by the supernatural. As a result of this meeting, the founder

was given and claimed exclusive rights to the dances, masks and powers owned by the supernatural. In order to perpetuate the prerogatives so gained the founders' heirs dramatized these origin stories in elaborately staged winter dances, the performance of which lay entirely in the hands of the dancing society. In acting out the histories and so validating hereditary claim to them, initiates became possessed by the supernatural spirit. After a display of wild and frenzied behaviour, they were tamed by other members of the society until a point of calm was reached whereby the initiate was able to display the aforementioned powers to an amazed and unsuspecting audience.

Dluwulaxa, freely translated, means "once more (come) down from heaven". Implied in this phrase is the belief that initiates are lifted to the heavens by the supernatural, and are later returned to earth. A series of dances, graded in importance, existed within the dluwulaxa society. Some of the masks represented in the display belong somewhere in this series but whether they represent one of the important and high ranking figures or is merely an ancillary character is not known.

*Information on the dluwulaxa from Kwakiutl Dancing Societies by Philip Drucker, Anthropological Records, Volume 2, Number 6, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1940.*



KWAKIUTL DANCE MASK

## NOT OVER 100 YEARS OLD

# TOTEM POLES ARE "CANADIAN"

## MASKS

The ceremonial use of masks are world-wide and can be traced back at least 12,000 years. A bond between man and the spirit world — the "not" himself. A theory that the custom of ceremonial use of masks possibly owes its origin to the still

earlier practice of wearing them as a protection to the face in war. The crest or the guardian spirit of the wearer was represented on the mask and by intentional grotesqueness to strike terror to the hearts of the enemy.

There are two types of masks: 1. Those attached to house-fronts and heraldic columns. 2. Dancing masks, that is: a. **Potlatch masks:** were used in summer and by daylight. b. **Secret Society masks:** were used only in winter and at night by firelight.

Masks were formed from various materials although wood was the most common material used on the northwest coast. Other materials were stone, metal, and bone.

*concluded, that, if travellers or voyagers, in an ignorant and credulous age, when many unnatural or marvellous things were supposed to exist, had seen a number of people decorated in this manner . . . they would readily have believed . . . that there existed a race of beings, partaking of the nature of man and beast; . . ."*

*Captain James Cook  
April, 1778.*

## TOTEM POLES

### CAPTAIN COOK AT NOOTKA

Notes taken some 200 years ago on West Coast masks:

*"They have a truly savage and incongruous appearance, but this is much heightened when they assume what may be called their monstrous decorations. They consist of an endless variety of carved wooden masks or visors applied on the face or to the upper part of the head or forehead. Some of these resemble human faces, furnished with hair, beards and eyebrows, others the heads of birds . . . and many, the heads of land and sea animals, such as wolves, deer and porpoises, and others. But, in general, these representations much exceed the natural size; and they are painted, and often strewed with pieces of the foliaceous mica, which make them glitter, and serves to augment their enormous deformity . . . It may be*

The first pole carvings were the interior house posts. The detached totem pole is of recent origin, possibly not over a 100 years old. The mortuary pole was common in Tlingit and Haida villages before the coming of white trade and occupation, roughly between 1840 and 1880.

Why fallen poles are abandoned: according to Charles Mark, a Gitksan of Gitsegyukla (in 1924)—

*"It gives the people great grief to see their totem poles falling and decaying on the ground. It is true that we are Christians, or would like to be, and we cannot have totems at the same time. Yet there is nothing written in the Bible anywhere that totem poles are wrong in themselves or that if a man raises a totem he will not go to heaven."*

Chief Weegyot



TSIMSHIAN FOOL'S MASK

# The Aller Masks

## TSIMSHIAN FOOL'S MASK

The original carving that inspired this grotesquely sad picture is a mask worn by a dancer who serves, what we might recognize as an analogous role to the European court jester. The masks vary widely from tribe to tribe, the Kwakiutl counterpart is renowned for its 'running nose'. The 'fool dancer' keeps the audience's attention (which might mean keeping them awake) by various antics, such as throwing stones, shaking rattles, and acting as the general comedian.

Mr. Aller's presentation portrays a curiously odd glowing apparition. A blank, staring face, and curiously pouting mouth, moves the onlooker's imagination by somewhat startling introspection, to see curiously cut figures looming out of the firelight.

## KWAKIUTL DANCE MASK

This bearded effigy was prompted by a Bella-Bella dance mask. It was the mask of a "flaothaxa" or secret society. In heavy, rich reds, blues, blacks, or natural wood, this is extremely impressive and most characteristically 'Indian'. The very definite and distinctive nose gives the face its prominent 'feature' and life, the beard detail is to the average person an unusual feature not usually associated with Indians, indeed they show up rarely in Indian art. These characteristics contrast sharply with the blank, staring eyes, which gaze lifelessly, indeed, maskishly, out of the living movement of rich, vibrant colour.

