

FREDERICK ALEXCEE, INDIAN ARTIST (c.1857 to c.1944)

A study of the art produced by Canadian Indians during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveals the diversity and creativity following the breakdown of their traditional cultures and during the period of European appropriation of their land and traditional territories. Artistic activity was continuous despite being sporadic, regional and relatively unrecognized. As attempts are made to define and classify the work of contemporary Indian artists within the art history of Canada, this early historical period should be noted for the technical innovation among native artists and the general reassessment of their cultural values. The exceptional artwork of the native people on the west coast of Canada has long been admired and recognized for its formal complexity and characteristic style, and can be found among the most prestigious collections around the world. But few individual artists were identified by name prior to the end of the nineteenth century. One Indian artist is noteworthy for his naive but dynamic painting and woodcarving. Frederick Alexcee¹ attracted the attention of collectors and critics in the early decades of this century and his name continues to appear in researchers' notes as a peripheral figure; but information about him is sketchy. An examination of his oeuvre will provide another view on the history of Canadian art and emphasize the importance of recognizing artists of native ancestry. My "discovery" of this Tsimshian artist occurred while browsing through exhibition catalogues in the National Gallery of Canada library. Marius Barbeau, folklorist for the National Museums of Canada, and Eric Brown, director of the National Gallery, included Alexcee in the 1927 exhibition, *West Coast Art: Native and Modern*. Held in the Victoria Memorial Building which housed the National Gallery of Canada, it combined a variety of art work by unnamed west-coast Indians with paintings by, among others, Paul Kane, Emily Carr, Lawren Harris, Edwin Holgate, A.Y. Jackson and the two by Alexcee. The catalogue gives little clue as to why Alexcee's work was included other than to state:

The two paintings by Fred Alexee in one of the smaller rooms might be placed among the primitives of Canadian art here exhibited. They are worth special notice. In European countries primitive paintings have been prized for their naïveté, their charm, and the historical perspective which they confer upon the development of art. In Canada this category has so far eluded search, if we except Indian art pure and simple. Alexee's work possesses something of the quality which we should expect from such primitive painting, and he himself is an old Tsimshian half-breed of Port Simpson, B.C. What he depicts in his many pictures is Port Simpson, his tribesmen, their

legends and their former battles. His sense of colour is limited; his composition is as a rule excellent; and the movement is spontaneous and spirited. Artists have already expressed their admiration for his efforts, which are carried out both in oil and watercolour. One of the two pictures here exhibited represents a battle between the Haidas and Tsimshyan at Simpson about 1840; and the other, native houses and totem poles of Port Simpson.²

The exhibition was a success and eventually travelled to Toronto and Montréal. As is well known, it was an important turning point for Emily Carr but no mention is made in the reviews and media reports of the work by Alexcee. Alexcee's paintings, panoramic views and narrative illustrations of the scenes and activities of the northern British Columbian coast, reveal the synthesis of native and European cultures from the native point of view. To date, I have found four paintings, fifteen carvings, thirty-eight glass slides and have evidence of two paintings, one drawing and two carvings that remain elusive. His work is found in public collections across Canada, notably the Vancouver Museum, the University of British Columbia, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. One painting is in the collection of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in England and the Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum has examples of his carved miniatures. Alexcee's work was also noted by André Malraux and collected by A.Y. Jackson. Frederick Alexcee lived in Port Simpson, the site of the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Simpson on the north-central coast of British Columbia. He is known to have been active during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and until about 1939. He was the son of a Tsimshian woman from the Gilndzano³ tribe on the Skeena River and "his father was of Iroquoian stock having come to Port Simpson with the Hudson's Bay when they first came overland"⁴ to work in the Fort and on the coastal trade boats. Although he was apprenticed according to the conventional native system of carvers, he broke with tradition to experiment with the techniques and media of the assimilating culture. His paintings described historical events and panoramic views of *Fort Simpson and the surrounding area in a style considered naive in European terms* and they did not reflect his native heritage. Alexcee's subjects were the people and scenes he saw every day or memories of events from the past.

