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"Neither One, Nor the 'Other'": The Unique Oeuvre of Freddie Alexcee

By

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History

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Abstract

This thesis situates the historical artist Freddie Alexcee and his body of work within transitional cultural contexts. His artwork reflects resilience, innovation and adaptation to the changes imposed upon his home community of Lax Kw'Alaams, British Columbia. Alexcee's landscape paintings, glass lantern slides and sculptures have been admired, dismissed and judged in various contexts across time and space. Chapters One and Two provide, respectively, biographies of place (Lax Kw'Alaams) and of the artist himself. In Chapter Three, I analyze his oeuvre and argue that while his works have not traditionally been included in the Northwest Coast "canon", they continue to compel and stimulate discussions regarding authenticity and identities. An examination of Alexcee's works within a broad cultural context outlines his own multiple motivations for creating art works as the beliefs of those who sought to categorize them within academic and disciplinary frameworks.

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the help of several people. I would first like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Andrea Laforet and Dr. Allan Ryan, who consistently and generously gave their knowledge, expertise and advice throughout the research and writing process. Drs. Laforet and Ryan supervised the writing on a chapter-by-chapter basis and finally reviewed the thesis in its entirety. Their time and encouragement will always be appreciated.

I would also like to thank the curators, archivists, collections managers and librarians who assisted my research and facilitated access to collections at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (Winnipeg, Manitoba); the Museum of Anthropology at University of British Columbia (Vancouver); the Bob Stewart Archives (Vancouver); the Museum of Vancouver; the Vancouver City Archives; the Royal British Columbia Museum (Victoria) and the British Columbia Provincial Archives (Victoria).

I would finally like to thank the faculty and staff of Carleton's Art History department for providing an experience that was intellectually, socially and culturally enriching.

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Introduction

Freddie (Frederick) Alexcee was an artist who lived in Port Simpson (now Lax Kw'Alaams) on the Northwest Coast of British Columbia from 1853 to 1939 (plate 1). Lax Kw'Alaams was initially a temporary seasonal camping ground for transhumant Tsimshian, but in the mid 1830s it became known as Fort Simpson when the Hudson's Bay Company erected a trading fort there. The fort then became the permanent home of European settlers and Tsimshian alike as the fur trade flourished.¹ Alexcee, the son of a Tsimshian mother and French-Canadian/Iroquoian father, grew up in this eclectic atmosphere and was heir to different cultural traditions, a reality that was furthered by the intense changes wrought upon his people with the arrival of missionaries and the establishment of non-native government.

Throughout his life, Alexcee visually recorded the historical realities of his people and this retrospective account of his oeuvre recognizes its insightful commentary on their contemporary realities, and on his own as a modern artist. Alexcee's artworks were considered unusual in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as they defied the Western artistic and ethnological categories of the day. Aesthetically and functionally, many of his works were considered to be neither fully Tsimshian, nor were they completely informed by European traditions. During his lifetime as well as today, Alexcee has been identified as a Tsimshian artist, a label that simultaneously affirms his cultural heritage yet complicates his artistic position between different 'traditions' as they have been, and still often are, outlined in Western terms – those of Aboriginal and Western/European art. His oeuvre, including paraphernalia made for

¹ Fort Simpson was named as such from 1834-1880. In 1880 Fort Simpson was renamed Port Simpson, and in 1986 its name was officially changed back to what the Tsimshian had always called that location, Lax Kw'Alaams, or *Place of the Wild Roses*. See Susan Neylan, *The Heavens are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity*. (Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), p. 396.

ritual use, touristic “curio” items, carvings for the Methodist church, lantern-slide drawings and landscape paintings, correspond to different periods in his life, a career trajectory that will be investigated further in my thesis. As a young man, Alexcee was trained as a *halait*² carver, however his works of this nature are not presently known to cultural “outsiders”. He converted to the Methodist faith in 1874 at age 21 and worked on a local mission ship as an engineer. About 1886, he is said to have carved an angel baptismal font for the Church; its uncanny appearance (a totem-like body and mask-like face) continues to compel observers and provoke discussion as to the nature of “hybrid” art. Further, his landscape paintings attracted influential Canadians such as National Museum of Man anthropologist C. M. Barbeau and painter A.Y. Jackson in the 1920s.³ Two of his paintings were later included in a 1927 National Gallery exhibition in Ottawa.

During his own time, institutional discussion surrounding Alexcee (in Western terms) seems to have begun and ended with Barbeau, and has only recently, with the advent of postmodern and postcolonial discourse, been taken up for further investigation. As an “Indian” artist, Alexcee and his work were not of significant interest within the context of the 1920s project of cultivating a Euro-Canadian artistic tradition and heritage. During that time, contemporary paradigms dictated fairly inflexible categories for what was considered “Indian” and “Canadian” art. These historical circumstances might help to explain why his reputation did not grow substantially east of British Columbia.

This thesis will investigate how Alexcee’s identity as a “Tsimshian” person/artist has informed his work, and how it has figured in the consumption and discussion of his art. I

² *Halait* is (the Anglicized version of) a Tsimshian term that refers to spiritually endowed objects, people, or practices. Its English translation means ‘dance’, ‘dancing’, and ‘dancer’ but can also mean ‘shaman’, ‘initiate’ or all potential individuals who participate in dancing and/or the dramatization of power. See Neylan, pp. 30-31.

³ The National Museum of Man is now called the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

consider his oeuvre as it is presently known, with a particular focus in Chapter Three on specific pieces to discuss a central problem: the relationship between cultural identity/ies and the Western art historical categories that ascribe value to material culture.⁴ Alexcee's oeuvre articulates his multiple identities as an active participant first within the traditions of his Tsimshian cultural heritage, as well as within the culture and society of "Westernized" Port Simpson. The forms and aesthetics of his work evade the stricter cultural and artistic categories of the earlier paradigms (i.e. "Indian" and "Canadian", "primitive" and "modern", etc.), and prompt the question of their authenticity, an important value-marker within the Western art-world. In contemporary discourse, the discussion surrounding the "hybridity" of his works demonstrates the relevance that scholars and consumers still ascribe to cultural attribution and identities when valuing artworks, and the question of authenticity is still pervasive. This introduction will first provide a chapter breakdown, followed by a literature review. I will then discuss the methodological approaches that influenced my research and writing.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One, an artistic history of Port Simpson, shows the community to be culturally, socially and economically eclectic. To analyze Alexcee's works it is essential to understand the context in which they were produced. This milieu was a dynamic atmosphere that provided for the exchange of ideas, customs and values across both Aboriginal and settler components of the community. In his lifetime, Alexcee witnessed the transition of the Hudson's Bay Company fort in its "heyday" (including the empowerment of tribal chiefs and dynamic economic and cultural exchanges across communities), to the mission period during which he converted to Christianity, when living conditions and lifestyles changed dramatically, and beyond this into the 1930s. In

⁴ It should be noted that art historical categories, especially with respect to Aboriginal art, have been influenced by the discipline of anthropology [i.e. "native/modern"].

Port Simpson Alexcee was heir to both Tsimshian and European art traditions. This chapter contributes knowledge to what is known of Alexcee's background.

Chapter Two, a biography of the artist, discusses his diverse life experiences and his own multi-cultural heritage. From the accounts and anecdotes of various acquaintances, the impressions left all reflect a strong-willed, opinionated, proud, creative and insightful individual. This chapter demonstrates Alexcee's agency throughout his career as an artist and acknowledges his own voice as the ultimate authority on the interpretation of his work. By synthesizing the various character sketches with data recently accessed in archives, this chapter adds to our understanding of Alexcee as an individual, providing necessary context for the following artistic analysis.

Having articulated histories of place and of the artist, Chapter Three investigates Alexcee's artworks (and where they fit within the trajectory of his artistic development) and the contexts in which they have been received. Issues of authenticity will be investigated here. What does this term mean and how has it historically informed Western expectations of West Coast Aboriginal art during Alexcee's lifetime? By analyzing specific works, this chapter will provide a comprehensive review and inventory of his oeuvre, while using the concept of authenticity as a framework for discussing the art-historical issues relevant to his work. I will show how this concept is outlined by issues of attribution, style and identities. It is ultimately a marker of value, the criteria of which has shifted over the years. In this chapter, the judgment and evaluation of Alexcee's work will be shown to have been informed by the expectations authorities had of Northwest Coast Aboriginal art throughout different times and contexts.

Literature Review

The body of scholarship addressing Alexcee's life and work is narrow and has not grown substantially since his name was published in the National Gallery of Canada's 1927 catalogue for *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art Native and Modern*. He was, however, a prolific artist for his time and place and the majority of his works are currently held in at least twelve public institutions; ten in Canada, one in the United States and one in England.⁵ The publications on his work span eight decades of art-historical discourse and include an exhibition catalogue and three scholarly articles.⁶ This body of scholarship speaks to issues my thesis will address, and each account raises compelling questions for further investigation.

The National Gallery of Canada's 1927 *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, a collaborative effort with the National Museum, was the first instance in Canada in which Northwest Coast art was shown within a gallery context, as well as being the first and only travelling exhibit in Central Canada in which two of Alexcee's paintings were hung. The exhibit included traditional works (such as masks, boxes and rattles) in the galleries along with the painted landscapes of the Group of Seven and Emily Carr among others, suggesting that traditional Northwest Coast artistic aesthetics could inspire the formation of a distinctly "Canadian" art tradition. Alexcee's work was situated as contemporary Northwest Coast art with a catalogue entry that suggested, while they were interesting and unusual, his paintings lacked sophistication, falling somewhere between "native and modern".

⁵ These institutions include the Wellcome Institute, London, England; the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; the Manitoba Museum, Winnipeg; the New Westminster Museum, B.C.; the Museum of Vancouver; the Vancouver City Archives; the Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver; the Museum of Northern British Columbia, Prince Rupert; the Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria and the Burke Museum, Seattle.

⁶ Alexcee has been extensively discussed in the unpublished ethnographic field notes of ethnologist Dr. Viola Garfield and briefly mentioned in some recent publications surveying larger bodies of Northwest Coast art. Although not addressed in this literature review, these important writings are referenced throughout this thesis. This literature review addresses the publications addressing Alexcee specifically.

It was the unconventional nature of Alexcee's work that attracted National Museum of Man anthropologist Charles Marius Barbeau in 1915, and continued to fascinate him. As he wrote retrospectively in 1944, "more and more [his works'] strange quality beckoned and puzzled me; they remained outside the regular categories of Indian and Canadian art".⁷ By placing him "outside" the normative frameworks of aesthetic judgment, Barbeau acknowledged the innovative quality of his work but the anthropologist's reflections also indicate a sense of uncertainty regarding Alexcee's place in relation to these binaries.

After Barbeau, there is a gap in the literature where Alexcee's work is not discussed. It was not until the late 1980s that his work was taken up again in academic circles. In his article, "Frederick Alexie: Euro-Canadian Discussions of a First Nations' Artist", art historian Ronald Hawker noted that relative to his contemporaries, Alexcee was the subject of substantial literature as an historic Aboriginal artist.⁸ Later, Diedre Simmons, in 1992 sketched a general inventory of his works (and their locations) as they were known to her.⁹ The establishment in Euro-Canadian terms of both an "oeuvre" and a body of literature is significant for the recognition of a historical Northwest Coast artist. Until the late twentieth century, scholars observed a general "three-eras" model, under which the stylistic traits of this art had been classified and judged. These three eras, widely spread, consisted of "initial contact, the late nineteenth century and the contemporary scene [i.e. the post-1960s "renaissance"]".¹⁰ As both Hawker and Simmons recognized, Alexcee's art complicates these categories. First, his works

⁷Dr. Charles Marius Barbeau, "Frederick Alexie, A Primitive", The Canadian Review of Music and Art, 3, (11-12) (December 1944): 21.

⁸ Various spellings of his surname include: "Alexie", "Aleksee", "Alexee" and "Alexcee". "Alexcee" will be used throughout this paper, as it is the most common and has been recorded as such on his death certificate.

⁹ Diedre Simmons, "Frederick Alexcee, Indian Artist (c. 1857 to c. 1944)," Journal of Canadian Art History: Studies in Art, Architecture and the Decorative Arts. 14(2), (August 1, 1992): 83.

¹⁰Ronald Hawker, "Frederick Alexie: Euro-Canadian Discussions of a First Nations' Artist," Canadian Journal of Native Studies, 11(2) (1991): 248.

exemplify the often dual nature of Northwest Coast art – it has been made for use within personal, conventional and ceremonial contexts as well as directly for sale. The acknowledgment of an Aboriginal art market and the objects that circulated within it was previously considered incompatible with notions of authenticity associated with these three constructed eras.¹¹ Further, Alexcee’s style reflects a cultural syncretism that is communicated through his more “unconventional” works, such as his landscape paintings of pre- or early-contact Port Simpson and stylistically totem-like sculptures of angels for the Methodist church, for example. Both Hawker and Simmons showed that Alexcee’s works disrupt and challenge what otherwise were accepted parameters for the aesthetic judgment of Northwest Coast art.

In his article, Hawker pointed out the continuity of Aboriginal social structure despite pressures to assimilate into Western culture¹² (as a result of the Indian Act [1876], the potlatch ban [1884, although this was barely enforced until the 1920s], the re-education of Aboriginal children [1861]¹³). Simmons also addressed the act of negotiating cultural/social change and claimed that Alexcee’s work “reveals the synthesis of native and European cultures from the native point of view”.¹⁴ She further characterized him as an individual with “a foot in both worlds, without being totally integrated into either”.¹⁵ His art was recognized as being unconventional for his time and place and as a result bypassed the “traditional” categories previously espoused by Euro-Canadian scholars of Northwest Coast art. As such, his oeuvre has compelled many and has prompted discussion as to its “place” in Canadian art history. In light

¹¹ It was assumed that if art was not made for use within a ceremonial/conventional/personal context, it was not a valid representation of Aboriginal culture.

¹² Hawker, p. 237.

¹³ The first residential school established in British Columbia was St. Mary’s Mission in Mission, B.C.

Source: British Columbia Assembly of First Nations:

http://www.fns.bc.ca/pdf/Backgrounder_ResidentialSchoolHistory.pdf

¹⁴ Simmons, p. 84.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 86

of this, cultural syncretism is clearly present in some of his works (i.e. in the fusion of Tsimshian and Christian imagery) and in his execution of European-style paintings and drawings.

A major point of controversy surrounding this artist is his place in the history of Canadian art. The literature on Alexcee spans eighty years and transcends fluctuating art-historical paradigms. Barbeau was fascinated with him as an artistic and cultural anomaly and saw him as a fascinating bridge between two (constructed) milieus – a “stagnant” native world and a “developing” Euro-Canadian world. It is probably the advent of post-colonial and post-modernist discourses that has rejuvenated interest in Alexcee’s work for his tendency to complicate categories and upset what have been previously identified as binary classifications (such as “native”/“modern”, etc.). In her study, Simmons accorded a degree of agency to the artist, bringing lesser or unknown works to the surface and illuminating possible reasons for their styles and composition. In this sense, she added a dimension to Canadian art history that had been relatively underprivileged (that of Aboriginal art) in view of the dominant narrative. Despite this contribution, Hawker criticized her for overlooking what he understood to be the crux of the issue – Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal social milieus. The history of Aboriginal art, in his view, had been underrepresented in view of other economic/political/social issues of the day.¹⁶ Building on the insights and questions of these authors, this thesis contributes new knowledge to the social-historical context of the artist’s life and body of work. Alexcee’s significance within Canadian art history (ies) will be discussed throughout with an emphasis on the issues of contemporary discourse.¹⁷

Methodology

¹⁶ Hawker, p. 248.

¹⁷ Examples of these issues include the questioning of cultural identities and authenticity.

Due to the relative lack of literature on this artist, this thesis is largely based on archival documents and on works held in institutional collections. Primary research was undertaken at various archives and museums across Canada.¹⁸ Chapters One and Two are informed by both primary and secondary sources. The data, images and documentation addressed in Chapter Three, an overview of Alexcee's oeuvre, have been compiled from the institutions in whose collections his works are held. Three theorists have been influential throughout the research and writing process, the first being Homi Bhabha. Simply put, Bhabha's post-colonial text, The Location of Culture, deconstructs the binaries that organize Western conceptions of culture and identity. These binaries include "self/other", "modern/primitive", "civilized/uncivilized" and even "West/East." Rather than being contained (or articulated) through these constructed boundaries, Bhabha argues that culture is located within the interstices of these frameworks. As such, his concept of cultural hybridity proposes that both colonized and colonizing agents translate elements of social difference to suit their needs and purposes. Bhabha's vision of hybridity is one of performance whereby the colonized "subject" finds ways to question and/or resist the dominant order by subverting cultural norms and rules through acts such as art and literature.¹⁹ This thesis interprets Alexcee's works as "hybrid" insofar as they negotiate various cultural influences, however I hesitate to characterize them as overt "acts of resistance," as they were also made and commissioned to generate income. On the other hand, Alexcee's depictions of traditional life and conventions continued and translated the culture and values of his people. To be seen throughout the thesis, these unique circumstances are part of what makes him such a fascinating individual.

¹⁸ These institutions include the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the National Gallery of Canada, the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, the Vancouver City Archives, the Museum of Vancouver, the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology Archives, the University of British Columbia Rare Books Collection, British Columbia Archival Union List (Bob Stewart Archives), British Columbia Provincial Archives and the Royal British Columbia Museum.

¹⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, see pages 110-114.

James Clifford's "articulation theory" has also been considered. According to Clifford, articulation "offers a non-reductive way to think of cultural transformation and the apparent coming and going of 'traditional' forms. All-or-nothing, fatal impact notions of change tend to assume that cultures are living bodies with organic structures."²⁰ The interpretation of cultures as "organic structures" is considered problematic as it implies the possibility of cultural "death" when certain traditions are discarded, rather than acknowledging cultural development in new or different directions. Instead of thinking linearly about the "evolution" and "devolution" of cultures, this model rejects the idea that cultures "die" with their adaption to new circumstances and adoption of different ways. Rather, in allowing for (and anticipating) connections and relationships to be continually made and unmade, articulation theory accounts for the development of individual cultures as non-essentialized entities. This theory has been developed to suit the circumstances of indigenous South Pacific Islander cultures, for which a diversity of relationships (fostered through constant travel) necessitates flexibility and the recognition of agency in cultural translation. This theory speaks to the positioning of Alexcee's work within its social-historical context and the argument that his work was in part a survivalist response to the shifting realities of his people. While this theory offers a more flexible and open-ended landscape for the articulation of culture, it is also very much a product of post-modern discourse. Clifford says that, "it is assumed that cultural forms will always be made, unmade, and remade...articulation theory sees everything as potentially realigned, cut and mixed."²¹ This model questions the structures and frameworks that form and polarize the concepts of "tradition" and "innovation," two categories to which Alexcee's work has spoken and challenged.

²⁰James Clifford, "Indigenous Articulations", *The Contemporary Pacific*, 13 (2) (Fall, 2002): 478.

²¹ibid.

Written from a post-modern perspective, this thesis privileges the artist-as-individual. As Sandra Dyck has noted, “the advent of post-modern and post-colonial theory has facilitated critical studies of colonial representations of Aboriginal peoples.”²² In light of similar subject matter and certain intersecting themes that arise throughout this project, I take a similar approach to Dyck’s.²³ I contextualize Alexcee’s work within the history of Fort/Port Simpson and within the broader landscape of Canadian art history. I also attempt to maintain a balanced perspective that acknowledges my own position in particular cultural, social and political milieus.

Finally, this research was undertaken while reading Shawn Wilson’s Research is Ceremony (2008), a research guide emphasizing respect, transparency and reflexivity while researching indigenous issues.²⁴ It is hoped that this paper will be a small but useful contribution to both the scholarship on this important artist as well as to the history of contemporary Lax Kw’Alaams.²⁵ That being said, no visits were made to the community and no local authorities were consulted. It was decided that the brevity of this project precluded this avenue and that the documentary approach would be taken instead.²⁶

²²Sandra Dyck, “‘These Things Are Our Totems’: Marius Barbeau and the Indigenization of Canadian Art and Culture in the 1920s”. (M.A. Thesis, School for Studies in Art and Culture: Art History, Carleton University, 1995), p. 21.

²³ Dyck’s 1995 MA thesis addresses the “indigenization” of Canadian art history and culture through the analysis of Marius Barbeau’s contribution to the nation-building project in the 1920s.

²⁴ Research is Ceremony describes a research paradigm “shared by Indigenous scholars in Canada and Australia, and demonstrates how this paradigm can be put into practice”. The book stresses accountability in terms of topic selection, methods of data collection and analysis and in the ways the research is presented. See Shawn Wilson, Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008).

²⁵ Throughout this thesis I refer to the various community names of that place. For the most part, “Fort Simpson” will be used to refer to the time prior to 1880. “Port Simpson” will be used when referring to the time period from 1880 to 1986 and “Lax Kw’Alaams” will be used when referring to the contemporary community.

²⁶ As a cultural outsider to Lax Kw’Alaams and the Tsimshian nation, it was decided it might be inappropriate to conduct interviews within the community given that I would not have the opportunity to

My thesis acknowledges the artist Freddie Alexcee as a unique individual living and working in a transitional time and place. His work demonstrates a nuanced perception of his particular social and cultural circumstances. Alexcee negotiated cultural change by producing art for the variety of contexts in which he was an active participant. In doing so, he maintained cultural continuity through alternative media as well as articulated his own innovative styles and compositions. As Barbeau noted, Alexcee's work stood outside the binary categories that dominant narratives sought – and, in many cases, still seek – to qualify “Aboriginal” art. I argue that his works are “neither one nor the other” but that they reflect a period of cultural transition and negotiate contemporary power structures. Not everyone appreciated his unsettling articulations. It has been only recently, with the advent of post-modern and post-colonial paradigms, that his oeuvre has been taken up for further examination. I hope to contribute to the existing literature surrounding this artist with my analysis of his life and work.

establish a long-lasting relationship with its members. It should be noted however that while in British Columbia I was given the opportunity to contact a descendent of Alexcee who then declined to comment on his family's history.

Chapter One: An “Artistic Biography” of Fort/Port Simpson/Lax Kw’Alaams

In an undated twentieth-century manuscript, Tsimshian scholar William Beynon wrote that the village of Port Simpson, which lies

thirty miles north of Prince Rupert on the coast of British Columbia is inhabited by the matrilineal Tsimshian. The location is a narrow shelf of gravelly soil on the beach, with quartz boulders and slanting ledges of slate forming reefs in the shallow bays. Between the two small bays on which the village is situated is a long gravel spit, which is cut off from the mainland to form an island at high tide. The mainland rises rapidly a few hundred yards from the beach and is covered with a tangle of underbrush and trees growing in muskeg which is practically impassable except in the short dry periods of mid-summer²⁷ (plates 2,3).

This eloquent passage describes the home of artist Freddie Alexcee. In 1915, the year Marius Barbeau first visited Port Simpson, Beynon drew a map of the reserve, upon which the lot of each individual was identified, including Alexcee’s (plate 4).²⁸ Not only does this blueprint identify the residences of Port Simpson’s Tsimshian population, it also contributes to the contemporary history of the place in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Port Simpson was in many ways non-traditional. In its entirety, the map shows the Methodist Church, a Temperance League, an Epworth League, an Athletic Club and a Salvation Army Hall, among other hallmarks of then-contemporary Western culture. Many local Tsimshian people actively participated in these organizations. Within Euro-Canadian historical narratives, Port Simpson (now called Lax Kw’Alaams) is known as a community born out of an old Hudson’s Bay Company fort and trading post, which was established on the coast in the 1830s. The community

²⁷William Beynon, “Process of Change from Matrilineal to Patrilineal Inheritance as Illustrated in Building, Ownership and Transmission of House and House Sites in a Tsimshian Village,” Boas Collection of American Philosophical Society. Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives, MS VII-C-8M, DOCS ETHNO B102, f13

(19-?), p. 1, Gatineau, Quebec.

²⁸William Beynon, “1915 Plan by Lots [Port Simpson],” Wilson Duff Fonds, 40-45, University of British Columbia Archives, Vancouver, British Columbia. Alexcee’s lot is #8 on this map.

underwent many changes over several decades, and an old missionary account even claimed that “the village has been entirely rebuilt since the inhabitants have embraced Christianity. The nice frame houses, that now replace the old ones (plates 2 and 3, respectively), are a vast improvement; and the three public halls – that of the Fire Brigade, the Temperance Society and the Rifle Company, reflect great credit on the natives.”²⁹ The historical photographic record supports this claim to “modernization.” According to archaeologist Dr. George MacDonald, images of Port Simpson date back to 1873 and record the very last stages of the village in its “traditional” appearance, prior to the deconstruction of the plank houses in the face of increasing missionization. By 1880 (four years prior to the potlatch ban), most of the huge plank houses, among the largest on the coast, had been dismantled. Geologist and explorer George Mercer Dawson was apparently the last to photograph an exterior painted house screen, belonging to Chief Skagwait in 1878 (plate 5).³⁰ The missionary’s claim illustrates what Euro-Canadian authorities believed to be an important turning point for the “progress” of the local Native population – the transformation from traditional ways of life to modernity and “civilization.”³¹

Alexcee documents the traditional familial and social organization of his people in several paintings of the clan houses along the beach (to be seen and discussed in Chapter Three). In order to contextualize his oeuvre, this chapter will act as an “artistic biography” of Fort/Port Simpson/Lax Kw’Alaams, where the community’s dynamic and complicated history will be discussed and illustrated. All of Alexcee’s paintings found to date depict aspects of the

²⁹ “J.C.”, “Missions in British Columbia”. Unpublished, undated manuscript, Box 1, File 21. University of British Columbia Rare Books Collection, Vancouver, British Columbia.

³⁰ George MacDonald, “Appendix III: Draft Paper by George F. MacDonald: A Note on the Ethnographic Background to the Tsimshian Monumental Screens,” Unpublished, undated manuscript, Museum of Anthropology Library at University of British Columbia, p. 2. [from Information Update on Tsimshian House Screen Project (by Ruth Anderson – ed.)], Vancouver, British Columbia.

³¹ Questions concerning tradition are complicated because they assume a fixed state of being, which is then interpreted as cultural “authenticity.” This is a constructed Euro-American notion based on settlers’ impressions formed upon contact with Aboriginal peoples.

community, and his subject matter is usually local. This chapter will address the following questions: what was the relationship between local Aboriginal populations and the Hudson's Bay Company? What effects did both parties have on each other and what kind of community developed from this relationship? How can we situate Alexcee's art within the unique context of this community? Given the work of other artists in the area, how and why is Alexcee unique? These questions work toward understanding the world he so frequently depicted in his works and the relationships that determined the circumstances of his artistic production.

A Brief History of Lax Kw'Alaams

Long before the arrival of Europeans and the ensuing changes imposed upon the people, the site of Lax Kw'Alaams served as a temporary camp for Tsimshian traveling between the Nass River eulachon fishing grounds to the east (plate 6) and their winter dwelling-place in Metlakatla. Prior to its relocation to coastal "McLoughlin's Harbour," the HBC fort had been originally called "Fort Nass," situated at the mouth of that river. After the death of HBC Captain Aemelius Simpson in 1834, it was renamed in his memory and relocated to the second coastal site.³² This strategic move was effective for several reasons. The wide mouth of the Nass provided little shelter from the elements, so a more hospitable location was desirable to facilitate Company trade. Further, the marriage of HBC trader John Kennedy to the daughter of the wealthy and powerful Chief Legaic³³ has been posited as another reason for the relocation to (Coast) Tsimshian territory.³⁴ The alliance forged between the Company and this powerful tribe was advantageous for both parties. Tsimshian oral history emphasizes Legaic's position as

³² Helen Meilleur, *A Pour of Rain: Stories From a West Coast Fort*. (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1980), pp. 16-17.

³³ "Legaic" is the name of a long line of Tsimshian chiefs and does not refer to only one individual. This has been noted in many sources, including Rolf Knight: *Indians at Work, An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia 1858 – 1930*. (New Star Books: Vancouver, 1996), p. 261.

³⁴ Joanne MacDonald, "From Ceremonial Objects to Curios: Power Exchange at Port Simpson and Metlakatla," (M.A. Thesis, Anthropology, Ottawa: Carleton University, 1985), p. 41.

a power broker in the Fort's re-location to Lax Kw'Alaams. The chief apparently told his new son-in-law, Dr. Kennedy, that, "'I have a place for you and your people. Come to Laxlgu'alaams (On Wild Roses). Here we can visit you more frequently and help you in many ways'."³⁵ This text passage records a component of Tsimshian oral history that significantly acknowledges the Hudson's Bay Company's establishment on territory given to them by Ligeex (Legaic) in 1834. Contemporary Tsimshian historical accounts underline the power of tribal chiefdoms at the time of early settlement. According to this source, each of the nine Tsimshian tribes claimed territory on this site, which they called "Lax Kw'Alaams (Fort Simpson to the HBC men) and the village was established."³⁶ Over the next five years the Tsimshian

became the centre of the fur trade, controlling the flow of furs from all the inland peoples to the Hudson's Bay Company fort and from there to the rest of the world. The wealth that flowed into their economy from far and wide allowed them to erect whole new villages with elaborate feast houses and totem poles. Through these they continued to display their history, their territory and their power.³⁷ (plates 7, 8,9)

Emphasizing power and agency in the development of this community, Tsimshian oral history provides an authoritative narrative to enhance that of the dominant culture.³⁸ Although the latter tends to privilege European presence in terms of the Fort's establishment and the power dynamics within the community, the impression of Aboriginal empowerment is clearly reflected within, and supported by, the Hudson's Bay Company Letter and Logbooks. This documentation of Fort life has actually created a comprehensive impression of the community's cultural, economic and social contexts.

³⁵ Susan Marsden, ed., NA AMWAALTGA TS'MSIYEEN: The Tsimshian, Trade, and the Northwest Coast Economy. [Told by: Henry Kelly, Herber Clifton, Cecelia Venn, Henry Reeves, Arthur Lewis, William Beynon, Joseph Bradley, Matthew Johnson, Charles Barton, Fred Johnson, John Tate, Henry Pierce, Walter Wright, James Lewis, Joshua Ts'ibasaa, James Pierce, Sam Bennett, Dan Gasin; Illustrated by: Fred Alexcee, Bill Helin, Sara Porter, Gordon Miller, Lisa Ireton] (Tsimshian Chiefs for Tsimshian Children Present and Future: Prince Rupert, 1992), p. 111.

³⁶ "Lax Kw'Alaams" means "place of the Wild Roses" in Tsimshian.

³⁷ Marsden, p. 112.

³⁸ This perspective reflects what has been gleaned from narratives written on behalf of Euro-North American culture.

To historicize a community such as Lax Kw'Alaams is to acknowledge it as culturally diverse. Its history is shared between Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal peoples. With this in mind, this "artistic biography" will reflect multiple historical and cultural perspectives - an approach I believe is important to understand the eclectic and dynamic atmosphere in which Alexcee spent his life and which informed his oeuvre. The following narrative negotiates various sources and perspectives which have been articulated over time and space. This oscillation between multiple pasts and "presents" is reflected in Alexcee's artworks and in the words of the people associated with this place. As scholar Shawn Wilson writes, the "interpretation of the context of knowledge is necessary for that knowledge to become lived, [to] become a part of our collective experience or part of our web of relationships. So we contextualize everything that we do, and we do that contextualization in a conscious way".³⁹ The history of Fort/Port Simpson/Lax Kw'Alaams is shared among people of multiple cultures and backgrounds. There has been much speculation about Alexcee's life and artistic inspiration, so this chapter documents historical, social and cultural circumstances in order to better understand the "web of relationships" influencing him. The vast majority of Alexcee's paintings and representational images depict the community and atmosphere he would have known as a youth. These works were painted at a time when the community was undergoing a transformation brought on by changes wrought by missionary efforts and non-native governmental legislation.

The Dynamic and Eclectic "Fort Simpson"

According to HBC clerk and artist Pym Nevins Compton (whose work Alexcee appears to have copied as a young man) Simpson was, in 1859, "a typical fort, well kept, well built, and one

³⁹Shawn Wilson, Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods (Fernwood Publishing: Halifax and Winnipeg, 2008), p. 102-103.

of the finest on the coast."⁴⁰ It was approximately two hundred feet square and enclosed several two-story buildings, such as houses and stores, a working well and a garden. The buildings had shingle roofs and were constructed of thick, twelve-inch logs. The doors of these buildings were painted and the walls were whitewashed.⁴¹ (plate 10)

Relative to contemporary commercial structures, this enclosure would seem small given its influence in the community. Yet in his article "Old Port Simpson", Barbeau (1940) notes that from the moment of its relocation (to the coast), the fort "became a thriving center of business and frontier life on the Pacific Coast".⁴² Both Tsimshian men and women were employed by the Company to perform various tasks within the fort, and HBC Log and Letter Books reflect their importance for Company success. For example, an 1863 "Letter Book" entry shows that Aboriginal men performed tasks (in addition to trapping) such as crushing clam shells for ammunition, planting potatoes, and working for the Company's stakes in the eulachon trade.⁴³ Women would gather seaweed, clean the Fort's galleries, clear its yard of snow and dig and tend gardens.⁴⁴ Conversely, when Tsimshian were away for seasonal activities (such as fishing), the books reflect economic losses for the Company. For instance, on one particular day there was "no fur trade...[as] Indians [were erecting] homes near canoes for the Nass fishing."⁴⁵ Some of these entries reflect the effects that Tsimshian seasonal activities had on the trade, such as that of Tuesday, July 15, which claimed, "...Trade slack, most of the Indians away for Salmon."⁴⁶ The Company clearly depended on the local Aboriginal population for their varied skills and

⁴⁰Pym Nevins Compton, "Forts and Fort Life in New Caledonia Under Hudson's Bay Company Regime, unpublished manuscript (University of California at Berkeley, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS P-C5), p. 3.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴²Dr. Charles Marius Barbeau, "Old Port Simpson," *The Beaver*, (September 1940): 22.

⁴³ Letter Books were journal-like documents used to record daily and weekly events and occurrences, such as the success of the fur trade on any given day.

⁴⁴[author not identified], "Fort Simpson Journal Commencing the 1st day January 1863". (Hudson's Bay Company Archives, 1863 B. 201/a/9) Jan. 6-10, 1863.

⁴⁵ Ibid., February 13.

⁴⁶ Ibid., July 15.

familiarity with the landscape. At the time, the Tsimshian community was still relatively independent from the European economy and benefitted from the relationship with the HBC traders to the degree it suited them.

The Hudson's Bay Company Fort Simpson Letter Books also provide context within which to situate Alexcee's childhood. A May 1866 entry illustrates not only the economic and cultural dynamism of this Fort community when Alexcee was about thirteen, but the inter-relationships of individuals holding power at that time, who would later factor as influential figures in the creation of some of his work. According to this source, the HBC store

supplied [missionary] Mr. [William] Duncan with a few Sundried [sic] goods. Leguine⁴⁷ gave away some property, and had a grand dance on the event of his returning safe back from Victoria. He is one of the men who was taken down by HMS Ship "Clio" as prisnor [sic] 12th Dec. 1865. Received 19 prime martens from Mr. Duncan...received 27 average martens from Legaic and a note of hand for the balance of his axe [?] payable on demand...Thursday 24th - ...men employed preparing ground for turnips. [A local missionary] The Rev. MacLoalan [?] arrived at 6:30 pm from Methlakathla on his way to Nass. He has settled with his wife in full and [?]. Hick a Kispocolots Indian had a pole raised in front of his house to the memory of his Brother.⁴⁸

Company trade, Fort agriculture, Indigenous property distribution, ceremony and pole-raising are all activities mentioned in this brief yet rich passage, which reflects the eclecticism of Fort Simpson's "heyday" in the 1850s and 1860s. It refers to the influential missionary William Duncan and the then title-holder of the famous Legaic chiefdom, who appears in *Pole Raising at Port Simpson* (plate 7).⁴⁹ The early HBC accounts of Fort Simpson present its atmosphere as a dynamic, exciting milieu of international and local trade. It was a "multicultural" place where

⁴⁷ This individual is presumably a chief, perhaps referring to Legaic, for whom the orthography is not consistent in these records.

⁴⁸ [author not identified], "Fort Simpson Journal Commencing the 1st day January 1863," Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1863 B. 201/a/9, 24 April, 1863.

⁴⁹ A detail of this image showing "Chief Legaic of Port Simpson on his trick stairway during a feast and pole raising ceremony" by Fredee Alexcee [sic] appears in George F. MacDonald and John J. Cove, Trade and Warfare: Tsimshian Narratives 2, (Canadian Museum of Civilization Mercury Series Directorate, Paper No. 3, 1987), p. 53.

different ideas existed in close proximity. Echoing Compton, it was “‘well kept, well built and one of the finest on the coast’,” with a personnel consisting of, in 1859, “Orkneymen [of the Scottish Orkney Islands], French-Canadians and Norwegians.”⁵⁰

Relationship Between HBC and Aboriginal Traders

The Hudson’s Bay Company Report for 1890 provides some useful information regarding the operation of stores and competition between establishments in the community at that time.

One entry claimed that there were

no local competitions. Each Winter 2 or 3 small shops are opened in the village by enterprising Indians and Half-breeds, and, although they make little or no profit and generally close before Spring, they compel a reduction in such articles as they deal in. It must be remembered that all the Stores on the Coast between the Skeena and the Stickeen Rivers are competitors for the trade of the Coast, as the Indians with their large sea-going canoes can and do go where they find the most is to be obtained for their money...The Indians are the most advanced in civilization of all others on the West Coast. They are very industrious and well-off, many having Bank accounts in Victoria. They hunt Furs when prices are good, but for a livelihood they depend principally on labor, which is obtained at the Canneries and other industries established up the Alaskan Coast, and down along the whole Coast of British Columbia and Washington Territory. They are a strong, vigorous race, keen and intelligent, possessing good houses, well furnished, and live in great comfort.⁵¹

This report provides a general but more empowering character sketch of the local Tsimshian population as it ascribes more agency to the people than what has often seen in the literature.

The report continues to describe the activities of the Aboriginal salesmen in the HBC store, saying that,

⁵⁰ Compton, p. 3.

⁵¹ J. McDougall, “Inspection Report. Port Simpson Post. Port Simpson District. J. McDougall, Inspecting Officer, 24/30th September 1890 Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba: B.201/e/2 Simpson Fort (Nass) REPORT 1890.

The salesmen in the Store here deal in Indian curiosities on private account. These are brought from Queen Charlotte Islands by the Hydats, bought by the salesmen in the Store for cash, and retailed to tourists and others at about 100 to 150 %. The whole trade may amount to \$500.00 per annum. Should the American boats touch at Simpson with Flour, etc., as above mentioned, this trade would be of much more importance, and might reach about \$2000.00 per annum.⁵²

The sale of curios was apparently unimportant, which could have been why the HBC allowed their shopkeepers to operate private accounts out of the store.⁵³ The records also reference regional Native-owned and operated stores, although they do not seem to have provided much competition. For example, the HBC register for 1900 notes that there were “one or two Indian Stores but no other immediate competition”. The Company faced competition at nearby Port Essington, and further inland on the Fraser and Columbia Rivers, where Tsimshian (and others) would travel to fish and pick hops. The canneries were another source of competition as they paid their workers in goods and gave them cash advances. The factor outlined the Company’s strategy of “keeping up the stock and selling to the Indians at home as reasonably as possible”.⁵⁴

One of Alexcee’s children was baptized at the Port Essington Church, according to Methodist Church records.⁵⁵ It is possible that he travelled there with the missionary Thomas Crosby on the *Glad Tidings* mission ship and by extension perhaps fished and sold artwork there. Printed Eaton’s catalogues were made available to the local Aboriginal population (which

⁵² McDougall, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba: B.201/e/2 Simpson Fort (Nass) REPORT 1890.

