

# Robert Davidson: Serigraphs

Robert Davidson, one of Canada's greatest artists, is one of the Haida people, whose ancestral territories are in the Haida Gwaii archipelago off the coast of British Columbia and the southern half of Prince of Wales Island in Alaska. His Haida name is *G\_uud San Glans*, which means "Eagle of the Dawn." Davidson is a talented carver of argillite, jewelry and totem poles, a creator of striking masks, and a master of silkscreen printing (serigraphy).

## Life

Robert Davidson was born in Hydaburg ("Haida city") Alaska in 1946. His father, Claude Davidson, was a fisherman from the village of Dadens on Haida Gwaii, and an important carver in argillite, a black stone found in Slatechuck Mountain in the southern part of Moore Island. Robert's maternal great-grandfather was Charles Edenshaw (1839-1920), a renowned carver from Masset (Wright & Augaitis, 2013). In 1947, the Davidson family moved back to Masset, where Robert spent his childhood and adolescence. In 1965 he attended high school in Vancouver. When he began carving argillite sculptures in 1966, he met Bill Reid (1920-1998; Shadbolt, 1986) and worked in his studio for 18 months.

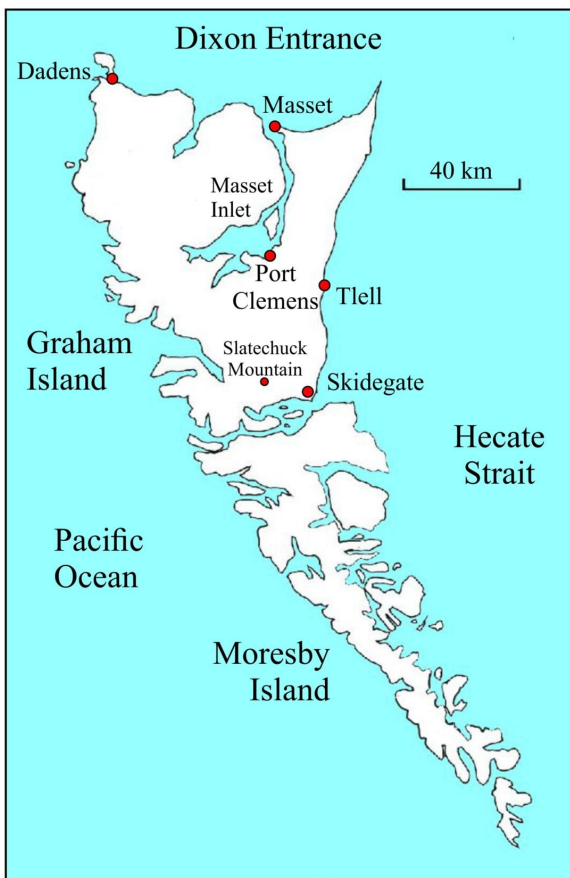
Davison began experimenting with silk screen printing in 1968 at the Gitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art in Hazelton, in the interior of British Columbia. He produced several prints in unnumbered editions in 1969, among them, *Sea Bear Box Back* and *Sea Bear Box Front*. Later in 1969 he carved a new totem pole for the village of Masset, sending out invitations to the potlatch and pole-raising adorned with a silk screen print that combined Eagle and Raven figures (see above). Eagle and Raven are the two main moieties of the Haida lineage. Davidson continued to carve totem poles throughout his life. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century he produced some large aluminum

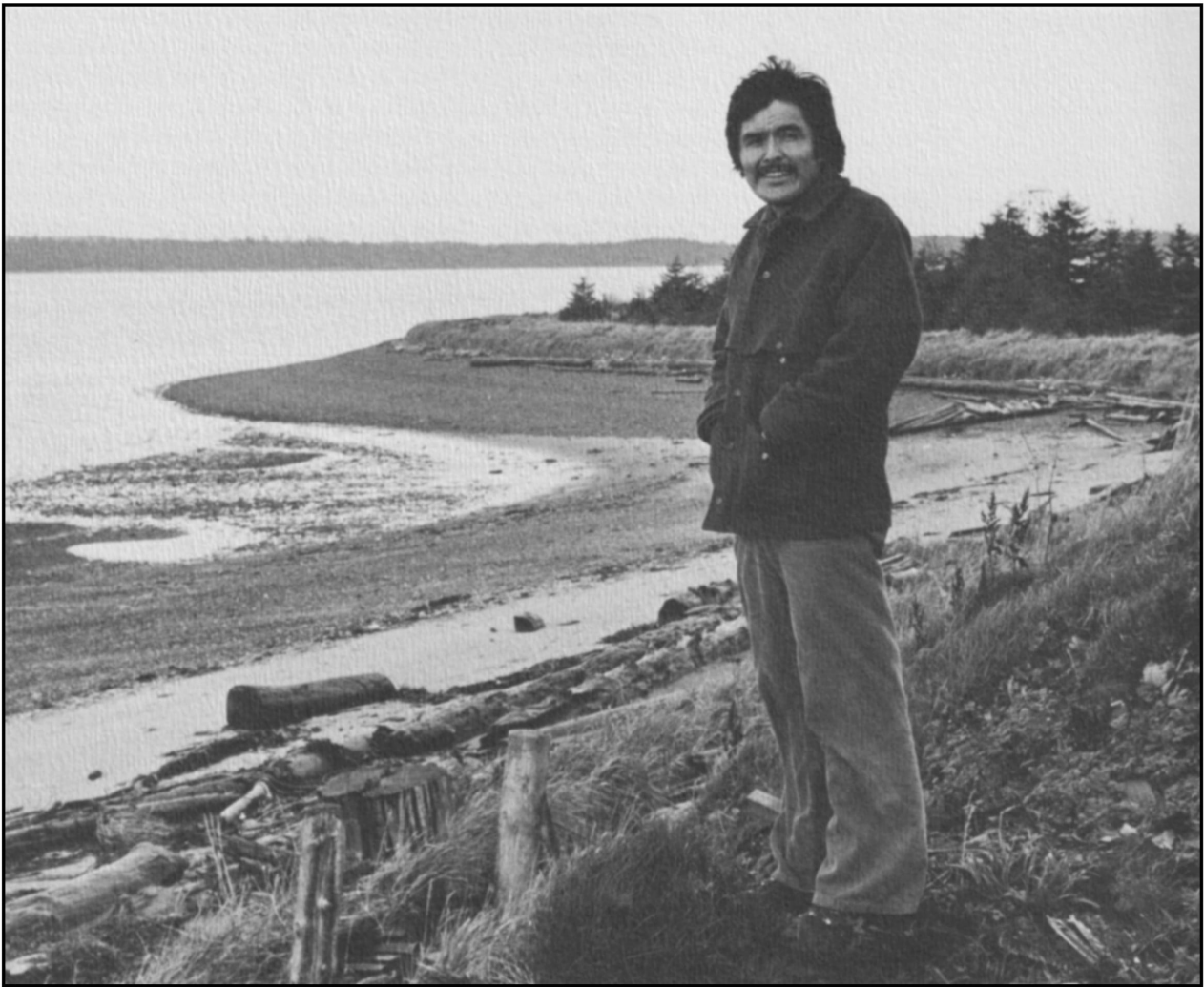
sculptures of Haida design forms.

