
Reading Images Stone B. C.

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Reading *images stone b.c.*

Yvonne Marshall

Abstract

The vibrant artistic traditions of America's Pacific Northwest Coast peoples are well documented in the ethnographic literature. Far less numerous, but equally fascinating, are the artworks which survive from a prehistoric period lasting at least 10,000 years. One little known collection of 136 stone artefacts from this area was brought together for exhibition in 1975. The striking and often explicit sexual imagery of these artefacts prompted anthropologist Wilson Duff to offer an unconventional, and therefore also controversial reading of their meaning in his book *images stone b.c.* In reading *images stone b.c.* through the lens of queer theory this paper suggests that the radical potential of Wilson Duff's ideas, and his vision of these artefacts in particular, was far greater than he was able to realize before his untimely death.

Keywords

Feminism; queer; sexuality; Wilson Duff; stone artefacts.

I'm not a transsexual, but I play one in real life.

(Riki Ann Wilkins 1997: 87)

Queer is a slippery, elusive idea. It arose as a way of acknowledging and valuing difference without needing first to define that difference in the reductive fictions of identity politics. Teresa de Lauretis, in her introduction to the volume of papers published from the 1990 conference where queer theory was developed, puts it this way:

Today we have, on the one hand, the terms 'lesbian' and 'gay' to designate distinct kinds of life-styles, sexualities, sexual practices, communities, issues, publications, and discourses: on the other hand, the phrase 'gay and lesbian' or, more frequently, 'lesbian and gay' (ladies first), has become standard currency. . . . In a sense, the term 'Queer Theory' was arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them – or at the very least problematize them.

(de Lauretis 1991: v)

This is a project concerned with self-recognition, with the self-representation of difference. It searches for ways of speaking difference which do not make recourse to the



exclusions of identity politics. To a world built upon precisely those exclusions, queer is a deeply counter-intuitive idea. Many find it incomprehensible; others dismiss it as abstract theorizing with no political application – a charge to which Riki Ann Wilkins replies:

What is left to organize around if we don't use identities? . . . Our movement [The Transsexual Menace] shifts its foundations from identity to one of functions of oppression. Coalitions form around particular issues, and then dissolve. Identity becomes the result of contesting those oppressions, rather than a precondition for involvement. In other words, identity becomes an effect of political activism instead of a cause. It is temporary and fluid rather than fixed.

(Wilkins 1997: 85–6)

Queer becomes an even more difficult and subtle project when it is also feminist. The relationship between gay and lesbian studies and feminism has always been problematic (Martin 1996; Rubin 1984). Both have sought for themselves 'proper objects' of study such as sexuality, sex, or gender, frequently defining them in opposition to an object of study attributed to the other (Butler 1997). Queer seeks to move the engagement between feminism and gay and lesbian studies away from the strictures of this reductive posturing (de Lauretis 1991; Weed 1997). My paper here is located in that engagement. It is 'an exploration of the "encounter" between feminist and queer theory' (Butler 1997: 1) carried out in the fields of archaeology.

My readings in this paper are closely informed by the work of Elizabeth Grosz. In her struggle to think bodies and sexuality in non-binary terms Grosz takes up a model once used by Lacan in which the subject is likened to 'a Möbius strip, the inverted three-dimensional figure eight' (Grosz 1994: xii). Its two-dimensional torsion in three-dimensional space (Fig. 1):

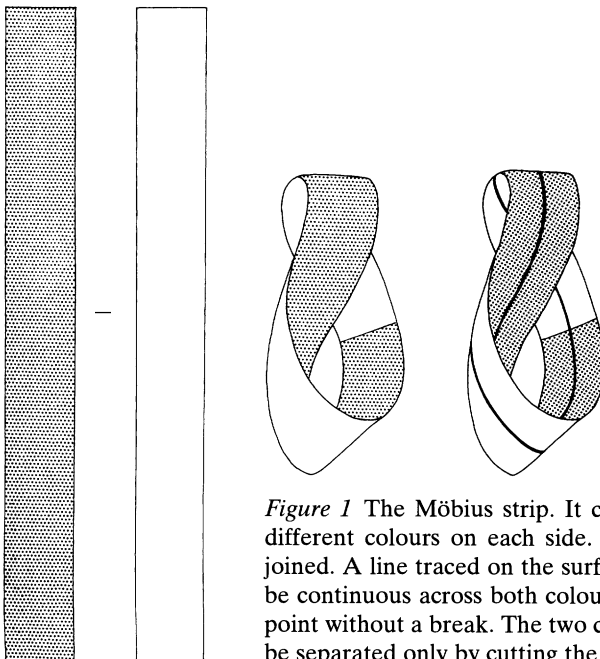


Figure 1 The Möbius strip. It can be made from a strip of paper with different colours on each side. The strip is twisted once and the ends joined. A line traced on the surfaces of the resulting figure is will always be continuous across both coloured surfaces and will return to its origin point without a break. The two coloured surfaces of the Möbius strip can be separated only by cutting the figure.

has the advantage of showing that there can be a relation between two ‘things’ – mind and body – which presumes neither their identity nor their radical disjunction, a model which shows that while there are disparate ‘things’ being related, they have the capacity to twist one into the other. This enables the mind/body relation to avoid the impasses of reductionism, of narrow causal relation or the retention of the binary divide.

