

**Bill Reid**  
**1920 - 1998**

Gold box featuring  
Killer Whale and Beaver  
(cat.no.13902)

William Ronald Reid was one of Canada's most celebrated and accomplished contemporary artists. His creations range from diminutive engraved gold jewellery to monumental bronze sculpture. He worked in a variety of mediums, breathing artistic life into cedar, precious metals, bronze, argillite and ink on paper.



In 1943, at the age of 23, Reid journeyed to Skidegate, a village in Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands). There he met his maternal grandfather, Charles Gladstone. At that time, Gladstone was one of a very few Haida men producing and selling silver and argillite works in the artistic tradition of their ancestors. During the visit, Reid saw and handled the carving tools of the great Haida artist, Charles Edenshaw. Gladstone had been trained by Edenshaw in the Haida tradition, which calls for a young man's maternal uncle to provide his traditional art education.

Reid's introduction to the Haida way of life in Skidegate differed sharply from his own upbringing. His mother, Sophie Gladstone, had left her aboriginal roots behind when she married William Reid, who was of Scottish and German descent. The family lived alternately in Hyder, Alaska, and Victoria, British Columbia. In Victoria, Reid attended South Park Elementary School, Victoria High School and Victoria College. His first career was not as an artist, but as a radio announcer. He worked for ten years at the CBC in Vancouver and Toronto.

Reid began to study Northwest Coast art during visits to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. A totem pole from his mother's village, Tanu, is one of the artifacts on display there. Reid also studied Haida art in books and in other museums, slowly unravelling the complexities of its style and form.

While living in Toronto, Reid also studied jewellery making and design at Ryerson Technical Institute. This training provided him with the

strong technical and contemporary artistic foundation that would influence his future career as a carver and jewellery maker.

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In the 1950s, Reid moved to British Columbia and began pursuing a career as an artist. He participated in a number of projects that revolved around Haida culture and art. He was part of a team from the Provincial Museum that travelled to historic village sites on Haida Gwaii (including Tanu, Skedans and Ninstints) to salvage poles. The poles were later moved to museums in Vancouver and Victoria. In 1958, Reid wrote and narrated a CBC television documentary on the expedition. He played a lead role in designing and building a Haida-style village, featuring big houses, poles and monumental carvings, at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology.

Reid's involvement with these Haida projects had a profound impact on the development of his artistic focus. Throughout his life, his ancestral connections were a strong influence on his art.

There were more than 10,000 Haida living in numerous village sites throughout Haida Gwaii in the 19th century. Following devastating small-pox epidemics in the 1860s, and other effects of colonization, the Haida population diminished to fewer than 600 people by the early 1900s. Today there are two thriving Haida communities: Skidegate and Old Massett.

Reid's grandmother was from Tanu, a now-uninhabited village that is part of Gwaii Haanas National Park. Reid traces his ancestry through Skidegate, the community where his mother grew up. Although Reid never lived in his ancestral territory for any length of time, there are a number of reminders of his artistic legacy in Skidegate. His cedar canoe, *Lootaas*, commissioned for Expo '86 in Vancouver, is stored in a building near the Haida Gwaii Museum. Like other works by Reid, it is masterfully executed, as much a work of art as a functional mode of transportation. As part of an exhibit of Reid's art at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris in 1989, *Lootaas* was transported to France. It carried Reid and several Haida leaders on a journey down the Seine River.

Photographs of Skidegate from the turn of the century reveal dozens of cedar house frontal and memorial poles that stood like sentries before the great cedar-plank houses. The poles were a powerful first

impression for any visitor approaching from the sea. By the early 1970s, there was only one pole left standing at Skidegate and it was deteriorating rapidly in the cool, damp environment. In 1978, Reid spent several months in Skidegate carving a pole for the Skidegate Band Council's new administrative building. Several Haida artists, including Gary Edenshaw, Robert Davidson and Gerry Marks, worked with Reid on the project. The National Film Board's 1979 film, *Bill Reid*, deftly captures the carving of the pole. The pole raising was accompanied by a celebration that included dancing, feasting and potlatching.

To best view Reid's pole in Skidegate, you must walk back to the edge of the shore and observe it both as an independent work of art and in its relationship to the Haida-style building for which it was carved. The traditional big-house style of the Council's building has a modern element -- an enormous plate glass window facing the ocean, its reflective surface like a screen featuring a never-ending film of sky and ocean. Reid's pole forms the centre post on the front of the building. Weathered to the colour of pewter, it features Bear with its tongue touching the head of Man, and Frog sliding head-first down the pole. The pole is an echo of a history that almost disappeared in this century and an important testimony to the Haida culture's endurance.

One of Reid's best known works is *Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, a bronze sculpture depicting a Haida canoe filled with Bear, Raven, Eagle, Frog, Man and other creatures, which was commissioned in 1990 for the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C. A jade-coloured replica of this monumental work is located in the new International terminal at the Vancouver International Airport. Other significant Reid works include *Raven and the First Men*, a Yellow-cedar sculpture commissioned by the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology in 1980, and the bronze sculpture *Lord of the Under Sea*, commissioned by the Vancouver Aquarium in 1984. Reid's works are in private, museum and gallery collections throughout the world.

Red-cedar screen depicting many intertwined animal and human figures (cat. no.16639)



The Royal British Columbia Museum has 17 of Bill Reid's works of art in its collection. One of the most important is a monumental laminated red-cedar screen depicting many intertwined animal and human figures (cat. no.16639). The screen was specially commissioned by the museum in 1968 and is now displayed at the exit to the First Peoples Gallery on the third floor. (See Ellen

Cunningham's article on the screen in **May 1998** issue of *Discovery*.) Other works by Reid in the collection are a gold box featuring Killer Whale and Beaver (13902), an engraved silver lighter (16490), engraved gold and silver jewellery, and silk-screened prints.

Reid held honorary doctoral degrees from Trent University, the University of British Columbia, the University of Toronto, the University of Victoria, the University of Western Ontario and York University. He was the recipient of many awards, among them the Canada Council's Molson Award (1976), the Bronfman Award for Excellence in Crafts (1986), the Vancouver Lifetime Achievement Award (1988), the Royal Bank Award (1990) for outstanding Canadian achievement, the National Aboriginal Achievement Award for Lifetime Achievement (1994) and the Bill Mason Award (1998) from the Canadian River Heritage Society. He received both the Order of British Columbia and the Order of Canada.

Bill Reid passed away in Vancouver on March 13, 1998, after a long and courageous battle with Parkinson's disease. He was 78 years old. Bill Reid's legacy is the volume of extraordinary works of art that he created for public and private collections, as well as the works created by a generation of young Haida artists whom he inspired and mentored.

**Barbara Hager**  
**Former Aboriginal Liaison Officer**

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