

T he Spirit Soars



Lorraine Parrow

Native art in Canada has a new look. Within the last decade, a Renaissance has bloomed in the native arts community and a new breed of artistic expression is surging into the mainstream of Canadian culture. These changes are running the gamut of native art, from traditional beadwork and carvings to contemporary performing arts. But the thread of native heritage, spirituality, and even politics, is woven throughout every piece.

Support for traditional works is being renewed by the revival of native spiritualism, while much contemporary work is underlined by current social and political statements. The result is a distinctly native hybrid. "The artists are being exposed to contemporary influences and it's the blend which makes their work so singular and beautiful," explains Claudette Fortin of the National Indian Arts and Crafts Corporation. "They [the artists] are sensitive to the modern tradition but are not willing to compromise their

heritage. They are working toward bridging the two without compromising one or the other," she says.

Functional and Ceremonial Use

Many of the cultural objects now labelled as "native art" were originally created as ceremonial functional objects. The Northwest Coast native transformation masks and totem poles, or the Iroquoian false face masks, for example, had utilitarian purposes, but the art form has outlived the ritual.

"The revival of native spirituality has precipitated the creation of more arts and crafts," explains Fortin. The concept of creating art for pleasure or entertainment, however, is rooted in European culture, not the aboriginal one. Native languages do not even have words for art and culture. Their creations were rooted in function.

Beyond Traditional Imagery

But native life in Canada has changed drastically in the last 50 years, and so has the character of its artistic expression, which has escaped the traditional stereotypes. David M. General explained this shift in last summer's issue of *Arts and Crafts Magazine*: "The emerging generations of painters, carvers, writers and performers are vigorously exploring and experimenting with unimagined modes of expression. And with exploration and experimentation have come new expectations and perceptions of the native artist."

There are many examples of this shift. Ojibwa Indian Ron Noganoosh was raised on the Magnetawan Reserve in Quebec. While his work emerges from the native philosophy that nothing should be wasted, it is nevertheless far from traditional. His creations are not carved in soapstone; rather his art is based on materials he finds in the junk-

Scene from *In the Land of Spirits*: modern interpretations of enduring myths.

yard. Migemag sculptor Viviane Gray also uses recycled goods, but her message is different. Her works are abstract social statements, softened by her sense of humour.

Into the Mainstream

Dance and performance have always been part of traditional ceremonial life for aboriginal people, though it was not often seen by non-native audiences. This too has changed. Although traditional native dance still attracts a largely indigenous audience, native-inspired performances are more frequently influenced by European theatrical techniques, leading to a distinctive contribution to mainstream performing arts.