## TSIMSHIAN CHARM FIGURE

The exaggerated eyes and 'arrested' expression designate the 'doll-like' qualities in this startling picture. The starting point was a Tsimshian Sha-

man's charm-figure. Carved charms assisted medicine in cure rituals. There were both male and female shamans, so this doll could have been the property of either. The hair on the head is human and around the neck is strung a neckless of feathers and cedar bark. The original doll is approximately 11½ inches high. In Mr. Aller's painting there is an unusual capture of surprised dollness. Note the small hands as compared to the large, staring eyes, while the mouth gapes open. The total impression is one of being 'caught in midair'.

## KWAKIUTL SUN MASK

This sombre specimen depicts a carved wood mask of a Kwakiutl Sun dancer. Note, in contrast to the majority of masks, the seriousness, indeed meanness, of expression, while the eyes, contrary to its mask origin show an intensity of life. The curious hooked nose ties in with the mouth to argue our conception of the fat, jovial fellow, we recognize as the sun. The detail of design both on the face itself and the radiating frame capture its maskness but fail to arrest the convincing life of the expressive eyes and full bodied mouth. The decorations become merely a textural arrangement, under which the artist has captured the living movement of expression in a real person. In this sense the picture works like a mask itself, a facade, a covering, a joke, behind which is concealed, not another mask, but the portrait of the original artist-dancer.

## KWAKIUTL DANCE MASK (2)

The mask of another flaothaxa, or secret society, distinguishes the "ayil-koa" or speaker. The difference is, however, in the use of materials, which



TSIMSHIAN CHARM FIGURE

caused these to be called "copper masks". Copper was extremely valuable to the West Coast Indians, as it was very rare. Any mask sporting a covering of this, was highly treasured. Although the model for this painting suffered the removal of the copper at the time of its collection, the artist has replaced it over his interpretation of the original form. Thus the work has about it a distinctive sculptural use of tonality, and indeed the eyebrows seem "stuck on". The round eyes and gaping mouth add a feeling of an almost ghost-like quality which startles the onlooker.

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KWAKIUTL DANCE MASK



KWAKIUTL SUN MASK

# The Man Behind The Mask

## LIFE HISTORY:

### THE ARTIST

Mr. Robert Aller was born in Dauphin, Manitoba, of Latvian parents. He first studied painting with the Vancouver School of Art, and later the School of Art and Design where he was a pupil of Dr. Arthur Lismur, R.C.A., LL.D.

In 1953 he was awarded the Swedish Scholarship, so was able to pursue his studies further in Konstfackskolan, Stockholm. This, he claims, is where he first conceived his passion for primitive, rugged landscape. During this period of a year and a half he studied art collections in England, Germany, and Fennoskandia. He then received another scholarship with the Vancouver School of Art.

While residing in Montreal, in 1951, Mr. Aller was commissioned by Aluminium Union Ltd., to do a series of paintings depicting the aluminum developments in Northern Quebec. Some of these paintings are in the private collection of the Aluminum Company and in company offices in Rome. Other Aller works are now in private collections in Canada, U.S.A., England, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and British Guiana.

Mr. Aller now teaches art in Port Alberni and Nanaimo. He has instructed both adults and children at Dauphin and Clear Lake, Manitoba; Nanaimo, Parksville, and Alberni. His interest in Native Art has led him to conduct art classes for Indian children in Dauphin and Port Alberni. Mr. Aller has a national reputation for his collection of Indian child paintings which have been exhibited across Canada, and appeared on C.B.C. television in Canada. Mr. Aller's own paintings have been exhibited in the Quebec Provincial Museum of Fine Arts, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, The Toronto, Vancouver, and Victoria art galleries, the Canadian National Exhibition, and the Western Canada Art circuit.

### INTEREST IN INDIAN ART

Mr. Aller first became interested in Native Art while studying under Arthur Lismur at the School of Art and Design, Montreal. Here he began his study of the West Coast art culture. The next ten years have been a build up to realize this ambition of somehow recording the life of the West Coast Indian. His first paintings depict the wild yet colourful Vancouver Island scenery while he became increasingly interested in Indian Child Art.

His persistent studies in this field have made him a prominent authority on the subject of West Coast Indian art. Mr. Aller first conceived of his present project while attending lectures by the famed Indian Art Authority, Marius Barbeau.

### SUFFOCATION OF INDIAN ART

Mr. Aller has very definite views as to the condition of Indian art, today — and its projected position in the future. Integration of Indian children into white schools is having some adverse effects on them, he asserts. "Since integration, their paintings have dropped to the level of the poor art work of the average white child."

Instead of producing their usual earthy and colourful paintings, he explains, they attempt to imitate the sterile work of the whites.

He feels this is a heavy loss to Canada and British Columbia.

Mr. Aller refuses to sell his collection of Indian Child art, though he has had many valuable offers. "They don't belong to me," he says, "they are the works of children." He plans, in the long run, to donate the collection to a public institution.

