

AN INTERVIEW **DON  
LELOOSKA  
SMITH**

BY CLYDIA NAHWOOKSY



Transformation mask made of cedar in the Bellacoola style. The mask represents Kwat-e-wala, a man who had special powers because he embodied the spirit of the loon. The mask, as it opens and closes, depicts the loon becoming the man, and the man being transformed into the loon. Photo by U.S. Department of the Interior, Indian Arts and Crafts Board.



Lelooska (Whittling Boy) is the name given to Don Smith by the Nez Perce tribe. Now living in Ariel, Washington, Don is a Cherokee who was adopted by the Kwakiutl people. With his mother, brother and sister, he is encouraging the development of

all forms of traditional Northwest Coast art. Next door to the Smith home, there is a Kwakiutl ceremonial lodge where the family performs songs, dances and stories for young school children. The following interview by Clydia Nahwooksy reflects that life.





C: Don, how did your interest in carving begin?

D: My grandfather was the major influence, I think, in my whole life, at least in the Indian part of my life. He was Cherokee and an extraordinary man in many, many ways.

When I was small, he began to teach me all the things he felt that I should know in order to be a complete person. He felt that I had to have the best of both societies, Indian society and white society, to be complete. He had no tribal prejudices. He had great respect for many, many different tribes and different peoples. He taught me the rudiments you might say, the first things that I was in touch with—Indian things—and then as time passed, I got more and more involved, and he encouraged my interests and helped me. It was from these roots that my interests grew.

My grandfather ran away as a small boy, went with a herd of cattle down the old Chisholm trail, returned home, and ran away again to join the cavalry. They cut his hair and he served in the last of the Apache campaigns. He thoroughly respected and admired the Apache people, deplored the way the white people—the military—had treated them. He was in and out of the Army all his life.

I remember that as a little boy he took me to a Jewish synagogue and Buddhist temple and was very reverent about both. He explained to me that different people had different names for God, that this was all good, that any religion was

good as long as the people were sincere and lived up to the teachings of it. We went to Shaker meetings, Indian sun dances, and things like that, and he pointed out that among different tribes there were different religions and beliefs and that this was good also. It was not so much the “brand” name of the religion as how well you lived up to its teachings.

C: Don, the effect your grandfather had on your life is now reaching many people through your involvement in Northwest Coast Indian arts. I’ve heard you referred to as a living legend. Such comments indicate an appreciation for your concern in continuing what is Northwest Coast culture. What are some of the teachings which you are doing and how did they begin?

D: I guess the roots of my interest in the Northwest Coast arts have to go back to my grandfather. Cherokee people whittle. He whittled and taught me to whittle. He made hominy spoons and little figures and masks. I found myself here in the Northwest as a very small child. Looking around me there were the remnants of a culture that had produced probably the greatest whittlers ever known to history, people who didn’t whittle sticks, but whole logs, whose carvings were simply colossal in size. They were magnificent things. A marvelous art style. There was something mysterious about the masks. They always looked at you as though they had something behind them, a secret or a story.

For many years, I was involved in what I guess you would call the tourist trade. I produced small carvings, as many people do, which were sold to dealers who resold them. As time went on, my skills developed and my knowledge increased. I became more and more discontented with grinding out souvenirs, trying to compete with manufacturers in Hong Kong and Japan, most of the time feeling sort of unappreciated in what I did.

Finally, about seven years ago, the opportunity presented itself to make a clean break with souvenir art and to try something that I had always wanted to do. That was to see if a person could make a living producing things of the old quality. It was a shaky, scary thing, but a lot of friends encouraged me. About the same time, the Indian Arts and Crafts Board sent a representative out here to the Northwest. He encouraged me. So I tried it. I probably committed some considerable atrocities in learning, but I guess any artist does.

When we moved up here, I set to work to try and learn to produce things that were of the quality of the old carvers and to use the old inspirations, the old myths and legends and stories, as the background. Not simply to reproduce or copy things from museums, but to try and synthesize the art style so that I could do new pieces with old inspiration that would be as valid as the old pieces as far as being objects of art. And from there it has been kind of a long trail.

C: Don, I understand that you have had supporters in the Northwest Coast tribes who very much appreciate your interest in continuing Northwest Coast art. Could you tell me about some of these people and the kinds of support they’ve given you?