(Grosz 1994: 209–10)

Such a model might be used in the subversion of any binary, including that of sexuality versus gender, or gay and lesbian studies versus feminism, or author and text. However, as Grosz herself stresses, the model of the Möbius strip offers us only a beginning point for thinking beyond the binary; a place to start. It comes with its own problems and must not be pressed too hard.

Archaeologists spend their time searching for patterns in the refuse of the past: patterns which they can identify and name as ‘things’, such as cultures, peoples, regions, artefact types: ‘things’ which can be held apart and defined against each other. The idea that bounded identities should be resisted goes against all the normative ideals which define archaeology as a discipline. As a result, attempts by archaeologists to use queer theory have often been based on subtle mis-readings of queer which enable it to be slipped back into the normative; made safe; un-queered. Consider, for example, the definition offered in the glossary of Roberta Gilchrist’s recent book *Gender and Archaeology*.

queer theory A term representing the diverse body of theory that takes as its starting point the definition of queer as an identity that acquires meaning from its opposition to the norm. Homophobic categories are reversed to represent heterosexuality as a constructed ‘political fiction’ or ‘other’. ‘Queer’ is also used to represent alternative positions to age difference, sexuality, etc.

(Gilchrist 1999: xviii)

Although the intention here is sympathetic, the subversive project of queer, its resistance to incorporation into the normative and its refusal of identity politics, is nevertheless reformulated in the very language it seeks to transcend. The unintentionally of such slip-pages is compelling evidence of just how difficult it is for archaeologists to think in terms which do not depend upon naming and identity. In my own struggle to make this shift I have found Elizabeth Grosz particularly insightful because so much of her work has a highly spatial quality (1995a). Her choice of the Möbius strip as a model for thinking outside of the binary is one case in point.

With her model in mind, I want now to take a fresh look at a collection of 136 prehistoric stone artefacts from British Columbia on the Northwest Coast of Canada (Fig. 2), and at Wilson Duff the anthropologist who in 1975 brought them together for exhibition. My reading is of both artefacts and anthropologist. I argue that Wilson Duff, in a way which might now be read as queer, sought to reach beyond the dominant theoretical framework of structuralism, to ‘transgress and transcend’ its binary limitations, in his search for the meanings of the stone artefacts. Duff was, however, unable to let the binary go. To borrow Donna Haraway’s metaphor, he found himself trying to climb while ‘holding onto both ends of a pole, simultaneously or alternately’ (1991: 188). Although Duff’s analysis strives to exceed its binary framework it remains held fast by phallocentrism. My

feminist re-reading of Duff, and of his analysis of the stone artefacts, highlights and values their implicit queerness, while at the same time critiquing their phallocentrism. I seek to build on and expand the queerness of Duff's analysis by freeing it from phallocentrism.

The stone artefacts brought together by Wilson Duff came from many parts of British Columbia and Alaska (Fig. 2). They range in date from about 3000 BP through to the nineteenth century. Very few were recovered from recorded stratigraphic contexts – most are chance finds. To find their meaning we can, therefore, look only to the artefacts themselves.

Duff's interest in stone sculptural forms began in the 1950s and continued throughout his life (1956a, 1956b, 1963). His most passionate engagements with the artefacts, his 'most audacious imaginings about the meanings of the images' are found in *images stone b.c.*, published to accompany the 1975 exhibition (Duff 1975: 13; Halpin 1981: 269). Some of these 'imaginings' were expanded in a later, more academic article 'The world is as sharp as a knife: meaning in northern Northwest Coast art' which was presented as a conference paper in 1976, only a few months before his tragic death, then published posthumously