⁵³ In September, 1890, an “Alexis” is mentioned as having a debt in the “List of debts” register. This register has been organized into the sections “Outstanding or balances, 26th Sept. 1890”, “Bad debts written off, Outfit 1889” and “Port Simpson Indian Debts”, upon which “Alexis” is listed as having a “good” debt of \$3.00. His name appears at the bottom of the list. His small debt probably indicates his low income (if this is indeed Freddie Alexcee – there were other Alexcees in Fort/Port Simpson at the time as evidenced in Beynon’s blueprint). Fellow artist Alfred Dudoward is also recorded on this list.

⁵⁴ E.K. Beeston, “Inspection Report on Port Simpson Post, Port Simpson District, G.R. Robson In Charge, E.K. Beeston, Inspector, May-June 1900,” Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1900 B.201/e/5 – Port Simpson Report 1900.

⁵⁵ See record of baptisms, Wesleyan Methodist Mission, Grace Methodist Church 27 Feb. 1874 – 5 Dec. 1897 (Box 197) Port Simpson Grace United Church, Bob Stewart Archives, Vancouver.

threatened HBC business from afar). In her accounts, ethnographer Viola Garfield notes Alexcee's intention to copy candlestick holders from a catalogue, which could have been from Eaton's or HBC.⁵⁶ The Report for 1900 mentions Aboriginal people taking their trade in furs to Victoria, Vancouver and Seattle, where they would work in the hop fields, salmon canneries and fisheries. Both Garfield and clergyman George Raley mention Alexcee's employment both as a hop-picker and as a fisherman.⁵⁷ Alexcee's contemporaries were enterprising people who were accustomed to travel and mobility.

According to regional historian Rolf Knight, by 1900 Port Simpson was host to a multitude of local services and stores owned and operated by Aboriginal and white residents. Knight references the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) Sessional Papers (1902:284) which claimed that

In the Northwest Agency the Indians own sawmills, and dogfish oil manufactures, they also have many stores, and have commenced in a small way to can salmon and clams; nearly all the trades are there carried on, such as carpenters, blacksmiths, painters, etc., etc., as well as many other different enterprises which are being started and wholly managed by the advanced natives, with every reasonable prospect of an average measure of success.⁵⁸

As this passage indicates, Aboriginal people were involved in a number of enterprises and had to respond creatively and assertively to succeed in communities such as Fort/Port Simpson.

Styles of Painting in Fort Simpson

⁵⁶ Garfield field notes (Xeroxed, no page numbers given). Garfield's field notes were accessed in Bill McLennan's "Freddie Alexcee" file at his office at University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver. The original primary source is located at the University of Washington in Seattle. See Accession No. 2027-001-Viola Edmunsden Garfield Papers, 1927-1963 (Bulk 1935-1963) Speeches and Writings, 1951-1953, 1963, "Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art". "Guide to the Viola Edmunsden Garfield Papers 1927-1978" accessible at http://www.lib.washington.edu/specialcoll/findaids/docs/uarchives/UA19_26_2027GarfieldViolaEdmundson.xml

⁵⁷ See Garfield's field notes and George Henry Raley "Notes for speeches and articles re civilization of Indians," (1863-1958) H/D/R13/R13.8, British Columbia Provincial Archives, Victoria.

⁵⁸ Rolf Knight, Indians at Work – An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia 1858-1930. (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1996), pp. 163-164.

Fort Simpson was home to several artists. Hudson's Bay Company clerk and artist Pym Nevins Compton worked at the store there in the 1860s.⁵⁹ Simmons reports that "at least one of Compton's paintings hung in [local resident Helen Meilleur's] father's store and was copied many times by local artists...Compton's landscapes are typical of the English topographical watercolour tradition of the nineteenth century."⁶⁰ According to the B.C. Archives, Compton painted "Fort Simpson" prior to (his death) in 1879 (plate 10). The same source indicates that fellow Hudson's Bay Company clerk Gordon Lockerby painted his version in 1895 (plate 11). An Alexcee painting currently in the collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), "Fight Between the Haida and Tsimshian at Fort Simpson" (plate 12) was painted in 1896, according to documentation in the National Gallery of Canada's curatorial file. John Flewin, a Government Agent at Fort Simpson, noted that this work was "painted for me in 1896 as I wanted a picture of the old fort and [Alexcee] told me he could paint."⁶¹ In 1926, Flewin was corresponding with the NGC director Eric Brown, who, along with Barbeau, was organizing the joint 1927 National Gallery of Canada-National Museum of Man exhibit in which two of Alexcee's paintings were to be hung.⁶² Brown responded to Flewin later that month, saying that the "picture [is] interesting – [with] great spirit & feeling & remarkable for someone without training or opportunity of seeing art."⁶³ As will be seen in Chapter Two, the reconciliation of various sources indicates that Brown was wrong – Alexcee *had* had the opportunity to see Western art – in catalogues, at the HBC store, probably in newspapers - and while perhaps not having formal training in European traditions, his works reflect the frontal, almost photographic perspective of the Fort as

⁵⁹ Hudson's Bay Company Letter Book; HBCA Biographical sheets database; Diedre Simmons, "Frederick Alexcee, Indian Artist (c. 1857 to c. 1944)", *Journal of Canadian Art History*. 14 (August, 1992): 87.

⁶⁰ Simmons, p. 87.

⁶¹ Correspondence between John Flewin and Marius Barbeau, 18 November, 1926 (Included in "Notes on Frederick Alexie [sic] Paintings in the 1927 West Coast Exhibition", National Gallery of Canada Archives, extracts compiled by Charlie Hill, curator of Canadian Art).

⁶² This exhibit will be discussed in greater detail later in this thesis.

⁶³ Barbeau to Flewin, 30 November, 1926.

evidenced in both Compton and later Lockerby, combined with the flat, two-dimensional perspective and general lack of depth characteristic of Tsimshian housefront painting. Alexcee's stylistic influences have been mostly speculated upon, but I argue that numerous "practical" or circumstantial factors led to the creation of types of works that he did, such as seeing or copying already-existing paintings like the ones mentioned above, documenting the community's appearance based upon memory and nostalgia for the "old fort days," as well as responding to the opportunities for commissions, as he did with Flewin.

Late Gitksan scholar Doreen Jensen has hypothesized the origins of Alexcee's style. Referencing a set of painted glass lantern slides, Jensen argued for the possibility of a Japanese artistic influence, based upon their similarity to prints and paintings of the late nineteenth century. She explained that when Japan began trading with Western countries, they used prints to wrap products destined for the North American Pacific Coast. She also noted the influx of Chinese and Japanese immigrants to the North Coast to work and trade, so it is conceivable that Alexcee saw the prints and, as an artist, took inspiration from their use of tableau, more similar to the Northwest Coast two-dimensional style than that of Western landscape. She noted that,

screens for ceremonial use in Northwest Coast culture may not have been realistic, as we define realism, but they were representations of narratives and histories. And, they employed tableau as a technique of organizing their creations.⁶⁴

Alexcee's lantern slides (to be discussed in Chapter Three) are certainly narrative histories. What becomes clear in the literature and documentation surrounding Alexcee's childhood and the Fort itself, is that there was a multitude of influences – social, personal, visual, from which he could have drawn inspiration for his work. Activities within the Fort included dealings with

⁶⁴Doreen Jensen, "Frederick Alexcee: Tsimshian Artist 1854-1939," Unpublished paper presented at Otsego Institute, Cooperstown, NY, August 7-8, 1999, pp. 4-5.

influential agents as Robert Cunningham (a Metlakatla shopkeeper who dealt with the HBC store from there and controlled the flow of goods to Nass River communities), Compton (who was in charge of the trade shop at Fort Simpson), as well as Aboriginal chiefs Legaic, Edenshaw and Arthur Wellington Clah, who were regularly in and out of town on business. Alexcee was a boy within this “heyday” atmosphere where Aboriginal leaders were actively dealing with the Europeans, and were very much empowered agents within the community, as the previously quoted HBC extract confirms.⁶⁵ It was this exciting and relatively functional landscape of the Fort Simpson of his youth that Alexcee consistently painted.

Many scholars emphasize the documentary aspect of Alexcee’s work. According to Aldona Jonaitis,

Alexie [sic] painted images of his community as it existed between 1850 and 1870, such as the one reproduced of a pole raising held in Lax Kw’Alaams decades earlier [plate 7]. Alexie’s paintings have sometimes been classified as ‘Indian primitive’, because their naïve, apparently self-taught style presents an immediacy and sincerity that complements their value as ethnohistorical documents. It would appear that Alexie was attempting to educate a largely non-Native audience about his culture by using a visual vocabulary they could understand. So, instead of creating isolated, uncontextualized items of regalia that outsiders may have found obscure, Alexie painted narrative works that included Native personages and portrayed dynamic movements that few non-Natives would have experienced.⁶⁶

Peter Macnair notes that

Alexcee is much better known for his sketches and paintings [than for his sculptures and carvings in wood] – produced in water colour on paper or oil on canvas. These are created in a Euro-American painting style although they would be described by art historians as ‘primitive’. The known examples feature

⁶⁵ During his youth, Alexcee was apparently being trained as a carver of ritual paraphernalia, so he grew up at a time when the cultural practices of his people were not yet outlawed, as the potlatch ban would not come into effect until 1884. By the late 1850s, missionary William Duncan had moved to Metlakatla and many people had converted to Christianity.

⁶⁶ Aldona Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast*, (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 2006), p. 233.

villagescapes, incidents from history, and depictions of traditional Tsimshian life and ceremony.⁶⁷

To contemporary audiences, his work is appreciated for being documentary, yet, as will be investigated in Chapter Three, it has also been dismissed as “inauthentic” Indian art, as he worked prominently within the Western tradition. We can only qualify Alexcee’s works as “unusual” or “unconventional” after investigating the types of material culture that were emerging in collections of his day. Secondly, if Alexcee’s works are so different from “conventional” Tsimshian art, what kinds of objects were considered traditional and who else from this community was known to be artistic?

Social Context: The Church, Products, Material Culture and Collections Out of Fort/Port Simpson

In addition to the cultural eclecticism at the fort, author Helen Meilleur notes the diversity of products being made and traded there.⁶⁸ In 1853 (the year of Alexcee’s birth), munitions, brooms, rope, wheel-barrows, buckets and sledges were being manufactured for the maintenance of the fort and for trade. Tsimshian men were involved in the fabrication of plaster and whitewash from shells, and Tsimshian women, by 1855, were cleaning the furs to be traded, an occupation that, in its early years, had been performed by the Company men.⁶⁹ Tsimshian people were both receptive to the changes brought by the company and participated in, and benefitted from, the economic opportunities it had to offer. By the time Alexcee was born, Fort Simpson was a dynamic and diverse atmosphere economically, politically, socially and

⁶⁷Peter Macnair, “Four Model Poles Owned by George Mess,” (unpublished manuscript, Royal B.C. Museum, 26 July 1990). (Document accessed in Bill McLennan’s “Frederick Alexcee” file at Museum of Anthropology at University of British Columbia).

⁶⁸ Born in Port Simpson in 1910, Helen Meilleur was a local resident who, as a child, assisted her father in his general store. As an adult, she composed a narrative of the Fort based mostly on HBC documentation while contributing memories of her own experiences there.

⁶⁹ Meilleur, p. 90.

culturally. His work (such as the painted lantern-slides) represented times and scenes in Tsimshian life prior to and after the effects of contact and colonial settlement. Clarence Bolt reports that by the time (missionary) Duncan had arrived in 1857, contact with whites had been relatively ordered, and people were curious about European ways and ideas.⁷⁰

As noted previously, the growing population of the fort eventually attracted the attention of the church. One HBC captain successfully convinced the Church Missionary Society that “Fort Simpson was an ideal location [for a mission]...noting the large number of native villages in the area of the Fort, and comparing [it] to the London of the Coast”.⁷¹ In October 1857, William Duncan arrived and two months later was preaching to the community in Tsimshian. In his first month of tenure, he founded a school inside the Fort, an important agent of acculturation.⁷² After a few years however, Duncan found that his hold on the Fort Simpson Tsimshian was not as strong as he had hoped. By 1859 (when the first three Methodist missionaries arrived in British Columbia), Duncan decided to leave, having realized that many people were not willing to completely change their traditions or lifestyles.⁷³ Duncan’s unsuccessful attempts to affect comprehensive spiritual and social changes among the people, as well as a conflict with the current Chief Legaic and the 1862 smallpox epidemic, prompted him to lead some converts away to establish his own community at Metlakatla.⁷⁴

In 1873, a small group of Tsimshian in Victoria converted to Methodism and upon their return to Fort Simpson, requested a missionary for the town, as “part of the desire for

⁷⁰ Clarence Bolt, Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian; Small Shoes for Feet Too Large. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), p. 21.

⁷¹ Joanne MacDonald, p. 60.

⁷² Robin Fisher, Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), p. 129.

⁷³ MacDonald, p. 60.

⁷⁴ Meilleur, p. 119.

acculturation.”⁷⁵ In 1874, Methodist missionary Thomas Crosby arrived, having been invited by Kate and Alfred Dudoward, two prominent Fort Simpson Tsimshian converted in Victoria.⁷⁶ By this time, the Tsimshian had been in contact with Europeans for almost one hundred years.⁷⁷ For Crosby, the Tsimshian were to become Western Europeans in how they lived and worshipped. According to Bolt, this was the “only suitable context for conversion.” Crosby was trying to construct a new cultural framework based on Western ways of life.⁷⁸ Prior to Crosby’s arrival, on 27 February, 1874, Reverend William Pollard, chairman of the B.C. District of Wesleyan Methodist Church, baptized 125 children and fourteen adults at Fort Simpson. Twenty-one-year-old Freddie was among the newly-converted.⁷⁹ Bolt writes that many Tsimshian made a conscious choice “to embrace what they interpreted to be the key elements of the success of Western culture...the choice was not an easy one but was made in the hope that the alleged advantages of Western civilization would be theirs and that some of the negative effects of contact would disappear.”⁸⁰

Some sources confirm that Aboriginal people on the Northwest Coast were encouraged to be active contributors to the aesthetic of the churches they joined. For example, a missionary in nearby Port Essington wrote that his church’s baptismal font was “made by Indians and the pulpit by white men. The choice may be taken as characteristic of the estimation in which both are held as regards relative values by the two races.”⁸¹ This reductive and rather cryptic

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ According to Rolf Knight, Alfred Dudoward was among the first Aboriginal ship owners. By the mid 1870s he owned and operated the schooner “Georgina”, which sailed between Victoria and Port Simpson. See Knight, p. 208.

⁷⁷ Bolt, p. 3.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 37.

⁷⁹ B.C. Archives Vital Events database (<http://search.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca>) Baptisms 1836-1888: Call # 300-18-2: Frederic Alexcee, baptized 1874/02/27 at Wesleyan Methodist Mission, Fort Simpson.

⁸⁰ Bolt, pp. 108-109.

⁸¹ George Henry Raley, “Miscellaneous articles, papers, etc. relating to Indians and Missions”:1863 – 1958, Raley Fonds, H/D/R13/R13.9 (I), British Columbia Provincial Archives, Victoria, British Columbia.

statement might actually provide some insight into the value that Aboriginal converts placed on “owning” the aesthetic of the object through which they would gain access to and membership in the new church community. Alexcee is said to have sculpted one such baptismal font, a beautiful and haunting angel (plate 13) for the Grace Methodist Church in Port Simpson.⁸² His motive for conversion remains unknown but it could be that membership within this new community would have been perceived as socially beneficial. It is possible that the preachers’ revivalist method or message would have been attractive to potential converts, and on a more practical note, given his age and employment as an engineer on the mission ship *The Glad Tidings*, conversion to Christianity would have secured Alexcee regular income by working for the Church.

Upon Crosby’s arrival, the Port Simpson Methodist Church was erected for services, becoming known as the “Grace Methodist Church” in the late 1880s.⁸³ This church has been illustrated by Caroline Sarah Tate (1850-1930), a near-exact contemporary of Alexcee, between 1876 and 1879 (plate 14). It, too, resembles contemporary photographs with its setting of the structure within a large landscape of land, sea and sky.

Cultural changes instigated by the missionaries included the reduction of shamanistic curing practices (i.e. whereas in traditional systems, religion and medicine were closely related). Changes in house style and traditional living conventions also occurred. Families, both converts and non-converts,⁸⁴ abandoned their communal dwellings (visible in Alexcee’s paintings [plates 3, 12,17]), which would have been occupied by a lineage house head and his wife, children and

⁸² This baptismal font will be discussed in Chapter three.

⁸³ History: Grace United Church (Port Simpson) Fonds, United Church of Canada British Columbia Conference Archives, <http://www.memorybc.ca/index.php/informationobject/show/rad/22766> (accessed 2010/04/27)

⁸⁴ Joanne MacDonald, p. 74.

some other relatives, and built single-family units (plate 2).⁸⁵ Building projects, which occupied a great deal of the missionaries' time, give an early record of their interest in the material culture of the Tsimshian as a funding source. When the roof detached from Crosby's church, he sought assistance in the form of "blankets, furs, muskets, earrings, finger rings, bracelets and everything that could be turned into money."⁸⁶ Missionaries also helped collectors locate anthropological "specimens" for private and museum collections. Besides illustrating aspects of "traditional" Tsimshian life and conventions, these collections indicate what cultural and anthropological institutions were seeking to substantiate or qualify their understanding of Aboriginal cultures. By contrasting Alexcee's works with those within these ethnographic collections, it becomes clearer why work such as his was considered unusual during his lifetime.

Ethnographic Collections of Fort/Port Simpson (and Metlakatla)

In 1875, the Smithsonian Institution's James Swan arrived in Fort Simpson on a collecting mission to commemorate the U.S. Centennial. Crosby, Swan's host, and the HBC trader C.E. Morrison, gathered a collection for him which they would then send to Victoria as he continued his travels up the coast to Alaska.⁸⁷ Historian Douglas Cole notes that despite the material amassed on his behalf, Swan was disappointed as "[it] hardly matched his expectations."⁸⁸ At Fort Simpson, Swan amassed about 45 to 50 objects.⁸⁹ These were mostly for conventional, personal and ceremonial use, including a stone adze, mortar and maul, halibut hooks, copper

⁸⁵William Beynon, "Process of Change from Matrilineal to Patrilineal Inheritance," Marius Barbeau Fonds, NWC file, "Frederick Alexee A Canadian "Primitive" folder, B-F-159, Box 102, Folder 13, p. 2, Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives, Gatineau, Quebec.

⁸⁶Joanne MacDonald, p. 75.

⁸⁷Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 1985), p. 23.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Dr. Andrea Laforet, personal field notebook (re: NMNH Swan collection).

and horn bracelets, a carved totem and dancing hats and masks. The items in his collection comprise what was then seen as an “authentic” representation of Tsimshian culture. This ethnological collection did not include the names of the works’ makers, a dimension that, for the collectors, was presumably irrelevant, as they were more interested in the general traditional material culture of the people, and not in their contemporary conventions. It appears that Swan did not collect anything by Alexcee. He did, however, collect a set of painted house front boards – subject matter that Alexcee explored in his painted lantern slides now in the collection of the Museum of Vancouver.⁹⁰

In 1864, one year after Duncan led his converts from Fort Simpson to Metlakatla, the Scottish minister Robert J. Dundas amassed a collection there with Duncan’s help. Unsurprisingly for a church leader, Dundas was especially interested in the ritual objects of the Tsimshian, writing that

I shd. explain to you, as far as I can, this medicine work. It is the great imposture among the Indians: having its force from their superstitious dread of Evil Spirits – wh. only the Medicine Man can bind & cast out...[they] pretend to have power over their victim – whom they can destroy at any moment by a word...⁹¹

Dundas’ fascination with ritual and ceremonial aspects of Tsimshian life is reflected in his collection, which includes finely carved feast bowls and dishes, shamans’ figures and rattles,

⁹⁰To this end, Dr. George MacDonald notes that Alexcee, “working in the ‘Sunday’ painting style (an amateur style) neither naïve nor sophisticated, reproduced a number of painted house fronts from his childhood memories, which can be validated in their accuracy from other sources,” including Dawson’s 1878 photos of Skagwait’s house exterior (plate 5). These screens are the only complete examples of their kind and are at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History (having been collected by Swan in 1875). See George MacDonald, “Appendix III: Draft Paper by George F. MacDonald: A Note on the Ethnographic Background to the Tsimshian Monumental Screens.” [Unpublished, undated manuscript]. Museum of Anthropology Library at University of British Columbia, p. 2. [from Information Update on Tsimshian House Screen Project (by Ruth Anderson – ed.)], p. 2.

⁹¹ Dundas, quoted in Sotheby’s auction catalogue: *The Dundas Collection of Northwest Coast American Indian Art*. New York, Thursday, 5 October, 2006 (New York, NY: 1334 York), p. 1.

chiefs' dance rattles, clappers, painted headdresses and masks.⁹² Collectors such as Dundas found the ceremonial practices of the Aboriginal "other" alluring and mysterious so it is not surprising that his collection contains mostly objects used within these contexts. Also, within the context of the mission period (beginning c. 1853), the religious paraphernalia of tribal cultures impressed the colonizers and was often taken to characterize (and later stereotype) them.

Duncan and Crosby differed somewhat in their views of the fabrication of material culture. Both encouraged the perpetuation of certain aspects of Tsimshian culture and convention as ways to potentially re-organize the Tsimshian world view under the banners of Christianity and Westernization.⁹³ Relating new ideas to the Tsimshian through material culture, Duncan favored the representation of clan images. He interpreted the clan system as the closest element of traditional culture to the formation of a unified native brotherhood, as opposed to tribal divisions, which can be understood as political units with elected chiefs to whom clans would pay tribute and thereby recognize prestige. His church at Metlakatla featured painted sculptures of the four clan crests of the Tsimshian nation as beam supports.⁹⁴ Duncan also encouraged crafts and curios to be made for sale within local and tourist markets and introduced Tsimshian women to weaving and spinning. Crosby, on the other hand, encouraged the production of non-traditional items - food, textiles, beadwork and patchwork which did not emphasize the clan or Indian motifs and which would be exhibited at an annual show in Port Simpson.⁹⁵ Joanne MacDonald notes a general lack of missionary encouragement for art and craft-making in the 1881 census. No Tsimshian artists are listed at Port Simpson at this time,

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Their interests extended beyond just collecting paraphernalia.

⁹⁴ MacDonald, p. 84.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 83-86.

although this is unsurprising given that the occupational title of “artist” was not recognized in the census for Aboriginal people. However, she cites one clergyman as having noted that “every other man is very handy with carpenters’ tools, others can do good work at the forge or in the tin shop, while others if brought under the guiding hand of the skilled teacher of art would excel as painters and draftsmen.”⁹⁶ Having been trained as a *halait* (secret society) carver, Alexcee would have utilized his sculptural and painting skills in a variety of works. A closer look at a few other collections confirms the presence of several local artists in Aboriginal communities.

There are many collections containing items obtained at Port Simpson between 1850 and 1915. The collections consulted for this project include those at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Gatineau), the National Museum of the American Indian (New York), the American Museum of Natural History (New York), the National Museum of Natural History (Washington, D.C.), the Field Museum (Chicago) and the Burke Museum (Seattle).

Two collections at the CMC include documented names of individuals having made the works collected, whereas three do not. Those of Bossom (collected circa 1910-1916), Crosby (collected 1886) and Dundas (collected 1863) do not associate makers’ names with the objects. Reasons for these omissions could be the relative antiquity of these pieces – many were used in ceremonial and daily contexts and so were not commissioned for sale in contemporary times. Like Dundas’ collection (discussed above), those of Bossom and Crosby include mostly traditional material such as adzes, axes, bowls, charms, dishes, gambling equipment, ladles, spoons, rattles and *naxnox* whistles. Crosby’s collection should be considered within the context of his attempted transformation of the Tsimshians’ lifestyles at Fort/Port Simpson.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86

Their adoption of Western customs and material culture probably influenced peoples' decisions to relinquish the objects used prior to the arrival of missionaries.

The lists of Barbeau (1915), who solicited works from various Port Simpson Tsimshian in his capacity as NMM anthropologist, and Perry (1911), do record some makers' names. Perry's collection is largely comprised of ceremonial regalia, archaeological items and old Hudson's Bay Company material, but he did collect a few contemporary works made in Port Essington.⁹⁷

These items were clearly made for sale as they reflect somewhat hasty craftsmanship and have not been used (plate 16). Apart from his interest in the religious history of Tsimshian cultures, the section titled "Modern Native Industries" shows that Perry was attracted to the contemporary craftwork of Aboriginal people, such as a carved and painted walking stick, four carved salad spoons and forks, two sopillily⁹⁸ spoons and six Tsimshian model totem poles. In his early correspondence with the National Museum (now CMC), Perry refers to a "bedridden Indian" craftsman identified as "Samuel Elwit", of Port Essington, whose name also appears on Perry's collector's list.⁹⁹ Although Perry identifies Elwit as the maker of the walking stick and the model totem poles specifically, it is possible that, based on their appearance and style, the carved utensils were all made by this same man.

As Rolf Knight notes, "members of some coastal groups [such as the Tsimshian] were...involved in producing items for the curio trade...these entailed novel objects and forms [and] model memorial poles [and although some of these creations were masterfully crafted and commanded high prices] much curio carving sold for relatively low prices."¹⁰⁰ The monetary value of Elwit's works is not provided in the correspondence, although they appear never to

⁹⁷ Port Essington, British Columbia, is located on the Skeena River, south-east of Prince Rupert.

⁹⁸ A sopillily (also spelled "sopallally") spoon is a thin, paddle-like utensil used for eating whipped berries (sometimes referred to as "Indian ice-cream").

⁹⁹ "Samuel Elwit" could not be located on B.C. Provincial Archives Vital Events database.

¹⁰⁰ Knight, pp. 137-138.

have been used and may have been purchased directly from Elwit. Compared to other, more elaborately painted model totem poles in the CMC's collection, these ones appear to be less refined.

In 1915, Marius Barbeau made his first ethnographic trip to Port Simpson to study the Tsimshian with the help of his assistant, informant and translator William Beynon. His collection is largely ethnographic and includes several baskets, fish hooks, storage boxes, spoons and ladles. These items, many of which he commissioned to be "made in the old style,"¹⁰¹ document traditional conventions of Tsimshian people, and Barbeau did record many of the makers' names. Basket makers Emma Musgrave, Matilda Kelly and Mrs. Joshua Moody were all contemporaries of Alexcee, if a couple of decades younger. Carvers Henry Nelson, Peter Denny and Steven Ward were also younger contemporaries. These men carved items such as canes, rattles, halibut hooks and ladles¹⁰² – all objects Barbeau could use for an "authentic" collection representative of traditional Tsimshian material culture, even if they were made in contemporary times.

This 1915 collection identifies approximately thirty-five artists. Fred and Charles Dudoward (a generation younger than Freddie) respectively carved and painted a model house that is now at the CMC. The painting represents the Gispuwudwuda (killerwhale) crest of the chief wice.ks, and was made in 1906.¹⁰³ It is also known that Charles Dudoward (born in Prince Rupert in 1888) completed at least one landscape painting, which, according to his wife Louisa¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Barbeau, 1915 collector's list, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Library, Archives and Documentation Services.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Freddie Alexcee was also of the Gispuwudwuda clan.

¹⁰⁴ This statement was recorded in a 1974 interview commemorating the Port Simpson Grace United Church.

hung in the school in Port Simpson.¹⁰⁵ It seems as though Charles was the only other (two-dimensional) painter in Port Simpson contemporaneous to Alexcee. He also replicated wice.k's house front painting on canvas,¹⁰⁶ and executed pen-and-ink drawings of totem poles and tattoo crest designs copied from the arms of women elders.¹⁰⁷ A perusal of Barbeau's Northwest Coast fonds at the CMC reveals his dependence upon Dudoward for the depiction of crests and traditional designs of Northwest Coast two-dimensional art. As far as can be discerned, Alexcee was never consulted by Barbeau for this kind of work (as he was by Garfield, about fifteen years later), nor would Dudoward ever become well-known within a wider Canadian context (as Alexcee would) for his art-making. Dudoward apparently fit Barbeau's idea of traditional but not innovative, and conversely, Alexcee was seen as innovative and far from traditional.

Contemporary artist Peter Denny was born in 1855 and died in Port Simpson in 1918. According to Barbeau, Denny also carved for the *halait*. Barbeau collected his rattle, war club, horn ladle, spoon, food dish, model totem poles and canes. Barbeau's collection lists are valuable records of Port Simpson's artists and help provide context in which to situate Alexcee, whose absence is significant. Within Barbeau's collecting mandate, Alexcee or his work does not appear in the list of adzes, bags, baskets, carved and painted boxes, bracelets, dishes, fish hooks, headdresses, mats and rattles collected in 1915. Alexcee's idiosyncratic work just did not fit within the Western-established parameters of "tradition."

On his 1915 visit, Barbeau took many photographs of Port Simpson and its Tsimshian residents, primarily the chiefs, whose "pedigree and history" were "worth recording." His

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Louisa Dudoward (by Ken McLeod), "Grace United Church Port Simpson, B.C., 100th Anniversary Celebrations, November, 1974 (Obtained at British Columbia Archival Union List, Vancouver, B.C.).

¹⁰⁶ Canadian Museum of Civilization artifact catalogue number VII-C-703.

¹⁰⁷ Barbeau, 1915 collector's list, Library, Archives and Documentation Services, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, Quebec.

photos (as anthropological documents) are more portrait-like in composition than the earlier panoramic shots taken by C.P. R. photographer Horetzky. Barbeau's images include poles and houses - remnants of traditional architecture - and people. Some of the chiefs he photographed at this time included David Swanson (Gilutsau tribe); Herbert Wallace (Gitsiis); "Clah", or Arthur Wellington (Gispaxlo'ots) and Chief Werley (Gitando). It was on this trip that Barbeau initially encountered – and then overlooked - the work of Freddie Alexcee. In his retrospective 1944 article, "Frederick Alexie, a Primitive," he recalled a lantern slide show held in the Port Simpson church by the Reverend J.C. Spencer for a mixed crowd of Hudson's Bay Company employees, government agents (including Perry), Methodist missionaries and converted Tsimshian. Barbeau remarked upon the "naiveté and ingenuity with which [the slides] illustrated stories and legends of the local Tsimshian tribe".¹⁰⁸ He later admitted that,

I have not yet forgotten the impression left by that peculiar display of colored illustrations of Indian stories...as [Alexcee] did not count among the Tsimshian chiefs, whose pedigree and history were worth recording, I overlooked him, and I left Port Simpson in the spring, knowing no more about him than I had learned during the winter evening at the mission; he sat there with the others in the audience, silent – he did not speak English very well – while the missionary commented on his cartoons and drawings...¹⁰⁹

Barbeau was personally fascinated with Alexcee's paintings and sculptures.¹¹⁰ He remarked that, "more and more their strange quality beckoned and puzzled me; they remained outside the regular categories of Indian and Canadian art."¹¹¹

Barbeau's use of Charles Dudoward (1888-1973) as an informant indicates his interest in more traditional Tsimshian designs.¹¹² As noted above, Barbeau collected information on this

¹⁰⁸ Barbeau, (1944), p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

artist's designs for face-painting, ceremonial regalia, jewelry, dishes, doors, totem poles, shaman's "charms", spoons, paddles and boxes.¹¹³ For the most part, Dudoward's knowledge speaks to tradition and convention, which is what Barbeau sought to characterize as "authentic" Tsimshian artistic styles. He was interested in what the designs represented and in what contexts they were used. At this point, Alexcee's art was considered something of an anomaly. Nonetheless, upon his return to Port Simpson in 1926 with A.Y. Jackson, Barbeau purchased the oil on cloth painting *Battle Between the Haida and the Tsimshian* (plate 12),¹¹⁴ while Jackson bought the watercolour *Indian Village of Port Simpson* (plate 17).¹¹⁵ According to Barbeau, Jackson was impressed with Alexcee's work. The following year, these two paintings would be exhibited in the joint National Gallery of Canada and National Museum show, *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern*.¹¹⁶

Another artist from Port Simpson who has achieved relatively little recognition was Moses Alexcee. His work is in the collection of the Museum of Vancouver and he was briefly mentioned in Garfield's field notes on "Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art".¹¹⁷ Possibly a nephew of Freddie's, his lot of residence is also visible on Beynon's 1915 map. Known to have carved and painted at least one feast dish, Moses was born in 1878 and died in 1958 in Port Simpson at the age of 80.¹¹⁸ According to a letter from T.P.O. Menzies, former curator at the Museum of Vancouver, Moses' sea lion bowl was donated to the collection in 1949 by a friend of his for

¹¹² Death Record for Charles Henry Dudoward (Registration #: 1973-09-00425), British Columbia Archives Vital Events Database: <http://search.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca>.

¹¹³ Charles Dudoward (artist), *Designs*, Marius Barbeau Fonds, Northwest Coast File, B-F-183.29. Box: B15, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, Quebec.

¹¹⁴ This painting was purchased by the National Museum of Man in the 1950s.

¹¹⁵ Barbeau (1944), p. 21. This painting is now in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

¹¹⁶ This 1927 Exhibition will be discussed in Chapter Three.

¹¹⁷ Garfield, "Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art" (field notes).

¹¹⁸ Death Record for Moses Alexcee (Registration #: 1958-09-014771). British Columbia Archives Vital Events Database: <http://search.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca>.

whom he had made it that year (plate 18). In the letter to Moses, Menzies thanked him, saying that he was

writing to let you know how pleased we are to get this fine example of your artistic work, which we think is wonderful, more specially so at your age. I feel sure that we have a set of lantern slides, painted by you, when you were a much younger man, these we have displayed often and they have been enjoyed by many people. Your carving is now out on display...¹¹⁹

As this document indicates, there had been curatorial confusion over the attribution of Freddie's and Moses' works. The lantern slides to which Menzies refers were painted much earlier by Freddie Alexcee, although it is worth noting the contrast in institutional attitudes towards First Nations art in the 1940s compared to when Freddie was active two decades earlier. Clearly, Menzies thought highly of Moses' dish regardless of its "tourist art" appearance – it is painted in bright, commercial paints and appears almost "kitschy." Its positive reception can be contextualized within the years leading up to the formation of the Massey Commission in 1949. As Ronald Hawker notes, the main objective of the Commission was to "promote the reception of First Nations arts, and, thus, the recognition of their contribution to Canadian society."¹²⁰ Menzies' tone above certainly recognizes Moses' work as a contribution to the Museum of Vancouver, and by extension, the wider context of Canadian society. Indeed, his praises can be contrasted with Garfield's from only fifteen years earlier, in which she criticizes the latter's style and technique.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Letter from T.P.O. Menzies, Curator, City of Vancouver Museum [now MoV], 13 Dec. 1949 to Moses Alexcee, of Port Simpson, B.C., Museum of Vancouver, in file of donor Miss Lorna K. Richmond.

¹²⁰ Ronald Hawker, *Tales of Ghosts: First Nations Arts In British Columbia, 1922-61* (UBC Press: Vancouver, Toronto, 2003), p. 128.

¹²¹ This encounter will be discussed in Chapter Three. At the time of this interview, Freddie was 81 and Moses was 56. A more comprehensive genealogical investigation could probably confirm the nature of their relationship but the twenty-five year age gap, their matching surnames and the identification of Freddie's artist nephew in Garfield's notes suggests this is possible. There are two Alexcee lots on Beynon's 1915 Port Simpson blueprint, one belonging to Freddie and one belonging to Moses Alexcee. The BCAUL church register lists two Alexcees in its early years, Freddie and Joseph. B.C. Vital Events death statistics show these two men were born in 1853. A letter from John Flewin to Eric Brown notes that

In her field notes, Garfield wrote that Freddie “is the only artist in Port Simpson at the present time, and the only one I knew of when I went there.”¹²² It is interesting that she made no direct reference to Moses, who did live in Port Simpson, although she had heard of him through Freddie. As a point of comparison, Garfield would contrast his work with that of another contemporary regional artist, Bryan Peel, who had “stopped in at [Port Simpson] on his way to Prince Rupert to sell potatoes. During his visit we interested him in staying and giving us a demonstration of his ability.”¹²³ As will be seen later in this thesis, Garfield was much more impressed with Peel’s work than she was with Alexcee’s as she believed his pieces were more sophisticated and reflected traditional elements. In these notes, Garfield uses Peel almost as a foil to comprehensively critique Alexcee while also situating him as relatively unique in the artistic landscape of Port Simpson.¹²⁴ Although a more comprehensive study of Fort/Port Simpson collections is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to acknowledge those found within the five institutions referenced earlier.

Online artifact catalogue database searches locate several objects from this community. The National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) contains approximately twenty-nine pieces, one group of which includes the house-front planks collected by Swan in 1875. The American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) displays eight Tsimshian objects however none is identified as having been collected in Fort/Port Simpson. Also in New York City, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian displays six ceremonial pieces including headdresses, charms and an interesting crab figure used in dance that was collected by Crosby circa 1880 that

Freddie’s father had “two sons both still [in Port Simpson]”. B.C. Vital Events statistics show Joseph died in 1928. It could be that they were brothers – perhaps twins. The painting “Pole Raising at Port Simpson” (c. 1900) depicts twins in ceremonial robes. If Moses was Joseph’s son, then he would have been Freddie’s nephew as there were no other Alexcees listed in Port Simpson at that time and Freddie’s children had different names.

¹²² Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ A comparison between her accounts of Peel and Alexcee will be discussed in Chapter Three.

bears some stylistic affinity with Alexcee's work. Finally, the Burke Museum in Seattle actually does contain a model house carved and painted by Alexcee. This model was executed for Garfield and represents a house with a potlatch in progress. Many institutions in North America contain works obtained at Fort/Port Simpson, the majority of which cannot be addressed in this study. However, even a cursory look through their databases shows a greater range of traditional or formal-type material coming from that community compared to the more representational, narrative and tourist-oriented works that Alexcee was creating.

Although many of these museum collection lists do not record makers' names, there is documentation identifying well-known and important artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Wilson Duff Fonds at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology Archive contains one such manuscript, "Emblems of Nobility", subtitled "Niskae Carvers of Emblems." This document, recorded in 1927, reflects the "insider" knowledge of informant Charles Barton (head-chief of a Wolf clan at Kincolith), regarding the important artists/carvers of the late 19th century in the Nass River area.¹²⁵ Many of the people he mentions were deceased by that time and would have represented the generation prior to Alexcee's (i.e. his elders). These would have been the kind of individuals from whom he learned his artistic skills. Were there not other significant traditional artists at Fort/Port Simpson? Possibly, although it is important to remember that it developed as a community in response to a trading relationship brokered between the Hudson's Bay Company and the Legaic chiefdom, and was based upon mutual economic and political interests. It is possible that by 1927 individuals knowledgeable in the "traditional" arts may have been visitors to the community. By

¹²⁵The style and layout of this manuscript and its date suggest that it was compiled by Barbeau (he took a group of Canadian painters [later called the "Group of Seven"] to the Nass River region in 1926/1927). Beynon's handwriting appears on the manuscript, another indication that this was compiled by, or on behalf of, Barbeau.

the time this manuscript was compiled, Alexcee himself would have been an elder, and it reflects the narrator's push (presumably Barbeau) to record and preserve knowledge concerning traditional aesthetics. Barbeau's 1915 collector's list records the names of many individual artists, but those people were a generation younger than Alexcee. Further, Alexcee himself was of mixed cultural heritage so training in the Tsimshian tradition would have been facilitated by his mother's people. Who would have taught him these skills and artistic conventions? "Niskae Carvers of Emblems" highlights some such individuals who, while it is likely did not train Alexcee, represented the conventions of the pre-mission generation or were contemporaries who worked within traditional contexts.

