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Daphne Odjig: A Great Indigenous Artist and Humanitarian Has Passed

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Abstract

On October 1st, an exceptionally talented and important Indigenous artist passed away at the age of 97: Daphne Odjig.

Keywords

Daphne Odjig, Indigenous art, Aboriginal art, culture

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Daphne Odjig: A Great Indigenous Artist and Humanitarian Has Passed

On October 1st, an exceptionally talented and important artist passed away at the age of 97: Daphne Odjig.

It would be impossible to recount to you how revolutionary she was, how much she contributed to building understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, and how much she gave to our collective culture through her amazing art.

Daphne:

Chi-miigwech for being a mentor.

Chi-miigwech for lending your artwork to our books and publications.¹

Chi-miigwech for what you have given everyone in this country and beyond.

I had the privilege to nominate and introduce her for an honorary doctorate at The University of Western Ontario eight years ago, in June 2008. As history would have it, at the same time the Prime Minister of Canada would deliver a long overdue and much anticipated apology for the history of forcing Indigenous Peoples of Canada into residential schools. Below I have reprinted the introduction I gave when she received the honorary degree because it was a time of happiness and acknowledgement, which I feel is respectful of this great human being, someone I think of as friend and mentor.

June 2008

“Mr. Chancellor, Honored Guests, Distinguished Colleagues, Graduates and Families, Dearest Daphne Odjig, The Museum of Civilization calls Daphne Odjig one of Canada’s most influential artists, instrumental in the development of contemporary Aboriginal art. We would add that she is a quintessential narrator of Canada’s cultural history.

She was born in 1919 and grew up in Wikwemikong, or WIKI as the people call it, describing herself as someone born with a paintbrush in her hand. “I lived for the Friday art classes at school,” she says. Originally, Daphne had hoped to be a teacher, but rheumatic fever cut her studies short. This was a life course event that was to give Canada, and the world, a truly a great artist.

Odjig has gone through several artistic phases: Beginning in the early days with realism, she quickly moved away from what she called the “rigid rules of this form” in order to paint more as she felt.

She is described by Vanderburgh and Southcott as moving from a self-taught realism to cubism, then to abstract expressionism, and the bold outlines of cloisonnism (Odjig, Southcott, & Vanderburgh, 1992). For those of us who have had the opportunity to view some of her magnificent achievements, we know she has been influenced by several schools including the art of the Indigenous West Coast and the styles

¹ Some of Daphne’s works appear as covers in our 10 volume series, *Aboriginal Policy Research* (see <http://thompsonbooks.com/higher-ed/aboriginal-studies/>).

of the Anishinabek. Her work is also influenced by Picasso² and incorporates unique features that link these diverse approaches and forms to the life breath of her Aboriginal roots.

But, personally, I see a powerful sense of women and family that tells us of cultures and understandings that we must embrace and come to comprehend. Many of her works portray visions of her peoples' history, which seem to be deeply personal expressions of her understanding of human truths in the context of her feelings of pain, anger, and hope—emotional experiences shared by her and this country's Aboriginal Peoples.

Sometimes history intervenes and circumstances demand that the best laid plans be set aside.

This is one of those instances and I must ask your indulgence while I take a moment to make some remarks that are not originally part of my citation.

I want to take you across three times in history: the late 19th century, 1978, and yesterday.

Since the late 1800's, many generations of Aboriginal children were taken from their homes, from their family, from their circles of care and cultures. Why? Why forcefully remove children from their rich and vibrant cultures and place them in the residential schools? These schools were often places of abuse and fear. The aim was to "take the Indian from the child" and in this way our country did terrible harm to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada.

Now let me take you to 1978 when Daphne Odjig finishes a work entitled, "The Indian in Transition" (Figure 1). This is a monumental work both in scope and size—at more than 8 feet by 27 feet—it hangs in the Museum of Civilization (Ottawa).

"The Indian in Transition" covers a sweep of history from pre-European contact to times still to come.³ Daphne first gives us a vision of an Aboriginal person playing a drum under the protective watch of the great Thunderbird. The image represents a strong Aboriginal culture held in place by collective understanding. A boat with Europeans arrives and the bow of their boat has turned into a serpent, which is an image of what is to come, but is also a bad omen in Daphne's Anishinaabe culture.

² Picasso once called her "a remarkable artist," and she was asked paint a memorial to Picasso by the Picasso Museum in Antibes.

³ Please note that the description of the painting above is not original to the author. It is borrowed from Lee-Ann Martin, the Curator of Contemporary Aboriginal Art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. She also holds a position at the University of Ottawa. Lee-Ann's interpretation has been printed in Jann Bailey's (2011) essay.



Figure 1. The Indian in Transition by Daphne Odjig.

As history passes, the painting depicts Aboriginal people seemingly trapped in a swirl of dramatic and unsettling change. Changes in governance, livelihood, social custom, and culture wreak havoc. Four otherworldly figures rise above a broken drum and a fallen cross. Out of this chaos, which depicts lost cultures and false or misguided religions, an Aboriginal person emerges, as in the beginning, holding and protecting a drum. As this person breaks free we see they are again protected by the Thunderbird.

Now let me take you to yesterday, where an apology was delivered in Parliament. An apology for the indefensible actions of forced assimilation that have led to pain, hurt, and misery for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people across Canada.

Let us all hope we can begin now to move to the last panel of your incredible work, “The Indian in Transition.” May we see the optimistic vision you have given us become a widespread reality.

I want to return to my prepared citation now.

This great Canadian, known affectionately as the grandmother of Aboriginal art, has many honors. I could not begin to list them. She was inducted into the Order of Canada in 1986, the same year she was chosen to be one of only four artists worldwide to paint a memorial to Pablo Picasso. She has been elected to Royal Canadian Academy of Art, has won the Canada Silver Jubilee Medal in 1977, a National Aboriginal Achievement Award in 1998, and last year a Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts. She has been honored by several provinces and her own communities, and has been the subject of more than 10 books and films.

I came to know this “grandmother of art” in more detail through my research partnership and friendship with her stepson, Dan Beavon. She has graciously allowed us to use her works on the covers of our books.

Daphne, with respect, I say thank you for bringing so much to all our lives, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Thank you for founding art galleries, starting schools, expressing our histories, and inspiring young and old.

Thank you for looking this country in the eye and daring us to understand.

Mr. Chancellor, on behalf of the Vice Chancellor and in the name of the Senate, I ask you to confer the degree Doctor of Laws, honoris causa upon Daphne Odjig.”

Jerry P. White

Acknowledgements and References

The above is not original work. This citation writer wishes to acknowledge that there are many texts, books, speeches, and tributes that provided the information used in this citation. Particularly influential were:

Bailey, J. (2011). Daphne Odjig. *Herizons*. Retrieved from <http://www.herizons.ca/node/481>

Boyer, B., & Podedworny, C. (2002). *Odjig: The art of Daphne Odjig, 1960-2000*. Toronto: Key Porter Books.

Odjig, D., Southcott, B., & Vanderburgh, R. M. (1992). *A paintbrush in my hand*. Toronto: Dundurn.

Special thanks for information provided by Lee-Ann Martin, Curator of Contemporary Canadian Aboriginal Art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (quoted in Bailey, 2011), describing her interpretation of “The Indian in Transition.” See also Native Online (http://www.nativeonline.com/daphne_odjig.htm) and Art Encyclopedia (www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/odjig_daphne.html)