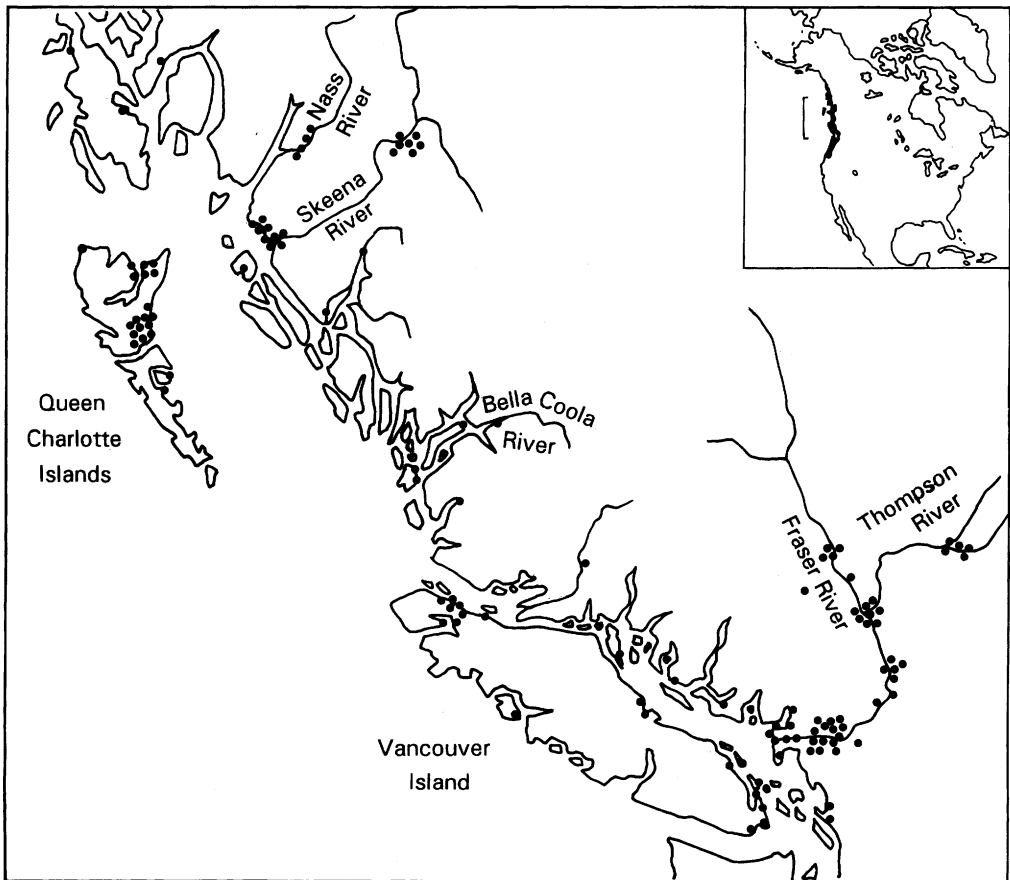


Figure 2 Approximate find locations of the 136 artefacts brought together for the *images stone b.c.* exhibition (after Duff 1975: 23).

(Duff 1983). Some of his work has now been republished, alongside tributes from a wide range of people, in the anthology *The World is as Sharp as a Knife* (Abbot 1981).

Duff's analysis of the stone images is inspiring because it is so exuberantly poetic and marvellously insightful. His was an emotional engagement, a seeking out of meaning which recognized the unknowableness of the artefacts. Duff sought only to enter their logic, to think with them not about them. The result is a sexually explicit, theoretically unruly engagement with the artefacts which is much admired but sits uncomfortably in the detached, objective world of academia (Abbott 1981; Marshall 1998).

What distinguishes and unites the 136 artefacts in the exhibition is the way they combine stone materials, functional form, and graphic iconography, most of which is sexual. The execution of each image in stone is of special importance because on the Northwest Coast almost all material culture was made from organic materials such as wood, bark, and bone. Stone artefacts are not common and stone art work even less so (Fladmark 1986; Stewart 1973). The artefacts are either functional items, such as bowls, clubs, and hammers or they are clearly derived from these functional forms. This functionality, whether actual or implied, is interwoven with their iconography. Consider, for example, the bi-phallic club shown in Figure 3. A smooth and somehow gentle phallic blade protrudes from a densely ribbed phallic handgrip surmounted by a gracefully arching handle, which is sharply square in cross-section. In stark contrast to the inward, vulnerable serenity of the smooth blade/phallus, the head of the second phallus which forms the butt of the handle, intrudes enquiringly in the world. Its open staring eyes, gritted teeth, and wide slash mouth search, seek, and take in the world rather than close it out. In this object the artist brings together in astonishing ways the qualities of the stone material, the implied agency of a hand, a person who grasps the handle to carry out the club's function, and an extraordinarily complex iconography.

Material, form, and iconography come together in the artefact to form what Duff called an image. Images, Duff suggests, 'seem to speak to the eye, but they are really addressed to the mind. They are ways of thinking, in the guise of ways of seeing' (Duff 1975: 12). Meaning, he argues, is not to be found in what the images represent, but in the relationships they express; the metaphors they create.