In 1970, Davidson moved back to Vancouver and published his first limited edition serigraph, *Killer Whale*. Since then, he has continued to produce serigraphs, usually at a rate of several per year. Wyatt (2022) documents over 150 prints between 1968 and 2022.

The designs of the early serigraphs were based on old Haida paintings and carvings. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Davidson began to use more abstract designs, though still using original Haida art forms. These formed the basis of his exhibition *Abstract Impulse* (Brotherton et al, 2013). At about this time, he also began to base his serigraph designs on original acrylic-on-canvas paintings rather than preparatory drawings.

The following illustrations show the location of Haida Gwaii, and a photograph by Ulli Steltzer of Robert Davidson on Old Masset beach in 1978.

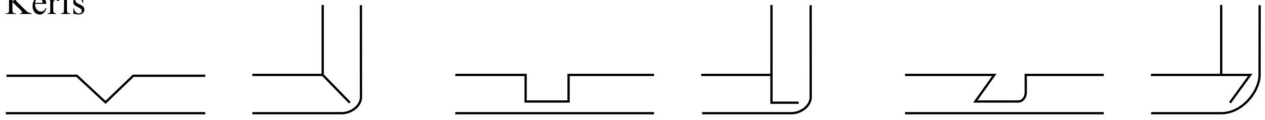




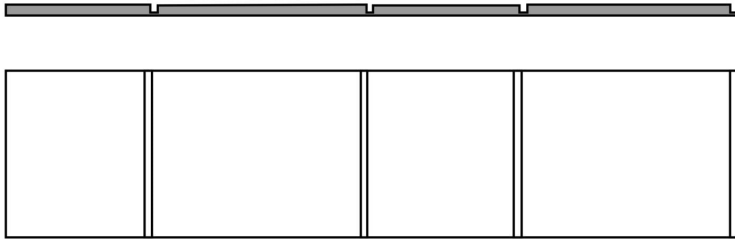
## **Bentwood Boxes**

Haida artists painted on the walls of their houses, on their furniture, and on bentwood boxes. Their designs were often supplemented by carving. Many old bentwood boxes have survived. The following illustration shows the technique of making these boxes. Specially measured grooves – kerfs – are cut in a cedar plank; the plank is then steamed to make it pliable and bent into box form; the free edges are joined by glue, sewing or pegs:

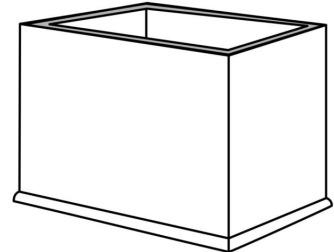
Kerfs



Kerfed Plank



Bentwood Box



The following is a famous 19<sup>th</sup>-Century bentwood box attributed to Charles Edenshaw, now in the Canadian Museum of History:



The central section shows a high-relief carving of a beaver. The box is large (142 by 58 cm) and only carved one side. MacDonald (1996) suggests that it may have initially been constructed as a burial chest, to be displayed at the top of a mortuary totem pole.

Another famous box – called the *Great Box* – was collected in 1884 and is now in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. In 2014,

modern Haida carvers Jaalen and Gwaii Edenshaw constructed a replica of this box. The design represents a sea monster, a mythical being perhaps related to the Orca. The monster has double eyes; its upper limbs have fingers and its lower limbs are flippers. The sea monster was meant to protect the contents of the box. The following illustration shows the original and the replica:



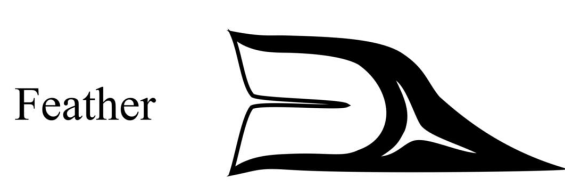
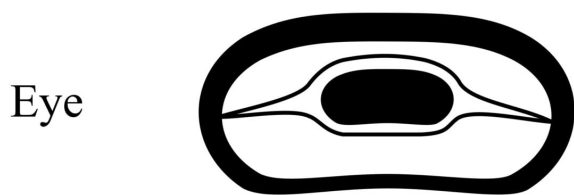
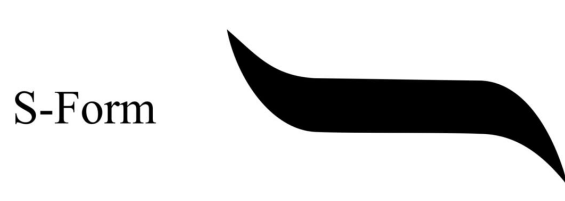
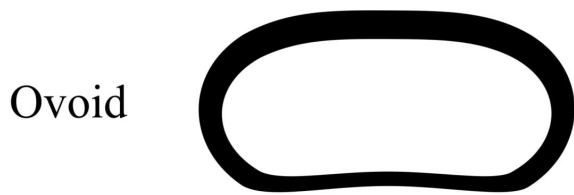
## **A Vocabulary of Forms**

From studying the designs on bentwood boxes and other carvings, scholars have identified a basic vocabulary of forms used by Haida artists for representation and decoration (Holm, 1965; Holm & Reid, 1975; Stewart, 1979a; Gilbert & Clark, 1999, 2002).

