



Theresa Baptiste's depiction of a baby cradle in a tree and an anonymous artist's picture of girl angels are some of the works made by Inkameep Day School students between 1932 and 1942.

# DRAWING ON THE PAST

THE RESULT OF AN EXCEPTIONAL CHIEF AND TEACHER, NATIVE CHILDREN'S ART EMERGES FROM THE PAST TO TELL A UNIQUE STORY

BY ROBIN LAURENCE

**“W**e virtually never show children's drawings,” says Ian Thom, senior curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery. He asserts this policy while he tours me through the Nk'Mip Chronicles in a first-floor gallery at the VAG. “But these works are very much about finding a mechanism to draw the world as these children experienced it,” he explains, hooking his curatorial exception to a larger exhibition theme.

Produced between 1932 and 1942 by students at the Inkameep Day School on what is now the Osoyoos Reserve near Oliver, British Columbia, the three dozen works in the Nk'Mip Chronicles constitute one of five components of the VAG's blockbuster summer show *Drawing the World*, which runs to September 21. (Nk'Mip is a modern spelling of Inkameep, a place name that was, for a time, assigned to the Osoyoos people.)

Executed in gouache, ink, graphite, coloured pencil, and crayon by children who ranged in age from five to 17, they depict everyday life in the community, and include scenes of hunting, farming, woodcutting, rodeo riding, and traveling into town on a horse-drawn wagon. They also record Okanagan Nation stories and legends, and are filled with vibrant images of forest animals engaged in human activities. Their style, Thom says, reflects the popular culture of the day, including book illustrations, greeting cards, calendars, and animation. “Disney certainly came into their cognizance,” he adds, citing a brief correspondence the Nk'Mip students had with Walt Disney.

Occasionally, the drawings reimagine the past, but more intriguingly, they record their own time and place, showing us what the Nk'Mip children were themselves doing: playing in the school yard, rolling hoops with sticks, dancing around a bonfire, performing in plays wearing masks of their own making, and venturing, by train and steamboat, to Victoria. “These drawings seem to be a way for these

kids, in a very isolated community in the Interior, to come to grips with their shifting world,” Thom observes. “They also tell us something about the history of relations between First Nations people and the larger white culture.”

The Nk'Mip works, most of them borrowed from the small, volunteer-run Osoyoos Museum, have recently been the subject of both scholarly scrutiny and renewed pride among the Osoyoos Band. Although the drawings garnered regional and international attention in the years in which they were produced, they were largely forgotten for nearly six decades. Now, they are being exhibited as a distinct body of work for the first time.

“One of the reasons why this collection is so valuable is that there's very little documentation—next to none—of aboriginal children's existence in that interwar period, from the point of view of children,” says visual anthropologist Andrea Walsh, by phone from Osoyoos. “Most of the stuff we see has to do with legislation, it has to do with residential schools, and if we talk about children's lives then, it's often through the memories of present-day adults, through the lens of present-day politics.”

An assistant professor at the University of Victoria, Walsh is engaged, along with Leslie Plaskett, director of the Osoyoos Museum, and Clarence Louie, chief of the Osoyoos band, in a multiyear project to research and catalogue the drawings. What they've turned up is the story of an exceptional body of work produced under the guidance of an exceptional teacher and overseen by an exceptional chief.

Rather than being dragged off to residential school and stripped of their cultural identity, as happened to thousands of First Nations children between the 1860s and the 1980s, the kids who produced the Nk'Mip Chronicles attended a day school in their own community, founded in 1919 by Chief George Baptiste. “He fought very hard to get a school on the reserve, but the government paid no atten-

tion to him,” Walsh says. “And so he actually built the school with his own money and hired the first teacher.”

In 1932, Anthony Walsh (no relation to Andrea), an Irish immigrant with an eclectic history that included shepherding and fox farming, arrived as teacher at Inkameep Day School and stayed for 10 years. “He had no teaching background, but he was used to being alone with his thoughts,” Walsh says.

