

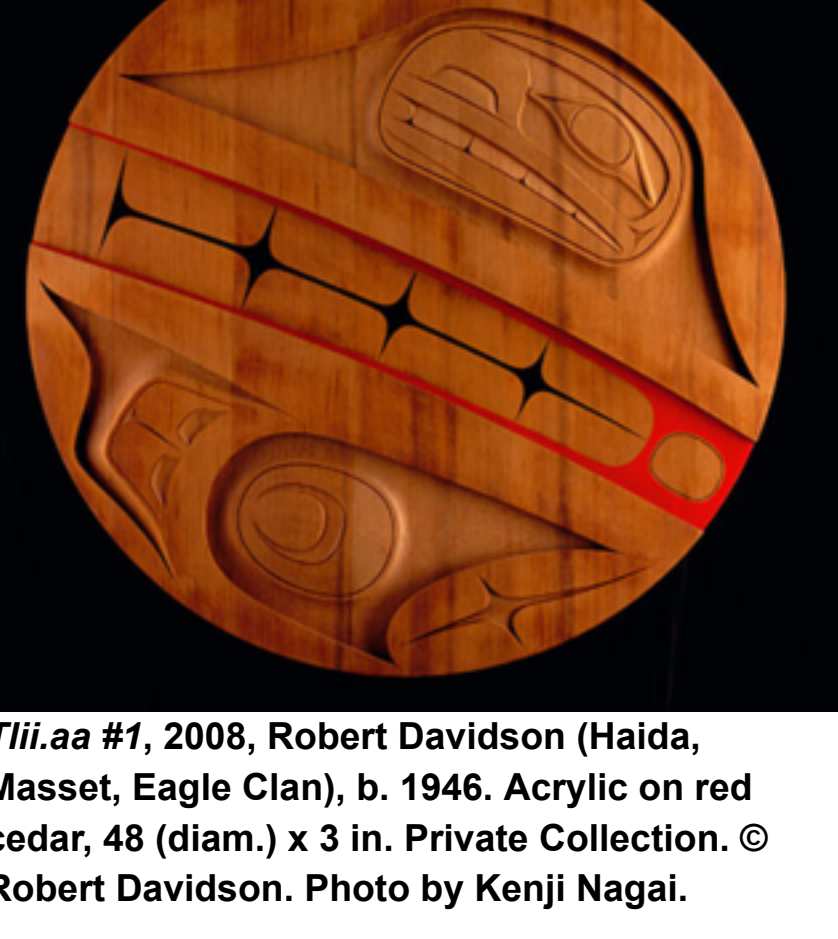
Life Lessons Learned from True Icon Robert Davidson

By Paul Niemi

True icons transcend time, history, and their contemporaries to achieve a mystique that is inexplicable. Their stature is also made stronger if they've been positive role models for others. Nelson Mandela, John F. Kennedy, and Mother Theresa come to mind. When I was 14, my idol was Jimmy Stewart, the quintessential nice guy actor of *It's a Wonderful Life* fame. The role of George Bailey was iconic, and people still enjoy the film today as if 1946 were just yesterday.

At age 24, while most of my peers were spending their money partying and going to rock concerts, I was contemplating buying art. Of course, I couldn't afford his work, but my idol, became (and remains) Haida master carver, painter, metalsmith, printmaker, and cultural leader **Robert Davidson**.

Davidson is well known among those in the art world, but he is still not a household name. I suspect more people will view him as an icon after they have had the chance to see **Robert Davidson: Abstract Impulse**, on view at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York. Organized by the Seattle Art Museum in collaboration with the National Museum of the American Indian, the exhibition in Lower Manhattan is the first major showing of Davidson's work since 2004. Curated by Barbara Brotherton of the Seattle Art Museum,



Abstract Impulse demonstrates what Davidson would call his "understanding of the Haida vocabulary to date." With work steeped in both Haida formline and his own distinct symbolism, the exhibition also features older works that lend context and reveal Davidson's love for and gradual move towards the more abstract side of Modernism. Undoubtedly, the show will undermine any remaining perception that Native art is "primitive" and will further cement the place of Haida art among the great traditions of the world.