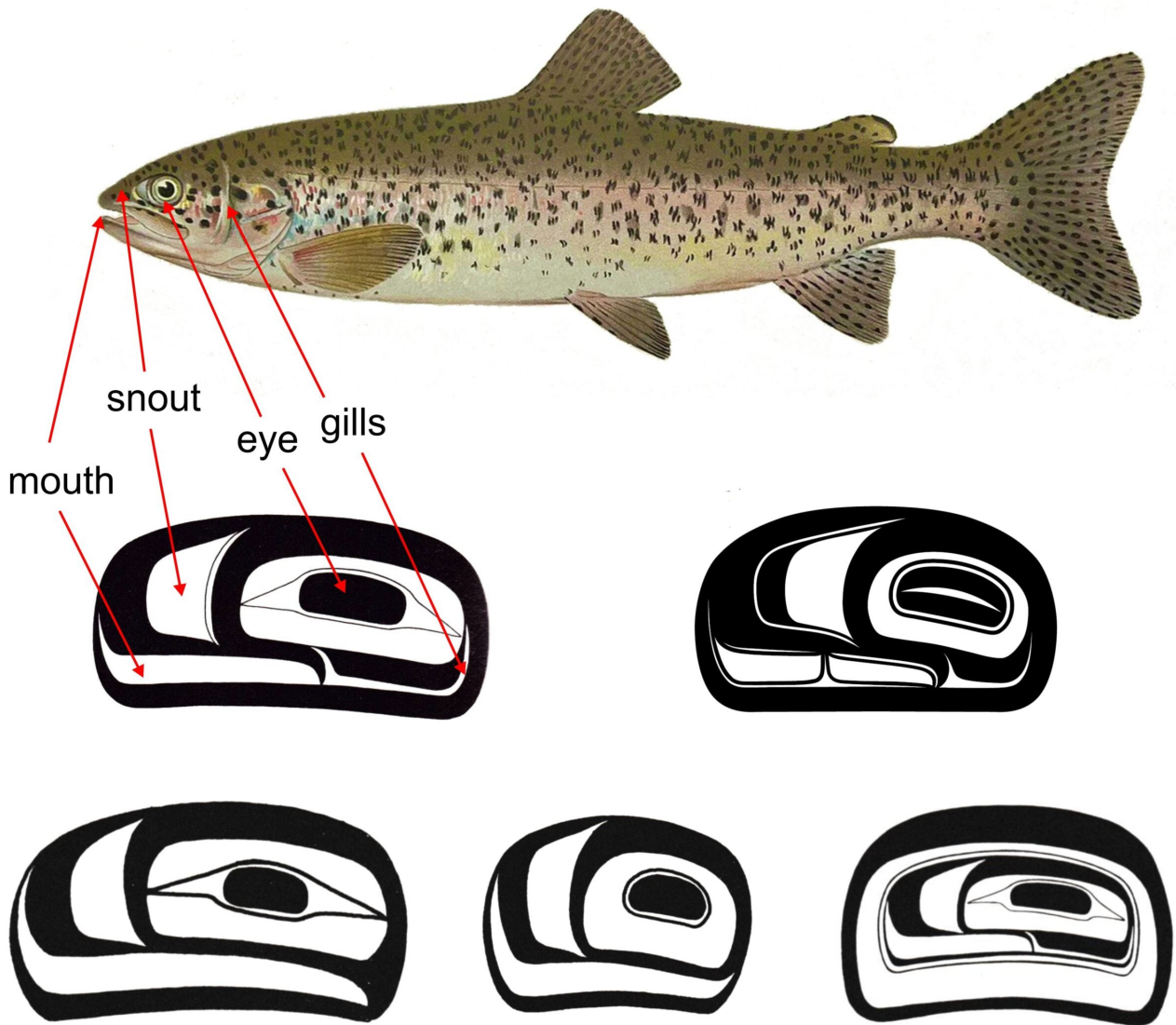
A basic feature of Northwest Coast art is the "formline." This is used to construct the basic design and to outline the anatomy of the subject being represented. The formline is typically black, but occasionally red. The formline varies in thickness, often tapering at junctions between major parts of the overall form.

The spaces within the formline can be filled with various forms that represent details, such as eyes and mouths, or that simply fill in the outlined spaces. These forms can be black or red depending on the importance of the detail. Sometimes a third color (usually blue-green) or cross-hatching is used for forms of lesser importance. Some spaces may be outlined by thin lines.

Various forms are shown below. Probably the most important form is the ovoid. Various theories have been proposed for the original source of this form. My preferred idea is that it represents a salmon egg resting on a surface. The U-Form is likely derived from one half of the ovoid. The trigone probably comes from extending the U-Form out into a third point. The bottom of the illustration shows examples of how an eye and a feather can be composed from the simpler forms. The thin lines in the eye represent the eyelids.



One common complex form is called the “salmon trout head.” Its derivation and various examples are illustrated below. The print of the steelhead salmon (also known as a salmon trout) was made in 1900 by Sherman Denton. Although it can represent an actual salmon head, the form is also used for other structures such as the joints of limbs, the palms of hands and the fins of fishes.



Three general rules are often (but not always) used in the overall design. The first rule is to fill the space, be it a rectangular box, or a circular drum. The second rule is to keep the forms symmetrical. The third is to include forms within forms in a recursive manner.

Robert Davidson closely studied the forms and designs on some of the old bentwood boxes. Two of his early serigraphs from 1969 were *Sea Bear Box Front* and *Sea Bear Box Back*. These designs do not represent a specific bentwood box, but rather illustrate the general idea of such boxes. The following illustration below (right) shows *Sea Bear Box Back*. In the belly of the monster can be seen an upside-down *Kugann Jaad*, or mouse woman, with two large eyes and a smiling mouth. The

previously described *Great Box* also shows this feature. *Kugann Jaad*, who is able to shape-shift between mouse and woman, acts as an intermediary between human beings and the supernatural, and makes sure things happen as they should (e.g. Harris & Tait, 1976). Features of *Kugann Jaad* are also shown at the top of the Davidson's design between the two ears of the monster. The illustration compares the Davidson print (on the right) to an actual bentwood box in the Canadian Museum of History:



The Davidson print shows the monster with hands on its forelimbs and flippers (with salmon-head centers) on its hind limbs. Within each ear is a representation of a human face seen in profile: eyebrow, eye, nostril and mouth.

