Ancestors rising: Aboriginal art as historical testimonials

MARY LONGMAN

Testimony—the attesting to the truth of a matter—is often thought of in legal terms as a form of evidence based on fact or perceived opinions, though there is as well the personal testimony, the bearing of one’s truth or personal experience for all to witness. For Aboriginal people, acts of testimony in the legal and personal sense have been a critical platform in the pursuit of reclamation of land, history, identity and personal experience. In the past two decades, many Aboriginal people have taken the legal stand for land claims to protect their traditional territories from further encroachment from governments and commercial enterprises by providing physical evidence of their historical territorial use. They have also had to ‘prove’ their painful, personal accounts of abuse in residential schools in order to bring forth justice and closure. The overlapping generation will soon testify to their personal accounts of the ‘Sixties Scoop’—the apprehension of thousands of Aboriginal children who were placed in foster care by Canadian Social Services, many of whom experienced abuse and exploitation as child labourers, mirroring the residential school experience. The Sixties Scoop term is in fact a misnomer, given that apprehensions began in 1951 and remain today in a staggering amount of apprehensions, with Aboriginals in foster care averaging 40 per cent of all children in foster care in Canada, even though they make up only 3–4 per cent of the Canadian population.

Given that Aboriginal peoples did not have the proof of written historical documents, oral accounts are being considered as admissible evidence in the courts. Aboriginal peoples do, however, have physical records of their history that have been overlooked: their historical art. Their artwork visually recorded major historical events, territorial maps, cultural ideology and customs, and personal and mythological stories—all of which were tied to a specific territory and period. This article explores how Aboriginal art in the past and present has served as a valuable testimonial of history and cultural identity.
Aboriginal art as historical records

For thousands of years, Aboriginal peoples have told their stories orally and visually to document their history and to teach the values, beliefs and traditions of their culture. Oral accounts, legends, songs, dances, ceremonies and art communicated experience and metaphors of life to the physical and the metaphysical realm. From these accounts, we have learnt about history and cultural customs and learnt to make meaning of the lessons of life. Aboriginal art—in representational forms or codified visual imagery—preserved this cultural and historical information for generations to come. The physicality of art, in and of itself, can be dated and placed within a specific area, though the content of the work points to specific stories. Pictographs and petroglyphs throughout Canada are good examples of visual records that document hunting practices, wars and colonial contact and provide large territorial maps on significant water passages. Works in stone, such as carved sculptures from the west coast and plateau regions, or tipi rings and medicine wheels from the plains, provided permanent markers for identifying communities that occupied sites thousands of years ago. Early palaeo-Arctic ivory engravings integrated images of everyday activities with the supernatural. Robe paintings and ledger drawings from the plains nations visually documented ceremonial custom and protocols, narrated wars and major political, historical or personal events.

A recently repatriated sketch done by Chief Pasqua of the Pasqua First Nation, Saskatchewan, was created some time between 1874 and 1882 and is a fine example of visual art documenting history (Figure 1). The illustration became the possession of William Henry Barneby in 1882 and remained with his family in London, England, for 124 years.

The graphite sketch shows the negotiations and trade agreements leading up to Treaty Four. The 1874 signing of Treaty Number 4 involved 13 separate Cree and Saulteaux Nations, and later Assiniboine Nations of Saskatchewan. The treaty promised to share 195,000 square kilometres of land as well as annuity payments, tax exemptions, medical services, schools, farming equipment and a variety of other treaty rights. By 1894, however, promises began to disappear and much of the land was transferred to the Department of the Interior, denying access to Aboriginal peoples. This drawing is the only historical document known to show a treaty from the perspective of First Nations people in Canada.

