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Preserving the Past and Shaping the Future:

What a Spindle Whorl Can Tell Us about Balancing Ancient History with Contemporary Narratives

The intent of this paper is to explore the various layers of meaning within Aaron Nelson-Moody's "Squamish Whorl" which is currently on display at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in the "Here and Now: Native Artists Inspired" exhibit. It is not the intent of this paper to insert meaning into the piece, but to reveal the layers of meaning already encoded. Additionally, I intend to situate the piece within a larger cultural context, and discuss the potential impact and implications that can result from an exhibit such as the "Here and Now" exhibit. I would like to dedicate some space in my paper to acknowledge and thank the artist for his willingness to share his stories and inspiration with me as I conducted my research. His confidence and bravery to confront, as bell hooks puts it, "The over-riding fear [that] ... the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten" assured me as I stepped outside of my own matrix in attempt to better understand those different and similar to me; and for that I am grateful (hooks 39).

The Story of Copperman

Copperman came to the Squamish people in an extraordinary fashion. One day four powerful beings, the Hai, were walking through the woods and they saw this giant ring of copper roll down the hill in front of them. It was crashing through the bushes and the woods, it rolled

right past them, and then a tremendous wind came and blew it back up the hill. The Hai were stunned by it, it was so beautiful, shining in the sunlight, this beautiful copper. So they went closer and they saw it roll down again and this wind blew it back up the hill. They followed it up and saw that Windman was playing with this big piece of copper. The Hai were so stunned by the beauty of the ring that they decided to try to take it. By some crazy scheme they managed to steal it away from Windman and get away with it. This copper was so beautiful and the Hai were so inspired by it that they hammered it out into the shape of a human being. Once it was in human form they breathed a spirit into it. Copperman possessed all of the best qualities of human beings: he was brave, generous, kind, and strong. The Hai then brought Copperman to the Squamish people and left him with them to inspire them and show them an example of a good man.

Stories and oral traditions are extremely important to the maintenance and furtherance of native cultures. As a means of recording history, educating, and establishing a worldview or cultural framework, understanding the use and functions of stories is crucial to understanding the role of art in Native communities. Native art is used to tell a narrative that is, many times, opposed to what is offered via the mainstream. Aaron Nelson-Moody, the artist who reproduced “Squamish Spindle Whorl” (Figure 2 pictured below inspired by Figure 3), shared the story of Copperman with me during our interview. This story is one example of a layer of meaning and a knowledge system encoded within his piece that is not readily visible or known to most outside of the Squamish culture. The act of sharing the story represents another layer of meaning in and of itself. Extensive research into every layer of meaning would expand this paper beyond its limits, however each of the various layers of meaning encoded within this piece that I focus on –

the spindle whorl as tool, the spindle whorl as art, the spindle whorl as worldview, and the spindle whorl as commentary – reveal and exemplify an Indigenous knowledge system.

The Squamish Nation

A bit of background is necessary to orient the piece within a geographical, cultural, and historical context. Nelson-Moody is a member of the Squamish Nation, part of the Coast Salish



Figure 1 (Brotherton)

tribe that extends as far south as the Puget Sound and continues North through Canada. The Squamish reside in what is present day British Columbia. Traditionally and currently, Squamish peoples have used the abundant surrounding natural resources such as cedar trees, mountain goat fur, and metals to create tools, build homes and canoes, and create art. The surrounding natural elements such as salmon, eulachon, and birds are commonly depicted on tools, house posts, woven into

blankets, baskets, and clothing, and spindle whorls. The use and influence of the surrounding environment is common and hugely important throughout the Coast Salish tradition. Yet and still, each nation has been able to find its own unique identity in the subtle differences amongst the group.

While the Squamish are part of the Coast Salish group, the diversity of languages is one example of the diversity and unique development of each nation. The term “Coast Salish” refers to the language family and the cultural groups that speak or spoke those languages, including the more than two dozen separate languages and dialects (Burke Museum). The story goes that “the Creator walked around the world, distributing languages from a large cedar basket. When he got

to our [Coast Salish] lands, he turned the basket over and spilled out all the languages he had left” (Joseph 15). However, until very recently, those languages and dialects were not written down but different nations found unity in their surroundings, experiences and stories. Specifically through art, Coast Salish artists are able to visually communicate where written communication would have failed.

