

Perceptions of Indigenous Art: 1930-1970

*This is Part I of a series, "Towards an Understanding of Indigenous Images on Twentieth-Century Canadian Pottery." Part II explores the period from 1970 to present and is available online at DiscoveringANTIQUES.com and CanadaPottery.ca, as well as in print in *Discovering ANTIQUES*, Summer 2021.*

I first became aware of Indigenous art during trips to the Royal BC Museum in Victoria when visiting with my cousins as a young girl. Invariably, my uncle would load the kids into his vehicle and head to some touristy spot on the island. Sometimes we wandered through Cathedral Grove or paddled in the ocean at Parksville. Of all the places we visited, I loved the museum best. There, we were quiet and respectful while touring the exhibits. There, I gained an appreciation and a love of museums, art galleries, antique stores, even botanical gardens – any place that tells the story of a place, a people, a culture. To this day when travelling, I make a point to visit the places that tell stories.

Like many collectors, I considered the pieces of Canadian pottery in my collection with Indigenous images as lovely additions to that collection, adding interest and unique design to what many Canadians would consider a rather boring hobby – who collects Canadian pottery anyway? I didn't start out to collect Canadian pottery – I just seemed to fall into it. For me, it was conducting research that led to this investigation into Indigenous images on the pottery in my extensive collection. I identified three main areas I wished to explore related to Indigenous images – those attributed to specific designers or artists on mainstream company pottery, those with no attribution, and those images created by Indigenous ceramic artists.

Indigenous - Terminology, over time, changes. Let's face it, non-Indigenous people struggle with knowing the acceptable term for Indigenous Peoples. The constitutional correct terminology in Canada, set out by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, is Aboriginal Peoples and this includes Indian (Status and non-Status), Inuit and Métis. Indian can also be referred to as First Nation, First Nations or even Nations. Here, I have chosen to use the term Indigenous Peoples as set by the current government. In summary, the term 'Indigenous Peoples' is the umbrella term under which First Nations, Inuit and Métis fall. Within each group, hundreds of individual communities have a unique culture, tradition, history and economy, indicating cultural diversity of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Art images of the Indigenous Peoples reveal this cultural diversity, in designs and symbols, in stories the images tell, of lessons learned and the history of a community, a clan, a nation.

Perceptions of Indigenous Art: 1930s-1970s

As early as the 1930s, a non-Indigenous recognition of Indigenous arts, and especially Northwest Coast Art, took place at the national level, embracing the ideal of a culture 'that could embrace and foster the recognition and production of Native art within the construction of the country's national identity' [Dawn, 307]. The 1930s to the 1950s saw a period of transition where Indigenous arts were pushed to a new audience of non-Indigenous consumers, effectively defining Indigenous art as commodity, notwithstanding these objects had cultural meaning intricately tied to the core of ancient social structures and ceremonies. During this period of time, Canadians looked to embrace a nationalism not clearly evident in their past - a way to market a distinct Canadian identity to the rest of the world. And Indigenous imagery fit the bill for forming part of Canada's national self-image. It was during this period of the 50s to the 70s that appropriation by non-Indigenous industry and craft became an acceptable means of fostering a new, uniquely Canadian, industrial design. Indeed, one government agency encouraged the spread of 'primitive' designs and trade marks to manufacturers of home décor and to art schools for inspiration and artistic interpretation. And the home decorative arts industry was no exception – Canadian pottery manufacturers incorporated

Indigenous images into their pottery, creating distinctive pottery lines easily recognizable as such in form-line and shape and colour.

Lambert Potteries Ltd. (Vancouver, Sardis) - “West Coast Indian Design” – in production from 1945 to 1979

David Lambert, considered the god-father of the BC pottery industry, incorporated West Coast designs onto his own pottery, creating the pottery line of *West Coast Indian Design*. In the mid-1940s, he recognized that there was no established or Native pottery industry in British Columbia. Lambert traveled to various Indigenous communities gathering images and the stories connected to them as research for the designs he’d use on his pottery. These stories were collected in *The Story of West Coast Designs: on Hand-made Pottery with 40 Authentic Stories and Myths of the Coast People*. Lambert’s pottery images were based on Indigenous stories and myths, but were, I believe, of his own design, and not commissioned for a pottery line. The Indigenous granddaughter of a Lambert Potteries Ltd. studio painter raised the point that this could be a case of cultural appropriation; the use of a community’s traditional images and stories for a non-Indigenous company’s gain can certainly be said to fall within that category. We cannot know what permissions Lambert had to use the images on his pottery. The booklet implies that it was the case, but there is no corroborating evidence.



