

The Sleep of the Dream in the Age of the Artwork

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“From the day of creation we have been enlightened by intelligent dreams,” an elder of the Tlingit Kaagwaantaan clan told his younger kin, Louis Shotridge, at the beginning of the 20th century. Shotridge, one of the leading Indigenous intellectuals of his generation, had returned to the Tlingit homeland on the far northwest coast of North America in order to collect stories and artworks for the University of Pennsylvania Museum. The elder wanted to explain to him how dreams had played a role in the origin of Shotridge’s own Tlingit name.

Their mutual ancestor, a young Shangukeidí Clan leader named Yoowúk, had once spent all night possessed by the fevered vision of an eagle. In the sleep chamber at the back of the house he is restless, beset by images. In the morning his wife teases him about it: “You have been dreaming of that poor old bird we once helped in landing his salmon,” and indeed they had rescued a bird some little while back. But Yoowúk cannot shake the image from his night-mind. He brings report of his vision to the council and says it is calling him to acquire a new eagle crest for the clan. He will go seek permission to use the image from a powerful clan to the south, among the Tsimshian people, who are known to lay claim to this animal. He musters a great party of canoes to make the long journey, bringing gifts and slaves with him for the Tsimshian chief. After many days of paddling, and a series of careful diplomatic maneuvers, Yoowúk is finally welcomed into the Tsimshian chief’s house, where he is overwhelmed by eagle carvings on every niche and post; they fill him

with desire to one day have such carvings of his own. The guest makes an impassioned and ornate speech, and the host responds in kind. It all goes well: Yoowúk is awarded the right to make an Eagle Hat, which will become one of the inalienable possessions of his descendants. He is also given a new name—*Stoowukáa*, the name that Shotridge will one day inherit, which has motivated the telling of this story to him in the first place.

This story says something about the bonds between art, power, and dreaming in the cultures of the Northwest Coast. A dream inspires the desire to possess a crest-animal, which in turn inspires a diplomatic mission and a delicate negotiation with both animals and humans, all of which in turn sanctions the creation of a prized artwork. Every action is saturated with a supernatural ache that motivates discipline, sacrifice, and decorum. “Who is there now with a mind firm enough to paddle to the other end of the world to satisfy the need of his people?” asks Shotridge, as he describes this leader and his men travelling day and night to a distant village in order to fulfill the dream of an eagle.

These relations and the desire that quickens them would require many pages to properly explain in English. In Tlingit they can be summarized by a single word, *at.óow*. The term literally means “something owned,” or perhaps “something paid for,” and it signifies the inherited possessions of a clan. Possession here is very far from European theories of ownership, built as they are on the distinction between the tangible and intangible. The category of *at.óow* includes stories, privileges, songs, prerogatives, territorial rights, the memory of ancestors, styles of dress, names, and also the material creations that in English would be most accurately

called artworks. What's more, in the realm of *at.óow*, these are all interrelated, even of a piece. A carved hat illustrates a crest acquired by an ancestor on a piece of territory to which the clan now has a claim; the same ancestor's name is kept alive by being bestowed upon a child of the clan, and the story of what that ancestor did is told whenever the name is brought up; from this story the clan claims certain privileges, and at ceremonies these are affirmed by singing a song that ancestor once composed in a time of need. These *at.óow* are usually acquired thanks to the exertions and sacrifice of the clan's ancestors, often by their deaths. And these *at.óow* usually originate in visionary experiences that brought power and wisdom to those same forebears through dreams, fasts, or periods of exile in the wilderness. Yet for something to become *at.óow* you must also get the present-day assent of other clans and peoples, often by giving gifts and hosting feasts, as in the story of the Shungukeidí Eagle. *At.óow* can be the crux of alliances and marriages; it can also be the cause of wars.

Philosophies of similar complexity bind together meaning and image in many of the world's cultures. The goal of such systems—to make a broad generalization—is to provide a conduit for travel between the visionary imagination, the political sphere, and the satisfaction of desire. None of the three is counted as sufficient in and of itself: you cannot just take an eagle as your crest because you had a vision; you cannot just covet an eagle because other people have it; but you cannot ask permission to have the eagle without first having had the dream and the desire.

In the 1930s, thanks to the efforts of Louis Shotridge and others, the art of the Tlingit and other Northwest Coast peoples helped launch a new phase in western modernism. It was in New York City that many European artists and thinkers first saw the creations of the Coast: they had come there as refugees from Hitler and the Second World War, and they spent their hungry afternoons in the ethnographic galleries of the American Museum of Natural History. André Breton and Max Ernst were astonished by what they saw there; Claude Lévi-Strauss was inspired by it to write a short article that contained, in embryo, much of his later thinking. After the exiles came the abstract expressionists. Mark Rothko tried to incorporate the stylized forms of Northwest flatline painting into his early amorphous organic shapes. Barnett Newman agreed to write the catalogue essay for a show of Northwest Coast art at the Betty Parsons gallery because the works left him breathless: only Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* seemed to him an adequate point of comparison for the tension and ecstasy on display.

These people had little contextual knowledge of what they were looking at, and inevitably projected their own anxieties and prejudices onto it. And yet, they sensed something important about those masks and boxes and clan hats—something which manifested as a great ache, a feeling that their own vocation as artists had left them incomplete. This they tried to convey in various groping ways, using the vocabularies they had to hand, whether of ancient Greece or Carl Jung. I believe that what they really saw in this Indigenous art—and what they yearned to manifest in their own—was a world where order and imagination were allies. I believe they intuited (and if so, rightly) that this was an art at once decorous,

political, consequential, diplomatic, high-stakes; and yet also flexible, individualistic, philosophical, prophetic, open to modification and revision by the dreams and visions of its originator. The art was the issue of an expressive system where the wildness of the dream and the pragmatism of politics could speak to one another productively, as equals.

The history of modernism and everything that flows from it might be described as a desperate bid to make the dreamlike and the political equal partners in the creation of the world—in other words, to fight capital's demotion of the dream into commodity, and fascism's manipulation of the dream into propaganda. This modernist struggle to recover the dream often involved leaning on other cultures, especially those deemed somehow "primitive," and so it is shot through with misunderstanding, appropriation, and sordid colonial fantasy. But this history nevertheless teaches us about a serious problem in the world as it exists today: namely that there is no good method for translating the private mythology of dreams into the public action of politics. Artists have produced, with great self-consciousness, a huge and ever-more variegated edifice for the representation of dreams, while the actual conduit between desire and action—the true locus of the political—remains obscene and out of sight. The pathway of human action has become a dark and disreputable organ snaking through the guts of the world, shuttling excrement between petty tyrants, unforgiving bureaucracies, black-box algorithms, and that huge mass of disorienting and easily manipulated wanting Simone Weil called The Great Beast. It is ironic, or perhaps inevitable, that the artistic project to merge the dream and reality is partly undone by an ideology of art

which insists on a special, privileged separation between representation and the world. Contemporary art has yet to find a way, despite decades of provocation and conceptualism, to breach this barrier. The dream remains imprisoned as if in a second envelope of sleep, so that it cannot penetrate meaningfully into life even when remembered.