Fred Alexcee was named 'Wiksomnen,' Great Deer Woman, and as a young man was an attendant to the Halait carvers, learning to carve the masks and paraphernalia used by this secret society and becoming familiar with the stories and dances.⁵ Viola Garfield explains in *Tsimshian Clan and Society* that: "all secret society dramatizations are spoken of as hala'it...in which supernatural powers are conveyed onto uninitiated persons or new ones acquired by older persons."⁶ William Beynon, a native informant, stated further that the hala'it carvers were "those that made the secret naxnoxs masks."⁷ In later years Alexcee would carve for the church



fig.1 Frederick Alexcee,
Winged Angel
Baptismal Font, circa
1886, wood and paint,
63.5 x 84 x 61.5 cm,
Coll. University of
British Columbia
Museum of
Anthropology,
Vancouver, cat. no.
A1776.

and the tourist trade. A unique wooden Baptismal font, attributed to Alexcee and collected by the Reverend George Raley *circa* 1886, is on display in the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology (fig.1). Raley's notes state that it was the "first representation of an angel by an Indian carver" and that it was used in the church at Port Simpson.⁹ The head of this winged angel has the features of a European man but reflects Indian masking traditions. The body mass is blocked out in totem pole fashion and is disproportionate to the head size. The drapery of the robe is exquisite, following the grain of the wood although the wings were made with less care from a separate piece of wood.⁹

The Vancouver Museum collection has ten examples of Fred Alexcee's carving including six model totem poles, two model houses, a model canoe and a carved figure. The totem pole models illustrate Alexcee's minimalist approach to the intricate carving of his ancestors, for example, painted figures on a straight wooden pole often replace the carved figures of the originals. Helen Meilleur, author and resident of Port Simpson during the 1920's and 1930's, remembers Alexcee produced prolifically. "Some of it done hastily for curio trade, was a bit crude though he was capable of excellent work. All of it, while characteristically Tsimshian, showed the Alexie flair for imagination, innovation and humour."¹⁰ William Beynon also noted this discrepancy when writing to Marius Barbeau in 1944: "Strange as it may seem, his paintings of landscapes were very much better than his works in native designs and carvings."¹¹



fig.2 Frederick Alexcee, *A Fight Between the Haida and Tsimshian at Fort Simpson*, no date, oil on oil cloth, 84 x 129.5 cm, Coll. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, cat. no. VII-C-1805. (Photo: neg. no.77046)

In 1948, American anthropologist Frances Densmore discussed the importance of the "mental concept" in Indian art. She defined this as consisting of "thinking a thing through," and as "the expression of a mental idea" acquired through cultural assimilation. An artist without the mental concept would produce a construction," lacking the cultural nuances reflecting an "understanding in which these results were attained."¹² Despite his apprenticeship, Alexcee's carvings seem to lack this mental concept for traditional Tsimshian art. Living in a transitional period of history, during which the activities of the traditional native cultures were discouraged by government officials and missionaries, and European goods and customs were being introduced, Alexcee had a foot in both worlds, without being totally integrated into either.

A recently restored painting (collected by Marius Barbeau and now in the collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization) illustrates the last battle between the Tsimshians and the Haida (fig.2), in 1855.¹³ His image of the event would have been accumulated from his familiarity with the site and from the oral histories of his family. The overall effect of the painting is flat; Alexcee made an effort at "bird's eye" perspective to create a panoramic image and the drawing of the fort buildings suggest the careful use of a straight-edged instrument. However, the figures fighting on the beach and in canoes are vaguely defined, being little more than sticks. Alexcee was undoubtedly introduced to the techniques of representational painting in the European style in



fig.3 Pym Nevins Compton, *Fort Simpson*, 1863, watercolour on paper, 21 x 28 cm, Coll. British Columbia Archives and Records Service, Victoria. (Photo: neg. no. pdp3668)

Port Simpson as the activities of the fort would have attracted a diverse population including professional and amateur artists and photographers.

Pym Nevins Compton (1838-1879), who first visited Fort Simpson in 1859 and worked as a clerk with the Hudson's Bay Company during the 1860's, may have had an influence on Alexcee. Helen Meilleur reported that at least one of Compton's paintings hung in her father's store and was copied many times by local artists.¹⁴ Several of Compton's watercolour landscapes are in the collection of the British Columbia Archives and Records Service in Victoria, including (fig.3) a similar view of Fort Simpson. Compton was a native of Hampshire, England and returned there briefly in 1866. While in British Columbia he travelled extensively on the Hudson's Bay Company trade boats and according to his obituary, he was "a very fluent linguist, speaking no less than eight different languages...and had a perfect acquaintance with the dialects of the various tribes of the coast and interior of British Columbia."¹⁵ Compton's landscapes are typical of the English topographical watercolour tradition of the nineteenth century. As noted in the *Artists Overland* catalogue which includes his work:

