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CLIFF WILSON: A WOOD CUT ABOVE

by David Morrison

On a summer Sunday morning in a tranquil Nanoose Bay garden, I held an object in my hands that seemed impossible. I could not comprehend its creation at all. An exquisite work of art crafted from red cedar, it was so light, so delicate, that I remain convinced a stiff breeze could have snatched it from my grasp and carry it away. That it weighed almost as little as the wispy natural object that inspired it—and somehow even possessed a similar translucent quality—truly bewilders me to this day.

This was Feather, one of a series of breathtaking carvings by First Nations artist Cliff Wilson that I viewed at his home that morning. Elegantly inlaid with copper and abalone, it's a representation of the eagle feather displayed beside it as a point of reference.

The lightness of touch required and the hours taken in its shaping truly do boggle the mind. As we discussed it over hazelnut coffee, Wilson explained that the application in realizing all his work is considerable: "For every piece I may spend five hundred hours on, I'll spend six hundred hours just looking at it."

Wilson grew up in a Port Alberni apartment block within a Coast Salish community, and was surrounded by wood carvers: "There was one apartment they picked just for carving and the whole thing would be filled with woodchip! I'd always watch these carvers. Some of them would be working on small pieces and they'd work on group things like totem poles. Finally, this old man showed me how to carve this one piece, and I worked on it for weeks."

Carved when he was just eight years old, his first effort today sits proudly in Wilson's idyllic outdoor gallery alongside his stunning creation Dorsal Fin, into which the design of the original carving is incorporated. The significance of the little totem pole is further amplified when learning what happened next: "My grandmother bought it off me for \$20 and I thought 'Wow! \$20!' That was the most money I'd ever seen at eight years

old. She said 'I'll give this back to you when you have a place of your own' and she did, when I was about nineteen. But she wasn't around long enough to realise the impact this had on me... and the repercussions."

Gathered with us under a folding gazebo in the centre of the garden were his wife Donna, my wife Susan, and Dick—the fellow carver and artist who'd introduced us. We listened intently, straining to hear above the cacophony of rain on canvas as the story unfolded.

The years went by and Wilson carved more pieces from time to time, the next milestone project being a soapstone chess set of Trojan soldiers at Grade 11. "I always got A's in art for doing those kinds of things. It was fun," he reminisced.

Yet carving remained just fun until much later in life, when a breakthrough came unexpectedly. At the suggestion of a friend, Wilson reluctantly exhibited his Paternal Whale Feast Bowl at the 1996 Brant Wildlife Festival, held annually in Qualicum Beach and Parksville. Originally a commission for another friend, Wilson deemed the piece incomplete and therefore unworthy of public

scrutiny. Donna disagreed and had to "literally snatch it out of his hands" while he was still working on it, in order to get it to the festival on time. It went on to win both its divisional award and first prize of the whole First Nations category. Despite his trepidation at the time, Wilson now understandably reflects on this as a turning point: "It was like 'Whoa! I guess I've got something here!'"

Following this acclamation, he started carving in earnest, introducing copper and abalone inlays using techniques that have taken him a decade to perfect. There was unfinished business to take care of in this respect, so he revisited the triumphant feast bowl to finally realize his original vision for it: "I went full circle, returning to that piece to say 'Now, I have to finish you!'" Even so, he refuses to acknowledge that the feast bowl or other creations are ever truly complete. "Wasn't it Picasso who said something about considering a painting finished is to sign its death warrant?" he enquired of me. It was indeed Picasso, and I've



Photo: David Morrison



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Photo: David Morrison

since learned the relevant portion of the exact quote was: “To finish a work? To finish a picture? What nonsense! To finish it means to be through with it, to kill it, to rid it of its soul, to give it its final blow.” Wilson adheres to this philosophy, but nonetheless knows when he should stop.

With the rain easing off and the coffee long since guzzled down, Dick, Susan and I ventured with Wilson back to the garden’s edge to take some photographs and once more admire the carvings. The gallery is such a peaceful spot, soundtracked only by the gentle tinkling sound of water from the stream and fountain just below. As a setting for Wilson’s incredible, deeply moving artworks, it could hardly be more fitting.

