

# ARTISTS IN HAIDA-GWAI

By *Jacqueline Hooper*

*With photographs by Anthony Carter and paintings by Minn Sjolseth*

A PHOTOGRAPHER-ARTIST TEAM last year visited the Haida country of the Queen Charlotte Islands or Haida-Gwai. Anthony Carter was in search of Indian history and photogenic subjects for a forthcoming book, one of a series depicting the British Columbia coast Indian of the present day, linked to the old ways within living memory but facing the reality of the new. Minn Sjolseth, Norwegian-born Vancouver artist and private life Mrs Carter went along to sketch while her husband interviewed and took photographs.

A sense of urgency accompanied them to the Queen Charlottes to record on film and canvas the hand-carved canoes rotting on deserted beaches, the magnificently worked storage boxes abandoned to the mercy of the coastal rain forest, totem poles toppling at crazy angles from their crumbling bases and, most important of all, the people, the old chiefs and ancient basket-weavers, passing unnoticed from the scene.

"With the establishment of a naval unit at Masset, and an upsurge in development of the Queen Charlottes' resources, I knew we had no time to lose," said Anthony Carter. "In a year or two nothing will be the same. With a growing population and an influx of visitors, the old

ruins—now virtually unprotected—will be obliterated."

Photo-historian Carter planned his series of books more than fifteen years ago. To gather authentic first hand material he had to be able to meet the Indians on their own terms, so he started out in the early fifties fishing and fish-packing along the rugged west coast.

"I was a terrible fisherman," he recalled, "but I got a lot of wonderful pictures and stories, and made lifetime friends."

As a result of his travels he is confident in his portrayal of these Indian people in their own environment, for "from here on they will never be the same again. The art of the Pacific Northwest Indian has been well documented by experts, almost written to death in fact, but the people and their own personal history have not."

The Queen Charlotte Islands have long had a special attraction for the Carters. Anthony Carter was stationed with the R.C.A.F. at Sandspit during the war, and dreamed of returning one day. Minn Sjolseth, following in the footsteps of Emily Carr since coming to B.C. in 1957, has a keen interest in painting the likenesses of old residents and the remains of native habitations. Everywhere they went she carried sketch book, easel and paint-box.

*Interval for lunch during a spruce root digging expedition in which the Carters joined at Sangen River east of Masset on the north shore. Minn Sjolseth is on the left.*





*Rufus Moody's boat at Tahnoo on Moresby Island.*

Arriving in Queen Charlotte City by plane in late July, they visited the main centres of Indian population and searched for deserted villages fast disappearing in the lush, advancing forest.

Their host in Skidegate was Rufus Moody, the artist who carved the Centennial Argillite Pole, a fifty-inch totem pole fashioned from one slab of the unusual black slate found only in the Charlottes. Commissioned by the government for Canada's centenary, it now stands in the parliamentary Commonwealth Room in Ottawa.

"Rufus and Jean Moody took us down the east coast of Moresby Island in their fourteen-foot boat," Anthony related on his return. "Minn was glad of her Norwegian sea-faring blood as the coastline receded and the expanse of Hecate Strait stretched before us. The little boat with its load of four, our equipment and camping gear, and the Moody's Irish wolfhound, Rex, finally made a safe

landfall at the old village of Skedans on Louise Island—much to our relief!

"Despite his sophistication, Rufus Moody was uneasy at Skedans. The totem poles there are heavily marked by time, long past the days when they might have been restored. Their life span is only eighty to a hundred years in the damp climate. Minn sketched some of the poles but we didn't feel like staying long. The spirits of long-dead villagers hurried us on our way.

"Moody was much more relaxed when we reached Tahnoo (or Tanu) farther south at the head of Logan Inlet. This was once the village of his family, even though the last occupants left before the turn of the century. Nothing remains except one totem pole, some graves, and the natural beauty of the setting. The day we were there was extraordinarily peaceful. The water was like a mirror even though we knew long swells were running outside."



*Minn Sjolseth sketching a mortuary column, one of the fifteen poles still standing at the old Ninistints settlement on Anthony Island.*

Tahnoo was once a thriving community. Two hundred years ago the Haida were masters of the islands and the Vikings of the North Pacific Ocean. They were the leaders among the three most important northern nations: Haida, Tsimshian and Tlingit. Once thousands strong, their numbers rapidly dwindled to hundreds with the coming of the white man who introduced alcohol and unfamiliar disease. Of many prosperous villages like Tahnoo, Skedans, and Cumshewa dotting the coast, only two now remain—Masset and Skidegate. Chieftains of villages stricken with dreaded smallpox took their surviving people to these centres; long-time feuds between clans were forgotten in the larger struggle for survival. This is why today you find a surprising number of hereditary chiefs in Haida Village (the Indian settlement at Masset), and at Skidegate.

After a hair-raising return trip from Tahnoo, running aground in Carmichael Channel while trying to beat the tidal bore of Louise Narrows, and discovering that Rufus Moody's dog, Rex, couldn't swim but knew all about chasing bears, the Carters returned to Skidegate to meet some of the old chiefs.

They met Chief Louis Collison, then eighty, whom Marius Barbeau described as one of the best argillite sculptors of his time. Minn Sjolseth sketched him, and later painted Nanai Williams, at 103 the oldest resident of Skidegate.