The artists who recorded British Columbia were topographical in their approach to their subject, and so produced a straight forward sketch, faithful to the original; few of them rearranged the details to suit their aesthetic sensibilities, and most tried to capture the clear colours of the province's landscape rather than to give their paintings the golden hues of some formal dictates.¹⁶ Paintings of the same vistas and in a similar style can be found in the British



fig.4 Frederick Alexcee, *Untitled*, no date, no location. (Photo: Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, neg. no. 86130)

Columbia Archives and Record Service collection by Gordon Lockerby, dated 1885 and by Charles Dudoward, no date. Lockerby was also an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company. Dudoward, the son of a chief at Port Simpson, was actively painting in the 1870's and served as an informant to Marius Barbeau.¹⁷ The inscription on the back of one painting by Lockerby reads: "Enlarged and painted by G. Lockerby after the watercolour sketch by Mr. Compton...taken in 1863."¹⁸

What appears at first to be an aerial view of Port Simpson (fig.4) is almost photographic in its accuracy and detail. The painting¹⁹ was collected by Marius Barbeau, probably in 1926, and his notes state that Alexcee was attempting to show "the fort and Indian village with totem poles, as they used to be in the 1850's."²⁰ The painting describes not only the fort in its protected bay surrounded by the plank houses and totem poles of the native community but also illustrates Chatham Sound and islands in the distance, a canoe, filled with people and the Hudson's Bay Company boat, S.S. Beaver, in the foreground. The S.S. Beaver was also included in a painting of a corner of the bay and native village at Port Simpson (fig.5). Collected by Sir Henry Wellcome *circa* 1900, it is now in the Wellcome Institute, London, England. The painting depicts each of the houses with its variations in size and decorative markings and commemorative totems stand erect as further identification of residency. Three canoes escort the S.S. Beaver toward the fort where a crowd is eagerly awaiting the supply ship.

Sir Henry Wellcome was a philanthropist, patron of the sciences and a collector. A founding partner in the British pharmaceutical firm of Burroughs, Wellcome and Company, he established the Wellcome Institute for the History of

Medicine. His interests ranged from research in tropical diseases to archaeology and the plight of the British Columbia natives at Metlakahtla.²¹ Between 1917 and 1925, Wellcome employed William Beynon²² "to collect artifacts and information about Indian culture."²³ Alexcee was employed by Beynon, for Wellcome, to paint not only the canvas of Fort Simpson but also a collection of lantern slides in return for which Wellcome was prepared to give him a Baloptican machine.²⁴ Correspondence between Beynon and Wellcome ended in 1925 with suggestions of problems with their relationship and no mention of the glass slides being completed nor the gift for Alexcee.²⁵

Marius Barbeau was first introduced to Alexcee's work during a visit to Port Simpson in late 1915. At that time Barbeau was a guest of the Reverend Mr. Spencer for an evening of entertainment in the Port Simpson church where glass lantern slides painted by Frederick Alexcee, a member of the audience, provided illustrations of local stories and legends. The images of costume, ceremony and battle scenes were prepared with native dyes and pigments mixed with fish oil, sandwiched between two squares of glass approximately three inches by four inches.²⁶ At the time of his visit, Barbeau remarked, on the "naiveté and ingenuity"²⁷ of the artist whose natural talent he was not to fully appreciate until a number of years later when he described Alexcee as "an interesting, solitary instance of a true primitive, in Canadian painting and carving."²⁸

During the next ten years Barbeau became increasingly aware of works "of a strange type"²⁹ by Alexcee in various private collections in British Columbia and was much drawn to his representations which "remained outside the regular categories of Indian and Canadian art."³⁰ Barbeau returned to Port Simpson in 1926 and, along with A.Y. Jackson, purchased paintings from Alexcee in both water-colour and oil. Although he did not meet Alexcee, Jackson described him as "a real artist, a natural primitive. ...There is not much knowledge of technique but



fig.5 Frederick Alexcee, "Beaver" at Port Simpson, circa 1902, oil on oil cloth, 43 x 137 cm, Coll. Wellcome Institute Library, London, England. (Photo: neg. no. L. 17633 ekt)



fig.6 Frederick Alexcee, *Indian Village of Port Simpson*, circa 1926, watercolour on paper, 31.4 x 50.5 cm, Coll. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of A.Y. Jackson, 1944, acc. no. 2763. (Photo: Brenda Dereniuk, AGO)

he says what he has to say simply and directly."¹¹ Jackson's watercolour (fig.6) was donated to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto in 1944. *Indian Village of Port Simpson* shows six houses along the shore of the harbour with treed hills and coastal mountains behind. Once again the viewer is aware of the artist's care in the detail of the houses and the totem poles but his lack of concern in the features and clothing of the people who wander among the houses.