How did Robert Davidson become my idol? It was the early 1990s, and I had just arrived in the Pacific Northwest. Galleries in Seattle, Portland, and Vancouver prominently displayed the work of Northwest Coast artists such as brothers Robert and Reg Davidson (Haida, b. 1954); Richard Hunt (Kwakwaka'wakw, b. 1951); George Hunt Jr. (Kwakwaka'wakw, b. 1958), Jr.; Beau Dick (Kwakwaka'wakw, b. 1955); and Dempsey Bob (Tahltan-Tlingit, b. 1948). There was an obvious grandeur and depth to the art, and I had never seen anything like it before. I began amassing catalogues, reference books, and postcards with historical and contemporary Northwest Coast art images. Their illustrations hung on my walls like posters of rock bands above a dormitory bed. Hours would pass as I regularly lost myself thumbing through pages of the books.

In 1994, my father surprised me at Christmas with an inscribed signed copy of Davidson's newly released book *Eagle Transforming*. Its vivid photography by Ulli Steltzer gave me my first glimpse into what Davidson's masks looked like on actual human beings. I was amazed by their size, and the images helped me make a mental connection between the works and the ceremonial context in which they belonged. The drama and life lessons cleverly embedded in his subject matter ignited my love for indigenous art. And while my life led elsewhere for more than a decade, my appreciation for Davidson's style, and Haida art in general, has never wavered.

It was thrilling to fulfill my dream of meeting Davidson at a Vancouver art opening last spring. Serendipitously, a year later I'm volunteering at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, helping to promote the show via social media. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to interview Davidson via telephone from his studio in White Rock, British Columbia, and to connect with him again at the New York opening of *Abstract Impulse*. While the opening was perhaps quite more subdued than a sold-out rock concert, in my head there were rotating stage lights, the collective roar of the crowd, and mental cigarette lighters swaying in the spirit of shared love for the work of a man who had a hand in reclaiming Haida art and culture and moving it forward.



Robert Davidson (left) and Paul Niemi during the opening of *Abstract Impulse* at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York.

My experiences with the museum come on the heels of a three-year detour in New Mexico that revived my passion for indigenous art. At a time that was economically difficult for artists, I had the opportunity to use my experience in public relations to help to find new means to promote Native art. In a short time I managed to absorb large quantities of historical and cultural knowledge and, most important, build scores of precious new relationships with Native artists. It's a beautiful life lesson in how things often come full circle and place people at the right moment in the time continuum.

When I was asked to write about Robert Davidson, however, I was skeptical that I could reveal anything new about the man who, in his own words is "pretty much an open book." In fact, when I posed the question, "What is something that most people don't know about you that you would want them to know?" it garnered a quiet, entertained chuckle as Davidson searched for something compelling to say. Nothing came to mind, which made my job even more difficult. But it was an education in Davidson's extreme humility. And while humble, Davidson has a clear sense of his achievements and place in the world.

The forward movement the Haida have made since the 1960s is an inspiring reminder to all of us just how quickly things can change, especially if we are fortunate and courageous enough, like Robert Davidson, to recognize the need for advancement.

That kind of courage is a transformation, a concept about which Davidson and I spoke at length. It happens as if a string is being pulled taut to open us to our conscience. Davidson describes it as "becoming who you were born to be."

Recalling a pre-missionary rite of passage for Haida boys, Davidson explained that the young men would venture off into the forest where "knowledgeable persons" would look after them and help them find their spirit. Afterwards, they would return to the village and be presented through song and dance. "The spirit that he is defined with will be his guide throughout his life," he told me. Davidson's spirit guide has been very good to him. "It seems like all the experiences that I've had and all the desires or dreams that I've had . . . they've all been part of the continuum of reconnecting with our history, our ceremonies." That reconnection was necessary to save traditions, to move his culture to a new place and position it for the future.