According to informant Charles Barton, Hlaaderh (of Gitwinskihlk tribe, Kahade ['Ganhada'] phratry) is said to have died around 1887. Barton notes his talent at hewing with axe and adze and that he made "old-fashioned houses and totem-poles," being considered as "one of the best carvers." This particular artist worked on the informant's father's pole at Angidah Village, which had since been lowered and burnt. He also made masks and rattles.¹²⁶ Barton's account identifies this man as a regionally-recognized and reputable carver who received commissions in various villages. He clearly produced socially and ritually significant works in the traditional style. Having died in 1887, this artist would have been a member of the pre-mission period generation, one or perhaps two generations older than Alexcee. Although working in the traditional style, prolific artists like him would probably have benefitted from access to new tools brought in through trade with companies such as the Hudson's Bay Company, reflecting "what has been called by some the classic art of the 'golden age' of Northwest Coast culture...the use of the formline – a swelling and narrowing calligraphy-like band – to define

¹²⁶ (Likely) Barbeau, Charles Marius, "NISKAE CARVERS of emblems [annotation by Beynon]; Carvers of the Nass River". Wilson Duff Fonds, File 5-6, Museum of Anthropology Archives at University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C.

major and minor elements of the composition.”¹²⁷ While this document contains no images or illustrations, it is likely that this artist (given his commissions for traditional material), would have produced works in line with the “classical” style of that period.

Unlike Hlaaderh, “Old Sqateen” of Gitlarhdamks made material directly for sale. A member of the Wolf phratry, this artist

was very good in making masks and rattles, the hasaerh [rattles] with a bird. It takes a good man to make one of them. He carved many of them. I have seen him making them, when he was living at Kincolith [at the mouth of the Nass]. He made them to sell, many of them. This was about 25 or 30 years ago [1892 or 1897], the last I have seen of him. Must have died about 15 years ago [c. 1912]. He was a very old man then. He sold his rattles to the white people.¹²⁸

This artist would have been a closer contemporary of Alexcee’s, having been active around 1900 and, like Alexcee, appears to have made curio items for sale to the tourist market. Barton further notes the difference between the style of dancing practiced by the Tsimshian, who he claimed had recently adopted the use of rattles, as opposed to that of the Nass people, who had used them for a long time. This observation is interesting because Garfield had Freddie demonstrate the carving of one in the early 1930s. If the Tsimshian had recently adopted the Nisga’a style of dance, then it is not surprising that Garfield would have been disappointed with the quality of Freddie’s rattle.

A third artist Barton noted was a man named Nakadzaei, of Gitrhateen, identified as a Wolf, belonging to Angydea village. Nakadzaei died in 1912 as an old man. According to Barton, “he saw the Hudson’s Bay Company come and establish their fort at Graveyard Point. He carved many totem poles and made a great number of masks. One of the poles now lying at Gitlarhdamks is by him, at Larhskeek (Thunderbird pole).” As a youth, Barton also claims to have

¹²⁷ Jonaitis, pp. XV – XVII.

¹²⁸ (Likely) Barbeau, Duff fonds, File 5-6, Museum of Anthropology Archives at University of British Columbia.

seen him carve masks, which was done in the winter time when people were not out hunting. These artists had multiple roles in society and could not only rely on art-making for their sole means of income. As Joanne MacDonald has noted, the historical census did not assign a vocational category to Aboriginal artists, so government records recognized them for their involvement in fishing, hunting, trapping, picking hops or working in canneries.

Barton's accounts reflect adaptation to, and involvement within, the changing cultural contexts instigated by systemic authorities such as the government and church. For example, he identifies Gaagyaehl, of Gwanwoq village, who

was a good carver, very clever. He made many masks, and died about 30 years ago [c. 1897]. He was one of the first who started Kinkolith [village, at the mouth of the Nass] and joined the mission there. He was a very good carpenter after that. He built schooners and plenty of boats. The first schooner on the Nass was by him.

Accounts such as these provide valuable insight not only into British Columbia's art-historical past, but into provincial history in general. Rolf Knight notes that there were Aboriginal boat builders, such as Frank Bolton, on the Northwest Coast who constructed rowboats and small schooners at places like Ports Simpson and Essington, Metlakatla, Bella Bella, Alert Bay and Fort Rupert.¹²⁹ Bolton, a Thunderbird of the Lower Nass region (and contemporary of Alexcee's), was born in 1867. Unlike Alexcee, Bolton did not convert to Christianity, but like him, carved model totems and masks, one of which was produced for Barbeau.

The final artist described by Barton was Qaguhlaen, a Wolf of Angyedae. He was a "great carver".

¹²⁹ Knight, p. 158.

There were lots of them in the old days. Qaguhlaen died about ten years ago [c. 1917]. He carved masks, hasaerh, bird rattles, and chief's headdresses. To make these requires a good carver, because they have to be carved overnight. This carver, at Gitiks, was also very good, about the best, at building boats, two-masted schooners, which were bought by white people at Victoria, and they lasted a long time.¹³⁰

Barton's accounts show that contrary to the official historical record (or lack thereof), British Columbia's upper coastal interior was home to many artists when Alexcee was alive. Because they were producing works mostly for ritual and traditional uses (a couple of them built boats as well), it seems they did not gain recognition outside the region in which they lived (unlike Alexcee). Most of these individuals are recorded and valued here for having produced "traditional" art work (and for contributing to anthropological collections). This document of Nass River-area artists provides a more comprehensive biographical sketch of the individuals listed than Barbeau contributed to his Port Simpson lists, so it is acknowledged that these accounts are site, region or culturally-specific. However, they indicate the kind of work that was being done regularly in the region at the time, as well as the other industries in which these artists partook to support their livelihoods.

In light of the collections reviewed and the artists discussed above, it seems that the Fort/Port Simpson artistic scene of Alexcee's time (as well as the surrounding region) spoke mostly to convention, with some artists producing models and smaller-scale copies of traditional works such as totem poles. The "insider" account of Charles Barton reveals a depth of knowledge that enriches dominant historical accounts and records such as the government census. Further, this kind of document permits a claim to be made for the uniqueness of Alexcee's work. Unlike the works of others, his early paintings were documentary in nature; they were strictly representational. As Indian Agent C.C. Perry remarked, Alexcee stood out as a

¹³⁰ (Likely) Barbeau, Duff fonds, File 5-6, Museum of Anthropology Archives at University of British Columbia.

unique artist throughout his experience in Aboriginal communities.¹³¹ An artistic biography of Fort/Port Simpson would not be complete without Alexcee's illustrations. They are significant both in that they introduced a relatively new medium into the Tsimshian artistic canon – painted lantern slides - while also illustrating “scenes from the past”. His works add doubly to the visual record of this place.

Dr. Harry Hawthorn, University of British Columbia's first professor of anthropology, speaks to some of the anecdotes outlined above. His 1961 article “The Artist in Tribal Society: The Northwest Coast,” cites then-contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw artist Mungo Martin as an example of artists' responses to social change in coastal communities. Acknowledging artistic changes spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Hawthorn claims that “the role of the carver in the societies of the Northwest Coast [was to] explore some of the relationships between recruitment and social response, motivation and rewards,” to “reveal something about the aesthetic goals of the artist in this region, and about the balance between traditional style and originality.”¹³² Although certain parallels can be drawn between Alexcee and Martin Hawthorn acknowledges that Martin's case certainly cannot be treated as a facsimile for other artists in the region.¹³³ To be sure, Martin was a generation younger than Alexcee, a member of a different cultural group and was deeply involved with the burgeoning academic scene as an informant for the Hawthorns. The context in which Alexcee worked was more local/regional

¹³¹ C.C. Perry, “List of glass paintings – the original work of Alexcee, the only full-blooded Indian (Tsimpshean) picture painter in colours that I have found amongst them in 14 years' intimate association with the Indians,” (1921 Collector's list, Museum of Vancouver).

¹³² Professor Harry B. Hawthorn, “The Artist in Tribal Society: The Northwest Coast”. [A.H., file 15-38 (5-B-232)] (UBC Museum of Anthropology), p. 60. (Original source: Marian W. Smith, The Artist in Tribal Society: Proceedings of a Symposium Held at the Royal Anthropological Institute. (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961)

¹³³ Both individuals were contemporary male artists responding innovatively and individually, producing art depending on the demands and interests of their perceived and available clientele.

and entirely predated the opportunities offered Native artists by academic institutions such as universities and colleges.¹³⁴

Acknowledging the difficulties of attribution,¹³⁵ Hawthorn wrote that,

A...limitation on extending the materials gathered on a contemporary man is that carving has passed through several different phases in recent years. We are never free to assume without examination that what we now see was true even in the recent past...the work of a carver was unmistakably his own...but the connection [between highly individualized styles and the individual himself] has generally been obscured because the vast majority of museum collections from the region have been assembled without assignment of object to the maker.¹³⁶

The collections of Swan, Crosby and Dundas speak to this assertion - for the most part, the collectors did not record the names of the makers. Why not? This information was not deemed important within the intellectual context of the “vanishing Indian” paradigm – the lack of naming and attribution probably in fact reinforced it. The pieces were accumulated by dominant cultural authorities to speak for the perceived absence of a culture, in which case individual makers’ identities were obscured or discounted from the historical record (although Barbeau’s intellectual approach a few decades later would challenge this paradigm). Lack of communication could be a second reason, as not all collectors had access to “insider” knowledge, as Barbeau did later. It could also be that the association of individual names with objects would complicate the “artifact’s” claim to universality or generalization. The link between object and maker would vastly lessen the connection between object and culture and thus could not “represent” a culture as a whole, which was a goal of then-contemporary anthropology.

¹³⁴ It should, however, be noted that Alexcee’s lantern slides were acquired by the Museum of Vancouver while he was still alive in 1934 – whether he knew it or not is unclear.

¹³⁵ This issue will be investigated in Chapter Three.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

The relationship between art-making and the transformations occurring in coastal communities such as Fort Simpson can be illustrated with the following anecdote. As contact with Europeans and settlement affected Northwest Coast societies, the opportunities for artists' individual creativity broadened and expanded, whereas the ritual contexts that necessitated art-making were being suppressed. In many communities, rituals and ceremonies became "suggestions and lost their right to compel [as] new occasions arose", such as secular commissions for tourists, collectors and museums. However, technical abilities diversified with the introduction of new tools and materials, allowing for the expansion of individual creative expression.¹³⁷

Two small sculptures in the collection of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia had been carved as a response to change and hardship for the region's Aboriginal people. As Hawthorn's anecdote goes, an individual went to the Superintendent of his Indian Agency, seeking assistance and relief for himself and his people, to which the agent responded that proper procedure necessitated the filling out of forms stating his case, after which aid could be administered. Frustrated, this individual returned home and "carved two expressive figures, one emaciated and gasping, the other upright and grim with pursed mouth and an outstretched hand holding an official form."¹³⁸ Feelings of suffering, anxiety and frustration were made manifest in artworks reflecting the changes imposed upon Aboriginal peoples by the settler/invader culture. In addition, artists such as Freddie Alexcee injected Tsimshian visual culture and aesthetics into the symbols of the Christian religion. What is most likely Alexcee's best-known works is a piece that is unusual in both its aesthetic and subject matter. In 1886, Reverend George Raley (Crosby's successor) collected a powerfully carved and

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

painted angel baptismal font.¹³⁹ The font, deposited with the rest of the Raley collection at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology in 1948, was noted by him as being the "first representation of an angel by an Indian carver" (plate 13).¹⁴⁰ Demonstrating tension between Christian iconography and Tsimshian artistic conventions, the sculpture was used in the Methodist Church in Port Simpson, where it was reported to have been removed soon after because of its unsettling effect on the parish's children.¹⁴¹ In a 1951 article for the French periodical ARTS, Andre Malraux commented on the unique character of this carving. He made a connection between its surreal quality and the conflation of two different cultures within one work.¹⁴² The collector's notes, held at the Museum of Anthropology, do not indicate the circumstances surrounding this presumed commission. However, it can be said that the work speaks to the profound cultural changes that had occurred in Fort Simpson by the close of the nineteenth century with the influence of Christianity.

Raley had arrived in Port Simpson in 1906 to continue the Methodist mission and in 1910 collected miscellaneous painted house-front boards, for which the community had become famous, however some authors claim that by this point the bulk of traditional material had been removed from Port Simpson.¹⁴³ In her monograph Tsimshian Clan and Society, Garfield remarks that upon the Duke of York's 1901 visit to Port Simpson, the Tsimshian had no traditional

¹³⁹ This attribution is doubted by some scholars, including Peter Macnair and Bill McLennan, who believe that the work does not reflect Alexcee's style as represented in other carvings and sculptures definitively attributed to the artist. It should also be noted that I was unable to locate a reference to this piece in Raley's 1934 collection list, although it appears in two contemporary (i.e. 1930s) photographs of the collection. However, scholar Doreen Jensen claims that Alexcee's descendents have confirmed the sculpture to have been done by him. This discussion will be taken up in Chapter Two.

¹⁴⁰ Simmons, p. 85.

¹⁴¹ Susan Neylan, The Heavens are Changing; Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), p. 261.

¹⁴² 1) Joanne MacDonald, p. 87, citing Museum of Anthropology (at the University of British Columbia) collector's notes; 2) Andre Malraux, "Il n'y a pas encore une notion universelle de l'art mais notre culture artistique commence a viser toute la terre et tout le passé," ARTS, November, 1951, no. 335 Barbeau Northwest Coast Series, B-4-7, Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives.

¹⁴³ Joanne MacDonald, p. 105.

ceremonial garments to wear or show so they made Chilkat blankets and canvas leggings upon which Alexcee painted designs.¹⁴⁴ University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology has one painted skin in its collection that has been attributed to Alexcee and appears stylistically accurate (plate 19). One collector who had come from Alaska remarked at his disappointment in finding no material there of note, instead seeing only Western-style houses and a lack of totem poles. These reports indicate Westerners' desires to "capture" elements of traditional culture. The belief that Aboriginal cultures were dying out speaks to the lack of nominal identification in certain collections, such as those discussed above. The record of "authenticity" could be facilitated through the preservation of material culture made for and used within personal, conventional and ritual contexts. Many cultural authorities and collectors at the time were not so much interested in contemporary Aboriginal peoples or material culture, which they believed to have been degraded, and even doomed, as a result of colonialism.

George MacDonald's Lax Kw'Alaams house-front study provides further context in terms of "traditional" Tsimshian painting styles within this community. In a draft paper noting the ethnographic background of Tsimshian monumental screens, MacDonald mentions the importance of the painted board project for revealing the rich heritage of displays of wealth and power which until then had "gone virtually unnoticed in records of the artistic heritage of the Northwest Coast".¹⁴⁵ Tsimshian flat design generally depicted supernatural entities believed to control power and wealth among individuals. People were expected to honor the supernaturals through ritual dances, dramatic performances and through the artistic designs on houses, canoes, boxes and other containers of wealth. This was a reciprocal relationship in which

¹⁴⁴1) Joanne MacDonald, p. 112; 2) Garfield, "Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art" (field notes).

¹⁴⁵George F. MacDonald, (unpublished manuscript) "Appendix III: Draft Paper by George F. MacDonald: A Note on the Ethnographic Background to the Tsimshian Monumental Screens," Museum of Anthropology Library at University of British Columbia.

Tsimshian 'real people'¹⁴⁶ would then be rewarded with spiritual power.¹⁴⁷ Several of Alexcee's lantern slide paintings depict such house-fronts, as does *Pole Raising at Port Simpson*, which is layered with symbolic meaning.

MacDonald acknowledges anthropology's indebtedness to tourist art, as "much of the information about house screens came from models built and decorated by Tsimshian artists predominantly for trade to early tourists."¹⁴⁸ For this project, he used Alexcee's work as a reference, which showed either the use of screens or poles on plank houses in Port Simpson dating back to the 1860s. MacDonald considered Alexcee to be an authority on such designs, as he had been one of the last individuals employed by his people as an initiate and artist of the *halait*. In his work, which MacDonald calls, "Sunday painted style, neither naïve nor sophisticated", Alexcee documents painted house fronts based upon childhood memory. In addition, his aerial-view paintings have been used by Beynon and others to identify chiefs' houses, which is important for the historical record, as by 1880 most of the huge plank houses had been dismantled as a result of missionization. These flat screens, covering the fronts of the Fort Simpson Tsimshian chiefs' plank houses, were monumental, measuring between twenty to fifty feet in length and between six and sixteen feet in height. According to MacDonald, they were erected for short ceremonial periods and were not permanent fixtures of the house fronts.¹⁴⁹

This tradition was maintained until approximately a decade after the arrival of Duncan, when Alexcee was a boy. He probably would have remembered seeing these screens being

¹⁴⁶ "Real people" are otherwise known as initiates within sacred communities such as the *halait*.

¹⁴⁷ George MacDonald, "Appendix II: Draft paper by George F. MacDonald: A Newly-Discovered Monumental Painting Tradition From Fort Simpson Circa 1840 to 1864", Museum of Anthropology Library at University of British Columbia, p. 2.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

painted and erected, so he was familiar with the two-dimensional art tradition of his own people. From his stylistic analysis, MacDonald has deduced that there seems to have been more than one painter involved in the screens' production, but because the study spans almost twenty-five years (1840-1864), there were probably no more than six artists responsible for the works, whose names are not known. The largest of the house screen components seem to be based on frontlet designs, worn by the head chiefs of the Coast Tsimshian, in that "they both portray the same supernatural beings, particularly long-beaked birds, killer-whales and ancestral human figures surrounded by a border of small human-like figures, often with some animal or bird detail, like fins or beak."¹⁵⁰ Alexcee carved and painted at least two frontlets, although it seems these were not made for use within ritual context and do not reflect the complex design elements of those MacDonald references.¹⁵¹ Alexcee's frontlets will be discussed in Chapter Three.

The artistic milieu of Fort Simpson at the time is directly relatable to its social and economic context. The huge house screens spoke to the wealth of the place, as the nine tribes of the Coast Tsimshian established themselves at the single new community of Fort Simpson. MacDonald says there were between two and three thousand people in the community at the time, making it the largest Aboriginal community on the coast prior to Victoria.¹⁵² The production of art in general increased within this community when Alexcee was a boy. Trade and economic competition between the chiefs led to an increase in potlatching, which necessitated the creation of more works. MacDonald says that the Tsimshian preferred the monumental painted house screen to the erection of totem poles, which were more common

¹⁵⁰ MacDonald says that it is impossible to determine which structural design came first, but that "since both [housefronts and frontlets] represent the elaboration of threshold designs of ancient origin on the Northwest Coast, it is likely that house front paintings preceded the development of the Tsimshian frontlet headdress."

¹⁵¹ These frontlets will be discussed in Chapter Three.

¹⁵² MacDonald, "Appendix II...", p. 2.

among the Haida, and that it is likely that each of the tribal chiefs in Port Simpson probably commissioned at least one screen during his lifetime. Documentary evidence from photographs, paintings, models and preserved screen fragments account for approximately twenty-five screens, but it is likely that there were about fifty completed during Fort Simpson's "heyday."¹⁵³

The data compiled in MacDonald's study illustrate a time when this type of art flourished in a community whose tribal leaders commanded considerable power and control over social, economic and political affairs. This period overlapped with the beginning of the mission era but was a few years' prior to Confederation and the ensuing systematic regulation and oppression of various activities by the Canadian government. These events would have a great impact on the social and cultural production of art for Fort Simpson's Tsimshian community. Audrey Hawthorn historicizes the traditional artist within a context of cultural loss and change along with European settlement. With the "downfall" of the totem pole for example, her profile of Haida artists could be compared with the situation at Fort Simpson. For the Haida,

the overwhelming impact of a new and complex culture, [was] determined to change the native one. As the Indian Acts of the newly formed government outlawed the potlatch and the wearing of costumes, and of dancing, the great impetus for totem poles was gone. As the Indian changed his old economy and way of life, so the demand for skilled carvers fell away and the artist, unneeded, turned to earning his living as best he might. Young men had no motive to learn the old techniques of carving and painting.¹⁵⁴

Within the landscape of cultural survival however, the artist was clearly not "unneeded". Alexcee was one such individual whose talents provided personal economic opportunities as

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Audrey Hawthorn, "Mungo Martin," Typed manuscript, Audrey Hawthorn Fonds, file 10-31 (5-B-32). Museum of Anthropology Archive at University of British Columbia, p. 4.

well as contributed to the preservation and vitality of his culture in flux. Fort/Port Simpson was a context in which Alexcee made a living within multiple spheres, of which art-making was one. By the early 20th century, contemporary Northwest Coast artists like him were carving and painting items for the tourist trade. Often, these were not so much considered as “art” or even ethnological “specimens” as they were “curios” – modern-day curiosities or souvenirs for visitors to the area (plate 20). As will be discussed in Chapter Three, many of Alexcee’s works were not valued as examples of traditional art by academics and institutions working within the context of the “salvage paradigm.” However, these works played a vital role in maintaining the cultural continuity and contemporary existences of their makers. University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology curator Bill McLennan says that objects such as these were “created for sale in the collector’s market of the early 20th century...decorative works such as painted paddles were a means for artists to continue their traditions in changing contexts and to experiment with new and vibrant forms.”¹⁵⁵ The introduction of Western ideas, tools and artistic materials, as well as the strength of the tourist market facilitated a milieu of creativity and cultural exchange. Alexcee fully participated in this milieu. His “uniqueness” is located within his individual identity and apparent lack of concern for conforming to particular aesthetic elements in his work. Whether he meant to or not, Alexcee complicated (and challenged) the “vanishing Indian” paradigm by marketing aspects of Tsimshian identity. In doing so, he documented both past conventions of his people as well as their contemporary realities.

Since its establishment, Fort/Port Simpson/Lax Kw’Alaams has been a dynamic and multicultural settlement represented in sketches and drawings, landscape paintings and

¹⁵⁵ Bill McLennan and Karen Duffek, The Transforming Image : Painted Arts of the Northwest Coast First Nations. (Vancouver/Toronto : UBC Press, 2000), p. 255.

photography.¹⁵⁶ Tsimshian people initially took advantage of the economic opportunities presented by the Hudson's Bay Company. When permanent settlement attracted the attention of missionaries, many people accepted and promoted the new ideas of the settlers (while many continued to potlatch and produce objects to be used in ritual and ceremonial contexts). With the arrival of collectors and anthropologists, individuals made and sold objects representative of traditional life and culture for museums and private collections. At the same time, the influence of Western artistic conventions such as landscape painting and photography added another dimension to the settlement's artistic atmosphere, from which Alexcee benefitted. His works are unusual for his time and place, given the content of many ethnographic collections of the day. However, it seems that his unique style developed in part through exposure to Western works executed in various media, as well as to the traditional works of his culture, such as Fort Simpson's famous house front screens.¹⁵⁷ According to Peter Macnair,

Fred Alexcee is best described as a unique native artist who explored new media and new forms in his quest to record the history of his people. As far as we know, he was the first Northwest Coast Indian to create narrative historical paintings on paper and canvas. Because of this his work deserves attention and scholarly study.¹⁵⁸

His two-dimensional painted work has mostly been discussed and used to illustrate this "artistic biography" of Fort/Port Simpson/Lax Kw'Alaams, although Alexcee was prolific in a variety of other media and subject matter, to be investigated in Chapter Three.

¹⁵⁶ Photographic representation has been under-represented in this thesis.

¹⁵⁷ These works would include the candlestick holders in the catalogue mentioned by Garfield in her dissertation field notes as well as Compton's painting.

¹⁵⁸ Peter Macnair, "Four Model Poles Owned by George Mess," Unpublished manuscript, Royal B.C. Museum, 26 July 1990. (Document accessed in Bill McLennan's "Frederick Alexcee" file at Museum of Anthropology at University of British Columbia).

Macnair acknowledged the importance of Alexcee's work, although the individual behind the art is just as compelling. Chapter Two, a character sketch, contributes new knowledge to Alexcee's personal background and reduces some of the opaqueness of his own biography.

Chapter Two: Biography of Freddie Alexcee

Freddie Alexcee's biographical details are scarce and have been gleaned from relatively few documentary sources. Much of what has been established about this artist can be found in a 1926 letter from Tsimshian ethnographer William Beynon to Marius Barbeau.¹⁵⁹ According to Beynon, Alexcee's father was "of Iroquoian stock having come to Port Simpson, with the HBC when they first came overland from the interior."¹⁶⁰ Many of the HBC voyageurs, according to Beynon, had intermarried with the Tsimshian at Fort Simpson and were still alive in 1926 when he wrote to Barbeau. This genealogical note is repeated by ethnographer Viola Garfield in an unpublished manuscript for her PhD dissertation, a monograph on Tsimshian clan and society (1939).¹⁶¹ In her field notes, Garfield remarked that Alexcee, at the time approximately seventy-five years old, had a Tsimshian mother of the killer-whale clan but that his father was "half French-Canadian and half Iroquois."¹⁶² His Iroquoian heritage has been noted in published articles by Hawker and Simmons (among others) however he is generally identified as "Tsimshian" in most sources. Alexcee was born and raised in Fort Simpson within the traditionally matrilineal culture and descended from the group of families who refused to join Reverend William Duncan's colony of (Old) Metlakatla in 1862, an act of defiance inspired in large part by the influential and wealthy Gispaxloats chief Legaic.¹⁶³

Discussion surrounding Alexcee consistently references his cultural heritage and this paper is no exception. Assumptions and issues of identity relating to cultural affiliation have

¹⁵⁹ Beynon was also a resident of Fort/Port Simpson.

¹⁶⁰ William Beynon, correspondence with Marius Barbeau, "Frederick Alexee A Canadian 'Primitive'": B-F-159, Box B14, Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives, Gatineau, Quebec.

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¹⁶² Viola Garfield, "Wood Carving and Painting, Introduction", from Modern Tsimshian Decorative Arts, Aug – Sept. 1934. (Obtained at University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology Archives).

¹⁶³ Viola Garfield, The Tsimshian Indians and Their Arts. (University of Washington Press: Seattle and London, 1950), p. 9.

repeatedly inspired comments such as that “...he was foolish to [copy candlesticks found in a department store catalogue] because they are not Tsimshian,”¹⁶⁴ or “more and more [his carvings’] strange quality beckoned and puzzled me; they remained outside the regular categories of Indian and Canadian art.”¹⁶⁵ His works have been perceived as culturally fractured or “hybrid,” yet they are ultimately provocative. Although a cliché, the phrase “art imitates life” succinctly captures the nature of Alexcee’s oeuvre, which is in large part documentary. Alexcee’s works should be contextualized within the fascinating landscape of his life experience, and this biography will review what has been established so far, as well as contribute fresh knowledge toward it. These details provide a greater understanding of the circumstances informing the production of particular works. The post-modern context from which this study has been conducted recognizes Alexcee’s existence as a contemporary (yet currently historical) individual, and, unlike the anthropological paradigm that informed Garfield’s expectations, does not attempt to evaluate his works in terms of their cultural “authenticity,” but instead investigates this essentialist notion itself.¹⁶⁶ This chapter in particular explores the diversity of Alexcee’s life experience, throughout which he performed multiple roles and assumed many identities, informing, as Garfield noted, the “highly individual[istic]” quality of his work.

According to Beynon, Alexcee was a member of the Giludzau (i.e. Thunderbird) tribe and the Gispewudwada (Killer-whale) clan. Further, he asserts that his Tsimshian name was “Wiksomnen,” meaning “Great Deer Woman”, however this claim is contradicted by the

¹⁶⁴ Viola Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art”. (Speeches and Writings, Manuscript Portions: Box/Folder: 2/1-3) [Xerox accessed 2009/09 at UBC MoA office of Bill McLennan, Curator, Pacific Northwest].

¹⁶⁵ Charles Marius Barbeau, “Frederick Alexie: a Primitive,” *Canadian Review of Music and Art*, 3, December 1944): 21.

¹⁶⁶ Susan A. Crane refers to authenticity as a “concept that encodes its own standards of verification.” In other words, the criteria that determine the essence or “truth” of something are informed by the systems of value constructed or respected by authoritative voices, such as an anthropologist, ethnographer, collector, etc. See Susan A. Crane, “Curious Cabinets and Imaginary Museums,” *Museums and Memory*, (Ed. Susan A. Crane, California: Stanford University Press, 2000) pp. 60-80, at p. 72.

following two sources. On his 1915 blueprint, Beynon has penciled “Fred Alexcee, gispuwudwuda” into the space demarcating his residential lot, but no Tsimshian name is listed.¹⁶⁷ This identification is repeated in another of Beynon’s documents, a written list of lots and tenants now archived in Barbeau’s Northwest Coast Fonds at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. This list identifies “Fred Alexcee, giludzau – gispuwudwuda” as occupying Block VII, Lot 8. In Block XV lived Joseph Alexcee, identified as “wiksomw’an – giludzau – gispuwudwuda.” Garfield as well noted Alexcee’s Tsimshian name as Wiksomnen. Despite the information on the maps, it is unclear why these two attributed this name to Freddie and not Joseph (whom neither mentions). According to Government Agent John Flewin, Alexcee had a brother at Port Simpson,¹⁶⁸ and the B.C. Archives Vital Events records show both Fredrick [sic] and Joseph Alexcee to have been born in the same year (1853).¹⁶⁹ It is possible that the two were brothers very close in age – perhaps even twins.¹⁷⁰ Beynon’s 1915 map illustrates only the lots of these two Alexcees, as well as that of Moses Alexcee, who was presumably Freddie’s nephew.¹⁷¹

As a youth Alexcee had been taken in as an attendant to the *halait* carvers, artists responsible for making secret *naxnox* paraphernalia. Having been privy to traditional knowledge, he was consulted by Garfield for his descriptions of secret society dances and

¹⁶⁷William Beynon, “Townsite of Fort Simpson,” Feb. 4, 1915 (Blueprint accessed at University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology Archives). (See plate 4).

¹⁶⁸John Flewin, correspondence to Eric Brown, 18 November, 1926. “Notes on Frederick Alexie Paintings in the 1927 West Coast Exhibition,” 16.1 – Alexie; compiled by Charlie Hill, Curator of Canadian Art, National Gallery of Canada.

¹⁶⁹Joseph Alexcee (d. 1928, age 75, Port Simpson: Call # 1928-09-012288, Roll b13361), Fredrick Alexcee (d. 1939, age 86, Port Simpson: Call # 1939-09-023470, Roll b13374), B.C. Archives Vital Events database..

¹⁷⁰Alexcee’s painting *Pole Raising at Port Simpson* (c. 1900) depicts a set of twins dressed in ceremonial robes. In conversation with University of British Columbia’s Bill McLennan, McLennan noted the significance of twins within Tsimshian culture, which had been relayed to him by Gitksan scholar Doreen Jensen. If Alexcee and his brother were twins, perhaps this iconographical detail was biographical.

¹⁷¹This connection is discussed in further detail in Chapter Three.

dramatizations, which she then recorded in her field notes for *Tsimshian Clan and Society*.¹⁷² Referring to his unusual works, Garfield noted that “certainly his combination of subjects from two different clans is extra-conventional,”¹⁷³ although she does not mention which clan imagery he combined specifically. Did Alexcee not uphold the rules of representation as they were regulated by crest ownership rights? As Beynon’s reserve maps show, there was a mixture of clans in Alexcee’s block (as well as in others), including *ganhada* (raven), *laxgibu* (wolf) and *gispuwudwuda*.¹⁷⁴ The use and display of crest imagery is directly related to the ownership of rights and privileges (i.e. intellectual property) associated with the social organization of the Tsimshian. By the time Alexcee was an adult however, community members were living in Western-style houses, in lots and blocks as exemplified on Beynon’s map. The Tsimshian, influenced first by the European houses at the Fort, began to change the appearance and structure of their dwellings. They added windows, plank floors (instead of ground surfaces) and furniture. While these features were introduced more for display and as symbols of prestige and affluence than for convenience, people gradually abandoned the paintings that had previously adorned the fronts of lineage houses in the years leading up to the mission period (c. 1870, before Crosby’s arrival in 1874). Beynon says that the last community plank house was abandoned in 1900, and by this time, with the arrival of the Indian Agents, they had all but disappeared and single-family frame houses had been built on land then organized into the reserve. With the reorganization of dwellings into individual families and the shift from matrilineal to patrilineal inheritance of tangible property, there was no longer emphasis on the group-ownership of a house based on lineage. However, the visual cultural traditions associated

¹⁷² Although Alexcee’s revelation of secret society knowledge to Garfield is noted by both Beynon and Barbeau (1945:22), it is unclear what knowledge in particular and to what extent he detailed these events, which were supposed to remain secret by definition.

¹⁷³ Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

¹⁷⁴ Charles Marius Barbeau, “Port Simpson” file, (B-F-16.12) Reference Map B-8, Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives, Gatineau, Quebec.

with the ownership of intangible property such as crests were strongly maintained. Beynon says that despite the changes in tangible property rights,

the new customs being established [did] not...affect the attitude towards any other property which is traditionally owned by lineages. Personal names, rights to crests and other intangible possessions and rights to hunting and fishing territories have not been affected by the changes. Everyone recognizes these as inheritable only within the mother's lineage.¹⁷⁵

As Garfield noted, Alexcee's works were unusual in their subject matter and did not conform to her expectations of traditional design. Despite the changes in house structure and social organization, Alexcee depicted traditional house fronts and crest designs in several of his works, which have been accepted for their authority by contemporary archaeologists such as George MacDonald. His interpretation of crest imagery will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Alexcee was baptized in 1874 at age 21 by Reverend William Pollard, who was the first Methodist Minister to Port Simpson.¹⁷⁶ He was married four years later by Reverend Crosby to a woman named Angeline, and their marriage was witnessed by the influential chief of the Gitundo tribe Alfred Dudoward.¹⁷⁷ The couple went on to have several children, including a daughter named Flora, who was baptized in 1897, son Peter Frederick (born in Port Essington in 1899), and daughters Angeline (b. 1900), Gertrude Grace (b. 1901), Annie Elizabeth (1905-1907), and Annie Elizabeth (b. 1907).¹⁷⁸ The last recorded child was a son named Frank Lewis, who was born in 1913. All of these children, with the exception of Peter Frederick, were baptized at the Methodist church in Port Simpson.

¹⁷⁵ William Beynon, "Process of Change from Matrilineal to Patrilineal Inheritance", pp. 1-19. Box 102-Folder 13, Marius Barbeau Fonds, Northwest Coast File, Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives, Gatineau, Quebec.

¹⁷⁶ Port Simpson Grace United Church: Circuit Registry. Box 197: Register of Port Simpson Mission, From 1874 to 1896, the Bob Stewart Archives, British Columbia Archival Union List.

¹⁷⁷ Dudoward and his wife Kate had been proponents and instigators of Methodism and the mission in Fort Simpson. They had converted in Victoria.

¹⁷⁸ Annie Elizabeth was baptized by missionary George H. Raley.

Although he had undergone several rites of passage in the church, Alexcee was apparently not considered a full member as far as Church authorities were concerned. The 1893 and 1894 Circuit Registry for the Port Simpson Methodist Church lists Fred and Angeline Alexcee as being “on trial.” According to one prominent missionary, the church required new converts, despite their having been baptized or converted, to pass through a “probationary period” before being recognized as full members.¹⁷⁹ Membership in the Methodist Church at that time depended on the individual’s willingness to embrace and act out its spiritual, moral and behavioral tenets. Rejecting the idea of the spiritual “elect,” the faithful were recognized as free agents who could accept or reject God’s grace. Conversion, or “rebirth,” was the first step in the membership process. Because Methodists believed that Christians lived “in the world,” the Church did not underestimate the capacity for converts to slip back into sin and impurity: “Methodism never desired to create an isolated utopian community; while avoiding contamination by the world’s evils, Christians were always to be in the world. Methodism was a vital, expanding fellowship embracing all who ‘wished to flee from the wrath to come’.”¹⁸⁰ The Church required its members to sacrifice and renounce customs that were considered incompatible with its beliefs, including forcing members to sever ties “which had sustained social relations in the ‘corrupt’ world. Their ties of previous kinship varied – blood, marriage, commerce, debt, class, sport, religion, [race]...to honour the world’s pattern of kinship was to reject that of Christ.”¹⁸¹ For members in Aboriginal communities such as Fort/Port Simpson, such sacrifices re-structured their own complex social, economic and spiritual systems.

¹⁷⁹ Port Simpson Grace United Church Circuit Registry, 1874-1896, Bob Stewart Archives, Vancouver, British Columbia.

¹⁸⁰ Neil Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion; A History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press: 1996), p. 16.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

The Methodists practiced revival meetings where individuals decided to convert, an experience that involved willfully stepping up to the altar where they would be prayed for by the group. After the conversion experience, the 'reborn' would be interviewed by revival leaders so that their conversions could be "authenticated". These converts were kept under surveillance to ensure the truthfulness of their change of heart.

Detailed statistics were kept, and attempts were made to measure the increases in the surrounding congregations... past experience had demonstrated that revival converts were often an unreliable basis for connexional [sic] strength. Too often when the initial ardour of special services faded, the new converts slid back into sin, and some even embarrassed the church by their conduct. True spiritual awakening did not depend solely on traditional revivals, and members who lived only for revivals provided a poor foundation for institutional development...conversion and even entire sanctification did not guarantee permanent spiritual safety or even insure loyalty to Methodism. The members had to be nurtured through religious training and pastoral supervision if they were to avoid corruption and sustain their dedication and spiritual progress."¹⁸²

It was probably to this end that the Port Simpson Grace United Church Ledger Book measured the "status" of its converts, Alexcee and his family included. According to scholar Neil Semple, the practice of "probation" was applied not only within Aboriginal communities but within others as well.

Because of the "hybrid"¹⁸³ nature of Port Simpson during Alexcee's lifetime, it must have been difficult to reconcile often conflicting or opposing worldviews (i.e. social organization). Further, conversion to Christianity did not always mean abandonment of tribal religious practices. Many Tsimshian made a conscious choice to adopt what they understood to be the key elements for success within Western culture, which was not always an easy choice but one

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 134, 214.

¹⁸³ For lack of a better term...

that was made in anticipation of gaining membership and status in the face of imposed Westernization.¹⁸⁴ According to Semple,

the natives often saw Christianity as a means of acquiring greater access to European goods and the benefits of citizenship and protecting land and legal rights. In Port Simpson, for instance, although many natives became sincere and devout Christians, Crosby was successful as long as it appeared that he represented the secular interests of the Tsimshians and had influence with the provincial and federal governments. By the mid-1890s, when it became clear these conditions were not being met and the tribe could not get a satisfactory land-claims settlement, many Tsimshians asked the Methodist church to remove him, invited the Salvation Army to the community or stopped practicing Christianity altogether.¹⁸⁵

Although the reasons for his conversion are unclear, it is possible that Alexcee had lost confidence in the assumed authority of the Church for helping his people.

