

## **Crests on Cotton: “Souvenir” T-shirts and the materiality of remembrance among the Kwakwaka’wakw of British Columbia**

**Date :** May 31, 2008

*Aaron Glass, UBC*

Figure 1: T-shirt design by Beau Dick, distributed at his 1993 potlatch in Alert Bay, BC (photo by author).

A couple of years ago, at a conference on Native American art, I stood speaking with two colleagues, a Kwakwaka’wakw (Kwakiutl) scholar from Alert Bay, British Columbia—the primary site of my research since 1993—and a non-Native man who had once attended a potlatch there. This gentleman reminded the woman that they had previously met at this potlatch, which was hosted by Beau Dick, a prominent artist, as a memorial for his father. The man couldn’t remember the exact year of the event, however, so he asked his indigenous interlocutor if she recalled. “Let’s see,” she said, tilting her head back and gazing at the hotel ceiling, “what does it say on my T-shirt?” After a brief silence, I chimed in: “1993.” They both glanced at me. “I have the same shirt,” I said with a shrug. (Figure 1)

This paper examines the circulation of Kwakwaka’wakw T-shirts within larger visual economies of display. Specifically, I explore the role of printed T-shirts in facilitating social reproduction through the public articulation of memories and identities in diverse contexts of daily life and in the face of plural audiences. This entails a historical and classificatory exercise, as I relate different types of shirt to their contexts of production and exchange. I draw particular attention to T-shirts as

“souvenirs,” that is, as material forms that encourage individual memories for specific events, collective family and village commemorations, and public affiliations at varying levels of identification. To speak of T-shirts produced in First Nations communities is to track the indigenization of this technology of mass production and consumption, to trace its legacy and legitimacy within communities that have long been objectified by outsiders and that have witnessed their own art forms appropriated to sell everything from smoked salmon and mouse pads to the idea of province and nation itself.

Like other forms of visual display on the Northwest Coast, T-shirts play a mnemonic role, prompting the recollection and discursive recounting of the events marked by the shirt’s graphics or text. Unlike totem poles and crest tattoos, however, T-shirts allow for flexible affiliation as they can be put on and taken off as occasion merits or as personal membership in social groups fluctuates. As Georg Simmel (1904) would have appreciated, they permit the (post)modern individual wide latitude in his or her vestimentary constitution vis-à-vis social norms and fashions. Here, I focus ethnographic attention on non-ceremonial, everyday items of Kwakwaka’wakw clothing that are nonetheless highly significant as objective links to ceremonial names and titles, extended kin units, various organizations, and historical events. This paper addresses an essential—if mundane—form of modernity as it is indigenized and circulated through a local economy of gift exchanges, fundraisers, and thrift stores, where it materializes both the remembrance of local events and the remembering of socialities.

- The full article is published in [Museum Anthropology](#) 31(1): 1-18, 2008.

- For full color versions of the illustrations, please visit:

<http://museumanthropology.blogspot.com/2008/05/color-images-for-crests-on-cotton-paper.html>