

Obituaries

ART (TSA-QWA-SUPP) THOMPSON 1948-2003

Native artist bridged traditional, modern

Survivor of abuse in residential school, his works became prized and displayed in museums around the world

BY TOM HAWTHORN, VICTORIA

Native artist Art Thompson's bold works can be found in museums around the world: masks and rattles, bowls and poles, spoons and feast dishes. His free-flowing style reflected the traditional designs of the Nuu-chah-nulth people of Vancouver Island and his success helped revitalize a nearly defunct style. Mr. Thompson, who was 54, has died of cancer.

He was a carver of profound skill, as well as a graphic artist whose designs bridged the centuries between an ancient culture and modern media. Perhaps his most reproduced image was the logo for the Commonwealth Games in Victoria held 1994.

The beauty captured in his art was the more remarkable once the hellish details of his childhood became known through his testimony at a criminal trial and a later civil lawsuit. He had been raped as a child and regularly beaten at a residential school run by the United Church of Canada where, Mr. Thompson once said, "abuse was as predictable as daily prayer." The judge at the criminal trial praised Mr. Thompson for his eloquence, while the judge hearing the civil suit cited his courage.

Mr. Thompson lost many years to drug and alcohol addiction. He attempted suicide three times by his count. Making art provided an outlet from despair.

The ability to rescue himself from so predictable a fate for a victim of sexual abuse fit well into his culture's myths of transformation. Mr. Thompson became a symbol for many natives of the worthiness of giving witness to the insufferable acts they had endured.

Arthur Ivan Thompson was born in the village of Whyac on the Nitinaht reserve on southern Vancouver Island on Dec. 10, 1948.

The deprivations of his childhood began at 3, when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and sent to a hospital for natives in Nanaimo, B.C., which would be his home for almost three years.

After his discharge, he lived with his mother's family in the Cowichan community of Koksilah. In 1955, he and two brothers were sent to the Alberni Indian Residential School, arriving in the baggage car of a train. On his first night, he wet his bed. His punishment the following morning was a strapping, which caused him to defecate in his pajamas. He was ordered to clean up the mess with his bare hands, he testified in 1999 at a civil suit heard by B.C. Supreme Court Justice Donald Brenner. At the time, he told court, he felt "terrified, lonesome, abandoned. There was no room for pity."

Students were barred from speaking their native languages, relying instead on their fragmentary knowledge of English. Mr. Thompson was addressed not by his name, but by his number, 511. He recalled life at the school as scary and punctuated with frequent corporal punishments administered by what he called sadistic adults. The most feared was dormitory supervisor Arthur Henry Plint, a Second World War veteran and predatory pedophile.

The boy frequently ran away, only to be returned to face further punishment. His only respite came in the summer months, when he spent time with his family. Among his fondest memories of those days were of watching his father and grandfather carve dug-out canoes. After nine years at the residential school, Mr. Thompson fled for good when he was 14, finding work with a logging-survey crew. A back injury a few years later ended his work in the forests. At his lowest point, he was a her-



CANADIAN PRESS

Art Thompson in his studio: a symbol for natives of the importance of giving witness to insufferable acts.

oin user stalking skid row.

In 1967, he enrolled in a commercial art program at Camosun College on Vancouver Island, where he studied under Joe David and Ron Hamilton.

Soon, Mr. Thompson began exploring the nearly forgotten forms of his own people, the Nuu-chah-nulth, who were known for a more free-flowing design, as well as the use of vibrant colours. He also took up carving and silver-smithing. The common figures in his art came from native myths of Wolf, Thunderbird, Whale, Lightning Serpent. Mr. Thompson had been initiated when he was 12 into the Tl'u Kwalaa (Wolf) Society, a traditional governing system. He inherited the name Tsa-qwa-supp from his father's family.

His works were bold and dramatic, and were sought by museums, embassies and private collectors around the world. He found a mass audience as a graphic artist, rendering logos for the native relations department of B.C. Hydro and for the 1994 Commonwealth Games. He was one of three native artists commissioned to design the Queen's Baton for

the opening of the Games.

The medals he designed for the 1997 North American Aboriginal Games in Victoria depicted the creation story of the Dididat people.

Two years earlier, Mr. Thompson had faced Arthur Plint, the former dormitory supervisor, in court. At a sentencing hearing in Port Alberni, Mr. Thompson donned a traditional headband and draped over his shoulders a ceremonial robe decorated by a thunderbird. He had paint applied to his face. In court, he delivered a 30-minute account that left many spectators in tears.

"I want you to know I am a survivor," Mr. Thompson said, addressing Mr. Plint. "Look at these people. They are all around you, the survivors."

He told the court that his abuser's crimes made victims of uncounted others. "You tore apart communities with your acts. You installed a parental learning that was absolutely disgusting. All those learned habits I inflicted on my family, my people."

Mr. Plint pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting 18 boys, ranging in

age from 6 to 13, between 1948 and 1968. Three of his victims were forcefully sodomized.

B.C. Supreme Court Justice Douglas Hogarth sentenced the 77-year-old Mr. Plint, who he called a "sexual terrorist," to an 11-year sentence.

In 1999, Mr. Thompson testified during the hearing of a lawsuit he launched against the federal government, the United Church, and four employees of the now-closed school. One of those employees was Mr. Plint. Mr. Thompson received compensation in an out-of-court settlement.

Over the years, Mr. Thompson became an articulate defender of the rights of former residential-school students.

Mr. Thompson died at his home in Victoria on March 30, four months after being diagnosed with cancer. He leaves his fourth wife, Charlene; 10 children; two brothers; two sisters; and, his mother, Ida Modeste Thompson. He was predeceased by his father, Webster Thompson; Iris, a younger sister; and, Marie, a daughter.

Special to The Globe and Mail