In 1975 Davidson published the following print in bentbox format: *Raven with a Broken Beak*. A famous Haida story tells how the great shape-shifter Raven, when playing in the form of a salmon, was captured on a fisherman's hook, and broke his beak trying to escape (Reid & Bringhurst, 1984).



The break in the beak is shown by the circle in the center of the print. The Raven, like many supernatural being has double eyes. In the bottom corners of the print are the Raven's wings with the joint between wing and body represented by a variant of the salmon trout head. In the Raven's mouth are representations of human faces: the Raven is able to talk to human beings.

For the opening of the Bent Box Gallery in Vancouver in 1978, Davidson produced a print entitled *Bent Box Design*. The central section of the serigraph is effectively a self-portrait. The outer persona is represented in black formlines. In the lower body the inner artist is outlined in red formlines.



## Four Circles

In 1977, Davidson brought out a set of four small (20 by 20 cm) prints: *Raven*, *Eagle*, *Whale*, and *Frog*. Each print portrayed the essential features of the creature within the bounds of the circular form.

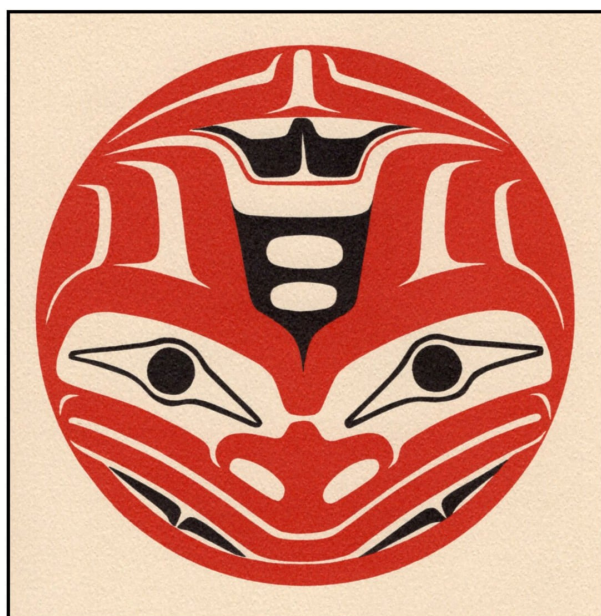
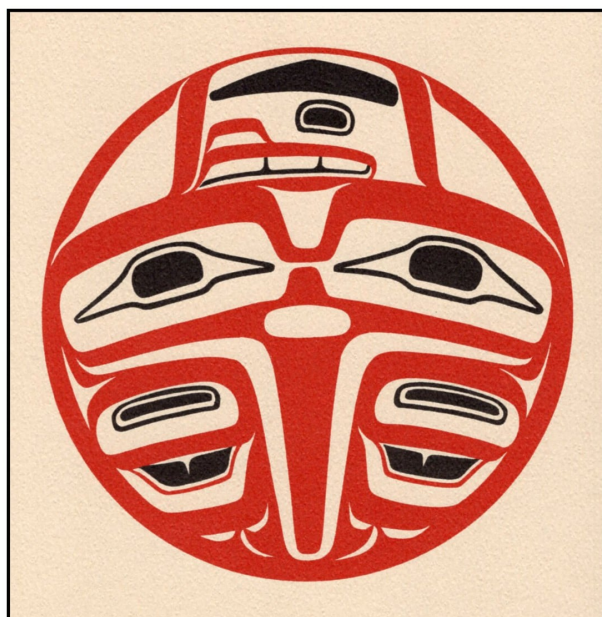
Raven is the great transformer, able to change between bird and human forms. In the print this is shown by the small human face at the top of its head. Another characteristic of Raven is the broken beak that it suffered when, in the form of a salmon, it was hooked by fishermen. In the print the broken

beak lies between the two wings.

Eagle is seen in profile. In the print the characteristic down-curved beak is placed between the head and wing. The ovoid in the upper beak represents the bird's nostril.

Whale is depicted with its large mouth between the head and the two pectoral fins. At the right, the large circle represents the blowhole. Unlike the other prints of this set, this is composed mainly in black.

The lower half of the frog print shows the face of Frog, with its large toothless mouth, big eyes and nostrils. The upper half shows the body in black and the limbs in red.