As well as being a Church member, records also suggest Alexcee's commitment to abstinence from alcohol. The Methodist Church Circuit Record Notebook "Port Simpson Long Roll 1903" contains an oath written by Crosby, stating, "I hereby promise that I will abstain from the use of all intoxicating liquor as a [?] with the help of God". Among its 91 signatures was "Fred Alexkcee" [sic].¹⁸⁶ Beynon's reserve map shows that Alexcee's lot was in the same block as that of the Temperance Society, a social organization that discouraged the use of alcoholic beverages.¹⁸⁷ Further, an individual resembling an older Alexcee is present in an undated historic photo of the Temperance Society, when compared to a photo of him as a younger man

¹⁸⁴ Clarence Bolt, *Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian; Small Shoes for Feet Too Large*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), pp. 108-109.

¹⁸⁵ Semple, p. 294.

¹⁸⁶ Port Simpson Grace United Church: Circuit Registry, Box 197: Port Simpson Long Roll 1903, The Bob Stewart Archives, British Columbia Archival Union List.

¹⁸⁷ The Temperance movement in Canada originated in the nineteenth century as a way to combat alcoholism among the self-employed such as farmers, fishermen and small businessmen at a time before the widespread existence of social programs. It was believed that self-discipline was essential to economic success and that alcohol was an impediment to self-control. Religious incentives were secondary. The first Temperance Societies arose in the early nineteenth century in Nova Scotia and Montreal. These societies declined after 1890. (See "Temperance Movement", Canadian Encyclopedia on-line, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0007912> (accessed 2010/01/05)).

taken before 1900 (plate 22).¹⁸⁸ Many accounts of Alexcee portray him as a principled individual so it would not be surprising to learn that he was involved in such an organization.

Alexcee left strong impressions on many people he knew during his lifetime. Raley met him in 1894 on the mission ship *Glad Tidings*, upon which Alexcee worked as a young man, first as a stoker and later as an engineer. Raley described him (in 1934) to an audience at the Museum of Vancouver, at which time some of Alexcee's lantern slide paintings were being shown. At that time (approximately five years prior to his death) Alexcee was eighty years old and living at Port Simpson. As a younger man he was small, "undersized for a Tsimpshean" when Raley first met him. He had "thick black hair which hung like a cloud over his shoulders from which shone two black beady eyes expressive. His mobile features his gestures would remind you of a Frenchman." At the time, he trapped fish for a living but "like many another artists eke[d] out a very precarious living. [Raley said that as an elderly man, he lived] in the past and [did] not believe the Indians of today [could] compare with their forefathers."¹⁸⁹ Raley's account describes an eccentric man who in his later years seems to have been disappointed with the contemporary reality of his people, a sentiment also expressed in Garfield's narrative of the same year. For example, speaking in broken English, Alexcee told Garfield then that "old natives had good ideas, married women wore earrings, nose ring, and labret not finger ring. Women stayed in house, not run out, just stay in house and sit by the fire. First time girl goes out, all men look, now they run out all the time, no good." Or again, "drawing [a dance scene for Garfield] brought back reminiscence of tales of early times and he remarked, 'if some of the old

¹⁸⁸ Comparison of two photographs: Royal British Columbia Museum, Photograph No. 22300, "Temperance Society", Group: Tsimshian, Location: Port Simpson, B.C.; McLennan and Duffek, The Transforming Image : Painted Arts of the Northwest Coast First Nations. (Vancouver/Toronto : UBC Press, 2000), p. 252.

¹⁸⁹ George Henry Raley, notes for speech given to the B.C. Arts and Historical Society, 29 Nov., 1934 H/D/R13/R13.8 – Raley, George Henry, 1863 – 1958 – "Notes for speeches and articles re civilization of Indians", British Columbia Provincial Archives, Victoria, British Columbia.

people could see this they would grieve for the past that it represents.”¹⁹⁰ If these comments accurately reflect Alexcee’s feelings, they indicate more than a sense of nostalgia but seem to articulate sadness at cultural loss. His life bridged different eras in which beliefs, expectations and lifestyles shifted and changed. He thus documented his peoples’ values and traditions (as examples of the “past”) for himself, for others, and for posterity. However, to counter Raley’s assertion that he “lived in the past,” Alexcee’s artistic endeavors show him to have fully participated as a commentator and actor in his contemporary context.

When Garfield was interviewing him for her monograph, Alexcee made some inquiries of his own. Having asked about her own background, he mentioned that he had visited Seattle, where she lived, around 1914. Apparently he had been part of a large group of Tsimshian (one hundred and fifty), who had travelled there to pick hops, a job that many Northwest Coast Aboriginal people were employed to do. He also questioned her personal life, after which he explained his disappointment regarding contemporary Tsimshian women and their having strayed from traditional roles in the home. Garfield dismissed Alexcee’s comments as “irrelevant,” a conclusion that, from a contemporary perspective, discounts his lived experience. As he got older, Alexcee seems to have become increasingly discouraged with the conditions in which his people lived and the lifestyles they espoused.¹⁹¹ In general, these accounts portray Alexcee as an observant, confident, assertive and imaginative man with a flair for the dramatic. Garfield noted that he liked to create art for its own sake, as he would often provide a narrative for an illustrated myth after having completed the image.¹⁹²

According to Beynon, Alexcee felt that his landscape paintings “were very much better than his works on native designs and carvings, [which] it would seem he felt [were] inferior in

¹⁹⁰ Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

¹⁹¹ This comment was made by Raley.

¹⁹² Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

importance.”¹⁹³ Beynon does not explain this statement but he implies that Alexcee was proud of his two-dimensional works, many of which were executed in great detail.¹⁹⁴ The photograph in plate 22 shows Alexcee proudly standing with his wife and child, paintbrush in hand, beside two canvases. Indeed, upon being commissioned by the local Indian Agent to copy two model totem poles, he illustrated a myth instead. As Beynon noted above, it could be that he felt more familiar working in two-dimensional media.

Alexcee’s conversations with Garfield are a rich source of his own voice regarding his art and the ways of his people. For example, she wrote,

He offered to make me a chief’s rattle, [saying that the] ‘Tsimshians are the best dancers, if you could only see them. The Tlingits and Haidas are not in it,’ and he began singing to himself. He chiseled off the bottom in the same manner as he had the sides. He looked up to say, ‘I make naxnox, roll eyes, wiggle ears, open wings, very fine. I know many naxnox. I am glad that you have come for you have awakened in me a feeling for the old Tsimshian things’.¹⁹⁵

While clearly not the subject that Garfield expected him to expound upon (i.e. tradition and thus “authenticity”), Alexcee was an authority in his own right. He would turn commissions into opportunities to paint what he deemed important and/or interesting. At one point, he offered to paint a dance scene for Garfield that had been inspired by a dream. She was not impressed with the result, characterizing his work as *sloppy, unorganized, improvised and neither careful nor systematic*. She considered his comments and observations irrelevant and mundane, yet from a contemporary perspective they helpfully reveal aspects of his personality and the importance he placed on documenting and preserving his peoples’ history and way of life. For example, as he drew the legs and feet of the chorus leader in one of the paintings he created for

¹⁹³ William Beynon, undated letter to Marius Barbeau, Marius Barbeau Fonds, Northwest Coast file, “Frederick Alexcee A Canadian ‘Primitive’ folder, B-F-159, Box. B14, Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives, Gatineau, Quebec.

¹⁹⁴ These works will be discussed in Chapter Three.

¹⁹⁵ Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

Garfield, Alexcee remarked that “old Tsimshians had thin legs, but large feet because they wore no shoes...he said that it just occurred to him that the chorus was much like the houses; the women stayed close together and the houses were that way too [both in life and in all his paintings]”. In his lifetime, Alexcee had witnessed and partaken in his peoples’ lifestyle in the old Hudson’s Bay Company fort days, in which Tsimshian ceremony and religious ritual were unquestioned events. By the time he was an elderly man, he seems almost wistful in his descriptions of those days, having lived through the significant changes imposed on the community by church and state.

During the latter part of his life, Alexcee seemed doubtful about Christianity. He was among the first wave of converts in the early days of Methodism on the Northwest Coast, a period in which people believed conversion would ameliorate their social or political standing. By the end of his life, however, he had probably realized that integration alone into “white” society would do little to help him or his people. He once recited a version of the great flood story to Garfield, explaining the mixing of the tribes and creation myths. In relation to the flood he said that “‘Thunder of Heavens’ told the people to prepare for the flood. ‘Thunder looked after Indians, Jesus he no care, he look after the English.’”¹⁹⁶ As Raley observed, Alexcee appeared to live retrospectively in the latter years of his life and a sense of nostalgia, or even sadness, permeates Garfield’s account of him.

Among the first of many canvases he would paint, Beynon recalls seeing “Port Simpson,” in 1899 at H.T. Hibbens, a large Victoria stationer.¹⁹⁷ He later told Garfield that Freddie had “the most fertile imagination of a true artist”,¹⁹⁸ who often let his imagination run away with him, an

¹⁹⁶ Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

¹⁹⁷ I have not been able to locate this painting.

¹⁹⁸ Beynon, correspondence with Barbeau

observation that is reflected in Garfield's own accounts.¹⁹⁹ It seems that his keen imagination matched his business sense. After being congratulated on the exhibition of two of his landscapes at the National Gallery in Ottawa in 1927, Alexcee offered to paint another for \$30, apparently shrugging off the honor bestowed upon him.²⁰⁰ Given his relative distance from Ottawa, it is not surprising that he did not make much of such accolades. After all, he did have a family to support. Of his sons, Beynon claimed that although none of them inherited their father's artistic talents, they were nonetheless industrious like their father, in that they were "always working and never idle."²⁰¹

While little is known of Alexcee's personal history, recent research at the Hudson's Bay Company archive in Winnipeg has illuminated some connections as to who was probably his own father. To date, there has been little mention of Alexcee's father, beyond his identification as a French-Canadian/Iroquoian HBC voyageur.²⁰² With this in mind, a November entry in the 1855 HBC Letter Book for Fort Simpson may prove relevant. The Letter Book documents a relatively small staff for this year, stating that, "with two Norwegians [and] two Iroquoix [sic] that have engaged for this place for one year respectively we have the same complement as formerly, say 22 all told, besides officers."²⁰³ This statement suggests the Fort was a rather intimate community, where all of its laborers would have been personally familiar with one another. The notation of "two Norwegians [and] two Iroquoix" is significant. Entries in the 1857-1867 Letterbook, dated to 1866, frequently identify laborers/work partners named "Hans

¹⁹⁹ Garfield, "Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art" (field notes).

²⁰⁰ Beynon, correspondence with Barbeau.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² The HBC Letter Books record the daily events, tasks and transactions at the various posts, and as such are valuable documents of individuals, places and names. These are located at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

²⁰³ W.H McNeill, [Chief Trader, as annotated on this typed copy], 1851 Fort Simpson Letterbook, W.H. McNeill E.243/17. Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

and Opetha” and “Antoine and Alexis”, which, even after a decade, could still refer to these two groups of individuals. The person named “Alexis” surfaces frequently throughout this document. According to Beynon, Alexcee’s father came to the coast with the HBC “when they first came overland from the interior.” Fort Simpson was established in 1831 on the Nass River and then relocated to the coast in 1834. If it is assumed that his father was between eighteen to twenty-five years of age in 1834, then he would have been between thirty-four and forty-one at the time of Alexcee’s birth in 1853, which seems an advanced age to start a family given the historical context. It is likely that he actually arrived later. As the Letter Book extract from 1855 notes, the “two Iroquoix” arrived to work for the Company in 1853.

The Fort Simpson journal for 1866 mentions the laborers “Hans” and “Aleskice” [sic]. Throughout these records, the orthography of the latter’s name is rarely consistent, and appears variously as “Alexis,” “Elexeia,” “Elexcia,” “Elexia,” “Elexcee,” “Alexca.” These inconsistencies are often mirrored in the published literature regarding Freddie himself, and his name appears variously as “Alexie,” “Alexis,” “Alexcee,” etc. According to the Letter Book, “Alexis” died in 1866, when Freddie would have been about thirteen. Although the Fort factor did not specify the cause of death, it is known that an epidemic of smallpox ravaged the community beginning in 1864, which is a possible cause of illness.²⁰⁴ Between 1864 and 1870, these epidemics killed over half the population, while diseases such as cholera, influenza and measles took their toll as well.

²⁰⁴ These epidemics consequently “began a rapid decline in an art style [house front paintings] that had emerged there on a level never seen before or after in the production of exquisite Northwest Coast two-dimensional art”. See Dr. George F. MacDonald, Appendix III: A Note on the Ethnographic Background to the Tsimshian Monumental Screens. Unpublished, undated manuscript, Museum of Anthropology Library at University of British Columbia, from Information Update on Tsimshian House Screen Project (by Ruth Anderson – ed.) Vancouver, British Columbia.

In April of 1866, “Alexis” appears several times in the Letter Book as a laborer, having performed such duties as washing the meat house, cleaning drains in the garden, squaring posts for the gallery, putting a floor in the pigeons’ house, as well as accompanying local merchants on canoe trips. Successive entries document an ill “Elexcee” later in June, “Elexcia” being still sick a few days later, and dead shortly thereafter. The Letter Book records his name as “Elexcia,” “Alexca” and “Elexia” over the next few entries, the last of which reported his interment outside the fort’s garden pickets.²⁰⁵ This is apparently the final reference to this individual in HBC records. Thereafter, there is no person with any orthographic version of this name located in the HBC Biographical sheets database, nor is there any reference to a wife or children. As noted earlier, Freddie was about thirteen at the time of his father’s death, so it is perhaps not surprising that there is a lack of information surrounding his Iroquoian heritage. Moreover, he would have adopted the responsibilities of his mother’s culture as necessitated by matrilineal tradition, which still functioned in this pre-mission period.

Painting “Fort Simpson”: Possible Connection Between Freddie and His Father

Initial skepticism about the connection between Freddie and the “Alexis” in the HBC Fort Simpson fonds has faded somewhat given the small number of laborers employed there. Furthermore, one of Freddie’s early works provides insight into his personal background, a dimension that has been previously unexplored in the literature,²⁰⁶ and which could be the impetus for his “unusual” landscape paintings. The National Gallery of Canada has recently acquired “Fort Simpson,” one of Alexcee’s paintings from a private collection (plate 23). It is a visual document of the early Fort landscape. By cross-referencing the information provided in

²⁰⁵[Author unknown], “Fort Simpson Journal Commencing the 1st day January 1863”, 1863 B. 201/a/9. (Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

²⁰⁶ In conversation with Ron Hawker, the author mentioned that when he wrote his article on Alexcee in 1991, the Hudson’s Bay Company records had not yet been made accessible for public use.

the curatorial file with the HBC Fort Simpson Letter Book, some interesting circumstances and connections emerge.

According to the NGC curatorial file, this painting (c. 1900) was originally owned by Hans Peter Brentzen (also spelled Berentzen). As the file states, Brentzen was an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company in Fort Simpson and was born in Norway in 1827.²⁰⁷ The HBC Biographical Sheet for this individual shows that Berentzen (Brentzen) [sic] arrived in Victoria in August 1853 and worked as a laborer from 1853 to 1870. His particular locality is not identified from 1853 to 1855, but he is listed as having worked for the Company from 1855-1861 at Fort Rupert and from 1861-1870 at Fort Simpson, being mentioned for the last time in the logbooks in 1870. According to this same source, Berentzen married and had a son, Henry Berentzen, who was born in 1865.²⁰⁸ Considering this information alongside the factors' entries in the Fort Letter Books raises some interesting points. Again, it can be assumed that most men and women would probably have known each other personally. As mentioned above, the Fort Simpson journal for 1866 mentions "Hans" and "Aleskice" [sic] working alongside each other, suggesting a relationship between the two laborers.²⁰⁹ According to the personnel database, "Hans Peter Brentzen's" arrival on the Coast in 1853 coincides with the dates that this "Hans" is mentioned at Fort Simpson, and if there were only two Norwegians in a company of twenty-two laborers, it is possible that it was this same individual who later commissioned the painting from

²⁰⁷ See HBC Biographical record for Brentzen. See also Linda Grussani, [Curatorial Assistant, Indigenous Art], National Gallery of Canada Acquisition Committee Meeting – 15 May 2009, For the Collection of Indigenous Art; Alexcee, Frederick [accessed in curatorial file for Frederick Alexcee].

²⁰⁸ Hans Berentzen, B.201/a/9/fo.33-34, Biographical Sheet, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/biographical/b/berentzen_hans.pdf

²⁰⁹ Shedding light upon Alexcee's genealogy was one original objective of this project, as there is a significant gap in knowledge regarding his own personal history. Previously, it appears that the only reference to this component of his lineage is found in the 1926 Beynon letter to Barbeau. There is never any reference to either of his parents in the documentation or in the literature and the only piece of work I have found so far that directly reflects his Iroquoian background is a model birchbark canoe in the collection of the Manitoba Museum (to be discussed in Chapter Three).

Freddie Alexcee.²¹⁰ Hans Peter Brentzen, the original owner of this painting, and the individual named “Alexis” were possibly co-workers within the HBC Fort in the mid-1850s.

“Henry Brentzen” is also documented in the HBC Letter Book as “Henry Breutzen”. As the HBC Letter Book shows, this individual worked at the store in Fort Simpson.²¹¹ It also mentions the following employees: Gordon Lockerby, the 51 year-old clerk (who painted “Fort Simpson,” apparently after that of Pym Nevins Compton);²¹² Paul Breutzen [sic], a 29 year-old Native and Tsimshian-speaker who worked as an interpreter and salesman. Henry Breutzen [sic] is listed as a Native man of 23 years who at that time had fulfilled four years’ service as a laborer. If in 1890 Henry was 23, then, as the HBC records show, he was born in 1867, making him fourteen years Freddie’s junior, and thus a relatively close contemporary. His status as “native” in the HBC Letter Book probably indicates that he was bilingual and a Tsimshian-speaker, which suggests that the store was fully accessible to Tsimshian-speaking customers such as Alexcee. I propose that the elder Brentzen (Hans Peter) knew and worked with Freddie’s father as a laborer for the HBC and knew Freddie through this connection. Freddie would have known Hans’ son Henry through his connections at the HBC shop where he probably purchased supplies and possibly viewed artworks such as Lockerby’s.

²¹⁰ It should be noted that there are some date discrepancies within these documents. According to HBC factor Hamilton Moffatt, “Hans Peter Brensen” is recorded as having retired first in July, 1859 and later in October, 1860, his “term of servitude having expired”. At this point, he was thirty-three and would have been in British Columbia for only seven years. However, a search through the HBC’s personnel database lists only one such individual by the name of “Hans Peter Berentzen” – there is no “Brensen” listed. The orthography of this individual is inconsistent, as the NGC curatorial file identifies him as “Brentzen (Berentzen)”. As outlined above, this notation might have been an administrative error, as he was listed as having retired on two separate occasions, unless “retirement” was taken to mean another type of leave. Again, given the number of employees at the fort (“22”), it seems unlikely that there would have been another individual with this same name. The NGC curatorial file indicates that the painting passed to Hans’ son Henry Brentzen (20 January, 1865–16 June, 1931). Grussani [NGC Curatorial File] (According to this source, the descendants also have a carved and painted wooden spoon by Alexcee).

²¹¹ An inspection report for 1890 discusses the store and its debts incurred (including “Indian debts”, a list in which Alexcee’s name occurred at least once so it is evident he bought supplies there).

²¹² See plates 11 and 10, respectively.

Given its subject matter and photographic perspective, it could be that Hans Peter Brentzen commissioned this painting from Freddie as a souvenir piece. This is not unlikely, as Alexcee had done the same for at least one other individual in the community, then Government Agent John Flewin,²¹³ whose painting, “Port Simpson,” was commissioned in 1896 and later exhibited in the National Gallery’s 1927 *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*.²¹⁴

As noted earlier, NGC director Eric Brown wrote that Alexcee’s works were impressive for someone who had not been exposed to “art.”²¹⁵ Brown’s assumption was incorrect, as Alexcee had access to many artistic resources – whether it be the two-dimensional works of his own culture or the European paintings in Fort Simpson such as those by Compton and Lockerby. Brown was right about his painting being “remarkable,” however, and Alexcee’s works are unique. The HBC records lend insight to the historical circumstances informing the production of Alexcee’s paintings, such as Brentzen’s “Fort Simpson,” as well as his family background.²¹⁶

This chapter has discussed Freddie Alexcee’s personal background and has shown how his experiences in Fort/Port Simpson influenced his artworks in terms of subject matter and style. A synthesis of historic testimonies characterized him as being talented, creative and innovative

²¹³ Correspondence, Jackson, Skeena Crossing to Brown, 4 October, 1926, included in “Notes on Frederick Alexie [sic] Paintings in the 1927 West Coast Exhibition”, extracts compiled by Charlie Hill, curator of Canadian Art, National Gallery of Canada.

²¹⁴ Grussani, [NGC Curatorial file].

²¹⁵ Correspondence, Brown to John Flewin, 30 Nov. 1926, included in “Notes on Frederick Alexie [sic] Paintings in the 1927 West Coast Exhibition.”

²¹⁶ Regarding Freddie’s potential genealogy, it should be noted that a letter from John Flewin to Eric Brown (1926) mentions the former’s acquaintance with Alexcee but spells his name as “Alexis”. This shows that the local spelling at the time in the Fort by Europeans coincides with the Letter Book documentation, perhaps indicating further that the HBC-documented “Alexis” was Freddie’s father. The orthography of recent immigrants’ names often changes over the early years of settlement. This brief biography has been compiled based on previous contributions by other scholars in the field, most notably Beynon, Garfield, and later Hawker and Simmons. While the claims made based on information obtained at Hudson’s Bay Company Archives should be acknowledged as speculative, it is likely that Alexcee’s HBC laborer-father knew the initial owner of Port Simpson (1900). A more comprehensive genealogical study would be beneficial, however due to time constraints, deeper research into this matter was not possible. It should also be noted again that an attempt was made to contact one of Freddie’s living relatives in Prince Rupert, but the individual declined to volunteer information.

with a keen business sense. His interesting biography is a useful backdrop for understanding and interpreting his oeuvre, to be investigated next.

Chapter Three: “Neither One Nor the Other”

Northwest Coast Native Art is ambiguous, imaginative, unstable, poetic, endlessly variable, changing, and productive of the new, the unexpected.²¹⁷
(Marjorie Halpin)

At the Museum of Vancouver, a box sits by itself on a shelf reserved for “miscellaneous” artifacts – objects in the museums’ collection that have been difficult to place within a particular collection. This box contains thirty-eight lantern slides painted by Freddie Alexcee.²¹⁸ According to collections manager Joan Seidl, when these slides were acquired in 1934, the registrar believed that they were too much influenced by “modernism” (in terms of their media and aesthetic) to be catalogued as ethnology pieces. Instead, they were catalogued as photographs, as they resemble visual “snapshots” of the daily life and activities of Tsimshian people presumably prior to European settlement.²¹⁹ Because they were representative and not used in daily, ceremonial or religious contexts, they were not thought “purely Indian” enough to be considered genuinely ethnological. Still sitting alone on a shelf, not belonging within any particular collection to this day, Seidl suggested that their history is complicated because of their subject matter, media and their creator. Although the documentary images depict “traditional” scenes and were painted by an Aboriginal person, the Western medium/media was unconventional. Even though they illustrated aspects of Native history, could they really be, as European-style paintings, considered examples of “authentic Indian art”?

²¹⁷ Marjorie Halpin, “A Critique of the Boasian Paradigm for Northwest Coast Art,” *Culture* 14(1), p. 6.

²¹⁸ Lantern slides, a Victorian-era invention, could be both hand-painted and produced from photographic images. The technology was important within Victorian society and they were used for entertainment purposes, but also for education, for the demonstration of scientific advancements and principles, for news and for instruction within religious and Temperance Society contexts. See Janet Tamblin, 1976: “A Brief History of the Magic Lantern”, <http://toytheatre.info/Magic/History.html>, accessed 2010/02.

²¹⁹ From a conversation with Joan Seidl at the Museum of Vancouver (2009/08). According to Seidl, the Museum of Vancouver numbers written on the slides are photograph numbers.

This chapter will examine particular works within Alexcee's oeuvre and in doing so discuss the complexity of "authenticity", a recurrent issue throughout the interpretation and historiography of his work. The slides are just one example of how Alexcee's works have defied the traditional categories historically used to classify First Nations and non-First Nations art and artifacts, and these images will be taken up later in this chapter. Alexcee's known oeuvre is too great to discuss each piece individually so this chapter will address particular works that I have grouped into three sections. His landscape paintings, lantern slides and sculptures/carvings will be considered in this order, which also roughly traces the trajectory of his career as it is known. This thesis considers Alexcee, the artist, as an individual, so the form of "authenticity" at stake from this point of view is whether a work attributed to him is an original.²²⁰ In contrast, as will be demonstrated in this chapter, the "issue" at stake for past scholars was often whether a work was "authentic Indian art," and the authorship of the piece, sometimes assumed, was secondary. Under past paradigms, the style of a work represented regional and cultural aesthetics, enabling scholars to make ethnographic assumptions based on style.²²¹ With this being said, two forms of authenticity that will be discussed are attribution (i.e. were these works really done by Alexcee?) and whether they have functioned as examples of Tsimshian art (or Northwest Coast art in general). For the purposes of this study, it will be assumed that the pieces signed with Alexcee's name have been reliably attributed, as well as those that exhibit particular elements of his own personal style.²²² This chapter will show how the discussion of

²²⁰ Over the past twenty years or so, interest has grown in Alexcee as an individual artist. Note also Barbeau wrote "Frederick Alexie: A Primitive," *The Canadian Review of Music and Art*, 3(11-12) (December 1944):19-22.

²²¹ For example, the formline, a thick black band used to define elements in a work's composition, is known to be essential within Northern Coast work, but is less prominent in the Southern Coast aesthetic. Works such as Alexcee's, not always subscribing to the traditional rules, would have frustrated scholars who valued these traditional aesthetic conventions.

²²² With historical art, the method of attribution based on style can be problematic, as will be discussed later.

“authenticity” elucidates the expectations and assumptions of Tsimshian art and artists both historically and in contemporary contexts.

What does “authenticity” mean within the context of Northwest Coast art history? Marjorie Halpin’s assertion invites room for instability and growth in new directions, qualities that are now valued and celebrated from a post-modern perspective. However, scholars were not always open to the versatility of these artistic traditions, and her description has developed out of more rigid historical definitions. An investigation of particular works within Alexcee’s oeuvre will show how they illustrate and contribute to the discussion of multiple authenticities (and inauthenticities) in evaluating Northwest Coast art. By looking at his pieces and their institutional, social and cultural contexts, an understanding of the paradigms of value and the interpretations of authenticity will become apparent. Historically, Alexcee’s works could not be contained within prescribed categories, nor can they now. Because they speak to multiple experiences, perspectives and values, and were created and exhibited within various contexts, this analysis will attempt to be critical yet open to interpretation as to where and how these works have fit within the history/ies of visual culture of the Northwest Coast and of Canada.

Some questions to ask include, why did his works not fit within the Northwest Coast “canon”? How did they deviate in terms of style, media and subject matter? What did his work mean to institutions and cultural authorities of his day? Why has there been a recent interest in his art? How do we even identify “an Alexcee”? Fortunately, there are substantial documentary records to help answer some of these questions. However, each raises complex issues, which are in turn complicated by the circumstances of individual experience. Those who recorded their impressions of this artist did so within different times and places, just as the questions and conclusions raised here have been informed by contemporary thought. Through an analysis of

particular works and circumstances, this chapter will investigate some of the broader issues that have been, and still are, at large in Canadian art history regarding the reception of Northwest Coast First Nations art.

What is “authenticity”? What is “authentic” Northwest Coast art?

From the earliest times of contact and colonialism to the present day, the worlds in which ‘ethnic’ arts are produced are said to have been teetering precariously on the brink of extinction. Producers, middlemen, and consumers have all capitalized in their own ways on this myth of imminent demise. In the end, however, it is apparent that each generation reclassifies the arts of world cultures in order to set high against low, authentic against touristic, traditional against new, genuine against spurious. The illusion of ‘authentic art’ could probably not persist were it not for the invention of its baser counterparts against which aesthetic merits can be measured and judged. The authentic could not survive without its unorthodox antithesis – the inauthentic.²²³

Phillips and Steiner note that aesthetic judgments are ephemeral and they acknowledge the binary categories into which “ethnic” arts have been historically placed. Although Alexcee’s works have been placed in both categories, they challenge the concepts of authentic and inauthentic. Alexcee’s art speaks to James Clifford’s “articulation theory” (or vice versa) in that it does not highlight the “death” of Tsimshian culture, but rather its vitality, as a response to the challenges imposed upon his people by settlement. His work shows how adversity was challenged with visual documentation, the celebration of tradition, and contribution to new social, cultural and economic spheres.

The development of Northwest Coast art testifies to cultural resilience in the face of colonialism. Briefly discussed in Chapter One, the fur trade initially stimulated wealth among Aboriginal peoples and the impact of these relationships was seen both in the economic sphere and in the production of art. It “stimulated an already significant artistic productivity, especially

²²³Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (eds.), Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999), p. 19.

in the northern and central regions” and led to increased potlatching and commissioning of ritual, ceremonial and everyday items.²²⁴ According to Aldona Jonaitis, colonial encounters and ensuing settlement “led to the creation of what has been called by some the classic art of the ‘golden age’ of Northwest Coast culture...central to the [northern style] is the use of the *formline*²²⁵ – a swelling and narrowing calligraphy-like band – to define the major and minor elements of the composition.”²²⁶ This formal stylistic element was essential within the art of the North for both two and three-dimensional design.²²⁷

Anthropologist Franz Boas was one of the first scholars to systematically document and describe regional art forms and styles. His project was historical and he attempted to establish the nature of Northwest Coast cultures in their “original” (i.e. pre-contact) states. The Boasian model located the end of “traditional” culture at the end of the nineteenth century with permanent non-Native settlement, so that pre-contact culture was considered “purer,” having been untainted by non-Aboriginal beliefs and practices. In the wake of settlement, Jonaitis says that the perceived “perfection of art, particularly in the north, gave way to cruder visual expressions.”²²⁸ A comparison of early nineteenth and early twentieth century works (here she contrasts Tlingit house screens) often reveals, in the later work, “disparate, unconnected elements...none rendered with the precision and elegance of the earlier work.”²²⁹ This difference is apparent when comparing one of Alexcee’s painted paddle designs with an older one exhibiting “classic” design principles (plate 21). For some, these differences highlighted

²²⁴ Aldona Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast*. (Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006), p. xv.

²²⁵ The term “formline” was coined by Northwest Coast art and culture scholar Bill Holm, whose 1965 illustrated publication *Northwest Coast Indian Art – An Analysis of Form*, provided a visual vocabulary with which to discuss the formal aesthetic elements of two and three-dimensional design. See Bill Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art, an Analysis of Form* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965).

²²⁶ Jonaitis, p. xv.

²²⁷ Three-dimensional design includes painting and sculpture.

²²⁸ Jonaitis, p. xvii.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

what has been called the “death” of Northwest Coast art that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, followed by a rediscovery of the “rules of classic Northwest Coast art during a renaissance that began in the 1960s.”²³⁰ Although this is a convenient way of organizing the developmental history of this art form, Jonaitis acknowledges that the “salvage” paradigm has, for many decades now, shifted in favour of analyzing cultural continuities and changes after settlement. The concept of “cultural continuity,” visible throughout Alexcee’s oeuvre, will be explored throughout this chapter. According to Jonaitis,

For decades, ‘salvage anthropology’ disregarded any indications of acculturation and sought the oldest, most ‘traditional’ data, be they artifacts from or information on culture. Not only was this shortsighted, it could not really be accomplished, for culture inevitably responds to new stimuli – such as newcomers like fur traders and settlers. After its nineteenth-century efflorescence, some Northwest Coast art became less refined and elegant. It has been suggested that this disruption of formal units reflected the cultural disruption caused by intruders into Native lands. Despite abandoning the classic canon, post-classic artworks held significant meaning within their communities and, in the light of the general contempt in which settlers held Native culture, represented forms of resistance to the majority society [Jonaitis contests the long-held] Boasian bias that older is better and newer [especially non-Native-influenced] is worse²³¹

The “Boasian bias” in favor of pre-contact visual culture became the standard against which scholars would base their assumptions and expectations of what was “traditional” or “authentic.”

Identification of Individual Style

While it is true that earlier scholars understood and organized style according to regional and cultural aesthetics, equally important for this project is the identification of individual style in Northwest Coast art. When did this practice begin? To properly answer this question would involve a comprehensive historiography, which is beyond the scope of this

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Jonaitis, p. xx.

paper. However, several historical sources lend insight into when, why and how the emphasis on individual style developed. In Euro-Canadian terms, this discussion seems to begin with the prolific Haida artist Charles Edenshaw (1839 – 1920). Some of Edenshaw’s works were exhibited at the *Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* exhibit in Ottawa in 1927, where he is individually noted in the category of “Slate Carvings,” in Barbeau’s catalogue entries. According to Barbeau, the carvers of argillite

were mostly from Skidegate and Massett, two north-eastern villages of the [Queen Charlotte] Islands. And it is probably that they resorted to this material only after 1859 [c. arrival of missionaries], when the white strangers showed their interest in native souvenirs. Some of these carvings are of unusual excellence, although the technique remains primarily one of wood carving rather than stone cutting.²³²

Why is Edenshaw distinguished among the unnamed artists of the regions mentioned above?

As Barbeau goes on to say, “many of the best pieces of this kind are the work of the famous Haida chief, Edenshaw, and his faithful Tlingit slave. These two men spent much of their fruitful lives in a friendly rivalry, carving figures of all kinds, most of which now grace the public or private museum collections in Canada and abroad.”²³³ As noted earlier in this paper, Barbeau was interested in individuals of distinguished rank, and Edenshaw was a hereditary chief of the Eagle Clan in addition to being a prolific artist. This made his biography notable and interesting (whereas nothing else is made of his Tlingit partner). Edenshaw was then exhibited four decades later in the Vancouver Art Gallery’s 1967 show *Arts of the Raven*. By this point, the scholarship had developed a more comprehensive oeuvre (one entire gallery was devoted to his work) and the catalogue note included an exclusive biographical essay on the artist. Edenshaw was initially trained to carve poles and masks in the Haida tradition, and then turned to the production of commercial items after the coming of missionaries to Haida Gwaii, becoming the

²³² Barbeau, from *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada (catalogue) December 1927), p. 11.

²³³ *Ibid.*

most-known Haida artist by the 1880s. He made jewelry including silver bracelets, model poles, figures and walking sticks, and from the argillite of the north-east region he sculpted pipes, dishes, chests, model poles and other figures. Gallery 6 exhibited houseposts, slate carvings (both individual and group figures), silver work and painted designs, among other works. Although he had long been known to collectors and scholars, the catalogue essay acknowledged that it was “only [then, in 1967] that research [was] beginning to reveal the full range and quality of his life’s work.”²³⁴ In 1897 Edenshaw gave illustrations and knowledge of artistic forms to Boas, which was an essential contribution to the anthropologist’s seminal book *Primitive Art* (1927). Edenshaw was also commissioned to make models and poles by the American Museum of Natural History. Although several works exhibited in *Arts of the Raven* were attributed to him, attribution was still problematic as he did not sign his work. Catalogue author Wilson Duff acknowledged attribution sometimes by collector, whereas others could be identified based on personal style. By 1967, “the full range of his work [was] still unknown” due to the time consuming nature of tracing stylistic patterns and searching for objects.²³⁵

How, then, did the identification of personal style develop? As Wilson Duff’s catalogue text acknowledges, there are few existing well-preserved works done by Northwest Coast artists in the period before contact (c. 1770s). This was due to the perishable nature of the media in which they worked. Materials were subject to decay and so details would have been harder to distinguish. The effects of contact brought new wealth (with the fur trade) that stimulated the need for more art-making to support ceremonies such as potlatches where objects such as chests, blankets and dishes were essential currency. Importantly, the introduction of materials

²³⁴Wilson Duff, *Arts of the Raven: Masterworks by the Northwest Coast Indian*. An exhibition in honour of the one hundredth anniversary of Canadian Confederation. Catalogue text by Wilson Duff, with contributory articles by Bill Holm, and Bill Reid. (Vancouver: The Vancouver Art Gallery 15 June – 24 September 1967).

²³⁵ Ibid.

such as silver and copper were used to make more effective tools and more durable works could be made including jewelry and objects painted with commercial synthetic paints. Individual artists' styles could be distinguished in hard materials like argillite (models, panel pipes), engraved silver jewelry and wood-carved and painted models, and artists could afford to be more prolific.²³⁶

Both the 1927 exhibit and *Arts of the Raven* share parallels in motive and organization, yet with different results due to their respective historical contexts. Both exhibits conveyed the message that Northwest Coast art was *art*. While this developing message may have been confusing in 1927, the curators in 1967 made it clear that a shift was underway ("the intent of this exhibition is to make an explicit and emphatic statement contributing to this shift: this is an exhibition of art, high art, not ethnology").²³⁷ Both exhibits grouped the early works into categories such as "models", "masks", "headdresses", "carved chests and dishes" for the former and "faces", "small sculptures in wood" for the latter. Both focused on one individual artist (Alexcee in 1927 and Edenshaw in 1967) who was understood to have bridged tradition and innovation and responded to change by continuing cultural forms from the "old" to the "new". Finally, both exhibits concluded with sections on the "contemporaries:" in 1927, these were the landscapes and portraits of Carr, Jackson and the Group of Seven. In *Arts of the Raven*, these works were masks, paintings, engraved silver jewelry, dishes, boxes and models by named Haida and Kwakwaka'wakw artists such as Bill Reid, Robert Davidson, Doug Cranmer and Tony Hunt. By 1967, the paradigm had shifted: old works were "masterworks" and contemporary pieces were "fine art." As art historian Janet Catherine Berlo has written, students of Northwest Coast

²³⁶Wilson Duff, "Contexts of Northwest Coast Art," from *Arts of the Raven: Masterworks of the Northwest Coast Indian*. [catalogue essay, no page number given].

²³⁷Doris Shadbolt, "Foreword", from *Arts of the Raven: Masterworks of the Northwest Coast Indian*. [catalogue].

art generally credit the exhibit “as a pivotal event in both scholarly and popular appreciation of the art of the Pacific Northwest.”²³⁸

But what about artists of the previous generation? Marcia Crosby discusses the efforts of several well-known Northwest Coast artists working prior to the 1960s “revival” who were “engaged in the cultural projects of modernism [in this case Indian art],”²³⁹ including George Clutesi, Charlie James, Mungo Martin and Ellen Neel, but whose works were not included in the 1967 exhibit. She writes that before the mid-1960s, “modern Indian” art was not supported by an “established intellectual discourse to create value for [it],” nor was there “sustained economic or/and institutional or private support from patrons.”²⁴⁰ Bill Holm’s influential book (1965) introduced the formal, art-historical language with which these works could be analyzed and organized, and this language is evident in the catalogue essays of the 1967 exhibit (i.e. Duff’s use of the term “formline,” coined by Holm). This mid-60s context of support and celebration of the contemporary arts was facilitated in part by the expansion (or invention) of descriptive language and helps explain why projects such as Barbeau’s in 1927 had little relative historical impact. According to Crosby,

in the post-1967 revival discourse and modernist paradigm that positioned “uncontaminated” traditional work as modern art, all the contemporary work that preceded it was relegated to the past—whether it was what had previously been called “artifact,” tourist art, curio, or work such as Clutesi’s legends on canvas or Ellen Neel’s carving.²⁴¹

Alexcee can be compared to Clutesi or Neel in the sense that his work was also dismissed within its wider contemporary context. As Barbeau said in 1927, his work “possesses something of the

²³⁸ Janet Catherine Berlo, “Recent Scholarship on Northwest Coast Indian Art: A Review Essay,” *American Indian Quarterly* 10(2) (Spring 1986) University of Nebraska Press.