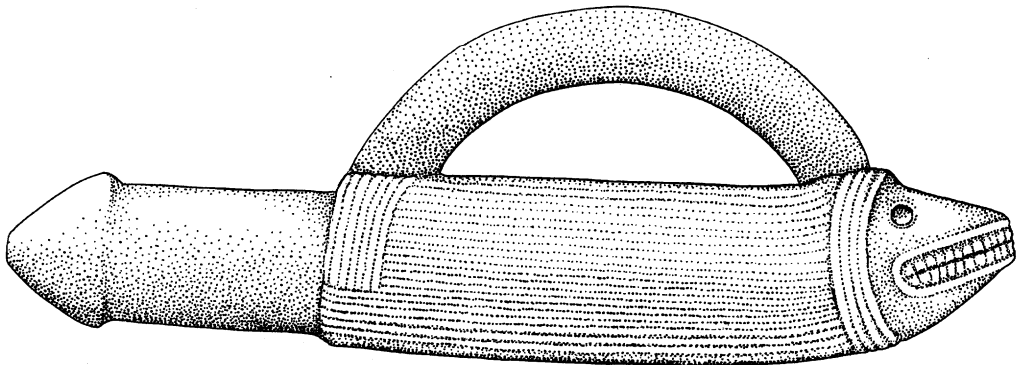


Figure 3 Sculptural form derived from the club, found with the Hagwilget Cache now in the Museum of the American Indian, New York (after Duff 1975: 115). Length 13½ inches.

it is somehow putting it the wrong way to say that images contain meanings. Images contain apparent ambiguities. Images are seeming contradictions. Images hold ideas apart so that they can be seen held together. 'Imaging' is reflecting. 'Imaging' is relating. 'Imaging' is recognizing. 'Imaging' is 'meaning'. Images *are* meanings, which come out in the thinking.

(Duff 1975: 16)

In Duff's analysis, meaning is sought in the ways in which the functional purpose of the artefact, its stone material, and its sexual iconography are interwoven to create multiple metaphors and resonances. Given the emphasis he placed on the ambiguities of the images, Duff's decision to order the 1975 exhibition by dividing the images into male and female forms seems a very odd choice. The contradictions of this approach are apparent right from the opening exhibit, the Sechelt Image (Fig. 4). Duff describes the Sechelt Image as 'the very image of masculine strength, stated in the metaphor of sex' (1975: 28).

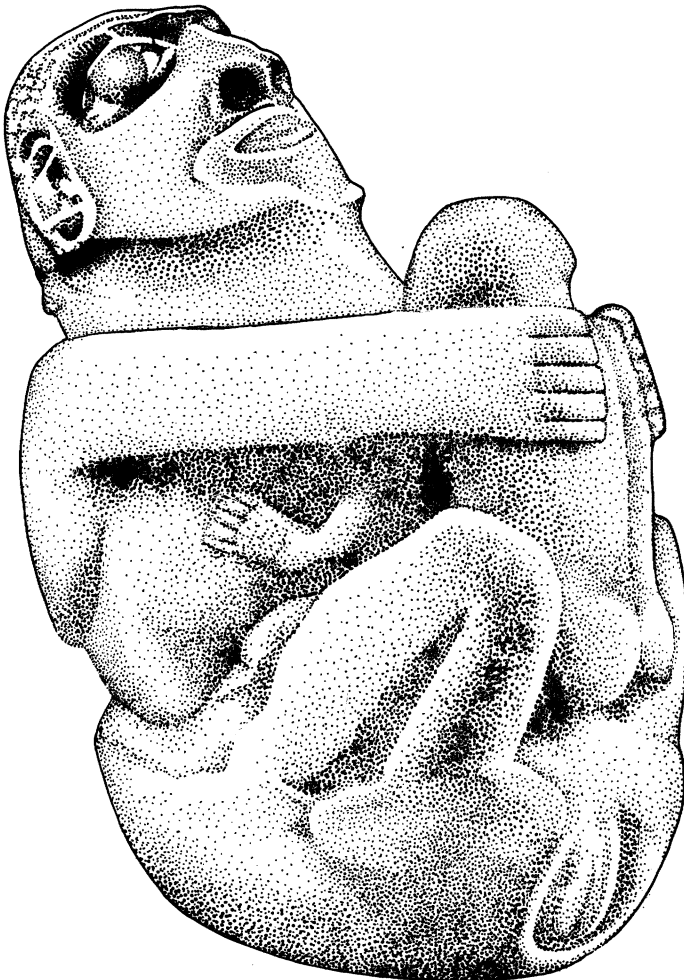


Figure 4 The Sechelt Image – found at Sechelt, now in the Centennial Museum, Vancouver (after Duff 1975: 29). Height 20 inches.