### GOOD ART TEACHER EXCLUDED

Mr. Aller points out that the fault is essentially with the system. Good art teachers will help the native children to make use of their natural creative resources. The trouble is

that there are very few first class instructors, and it is too expensive.

If an art instructor wants to move ahead in the school system it is necessary for him to obtain a B.Ed. Mr. Aller sees that this type of selection does not consider the teaching capabilities of the art instructor at all. Many artists who would make first class instructors are discouraged from teaching in schools because of this.

"They attend art school for four or five years and then are told that if they want to get ahead they must work for their B.Ed. It's not a matter of being paid for their ability to teach, but rather on a basis of academic qualifications."

The people who suffer from this are not only the artists, but pupil, teacher, and public alike.

Now Mr. Aller divides his week between Art classes in Port Alberni and Nanaimo and the Provincial Government Museum and Archives where he paints directly from the masks. So far he has completed some 400 studies, 40 of which are now on display at the library on campus.

### SLIDE LECTURE TOUR

At the end of March Mr. Aller leaves on a slide and lecture tour on his Indian Child paintings and own works. Among his many stops will be museums and art galleries at Ottawa, Toronto, Montreal, Chicago, New York, and the Smithsonian Institute. There is also a possibility that some of these paintings will be displayed at Expo.

## Chinese Fastidiousness . . . Now

# Massive Form and Powerful Movement

The collection presently on exhibition includes brush sketches from Haida, Tsimshian, Coast Salish, and Nootka ceremonial masks and totems, as well as a few 'unknown.' The display is interesting to anyone who is familiar with Mr. Aller's earlier work, as their seems to be a great shift in style to accommodate the new subject.

### OTHER WORLDNESS

Writing in the Montreal Star in April, 1955, Robert Ayre, Editor of Canadian Art, said of one of Mr. Aller's exhibitions, ". . . he has something of a Chinese fastidiousness . . . he gathers the forest around him, shuts himself in . . . bristling evergreens, silver birches, slender and naked . . . others anonymous in full leaf. Sometimes they are involved in mist, sometimes they move apart to make way for a boulder . . . there is satisfaction to be had in the play of light, the subtleties of movement and the delicacy of handling."

Indeed, now there is little evidence of any "Chinese fastidiousness," it seems rather to have given way to the Indian style of massive form and powerful movement. Restrain, for the most part in the use of colour places heavy emphasis on form and

tonality. Rarely are more than three colours used, usually the artist restricts himself to combinations of browns and greens. A kind of inherent fecundity is essential to the Indian artist, and it is evident Mr. Aller has captured this quality in the rich though economic use of colour.

### FAILURES BURNED

"Sometimes I get it in one sketch, taking anywhere from three to forty-five minutes, then again after six painstaking sketches on the same theme, it just doesn't come," Mr. Aller pointed out. Any sketches which he feels haven't succeeded, are put to the match; so far that has amounted to about half.

The "it" is that mysterious something behind every mask which makes it an 'expression,' a work of art. The tribe, the tradition, the ceremonial purpose, through the native artist himself, live on the carving. In this way the mask is, to a large extent, the original carver.

Thus Mr. Aller's paintings capture something of the violence, the barbarity, the colourfulness and richness of Indian ceremonial life, as well as the immediacy of nature and the passionate emotions of the original artist.

### STYLE VARIES ACCORDING TO TRIBE

The general heaviness of form is Indian, although its presence is often somewhat softened through a definitely Aller quality of swirling mistiness. This impressionistic quality is most notably evident in the Nootka and Coast Salish sketches, especially the introductory life sketch of the Nootka girl. Realism and thereby the Indian dominates the Kwukiutl pieces, as the artist tends toward more colour and graphic detail, except in the House Post Bear. This, in its grotesqueness, yet economy of detail, seems to be the most definitely Alleresque piece in the entire exhibit, and one of the most successful.

The Tsimshian and Haida pieces show total restriction of colour. The artist depends entirely on variations of green, except in one variation on the weeping woman which is in brown. These tend to be more impressionable in their simplicity of colour and subtle, sculptural, use of light and tonality which is the only element lending life and movement.

Among these one of the most interesting is an impression of a Tsim-

shian potlach mask which the artist presents as a portrait of a man burned in a fire dance. A number of variations on the same mask whirl and loom out of a misty gloom, each face twisted and contorted in grotesqueness of pain. The original is equally hideous, having numerous strips of human skin attached to the front of the mask.

A look at Mr. Aller's former work is provided by the pastel sketch of the Nootka Village. This same scene was painted many years earlier by Emily Carr; though the significance of the Aller work is the fact that it is the last recording of this particular scene. The canoe is now in the provincial museum awaiting reconstruction, the houses have long since collapsed under the weight of snow.

The total result seems to demonstrate a development of style and technique to accommodate a new theme, and by that, the partial adoption of a cultural style to produce an extremely poignant and successful effect. The result . . . a new insight into the oldest culture of Canada.