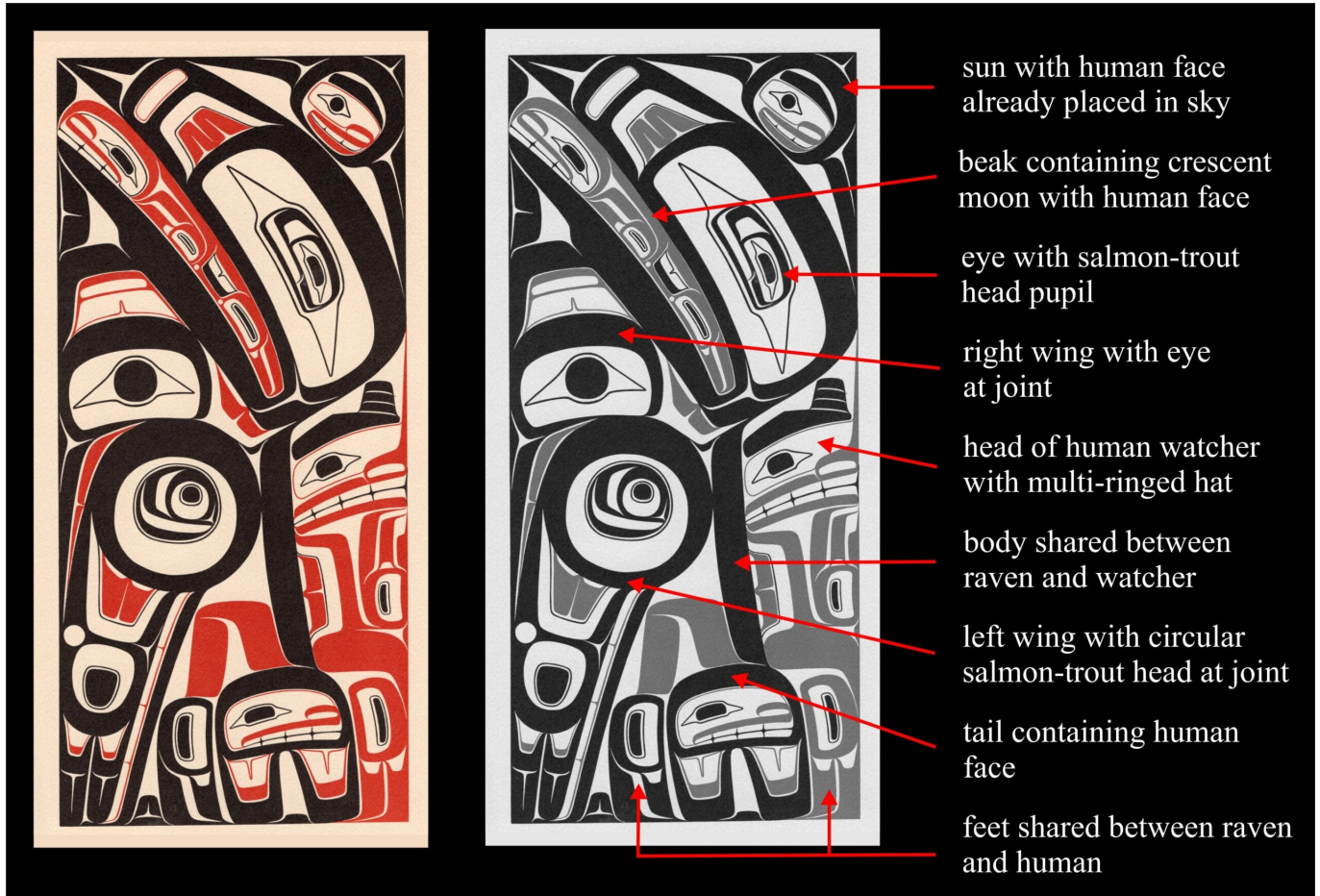
## **Raven Stealing the Light**

One of the most famous stories of Raven is that he stole the sun and the moon from the Old Man, who kept them hidden in a box for his daughter to play with. The curious Raven transformed himself into the form of a young boy and became part of the Old Man's household. The Ravenchild asked the Old Man if he could hold the lights, but for a long while the Old Man refused. When at last the Old Man relented, Raven stole

the bright lights, flew through the smokehole of the Old Man's house, and ultimately released the sun, moon and stars into a world that had before been completely dark. The Old Man was upset over the loss of his precious lights, but he looked around

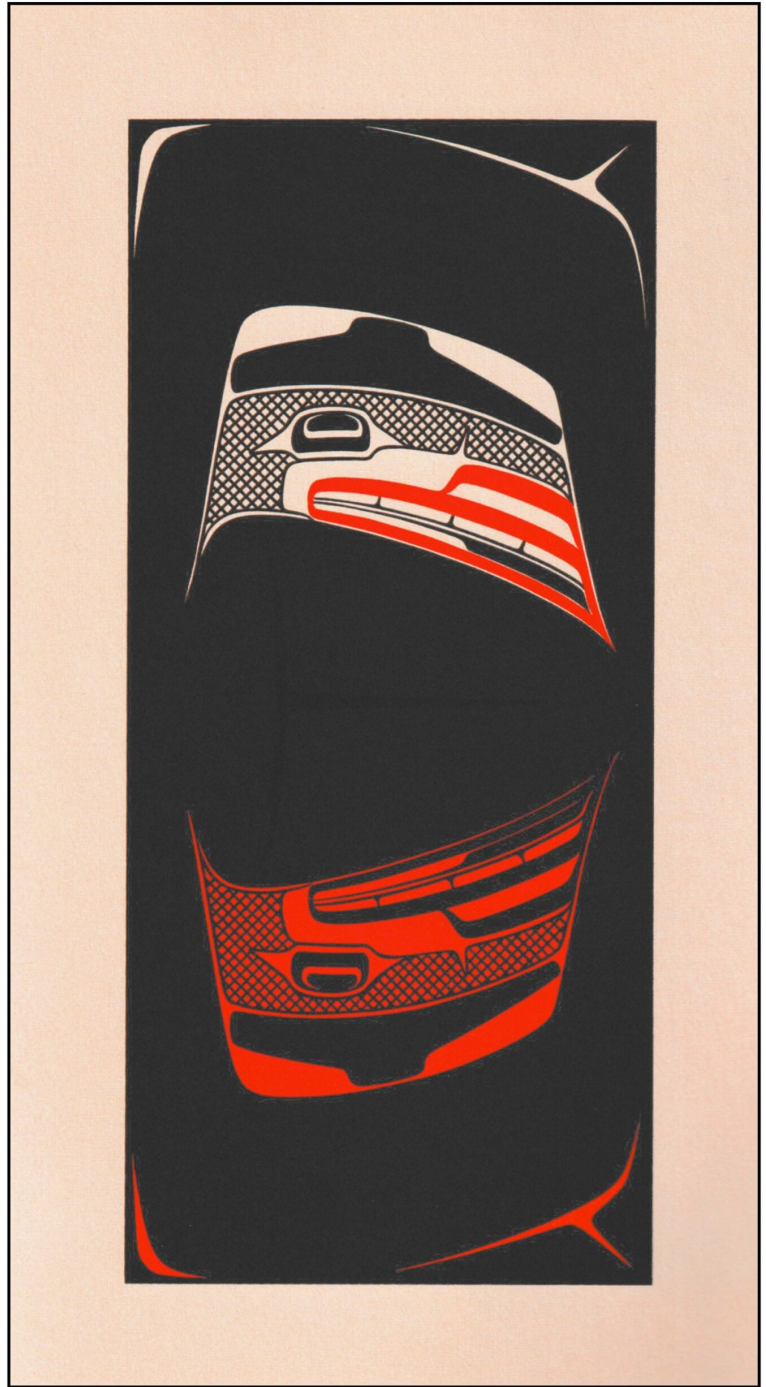
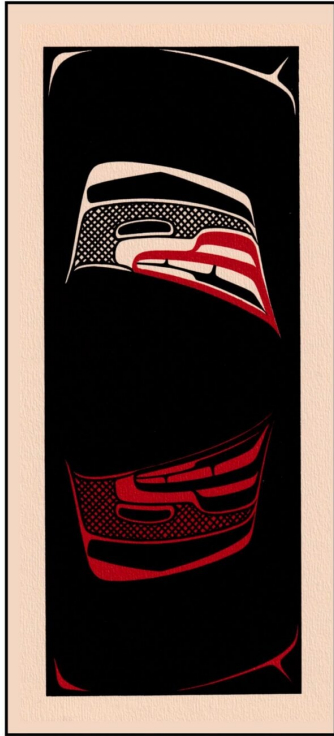
and for the first time saw his daughter, who had been quietly sitting during all this time, completely bewildered by the rush of events. The old man saw that she was as beautiful as the fronds of a hemlock against a spring sky at sunrise, and he began to feel a little better. (Reid & Bringham, 1984, p 17).

