

## Curator Robert Soppelsa in Reykjavik

Story Theater

American Embassy Reykjavik Iceland

Art in Embassies

Ambassador Luis Arreaga and Mrs. Mary Arreaga  
Reykjavik, Iceland

“We hope you will enjoy the art exhibition at the Residence of the U.S. Ambassador to Iceland. It identifies and explores, through art, some of the deep but not readily apparent connections between the American and Icelandic peoples.”

Ambassador Luis Arreaga and Mrs. Mary Arreaga with portrait from catalogue

Exhibition curator Bob Soppelsa visited Reykjavik in February 2011. Enjoy Bob’s tour of the fourteen works in the exhibition.

Anonymous American

Eskimo Woman, ca 1915

Photograph from digital negative

16 x 13 (41.3 x 33.3 cm)

Courtesy of ART in Embassies, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Photographic Archives LC-DIF-ppesc 02277

Anonymous American

Eskimo Woman, ca 1907

Photograph from digital negative

16 x 13 (41.3 x 33.3 cm)

Courtesy of ART in Embassies, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Photographic Archives LC-DIF-ppesc 02278

Soppelsa: These two photographs are taken from the photographic archives of the Library of Congress, one of the largest libraries in the world. It is the official library of the United States. There are more than a million and a half visual documents in the Library of Congress’s photo archive, among them these two photographs identified as of Eskimo women, probably what would be called today Inuit women, taken some time very early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This one dates from probably 1915. The figure right next to me there probably dates from 1907.

They show women in traditional dress. They show women who obviously have been posed by the photographer as if for portraits who seem very pleased to be there. What they do is of course record a native culture that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was thought to be dying which is not thought to be dying at all any more, they are vibrant living cultures that have come to adopt modern ways, using snow mobiles

where they used to use dog sleds but also continuing to use dog sleds. And knowing how to handle animal skins.

Jim Charlie  
Salmon Plaque, undated  
Red cedar, acrylic paint  
15 x 45 x 3 in. (38.1 x 114.3 x 7.6 cm)  
Courtesy of Hill's Native Art  
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Jim Charlie  
Orca Panel, undated  
Red cedar, acrylic paint  
35 x 25 x 3 in. (88.9 x 61.5 x 7.6 cm)  
Courtesy of Hill's Native Art  
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Soppelsa: The northwest environment is rich in animal life and the animals play a large part in the mythologies and legends of the history of the origins of people in the world. Jim Charlie's relief carving called Orca Panel portrays an orca, a killer whale, which appears very frequently in the art of the peoples of the northwest coast. It also is a wood that is typical of the woods they use, made of red cedar. It's painted with a modern substance, acrylic paint. If you look carefully at the surface you will see that it is carved all by hand, individually gouged out. He may have begun the carving using a router, using a mechanical tool, but then all tools are mechanical, at the start and why shouldn't an artist take advantage of modern technologies when they are available to them?

Eric Parnell  
Ethan & Isaiah, undated  
Serigraph  
28 x 25 in. (71.3 x 63.5 cm)  
Courtesy of Hill's Native Art  
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Eric Parnell  
Eagle, undated  
Serigraph  
28 x 25 in. (71.3 x 63.5 cm)  
Courtesy of Hill's Native Art  
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Soppelsa: Another of the animals that appears very frequently in the arts of the northwest coast is the eagle, because there are many eagles in that part of the world, because eagles are fishing birds much like many of the northwest peoples are fishing people. And here an abstraction, a representation in two dimensions of an object that sometimes appears in three dimensions in the arts of the northwest coast,

an eagle. A totemic animal, an animal often associated with the history of the people, as is the orca as are other animals of that part of the world, like the beaver, like the crow, like the woodpecker, and so forth.