²³⁹ Marcia Crosby, “Making Indian Art ‘Modern’,” *60s Ruins in Progress. Vancouver Art in the Sixties*. http://vancouverartinthesixties.com/files/sixties_making-indian-art-modern.pdf (accessed 03/2010).

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

quality which we should expect from primitive painting. What he depicts in his many pictures is Port Simpson, his tribesmen, their legends and their former battles.”²⁴² And later in 1945, his works, while intriguing, were “strange” and “puzzling.”²⁴³ In these ambivalent passages, Barbeau communicated what would become commonly accepted and more firmly articulated by new language twenty years later – that not only did contemporary Aboriginal artists exist in the post-mission, post-“golden age” period (of “decline”), but that their works were worthy of attention and admiration. Although he is often criticized for presenting a pejorative view of contemporary Northwest Coast artwork, I think it is fair to say that in the 1920s Barbeau anticipated or foresaw the completion of the shift to come in the 1960s. For a gallery exhibit to highlight the works of individual, named artists such as Alexcee and Edenshaw, was forward-thinking for the 1920s.

Artists’ names began to hold significance in the late nineteenth century but this was not always the case. A brief review of the paradigms within which Northwest Coast artworks have been categorized in European terms begins with the status of masks, rattles, boxes, etc. as “curio” objects that interested European explorers fascinated with the “other” upon contact, and in the years following. When Europeans established permanent colonies and governments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the status of these objects shifted within the new discipline of ethnology. As ethnological artifacts, they were valued by Euro-North Americans for being representative of the beliefs, lifestyles and customs of Aboriginal peoples.

In addition to Boas, his student, anthropologist Herman Haeberlin and American Navy lieutenant G.T. Emmons were two other early twentieth-century authors interested in

²⁴² (1927) Barbeau, 13.

²⁴³ (1945) Barbeau, 21.

Northwest Coast aesthetics and compositional elements.²⁴⁴ These authors were among those who set the discursive and disciplinary frameworks that would inform the assumptions and expectations of their successors, such as Barbeau and Viola Garfield, two later scholars who greatly contributed to the study of Tsimshian arts and culture and who had a direct relationship with Freddie Alexcee.²⁴⁵ The academics' interest in this art was then enthusiastically explored by European and American modernist artists in the late 1930s and early 40s who were fascinated with the "primitivist" aesthetic. To this end, W. Jackson Rushing notes the "self-conscious primitivism of early Abstract Expressionism included totemic imagery and pictographic writing derived from Native American art" exemplified by artists such as Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko.²⁴⁶ To reiterate, the publication of Bill Holm's 1965 *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*, presented these forms as art proper. His naming of Northwest Coast art forms, styles and elements accorded the aesthetic a translatable vocabulary that allowed the reader (or anyone unfamiliar with these elements) to understand and study its elements. As outlined, *Arts of the Raven* (celebrating mostly Northern historic and contemporary work) showed that "Northwest Coast art belongs in the category of 'fine art', as opposed to being anthropological artifacts, [and that] contemporary art can have quality

²⁴⁴F. Graeme Chalmers, "European Ways of Talking About the Art of the Northwest Coast First Nations," (Vancouver: University of British Columbia) <http://www.brandonu.ca/library/cjns/15.1/chalmers.pdf>, accessed 2008/11/03.

²⁴⁵ Garfield obtained her M.A. in anthropology at the University of Washington under Erna Gunther. Her thesis focused on Tsimshian marriage patterns and was based on research done in Metlakatla. Most of Garfield's PhD work was completed under Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict via transfer graduate courses from Columbia University. Garfield's attention to ethnographic detail can be understood in light of her teacher, Boas. Her primary research assistant while in Port Simpson for her monograph *Tsimshian Clan and Society* was William Beynon. See *Biographical Note*, "Guide to the Viola Edmundson Garfield Papers (1927 – 1978), University of Washington Libraries, http://www.lib.washington.edu/SpecialColl/findaids/docs/uarchives/UA19_26_2027GarfieldViolaEdmundson.xml) (accessed 2010/03).

²⁴⁶ W. Jackson Rushing, *Native and American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), p. 121.

equivalent to older pieces.”²⁴⁷ The exhibit, curated by Doris Shadbolt and assisted by Wilson Duff, Bill Holm and Bill Reid, focused not on social or cultural contexts and meanings, but on the forms and aesthetics of Northwest Coast material culture.²⁴⁸ Although *Arts of the Raven* was a significant turning point for the appreciation of this art, Crosby argues that the curators’ “fine art” definition included the old masters and the up-and-comers of the 60s, yet overlooked the works of 1940s and 50s contemporary artists such as Neel, Clutesi, Henry Speck and others, who, like Alexcee, produced works for the tourist market as a means of generating income. As Alexcee lived and worked within the so-called period of “decline” (i.e. after the “golden era” and prior to the 1960s “renaissance”), his works have sometimes been treated pejoratively. His paintings, while valued for their novelty, were thought to be neither authentically Tsimshian (as visual representations) nor able to compete aesthetically with the Canadian “moderns” such as members of the Group of Seven.

Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern

This show is significant within both Alexcee’s and Canada’s art histories. In 1927, the National Gallery of Canada and the National Museum of Man held a joint exhibition the purpose of which was to commemorate Northwest Coast art and expose the nation to a new Canadian painting style, inspired by the landscapes of mostly the west coast and interior of British Columbia.²⁴⁹ At this exhibit, Alexcee’s paintings were first exposed to Eastern Canadian audiences: *Battle Between the Haida and the Tsimshian*, *Port Simpson* and *Indian Village of Port Simpson* (plates 12, 17). It was the first instance in which Aboriginal art was shown within a Canadian gallery setting and raises significant issues relating to the reception of Alexcee’s work by a large institution east of British Columbia.

²⁴⁷ Jonaitis, p. 284.

²⁴⁸ Marcia Crosby, p. 5.

²⁴⁹ This exhibit was also shown at the Art Gallery of Toronto in the winter of 1928.

Landscape Paintings

In 1918, Haeberlin wrote that

in the case of the carving and painting of the Northwest Coast we are dealing with an art whose style is 'felt' by everyone. To whatever objects this art is applied, be it totem poles, house fronts, canoes, dishes or spoons, we are always confronted by certain characteristics of style. The most striking demonstration of the esthetic sense of the northwest coast artist lies in the adaptation of the [artist's] subject matter to a given surface [i.e. a totem pole]. The given surface is the primary condition of composition and its utilization as an esthetic factor presents to the artist ever new problems. The solution of these problems involves truly artistic imagination.²⁵⁰

His praise of the style, aesthetic, and "truly artistic" imagination of West Coast artists presumably referred to the "old masters," whose unsigned works inspired the European and American modern "primitives." While the precedent had been set in the literature for the consideration of Aboriginal art as such, the 1927 exhibit represented the native works somewhat ambiguously, their meanings shifting, both in display and in the catalogue, between "art," "craft" and "ethnology," with Alexcee's paintings being fit somewhere in between.²⁵¹

Although displayed in the Gallery alongside the paintings of Canadian "modernists" (such as Emily Carr, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson and Edwin Holgate), the Northwest Coast objects, borrowed from the National Museum, the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) and the McGill Museum in Montreal, were represented ethnographically in the exhibition's catalogue. The catalogue is divided into three parts – the opening remarks by both Eric Brown and Barbeau,

²⁵⁰ Herman K. Haeberlin, "Principles of Esthetic Form in the Art of the North Pacific Coast: A Preliminary Sketch". *American Anthropologist*, New Series. 20(3) (July – September 1918): 259, 261.

²⁵¹ *Exhibition of Northwest Coast Art: Native and Modern* was for many years acknowledged for solidifying Victoria artist Emily Carr's artistic career and fame throughout Canada. However, the exhibition has been heavily criticized by contemporary scholars in recent years for its simultaneous denial of the vitality of Aboriginal culture as well as for the appropriation of Northwest Coast art for the attempted construction of a Canadian cultural identity. Because of the collaborative efforts of Eric Brown, then-director of the Gallery, and Marius Barbeau, then- anthropologist at the National Museum, the display of the exhibit and the language of its catalogue reveal the ambiguity of the status of these works.

contextualized descriptions of the Northwest Coast objects on display (organized into categories) and finally the uncontextualized listings of the Euro-Canadian works exhibited, organized by artist and title. According to Brown, the exhibition's purpose was

to mingle for the first time the art work of the Canadian West Coast tribes with that of our more sophisticated artists in an endeavor to analyse [sic] their relationships to one another, if such exist, and particularly to enable this primitive and interesting art to take a definite place as one of the most valuable of Canada's artistic productions.²⁵²

In other words, the Northwest Coast works were shown in part as inspiration for the Canadian painters. Of the unnamed Aboriginal artists, Barbeau observed that it was "remarkable how skillfully [they] have adapted their designs to the exacting nature of their materials, while striving to serve a public purpose that constantly stimulated their originality and taxed their creative talents to the utmost."²⁵³ While both curators professed an appreciation for Aboriginal "art," their language relegated it to a past time in Canada's history. In this exhibition, the objects were also interpreted as a basis for the construction of a distinctly Canadian national art and identity. This exhibition, like those being shown in the U.S., was part of an initiative to have Aboriginal art "recognized as a fundamental component of a unique, non-European national identity and aesthetic; to preserve Native culture; and to create a market for current artistic production."²⁵⁴ The message was that "native" art, seen as timeless and supposedly tied to the

²⁵² Brown, Eric, from *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* (Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada (catalogue) December 1927), p. 2.

²⁵³ Barbeau, Ibid., pp. 3-4.

²⁵⁴ Leslie Dawn, *National Visions, National Blindness*. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), p. 238. The idea of appropriation has also been discussed by contemporary scholars such as Diana Nemiroff, Hawker and Paul Hjartarson: at a time when Canada was pursuing the construction of a distinct national cultural identity the nation, missing an "ancient *volk* whom they could cite as ancestors" sought, for this cultural construction, a "heritage of decorative design to be mined by the Canadian artist." See Diana Nemiroff, "Modernism, Nationalism and Beyond: A Critical History of Exhibitions of First Nations Art," in Diana Nemiroff, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, and Robert Houle, *Land/Spirit/Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*. (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), p. 25.

land, could provide the foundational styles for a uniquely Canadian visual representation, visible in the works of Carr and the Group of Seven.²⁵⁵

The status of the Northwest Coast works oscillated between art and ethnology in the galleries and catalogue, their makers shifting between “artist” and “craftsperson.” As Leslie Dawn says, “[Brown’s] vacillation between referring to the Native material as ‘art’ and ‘craft’ indicates some indecision about the nature of the material.”²⁵⁶ The exhibition sought at once to define the categories of identity (other/self) by producing binaries between Northwest Coast art and the so-called “modern Canadian” art. That the ethnographically categorized Aboriginal objects in the catalogue preceded the un-contextualized, titled paintings is significant. In this sense, the exhibit is now accused of suggesting that Aboriginal cultures were dying but that their material culture could be used as a source of inspiration for a more sophisticated genre.

The above being said, it is easy to vilify these historic professionals from a contemporary standpoint but at the time, the “oscillation” of the Aboriginal works between categories and binaries suggests a rather radical shift in thinking about the pieces as art proper. After all, several works were indeed displayed outside of the traditional ethnographic cases and hung on the walls to be admired as works of art alongside the paintings. This point is often obscured within retrospective critiques that focus on the language used at the time, which is now accepted as discriminatory.

²⁵⁵ In her M.A. thesis, “‘These Things Are Our Totems’: Marius Barbeau and the Indigenization of Canadian Art and Culture in the 1920s,” Sandra Dyck discusses the late-1920s excursion of a group of non-Aboriginal artists to the Skeena River region (Gitksan territory). They were encouraged by C.M. Barbeau to paint images of people, villages and art forms, as he “identified Gitksan culture as a unique part of Canadian patrimony, and thus viewed images of Gitksan subjects as one means of developing a distinctive national art”. In her thesis, Dyck refers to *Indigenization* as “the colonial appropriation of aspects of Native (aboriginal/indigenous) culture in the service of native (distinctly Canadian) culture.” Dyck (1995),

iii.
²⁵⁶ Dawn, 240.

So where did Alexcee's paintings fit within this exhibition? The curators placed his catalogue entry between those of the traditional works and the listing of the moderns. The entry reads as follows:

The two paintings by Fred Alexee in one of the smaller rooms might be placed among the primitives of Canadian art here exhibited. They are worth special notice. In European countries primitive paintings have been prized for their naivete, their charm, and the historical perspective which they confer upon the development of art. In Canada this category has so far eluded search, if we except Indian art pure and simple. Alexcee's work possesses something of the quality which we should expect from such primitive painting, and he himself is an old Tsimsyan half-breed of Port Simpson, B.C. What he depicts in his many pictures is Port Simpson, his tribesmen, their legends and their former battles. His sense of colour is limited; his composition is as a rule excellent; and the movement is spontaneous and spirited. Artists have already expressed their admiration for his efforts, which are carried out both in oil and water colour. One of the two pictures here exhibited represents a battle between the Haidas and Tsimsyan at Port Simpson, about 1840; and the other native houses and totem poles of Port Simpson.²⁵⁷

Homi Bhabha has conceived of culture (and cultural hybridity) as being located in the interstices between constructed boundaries.²⁵⁸ Plate 24 illustrates an installation photo from the exhibit's run at the Art Gallery in Toronto in 1928. *Fight Between the Haida and the Tsimshian at Fort Simpson* is visible beneath a "modern" painting to the left of the doorway. For contemporary critics, the presence of Alexcee's works in this exhibition suggests the threat of hybridity to the binary categories of "Indian/Primitive" and "Canadian" art. In the catalogue, his paintings were labeled as "primitive" yet "worth special notice." Their placement between the ethnological paragraphs and the listing of the "moderns" have been interpreted as bridging a gap between what was considered "native" art (i.e. in the past) and "modern" art (i.e. of the Canadian present). As "neither/nor", Alexcee's art reinforced these categories (by separating

²⁵⁷ Brown and Barbeau, p. 13.

²⁵⁸ See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

them into binaries) but also complicated them, as he was an Aboriginal artist working in non-traditional modes of representation.

For the curators, although his work was worth special notice, it “might [have been] placed among the primitives of Canadian art.”²⁵⁹ These comments are vague and ambivalent, and although the curators may be charged with indecision as to the nature of the works, to accuse Barbeau (and Brown) of overt racism and backwardness is hyperbolic and unfair. Again, their basic motive of exposing Northwest Coast art to the public in a gallery context was novel and ahead of its time. As National Museum anthropologist Douglas Leechman commented, the Northwest Coast works “appeared in the same room and on the same walls with modern oils and water colours” and that in the exhibit, it was “the art [of Northwest Coast peoples] itself which [was] of interest.”²⁶⁰ These are significant comments for their time. Another article praised the

carved boards...including some striking examples of Indian mural painting at its best, and [the] carved and painted chests also commanded attention. [These were] beautifully executed, with well-planned and bold decorations and of value particularly on account of their originality and design. The delicacy of the work, its authority and mastery of line and design [were] to be noted.²⁶¹

Although the language in the catalogue notes (such as the Alexcee paragraph above) reflects commonly-held ethnographic/anthropological assumptions of the day, the exhibit spaces themselves were fresh and thought-provoking. The innovative philosophy, organization and layout of the exhibit spoke to the curators’ challenges of not only exhibiting “Canadian” art, but of conceptualizing it. As a project of its time, *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* was Canadian art history in the making.

²⁵⁹ Barbeau (National Gallery of Canada, 1927), p. 13.

²⁶⁰ Douglas Leechman, “Native Canadian Art of the West Coast,” *Studio* (November, 1928), General Press Cutting Association Ltd. Atlantic House.

²⁶¹ “Canadian West Coast Art on Exhibition by the Art Association”, *Montreal Daily Star*, Thursday, March 1, 1928.

In the catalogue, Alexcee is qualified as a “primitive” in both the pejorative sense of the term, as well as in the Western artistic sense, where in “European countries primitive paintings have been prized for their naivete, their charm, and the historical perspective they confer upon the development of art.”²⁶² It is likely that these comments attempted to reverse the disappointing reviews of a similar art show held in Paris in 1926, where French critics praised the quality of the Northwest Coast works above those of the same Canadian “moderns” exhibited at the NGC in 1927.²⁶³ Having located Alexcee’s Western-style paintings between tradition and innovation, the exhibit is now accused of attempting to polarize “articulation and nonarticulation, mastery and lack of competence, and modern and primitive.”²⁶⁴ According to Ronald Hawker, Alexcee’s work was “used to mediate the myth of cultural extinction and the physical survival of First Nations peoples by serving as a stepping stone from the old to the new, from ‘primitivism’ to ‘modernity’.”²⁶⁵ While they showed an interesting and unusual new aesthetic, the implication seemed to be that contemporary West Coast Native art had become degraded in the generations following the decline (or presumed disappearance) of the “old masters.”²⁶⁶ The way the traditional works were represented suggested the curators’ uncertainty regarding Euro-Canadian culture and the formation of a national identity, as well as an unpreparedness to articulate the fluctuating disciplinary paradigms in which Aboriginal art was being considered.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ Dawn, p. 241.

²⁶⁴ Dawn, p. 253.

²⁶⁵ Hawker, p. 65.

²⁶⁶ What was Alexcee’s work expected to be? Cultural authorities in Ottawa and Toronto seemed to find his work interesting, but in a patronizing way. They were not technical masterpieces, yet their novelty and quality may have been seen to threaten the success of the Group of Seven and the reputation of the Gallery during that critical phase of defining a national art aesthetic and tradition. In this case his work was criticized for not being authentic enough (i.e. the inference being that of a “degenerate”) but not being “modern” or as sophisticated as the Group of Seven works.

Alexcee's work fascinated Barbeau personally over the course of his career but it was not what the anthropologist sought for examples of traditional material culture. He admitted to having "overlooked" Alexcee on his trip to Port Simpson in 1915 in view of his professional responsibilities of documenting the more prominent members of the community, such as the chiefs. His collector's list includes mainly ethnological objects and none of Alexcee's contemporary works. In terms of what Barbeau and others sought to represent Tsimshian arts (i.e. traditional designs), his Northwest Coast files contain illustrations by Charles Dudoward (1888-1973), a younger contemporary of Alexcee's from Port Simpson.²⁶⁷ Briefly noted in Chapter One, Barbeau collected information from Dudoward on face-painting designs, ceremonial regalia, jewelry, dishes and a variety of other types of objects, including painted house fronts (plate 25).²⁶⁸ He painted landscapes (plates 25, 29), but also pieces that spoke to tradition and convention, as Barbeau was interested in what the designs represented and in what contexts they were used. Despite his interest in more canonic works, Barbeau recalls being personally fascinated with Alexcee's "painted pictures showing Port Simpson, Indians fighting in front of a trading post, or racing dug-out canoes [and] wood carvings of a strange type [presumably Alexcee's Christian religious carvings]."²⁶⁹ At this point, Alexcee's art was seen as somewhat of an anomaly. Nonetheless, upon his return to Port Simpson in 1926 with A.Y. Jackson, both men purchased the paintings that would one year later be hung in the 1927 National Gallery exhibition.

Returning for a moment to the *West Coast Art* catalogue entry, Barbeau's arguably patronizing tone contrasts with his views that "[Alexcee's] composition is as a rule excellent; and

²⁶⁷ Vital Event Death Registration: Charles Henry Dudoward. See B.C. Archives database; <http://search.bccarchives.gov.bc.ca>. (Accessed 2009/03/10).

²⁶⁸ *Designs*. Marius Barbeau Fonds: Northwest Coast File, B-F-183.29 Box: B15, Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives, Gatineau, Quebec.

²⁶⁹ Barbeau (1944), p. 23.

the movement is spontaneous and spirited. Artists [i.e. Jackson] have already expressed their admiration for his efforts, which are carried out in both oil and water colour."²⁷⁰ Barbeau's personal observations record what he saw as artistic merit and value in Alexcee's works, however unusual or inauthentic he may have considered them. Prior to the 1928 publication of his book, The Downfall of Temlaham, he told A.Y. Jackson he wanted to have an Alexcee painting included to illustrate the text. Jackson responded, saying that

I think the Alexcee had better be left out. It will not have much bearing on the book and the [Canadian National Railroad] may think less of the other work if it is included. I would like to suggest that [Edwin] Holgate make another drawing in colour. He had one done of an Indian woman with a cradle on her back and the end of a dug out [canoe] standing in the design.²⁷¹

Reluctant to include Alexcee's paintings in the book, Jackson's comments confirm that he was "not an artist noted for technical aptitude in his European-influenced work."²⁷² Perhaps Jackson was concerned about his own image and reputation as an artist. If the Canadian National Railroad perceived the quality of the "finer," "avant-garde" works to be degraded by the inclusion of Alexcee's "primitives," perhaps they would no longer be interested in promoting the Group of Seven and funding their travels to Western Canada. Furthermore, this extract illustrates the desire to capture "traditional" (i.e. stereotypical or romanticized) scenes of "Indianness," such as the one above, with no suggestion of contact (contemporary reality), as Alexcee's works showed. Barbeau's response later that month indicates his deferral to Jackson. Alexcee's painting would not be included, but was instead, at Jackson's request, replaced by that Holgate painting.²⁷³

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Jackson to Barbeau, January, 1928. Marius Barbeau Fonds: Northwest Coast Files, Box 205/53, Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives.

²⁷² Hawker, p. 230.

²⁷³ Edwin Holgate, "Young Gitksan Mother With a Cradle, At the edge of the Skeena", in C.M. Barbeau, The Downfall of Temlaham. (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1928), p. 142.

In another letter to Jackson, dated to December, 1929, Barbeau commented that

Official heads of much official departments fail to appreciate the value of Alexee's work and this is no blemish for him. Both pictures [presumably the two shown in the exhibition], which I had sent to the Archives quite long ago, were returned to me recently with a caption of "no funds."²⁷⁴

Jackson later donated his painting to the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1944 and Barbeau's remained at the National Museum. It appears that his fascination with Alexcee's work was not ultimately shared by other private or public bodies. As an anthropologist, Barbeau appreciated Alexcee's works for their iconographical value, in their merit as historical documents and foremost in their unusual stylistic quality and deviation from the highly valued "traditional" artistic conventions of Northwest Coast carvers and painters such. As he wrote in 1944,

the totem-like features and plastic treatment of the figures shown [in two small angel carvings (plate 6) belong partly to the art of the North West Coast Indians and partly to the conceptions of the white people within the fold of the church. This blend of two cultures in Alexie's carvings is a rare accident at the frontiers of two worlds. It makes his paintings and carvings exceptional, fascinating, significant...²⁷⁵

Barbeau's reference to the "two worlds" of Aboriginal and Canadian art was constructed from Ottawa; perhaps assumptions made about West Coast art from the East underestimated the cultural complexity of metropolitan communities such as Port Simpson. Furthermore, the Canadian art "world" was a developing project in the 1920s, in which he was involved. The Port Simpson of Alexcee's day was one world, albeit a complicated one. This eclectic milieu supported innovation - the formation of new styles and deviations from "normative" or "traditional" Northwest Coast artistic practices and methods. Along with the Group of Seven and Eric Brown, Barbeau was involved in constructing what is now taken as the quintessential

²⁷⁴ Barbeau to Jackson, 28 Jan., 1928, Marius Barbeau Fonds: Northwest Coast Files, Box 205/53, Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives.

²⁷⁵ Barbeau (1944), p. 22.

Canadian art tradition. However, he appreciated Alexcee's innovative works, which ultimately upset those essentialist categories to which Bhabha refers, and with which exhibits like *West Coast Art* sought to maintain the divide between "primitive" and "modern". Whether Alexcee's performance as an artist intentionally disrupted these binaries is doubtful. As Beynon remarked when he told him about the recognition his work had received in the East, Alexcee said, "'Oh well. You tell them that I will paint another for them if they want it, it will cost them \$30.' I gave up."²⁷⁶ As outlined in previous chapters, throughout his lifetime Alexcee honored commitments within both Tsimshian and Christian religious contexts, was exposed to European artistic traditions, and participated in the market economy as a producer. Alexcee negotiated his own complex historical circumstances as he was able to, likely supplementing his income as a fisherman and mission-boat engineer with his art making. However, although his works demonstrate "hybridity" (by negotiating various cultural influences), and celebrate his culture with the depiction of traditional scenes, interpreting them as overt "acts of resistance," a post-colonial/post-modern term, obscures Alexcee's historical experience.²⁷⁷

The two works discussed above were signed so their attributions are presumably reliable. An analysis of several paintings illustrates patterns in his individual style and subject matter that can supplement this mode of attribution. Alexcee's paintings are generally easier to identify than his sculptures as many of them have been signed and his illustrations reveal clearer

²⁷⁶William Beynon, letter to Barbeau [undated]. Ref. B-F-159.4; Marius Barbeau Fonds, Northwest Coast File, "Freddie Alexee, A Canadian Primitive", B-F-159, Box: B14, Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives.

²⁷⁷When considering Alexcee and his work within a theoretical framework, James Clifford's articulation theory might be useful instead. This is "a non-reductive way to think about cultural transformations and the apparent coming and going of 'traditional' forms". This model might allow more room for the consideration of Alexcee as an individual working within the unique atmosphere of the Port Simpson of his day. Although Barbeau may have recognized this artists' potential for expanding the dialogue and boundaries with which Northwest Coast art was framed, the cultural atmosphere in Central Canada was not receptive to an Aboriginal "avant-garde".

stylistic patterns.²⁷⁸ Peter Macnair, the former Head of the Ethnology Division at the Royal British Columbia Museum, has noted the

way in which [Alexcee] paints anatomical features on human faces. Typical are the slightly arched eyebrows. The eyes usually consist of a convex arch defining the upper eyelid line; these are combined with a dot representing the iris. Note the lower eyelid line is frequently absent. On a flat surface, the nose is simply indicated by a slightly concave line in black while the mouth, also a single line, is somewhat longer and curves in the opposite direction. If the human face has a slightly three-dimensional quality, the nose and lip lines are usually red, rather than black. Sometimes the mouth may be defined by two lines indicating upper and lower lips.²⁷⁹

Macnair's observations speak to the forward-facing human figures in the painting *Pole Raising at Port Simpson* (plate 17), as well as in several lantern slide images at the Museum of Vancouver (plates 6, 8, 9, 27, 28).²⁸⁰ While the elements that Macnair outlines help students identify Alexcee's paintings, attribution based on style can be problematic given the possibility that other artists emulated his works,²⁸¹ just as Alexcee likely copied the landscape paintings of HBC workers Pym Nevins Compton and Gordon Lockerby (plates 10,11). This problem occurs in other instances where documentation and signatures on historical works are scarce. For example, Barbeau suggested one painting could have been done by Alexcee, probably based on

²⁷⁸ It should be noted that the signature occurring on most of these paintings is not necessarily Alexcee's own. There is a signed petition issued by Reverend Crosby of the Port Simpson Methodist Church at the British Columbia Archival Union List (Bob Stewart) Archives in Vancouver (an oath to abstain from alcoholic beverages) that exhibits his signature, which is not similar to those on his paintings. It is possible that he had someone sign the works for him (perhaps an HBC store employee?).

²⁷⁹ Peter Macnair, "Four Model Poles Owned by George Mess" [unpublished typescript accessed in Bill McLennan's "Alexcee" file at University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology], Royal B.C. Museum, 26 July 1990, p. 4.

²⁸⁰ These images will be discussed later.

²⁸¹ Viola Garfield made note of other artists having copied his works in her unpublished field notes, although she does not mention particular individuals.

its similar subject matter (the fort and beach) and perspective despite its more painterly style and the signature “CHD” on the lower right third of the canvas (plate 29).²⁸²

Paintings that are reliably attributed to Alexcee, bearing the standard signature (appearing also on several sculptures/carvings), include *Pole Raising at Port Simpson* (c. 1900, oil on canvas), *Indian Village of Port Simpson* (c. 1915-1916, watercolour on paper), *Battle Between the Haida and Tsimshian at Port Simpson* (pre-1927, oil on cloth) and *Beaver at Port Simpson* (date unknown, oil on cloth). *Port Simpson* (c. 1900, oil, graphite on canvas) has not been signed but its documentation is reliably traced back to the original owners, as discussed in Chapter Two. Nor has *Port Simpson as it was around 1850*, by *Frederick Alexie* (1939 (?) medium unknown) been signed but it has been accepted institutionally as being one of his works.²⁸³

These six paintings share many similarities in that they all depict views of his home community of Fort/Port Simpson. Their perspectives are generally photographic and could be likened to the landscape photography of his day, although each painting depicts life before the disruptive effects of the Christian church on the community and peoples’ lifestyles (plate 30). This is visible in the iconography: traditional plank houses lining the beachfront, totems and house-poles are visible. The imposing white church, visible in several contemporary photographs of the community (plates 30, 31, 32), is absent in all of these paintings (all of which were painted during the mission period). They give the viewer a sense of Fort Simpson’s place within a vast landscape. The forest in the background is always visible, as well as the large sky. The Hudson’s Bay Company fort is usually visible in the background as well (except for in two works) and its architectural style is contrasted against the Tsimshian plank houses that

²⁸² This was probably the work of Charles H. Dudoward, another known Port Simpson artist whose work Barbeau himself collected for representations of traditional designs. It is known that Dudoward painted landscapes.

²⁸³ Simmons includes a copy of this image in her article, “Frederick Alexcee, Indian Artist,” having obtained the photo from the CMC photo archives [neg. no. 86130].

foreground it. These works depict the shared history between Aboriginal and European cultures in Fort Simpson and the scenes are always populated with people performing activities on the beaches and in canoes.

It should be noted that these paintings appear at varying levels of sophistication so although there are iconographic similarities or patterns throughout the catalogue, inconsistencies can be problematic if one bases their attributions on stylistic similarities alone.²⁸⁴ For example, comparing *Port Simpson* with *Battle Between the Haida and the Tsimshian* shows the latter to be somewhat less sophisticated than the former in its level of detail, application of paint and depth of perspective. According to National Gallery of Canada Curatorial Assistant Linda Grussani, Alexcee's painting, *Fort Simpson*, documents a living history of place, shared between both Aboriginal and European settlers. She says that it is

an image probably derived from the artist's memory and the collective memory of his elders in the community of what the fort would have looked like in his youth. The imposing fort is at the centre of the composition and is surrounded by people engaged in various aspects of day-to-day activity.²⁸⁵

Grussani's assumptions have been informed by the expertise of Bill McLennan, whom she quotes. According to McLennan, "like several of his contemporaries, as well as later artists, [Alexcee] tried to record aspects of his people's history and culture that were beginning to fade from memory'.²⁸⁶ Because contemporary art-historical paradigms recognize and value the agency of the artist-as-individual, Alexcee is now understood as having had a more empowering

²⁸⁴ According to Bill Holm, it is possible to attribute works based on style as individual artists' distinctive stylistic choices are traceable through their work. However, their styles could also change over the years, and they also copied elements of each others work, two factors that can complicate the process of attribution. See Bill Holm, "Will the Real Charles Edenshaw Please Stand Up?: The Problem of Attribution in Northwest Coast Indian Art", in Donald N. Abbott (Ed.), *The World is as Sharp as a Knife: An Anthology in Honour of Wilson Duff* (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1981), pp. 177-178.

²⁸⁵ Linda Grussani, Minutes of Acquisition Committee Meeting – 15 May, 2009, for the collection of Indigenous art, Alexcee, Frederick, pp. 3-4, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., from McLennan and Duffek, *The Transforming Image*.

role than during his own day – that of a visual historian. The work of artists like him challenge (or add another dimension to) the assumption of a lack of historical Aboriginal voices. For example, historian Rolf Knight is surprised

not that there were native memorialists by the late nineteenth century, but that there were so few of them. Even though native traditions had been passed on orally, knowledge of and facility in writing was established among most native groups by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Newspapers in native Indian languages were being produced by Indian journalists and printers in parts of America before the mid nineteenth century. Therefore it is puzzling that no native people in western Canada kept diaries or recorded narratives of their own past, distant or immediate, until they were canvassed by anthropologists.²⁸⁷

While this might be true of the written record (although maybe not surprising given the transition period for oral cultures to learn written traditions) Alexcee was painting canvases and scenes prior to the arrival of Barbeau and Garfield, two anthropologists. The circumstances surrounding these works are not always known, but each memorializes aspects of his peoples' history, such as *Pole Raising at Port Simpson* (plate 17). Alexcee negotiated his contemporary context by articulating visual narratives (and apparently preferring to speak in Tsimshian) while also participating in the Western culture of Port Simpson.²⁸⁸

Pole Raising at Port Simpson depicts a celebration within a diverse and vibrant community. A chief emerges from a house as two men present coppers. Men stand on the roof, on the ground and on the pole as they pull ropes to raise it, wearing bright and baggy clothes. To the right of the housefront, four people walk holding piles of blankets – presumably for a potlatch. Behind the four people standing at its base to steady it, nine down-sprinkled backs line the bottom of the canvas. It is possible that these are the nine tribal chiefs of the Fort Simpson Tsimshian and the down, represented by white dots, has sacred properties. This

²⁸⁷ Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work – An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia 1858-1930*. (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1996), p. 151.

²⁸⁸ Perhaps Alexcee's linguistic preference can be seen as a form of resistance?

painting, the colours of which are still vibrant (unlike the muted browns of *Port Simpson*) is rich in symbolism, although many symbols are probably inaccessible to cultural “outsiders.” This painting is a visual document, a narrative the meanings of which can be decoded by “insiders.” For example, Doreen Jensen has commented on the significance of twins in Tsimshian culture, who are depicted in the painting wearing matching robes facing the viewer in front of pole. To the left, a man holds out a blanket or skin, which at first appears as a safety mechanism for the protection of those climbing the pole. In fact, Jensen confirmed that this material was used to send spirits up to the heavens.²⁸⁹ Paintings such as this suggest that Alexcee valued recording his peoples’ history, where its layers of meaning would be accessible to viewers sharing the same cultural knowledge. The painting exhibits Alexcee’s stylistic “hallmarks,” such as the thick limbs, boxy torsos and stylized faces of the people identified by Macnair. He usually illustrated people head-on or in profile to represent activity. This painting appears in the only known photo of him, where he stands proudly beside it with individuals who are presumably his wife and child (plate 34).

Fight Between the Haida and Tsimshian at Fort Simpson (plate 12) was completed in 1896 according to John Flewin, a government agent who commissioned it.²⁹⁰ It is possible that Alexcee drew inspiration from either or both Compton (1879) and Lockerby (1895). As Flewin wrote to National Gallery director Eric Brown in 1926, it

was painted by an Indian for me in 1896 as I wanted a picture of the old fort and he told me he could paint. Frederick Alexis [sic]. He was born here I think about time Rev. Wm. Duncan arrived here, i.e. 1857. His father was Iroquois H.B. Co.

²⁸⁹ Information obtained in conversation with Bill McLennan at University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology, who consulted with Jensen for her interpretation of the figures in this painting.

²⁹⁰ 6 April, 1927, National Gallery of Canada Out Order Ship to Barbeau: “Indian Scene” by Alexis and “Indians Fighting outside H.B. Fort” by Alexis owned by John Flewin, Port Simpson, 16.1 –Alexis “Notes on Frederick Alexie Paintings in the 1927 West Coast Exhibition,” Charlie Hill, Curator of Canadian Art, National Gallery of Canada.

voyageur who married [a] native woman of Port Simpson and had two sons both still here. I have known him since 1880.²⁹¹

As Bill McLennan noted, Alexcee painted these scenes from memory and painted what his customers wanted, in this case, a historical landscape. While art historians have likened his paintings to British landscape style (Simmons) and his painted lantern slides to Japanese prints (Jensen), it is also important to acknowledge the documentary record, which outlines particular circumstances informing his works.

In *Indian Village of Port Simpson* (plate 17), a signed work, the village appears as it was prior to settlement – there are plank houses with smoke escaping from the roofs, in front of which stand totem and house poles. There are people in front of the houses, walking to the beach and paddling in a canoe. The watercolour paints prevented the level of detail/realism that Alexcee achieved in oil but the figures are drawn similarly to those in previous works. The image resembles a snapshot of “everyday life.” Alexcee has painted the whale crest on a building that sits on the beach, a recurrent image throughout both his paintings and sculptures. Despite their dismissal within Canada’s contemporary academic art scene, Alexcee’s paintings were consistently appreciated for their documentary value.

In the 1923 *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report*, Barbeau, who was Secretary-Treasurer of the organization, noted his indebtedness to Alexcee for the artist’s “pictorial reconstruction of the Indian village of Port Simpson Lahkwaw-Kalamps, ‘Place-of-the-wild-roses’ in Tsimshian. The only two surviving buildings were destroyed by fire [in the] winter of 1915 when I was there.”²⁹² Leading up to the 1927 exhibition, Jackson commented to National Gallery of Canada director Eric Brown that he had “heard of an Indian artist. He was away

²⁹¹ 18 Nov. 1926, Flewin to Brown NGC 1.61 – Alexis, compiled by Charlie Hill, “Notes on Frederick Alexie Paintings in the 1927 West Coast Exhibition”, National Gallery of Canada.

²⁹² C.M. Barbeau, *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report, 1923*, “Notes on Frederick Alexie Paintings in the 1927 West Coast Exhibition, (National Gallery of Canada).

fishing [Alexcee would have been quite elderly at this point] so I didn't see him but I bought one of his pictures, a real artist, a natural primitive."²⁹³ *Of Fight Between the Haida and the Tsimshian*, Brown commented that the "picture [was] interesting – great spirit and feeling and remarkable for someone without training or opportunity of seeing art."²⁹⁴ Later, in 1928, with reference to his Tsimshian research, Barbeau commented,

in 1915 I tried to reconstruct the houses and poles of last century and asked Alexcee to make drawings. Wasn't ready when I left and has since been through several hands [referring to Jackson's watercolour]. Largest being offered by John Flewin of Port Simpson for \$45 and second smaller by Jackson for \$40. Needed as illustrations for my work on Tsimsayans.

All of these people valued Alexcee's ability to document Port Simpson's historical villagescape, despite conflicting opinions as to his status as artist or craftsman. Another individual who relied on Alexcee's works as documents was ethnographer William Beynon.²⁹⁵ The painting *Beaver at Port Simpson*, in the collection of the Wellcome Institute in London, England, demonstrates many of the same elements visible in his other works: the fort, plank houses with smoke issuing from the rooftops, poles, a populated waterfront and the famous HBC steamer "Beaver" surrounded by canoes. It also appears to be a pre-mission period scene (plate 33). Canoes are drawn in his typical style, in motion. Beynon later used a photograph (or copy) of this painting as a historical document and as a map of chiefs' houses in Port Simpson (plate 36). The signature at the bottom right of this piece differs from the others as it has been printed in capital letters. Stylistically, it is typical, with the same fine details (fine lines in houses, grass, trees) that are visible in the painted glass panorama of Fort Simpson at the Vancouver

²⁹³ Barbeau to Collins, 1928, CMC: Jenness: Collins, B652, f.2, "Notes on Frederick Alexie Paintings in the 1927 West Coast Exhibition, National Gallery of Canada.

