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Authenticity of Eskimo Inuit Art & Native Indian Art

By Clint Leung

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Both Inuit Eskimo art and Native American art have gained international recognition as valuable art forms over the past few decades. However, the rising popularity of both Inuit Eskimo art and Native American art has resulted in the increased proliferation of imitations and mass-produced reproductions of original Native arts. Some obvious fakes are made in Asia from molds where the finished pieces are forms of plastic, resin or ceramic.

Other fakes are actually made of cast stone simulating actual Inuit Eskimo art carvings and wood for imitation Native American carvings. These fakes, which are harder to distinguish from authentic artwork, are often hand carved reproductions of an original piece of artwork. Workshops have illegally reproduced hundreds of copies without the artisan's permission. The counterfeiting companies would then attach some type of tag that claims the fake pieces were influenced by aboriginal artisans and even background information on the Native designs used in the artwork. Some even go as far as adding in Inuit syllabics on the bottom of the fake Inuit Eskimo art carvings.

These are very deceptive tactics on their part since they give the consumers the impression that the imitations are authentic and income producing for the aboriginal communities.

Fakes and imitations have lowered the image of authentic Inuit Eskimo art and Native American art. Sales of genuine aboriginal artwork have declined which in turn have deprived aboriginal artisans of income. The argument against these claims is that not every consumer can afford to buy authentic Inuit Eskimo art or Native American art so the souvenir level reproductions legitimately meet this part of the market. The imitations, which are usually low priced, enable students visiting Canada for example, to bring home a Canadian souvenir without breaking their travel budget. This claim would have more support from Native communities if aboriginal artisans were paid a fair royalty as income for each imitation and reproduction piece sold. However, this is seldom the case since most of the time, no royalties are paid at all.

The obvious fakes can be spotted quite easily. An imitation of an Inuit Eskimo art carving spotted at a gift shop was not made of stone as it was not cold to the touch. It was very light in weight unlike a

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stone which has some mass to it. The detail and the bottom of the piece had the molded look to it. There was even a sticker on the bottom with the company name Wolf Originals. Side by side comparisons of similar pieces in the souvenir store revealed that they were all identical in every detail, which is impossible for original artwork.

A black totem pole had a very flat uniform back and bottom again giving away the fact that it came from a mold. Other totem poles made from wood or mixed wood with a claim that they were hand painted were among many similar pieces in the store. All of these examples were each priced less than \$20 Canadian which was another indicator that they were not original artwork.

Imitations of Inuit Eskimo art sculptures were recently spotted for sale in shops located at major Canadian airports. From a distance, these Inuit Eskimo art sculptures of hunters, polar bears and Inuit

women with children looked very authentic. However, each piece had several identical copies on the same shelf.

To avoid accidentally buying a fake or imitation, it is suggested that consumers buy Inuit Eskimo art and Native American art from only reputable galleries and dealers rather than from tourist souvenir shops. A piece of original, authentic Inuit Eskimo art or Native American art is one of a kind. There should be no other identical pieces on the shelves. In addition, original Inuit Eskimo art carvings should come with an Igloo tag (or sticker) which is a Canadian government registered trademark. Inuit Eskimo art carvings that are certified by the Canadian government to be handmade by Inuit artisans, come with Igloo tags.

Clint Leung is owner of Free Spirit Gallery (<http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca>), an online gallery specializing in Inuit and Northwest Native art including carvings, sculpture and prints. Free Spirit Gallery has numerous information resource articles with photos of authentic Inuit and Native art as well as free eCards.

My Introduction To Northwest Coast Native American Art

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I had lived in Vancouver very briefly as a child and it was during that time when I was first exposed to the art of the Northwest Coast Native American Indians. It was the towering colorful totem poles out in Stanley Park that everyone gazed at with wonder and appreciation. It took about 30 years later during a return trip to Vancouver when Northwest Coast Native American art caught my eyes again.

I was in Vancouver for business and landed at the city's new airport terminal. One could not help but notice the huge native carvings near the arrivals area. Later on during my stay, I decided to wander around in the Gastown district. It was in these shops and galleries in Gastown where I fell in love with Northwest Coast Native American art. I saw many wonderful wooden plaques representing different

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animals. There were also art prints, paintings, masks, wooden bowls and even furniture with these animals either painted or carved right into the pieces.

The colors and designs, which might be considered a bit exaggerated to non-native eyes, were striking as well as bold. I knew at that time that I wanted to include some of this magnificent artwork on my walls back at home. So I bought two plaque carvings and carried them home like newly found treasure.

Historically, the native Indians who lived along the river valleys and coastal waters of the Pacific Northwest were all hunters and gatherers. The region was blessed with abundant resources from both the seas and forests. These people captured in their artwork the animals they hunted and observed. These included bears, killer whales, eagles, ravens, salmon, wolves, hummingbirds and even frogs. Chiefs and mythical characters important in their legends such as thunderbirds were also included as art subjects.

Northwest Coast Native American art is just only recently gaining some major attention in some galleries and museums around the world. Compared to other native arts such as Inuit (Eskimo), exposure of Northwest Coast Native American art is still rather limited to the northwest coast of Canada and the United States. This form of artwork is virtually unknown to most parts of the world including many regions of North America. This will hopefully change as more people from around the world travel to Vancouver. The future winter Olympics in 2010 up in Whistler, BC will also have a positive impact on the region's Native Indian art. I personally believe that Northwest Coast Native American art has a lot of potential to be internationally recognized and accepted.

(To see this article complete with photos of actual carvers and their artwork, see <http://www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca>)

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