Davidson says that early Haida art was very sophisticated. Its vocabulary demonstrated a natural, fluid progression over time. Haida formline—a unique and purposeful system of ovoids, U forms, and S forms found in Northwest Coast art and carving—flourished until the mid-1880s. In our conversation, the term *vocabulary* came up a lot. It is integral to understanding Davidson's work, the history of Haida art, and the exhibition *Abstract Impulse*. Davidson contends that his generation "came into being in the nick of time," to recognize its vocabulary and discover the means to propel its movement ahead.

Haida history is difficult, but it is what brings the culture and Davidson to where they are today. In 1884, the Canadian government revised the *Indian Act*, discouraging First Nations arts and forbidding the practice of ceremonies, particularly the potlatch, a feast in which wealth in the form of dances, masks, and other privileges and objects was transferred between peoples to mark alliances or show prestige. On Haida Gwaii, an archipelago of islands 60 miles off the northern coast of British Columbia, traditions went dark for nearly a century. Children were sent to boarding schools, villages were ransacked, and precious cultural objects were destroyed or taken and sold to museums and collectors. Between 1884 and 1951, when the Indian Act was loosened, this disruption of families and communities and suppression of Haida culture made the creation of ceremonial items a largely futile task.



There is Light in Darkness, 2010, Robert Davidson (Haida, Masset, Eagle Clan), b. 1946. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 30 in. Kim and Tony Allard. © Robert Davidson. Photo by Kenji Nagai.

Robert Davidson was born in Hydaburg, Alaska, in 1946 (incidentally, the year *It's a Wonderful Life* arrived in movie theaters). As a child growing up in the village of Old Masset on Haida Gwaii, he remembers a few weavers and a handful of carvers who made argillite curios for tourists. It was a time when very little information about Haida and First Nations culture existed in school textbooks. So while Davidson knew he was Haida, he lacked the historical context within which to place himself. In a recent ArtTalk at the museum in New York, Davidson recounted playing cowboys and Indians as a child. He mused over the fact that he always wanted to be the cowboy for fear of being on the losing side. His uncle Reggie would remind him, "Robert, you know you're an Indian, right?"

Luckily for Davidson, he and his peers found themselves on the historical timeline living among grandparents, like Florence Davidson and Robert Davidson, Sr., who still knew the Haida language and some of the songs. The laws of Canada had so muted things that people were reticent to speak of the past. There existed repressed pain and sentiments about openly acknowledging the old ways. Traces of the past were found in weddings, memorials, and other events. Davidson recalled a family story about the time a totem fell in the village in 1905. The other clan made fun of it. In order to not lose face, the chief—Davidson's grandmother's uncle—invited the other clan to a "picnic." It was actually a potlatch in disguise.

His grandfather, Robert Sr., and father, Claude, taught Davidson carving skills. After leaving home for the first time in 1965 to finish school in Vancouver, he spent time at the Vancouver City Museum, where he saw numerous pieces created by his ancestors and worked with Bill Reid (1920–1998), an artist of Haida background. It was the first time Davidson discovered what "quality" was in Haida art, and it became obvious to him just how much more he had to learn about his people's ceremonies.

Up to then, he and the carvers of the day had learned by studying pictures of totems they saw in the three books on Haida ethnology by Marius Barbeau (1883–1969). After experiencing boxes and totems from the past, Davidson wanted to learn about the meaning and traditions behind them. "I was absolutely blown away," he says. "That prompted me to knock on every door in the village of Masset to see if they had anything of the old pieces." Disappointingly, he found only one storage box.

As if in response, in 1969 Davidson carved the now legendary *Bear Mother* totem with his brother Reg (interestingly, the year of Barbeau's death). He initiated a ceremony to raise the pole at Masset, because he finally understood the knowledge his grandparents' generations had carried with them. He wanted to give the elders the chance to celebrate openly, as he says, "in the only way they knew how." It was the first pole-raising on Haida Gwaii in 90 years and would mark the beginning of the end of the community's generations-long cultural dislocation. The pole-raising taught the self-described "smart aleck" kid, who thought he knew what art was, to connect with his people in a new and meaningful way, though he had no idea of its future ramifications. While it was initially scary for the elders to celebrate, Davidson says the response was very positive afterwards. It laid the foundation for him to learn to sing the songs that survived in Masset.