²⁹⁴ Of course, Alexcee had had some opportunities of seeing art, such as those paintings which hung in the local Hudson's Bay Company store.

²⁹⁵ William Beynon, "Port Simpson 1915 Social Organization," B-F-26, Box 3.3: Marius Barbeau Coll. Northwest Coast Files, Canadian Museum of Civilization Archives.

Archives (plates 3, 37). Beynon apparently considered the work historically accurate enough to pass on to Barbeau for his anthropological work on the Tsimshian.²⁹⁶

In another passage from her field notes, Garfield remarked that Alexcee had received little formal training in two-dimensional representation (i.e. painting and drawing) by either white or Native teachers. She credits his life experiences, such as travelling with Reverend Crosby on the *Glad Tidings* on the Skeena River and up and down the coast, for informing his work. She remarked that his paintings of old Fort Simpson had been reconstructed from memory, and that they were “done in a stilted manner with very little regard for perspective. Where the limits of surface and scope of the picture required it he resorted to the telescoping so familiar to Northwest Coast art.” Here, she presumably refers to the artists’ technique of adapting the subject matter to the given surface (the canvas, in this case), a problem that he solved by using his imagination but which was frowned upon by Garfield.²⁹⁷ She did, however, acknowledge his having had the two landscape paintings exhibited in Ottawa, noting that as a younger man he had been considered “a promising artist by the whites who have seen his work of that period.” She also acknowledged his painted lantern slides, many of which were scenes drawn from ceremonial events. She says that “these he showed to the village population once each winter until they were burned about eight years ago [ca. 1926]. Due to his dramatic ability this annual event is still talked of in the village.”²⁹⁸ These slides will be discussed shortly.

The value of authenticity now also includes the identification of original works, but for earlier audiences such as Barbeau, Brown, Jackson and Garfield, the issue was whether or not

²⁹⁶ According to Simmons, this painting, now in the Wellcome Institute in London, England, was collected by Henry Wellcome, a British collector, philanthropist and part founder of a pharmaceutical firm, circa 1900. Wellcome employed Beynon to collect Aboriginal material culture, and this was one of the paintings that Beynon commissioned from Alexcee for Wellcome. See Simmons, pp. 88, 89.

²⁹⁷ As noted by Haeblerin.

²⁹⁸ Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

they represented the “traditional” Tsimshian art they wanted to showcase and preserve.²⁹⁹ However, cultural affiliation is still an important value marker in the contemporary art market. A perusal of galleries (or their websites) confirms that the artist’s cultural identity is still in many cases essential to the marketing of their work.³⁰⁰ The identification of Tsimshian, Nisga’a, Haida, Coast Salish, Kwakwaka-wakw heritages, etc., or whether they are a descendant of multiple cultures usually appears following or beneath the work’s title and artist’s name.³⁰¹ The literature surrounding earlier artists such as Charles Edenshaw, Charlie James or Mungo Martin preceded a current paradigm of value: the biographical and artistic profiles of contemporary Aboriginal artists. Questions such as “is it a Charles Edenshaw argillite pole?”, “a Robert Davidson bracelet?”, “a Mungo Martin mask?”, are relevant for determining the value of a work. As Bill Holm remarked in 1981 with Northwest Coast art, as with Western art, “the name’s the thing”.³⁰² In his own time, Alexcee would sign his works (or have them signed) with his name and place, Port Simpson. Perhaps this practice was informed by the signatures he saw on paintings such as Compton’s and Lockerby’s, or maybe his clients asked for signatures in terms of their being souvenir pieces. In either case, it was not until the late 1980s that interest in his art was taken up again, probably because his interesting life and unusual work speaks to two of post-modernism’s essential themes: individuality and challenging normative categories.

Because of Alexcee’s choice of medium and meaning (landscape painting on canvas, representational art not made for ritual use), some people were not convinced of his works’ cultural authenticity, nor did they really appreciate the work as insightful of the contemporary realities of Aboriginal artists. Although considered interesting and perhaps quaint, Alexcee’s

²⁹⁹ The issue of authenticity is not mentioned in Beynon’s notes.

³⁰⁰ Attribution of cultural or natural affiliation is frequently given for Western artists too but seems to be less emphasized within the marketplace.

³⁰¹ See for example, Spirit Wrestler Gallery website: www.spiritwrestler.com.

³⁰² Holm, in Abbott (ed.), p. 175.

works were generally viewed as cultural anomalies and in some cases, as a lesser art form (with the exception of Beynon's and Barbeau's anthropological appreciation of his paintings as historical records of place).

Lantern Slides

This chapter began with a brief description of Alexcee's lantern slides in the collection of the Museum of Vancouver and the difficulties of cataloguing them throughout its institutional history. The slides' acquisition history is detailed in correspondence between their last private owner, Indian Agent Thomas Deasy and Vancouver City archivist Major S.J. Matthews.³⁰³

The thirty-nine "reverse-glass" paintings were first acquired by Indian Agent Charles C. Perry,³⁰⁴ who sold them to Deasy in 1924. Seeking an institutional home for the paintings, Deasy offered them to Major Matthews,³⁰⁵ sending them in July, 1934, along with a letter written by Perry in 1921 listing the paintings and certificates of authenticity from both agents. The two experienced Indian Agents considered these items to be extremely rare. On his list, Perry had written, "List of glass paintings – the original work of Alexcee, the only full-blooded Indian (Tsimpshean) picture painter in colours that I have found amongst them in 14 years intimate association with the Indians."³⁰⁶ Impressed by their apparent novelty and value as historical documents, Matthews felt that they should be preserved in a public institution, but acknowledged that all were short of money. Prior to their acquisition by the Vancouver Museum, they had been declined by the B.C. Provincial Library for lack of funds.

³⁰³ Deasy was an Indian Agent who was responsible for the Queen Charlotte Islands. He was an avid collector whose collections reside at various museums, including the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, PQ.

³⁰⁴ Perry was responsible for the Port Simpson area in his capacity as Indian Agent.

³⁰⁵ Matthews was Vancouver's first city archivist.

³⁰⁶ Charles Perry, Collector's list (1921), Museum of Vancouver.

Finally in 1934 the Director of the Museum of Vancouver,³⁰⁷ curator T.P.O Menzies, agreed to purchase them for \$100. Upon their acquisition, Matthews wrote to Menzies that he had included, along with the slides, the “original ‘certificate’ of authenticity of these paintings.”³⁰⁸ Menzies kept this acquisition from the museum’s Board of Directors because they were apparently against collecting Native artifacts at the time.³⁰⁹ He secretly took the money out of the museum’s petty cash supply at the rate of ten dollars per month. Matthews’ one condition upon their purchase (informed in part by Deasy’s wishes) was that the slides “not be sold to a private person; only to a public institution such as the City Museum. If a decision to purchase is not made before September 1st 1934 they are to be returned to J.S. Matthews”.³¹⁰ As a reward for his brokering services, Matthews was allowed to keep the thirty-ninth painting, the larger painted glass vista of Fort Simpson now at the Vancouver City Archives that had been accidentally broken by Deasy (plates 3, 37).³¹¹

Like his canvas paintings, Alexcee’s slides detailed scenes of traditional life.³¹² Although those to which Garfield referred in 1934 had been destroyed in a fire, these slides are probably similar to the ones that she had seen. For his contemporaries, these “authentic Indian” artworks, categorized by Perry in sections titled “descriptive of the oolachan fishing in Nass River, B.C.” and “Aboriginal Customs”, were considered national treasures by several people

³⁰⁷ The Museum of Vancouver was then called the Vancouver City Museum.

³⁰⁸ Matthews to Menzies, August 3, 1934, Correspondence in Major J.S. Matthews’ Donor’s File No. 2, Museum of Vancouver.

³⁰⁹ This information was extracted from a summary of correspondence re: the origin of the slides in the Vancouver City Archives’ “Alexcee” file.

³¹⁰ From a 27 July 1934, letter in J.S. Matthews’ Donor’s File, No. 2, Museum of Vancouver.

³¹¹ Unfortunately, Deasy’s eyesight was failing and when he set the glass painting aside on a chair, he sat and broke it. It has since not been repaired but is kept in a box at the Vancouver Archives.

³¹² These slides are all similar in size, measuring 3 ¼” x 3 ¼” or 3 ¼” x 4”. The original collector’s list carried a warning that they were to be kept from heat as they were painted with fish oil with “native pigments”, which Matthews said “would not dry” even at the time of acquisition. Matthews took conservation measures upon receiving them and wrapped each individually in protective paper.

who were affiliated with institutions such as museums and archives. Deasy believed that there was a

unique feature about these glass paintings: Indians make their own colours, with fish oil and powdered stone and other pigments. It would be a mistake to let the collection go out of the country, the value of the collection of paintings is that an Indian painted them, and they are as the Indians carried on, in the early days. In fact, the remaining few are still potlatching, fishing and doing as described, in our day. The one thing that the White painter fails in producing is the real manner in which this Indian depicts scenes, dress and other performances which few whites even witnessed.³¹³

The qualities of authenticity that Deasy appreciated in 1934 were the elements the curators critiqued in his paintings in Ottawa seven years earlier. Praising them in terms of media, artist and subject matter, he felt they were more genuine representations of Indigeneity compared to the illustrations of “Indian life” by non-Aboriginal artists such as, presumably, the Group of Seven. Because Deasy witnessed the cultural changes in Northwest Coast communities, he had a different conception of authentic Aboriginal art, whereas in Eastern Canada, it seems that the definitions of these binaries were derived from the objects studied by anthropologists as “traditional.” Deasy’s comments value Alexcee’s “insider’s perspective” on Native life, giving the slides historical weight and acknowledging them as a rarity. Unlike the works of the Group of Seven, Alexcee’s scenes are busy and populated, showing individuals participating in aspects of traditional life that continued despite settlement and the enforcement of government regulations.³¹⁴ In comparing the two modes of representation, Deasy appreciated the slides more as valuable historical documents in terms of their cultural authority, media and iconography.

³¹³Thomas Deasy, Correspondence, 1901 – 1921, File 5. British Columbia Provincial Archives.

³¹⁴The Group of Seven documented Aboriginal villages but generally depicted depopulated landscapes, which is now a “hot” issue in contemporary Canadian art historical criticism (with the exception of Carr, although she was not technically considered a member of the Group of Seven).

Tsimshian Indians in a canoe, hunting sea otter (plate 38), like a photograph, has a fore, middle and background. In the foreground is the canoe with four figures sitting in it, painted as silhouettes in profile (also seen in canvas paintings such as *Fight Between the Haida and Tsimshian at Fort Simpson, Port Simpson and Indian Village of Port Simpson*). There is a rock island in the middle ground surrounded by black dots, perhaps representing seals or smaller rocks and the background is filled with a beach and two layers of forest, the fore greener and the latter more brown. Overall, the colours in this image are muted browns, greens and blues and the sea water is a light wash possibly painted after the darker figures. The canoe might have been painted with crest figures as there appear to be traces of red at the prow and stern, but this is unclear as the painted glass surface is somewhat scratched. Again, the landscape resembles contemporary landscape photography, such as the photo dated from the 1880s. Other delicately-painted slides include *Tsimshian Indians making Cedar Canoe, burning out the interior of the log* and *Tsimshian Indian Houses at Oolachan fishing grounds* (plate 39), where daily activities are depicted as detailed scenes showing individuals performing particular activities.

Deasy commented that "some may not consider them works of art, but they are most illuminating portrayals of Indian life before the whitemans came, and I doubt not are absolutely authentic in their description pictorially."³¹⁵ Again, the works were aesthetically undervalued (probably due to their folkish appearance), but trumped by their value as historical documents.

There is actually one lantern slide in this collection that depicts interaction with a non-Aboriginal person, entitled *Hudson's Bay trader and Tsimshian Indian trading, bartering a gaudy handkerchief for an otter skin* (plates 9, 39). Although the documentation accompanying these

³¹⁵Thomas Deasy, Correspondence 1901-1921, File 4 (B.C.P.A.).

images does not identify the context in which they were originally shown, it could be that they were commissioned by someone like Perry to illustrate traditional scenes prior to contact (or activities and conventions that continued despite it), like the set of slides seen by both Barbeau and Garfield. With the interaction between trapper and trader, perhaps Alexcee felt that this aspect of the Fort Simpson Tsimshian's history was essential to recording a complete historical narrative. This image is unfortunately quite damaged and some of the red, brown and black pigments have faded. The Tsimshian figure is portrayed in Alexcee's typical style, having an upper convex eyelid over a black dot pupil. His cheeks are painted with possibly tribal markings on brown skin, but here some paint has worn off. His hair is painted black and voluminous, as are his lips. The trapper wears a black garment and holds a black/brown pelt toward the trader, who, dressed in whitish/grey robes, holds out a red-outlined blanket in exchange.

This piece illustrates the "shared" history of Aboriginal and European peoples at Fort Simpson and suggests that the relationship between the two cultures was at first mutually beneficial. However, it could also be argued that Alexcee was exploring power relationships within the Fort's early socio-economic dynamic, communicated through the figures' statures, postures and facial expressions. Beyond representing the exchange of goods from which both parties benefitted, as well as the traders' respective appearances, this image seems to question the dominant historical narrative of Fort/Port Simpson/Lax Kw'Alaams – in this case, the European trader looks pleadingly to the Aboriginal trader to accept his goods. The trapper appears strong, powerful and authoritative, as the European man cranes his neck and holds out his blanket, while people look on from the background. With this image, Alexcee shows a collective (Native/European) history of the place, while also asserting the essential role

Aboriginal people played in the development of the community and the success of the fur trade.³¹⁶

The value that people like Perry, Deasy, Matthews and Menzies placed on these slides was echoed by missionary George Raley, who was also an avid collector (and amateur scholar) of Aboriginal art and culture.³¹⁷ In November 1934, shortly after the Museum of Vancouver acquired the slides, Raley gave a speech to the Vancouver Arts and Historical Society, congratulating the museum on the acquisition.³¹⁸ Raley said that

In my lecture tonight [I was] asked to explain a set of slides purchased recently by the museum auth[orities]. They are valuable not only because they depict many phases of Indian life but because they are the work of Tsimpshean artist they may appear crude and must be interpreted in the light of the feelings and imagination of the artist they express. What they lack in modern technique and training they make up in the legend... The slides are original genuine vouched for by Ind. Commisr. Ind. Agent. [sic]³¹⁹

Still critical of Alexcee's aesthetic, Raley's comments suggest an empathy for his lack of training and more of a focus on their personal and cultural meaning, although he still seemed to appreciate Alexcee as a contemporary artist (he also knew him personally). It is interesting to note that whereas Raley believed the slides *lacked* modern technique, the museum registrar believed that it was precisely *because* of this that they could not be catalogued as ethnological pieces. This scenario highlights what Phillips and Steiner call the "slippery line that divides art

³¹⁶ This slide collection also includes images of painted Tsimshian house fronts with lineage crests (in this case his own Killerwhale crest), the work done by women, such as preparing eulachon grease, scenes of Tsimshian warfare and peace conferences. In all, it offers a comprehensive account of traditional life.

³¹⁷ It should be noted that these four men were not anthropologists or art historians, as were Barbeau, Garfield and Brown, respectively. Where the latter group probably felt responsible for evaluating Alexcee's work against the authentic canon, the former group probably did not feel these disciplinary pressures and were freer to appreciate his work according to their own values.

³¹⁸ Matthews would later lament to Deasy that their efforts had been overlooked: Matthews to Deasy, 7 Dec., 1934 – "you know about your lantern slides. They [Raley] gave a lecture down at the museum last week...President said that Vancouver was to be congratulated on securing them. The audience did all the clapping. They forgot to say that they came from you, or that I had anything to do with begging them..." He regretted their having not being acknowledged or credited for their acquisition.

³¹⁹ George Henry Raley, Notes for speeches and articles re civilization of Indians, 1863 – 1958, H/D/R13/R13.8, British Columbia Provincial Archives.

from artifact” in this period when Northwest Coast artists were experimenting with new forms, styles and modes of representation that would complicate the categories constructed by the academic disciplines.³²⁰ What was constantly stimulating and informing these situations was the myth that First Nations cultures were disappearing, fuelling the urgency with which these pieces were being collected.³²¹

In his 1928 review of the *West Coast Art, Native and Modern* exhibit, anthropologist Douglas Leechman wrote that

It is greatly to be regretted that this art is rapidly dying out, and once dead it can certainly never be revived. In the old days when the influence of the white man had not made itself felt, the workmanship was of the highest [quality], but, first the introduction of our tools, which led to quicker and, therefore, more careless production, and then the adoption of our ways of living by the younger generation of Indians, have had their fatal impact. Nearly all the old artists are dead and there are none to take their places.³²²

Leechman’s comments are typical within the context he shared with his contemporaries. To be discussed next, the three-dimensional work that Alexcee produced, largely for the tourist market, would be seen to speak to the “quicker and, therefore, more careless production” that he laments. Phillips and Steiner outline two reasons for art historians’ and anthropologists’ rejection of these commoditized objects, the first being “stylistic hybridity, which conflicts with essentialist notions of the relationship between style and culture” and secondly “their production for an external market, which conflict[ed] with widespread ideas of authenticity.”³²³ Several of Alexcee’s sculptures exhibit elements of cultural hybridity and many were intended as commodities for the consumption of tourists.

³²⁰ Phillips and Steiner, p. 12.

³²¹ See Douglas Cole’s *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (publ. 1985) for a comprehensive account of private and public collecting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

³²² Douglas Leechman, “Native Canadian Art of the West Coast,” *Studio* (November 1928), General Press Cutting Association Ltd. Atlantic House.

³²³ Phillips and Steiner, p. 9.

Sculptures and Carvings

As Garfield pointed out, Alexcee spent the earlier part of his career painting. The most complicated body of work in his oeuvre, in view of issues of authenticity, is his sculpture/carving. As Peter Macnair has noted, he produced many more wood carvings than paintings although they are lesser known as he rarely signed them. Identifying an original is also difficult given the likelihood that he trained other artists or that they copied his work.³²⁴ When Garfield consulted him for her work on the Port Simpson Tsimshian, she noted that it was later that Alexcee started carving in wood, which, by 1934, he did “almost exclusively.”³²⁵ His paintings, completed earlier in his career, and while less numerous, are easier to identify due to stylistic consistency and the fact that most of them bear signatures.³²⁶ This section will consider works that have been both officially attributed (i.e. have been signed) and unofficially attributed to Alexcee (i.e. are suspected as originals based on style or historic context). As such, the issues of authenticity here are both clarified and complicated in terms of the pieces’ maker, context and cultural and historical relevance. Garfield said that Alexcee’s “artistic ability has never really functioned in native society as has [his contemporary, artist] Mr. [Bryan] Peel’s. He has never made masks for dances or carved totem poles that were to be set up. He has never made dishes, spoons or boxes for native use. Most of his work has been for commercial sale.”³²⁷ If these works were detached from authentic contexts, why did Alexcee’s art fascinate, perplex, and impress in his own day as well as inspire a resurgence of interest over the past few decades?

³²⁴ Macnair, p. 1. An example of potential copying is the painting *Port Simpson, as it Used to Be About 1850*, which Barbeau had attributed to Alexcee but which bears Charles Henry Dudoward’s initials.

³²⁵ Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

Although both Alexcee himself and Beynon confirmed his training in the traditional arts, there is no reference to specific teachers or pieces that were made for and used within ritual contexts. Having being trained to carve as a youth, and converting to Christianity as a young man, the *naxnox* Alexcee claimed to have made are unknown and his style probably changed over the years as he produced art within different contexts, such as the church. So, it is unsurprising that these pieces have not been identified or located today. Many converted Tsimshian hid, sold or gave away their ritual paraphernalia and Alexcee was probably no exception. Also because of the changing context in which he lived, perhaps his training period was less comprehensive than how it might have been prior to the influence of the Church in Port Simpson and the surrounding region.

The best known, and most controversial piece attributed to Alexcee is a carved and painted baptismal font in the collection of University of B.C.'s Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver (plate 13).³²⁸ Many people say this piece was made by Alexcee although both Macnair and Museum of Anthropology's Bill McLennan doubt the attribution based on their knowledge of his other works. The piece is unsigned, but its catalogue record contains a few facts: it was made in 1886 in Port Simpson/Lax Kw'Alaams, having been collected sometime between 1893 and 1934. The museum purchased it from George Henry Raley in 1948. The piece is visible in contemporary photographs of Raley's collection (1934) (plate 40) and according to Museum of Anthropology's former collections manager Ann Stevenson, Raley typed this list around 1934, several years after he had stopped his most active collecting period (1890s to 1920s). The font is listed beneath the category "totems" and is described simply as "Tsimpshean, Ideal of angelic form". Stevenson noted also that over the years some hand-written comments had been added, saying that it was "carved by Freddy Alexeei Port Simpson

³²⁸ A baptismal font is a bowl containing baptismal water.

1884.”³²⁹ It is probably because of the later (unidentified) attribution that the M.o.A. catalogue record identifies its maker as “(attributed to) Frederick Alexcee.” If museum authorities are skeptical, who initially linked the work to Alexcee? As will be shown later, the sculpture does differ from other works of his whose attributions are more reliable.

Barbeau’s 1945 article “Frederick Alexie, a Primitive,” has this font as its illustration. Again, he recalled being fascinated with Alexcee’s “wood carvings of a strange type”, that “more and more their strange quality beckoned and puzzled me; they remained outside the regular categories of Indian and Canadian art.”³³⁰ These remarks included a reference to the two other smaller angel carvings in the collection of the Museum of Northern B.C. in Prince Rupert (plate 26).³³¹ This thesis investigates the issues Barbeau touched upon here – the diversity of Alexcee’s oeuvre and the tendency of his works to complicate or upset cultural-aesthetic categories (binaries such as “native/modern”, craft/art, as demonstrated in the 1927 *Exhibition of West Coast Art, Native and Modern*). Just as these types of categories were based on assumptions and generalizations, so the identification of his style has also been founded on assumptions relating to patterns in the works believed to be his. Some scholars believe that stylistically, the font is too sophisticated given the aesthetic and quality of his other three-dimensional works. Macnair wrote that “when painting his carvings, he almost exclusively limited his colours to black, white, yellow, red and green...[and in contrast to his painting style] his sculptural style is fairly amorphous, although one can find certain consistent elements in his carving.”³³² While the mostly brown and blue font conflicts with this pattern, there are a few things to consider. Perhaps the context for which this piece was commissioned inspired a different aesthetic; as will

³²⁹ From email correspondence with Ann Stevenson, 1/27/10.

³³⁰ (1945) Barbeau, p. 21.

³³¹ Information about these works has been difficult to access. No response has been received after several attempts at contacting the Museum of Northern B.C.

³³² Macnair, pp. 1-4.

be shown shortly, Alexcee catered to the requests of his customers/patrons. In terms of its grace and sophistication, several of his signed paintings are arguably finer works than others.³³³ Lastly, if this piece was created before the twentieth century, when he began prolifically carving tourist-trade items, then his style would probably have been different. These potential factors show how problematic attributing (or doubting the attribution of) historical art based on style alone can be.

The above-noted sculpture is said to have been used as a baptismal font in Alexcee's Port Simpson Methodist church, but was removed when the children became frightened by it.³³⁴ Somewhat mysterious in terms of its documentation, the piece is also visually unsettling. I was first drawn to Alexcee's work after seeing an image of this striking sculpture in Ronald Hawker's article, "Frederick Alexie: Euro-Canadian Discussions of a First Nations Artist," where it seemed to show the meeting of cultures within one fluid, articulate and haunting figure. Later in 2008, the piece could be seen on exhibit at the National Gallery of Canada.³³⁵ Stationed between two French-Canadian angel sculptures in the Rideau Chapel Gallery, it stood out. The eyes of the angel scanned the room. The facial expression is simultaneously stoic and compassionate, innocent and wise, and it attracts and captures the attention of those who have seen it. At the Gallery, mention of "the angel sculpture" was enough for the guards to immediately point out its location. What is it about this piece that makes it so memorable, so powerful? As Jensen has written, there is a

movement of time, place, spirit and sculptural design. This piece has a powerful beauty and a mysterious quality...two images were brought together: the very classic.

³³³ Compare, for example, the elegantly-painted *Port Simpson* with the somewhat simpler *Battle Between the Haida and Tsimshian at Fort Simpson*. One could also compare the delicate glass slide panorama of Port Simpson at the Vancouver City Archives against any of the lesser-detailed works at the Museum of Vancouver. I would argue that the former is a finer work than the latter.

³³⁴ The baptismal font measures 82.5 x 60.6 x 62.5 cm.

³³⁵ The font was on loan to the NGC during the M.o.A. renovations in 2008.

Tsimshian form of the head, and the European religious robe starting with the crisp line at the neck then draping over the body, with wings attached. The forms seem to fit, but at the same time don't fit. Alexcee had combined these two very different aesthetics into one carving and the result is a dynamic tension."³³⁶

If we are to assume, as Jensen did, that Alexcee made this font, then with it he gracefully embodied the complexity of identities and worldviews of the Fort/Port Simpson/Lax Kw'Alaams of his day. As an artist presumably sought for the commissioning of this piece, Alexcee created a work for a community to which he felt he belonged, but perhaps not absolutely.³³⁷ As the aesthetic of the sculpture itself testifies, one individual can espouse different world-views, adapt to new ways, and maintain, celebrate and promote those of tradition. Identities and cultures are in constant flux.

Macnair's skepticism over the Alexcee attribution highlights a dilemma common to unsigned historical art.³³⁸ It has been a Western convention to elevate the status of the artist as *individual*, and if the individual is unnamed (i.e. if the work is unsigned), then how can it be reliably attributed? Bill Holm discusses the problem of attribution extensively in his article, "Will the Real Charles Edenshaw Please Stand Up?," in which he notes lack of documentation, artists' signatures and stylistic inconsistencies as problems inherent to the identification of individuals' works.³³⁹ A comparison of this piece's aesthetic with other (signed) works of Alexcee's supports Macnair's contention. For example, there are two dancing frontlets in the Royal B.C. Museum collection attributed to him as they are both signed "Carved by Frederick Alexcee, Port Simpson

³³⁶Doreen Jensen, "Frederick Alexcee: Tsimshian Artist 1854 – 1939," Paper presented at Otsego Institute, Cooperstown, NY 7-8 August, 1999, p. 1.

³³⁷ As discussed in Chapter Two, Alexcee's status as a Methodist was questioned by Church authorities, suggesting that he perhaps had other spiritual/religious priorities in addition to Church membership.

³³⁸Peter Macnair, "Four Model Poles Owned by George Mess". (Unpublished) manuscript, Royal B.C. Museum, 26 July 1990. Accessed in Bill McLennan's "Frederick Alexcee" file, University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, August, 2009.

³³⁹ Holm, in Abbott (ed.), pp. 175-100.

carver" (plate 41).³⁴⁰ Although they are missing some paint, the frontlets are in excellent condition and bear no signs of stress or wear that would suggest their having been used in ritual context.³⁴¹ The frontlets have been labeled "Squid Mask" and "Beaver Mask", respectively, and both measure 15 by 20 by 7.4 cm. They are painted with red and black paint and the "squid" frontlet also contains green pigment in the tertiary space around the eyes. These are colours typical of Alexcee's oeuvre. Museum documentation confirms they were collected at Port Simpson although the dates are unknown. The Royal B.C. Museum also has several pieces tentatively or speculatively attributed to him including a model painted paddle depicting the church at Metlakatla (plate 42) in which the painting style and colour scheme (brown, black, white, blue, green) resembles his own. This paddle is unsigned however, and as such a definitive attribution is problematic. There is also a model totem pole representing a whale and a bird that is signed "F.A. P.S. B.C." but "wooden totem Masset, B.C., Haida" has been inscribed on the back. Although the first inscription could represent "Frederick Alexcee, Port Simpson, B.C.," the attribution is complicated by the second one identifying it as a Haida piece. Despite these complications, what is clear was the importance of the artist's ethnicity to the frontlet's collector (perhaps it was a souvenir piece). This is still an important identifier for many artists and consumers of Aboriginal art today. Although the frontlets were well-made and painted, it is fair to say that the elegance of the baptismal font is aesthetically more sophisticated. However, given the range of skill and sophistication visible in some of Alexcee's paintings, the attribution of unsigned pieces remains speculative.

It is impossible to count how many sculptures Alexcee produced as there are probably many in private collections in addition to those that have been accounted for in institutions. He

³⁴⁰ Frontlets would be worn on the forehead as a component of ceremonial regalia.

³⁴¹ Signs of wear would include exposure to smoke, the attachment of component pieces, damages, etc.

made several totem poles and model paddles with mythical themes and designs, as well as crest and tribal designs relating to his family heritage. Garfield noted his many sculptures made for the tourist trade. She was disappointed when she sat the eighty-one year old artist down to demonstrate his creation of what she was expecting to be models of traditional Tsimshian material culture, such as rattles, masks and boxes. Her accounts of his work are mostly pejorative – she disapproved of his personal technique, use of commercial media and the capricious way he treated his subject matter. These were all elements that she felt fell outside “traditional” modes of production.³⁴² As an ethnographer, her disappointment is not surprising. What stands out in these interviews, however, are Alexcee’s comments and interjections as he worked beside her. In one account, which has been noted by other scholars of Alexcee, Garfield says that he “showed us a silverware catalogue and pointed to a pair of tall candlesticks which he plans to copy, that is, carve in Tsimshian, to use his expression.³⁴³ I pointed out that he was foolish to do such things, because they are not Tsimshian, to which he replied, ‘well, they ask for it’.”³⁴⁴ The candlestick holder in plate 43 is suspected to have been created by Alexcee, as it exhibits his style and has been signed “F.A.P.S.B.C.” Of his tourist art, he remarked, “All the people come before Christmas and want things, I don’t like to sell for 35 cents, 50 cents, [is] too little.”³⁴⁵ Alexcee apparently marketed his own work and this comment suggests his confidence in its value. As Garfield remarked, he made “scores” of small paddles for sale, and Alexcee even remarked that he should charge her extra to watch him work.³⁴⁶

One such paddle is in the collection of University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology, (plate 44). The painted images have been identified in the catalogue record as

³⁴² Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

³⁴³ Megan Smetzer, “Freddie Alexie, Tsimshian Artist,” paper presented to the 3rd Conference of the Otsego Institute for Native American Art History, August 1999, Cooperstown, New York.

³⁴⁴ Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.* Garfield does not mention whether or not she paid him.

“Thunderbird” on the back of the paddle and “Northwest Coast Design” on the front. As Beynon confirmed, Alexcee was part of the Thunderbird tribe, and the Killerwhale clan. It seemed at first that perhaps the Northwest Coast design might represent the killerwhale, Alexcee’s crest figure, as there appear to be flippers behind the creature’s eyes, and tail fins beneath these. Iconographically, the work could then represent images associated with both his tribal and clan identities. However, the apparent “thunderbird” design lacks its characteristic ears and the NWC design could most likely be a combination of aesthetic forms of Alexcee’s own preference.³⁴⁷ Although the relevance of these images to Alexcee himself may never be known, they do indicate that he was working in an individual style and owned his own aesthetic. As Garfield noted, “the subject matter used by Mr. Alexcee is in the main traditional, his treatment of it highly individual. Whether his originality is greater than [would] have been allowed an artist in ancient times cannot be definitively said.”³⁴⁸ His rendering of the modern-looking bird and the “Northwest Coast design” on the paddle, the latter a symbol of West Coast indigeneity to tourists, combine traditional elements, interpreted originally, made for sale within the economic context of the tourist trade. He profited from the tourist market, knew his clientele, and as Garfield noted, made “what they want[ed].” By playing to the expectations of his customers, Alexcee negotiated both his contemporary context as well as articulated the aspects of his culture that he anticipated would sell. Garfield would not let him use sandpaper in one of her encounters with him when he was carving an eagle dish. He asked “how am I going to get it smooth” and she replied “knife”, to which he agreed and used that instead. During Alexcee’s demonstrations, he asked Garfield whether his work was what she wanted, demonstrating his attention to the consumer. Garfield was generally not pleased, believing that his work lacked grace and life, and was essentially rigid.

³⁴⁷ Correspondence with Dr. Andrea Laforet.

³⁴⁸ Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

Alexcee also expressed to Garfield the importance of his peoples' collective knowledge, saying that, "no man can carve unless he knows the myths".³⁴⁹ When asked to demonstrate the creation of a mask, he said, "I am glad that you have come for you have awakened in me a feeling for the old Tsimshian things."³⁵⁰ He reflected his heritage in model houses, such as one with the killerwhale on top (plate 45), several other paddles, and a ladle with the killerwhale painted on the bowl and the bird at the top of the handle (plate 46).³⁵¹

Referring to the carving of Alexcee's nephew (presumably Moses), Garfield characterizes his efforts as "certainly atrocious." There is a carved and painted feast dish at the Museum of Vancouver that is signed "Moses Alexcee" on the underside (plate 18). The dish represents a sea-lion and was painted with commercial polychrome.³⁵² Aesthetically, it appears to have been made for sale, as it is not particularly detailed or sophisticated. Upon its acquisition in 1949, T.P.O. Menzies wrote a letter of thanks to Moses in which he praised his work, also referencing the lantern slides acquired earlier: "I am writing to let you know how pleased we are to get this fine example of your artistic work, which we think is wonderful, more specially at your age, I feel sure that we have a set of lantern slides, painted by you, when you were a much younger man, these we have displayed often and they have been enjoyed by many. Your carving is now out on display."³⁵³ The lantern slides were mistaken for having been painted by Moses, even though the artists' styles differed. Clearly by 1949 institutional attitudes had changed as to the value of these arts, however the fact that Menzies forgot about the elder Freddie Alexcee suggests that the First Nations material from Port Simpson was probably not a priority within the collection.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁵¹ The donor was F.G. Sherbourne (private collection).

³⁵² This is according to the catalogue card.

³⁵³ Letter from T.P.O. Menzies to Moses Alexcee, 13 Dec., 1949, donor file of Miss Lorna K. Richmond, Museum of Vancouver.

If most of his works reflected his Tsimshian culture, what about the expression of Alexcee's Iroquoian heritage, to which he was also heir through his father, the Hudson's Bay Company worker? There is at least one work, a birch-bark model canoe in the collection of the New Westminster Museum that reflects this aspect of his cultural heritage. It is possible that Alexcee possessed a lack of knowledge of Iroquoian material culture and that the canoe was a figure with which he was familiar. It is unclear whether this canoe has been signed but the paddles accompanying it are inscribed "Frederick Alexcee, P.S." and are painted in Northwest Coast designs including two birds in profile (a simple, flat design coloured black, green, red and yellow) and an abstract design profiling perhaps a bear and two other zoomorphic creatures (painted green, red, black and yellow). If these two works were made and sold together, perhaps they could be understood as Alexcee's exploration of both aesthetic traditions of his cultural heritage. This interpretation speaks to Bhabha's understanding of cultural hybridity as the "third term" developed out of two original cultures. In this case, Alexcee's personal identity as a modern man of Tsimshian and Iroquoian heritage could be seen to inform his creative output – tourist art (an artform reflecting his contemporary circumstances) and both cultures.

Two painted model paddles at the Manitoba Museum (plates 21, 47) illustrate Jonaitis' identification of late-nineteenth to early twentieth-century Northwest Coast styles being not as formal and refined as their earlier "golden age" predecessors. These paddles, both signed "Alexcee," illustrate anthropomorphic and zoomorphic designs and imagery (and they reflect his typical colours of black, red, green, yellow) but in looser form. The designs and iconography are not bound by black calligraphic-like formlines but rather are less formal, resembling more of an assemblage of shapes and designs. Interpreting the "meanings" of these designs could be a fruitless and irrelevant exercise, as it is likely that Alexcee, producing objects for trade,

illustrated paddles like these with abstract designs of his own liking, such as the one discussed earlier.

Garfield's quest for authenticity in Alexcee's work was met with frustration as she did not accept the images he created as culturally authoritative, nor did she take his visual/material translations of Tsimshian myth seriously. For example, she says that

other myths [that Alexcee drew upon in his carving] were Part Summer, erroneously interpreted as the story of the girl who married a dog; and the war between the Gitsis and the Gispaxlo'ts. In connection with this story he mentioned an arrow with a mouth. There is no reference to such an object in the recorded myth, nor have I been able to place it in any other one. It was not possible to get the reaction of others in the village toward his work. None of them buy it. The only reactions I could get from [contemporary artist] Mr. Peel were respect and admiration; though several leads were given he would not criticize. He, of course, was a visitor in the village and may have been reticent for that reason.³⁵⁴

Although Garfield may have found him amusing (as Barbeau found him fascinating), she suggests that most of his work had no place in traditional or contemporary society, and was useful only to the extent that it could sell to tourists as a source of income. Bryan Peel's respectful attitude was probably informed by his understanding of their circumstances – making art to make a living. Regardless of what Garfield thought, Alexcee's work sold.

Of Peel, Garfield commented that

his paints were commercial water colours, even cheaper in quality than Mr. Alexcee's. His own rattles and tool box were painted in quite untraditional pinks, blues, lavenders and greens for which he expressed great preference. The conventional ochre shades and black, which were the predominant ancient colours, were used only for emphasis, and he considered them less interesting than the others. For several reasons we decided not to paint the rattle. Time was one consideration. The fine surface of the carved rattle was another. An

³⁵⁴ Garfield, "Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art" (field notes).

unpainted climp rattle is as foreign to native feeling as one painted in pale blue, pink and green, but I chose what I considered the lesser of the two evils.³⁵⁵

Even though she considered Peel the better, more authoritative artist, she still did not completely find what she wanted – an “authentic” piece. Born in 1919, Peel was a few generations younger than Alexcee.³⁵⁶ She had him carve a mask on a cane that he remembered his father, a shaman, using, on which were carved images of his father’s supernatural aids. The original cane and other paraphernalia used by his father were sold in 1914. She describes how Peel remembered its use and its meaning but lamented the generational gap in knowledge that she believed to be lost forever: “the question immediately arises as to how accurately he was able to reproduce the original. On that there is no way of checking.”³⁵⁷ She discusses the rules of commission – had she asked him to carve a design from another’s clan, the onus would be on her for using a crest not hers, as he would just be fulfilling a commission. By leaving the planning to him, he was confined to his own or his father’s clan imagery. She noted Peel’s and Alexcee’s similarities in terms of both artists being of the blackfish clan, hence the predominance of the whale and bear in their work.

Garfield seems to have respected Peel’s work more because of his background (he was heir to his father’s cultural knowledge and thus to traditional lifestyles and practices). As such, her account of Peel’s work is much more positive. She notes that

He stopped to ask me how I liked the mask, to which I replied, ‘very well’. I remarked that I liked the angular contours and he replied that it was not done yet. I did not feel free to make suggestions or comments to him as I did to Mr. Alexcee. His knifework was so skilful that little other smoothing was necessary. He said that he brought it mainly to show what the natives had used in place of sandpaper.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Death certificate for Bryan Peel: B16575. (British Columbia Provincial Archives)

³⁵⁷ Garfield, “Modern Tsimshian Decorative Art” (field notes).