But surely, like the Möbius strip, this image refuses such attribution in the way it incorporates woman/man: head thrown back and mouth open in ecstasy, penis/child erect, ready, clasp and clasped, vulva open and inviting, each part active, inseparable, and mutually creating. Yet, to Duff, 'His ambiguity is absolute' (1975: 28).

The same logic is then applied to the bowl forms. Given their dominant iconography of openings, mouths, and bellies, and their implied if not actual function as containers, it is hardly surprising that Duff interpreted these bowls as female 'fonts of life'. Again, by valuing one resonance in the iconography over others, Duff misses his own point, that meaning resides in relationships not things. While male imagery is obliquely present in the simple bowl forms – being suggested by carved heads and some aspects of the overall form – it is very apparent in the more complex bowl images. It can be seen, for example, in the strongly phallic figures which rise to form the backs of the seated human figure bowls (Figs 5 and 6). Each comes together with a second more supine figure to create and hold both each other and the bowl. The inseparability of male and female implied in these

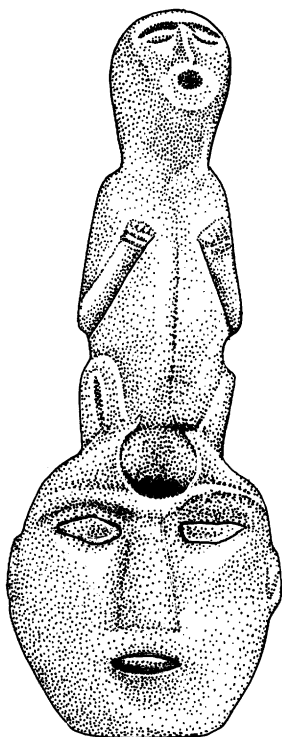


Figure 5 Seated human figure bowl from a burial ground at Kamloops, now in the Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria (after Duff 1975: 80). Height $7\frac{3}{4}$ inches.

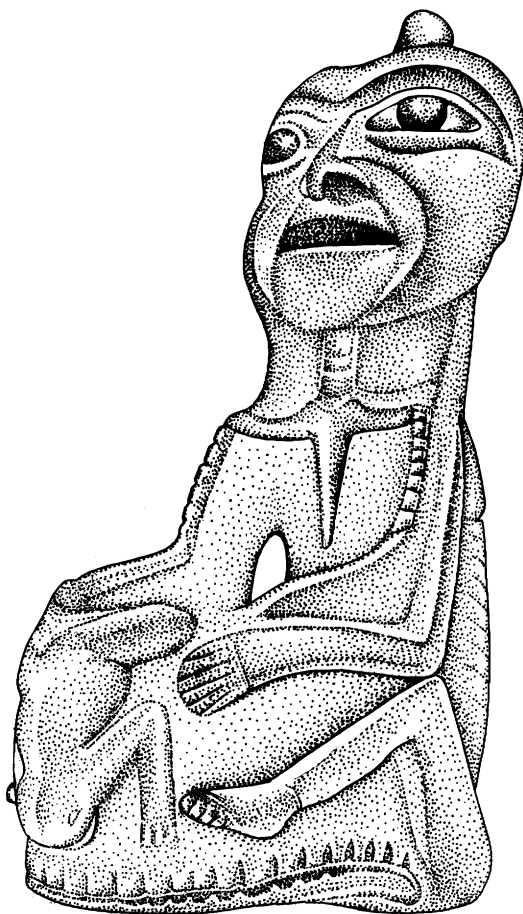


Figure 6 Seated human figure bowl with frog from Lytton, now in the Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria (after Duff 1975: 74). Height $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches.

metaphors is made particularly explicit in the unique Sechelt Image, which derives its form from the seated human figure bowl.

Duff then turns back to forms he reads as male, to 'images of power'. These include hammers and pile drivers whose implied function is hitting things. Again he presumes the existence of a foundational binary construction in which the primary opposition is male/female. These images he suggests are 'artistic play with the opposition of sex, but also general equations in logic, either in abstract or in reference to the fundamental binary opposition of life and death' (Duff 1975: 90).

Although much of the iconography of both hammers and pile drivers is overtly phallic, it is far from exclusively so. Some of the images bring together female and male iconography in astonishingly subtle yet powerful ways. Consider the dogfish pile driver shown in Figure 7. When used, it was held with the thumbs slotted into the eyes of the shark and the fingers curled around the sides into the 'gill slits' at the back. Thus the presence of the hands and therefore the person who holds the pile driver is implied by the form itself. A high forehead, reminiscent of both phallus and vulva/clitoris, rises up from the eye slots, while beneath them a wide shark mouth curves down. In the lower lip there is the suggestion of a labret and hints of connections with historic period traditions which identify dogfish as woman (Duff 1975: 110). This image resonates with power. But that power resides in the interweaving of metaphors which can never be fully identified, pinned down, and known. It does not depend upon a masculinist metaphor of domination.