The left panel, drawn in representational form, outlines various forms of trade agreements: two men, in a shaking-hand position, the furthest left with a pair of glasses beneath him and the man on the right with a goose behind him, which is being shot by a gun from a man in a boat. The second illustration below depicts a white man standing in front of a chair holding a round vessel, while facing
An Aboriginal man, who is presenting a war club while standing in front of a table. The third image shows possibly a fir tree and a poplar tree beside a table on which there is a kerosene lamp and book, with a shot bag or bandolier bag to the farthest right. The fourth image appears to be a knife sheath attached to a belt with a ceremonial pipe. The fifth image shows a fir tree alongside a trimmed tree with a horse and a riding quirt. The bottom image depicts a man on a pedestal—possibly a priest or auctioneer—with an Aboriginal man to the right shooting a duck with a bow and arrow. Surrounding these illustrations is faint handwriting that was done at a later date by a priest from Winnipeg who attempted to interpret the images for Barneby, though the Pasqua band states that these are misguided interpretations. The right panel of this sketch is done in codified visual imagery and is therefore much more difficult to interpret, although it appears to present the specific accounting of trade agreements that include a variety of items such as clothing, feather staffs, steers, pipes and pitchforks. Currently, Pasqua elders are working on its complete interpretation.

Figure 1 Historical sketch by Chief Pasqua, 1874–82. Graphite, 33 x 42 cm.
Contemporary Aboriginal art

Today, artists continue in this role, producing work that documents recent history, important historical/political events, cultural practices, social realities and experience of the dynamics of coexistence in a colonised country. For the contemporary Aboriginal artist, however, the neo-colonial circumstance required that they not only reflect their current realities, but deconstruct the colonial narratives of the past that were overshadowing their realities. Therefore, in the past 40 years, much contemporary Aboriginal artwork has served two primary purposes: to deconstruct the colonial narrative that has represented Aboriginal people and to rebuild and reclaim the Aboriginal narrative.

The colonial narrative has a long history of conditioning the public mind-set about Aboriginal peoples. Since colonial contact in North America in 1492, Aboriginal identity, history and culture have been displaced, erased and fictionalised by dominant colonial representations. Significant portions of colonial history have been submerged, such as massive genocide and assimilation of Aboriginal peoples. The colonial strategy of territorial takeover involves ‘direct force’ and ideological force—termed ‘cultural imperialism’ by Edward Said,¹ which substitutes the Aboriginal narrative with European interpretation, creating a massive web of myth making. The long-term impact of this strategy effectively suppresses and controls Aboriginal history, culture and identity, which have made myth making concrete in the collective unconscious.

Fuelled by the building and collective empowerment of political activism in the 1960s, First Nations artists sought to retell history from their perspective and expose government injustices towards their people. The 1970s revealed a significant movement in Aboriginal art that set out to reclaim their history and evolved into several themes of critical analysis of the colonial narrative and assertions of the Aboriginal perspective, such as themes that addressed colonisation, stereotypes, cultural appropriation, identity and the Western art-history framing and exclusion. Through their deconstructive work, they have paved the way for this current generation of artists to reclaim their history, identity and culture through their own artistic testimonials rooted in Aboriginal experience and tribal knowledge. Ultimately, this process is providing a new space in the literary canon for the representation of Aboriginal people directly from the voices of the people themselves.

Ancestors rising

As an Aboriginal artist within this milieu, I have also created several works that seek to raise awareness of past and present Aboriginal issues through the exposure of myths and their retelling from an Aboriginal perspective. The retelling often involves a combination of speaking from direct experience and researching from resources of tribal knowledge and visual and written archives.

An example of a work that serves as a testimony to Aboriginal history in Saskatchewan is the sculptural work *Ancestors Rising* (2006), located at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina. This site-specific piece researches the Wascana Park area in the context of the shared history of Aboriginal peoples and early settlers with the bison. Since the earliest existence of palaeo-Aboriginals in this territory (approximately 27,000 years ago), they have coexisted with the bison—first hunting the giant bison alongside the mighty mammoths and, in later years, hunting the bison we know today. The bison not only contributed food for the survival of the people. Their hides, bones, horns and hooves contributed to many aspects of cultural production, including ceremonial items such as headdresses and sun-dance items, narrative hide paintings and utilitarian items such as tipis, clothing, blankets and implements.