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

Unlike Alexcee, she let Peel finish the mask, and she was pleased with it. Regarding his painting,

he liked the coarse commercial brushes better than the old native porcupine hair ones. Mr. Peel was careful not to mix his paint in dirty containers or use dirty brushes. Mr. Alexcee was very careless in this regard. Mr. Peel remarked that he knows how to make the old paints, but that it was too much trouble.

In contrast, Alexcee was portrayed as sloppy and careless.³⁵⁹ Garfield had little good to say about Alexcee's work in terms of its worth as an ethnological specimen. In her search for "traditional" material culture, she overlooked its value as documenting the present conditions, circumstances and attitudes of contemporary Tsimshian artists. Garfield was clearly fascinated with Alexcee as an individual, and made several amusing remarks about his flamboyance, confidence and eccentricities, however her pejorative views towards his work are to be expected within the historical context. Garfield's field notes are an invaluable source of information on his life and work.

Two decades after Garfield, Dr. Harry Hawthorn wrote that in traditional society, the carvers were "generally of higher status than other men because some of their work demanded that they be initiated in secret societies or be capable of taking other major parts in a ceremony. None lived by carving to the exclusion of other tasks. All of them hunted, fished and carried out

³⁵⁹ Garfield explains that "he first drew in the main outlines [of a dance scene] in pencil, handling both that and his paints very carelessly. His attitude was that it made no difference where the pencil marks went, they would be covered up with paint anyway" Although she portrays him as careless, the comments she deemed worth recording indicate he was opinionated in his own way in terms of his subject matter and Tsimshian style as he knew it, for example, "he remarked that the Tsimshian use yellow because of yellow sunlight in the morning. The Haida use so much green because of the green of the surrounding waters." Alexcee used commercial paints by the time she spoke with him in 1934: "He got out his yellow paint and said he uses yellow because early in the morning you see red, yellow and blue in the sky. He did not want to use the tube yellow because as it was too pale. He explained how the colours should be used. The leggings are sometimes red, sometimes yellow, the rattle and moon red, the blankets red, yellow and blue (green)..." At one point, she even suggested the colours for him to use: yellow, red, green, black.

various social and political roles.”³⁶⁰ Although Alexcee was supposedly trained as a *halait* carver as a younger man or boy, Barbeau remarked that he was poor, at least at the time he encountered him. As discussed in the previous chapter, Alexcee fished, worked extensively on Crosby’s mission ship *The Glad Tidings* and on at least one occasion, had travelled to Seattle to pick hops. Art-making at that time did not provide sustainable income. Hawthorn argued that as

originality and innovations increased, the carver was now able to carry out his conception more quickly and with less cost in case of failure...A later phase of the changes in NWC carving is its present decline; it can be labeled nothing other than that.”³⁶¹

In the context of Hawthorn’s understanding of the “state” of Northwest Coast art, he saw that Alexcee was an artist responding to the changes imposed upon his community by using his skills advantageously and productively. But he still considered it a lesser art form, as in the 1940s and ‘50s, old meant authentic, and was ultimately more valuable. Yes, Alexcee was a talented artist/craftsman and a good businessman, but even at that,

a few carvers work capably, even imaginatively. Many more carvers work crudely and repetitively, their work separated from the values of their communities and selling on a completely uninformed, external market. The MoA possesses a few objects made by northern carvers like. Alexiz [sic], who worked some fifty years ago. They at times employed the familiar mythological elements but in new ways, with increased plasticity and considerable inventiveness. None of these sorts of carving had a place in the traditional arts. In all likelihood they were made because the carvers felt restlessly creative; no commission to undertake them would have come from the communities.³⁶² And the work failed to win enough external appreciation and support to maintain it. The art consequently confined to its traditional organization and purposes, continued only in so far as the older system itself went on. The pre-contact style of carving changed when trade brought sharper tools and increased wealth, and again when it brought commercial paints. Both phases were

³⁶⁰ Harry Hawthorn, p. 62.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² As Garfield remarked, “It was not possible to get the reaction of others in the village toward his work. None of them buy it.”

creative and readily distinguishable from the recent period when the remnant of the art has been copyist but inaccurate and unschooled.³⁶³

This historical overview locates Alexcee's work in a third-wave of post-contact art, a "period of decline" in which Hawthorn suggests the benefits of new tools and media gave way to an artistic or stylistic laziness. Alexcee sold items such as carved and painted paddles on the tourist market like those discussed above, illustrating the inventiveness of artists' treatment of "familiar mythological elements," however "copyist but inaccurate and unschooled" they might have been. A post-modern reading of this scenario would not consider these effects negative, but would rather argue for cultural continuity as a response to the changing times and changing needs and outlets for creating art. At the time he wrote this, Hawthorn himself was involved in facilitating new arenas for art-making as well as programs to support and celebrate contemporary Northwest Coast artists such as Mungo Martin.

According to Phillips and Steiner,

the makers of objects have frequently manipulated commodity production in order to serve economic needs as well as new demands for self-representation and self-identification made urgent by the establishment of colonial hegemonies. [Objects] are all equally difficult to contain within the binary schema of art and artifact. In some instances, where the fact of commoditization could be hidden, the objects have been accorded a place in one or another category. On others, where their commoditized nature has been all too evident, they have most fallen into the ontological abyss of the inauthentic, the fake, or the crassly commercial. A particularly dense aura of inauthenticity surrounds objects produced for the souvenir and tourist trades because they are most obviously located at the intersection of the discourses of art, artifact, and commodity.³⁶⁴

This chapter focused on the multiple authenticities (and inauthenticities) inscribed upon Alexcee's works by their various consumers across time and space. After a brief summary of the paradigms of value constructed by outsiders on Northwest Coast art objects, I located his work

³⁶³ Harry Hawthorn, p. 69.

³⁶⁴ Phillips and Steiner, p. 4.

in the so-called “period of decline” of the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century. As has been discussed, Alexcee’s works have been collected and studied within local, touristic, anthropological, art-historical, and museological contexts and as such they have been evaluated and re-evaluated variously by different interests. Deemed valuable as documents, fascinating, upsetting, primitive, modern, fine and exceptional, Alexcee’s works not only preserved and celebrated aspects of his culture in his own contemporary context, but they continue to speak to ongoing discourses about the ways Western value systems judge art and treat the circulation of objects. The two forms of authenticity that have been discussed include those of cultural and individual attribution. The Boasian model (1927) of evaluating works based on their adherence to historical cultural or regional styles predated the emphasis on individual style and biography seen in more contemporary discourse. While contemporary accounts of what constitutes Northwest Coast art have expanded and diversified, and the rigid definitions of art and craft have somewhat relaxed, the issue of authenticity is still closely connected to the cultural identity of the artist. Having identified and analyzed various “Alexcee” works, I have tried to avoid making the art/craft distinction as it no longer seems appropriate or relevant, and have instead focused on biography and historical context. As such, this thesis is a product of its time. Although biography has been an art-historical model for several centuries of evaluation of European work, it has been only relatively recently been applied to the arts of the First Nations. As such, attribution based on personal style has been important for this project and, as was noted above, cultural identities have always been, and still are, important for the collecting and marketing of Northwest Coast art.

Works perhaps not considered “fine art” in Alexcee’s own day have recently been sought after by major institutions, such as the painting *Port Simpson*, acquired in 2008 by the National Gallery of Canada. This acquisition could speak to a re-definition or expansion of the

canon of historical Northwest Coast art, one that is inclusive of canvas painting as a means of cultural expression. Conversely, the acquisition of Alexcee's painting might suggest a re-definition of the "Canadian" canon, one that is inclusive of historical Aboriginal artists. To conclude this chapter,

Definitions of art, artifact, and commodity typically occur at such interstitial nodes – sites of negotiation and exchange where objects must continually be reevaluated according to regional criteria and local definitions. At each point in its movement through space and time, an object has the potential to shift from one category to another and, in so doing, slide along the slippery line that divides art from artifact from commodity.³⁶⁵

Alexcee was continuously innovative in the work he produced for commissions and for the tourist market and although he was probably bound by the expectations of his customers in many ways, he did not seem overly concerned with issues of authenticity, as were and are many of those who have studied his works. Throughout this thesis, he has been shown to have been an eccentric, dynamic, creative and opinionated individual and as such his work has danced, and will continue to dance around the various categories that seek to define historic First Nations art.

³⁶⁵ Phillips and Steiner, p. 12.

Conclusion

This thesis contributes to the on-going yet infrequent conversation on Freddie Alexcee and his art that has occurred over the past century. The preceding chapters offer new knowledge in the hopes of stimulating further discussion. Despite many value judgments, both positive and negative, that have been assigned to his works, both Alexcee and his art are undoubtedly important within the multiple local and national histories that have emerged from within Canada's borders. Chapters One through Three have generally and respectively established local historical context, a biographical sketch of the artist and a discussion of his oeuvre as to how his works have been shown, debated, judged and studied within various contexts. However, despite the contribution of new knowledge, much remains to be investigated.

Literary historian Paul Hjartarson has claimed that "in most articulations of the national tradition [Alexcee's] work is ignored." Hjartarson takes issue with his exclusion from many historical narratives of Tsimshian culture, from the history of "Canada's past as a settler/invaser colony" and, in framing Alexcee as an active agent, argues that his character "does not fit the story that Canada seeks to tell about itself."³⁶⁶ Although Hjartarson makes a case for Alexcee's importance (and contrasts it with his absence from standardized Canadian narratives), he overlooks the challenges involved in accessing information on historical Aboriginal artists.³⁶⁷ It was not commonplace for people of Alexcee's generation to leave behind written records, so what remains are the accounts of others (mostly cultural "outsiders"), which are now held in contemporary archives, such as those that substantiate the bulk of this paper. The articulation

³⁶⁶Paul Hjartarson, "Wedding 'Native' Culture to the 'Modern' State", in *Re-Calling Early Canada: Reading the Political in Literary and Cultural Production*, eds. Blair, Coleman, Higginson, York (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005).

³⁶⁷ Hjartarson's tone is rather polemical and suggests a conscious "writing out" of Aboriginal voice, presence and agency from mainstream Canadian history.

of a Canadian national tradition is an ongoing project that reveals new knowledge and insights as the data is made available and as the research is completed. Art historian Ronald Hawker commented that at the time of his own research on Alexcee, the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort/Port Simpson fonds was inaccessible.³⁶⁸ In contrast, twenty years later, I have had the opportunity to access this collection (and many more rich resources across the country). This opportunity, along with the availability of time, has allowed for an in-depth research experience. That being said, this narrative has several shortcomings.

First, the inventory of Alexcee's work that I had been compiling over the course of the research did not fit in to the narrative for two main reasons. It became clear that his oeuvre was too large to note every individual piece attributed to him. Secondly, attribution itself is a problematic issue, as discussed in Chapter Three. I decided that focusing on a few specific works to highlight additional issues (such as historical documentation, identities, authenticity, etc.) would provide a more fruitful and interesting discussion than trying to account for every piece individually. Had I additional time, more collections research could have been undertaken, and a search for works in different institutions that are possibly his could be an avenue worth pursuing for future projects. It would be interesting to find out how far and wide Freddie Alexcee's works have circulated. Perhaps there are some in European collections?. Again, more time would have allowed for a more comprehensive object-based search.

Two approaches that I did not pursue were tracking the prices of works he sold, how they were marketed and how many of them ended up in museums. Again, lack of time blocked these avenues. Because many of these works were acquired during his own day (the NGC is the only

³⁶⁸From a personal conversation with Ronald Hawker, 2010/10.

institution I know of to have recently acquired a work), this would involve time spent sifting through contemporary correspondence and staff interviews, among other documentation.

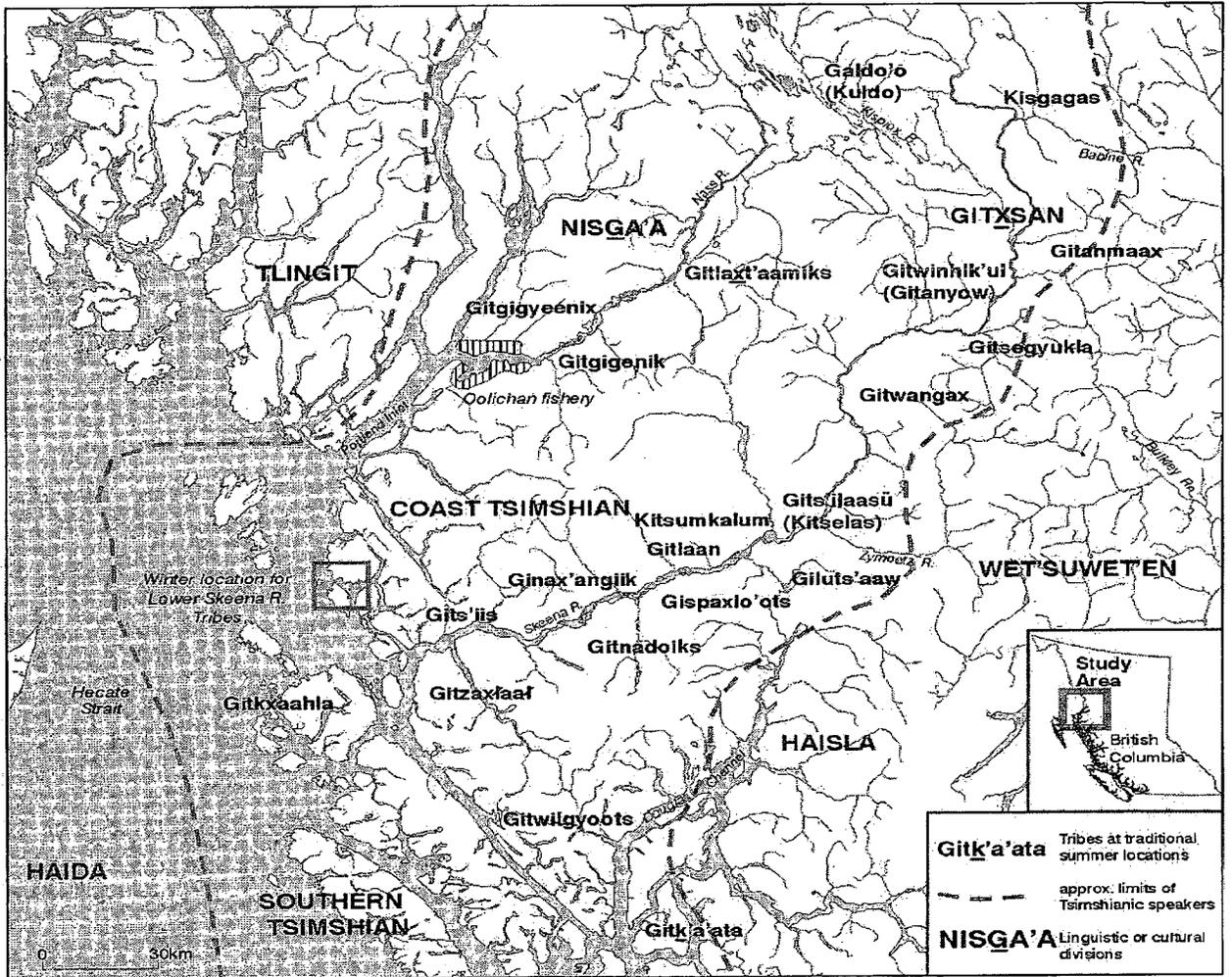
I also did not attempt to locate or contact private owners although this would be essential for expanding his oeuvre as it is known, and for obtaining more history on the circulation of his work. Given the information I did find, I expect there is probably more out there, given Alexcee's candidness with his academic and missionary acquaintances. Perhaps most regrettable was not accessing community voices from Lax Kw'Alaams. As mentioned in the thesis, it was initially decided not to interfere with the community and when one opportunity arose, a descendent of Alexcee's declined to comment, saying he did not have knowledge of his ancestor. If somewhat disappointing, this was not a significant setback given the documentary angle of the thesis. It would, however, be interesting and important for future research if the community could give an authoritative account on Alexcee's legacy, if any, of helping to preserve and maintain cultural identity and the history of the Lax Kw'Alaams people.

This thesis was motivated by a desire to reduce some of the mystery surrounding the historical character of Freddie Alexcee, to dig deeper into his life story, to illuminate some of the circumstances that informed and inspired his work and in doing so, to bring out his own voice. From the accounts of people like Beynon, Garfield, Barbeau and Raley, Alexcee was very much his own man with a unique grasp on his own reality as well as that of his people. He lived to be eighty-six years old, a significant life span given the epidemics, social and cultural traumas, poverty and other challenges his people experienced in the face of colonization. And yet, visual and textual accounts of him depict a proud individual, a survivor who, despite his apparent disappointment and sadness in aspects of the contemporary conditions of his people, left behind images of strength, celebration, pride, non-conformity and resilience.

Barbeau once reflected that Alexcee had a foot in “both [Aboriginal and European] worlds,” a tempting characterization even today, but a reductive one nonetheless. A contemporary perspective would hold that Alexcee was an individual negotiating a complicated present. A constant challenge throughout this project has been whether to offer conclusions regarding the identities, meanings and significances that are present in his works. If anything can be concluded, it is that his oeuvre is irreducible and complicated and illuminates the shared histories of Aboriginal and European peoples in early Canada. As he provided insight into the contemporary realities of his own people, his legacy, to me, is that he also illuminates the reality of our contemporary present – he challenges current expectations and assumptions that we still have of Aboriginal art. When the curators hang Alexcee’s painting *Port Simpson* in the National Gallery of Canada, more than eighty years after his first and last hanging there in 1927, it will be interesting to see what kinds of reactions it receives. In 1927, Alexcee’s paintings were used to mediate the past and the present (and future). As Doreen Jensen eloquently wrote, “Alexcee lived, as we all do, in a convergence of time and place. In this convergence, his imagination created work that flowed from the past, spoke in the present and helped create the future.”³⁶⁹ In the broad context of Canadian art history, Alexcee’s works have been, and still are, visible and powerful for their ability to challenge historical stereotypes, question contemporary assumptions and to stimulate discussion on the articulation of narratives that have yet to be imagined.

³⁶⁹ Jensen, p. 1.

Plate 1



Map of Northwest Coast of British Columbia

From Susan Neylan, The Heavens are Changing; Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.

Plate 2



Photographer unknown

Fort Simpson

Date: n/a

British Columbia Provincial Archives

B-03578

Plate 3



Alexcee, Freddie

Port Simpson (with Hudson's Bay Stockade)

Undated

Paint on glass

Vancouver City Archives

Shelf 26, Box 1 (86-10)

Plate 4



Beynon, William

(Detail) *Townsite of Fort Simpson: "Fred Alexcee portion, gisp. gilludzau"* ("1915 Plan by Lots [Port Simpson]"). (lower right corner lot)

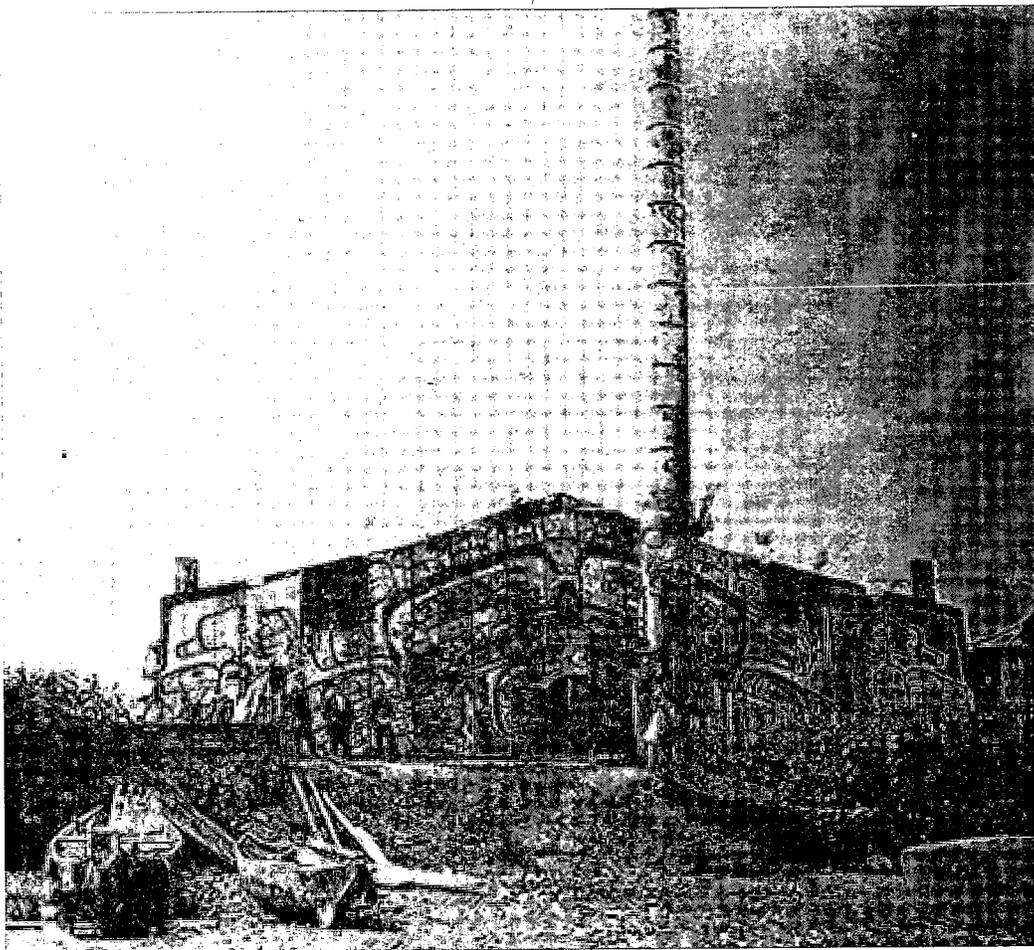
Feb., 1915

Pencil on Cloth (blueprint)

University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology Archives

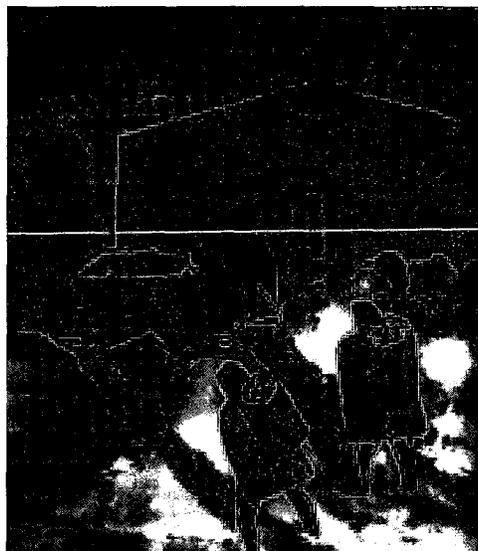
Wilson Duff Fonds, 40-45

Plate 5

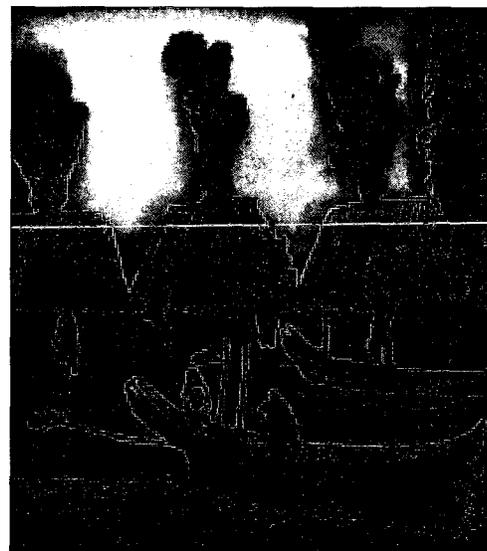


Dawson, G.M.
Chief Skagwait's house, Fort Simpson
1879
Canadian Museum of Civilization

Plate 6

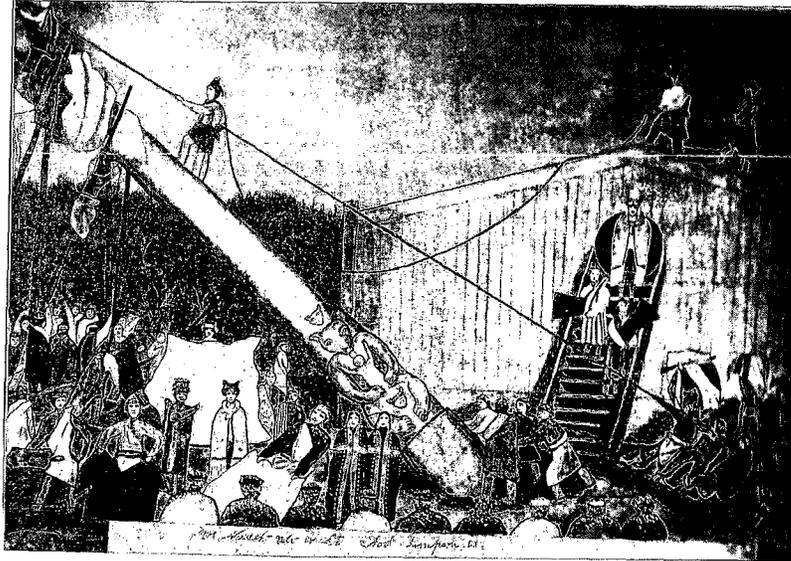


Alexsee, Freddie
 Gitksan Indians, BC, taking Oolashan (sic) fish
 from canoes. Fishes are put in large wats to
 decompose. After boiling, the oil is drawn off and
 placed in boxes to be used as food
 Pre-1921
 Pigments on glass
 Museum of Vancouver
 1048



Alexsee, Freddie
 Gitksan Indian houses at Oolashan fishing
 grounds, BC
 Pre-1921
 Pigments on glass
 Museum of Vancouver
 1042

Plate 7



Freddie Alexcee

Pole Raising at Port Simpson

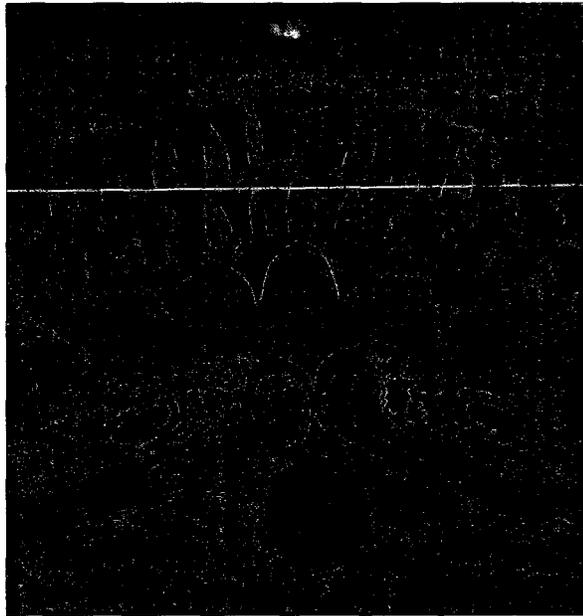
c. 1900

Oil on Canvas

Collection of Louise Hagar.

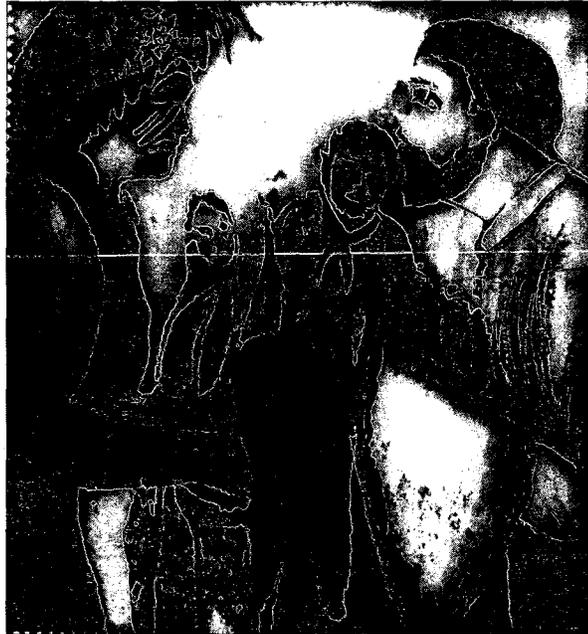
(image scanned from Aldona Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2006, p. 234.)

Plate 8



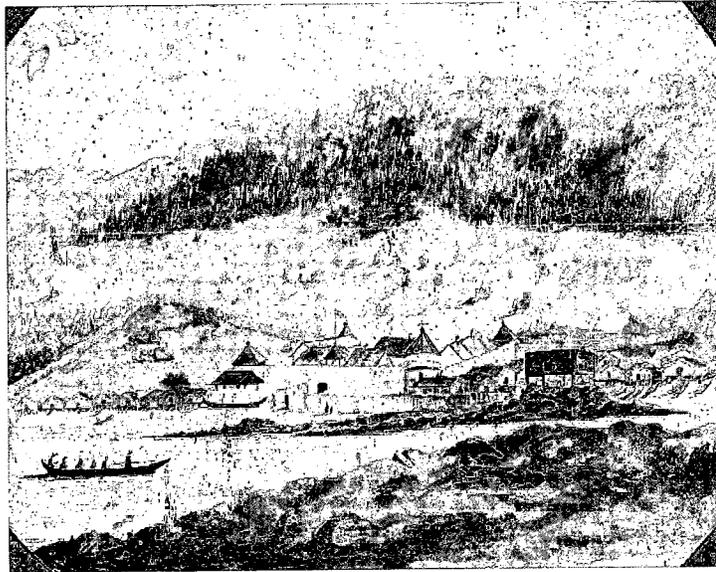
Alexcee, Freddie
*House front of a Tsimshian Indian, BC, showing chief's crest...Probably the
Ho-Hok – Indian Housefront Painted with Eagle Crest*
Pre-1921
Pigments on glass
Museum of Vancouver
1038

Plate 9



Alexcee, Freddie
*Hudson's Bay trader and Tsimshian Indian trading, bartering a gaudy
handkerchief for an otter skin*
Pre-1921
Pigments on glass
Museum of Vancouver
1072

Plate 10



Compton, Pym Nevins
Fort Simpson
Pre-1879
Oil on canvas (?)
British Columbia Provincial Archives
PDP03668

Plate 11



Lockerby, Gordon
Fort Simpson
1895
Oil on Canvas (?)
British Columbia Provincial Archives
PDP00094

Plate 12



Alexcee, Freddie

Battle Between the Haida and Tsimshian, Port Simpson, B.C.

c. 1896

Oil on Cloth

Canadian Museum of Civilization

VII-C-1823

Plate 13

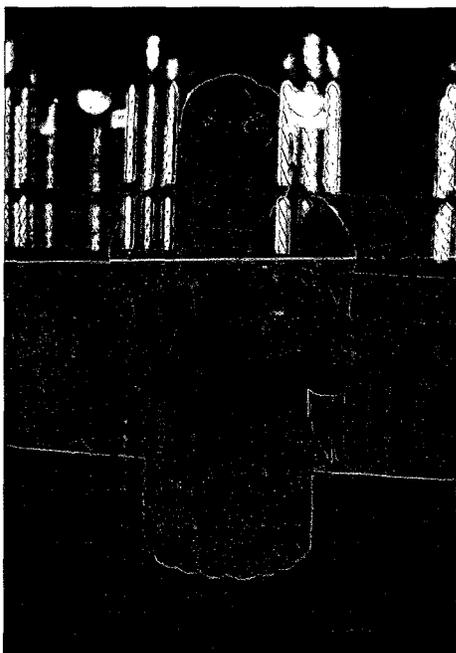


Photo at Canadian Museum of Civilization, negative number 87333

(Attributed to) Alexcee, Freddie

Angel Baptismal Font (pictured on loan at National Gallery of Canada's Rideau Chapel)

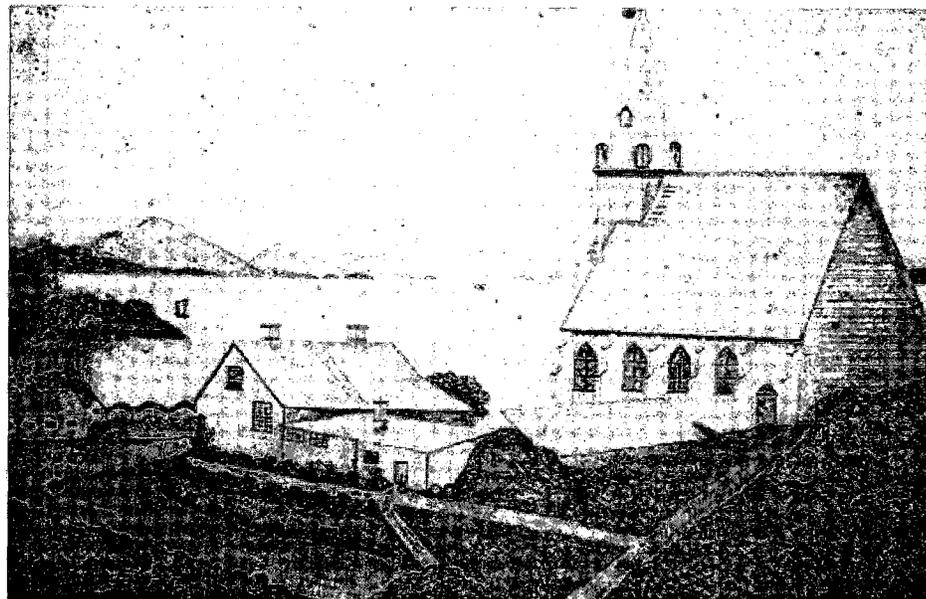
c. 1886

Wood, paint, metal (82.5 x 60.6 x 62.5 cm)

UBC Museum of Anthropology

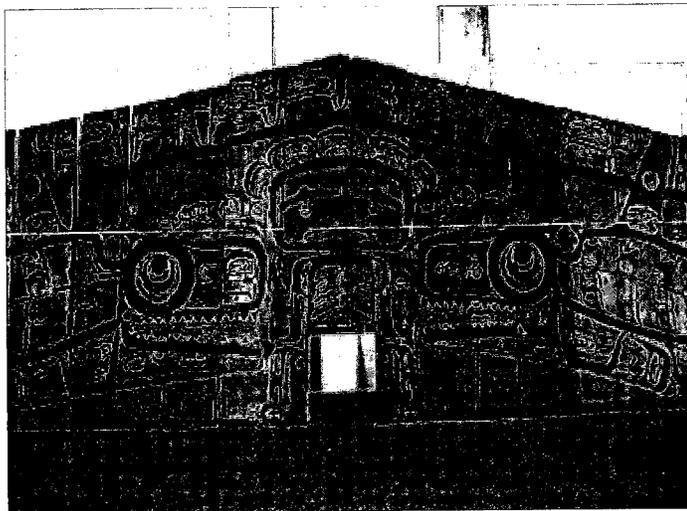
A1776

Plate 14



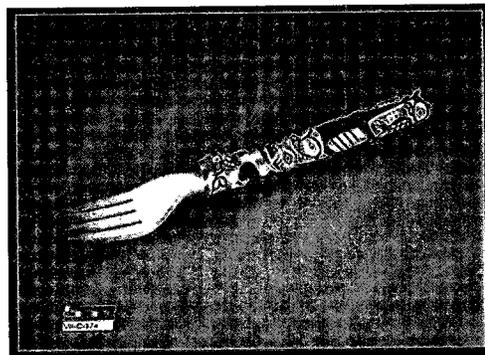
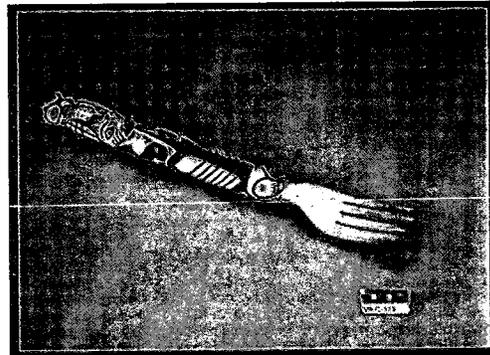
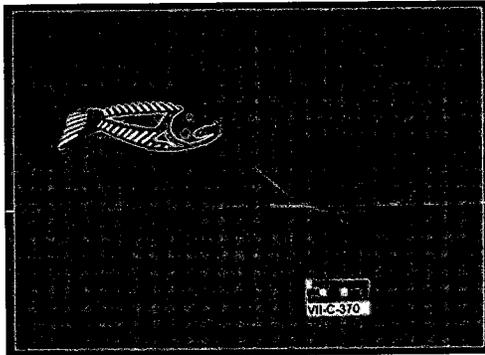
Tate, Caroline Sarah
Port Simpson, B.C.: Grace (Indian) Methodist Church
between 1876 and 1879
Medium: n/a
British Columbia Provincial Archives
PDP01314

Plate 15



House Front
Collected by James G. Swan c. 1875 (?)
National Museum of Natural History
E410732-0

Plate 16



Elwit, Samuel

Painted Utensils

Pre-1911

Wood, paint

Canadian Museum of Civilization

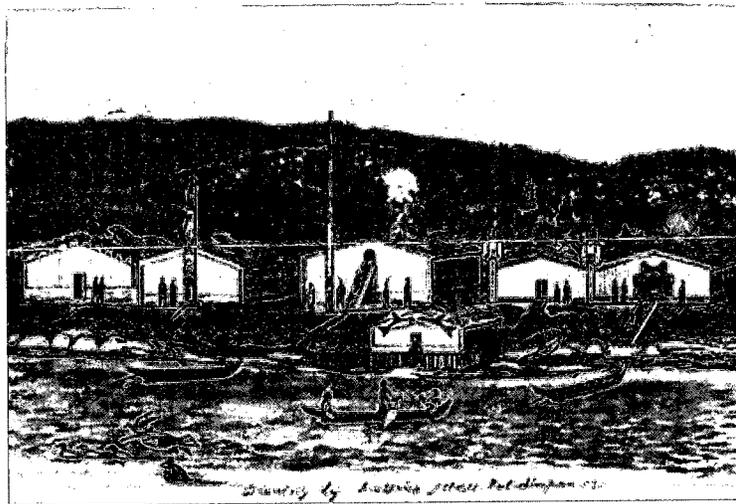
(clockwise, from top)

VII-C-370

VII-C-373

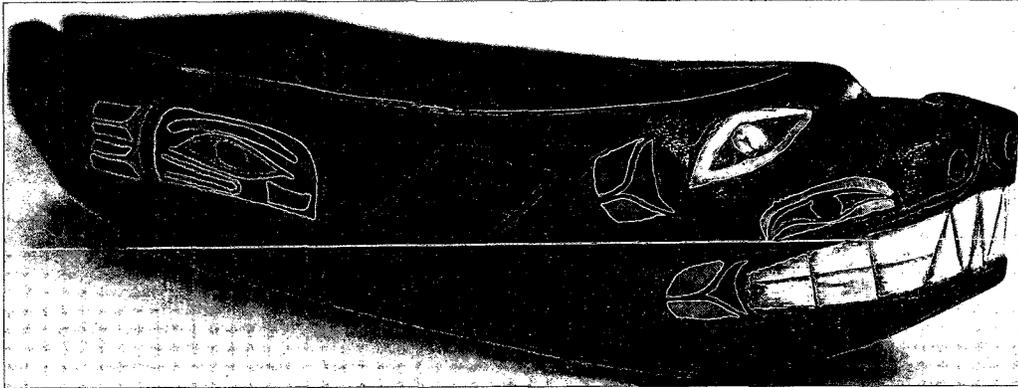
VII-C-374

Plate 17



Alexee, Freddie
Indian Village of Port Simpson
1915-1916
Watercolor on paper
Art Gallery of Ontario
(Gift of A.Y. Jackson, 1944)