Betsy Gandy

Excavations: Charging Aurochs 3, 2005

Acrylic on canvas

20 x 16 in (50.3 x 40.6 cm)

Courtesy of the artist, Miami, Florida

Betsy Gandy

Excavations: Leaping Horse 3, 2005

Acrylic on canvas

11 x 11 in (27.9 x 27.9 cm)

Courtesy of the artist, Miami, Florida

Betsy Gandy

Excavations: Large Charging Bison, 2005

Acrylic on canvas

32 x 40 in (81.3 x 101.6 cm)

Courtesy of the artist, Miami, Florida

Soppelsa: In the entry hall to the residence are three paintings by a contemporary artist, Betsy Gandy, who works now in Florida. She is a friend of Ambassador and Mrs. Arreaga for some years. They met when both families were in the foreign service.

The paintings that Betsy Gandy does are in fact recreations of cave paintings that she learned about during her travels in northern Spain and southern France. They are in fact copies of paintings from the upper Paleolithic time when southern Europe had a sub-arctic climate at the end of the last glaciation. And in fact they are among the earliest examples we have of art made by human hands. These were made by the ancestors of those of us that come from a European background.

In fact the handprint that you see on the lower right of the painting could be interpreted as a signature. We have numerous examples of these in the art of Paleolithic times where human beings either dipped their hand in colored clay and pressed it on the wall or pressed their hand against the wall and then blew clay through probably a hollow bone around the hand creating a negative image using the hand as kind of a stencil. But it's also a representation of identity.

The animals are animals that they hunted. These people lived by hunting and gathering, they did not farm. In fact it was not an environment that was friendly to farming. Also this is art for a cold place and cold time, which is also true of the art of the northwest coast. Another similarity is that it is art that is representational of animals, much moreso than of human beings.

Kathleen Walsh  
Flower in Blue, 2009  
Mixed media on wood  
50 x 12 in (127 x 81.3 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist, Fredericksburg, Virginia

Kathleen Walsh  
Elena Dancing, 2009  
Mixed media on wood  
28 x 52 in (71.1 x 132.1 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist, Fredericksburg, Virginia

Soppelsa: This is called Elena Dancing. It's by Kathleen Walsh, an American painter who lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia, not far from Washington. Kathleen spent much of her adult life as a as what we often call in the State Department an embassy spouse—her husband was a foreign service officer. She is very active as an artist and she works in many media. I first encountered her work in water color.

This is a mixed media piece. It involves painting, collage, drawing, and there's other bits and pieces of work that I can't quite identify. It works interestingly into the theme of this exhibition in that it portrays a figure in movement. If you look at the figures as they move across you're looking at the same person as she moves across the space.

Randy Stiglitz  
Ozunukwa Mask, undated  
Yellow cedar, acrylic paint and horsehair  
16 x 15 x 18 in (40.6 x 38.1 x 25.4 cm)  
Courtesy of Hill's Native Arts, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Soppelsa: This piece of sculpture by Randy Stiglitz who is a Haida carver, a modern Haida carver, from the far northwest coast, from the native nation, the northwest Indian tribes, is called an Ozunukwa mask and it represents another of the spirits of the Haida world. Like its neighbor across the room it should be seen in movement, it would speak to you, it would be present on a dancer, and its movement and the narrative of the performance would have a great deal of meaning.

Josh Dawson  
Bukwas Mask (Kwakwaka'waku), undated  
Red cedar, acrylic paint and horsehair  
18 x 11 x 9 in (45.7 x 33 x 22.9 cm)  
Courtesy of Hill's Native Arts, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Soppelsa: This one by Josh Dawson, another modern Haida sculptor, is called a Bukwas mask. Its Haida name is to many English speakers almost unpronounceable, it's Kwakwaka'waku. It is in fact supposed to be seen worn by a dancer in movement and it speaks to its audience. So we see here an echo of a much more complex art form. To us it is interesting because of its color, because of the way it distorts what

looks like a human form—in fact it combines both human and animal form, those eyes are very much like eagle eyes and that hair by the way is horsehair, they often use horsehair in their masks. And it is very anthropomorphic in its conception, but as you see it's about three times life size. These masks are interesting as sculptures but they are even more interesting as elements of performance art.

(credits)