Lambert Potteries “Frog”, “Thunderbird, Haida Tribe”, “Bear”, “Skookum, Haida Tribe”

BC Ceramics (Vancouver, BC) Herta - “West Coast Indian Designs”, produced from 1955-early 1960s.

Herta Gerz, a skilled German potter, was the main designer for BC Ceramics from 1955-1967. Almost immediately, she introduced the *West Coast Indian Designs* line as a means of grounding her designs in Canada’s Northwest Coastal culture. Indigenous artists were commissioned as designers, then the pieces were hand-finished by factory workers.

These commissioned pieces represented a limited partnership with Indigenous designers. Although Herta commissioned the designs on behalf of BC Ceramics, no attribution was provided naming the artists. Most often ‘Herta’ appeared with the collection and image name as the base mark. No information was provided on the design meanings, no cultural representation or passing on of traditional knowledge. The designs were targeted toward a non-Indigenous home décor and tourist market. Here was an example of a Canadian pottery manufacturer viewing the adoption of Indigenous imagery as representing a ‘national identity’. In reality, one could make a case for cultural and artistic appropriation of images on BC Ceramic pottery pieces in this line. On the flip

side, according to copyright laws, artists who agree to commissions sell the copyright with the design and the client can reproduce the designs for future sales.



[BC Ceramics-Herta WCID – “Eagle”]

Ceramic Arts (Calgary, AB) – Studio pottery in production from 1957-1977

This pottery was very much a regional Alberta pottery, with several individual artists creating their works in the studio space. I only have the one design by this studio that has any connection to the Plains First Nations, an inset horse and rider pictograph. The Plains People developed the pictographic system as a means of recording important events in the life of the people, an artistic representation of those life-events and actions. Pictographs and petroglyphs can be found throughout the Canadian plains as rock art, telling of a nomadic lifestyle through a combination of simple, yet masterful, imagery. The design on the Ceramic Arts ashtray was taken out of context, removed from the pictograph storyline - it was but an image, representing no life-event, removed from the Plains People.



Souvenir Ware

Tourist culture in Canada, spanning the first 50 years of the 20th Century, promoted the design of miniatures and curios depicting Indigenous life and customs, mass-produced and distributed by companies such as the **McMaster Pottery** (1940s-1988). This Indigenous-themed souvenir ware could be found in every gift shop across the breadth and width of Canada. An Indigenous artist discusses

in the video 'Authentic Aboriginal' that even today the reality of living in a mass-produced world is that "80% of aboriginal-themed giftware has nothing to do with aboriginal people...no aboriginal involvement in producing it." He goes on to note that they have taken a cliché of a design and splashed it on mugs, backpacks, or tee-shirts, where all resources have gone toward non-aboriginal companies or persons.



[McMaster Pottery – themed souvenir ware]

Another pottery, **Canadiana Pottery** (1973-1979?), created a line depicting a woodland chieftain's face molded with a stunning caramel and white drip glaze – simultaneously incongruous and striking.



[Canadiana Pottery – Woodland chieftain]

In the far north to this day tourists do not differentiate between imitation 'Inuit' products mass-produced in Asia and the original Indigenous-made artworks – the seller is interested in maximizing profit, the tourist is interested in an inexpensive memento, and neither are particularly interested in putting money into the hands of Indigenous artists. Twentieth-century pottery souvenir ware certainly depicted a stereotypical view of Native and Inuit life, reinforcing the 'folksy' image of difference and quaintness.



[Unmarked Inuit souvenir ware & Skemo modern vase]



[Unmarked totem ashtray]

In conclusion, I remember the fantastical carvings, totems and paintings of fluid and inter-connected form-lines exhibited in the Northwest Coast art galleries of the Royal BC Museum in the early 1970s. I especially loved the animal forms and often wondered what they meant, not knowing or understanding that the images in the art and the carvings, the masks, and the totems represented the very core of Northwest Coastal clan cultures. Northwest Coast peoples' art and artifacts connected clans and communities, religious and social ceremony, history, myth and story, personal and family status, political and legal systems. This interconnectedness of art and story fascinated, and still fascinates, me. It was when I began to see Indigenous images on Canadian 20th Century pottery that I wished to learn more about them in this age of Truth and Reconciliation, to research who, what, when, where, and why? I will continue to investigate this timely, but sometimes difficult, topic.

If you have a similar interest, you can find a list of works consulted on my Canadian pottery website, <https://canadapottery.ca>.