Plate 18



Alexcee, Moses
Sea Lion Dish
 1949
 Paint, wood, shell inlay
 Museum of Vancouver
 AA 740

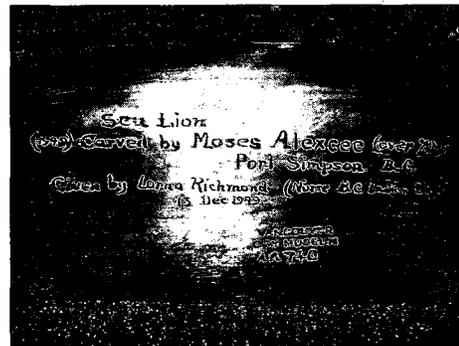
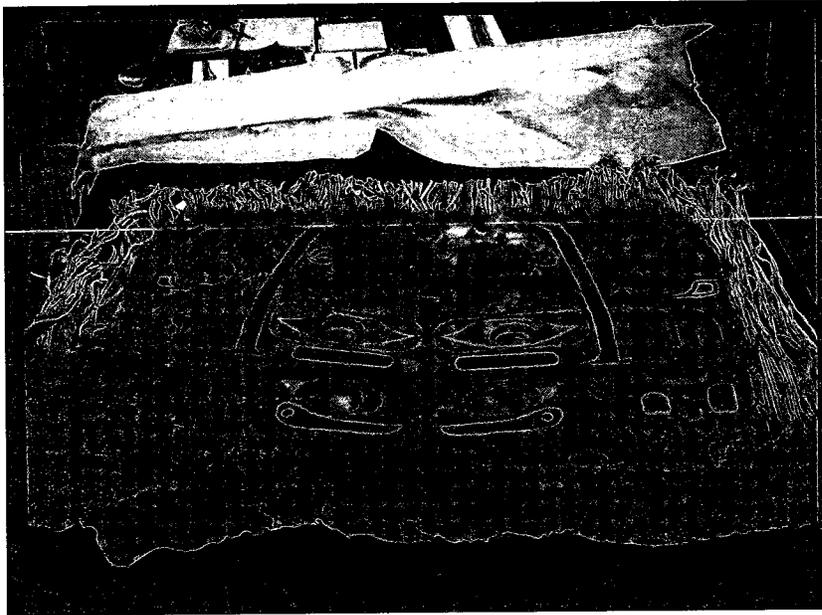


Plate 19

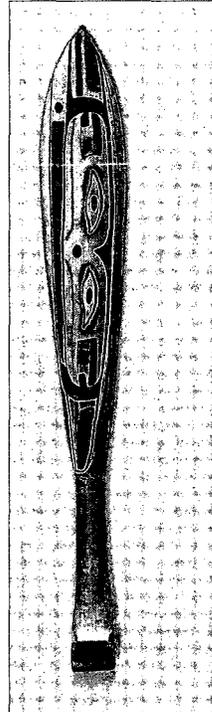


Alexcee, Freddie
Robe
Moose skin, paint
Undated
U.B.C. Museum of Anthropology
A2.694

Plate 20

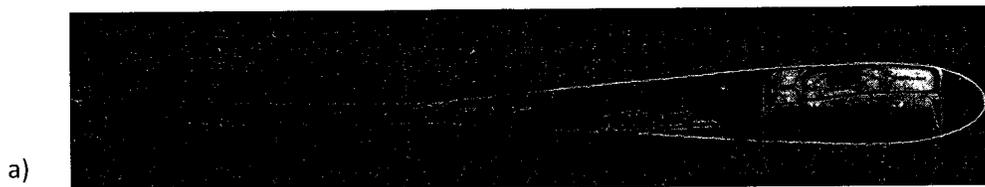


Alexcee, Freddie
Model Totem Pole
 Undated
 Wood, paint, metal
 U.B.C. Museum of Anthropology
 A2206

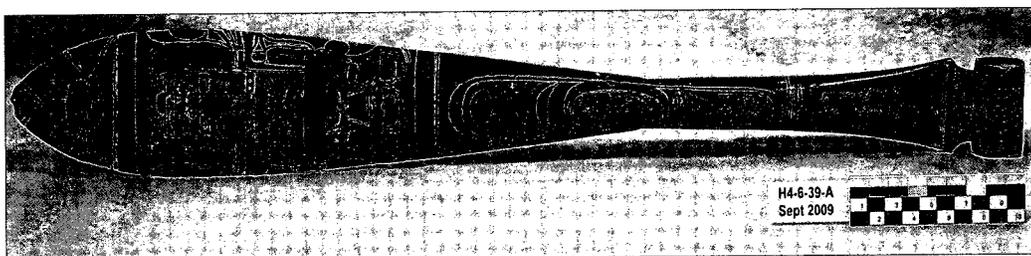


Alexcee, Freddie
Miniature Paddle
 Undated
 Wood, paint
 U.B.C. Museum of Anthropology
 1730/7

Plate 21

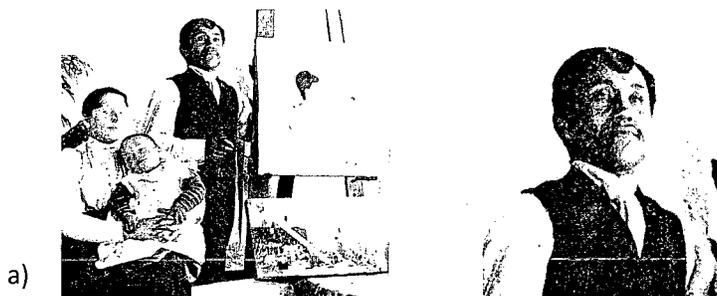


Artist Unknown
Paddle (Tsimshian type)
Collected c. 1917
Yellow cedar, paint
Royal B.C. Museum
10131

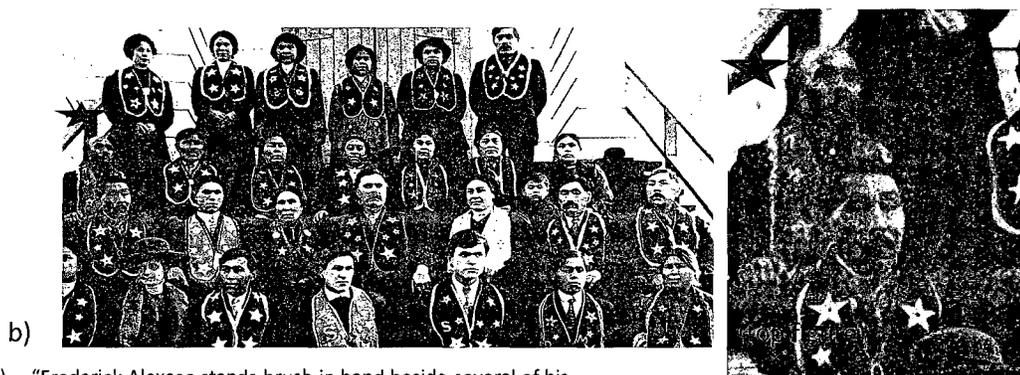


b) Alexcee, Freddie
Paddle
Date ?
Paint and wood
Manitoba Museum
H4-6-39-A

Plate 22



a)

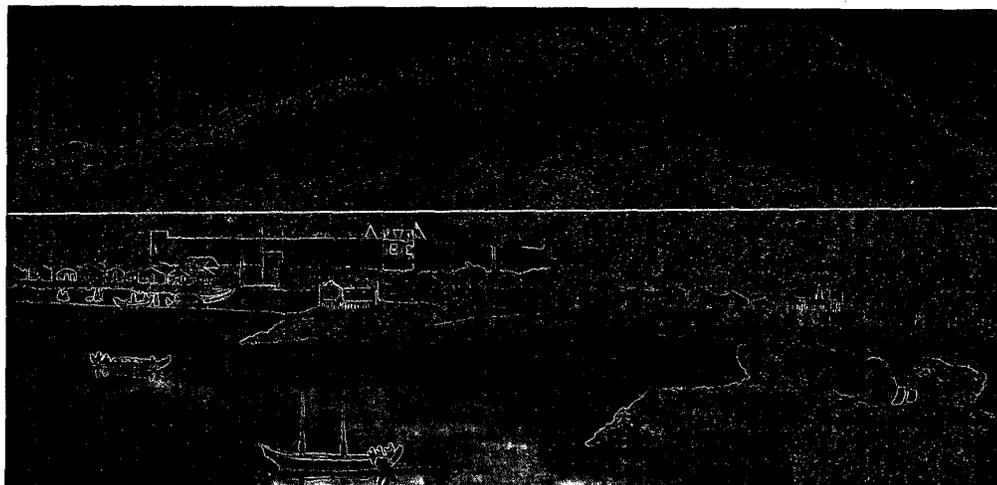


b)

a) "Frederick Alexcee stands brush in hand beside several of his paintings, c. 1900. The individuals beside him are probably his wife and child. UCC". Photo accessed in Bill McLennan and Karen Duffek, The Transforming Image: Painted Arts of Northwest Coast First Nations. Vancouver/Toronto: UBC Press, 2000, p. 252.

b) "Temperance Society, Port Simpson"
Royal British Columbia Museum,
Photograph No. 22300

Plate 23



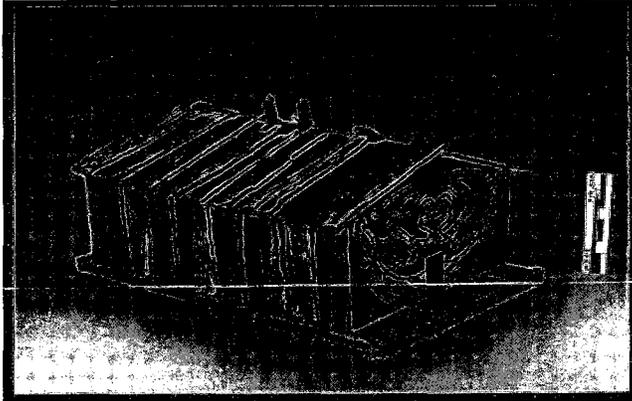
Alexcee, Freddie
Fort Simpson
c. 1900
Oil, graphite on canvas
National Gallery of Canada
42366

Plate 24

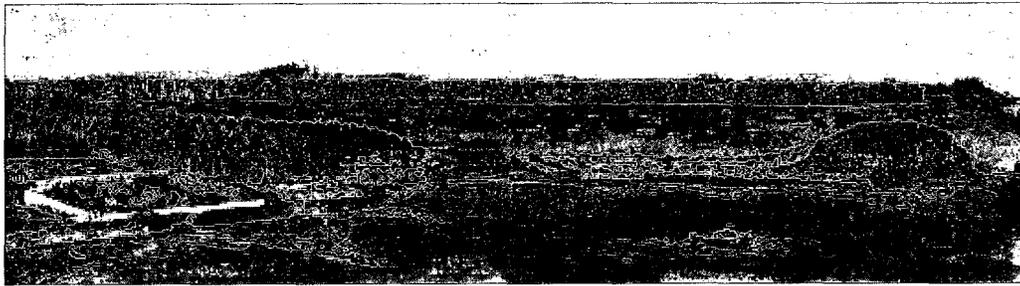


Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern
November-December 1927 (National Gallery of Canada)
January – April, 1928
Art Gallery of Toronto (installation photo)
EX0085b 2/7

Plate 25



Dudoward, Charles (painter) and
Dudoward, Fred (carver)
Model house
1916
Wood, paint, metal
Canadian Museum of Civilization
VII-C-674



Dudoward, Charles
Indian Village of Port Simpson As It Was in 1873
oil on canvas (?)
1873
B.C. Provincial Archives
PDP00037

Plate 26



(attributed to) Alexcee, Freddie
Two wooden carvings of angels

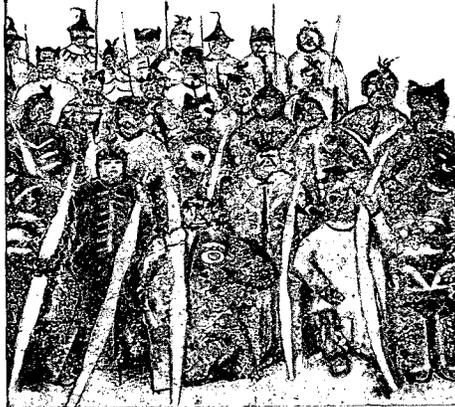
Undated

Paint, wood

Prince Rupert Museum, B.C.

CMC Neg. No. 87406

Plate 27



(clockwise, from top)

- a) "Tsimshian People Proclaiming Peace at Peace Conference, B.C."
- b) "Tsimshian in Peace Conference, B.C."
- c) "Tsimshian People in Fighting Clothing, Preparing for War"

Fish oil and pigments on glass

Pre-1921

Museum of Vancouver

a) 1060 b) 1061 c) 1056

Plate 28



- a) "Tsimshian Chief Wearing Chief's Hat, B.C."
- b) "Tsimshian Chief Riding the First Horse in Northern B.C."
- c) "Tsimshian Potlatch View, B.C."
- d) "Tsimshian Types of Ceremonial Clothing and Headdresses, B.C."

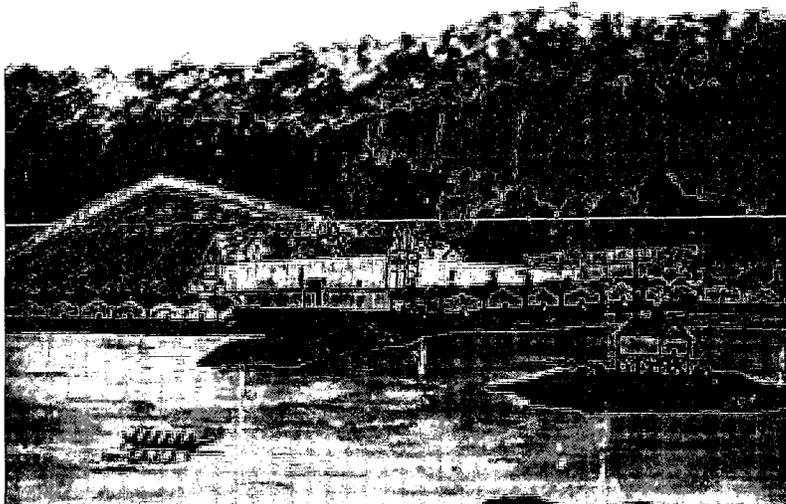
Fish oil and pigments on glass

Pre-1921

Museum of Vancouver

a) 1064 b) 1065 c) 1067 d) 1066

Plate 29



Charles Dudoward (?)

Port Simpson, as it used to be about 1850 [possibly from Frederick Alexander]
1925

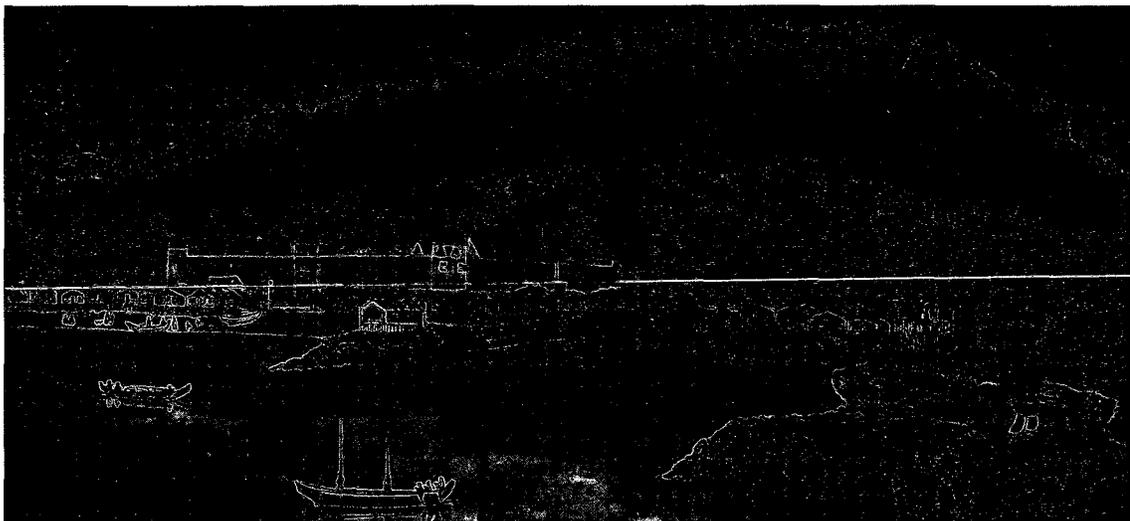
Oil on canvas

Canadian Museum of Civilization

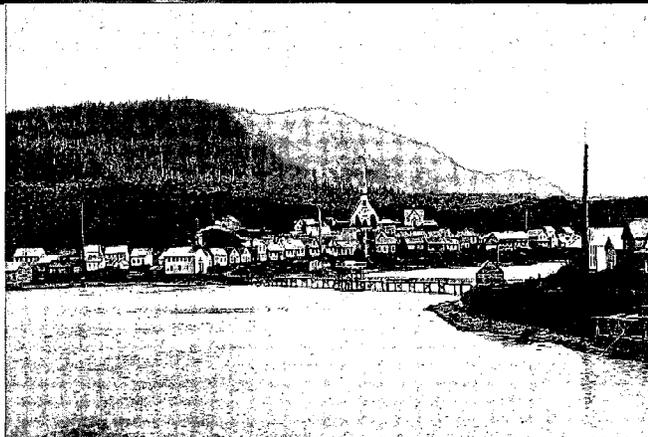
Control No. 63222

**this is likely wrongfully attributed, as initials "CHD" appear to right. It was probably painted by P.S. artist Charles Henry Dudoward, who may have also copied Compton and Lockerby.*

Plate 30

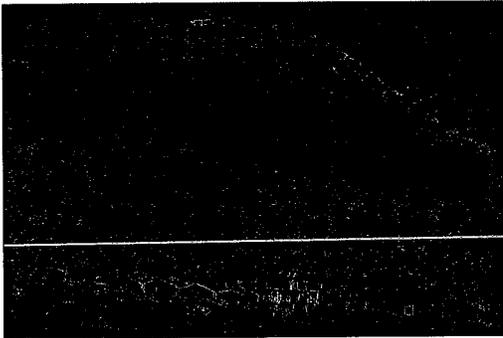


Alexcee, Freddie
Port Simpson
 c. 1900
 Oil, graphite [ink and watercolour?] on canvas
 National Gallery of Canada
 42366



Richard Maynard
Port Simpson
 1884
 B.C. Provincial Archives
 A-04180

Plate 31



Detail, *Port Simpson*

H.A. Tremayne
Port Simpson
1900
B.C. Provincial Archives
F0470

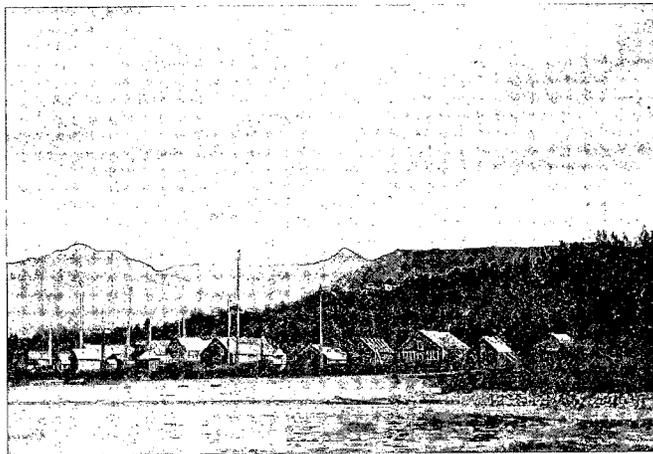
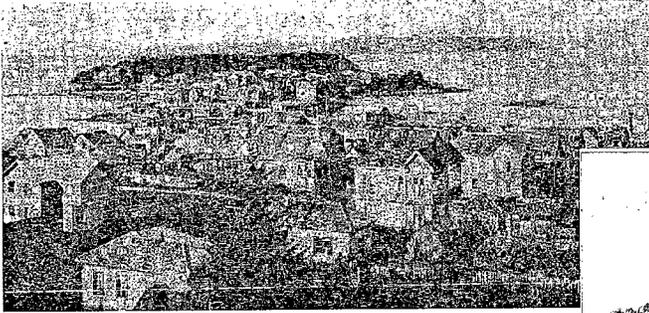
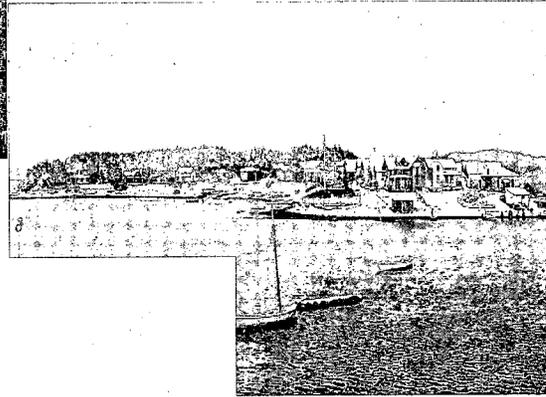


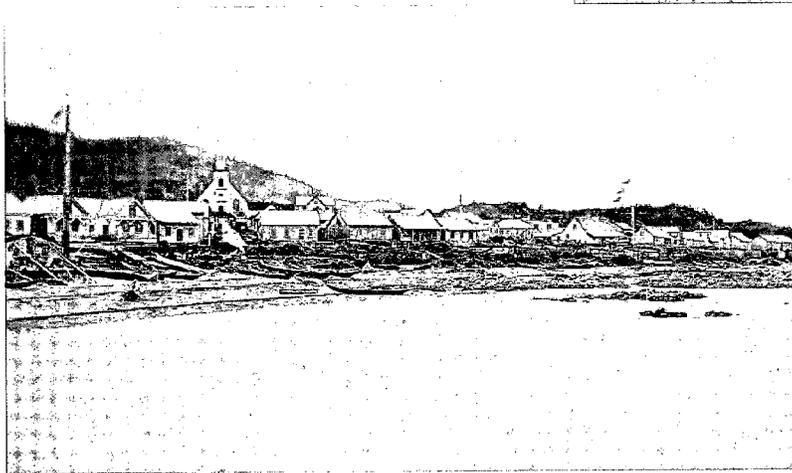
Plate 32



b) *Port Simpson*, photographer unknown, undated, B.C.P.A., B03748



a) *Port Simpson*, photographer unknown, c. 1910, B.C.P.A., B01014



c) *Fort Simpson*, photographer unknown, undated, B.C.P.A., B03578

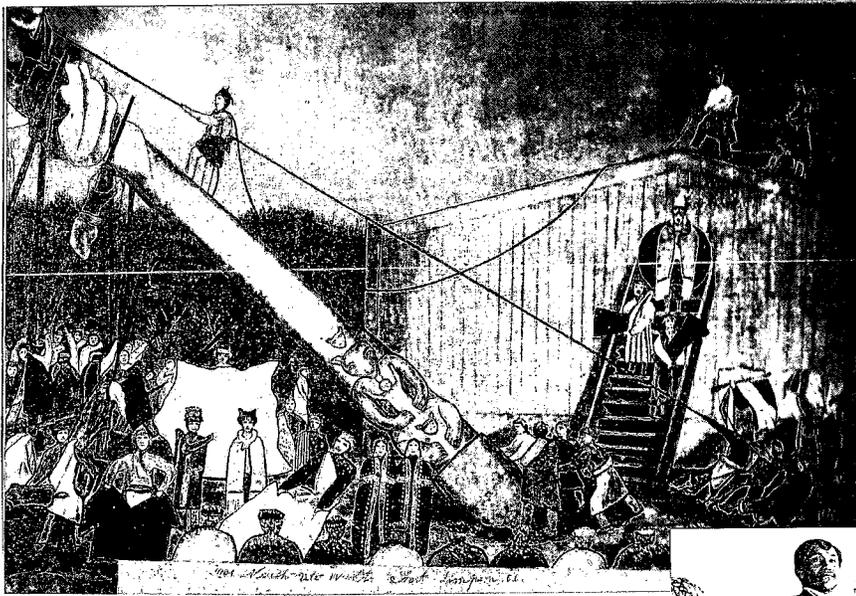
Plate 33



Alexcee, Freddie
Beaver at Port Simpson
Undated
Oil on cloth
Wellcome Institute, London, England

Scanned from Blair, Coleman, Higginson, York, p. 364.

Plate 34

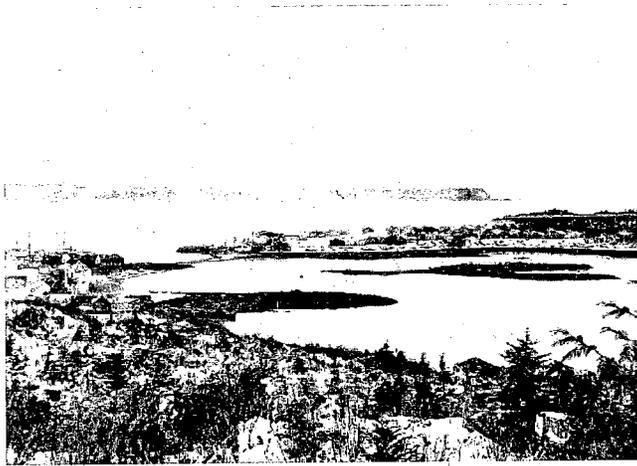


a) Pole Raising at Port Simpson

b) Alexcee, family
and paintings



Plate 35



Photographer Unknown
Port Simpson in Two Parts
c. 1872
B.C. Provincial Archives
A-04173, A-04174



Plate 36



Beaver at Port Simpson

(now at Wellcome Institute)

Used by Beynon to identify chiefs' houses
in 1915

Copied from Marius Barbeau Coll.
Northwest Coast Files
Folder: Port Simpson 1915 Soc.
Organization (General)
B-F-26 Box B.3

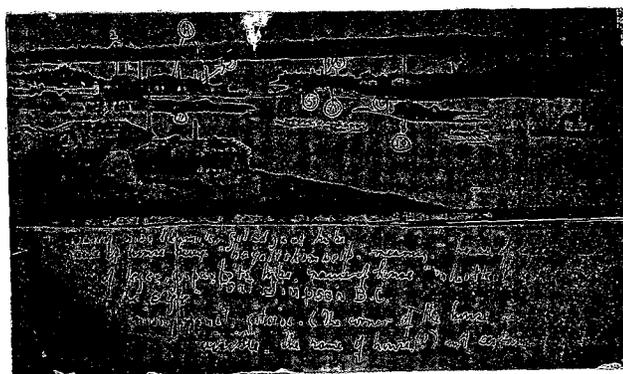


Plate 37

Alexcee, Freddie
Fort Simpson (with Hudson's Bay Stockade) (details)
Pre-1921
Fish oil and pigments on glass
Vancouver City Archives
Shelf 26, Box 1 (86-10)

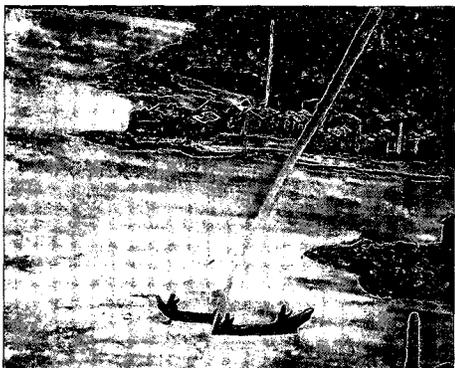
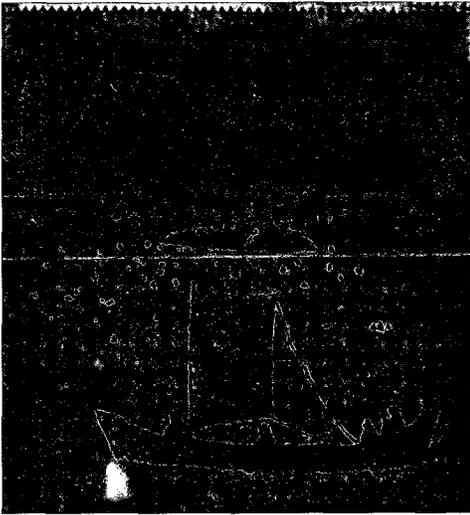


Plate 38

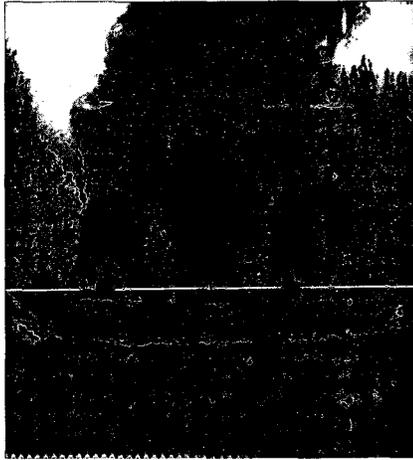


a) Alexcee, Freddie
Tsimshians in a Canoe, Hunting Sea Otter
Fish oil and pigments on glass
Pre-1921
Museum of Vancouver, 1039

b) Photographer Unknown
Port Simpson
c. 188-
B.C. Provincial Archives
HP000632



Plate 39



Alexcee, Freddie

- a) *Tsimshian Indians making Cedar Canoe, burning out the interior of the log*
- b) *Hudson's Bay trader and Tsimshian Indian trading, bartering a gaudy handkerchief for an otter skin*
- c) *Tsimshian Indian Houses at Oolachan fishing grounds*

Fish oil and pigments on glass

Pre-1921

Museum of Vancouver

a) 1041 b) 1072 c) 1042

Plate 40



Photographer Unknown
First Nation Carvings; Raley Collection
Date unknown
B.C. Provincial Archives
AA-00025

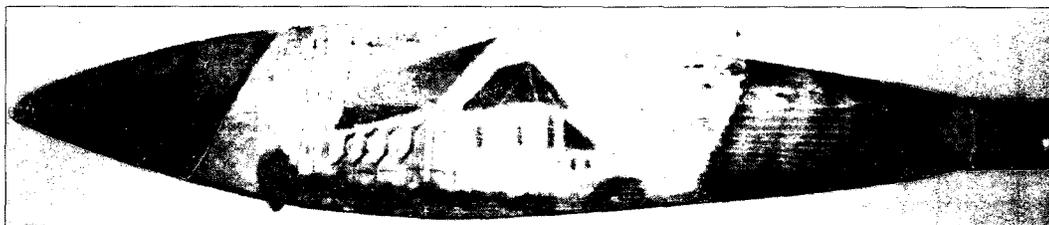
Plate 41

Alexcee, Freddie

- a) *Frontlet plaque ["Squid"]*; date unknown; wood, paint, metal; Royal British Columbia Museum; 18700
b) *Frontlet plaque [Beaver]*; date unknown; wood, paint, metal; Royal British Columbia Museum; 18129

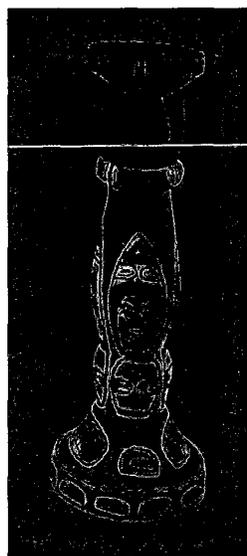


Plate 42



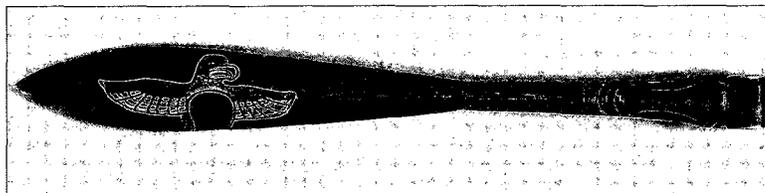
Artist unknown
Paddle, representing church at Metlakatla
Date unknown
Wood, paint
Royal British Columbia Museum
16175

Plate 43

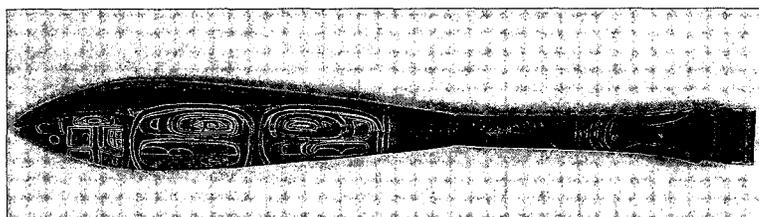


[Possibly made by Alexcee]
Model candlestick holder
Collected c. 1914-1932
Wood, paint
Royal British Columbia Museum
17690

Plate 44

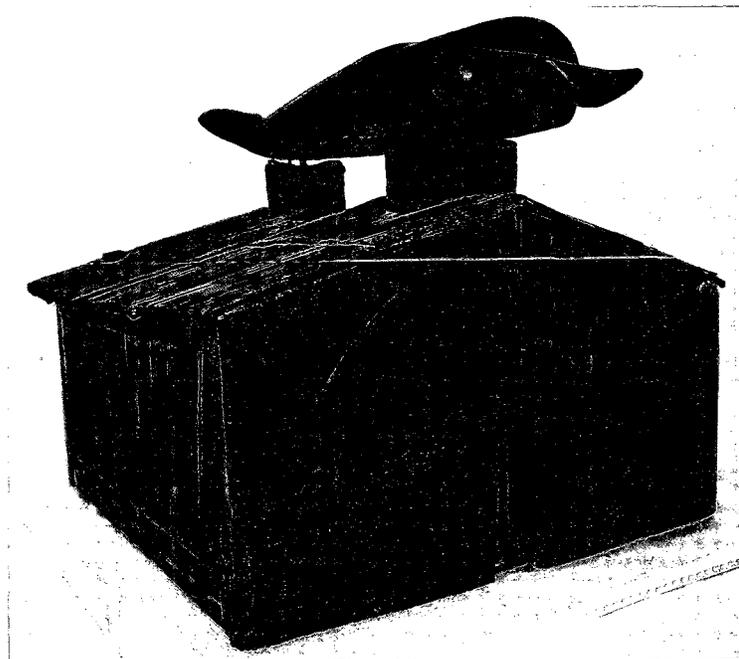


Alexcee, Freddie
Model paddle ("Thunderbird design" - back side)
Date unknown
Wood, paint
UBC Museum of Anthropology
A2132



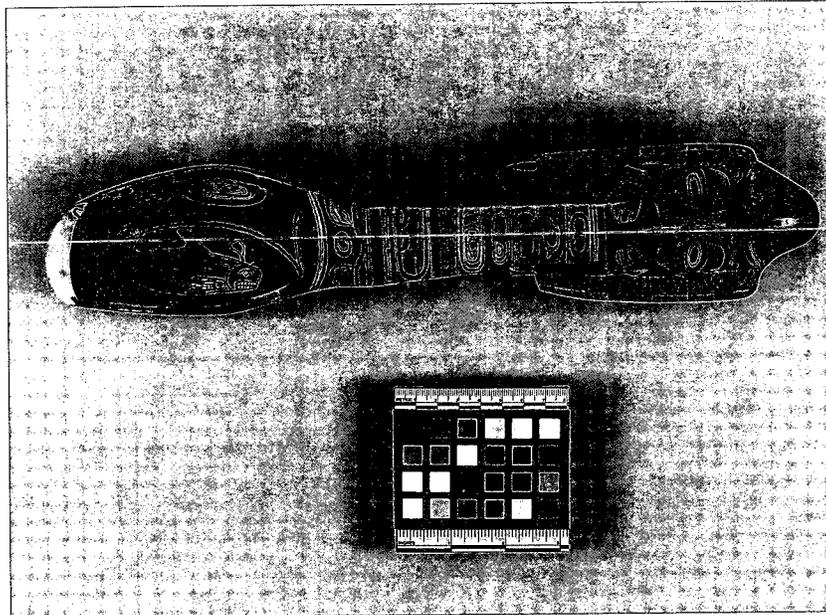
Front side, "Northwest Coast Design"

Plate 45



Alexcee, Freddie
Model house
Date unknown
Wood, paint, metal
Museum of Vancouver
AA698

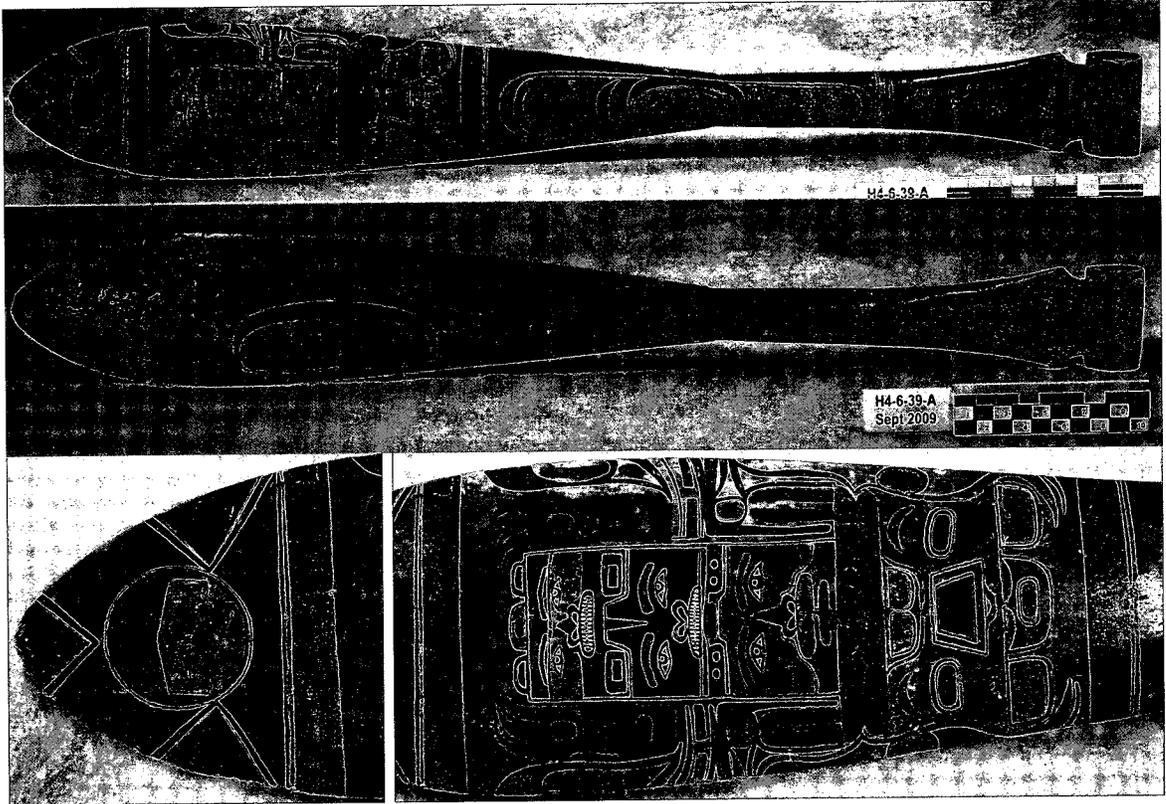
Plate 46



Alexcee, Freddie
Ladle
Date unknown
Wood, paint
UBC Museum of Anthropology
A2107

Plate 47

Alexcee, Freddie; Paddle; date ?; wood, paint; Manitoba Museum; H4-6-39-A



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