Even more subtle is the stunningly beautiful slope-handled maul (Fig. 8), a highly derived form of hand hammer. In this image phallus and vulva create each other; are each other. Duff reads this image as a denial of the binary: 'both and neither at the same time'; 'neither that is both' (1975: 91). But to deny something credits it with prior existence. This image refuses rather than denies. It speaks itself in its own terms, terms which allow no 'possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched' (Irigaray 1985: 26),

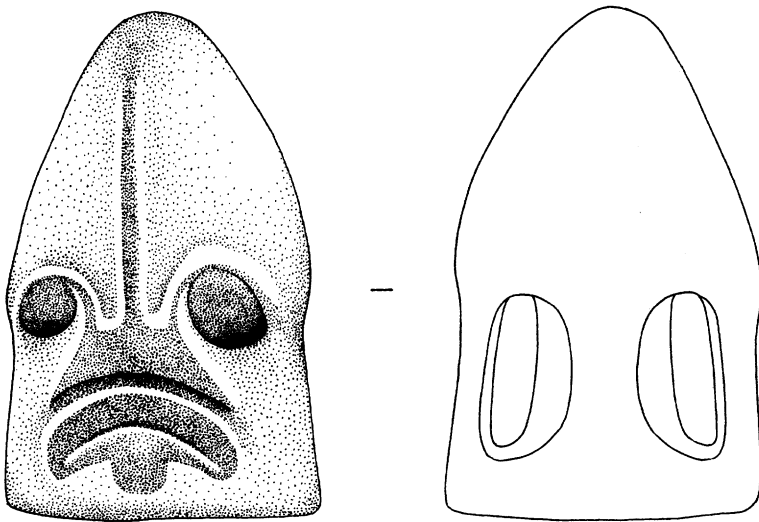


Figure 7 Pile driver in the form of a dogfish shark's head, now in Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia (after Duff 1975: 111). Height 15½ inches.

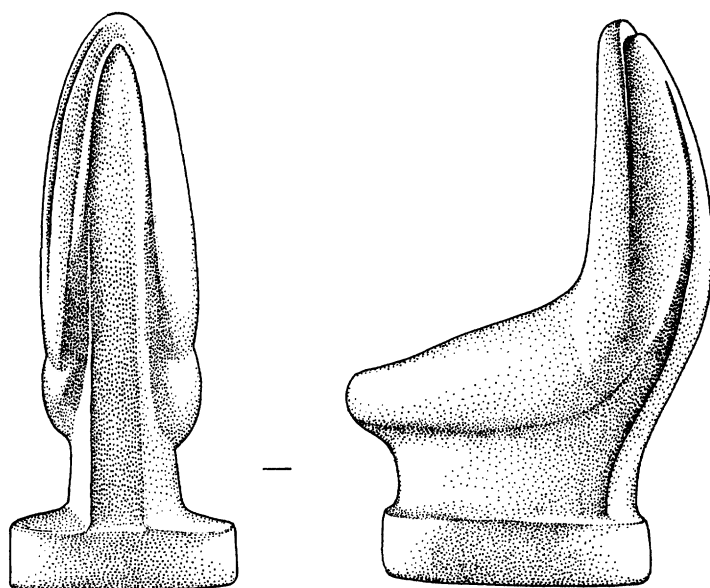


Figure 8 Slope-handled maul form derived from the hand hammer, now in the Tongass Historical Society Museum, Ketchikan, Alaska (after Duff 1975: 98). Height 9 inches.

what is made from maker. Here I feel the Möbius strip model begins to fail us because, as Grosz (1994: 210) points out, it is 'not well suited for representing modes of becoming, modes of transformation'. The complexity and subtlety of the interweavings of meaning in this image far exceed the possibilities of our analogy with the Möbius strip.

Duff concludes his analysis of images of power with clubs, 'death-bringers' (Figs 3 and 9). For Duff 'the most persistent visual metaphor' portrayed in the clubs is 'that of male sexual power . . . a symbol of man's most potent "weapon"' (1975: 117). They are seen as the ultimate image of masculinity because they combine male sexual symbolism with their implied function of killing. It is in this juxtaposition that Duff sees their power as images. Consider the text which accompanies the club shown in Figure 9, where Duff once more reads against himself, setting up dichotomies only to deny them.

It is difficult to imagine any more perfect sculptural control of stone than this masterful club. The blade, in the shape of a Roman sword, is in this case a lethal weapon. The handle, bearing its unique head, may also be a message of death. It is just that the whole sculpture is so perfect that it gives the lie to its message by vibrating with life.