Depicting aspects of the natural world, thereby upholding particular common themes within First Nations art, Cliff Wilson’s work represents a continuation of tradition, yet his style is all his own. As displayed early in life via the carving of Trojan warrior chess pieces—so desired by pilferers unknown, incidentally, that three sets were taken from locked cabinets three times—Wilson’s influences are far reaching. One particular work, Thunderbird, beautifully illustrates how.

This magnificent carving owes as much to the art of ancient Egypt as it does to the traditions of Northwest Coast Native art but, even then, there’s a twist. The way in which the head of the bird is held within the piece is deliberately

reminiscent of the Pharaohs’ falcon god Horus. The ‘twist’ is literal, as in a contradiction of tradition it’s an asymmetrical work with the feet moving away from the head, one sitting lower than the other, and a flowing, sensual line running through the carving to lend it true movement.

This is how Wilson’s creations have evolved to ensure he can offer a unique signature to purchasers of his work. His carvings are consequently fresh and exciting, as contemporary and vital in their field as they are observant of the values of traditional First Nations art. With this approach, he is surely destined to become a key figure in his arena.

Talk turned to Wilson’s desire to make a living from selling his work, which I’d thought was already the case. “No, it’s a not a living,” he said. “This is a long-term dream that I know will come to fruition one day. I know that it will if I put my

heart into it and don’t lose the reasons why I started in the first place.”

Born of deep emotions, unique vision and an uncanny natural aptitude for his art,

Wilson’s work will both earn him a living and continue to enhance a steadily burgeoning reputation. Of that, I am certain.

Cradling Feather in your hands for just a few moments would also convince you of this but, please, beware that stiff breeze.

For commissions, private showings and serious enquiries, contact Cliff & Donna Wilson at wilsoncd@shaw.ca

Captions:

Page 39: Wilson’s first ever carving—the wee totem pole carved when Cliff was just eight years old.

Left top: Whale Feast Bowl

Left below: Feather

Top left: Cliff Wilson himself

Left: Thunderbird

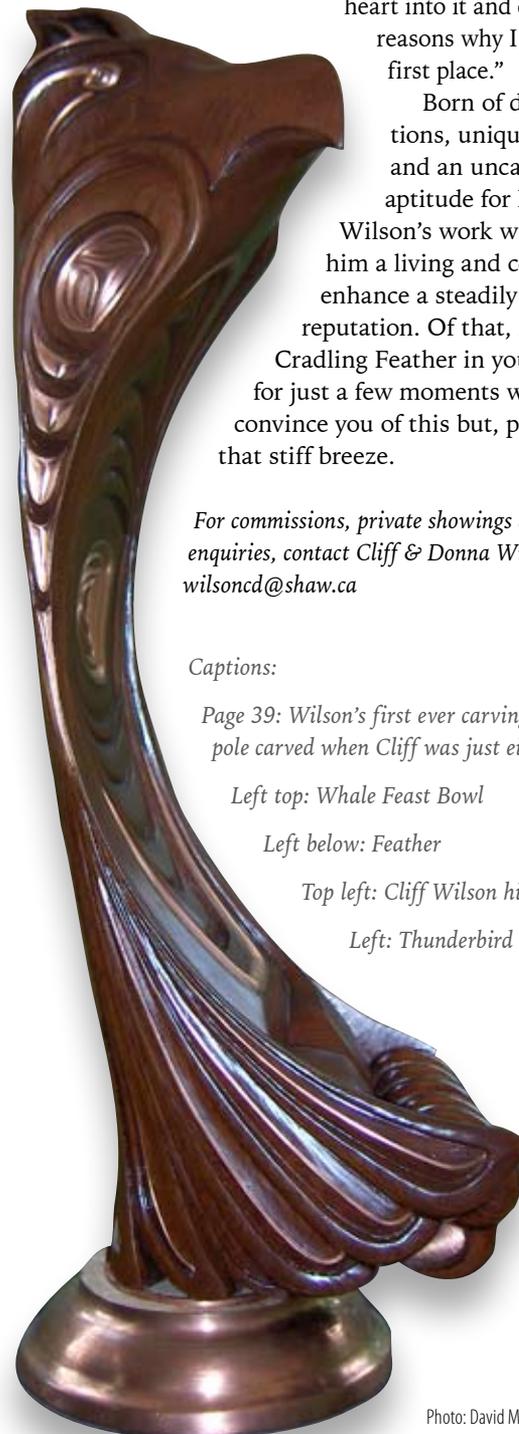


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