In 1977 Davidson created a print that told the story: *Raven Stealing the Moon* (Stewart, 1979a, p 37). The print shows Raven releasing the moon; the sun is already in the sky at the upper right. It is difficult to be sure of what is represented by the human figure on the lower right. This may be the Old Man, a chief of the Haida people, who stand to benefit from Raven's thievery, or a human watchman observing the supernatural happenings.



## Reflections

In 1975, Davidson printed a small (10 by 22 cm) Christmas card entitled *Negative and Positive* (below left). The upper image of a human face in profile was inverted and repeated on a red background below. In 1977 he reworked the earlier image to make a larger (32 by 57 cm) print entitled *Reflections* (below right). The face was made more detailed: the eye has taken on eyelid forms, and there are more teeth. The most intriguing aspect of the new print is the split-U form that is overprinted in red on the black center of the print. The fold between object and representation, between reality and imagination. This subtle addition is almost impossible to see on reproductions:



## Eagle

In 1979, the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology presented *Cycles*, an exhibition of Davidson's graphic work. Davidson produced a special print *Eagle* for the exhibition. An outer black Eagle contains an inner red Frog. These two are interconnected: the red beak of the Eagle forms

the hindlimbs of the Frog and the red tail of the Eagle forms the mouth of the Frog.



The following is Marjorie Halpin's description of the print (Halpin, 1979, p10) with a quotation from Davidson in italics:

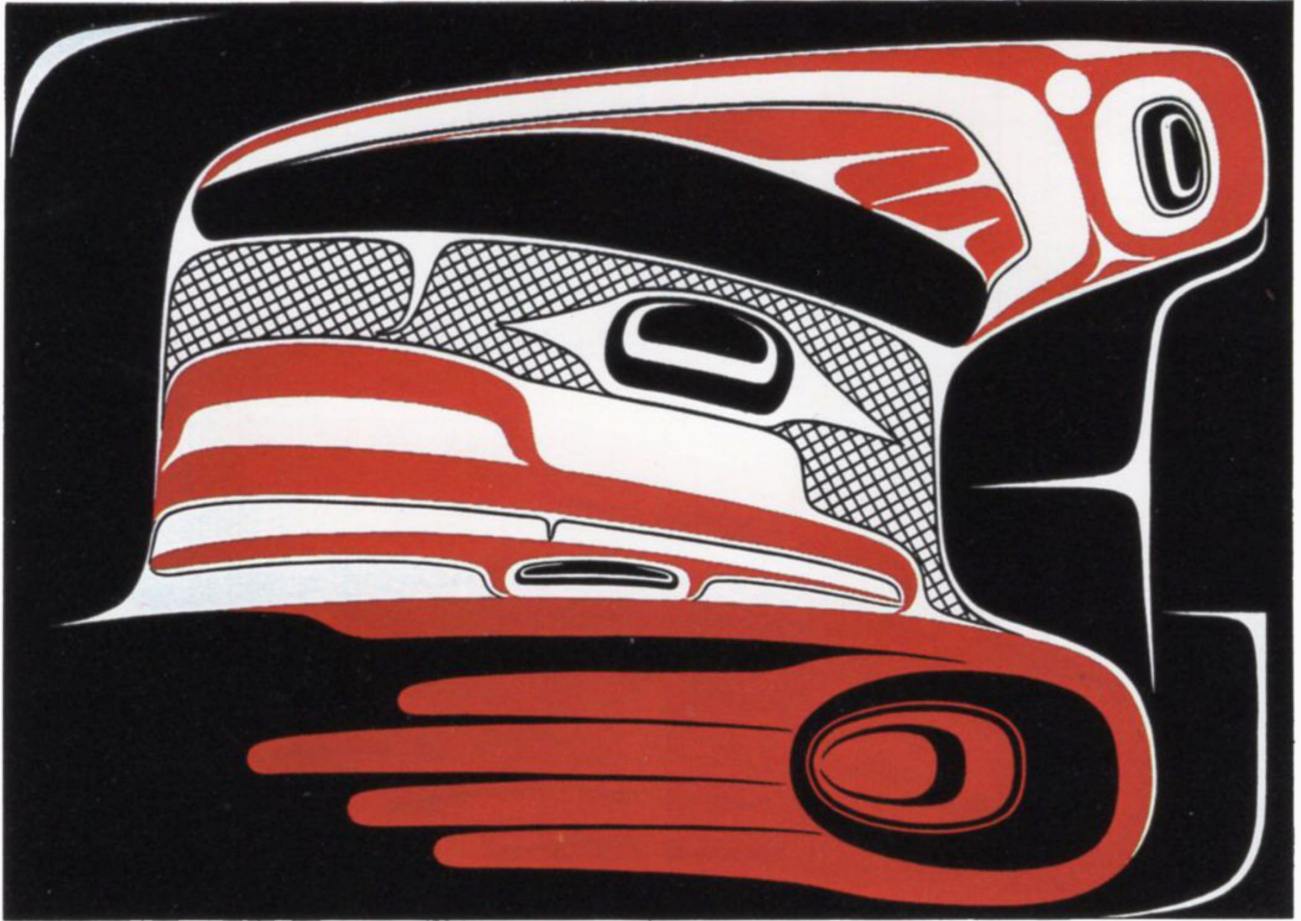
The eagle, shown in the outer black segment of the circle, is his outer person, his social self, that part of him that the world sees. In-side, the red middle circle. is the frog. *The inner self, the heart, the gut reaction. Love. This is the first time I allowed the feeling to show, to help the outside. Without the inner frog, the eagle isn't complete.*

*If you take the frog away, the eagle has no mouth.*

Although, at first look, the black outer eagle and the red inner frog seem sharply separated from each other, totally separate and distinct, there is continual interaction between them expressed by interpenetrating elements of each in the other. This is most obvious in the eagle's mouth, which is totally red and in the frog circle, but it occurs at even more subtle levels as well. The narrow black formline that connects the frog's eyes and completes the red circle, for example, is repeated in a white or negative formline in the black ovoid of the outer circle. These and other interpenetrations can be read as symbols of integration, of the combination of opposites, into a new unity or wholeness. We might call it a Haida yin/yang.