This history is central to the site of Wascana Park, formerly known as Wascana Creek (Figure 2). The term ‘Wascana’ was a variation of a Cree word that meant ‘pile of bones’, which referred to the piles of bison bones that were viewed by early settlers on this prairie landscape. The bones were placed there by the local Cree and Saulteaux people, who believed that the bison would return to the bones of their dead ancestors, therefore always bringing subsistence for their people.

Figure 2 North-West Mounted Police barracks and Wascana Creek, Regina, 1885. Photograph by Oliver B. Buell, no. R-B4525.
When Colonel Palliser arrived in 1857, he named the settlement Pile-o-Bone. Shortly thereafter, new piles of bison bones were made by the colonists—but for different purposes, such as the export industry and sport hunting. Bison bones were sold for fertiliser and chinaware, and colonial sport safaris killed off large numbers as they rode through the prairies on their trains. As well, government policy encouraged the death of all bison in order to starve Aboriginal people, who were viewed as a hindrance to colonial expansion. Several archival photographs reveal early settlers posing beside massive piles of bones ready for manufacturing and export (Figure 3). The combination of the bison industry with sport hunting culminated eventually in the extermination of wild bison from the prairie landscape. This extermination marked a significant change of life for the Aboriginal peoples of the plains. Their main food staple was gone, bringing much hardship, and the long history of cultural production of bison materials ceased.

Figure 3 Piles of bison skulls awaiting shipment at Saskatoon, ca. 1890, no. R-B677-2. Saskatchewan Archives.

Today, ‘pile of bones’ has a different meaning to the people of Regina; it marks the annual celebration of colonial settlement. This celebration highlights early 1900s-style costumes and enacts stage shows of singing and dancing. Curiously absent for many years were any sign of Aboriginal people in these historical re-enactments—until very recently when some Aboriginal cultural shows began to appear. Perhaps one day, ‘Pile of Bones Day’ will truly reflect the original history of this land, though for now, bones from past millennia lie silently beneath the soil that unaware Reginans dance and sing on.
To address the silence of this submerged history, *Ancestors Rising* (Figures 4 and 5) becomes the symbolic metaphor for the voice of the silenced spirits, and calls to their resurrection from the soil so their presence is known. The bison horn, in and of itself, was a powerful symbol for plains Aboriginals. Its symbolism referenced respect, strength and courage. In the old days, bison horns could be seen on prestigious head regalia that attested to the wearer’s status as a respected leader.

Figure 4 *Ancestors Rising*, 2006. Bronze, diameter: 20’; each horn: 54” x 228”.

Figure 5 *Ancestors Rising*, detail.
The four life-size horns stand in a circle, one each in the position of the exact direction of north, south, east and west, referencing the ultimate power of the balance in life. From each horn’s tip flows a braided rope, all of which meet in the centre of the circle to suspend and cradle a woven net of rocks, which hovers just above the ground. These braided ropes of copper patina refer to the ancestors’ power as conduits of energy who combine their energies to help heal the people. The stones recall early burial sites made of stone mounds and red ochre pigment. The stones also reference a long history of their use in plains culture. The permanence of stones traced the history and cultural practices and documented important places, events, commemorations and memorials. They were used for their practical physical properties and for their spiritual and metaphysical properties. The dense, physical properties of the stone served well for utilitarian purposes such as tipi rings, fire pits, burial sites and caches, and in items used for tools and in warfare. The metaphysical properties of the stone served as a medium of communication with the spiritual realm, which could be seen in the remnants of medicine wheels, pictographs, petroglyphs, petroforms, sacred boulders, amulets and carved figures and pipes.

In conclusion, the sculpture *Ancestors Rising* serves as an urban historical marker that memorialises the Aboriginal people and bison that lived off of this very land only 200 years ago. This work is a testimonial to the history and territory of my people. Through this work, I ask the reader and the community of Regina to bear witness to this history, to acknowledge it and give this place and its spirits the respect and commemoration they deserve.

**Select bibliography**

Carrier, L., Personal communication, 3 December 2008.


Figure 6 The artist with her son, Art Longman, and *Ancestors Rising* (detail of work in progress), 2006.