“He had a very different kind of temperament than a lot of people who came from Europe at that time.” This, she suggests, enabled him to see student art—not just drawing and painting but telling stories and staging plays, dances, and concerts—as a means of bridging the gap between two cultures. “He was convinced that the nonaboriginal people just didn't understand who aboriginal people were,” Andrea Walsh observes. “And he started to ask, ‘What kind of common ground could be created?’ ”

Radical for the time, Anthony Walsh encouraged his students to learn at their own pace, to teach him what they knew, and to make art about their own lives and culture. He also enlisted the help of the Canadian Red Cross and the B.C. Society for Indian Art and Welfare to disseminate their art abroad. Nk'Mip works were exhibited in London, Paris, Glasgow, Dublin, Prague, and Vienna, and won prizes in international competitions. The kids also travelled, as they themselves chronicled in a suite of drawings on view at the VAG, to Victoria in 1941 to perform a play at the opening of Thunderbird Park.

Thom points out the very selective way the children depicted that performance, as well as their various modes of transportation and their visits to local sights such as the Crystal Pool and St. Anne's Convent. “One of the things that interests me...is what they choose to pick out and what they choose to ignore,” he says. “The drawings have a really charming naiveté about them, but at the same time they tell you something about how First Nations children positioned themselves in the world.” ■

**WHAT**  
Drawing the World  
**WHERE**  
Vancouver Art Gallery  
**WHEN**  
To September 21  
**INFO**  
604-662-4719

## MILLENNIAL MILESTONE COMPLETED ON CAMPUS

Rodney Graham has finally unveiled a major new artwork commissioned to mark the millennium. *Millennium Time Machine...*, a 19th-century carriage with a camera obscura on top of it. The piece sits out at the UBC campus, in a glass-walled pavilion across the street from the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the southwest corner of Main Mall and Memorial Road. The camera obscura, a device that's been used for hundreds of years as a model for human vision, an instrument of scientific inquiry, and a form of popular entertainment, produces an upside-down, reversed image. Graham's centres on a young sequoia tree between the Koerner Library and Main Library. The artwork is meant to

speak to the university as a place where knowledge, technologies, and histories are constructed, but also hints at the disappearance of nature in the new economy.

The work was built with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts

## ARTS NOTES

Millennium Fund, the Morris and Helen Belkin Foundation, the British Columbia 2000 Recognition Plan, and UBC.

At press time, the Belkin was in the midst of working out which hours the pavilion will open its doors to viewers.

Spokesperson Naomi Sawada said an attendant will have to be on-site when there are visitors. Those interested can call the gallery at 604-822-2759 for viewing times.

**WILLIAMS DROPS IN TO WELL** The rumour mill was working overtime at the Kitsilano Urban Well on June 24, after the *Straight's* deadlines last week. People were being turned away at the door as they heard actor-comedian Robin Williams, in town to film a movie, was going to drop by to do a set at the weekly comedy room. Early during the first show, Williams appeared on his bicycle, wearing a tight, blue-spandex riding outfit. The manic comic was welcomed to the stage by host Sean Proudlove and delivered about 10 minutes of riffs on Canada's gay marriages, Kits's gorgeous women, and George Bush's inability to

find a six-foot-eight-inch Arab man on dialysis, Osama bin Laden. The giddy crowd lapped it up, and Williams graciously returned for an encore; he thanked everyone and promised to be back during his long stay in town. Young comic Dustin Ladd had the unenviable task of following the comedy icon. He opened with, “I hate it when I get shit opening acts.” Williams was a no-show for the second round, despite telling organizers he'd be back to close the evening, but the sell-out crowd was treated to inspired local comedy by Vic Lippucci, Kevin Foxx, Dan Quinn, Paul Bae, and Dave Nystrom, among others.

**MUSEUM MERGE** Call it the biggest rock show in town: UBC has opened a new on-campus museum that combines the collections of the now-closed Pacific Mineral Museum

(which was previously housed on West Hastings Street) and the school's former M. Y. Williams Geological Museum. The facility's new name is the Pacific Museum of the Earth, home to 30,000 pieces, including rocks, minerals, and fossils from around the world. Showpieces include a seven-foot amethyst “tube”, ancient gizzard stones, a giant “jelly-roll” sedimentary structure, and a six-metre-long lambeosaurus named George.

Plans are to expand the centre to include an interactive tornado machine, a seismic centre, and oceanography displays. The museum will also serve as a resource centre for local teachers. Rock fans can find it on the main floor of UBC's Earth and Ocean Sciences Building (6339 Stores Road). Admission is free.

• JANET SMITH AND GUY MACPHERSON