(Duff 1975: 120)

Despite its intensity and power, this image feels strangely still. It languishes 'in its erotic torments rather than hastening to quench them' (Grosz 1995: 286). It suggests something fleeting, held, but unsustainable, the approach of orgasm but not its moment: 'I am completely still now, holding my breath to deny her the reward of further response' (Wilkins 1997: 183). The agency of a hand, a lover, hovers within the stillness of the moment and image. Death does not deny life. Life and death create each other; each makes the other possible.

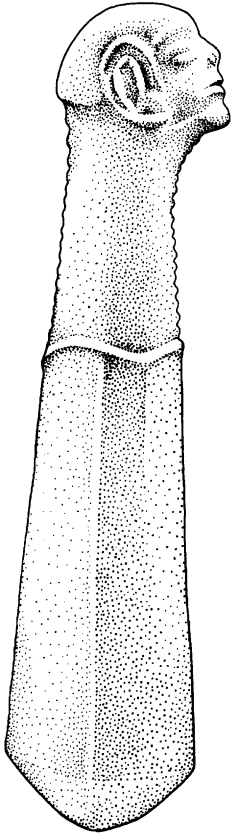


Figure 9 Club found on the same site as the Hagwilget Cache, now in the Museum of the American Indian, New York (after Duff 1975: 120). Length 18 inches.

Balancing his ultimate symbol of male/death is the Kiusta Frog bowl, Duff's ultimate symbol of female/life (Fig. 10). This is the concluding image of the concluding section, 'vessels of thought'. These images are tobacco mortars of fairly recent origin, so the figures depicted are accessible to ethnographic readings.

As a starting point, consider that the Frog's wide, wide mouth has just snapped shut. . . . The human figure at the other end, for all the world like a seated human figure bowl, wears the mouth of the bowl as her labret perforation, and therefore must be female. Her arms extend along the rim. Or are they Frog's legs? Or both? At any rate, the human figure has just been swallowed whole. Behind Frog's mouth is a flipper: she is being punned as seal.

(Duff 1975: 145)

Characteristically, Duff is not content to stop there. He goes on to read the bowl as the ultimate achievement in a developmental sequence which begins with the ancient seated human figure bowls, moves through the simpler seal dishes, and in recent centuries culminates in the Haida tobacco mortars, the vessels of thought and their dominant frog iconography. The unifying concept in this development is female sexual symbolism and therefore 'life, pure and simple' (Duff 1975: 149). Yet this creative female/life is a smugly self-creating and self-consuming force:

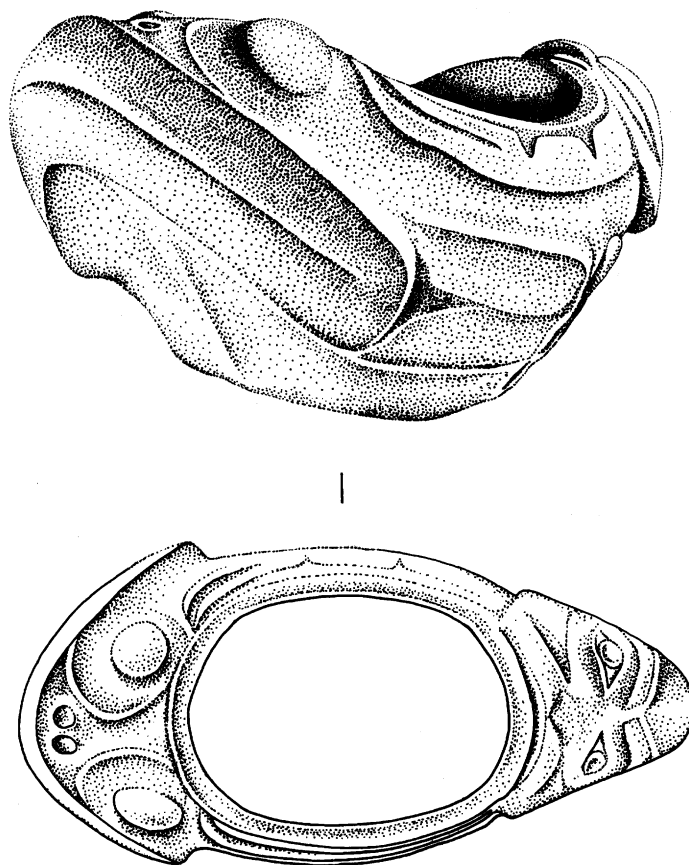


Figure 10 Tobacco mortar with frog and human figures from the village of Kiusta, now in McCord Museum, Montreal (after Duff 1975: 144). Length 17 inches.