In 1945 Barbeau wrote on Alexcee for the *Canadian Review of Music and Art* using information he received from William Beynon and illustrated with four examples of Alexcee's work. In 1951 a photograph of the Baptismal Font illustrated an article about André Malraux. Malraux had commented in his book, *Voix du silence*, on Alexcee's adaptation of the totem pole style to conventional sculpture with a Christian theme. Alexcee was not referred to by name, simply as "l'Indien Tsimshian."¹²

Frederick Alexcee died circa 1944 leaving behind only a few paintings, some carvings and a set of lantern slides. Of what importance is this little known artist? What makes an individual deviate from tradition and tread on unfamiliar ground? Alexcee was living in a transitional period. Of mixed native descent he lived a non-traditional lifestyle during his adult years, working for the company that was responsible for the changes in his cultural heritage. Judging from his carvings which most closely reflect his Indian heritage, he had not completely assimilated the concepts of the traditional art of the Tsimshian. His paintings are of the folk-art genre, quite removed from the complex two-dimensional graphic designs on wood of his Tsimshian forebears.

With an imaginative innocence and a passionate affection for his surroundings, Alexcee was successful in conceptualizing panoramic details. Technical limitations and lack of formal instruction were compensated for by his natural sense for atmosphere, space and composition.

This study of his work has provided the opportunity to recognize the significance of an artform which bridges the past and the present and adds a further dimension to our study of contemporary Indian art. If we accept Alexcee as an artist, as he was accepted by collectors during his active years, then he provides a fresh perspective on the history of Canadian art.

DEIDRE SIMMONS

Winnipeg

Notes

- 1 Various spellings include Alexis, Allxcee, Alexix, Alexcie, Alexei and Alexie. Alexcee is the spelling which appears on the work attributed to this artist. The author presumes that the printed signature is the artist's own.
- 2 Marius BARBEAU, *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1927), 13.
- 3 "Gilndzano" spelling according to William Beynon.
- 4 Beynon to Barbeau, 7 November 1944, Marius Barbeau's Northwest Coast Files, B-F-159.4, Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull.
- 5 Beynon to Barbeau, Northwest Coast Files.
- 6 Viola GARFIELD, *Tsimshian Clan and Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1939), 192.
- 7 Beynon to Barbeau, Northwest Coast Files.
- 8 Reverend George Raley, Collection notes, A1776, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
- 9 Marius Barbeau also attributed two similar carvings to Alexcee, apparently in the Prince Rupert Museum. Correspondence between the author and the Museum of Northern British Columbia, Prince Rupert and the Prince Rupert Regional Archives failed to verify the location of these carvings.
- 10 Helen Meilleur, Letter to author, 18 January 1987.
- 11 Beynon to Barbeau, Northwest Coast Files.
- 12 Francis DENSMORE, "The Importance of the Mental Concept in Indian Art," *Masterkey* 22 (May 1948): 96.
- 13 Marius BARBEAU, "Old Port Simpson," *The Beaver* (September 1940): 22.
- 14 Helen Meilleur, Interview with author, Bedwell Bay, B.C., 17 September 1987.
- 15 "Funeral," *The Colonist* (12 April 1879): 3.
- 16 Berenice GILMORE, *Artists Overland* (Burnaby: Burnaby Art Gallery, 1980), 13.

- 17 J.R. HARPER, *Early Painters and Engravers in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 96.
- 18 PDP 94, British Columbia Archives and Records Service, Victoria.
- 19 Photo #86130, Northwest Coast Files, B-F-161.
- 20 Marius BARBEAU, "Frederick Alexie, a Primitive," *Canadian Review of Music and Art* 3, Nos. 11 & 12 (1945): 22.
- 21 Sir Henry WELLCOME, *The Story of Metlakahla* (London/New York: Saxon & Co., 1887).
- 22 William Beynon was a Tsimshian who also worked as an informant, interpreter and assistant for Marius Barbeau.
- 23 Beynon/Wellcome letters, No 1-24, 1917-1925, Wellcome Institute Library, Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, London, England.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 The slides were probably made *circa* 1918-1920 and are the ones eventually deposited with the Vancouver Museum in 1921 by C.C. Perry, Indian agent (NA-788-1 to NA-788-38). The lantern slides enjoyed by Barbeau in 1915 were apparently destroyed in a fire. BARBEAU, "Frederick Alexie," 21.
- 26 Charles Perry, Alexcee collection notes, Ethnology Collection, Vancouver Museum, Vancouver.
- 27 BARBEAU, "Frederick Alexie," 19.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 A. Y. JACKSON, to National Gallery, 4 October 1926, Canadian Art Collection, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
- 32 André PARINAUD, "André Malraux nous dit:" *Arts* 335 (30 November, 1951): 1, 10.