### **Forms within Forms**

The interpenetration of forms is clearly evident in a set of large prints from 1983. In *Ti-Silii-AA-Lis (Raven Finned Killer Whale)*, the details of Raven are placed in the form of the dorsal fin of a Killer Whale. At the bottom is a human hand (perhaps the human aspect of Raven) that could also be the pectoral fin of the whale.



*Wolf Inside Its Own Foot* uses a recursive design. The large wolf is located within the overall black form of its foot. And a smaller red wolf is located within the form of the large wolf's foot:



## Thunderbird

The Thunderbird is a supernatural being common to the myths of many North American indigenous people. This all-powerful deity created thunder by flapping its wings and lightning by flashing its eyes. The Thunderbird has a large crest (often coiled) on the top of its head, which gives it power. Early in his career, Davidson produced a beautiful traditional print of *Thunderbird* (1979). Within the body of the Thunderbird is represented a Woodpecker in red formlines (below left). In 2006, Davidson created a large acrylic painting of *Hiilang (Thunderbird)*. The design is stripped to its essentials; the crest on the head, the eye, the wing, the body, leg and talons (below right). The representation has become almost abstract. When the canvas was stretched the lower edge which had been painted green became part of the image (Wyatt, 2022, p 19). The green stripe provided a gentle ground for the stark image, and was maintained for the serigraphic reproductions.



## Bird in the Air

Over the past twenty years, Davidson's prints have become more and more abstract. The print *Bird in the Air* (2016) places an ovoid representation of an eagle within a large yellow trigone form that may represent the eagle's beak, the ovoid being the nostril (below right). The illustration below shows the print together with two photographs of the eagle:



Davidson has been intrigued by the concept of “Bird in the Air” and how this seems to encapsulate the spirit of the Haida. The following illustration shows a recent small aluminum sculpture entitled *Bird in the Air* (2013, 28 cm high) by Davidson, and compares it to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century silver bracelet carved by Davidson’s great-grandfather Charles Edenshaw (Wright & Augaitis, 2013, p 144).

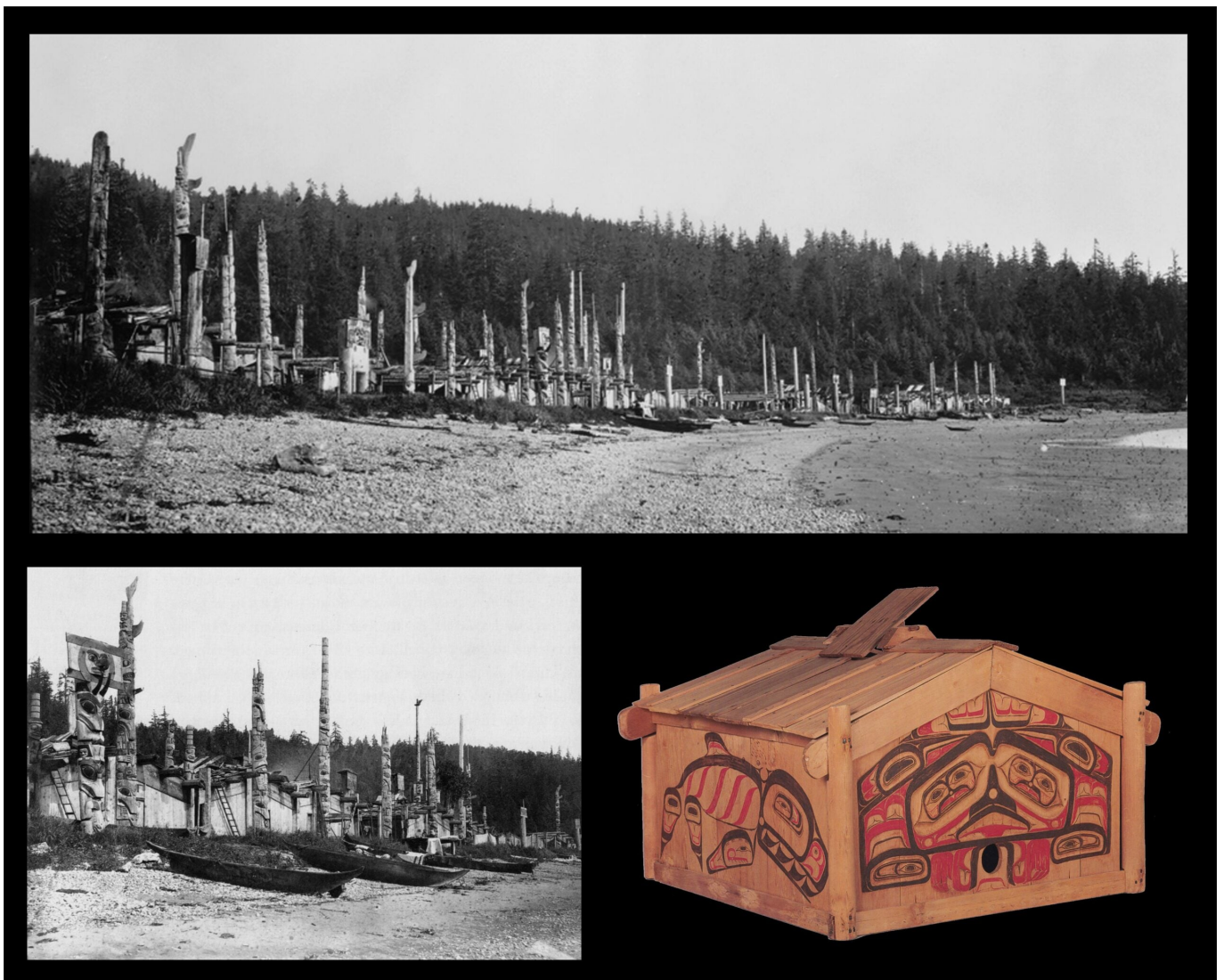
## **The Recent History of the Haida People**