Nineteen sixty-nine was a year of cultural awakenings and tremendous change. In preparing for my interview with Davidson, I decided to ask him if he felt the pole-raising was as groundbreaking for humanity as the moon landing that same year. I was unsure where the question would take the conversation, but Davidson replied, "When the eagle lands, the Natives will rise again." Those words are from an ancient eastern Canadian tribal prophecy that Davidson said he was "amazed" to hear a few years after raising *Bear Mother*. "I feel that we're in tune with each other, and there are certain events that transpire, and those events make their mark in incredible change." It was an affirmation that, perhaps, he had fallen exactly where he needed to be in the historical timeline. As I held the phone to my ear, goose bumps filled my arms, and I was grateful I had chosen that question.



Fast Bird, 2011, Robert Davidson (Haida, Masset, Eagle Clan), b. 1946. Silkscreen print, 39 x 30 in. Private Collection. © Robert Davidson. Photo by Kenji Nagai.

For the next 12 years Davidson would go back and forth between Haida Gwaii and Vancouver, where he was living. Historically, Haida names had always been given publicly to children and grandchildren. On a regular basis Davidson says he would hear the elders complain that no one was being given their Haida names anymore. In 1981 he decided to host a potlatch and naming ceremony, to celebrate Haida traditions openly once again.

Davidson also opened up to me about his artistic process. In spite of the fact that he has taken traditional Haida art and redacted it into his own recognizable style, there appears to be no ego in its creation. When he works, he is not expressing his Haida nature, nor is he "expanding" Haida art. His work is about "expanding on his knowledge" of the vocabulary that he has learned up to this point. Being confident and comfortable with who he is and where he comes from makes ego no longer "part of my vocabulary," he explains.

From young man, to cultural leader, to contemporary fine artist who is always growing, Davidson says he'll die the moment he is satisfied with what he has done—and he notes that he wishes to live considerably longer. There has been a fluidity to his life. It comes as a result of hard work, open eyes, and courage. We live now in a time of great shifts with many uncertainties. While some of us might only dream of falling perfectly into history, Davidson's path can inspire each of us to build on a new vocabulary in order to bring meaning to our lives. He sets the standard for trusting our instincts, removing ego from the creative process, and positioning ourselves in the world as bridge-builders.

Davidson asserts there is still so much more "homework" to be done to bring the Haida vocabulary to the place it was prior to the mid-1800s. His words serve to teach all, especially younger generations, about the pitfalls of "leapfrogging"—of circumventing the building blocks required to achieve crucial aesthetics. He says, "It's important to understand the standard that was established and that is the foundation for growth."

Robert Davidson is proud that his work with the fundamentals has allowed him to pass the torch to his son Ben, a successful artist and gallery owner, and his daughter Sara, a teacher pursuing a Masters degree in literacy. We can only speculate what Davidson will come up with next in his continuing quest to express his understanding of the Haida vocabulary.

For visitors to *Abstract Impulse*, knowledge of the historical background that shaped the work offers a more meaningful experience, though it's not necessary. Davidson's work has a universal appeal that speaks to everyone in a different way.

In her essay in the exhibition catalogue, curator Barbara Brotherton asserts that early Haida art pieces possessed formline abstractions and reductions that could be seen as ambiguous and open to interpretation to suit appropriation amongst various clans. The ambiguities in Davidson's work will, no doubt, serve to connect people of all clans. And while his work is contemporary, he is emphatic that he will never stop using certain traditional elements, such as the ovoid, which took him 30 years to learn. He focuses on Haida art because he continues to see its potential, but he refuses to "imitate an old vocabulary."

Twenty minutes into a hike, Robert Davidson's father once told his young son "You have to look back once in a while to see where we came from, so we can always find our way back." "Relearning" their history is essential for the Haida, Davidson insists. The symbolism of looking back at times "will mark our trail forward." Wise words from a man who is an undisputed icon.

Robert Davidson: *Abstract Impulse* is on view at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York through September 14, 2014.

Paul Niemi is an arts and culture writer and blogger as well as a Museum Ambassador for NMAI-NY. The quotations in this article are from a phone interview Paul conducted with Robert Davidson in early April 2014.

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