

Women's Work: Art of the First Women at Out of the Mist Gallery

716 View St. 250-480-4930 outofthemistgallery.com Until Dec. 24



'First women' created everyday art

By Robert Amos, Times Colonist November 29, 2009

Detail of a Chilkat blanket at the

Out of the Mist Gallery in Victoria, B.C.

November 2009

Photograph by: Handout, Times Colonist

Out of the Mist is a gallery dedicated to North American native art, focusing on the Pacific Northwest. The current exhibit shines a light on "art of the first women." Owner Thomas Stark told me, "I didn't realize how much of the work in my gallery was made by women."

During the next hour, with passion and a wealth of information, Stark introduced me to button blankets, basketry and beadwork. We began with Salish weaving, where the pride of place is given to a huge 19th-century goat-hair blanket. Fully three metres wide, it was created at Coles Bay in Saanich, and is complete with the tools used to make it.

Next to it, a rugged loom from Pat Bay holds a coarsely woven blanket made from remarkably thick goat yarn. "To get the wool you had to kill the goat, or trail it to where it was calving," Stark reminded me, "and then prepare the wool, spin it and weave the wool." This was a

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project of at least one year.

More recently Mary Sam of Saanich knitted a sheep-wool blanket with a playful design of whales adapted from Cowichan sweater motifs. Nearby, a "Cowichan" poncho from the late '60s speaks volumes about the fashions of that era.

The most spectacular piece in the show is a Chilkat blanket with "diving whale" motif, woven by a Tlingit woman on the coast near Alaska in 1870 or earlier. Woven of goat wool, in part twined with cedar bark, this is one of the few Chilkat robes in private hands, though 300 or more are treasured in museums around the world. Chilkat weaving, done on a single bar loom, is fiendishly complex and delights in curved designs and "low relief" patterns. This treasure is in amazingly good condition.

Button blankets are the more common form of dancing robe. One of the six on show is clearly an old one, based on a faded green woollen blanket which bears holes from cinders and moths. A thunderbird, appliquéd in red, is picked out with antique Chinese mother-of-pearl buttons and a judicious sprinkling of sequins.

We next considered the relative merits of two blankets. One was a rather simple "thunderbird and mountain" blanket made by a Kwakwaka'wakw woman, Agnes Elfred, in about 1950, and the other a "thunderbird" blanket from the 1960s, with myriad tiny buttons and sequins imbricated in layers like fish scales. The amount of sparkle is certainly a matter of taste.

In passing we looked at a hooked rug showing a colourful "thunderbird and sisiutl" design. It is thought to be a creation of the Society for the Furtherance of Indian Arts and Welfare, founded in Victoria in 1940 by a British woman, Alice Ravenhill. This is cultural appropriation with a historical context.

Out of the Mist has a remarkable collection of baskets, the most dramatic of which is a burden basket from the Thomson River/Lillooet area circa 1850. It is of capacious size (20 inches deep) and finely crafted, the elegant patterning just discernible through signs of use. "It's a survivor," Stark commented.

A number of large storage baskets here, dating from the 1880s, have features that indicate they were made for Salish use rather than the tourist trade. Rounded corners, domed tops and heavy-duty handles took extra work to create but helped these heirlooms last longer. A lovely old cradle basket still has two sets of strings, one to hold the baby secure and the other to hold moss, which made a soft, disposable lining.

Protected in a glass case is a beaded headdress with "sisiutl" design attributed to Kwakwaka'wakw noblewoman Mary Ebbets Hunt (circa 1870). Such elaborate beadwork is rare on the coast, yet beadwork is the main form of artistic expression on the other side of the Rockies. The current show includes ravishing beadwork designs on moccasins by Sioux, Assiniboine and Blackfoot women. Of particular note is a James Bay Cree baby carrier with lovely steam-bent wooden frame and a gorgeous beaded wrapper for the baby.

There's much to see at Out of the Mist.