Then they drove up to Masset on the north coast of Graham Island, to talk with William Matthews, better known as Chief Weah, a proud name for generations in the Masset region. They also met master carver Chief Robert Davidson and his wife. Minn sketched them in animated poses as fascinated grandchildren, great grandchildren and neighbouring children peered over her shoulder. Chief Davidson's young grandson, Robert, studying art in Vancouver, is acknowledged as the best of the younger generation of Haida carvers.

"I wanted to pay the Davidsons for posing for their portraits," Minn recalled, "but Mrs Davidson made us a gift of homemade bread and jelly instead. That's the way it was with all the Haidas we met—they couldn't do enough for us. I think they understand and appreciate those who are trying to preserve whatever they can of this amazing heritage of the Haida people."



*Beaver pole on Anthony Island, or Sung-Gwai, by Minn Sjolseth whose original painting was presented to Crown Prince Harald of Norway.*

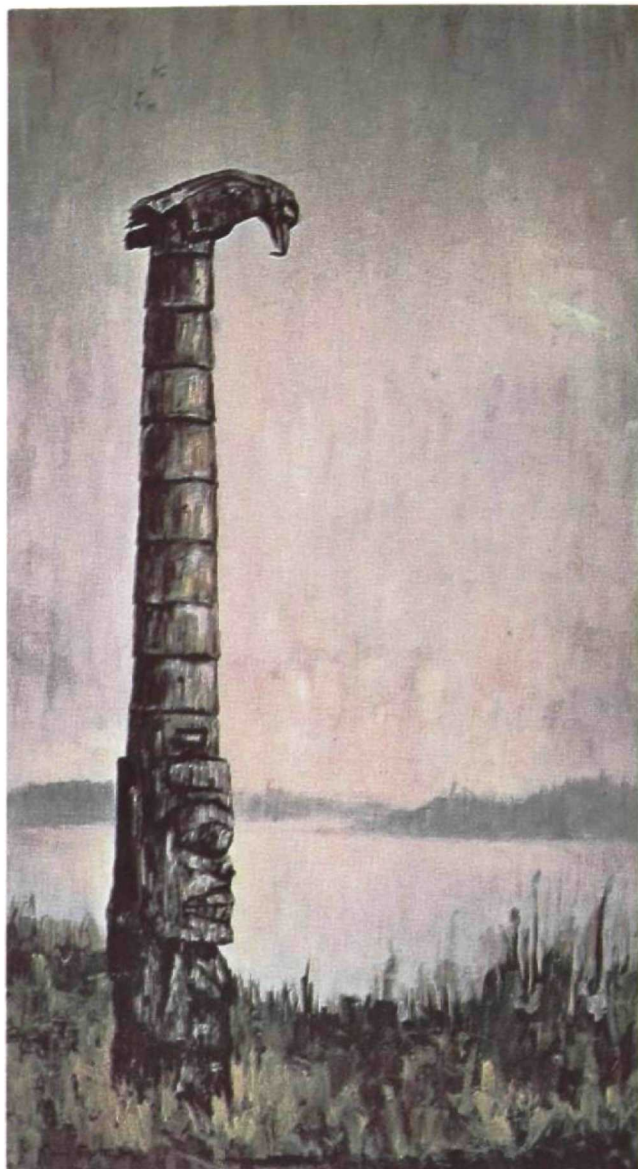
Highlight of the Carter expedition was a visit to Anthony Island (Sung-Gwai) at the southwest tip of the Queen Charlotte group. Little is known about the Ninstints village on the island which was abandoned in the eighties. "The Sung-Gwai people who once lived there have vanished now," reported Anthony Carter. "A few made their way north to Masset and Skidegate, but the fate of the rest is a mystery—like the island itself."

In 1957, with the permission of the Skidegate band council, an expedition collected totem poles from the island and from other villages farther north. The poles, and sections of some, were crated and transported to Victoria and Vancouver for preservation. "Tragically, for future generations," Anthony Carter feels, "there is now no opportunity to restore any of the villages to their former glory. No 'Barkerville' or 'Lower Fort Garry' is possible here because of the advanced state of deterioration of the village remains.

"Anthony Island is now a provincial park and, as far as I can gather, it isn't visited for years at a time. Despite the indescribable loneliness of the place, the old village feeling is still there. Without meaning to, you find yourself turning your head quickly when the wind makes a movement in the trees, half expecting to see one of the villagers."

Minn Sjolseth started painting the relics on Anthony Island as soon as she could set up her easel. "I sat on the sand at low tide near the half-decayed burial poles. They are enormous, some of them twelve feet around, some leaning at fantastic angles. I could feel the huge sightless eyes of a carved beaver on me as I painted, my stomach in knots. I wasn't really afraid, but I was very much aware of the overpowering spell cast by these poles".

*Nanai Williams, age 103, the oldest resident of Skidegate.*



*The last pole at Skidegate.*

Anthony Island's secrets are well guarded by treacherous currents and the vagaries of the open Pacific. Small boats have difficulty amongst hidden rocks and enormous beds of kelp, and the unpredictable sea mist which frequently shrouds the island. Anthony Carter described his feelings this way:

The pillage of time  
and grotesque  
the rotting stubs of ancient scrolls  
await the darkened forest's march,  
to wrap the shroud of history  
about what still remains:  
Man's art should never die like this. ♦