Résumé

FREDERICK ALEXCEE, ARTISTE INDIEN (1857?—1944?)

Frederick Alexcee a vécu à Fort Simpson où il est né, dans la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle, et où il est mort, vers le milieu du XX^e. Deux de ses œuvres, exposées à la Galerie nationale du Canada, à Ottawa, en 1927, dans le cadre de l'exposition *West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, le font apprécier du public canadien. Cette exposition, organisée par Marius Barbeau et Eric Brown, voyage aussi à Toronto et à Montréal, et connaît un succès dû, sans doute, à la découverte d'un peintre jusque-là inconnu, Emily Carr. Les toiles d'Alexcee y avaient été incluses à cause de leur caractère «primitif». Dans le texte du catalogue, Barbeau compare leur style aux traditions folkloriques européennes.

Alexcee, Indien Tsimshian à l'emploi de la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson, peignait dans le style topographique des aquarellistes anglais. On peut comparer sa manière à celle du Britannique Pym Nevins Compton, commis à la Compagnie dans les années 1860, dont on retrouve les œuvres dans plusieurs collections importantes des provinces de l'Ouest. On peut aussi remarquer l'influence de Compton chez des artistes contemporains d'Alexcee.

Ce dernier fait d'abord son apprentissage selon les coutumes des sculpteurs autochtones, mais il rompt avec cette tradition pour expérimenter les techniques et les médias de la culture des colonisateurs. Ses œuvres représentent des événements historiques et des vues panoramiques de Fort Simpson et des environs dans un style considéré comme naïf selon les critères européens. Elles illustrent aussi les réalisations artistiques propres à son héritage autochtone. On lui doit des sculptures que l'on retrouve aujourd'hui dans les collections des musées et qui représentent, en format réduit, l'art traditionnel de la culture tsimshian: totems, maisons, canots et avirons, figurines reprenant d'une manière minimaliste ce qui était, à l'origine, un style de sculpture complexe. L'ornementation raffinée qu'il a sculptée pour des fonts baptismaux est particulièrement remarquable par son élégante simplicité.

À ce jour, l'auteur a pu trouver des œuvres d'Alexcee dans les collections du musée de Vancouver, de l'université de la Colombie-Britannique, du Musée de l'homme et de la nature de Winnipeg, du Musée des beaux-arts de l'Ontario, du Musée canadien des civilisations et du *Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine* de Londres. Ces collections comprennent en tout 4 tableaux, 15 sculptures et 38 plaques de verre. Cinq œuvres, notées par certains des premiers collectionneurs, n'ont pas été retrouvées; il s'agit de deux tableaux, d'un dessin et de deux sculptures.

Quelle est l'importance d'un artiste comme Alexcee? Il vécut à une époque de transition dans l'histoire de sa culture. Il ne suivait pas le mode de vie traditionnel, mais restait cependant marqué par les traditions tsimshian. On l'a classé parmi les artistes folkloriques, primitifs et naïfs. Mais ne serait-il pas plus que cela? Si nous le considérons comme un artiste, comme l'ont perçu les collectionneurs pendant sa vie active, il nous apporte une perspective nouvelle sur l'histoire de l'art au Canada et sur l'inclusion, dans cette histoire, d'artistes d'origine amérindienne. À mesure que l'on tente de définir et de classer les artistes autochtones contemporains à l'intérieur de l'histoire de l'art au Canada, on se voit forcé de prendre comme point de départ d'évaluation et d'innovation l'œuvre de ceux qui ont travaillé au début de la période historique. La diversité et la créativité des artistes autochtones durant la période de transition se sont maintenues, bien qu'irrégulières, régionales et relativement méconnues. Frederick Alexcee nous fournit l'occasion de reconnaître l'importance d'un autre aspect de l'histoire de l'art au Canada.

Traduction: Élise Bonnette