With the Kiusta Frog mortar . . . the threads come finally together. It is a Frog mortar, seal dish, and seated human figure bowl, all at the same time. The reason is that all are really about the same thing. That thing is made of the stuff of analogy, it is that which is common to the mouth, where eating occurs, the belly, where digestion and gestation occur, and the vulva, where life-giving occurs. What the mortar is full of, therefore, is creative transformation.

(Duff 1975: 148)

What is lost in Duff's reading is the vibrancy, the ecstasy, of life and sexuality – its unruly passion and languid desiring. Are these vessels of thought, so vividly written in intertwining bodies, really so passionless? Must creative transformation be reduced to deathless aberration? I argue not. As with the other artefacts, the moment of closure implied in Duff's reading is approached but never achieved, its metaphors never completely close around each other because the agency of an activating hand, in this case presumably holding a pestle, remains implicit within the image, holding it open. Creative transformation ripens with that touch.

To close the 1975 exhibition Duff chose the twin stone masks (Fig. 11). Although not

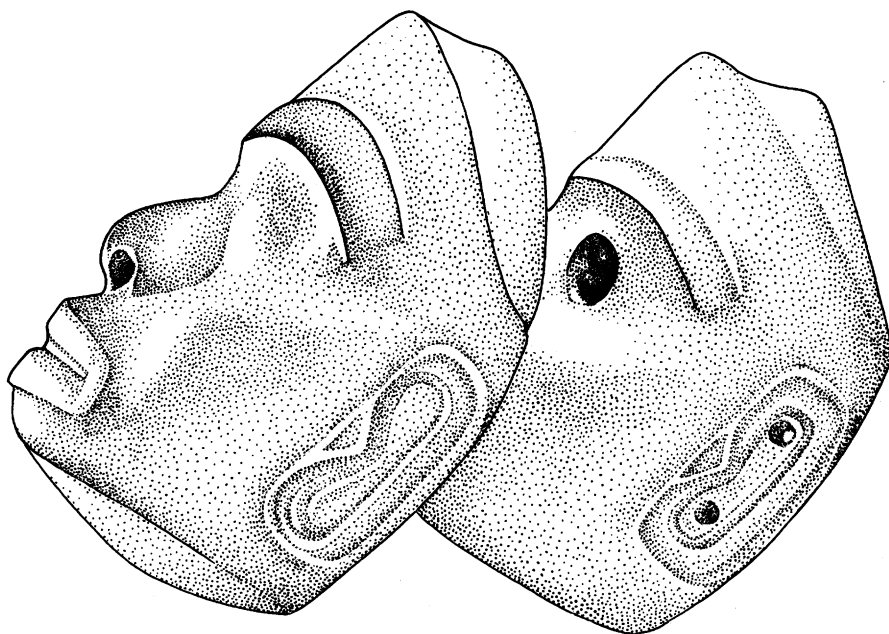


Figure 11 Pair of stone masks (after Duff 1975: 167). Unsighted mask from Kitkatla, now in the National Museum of Canada. Sighted mask from Nass River or Metlakatla, now in the Musée de l'Homme, Paris. Height 9 inches.

overtly sexual, when placed with the other artefacts the masks strongly recall the sexually ecstatic faces of so many of the images; the Sechelt Image, the Seated Human Figure Bowls, the rising forms of the slope-handled maul, and dogfish pile driver, the toothless tilt of the tobacco mortar's frog mouth, the toothy grin of the double-headed phallus club, the arching neck of the 'death-bringer' club. The moment of closure, approached but never attained.

The Tsimshian artist has shown the two to be as alike as twins, and as separate: outer vision and inner vision, sight and memory, seeing and imagining. He has shown the two in the act of self-recognition, both equally masks, both equally mirrors. . . . I cannot help but think that if they could speak, their message would be what Raven's grandfather said to Raven in one of the Haida creation myths: 'I am you. That is you'.

(Duff 1975: 165–6)

When danced the masks would be shown alternately but they would be seen as one. As the dancer turned and the mask changed, the stone eyes would open and close in a theatre of transformation and illusion (Duff 1975: 166; Halpin 1981).

Conclusion

There is of course no truth to be told about these extraordinary stone images. Even if they had all been recovered in the course of careful excavations and each came to us with secure stratigraphic co-ordinates, radiocarbon dates, associated contexts, and artefacts,

we still could not know them in the manner of the artists who made them, or the people who in the past handled them and brought them to life. The meanings we draw from them will always be ours. If there is a sense in which we might be 'true' to such artefacts it lies in the way we attempt to know them. Our knowing must allow them difference – a difference whose shape and boundaries are not pre-defined. In opening a space for this difference my project is not to displace existing voices, but to join with them in ways which draw attention to new strands of meanings; to make ever more complex the twisting torsion of our multiple, situated, knowings.

Acknowledgements

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