

Canadian Indian art exhibition at ROM

The most comprehensive display of contemporary Canadian Indian art ever shown in Canada is on display at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

The exhibition was opened on June 3 by Jean Chrétien, Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, whose department has contributed to the exhibition to promote Indian arts and crafts.

The show, Canadian Indian Art '74, which closes on July 14, coincided with the tenth annual conference of the World Crafts Council at York University from June 9-17. Representatives of the 3,000 delegates from 78 countries attending the convention had the opportunity to see over 200 pieces of Indian handiwork at the Museum.

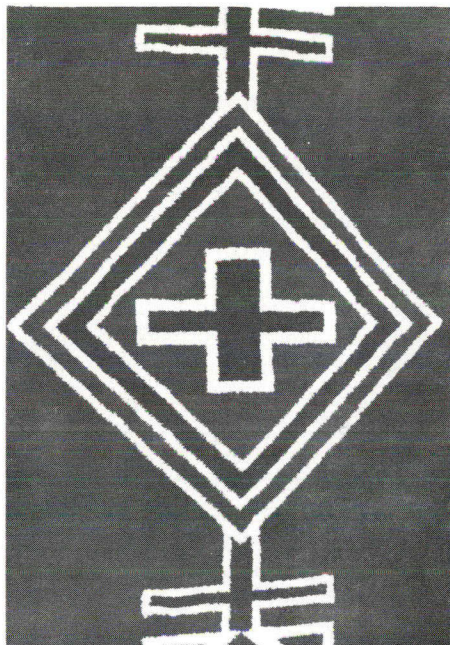
Each item, ranging from acrylics on canvas to exquisite beadwork, was hand-picked to represent the finest of traditional Indian art from across the country by co-ordinator of the show, Tom Hill, a Seneca Indian artist on loan from the federal department to the ROM, and his assistant, Jay Baer.

Among the highlights of the exhibit is a dramatic display of ritualistic masks used in pre-European ceremonies. They vary from delicate, luminous moon masks to distorted false faces. Also shown are finest samples of Salish weaving, basketry, tamarack sculpture, silverwork, jewellery, ceramics and wood sculpture.

Indian artists and craftsmen across the country were commissioned to provide special pieces for this exhibition.



Bear mother giving birth (Haida)



Wool tapestry (Sioux)

In opening the exhibition, Mr. Chrétien said:

"Canadian Indian Art '74 is a collection of 200 items of fine art and traditional crafts. Each carefully selected piece is a surpassing and superb example of its genre. Painting on canvas is one special feature. Rarely has such a collection of Indian paintings been exhibited at one time in Canada. A new school of Canadian artists is represented. Influenced by Norval Morrisseau, an Ojibway artist, the school uses the legends, beliefs and philosophy of Indian people as subject matter. In doing so, these artists have cut across traditional tribal taboos which had restricted story-telling to certain families, but they are also helping to preserve a rich bank of legendary material.

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"What is the significance of Canadian Indian Art '74 for the Indian artist? Indian art forms were the product of a traditional way of life. Artists and craftsmen produced works that answered functional, aesthetic and spiritual needs. With the coming of the European and the subsequent breakdown of Indian society, Indian art forms were almost totally destroyed. For most Indian people, the traditional ways have been long dormant. Now, innovative Indian artists are making objects which incorporate old skills and designs. This was best expressed

by Tom Hill:

"The art movement, although its roots plunge deeply into the past, is totally contemporary in its choice of language. Indian art, historically, was utilitarian. It was used exclusively to decorate everyday objects, for religious rituals or to act as a barometer of social position. Today's Indian artist creates art for art's sake in the Western sense but always works from the core of his hereditary identification with the country and his special experience as a Canadian Indian today."

"Canadian Indian Art '74 will make Indian artists and craftsmen part of the community of artists where the uninitiated may learn, grow and be appreciated. Undoubtedly, the catalogue documenting this collection will become a reference work and assist in establishing new criteria for other artists. Through the excellence of their work in this exhibition, Indian artists and craftsmen will gain national and international recognition, a reputation which some already enjoy.



Ceramic teapot (Mohawk)

"Arts and crafts offer the 'doers' or those who may only appreciate their efforts, a lifelong self-renewing pleasure from new connections, new insights from old half-forgotten and familiar things. This exhibition with its revival of art forms is helping to rejuvenate the Indian identity. Indian arts and crafts is re-establishing a long dormant facet of Indian culture.

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"Indian art forms add a new dimension to Canadian culture. In contrast with the artificial uniformity of technology, art and crafts express the diversities of cultures and societies. For the average citizen in the larger community, to have a reviving and vibrant art movement flourishing within a culture, cannot but help Canadian multiculturalism...."