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, it is estimated that the Haida population was somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 people. The first recorded encounter between the Haida and Europeans was in 1774 when the ship of the Spanish explorer Juan Perez anchored outside Haida Gwaii and was visited by Haida canoes. In 1787, the British captain George Dixon traded with the Haida for sea-otter furs. He named the islands after Queen Charlotte, the wife of George III. Subsequently, the Haida interacted with European whalers and fur traders. In this way the Haida came into possession of European tools and weapons. Shortly after gold was discovered on Haida Gwaii in 1850, the Canadian government annexed the Queen Charlotte Islands.

In 1862, a passenger infected with smallpox arrived in Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island. This center for the fur trade later became city of Victoria, British Columbia. The disease spread rapidly through the indigenous people of the Northwest, many of whom had travelled to Vancouver Island to trade. Although the white colonizers protected themselves by vaccinations and quarantine procedures, the government did not make these measures available to the indigenous people. Instead, they burned indigenous settlements where the infection had broken out, and forced the Haida to retreat back to Haida Gwaii. By 1881, the Haida population had been reduced to below 1000 people (Macdonald, 1996, p 223, estimates that it may have been as low as 500 by 1900).

In 1876, Christian missionaries arrived on Haida Gwaii. They thought the totem poles represented idols rather than family histories and urged the Haida to destroy them or risk not going to heaven. Together the church and the government outlawed the Potlatch ceremonies (Davidson& Davidson, 2013), and set up the Indian Residential School System.

The first photographs of the Haida Gwaii settlements were taken by George Dawson in 1878. Even at that early date many of the buildings were unoccupied, and many of the poles were mortuary poles rather than simple totems. By the time of Chicago World Fair in 1893, only a few buildings remained. One building and several totem poles from Skidegate were dismantled and taken to the fair. Several Haida artists were commissioned to make models of the other houses at Skidegate (Wright 2024). These models remain; the original buildings are no more. The following illustration show two of Dawson's original photographs of Skidegate, and a modern photograph of one of the house models that was displayed at the fair:



Despite ravaging disease and cultural genocide, the Haida people have survived. In 2010 the islands reverted to their

indigenous name Haida Gwaii (Islands of the Haida). Today the Haida form a thriving cultural community. The population is now about 5000.

The survival of Haida culture is in part due to the tenacity and creativity of their artists. In 1969, Robert Davidson erected the first new pole in Masset in over 90 years: the 12-meter *Bear Mother Pole*. In 1978 Bill Reid erected the 16-meter *Dogfish Pole* in Skidegate. The following illustration shows on the left a totem in front of a derelict house in Kayung as photographed by Richard Maynard in 1884. The remaining people from Kayung on the east side of Masset Inlet had by then moved to the nearby village of Masset. The pole is presently in the British Museum. The middle totem is the *Bear Mother Pole* from 1969 and the right is the *Dogfish Pole* from 1978.



The serigraph technique initially used by Robert Davidson to present Haida designs, has become widespread among Haida artists. Their prints provide an easy way for the Haida to

preserve the images of their culture, and to proclaim its beauty to the rest of the world.

Some sense of the Davidson's determination can be found in an address that he gave on Haida Culture in 1991 (reprinted in Augaitis, 2006, pp 48-55). The following paragraphs are from the beginning and the end of that address:

We call ourselves *Xaadaa 7Iaa Isiss*, "The Good People." The common derivative has become "Haida People." We are the survivors of a once proud and prosperous nation who enjoyed the fruits, beauty, and magic of the place we call Haida Gwaii. Our philosophy has been to be generous and hospitable to the new people who we came to call the *Yaats Xaadee*, "Iron People." The arrival of outsiders began a time of great change in our history, our values and our outlook on life. We have suffered great losses since the arrival of the *Yaats Xaadee*, of our population, cultural knowledge, and especially our self-esteem, our sense of identity; members of a whole generation were denied their own cultural values. There have been many changes, some of them good, and some from which we are still recovering. ...

The next thing we need to reclaim is our language. Language holds insights and philosophies of our culture. It will add to the foundation we are rebuilding, as a nation, from the frustrations that came through my parents' generation, from the experiences they lived through as children. It can come only from us as Haida People. The benefits we gain can only come from the efforts we put into reclaiming our ancestral values. Our forefathers had a position in the world, they had an understanding of their universe through generations of development. It is now time for us to regain our place in the world. It has been over two hundred years since the *Yaats Xaadee* first arrived on the shores of Haida Gwaii. This is a very short time in our development as a people. We have experienced many changes to date, we have suffered great losses, we have survived many obstacles, we have

gained many new insights, but through it all our spirit is still alive. We cannot carry the burdens of confusion, self-abuse and lost identity anymore. It is our responsibility to pick up the pieces and mend them, to become whole again as a healthy, progressive, contributing and developing people.

## A Man of Many Talents

This essay has focused on Robert Davidson's serigraphs. He is also renowned for his carvings in argillite, silver jewelry, masks and carved poles (Stewart, 1979b; Thom, 1993; Steltzer, 1994; Rhyne, 1998; Davidson website). The following illustration shows an argillite carving with figures of bear, raven and eagle from top to bottom (height 18 cm), a silver bracelet with Beaver design, a Bear mask and the 1989 pole *Breaking the Totem Barrier* (height 6 meters).



## Hope

We can conclude with a recent print entitled *Hope* (2024). This has become almost completely abstract although one can sense the feathers (below). It represents an idea rather than a creature. The print may refer to the poem by Emily Dickinson, written around 1861:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chillest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.

Emily Dickinson



Robert Davidson

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Wyatt, G. (2022). *Echoes of the supernatural: the graphic art of Robert Davidson*. Figure.1.