Lastly, because Coast Salish people rely heavily on oral traditions, the art is used to capture the history of the Coast Salish in order to pass it down to later generations. Rather than looking to the narratives created for them, such as Ashwell’s explanation of the arrival and use of “Exciting metals such as brass, silver, and copper, [which] were also available from the traders... some of the ladies mounting five or six [pieces] on one ankle!” Indigenous communities can tell their own history through art (21). Contemporary Native art can and is used to intervene into mainstream narratives riddled with misconceptions and stereotypes. Traditional and contemporary Native art encodes language diversity, material and technical knowledge, cultural heritage, stories of origin, and so much more. Native art has historically been used to subvert the dominant narrative and artists like Nelson-Moody continue to do so today.

The spindle whorls depicted below are indicative the Coast Salish style in a number of ways including in design, form, function, and meaning. Mimi Gardner Gates stated that “Central to the Coast Salish culture is the practice of ritually and artistically honoring the gifts (s’abadeb) of the earth, of the ancestors, of the spirit world, of family, and of the artists and culture-bearers who uphold age-old responsibilities of re-presenting those teachings in visual art, story, song, and speech” (Brotherton vi). As a “culture-bearer” Nelson-Moody uses his art to tell the stories of his people and apply these ancient stories to the contemporary moment.



Figure 2 (Burke Museum)



Figure 3 (Burke Museum)

Spindle Whorl as Tool

The first layer of meaning lies in the functionality of the object. As mentioned in our interview, Nelson-Moody described the two ways that he viewed the original whorl: first as strictly an art piece or “decorative motif” and secondly as functional tool (Nelson-Moody). The decorative nature of the design as consisting of traditional Coast Salish artistic elements and as representing Coast Salish life is discussed below, but the significance of the spindle whorl as a tool exemplifies specific aspects of Indigenous Knowledge. Nelson-Moody stated that the way he was “taught about our [Coast Salish]



Figure 4 (Burke Museum)

work is that first of all it has a function. It has to work to fulfill that function” (Nelson-Moody). Spindle whorls, in Coast Salish culture, are used to weave the wool needed to make beautiful blankets, clothing, and other items. The whorl, as shown in Figure 4, would be used as a weight and placed at either the top or the bottom of a needle, depending on the type of wool that the weaver wanted to make. The whorl itself would be used to keep the needle spinning so that the weaver could create balls and balls of wool, usually from mountain goat fur as mountain goats

are indigenous to the area. Spindle whorls were remarkably uniform in size and weight and were quite numerous in the various Coast Salish communities. The spindle whorl came as part of a tool kit that included the whorl, a spindle, a comb, and a tension ring among other items. Usually, the men would carve the spindle whorls and present them to women as a sign of appreciation and value for their weavings (Nelson-Moody). The original Squamish whorl was used in the method described and is part of not only a culturally significant practice but a technically sophisticated practice that is important to the life of Coast Salish people, creating garments that would keep them warm in the cold months and represent familial relations and the skills of the weaver.

Spindle Whorl as Art

The next layer of meaning that can be found within this piece is in the traditional style and characteristics of the design, or as a “decorative motif.” Characteristics of what Blanchard and Davenport describe as “proto-Northwest Coast tradition” includes three main elements: the circle, the crescent and the trigon (13). Within both the original spindle whorl (Figure 3) and the contemporary spindle whorl (Figure 2) each of these elements is present. In the circular nature of the spindle and hole within the spindle through which the needle would run, the crescents that outline the numerous fish on the perimeter, and the trigons that denote the gills of the fish. A fourth additional element, outline, is characteristic of Coast Salish art as well. Exemplified by the human form in the center of both of the spindle whorls, Michael Kew described the outline form as a “combination of sculpture and engraving” that within the pair of spindle whorls creates an interesting juxtaposition of negative and positive space (Brotherton 158). Parts of the spindle whorl are divided into levels in which part of the design appears raised as if it were coming out from the background (positive space) while other parts of the design appear carved into the

material (negative space). Traditional carvers used that combination of the sculpture and engraving that Kew described in wood, however, Nelson-Moody was able to create a similar effect using a technique called repousse in which the design was hammered out from backside of the piece of copper. The strength of the hammering created various levels, positive and negative, of the design within the piece of copper. The pair of spindle whorls not only showcase two different artistic techniques but also represent a specific artistic style with defining characteristics.