D: Well, from the beginning, I’ve always felt that the best way to learn things Indian is from our old people, who really are our archives, our libraries, our memories, who are invaluable. A person can read lots and lots of books written by anthropologists, but it is always a good idea to crosscheck what you learn with the memories of older people. I’ve been very fortunate in knowing a great number of really wonderful old people, among them the last full chief of the Columbia River people, Tommy Thompson, Kuni, and his wonderful wife, Flora, who from the time I was pretty young, probably about thirteen years old, really cooperated in teaching me everything that they could about their old ways, their old arts, and their old crafts.

Among people from the heart of our Northwest Coast area who have helped me, Jim Sewid is probably the most important. Jim is a great hereditary chief, a man of high rank and great importance in the old system. He served for many, many years as elected chief councillor of the Kwakiutl people. I always felt like just a bit of an intruder into Northwest Coast traditions until I became acquainted with Jim. I felt a little guilty, for I am a person whose blood is of an entire-



ly different tribal culture. Yet here I was practicing the arts and learning and studying the culture of another tribe.

Jim really was the person who sort of legitimized the whole thing. From the first time I met him, he was thoroughly delighted with what we were doing, and a great source of encouragement. Finally, at a potlatch in the old way, he presented me with a very fine Kwakiutl name and granted permission for us to use all of the songs and dances and stories of his particular lineage of the Kwakiutl people. This is the greatest thing that a Kwakiutl can do, because these traditions and privileges handed down from one generation to the next are validated by the expenditure of tremendous amounts of property and wealth in potlatching. It was the highest honor Jim could have paid me.

C: So you were adopted by the Kwakiutl people.

D: Yes, he gave me the name of Gekkun which means "chief of chiefs." It was the name of his grandfather, who was a high-ranking and important chief. He presented my younger sister with the name Tlakwastaliumga which means "precious as copper," and then granted his permission for all of his songs and dances to be used.

C: I see that your mother is also an artist. How has she influenced your work?

D: Mom's been a tremendous influence. She's a craftswoman. She produced for the tourist trade, just as I did, for many, many years. In fact, she was producing

long before I really grew old enough to do much. Mom makes portrait dolls of Indian people—people of the Plains, but mostly people of the Northwest Coast. She's also a very skillful sewer of buckskin and a good beader. All types of Indian craft work interest her. She does ink drawings on cloth, which are really wonderful. They have an almost photographic quality.

C: Those are the ones I've seen. They're beautiful.

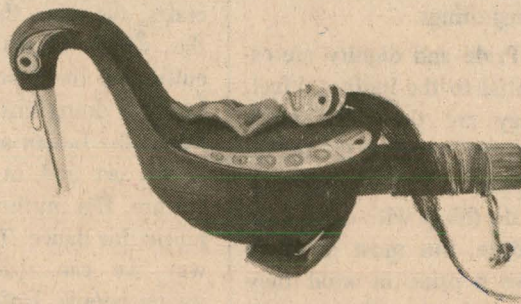
work, mostly in the Northwest Coast style. She's my apprentice, just as my younger brother is.

C: Smitty, your younger brother, is a carver as well?

D: Yes, he's probably my chief apprentice. Smitty is tremendously strong. He has very powerful hands and arms, which are a big help in producing a large carving, and a lot of natural art ability. Smitty is also a very fine dancer. If Smitty can stand on the shoulders of the research I started, I see

your family is doing to change the misconceptions the public has of the American Indian, and in particular, of the Northwest tribes.

D: Our programs are an extension of our practices of Northwest Coast art, because the Northwest Coast artist was a total artist. He might be a storyteller, a carver and painter, and sort of an unofficial historian. He had to know all of the traditions. He might be a song composer, a maker of



A dance rattle carved and painted by Lelooska based on a type once used in the religious ceremony, Klukwala. The figure on the bird's back is reported to be the mythic trickster and hero Xwetu. The fish-like figure represents octopus suckers. Photo by U.S. Department of the Interior, Indian Arts and Crafts Board.

D: Mom is a very gifted woman, and I think probably if she hadn't devoted so much time and effort to her family, she would have been a well-known artist. But Mother is a deeply Indian person, and, among Indian people, the mother devotes herself to her family. She doesn't promote herself; she encourages her family.

C: Tell me about the kind of work your sister is doing. I know that she does some beautiful silver jewelry. What other kinds of work is she involved in?

D: Patty carves in wood, antler, and ivory. She's recently taken up doing silver

no reason why, when he is an old man, he won't be one of the finest practitioners of Northwest Coast art that ever lived.

C: When you say "Northwest Coast" art, are you also speaking of the performing arts? I attended a performance that was given for school children to help them learn and appreciate the history and culture of Northwest Coast tribes. I think that some of them were learning for the first time that the feathered Indian they see on their home television set is not the Indian person who lives next door to them. Tell me about the kind of work

songs, a choreographer of dances at the potlatch presentations. He was totally involved in the whole artistic part of Northwest Coast art. So, our dancing helps us to better understand Northwest Coast art. And the dancing is an extension. It isn't enough to simply carve a mask; to thoroughly understand it, you have to use it.

Our programs are aimed primarily at young people because I find, if you are going to fight prejudice at any level, it is probably easier to start with youngsters who really, until they reach a certain age, are very free of prejudice. This is



something youngsters learn. They don't know about color when they are born. Prejudice comes later. We hope to try to get rid of some of the misconceptions, as you said. Most of all, we want to get across to youngsters that Indians are people, that they are human beings, that they live in a different manner. In the old days they had to: they lived in a different world.

We want youngsters to come to appreciate the Indian's culture, to realize the richness of it, to realize the contribution the Indian has made to the fabric of our country. Many expressions in everyday use have Indian roots. Many of the foods we eat are contributions of the Indian. Even our form of government was copied, in some measure, from the famous League of the Iroquois. So many contributions!

We try to get this across to young people who come here. We want them to feel a certain pride in the accomplishment of the Indians and to appreciate it. The thing we ultimately hope to accomplish is that perhaps by appreciating the Indian, when he encounters the Indian in everyday life as a job seeker or as a neighbor or as someone he is doing business with in his social life, he will recognize that the Indian is not a curiosity. He is a person. He has a marvelous background, a rich heritage, and is a person well worthy of respect.

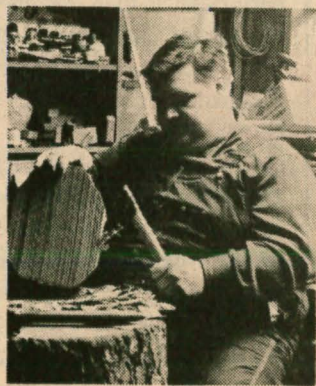
I personally don't believe in taking up signs and going out and demonstrating. This is sort of my own way of trying to get the Indians'

message across. We do it through the cooperation we have with the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry. I think last year we had upwards of 11,000-12,000 youngsters through the place here. We like to think that we reached at least a part of the youngsters with the message that Indians are people, that they do have a rich culture that really can be shared by the non-Indian, at least as an appreciator.

C: You know, Don, I think that the way you have of sharing the Indian culture is really the Indian way of doing things.

D: Pride and dignity are essential to the Indians, I feel. They are the only things that have enabled the Indian people to survive suffering, to do things with dignity, to endure, but most of all to have a pride in what they are and what their people are and were. Jim Sewid, my adopted relative, sometimes says in a very sad and touching way that his

Lelooska roughs out and begins to carve a mask in his home workshop. His masks and totem poles are in private and public collections in the United States and abroad. Photo by U.S. Department of the Interior, Indian Arts and Crafts Board.



people have lost their pride.

Pride is, I feel, at the very core of the Indian personality. He has to feel his worth. The tribes that have been able to keep some measure of their ancient pride seem to be the people that have done the best in our modern society. I think it's important to try to restore pride to the younger people who have lost it or were born without it, or haven't been able to find it in the crushing poverty and the drab surroundings that reservation life sometimes gives them.

And I think the arts and crafts, the tales, the stories, the whole beauty of the culture is the best tool we have for doing this, because this is the Indian at his best in his art and in his rich culture. His mythology, his music, his dance. This is the way we can reach these young people. Unfortunately, the young person on a reservation gets to see only the sad remnants of his rich culture. Perhaps, as in some villages up north, everything really fine of the old culture has been carried away and lost to him. I think we have to find a means to acquaint these young people with the very best that their culture has to offer. Through this, perhaps a little spark of pride will spring up and give them what they need to survive in modern society.

A CHEROKEE from Cherokee County, Oklahoma, Clydia Tro-linder Nahwooksy, has worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service. She has been with the Smithsonian Institution's Division of Performing Arts since 1969 and is now director of the Institution's Indian Awareness Program.