These characteristic design elements differ from the formline style that defines the northern style of Native art as determined by Bill Holm. Blanchard and Davenport explain that

Formlines, as defined by the northern style and described by Holm, simply don't exist in the Coast Salish design tradition, though some writers on the subject have attempted to apply the term. There does exist a continuous "net" or positive design field, pierced flowing patterns by the negative element, but it does not possess the consistent types of conventionalized design shapes that are so characteristic of northern-style work, for which the term "formline" was created (Blanchard and Davenport 13).

As apparent in the spindle whorls, the thick dark lines that would segregate the different aspects of the piece if it were in the formline tradition are notably absent. In Coast Salish work in general, the formline technique is not used deferring instead to the outline form to create different sections in the piece. This deviation from the widely-known formline style speaks to the unique nature of Coast Salish design as well and the particularly unique nature of this pair of spindle whorls. It is these subtle differences that create the beautiful variety within Native art and

again establishes a layer of meaning that, while it may be readily visible, takes prior knowledge to understand.

Lastly, Coast Salish art can be characterized in terms of how the designs fit within the space onto which they are carved. Again, as Blanchard and Davenport explain, Bill Holm describes the difference between designs that *prioritize the shapes* of the depicted creatures over the space in which they must fit and designs that *adapt the shapes* of the depicted creatures to the space in which they must fit as “distributive” and “configurative” respectively (15 emphasis added). As can be seen within the original and contemporary spindle whorls, the fish and human forms are not adapted to fit within the space of the whorl, the fish bodies extend beyond the perimeter and the human form maintains its size and shape throughout. These designs would therefore be considered “distributive” in nature.

The different artistic elements of the design, technique, and Coast Salish characteristics offer just one way to look at the spindle whorls. Compared with the other pieces in the “Here and Now” exhibit, Nelson-Moody’s repousse spindle whorl is more of a direct translation that follows in the footsteps and Coast Salish tradition that came long before him, preserving ancient knowledge and keeping historical understanding alive in the contemporary moment.

Spindle Whorl as Worldview

Expanding upon the design elements that make up the Coast Salish aesthetic, each element holds meaning within the worldview of Northern Coast Natives. According to Cordova worldviews are views that are shared within a culture and the foundation of an understanding of the world, humans in the world and humans’ roles in the world (61). For example, the outline element of the design is used as a way to connect all of the other elements of the design. The

human form outline in the middle of the spindle whorls is the lynchpin to each of the different elements that surround it and helps to maintain continuity throughout the design. In the spindle whorls the human form functions as a signifier of the relationship between human beings and non-human beings as understood in the Coast Salish worldview. The “Coast Salish people view themselves as being interconnected with and part of everything...The idea that human beings are but a small part of the larger fabric of the universe” (Brotherton 43). The human form in the center is “interconnected” with the surrounding fish, part of the landscape. Further, the fish that surround the human form are believed by the artist to be eulachon, a small sardine-like fish that was plentiful in the environment, and not salmon as many other people believe they are. Salmon are commonly depicted in Coast Salish pieces, however they are traditionally carved differently than how the fish in the original whorl are carved. The Squamish have stories about the eulachon fish and the fish were so plentiful that they traded with it, as if it were “Indian gold” (Nelson-Moody). The deviation from traditional salmon carving technique would fit this particular design element and would highlight the importance of these particular fish to the Coast Salish community in the Coast Salish worldview.

Additionally, the circle is used “as a prominent design element in traditional Coast Salish art because it represents unity and centrality” (Brotherton 43). Next, the crescent shape “is better understood by traditional Coast Salish people as phases, such as phases of life or phases of the moon” (Brotherton 45). Lastly, and most interestingly, the trigons represent a variety of different aspects of Coast Salish belief but mainly the four points within the trigon represent the fact that “four is a ritual number: there are four major directions, four seasons, and four stages of life” (Brotherton 47). As yet another layer of meaning, the spindle whorls exemplify a specific understanding and knowledge of the world for the Coast Salish people. As a result, a specific

artistic style influenced by the environment, capturing the history of the Coast Salish people, and determined by a specific worldview all come together to produce this set of spindle whorls to be displayed at the “Here and Now” exhibit and instigate conversation on a variety of levels.

Spindle Whorl as Commentary

The spindle whorl, as previously mentioned, exposes a particular worldview. Nelson-Moody’s spindle whorls reveal a particular worldview and an associated knowledge system that has survived for “millennia, even while undergoing major social upheavals as a result of transformative forces beyond their control. (Barnhardt and Kawagley 9). Indigenous communities have been subject to the disease, genocide, displacement, and nearly complete destruction of their culture and entire ways of being. As a final layer of meaning, the spindle whorls exemplify the legacy of the Squamish people that lives on in the community today, the stories of the past that are being told in the present. Stories that open up conversation and challenge mainstream narratives that have been told for centuries.

The presentation of the Squamish worldview serves as a spark for conversation when people with a differing worldview happen across it. For example, when I first looked at the pair of spindle whorls, I was not sure which whorl was the original and which was the recreation. At that time I had no understanding of what a spindle whorl was or what it was used for. I was looking at the pieces through the “lens of [my] own culture” (Brothers 178). In trying to fit the whorls into my own understanding, I nearly missed an opportunity to challenge my worldview. This expression of worldview through art can serve an opportunity to learn for the community that observes it and as a means of healing for the community from which the art comes. As Cordova explains “Where there is no awareness of competing matrices, there is no awareness of the possibility of differing, equally valid ways of being” (64). In order to reconcile past wrong

doings and balance ancient history with contemporary narratives, this cultural exchange is critical. Displays of artwork and exploration of the layered meanings offer a safe space through which to conduct that cultural exchange and, as Nelson-Moody puts it, “brings them a step closer as human beings” (Nelson-Moody).

Nelson-Moody’s spindle whorl, as a function of appearing in a museum, also serves as a legitimization of Indigenous knowledge and has larger implications for Natives as well as non-Native communities. Barnhardt and Kawagley state that “By documenting the integrity of locally situated cultural knowledge and skills ... Indigenous people engage in a form of self-determination that will not only benefit themselves but will also open opportunities to better understand learning in all its manifestations” (20). Applied to the context of art, Nelson-Moody’s spindle whorl and the “Here and Now” exhibit as a whole allow the participating artists to take some control over a narrative that has been assigned to them. They are able to practice self-determination by contributing their pieces to a larger conversation about authenticity and what it means to be a modern Indian. They are able to legitimate Indigenous knowledge via a space that welcomes learning and exploration of diverse perspectives. This layer of meaning is significant because it speaks to the overall effect of visual communication, to leave a lasting imprint on the viewer’s mind and cause the viewer to question what they think they already know. This contemporary understanding aids in the process of “Acknowledging ways [that] the desire for pleasure... informs our politics, our understanding of difference, [so that] we may know better how desire disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible.” (hooks 39). This contemporary understanding helps us to step outside of our matrices and acknowledge varied and valid ways of knowing.

Conclusion

The final layer of meaning returns to the story of the Copperman. For the artist, this exhibit not only represented an opportunity to learn from the teachers he never had, but to make a statement about how the ancient traditions of the Squamish can and do inform his decisions today. By translating the original whorl so directly Aaron preserves the traditional style, he participates in the transfer of knowledge, and he also utilizes the knowledge in a contemporary way. The stories of the past run deep within his artwork and are revealed through various layers of artistic, cultural, functional, historical, and geographical meaning. Through his art, Nelson-Moody is able to preserve the past and shape the future. The material used to create the contemporary spindle whorl holds a measure of significance to the artist and he explains it best:

I like this story a lot because it talks about some of the qualities that man is supposed to possess and it talks about the supernatural world, but in particular I like it because it talks about us working copper. There's a lot of people on the coast who will show up with a book in their hand and say "you people never had any metal," but some of the first recorded uses of metal anywhere in the world are aboriginal people here using copper so I wanted to depict that when I translated that spindle whorl at the Burke. I used copper because that's from our old stories we worked in copper, we made forms out of copper, copper was extremely valuable so when I made that piece that's how I thought of doing it.

This is what a spindle whorl can tell us about balancing ancient history with contemporary narratives. There is still so much that the past can teach us that we can unknowingly overlook, but exploring Native art allows us all the opportunity to look beyond the surface, to question our assumptions and decisions, and the leave our

matrices. By examining this pair spindle whorls in terms of function, artistic style, as representative of a worldview, and as commentary not only is an Indigenous knowledge system revealed but it is experienced.

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