Mildred Valley Thornton (1890-1967): Painter of the Native People

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'Chief Willie Sieweed, 1946' Mildred Valley Thornton

Mildred Valley Thornton (1890-1967): peintre de femmes indigènes

Thornton était une des rares femmes artistes qui ait voyagé seule dans des régions inexplorées afin de peindre les chefs indigènes et leur culture avant qu'ils ne disparaissent à jamais.

Of the few women artists who have travelled alone in the wilderness recording the lives and culture of the Native People of North America, the best known is Emily Carr. Of equal importance in portraying Canada's Native People, their way of life and their communities, is Mildred Valley Thornton. Unlike Carr, who did few portraits and rid her later work entirely of human figures, Thornton's primary concern was portraiture. Known as the 'lady who paints Indians', Thornton gained wide acceptance during her life. Today, however, her work is little known even in Vancouver where she lived and worked for more than thirty years.

Mildred Stinson was born on a farm in Dresden Ontario in 1890. During her childhood, she often came in contact with Indians who visited the farmers trying to sell their hand-woven baskets. Having been born female, she was not expected to carry on the burden of the family farm, and was sent to Olivet College in Michigan before World War I to study art. Later, she pursued her studes at the Ontario College of Art and the Art Institute in Chicago. She was not the only member of her family involved in art. Her grandfather, Edwin Longman had been an artist. Her aunt, Evelyn Beatrice Longman, a New York sculptor, was the first woman admitted to full membership in the National Academy of Design.

Unlike Carr, who decided upon the Native Indian theme for her painting while she was in Europe, Thornton seems to have believed since childhood that it was her destiny to paint the Native People. Her driving force was to preserve their way of life on canvas before it vanished altogether. In an interview, she once explained her interest in these people:

> They are so basic. There is in their character an acceptance of things as they are. They identify themselves far more with nature's forces than we do. I think it is this affinity they enjoy with animals and birds and all the life and growth around them, that attracts me so much to the Indians. Before the white man came, the Indian lived in total harmony with his environment, almost to a point of blending. It was many years ago, when I was living in Regina, I began to realize how fast the Indians are losing their old cultures. . . . I began to develop an uncontrollable urge to paint the Indians, and to record everything I could on canvas.[1]

Around 1910, Thornton headed West alone by rail in order to paint the Native Indians of the Prairies, settling in Regina to begin her work. She first established contact with the Native People by attending local fairs. Armed with paintbox and sketchboard, she would not ask potential sitters to 'pose' for her, but would request permission to paint them just as they were, whether sitting in the sun, working or smoking a pipe. When the Indians were suspicious of her and refused to be painted, she honoured their wishes; when they agreed to sit, she refused to take advantage of them and paid them.

Her primary concern as a painter was to record in portraits the leaders of the Native People whose lives were soon to become history. Many of these portraits are the only existing visual records of the important Indian chiefs. Her paintings reveal the dignity with which these leaders passed into old age, serene, peaceful and revered by their people. She respected these women and men as living links to our past, and transferred her respect to the canvas.

In order to locate these aged leaders, Thornton travelled throughout Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia for weeks and sometimes even months at a time. Of these trips which she continued until the end of her life, she said:

> I usually returned home with every canvas used and as much improvised material as I could acquire as well. I would have crowded six months' work into a month or so of effort, but it sometimes took me nearly six months to recover from the orgy of expended energy.[2]

The working conditions of these trips to paint the Plains Indians were far from ideal. She usually travelled alone, employing any available means – car, horse, train or ferry – to reach what were often remote locations.

She rarely used sketches, but worked directly with oil on canvas while in the wilderness. Two hours was considered a long time for a subject to be patient and remain still. More often Thornton was allowed considerably less time. These portraits, consequently, reveal the broad, swiftly executed brushstrokes which became characteristic of her style. The best description of her painting technique comes from Thornton herself:

> When I was painting an Indian wearing elaborate costume, I concentrated on the face, making hasty indications of colour and design in the clothing which I could finish later. Rarely did I ever touch the face again, and then only at my peril. There is absolutely no substitute for working directly from the subject in portraiture.[3]

While working on location, she often faced the problem of running out of materials. Paints could be mixed to supply a missing colour, but often cardboard, plywood, or any suitable available material would be substituted for sketchboard.

Thornton's records of these aged Native People were not visual only. She became friends with them and recorded a personal history of each of her subjects, along with any legends they might relate to her. Her award-winning book, *Indian Lives and Legends*, published in 1966, contains profiles and legends of the Native Peoples of British Columbia whom she met in the 1930's. A second volume dealing with the Plains Indians, exists in manuscript form, but has never been published. In her later life this process of information gathering was simplified by the use of a tape recorder. These unique tapes, containing old songs and legends, are in the collection of the Oral History Department of the Provincial Archives in Victoria.

In the mid-twenties, while living in Regina, Mildred met and married John Henry Thornton, a bakery manager. For many women artists, marriage has meant an end to their careers, but not for Mildred Valley Thornton. Due to the understanding and financial support of her husband, she was able to pursue her career with even more devotion. Somehow, she combined the seemingly incompatible tasks of caring for her family and continuing her extended painting trips. She once explained, 'I would bake for days and load up the fridge with food and leave him [her husband] to take care of the house and twins.'[4] Whenever possible she took her twin boys along with her on her painting trips. One of her sons recalls trips where mother and children would arrive at a village looking for a particular chief, only to discover that he had just departed. Although the Indians would caution, 'he's ninety-five, so he may be dead by now,' they would set off in pursuit, determined to locate their subject.[5]

The Thornton family remained in Regina until 1934 when the Depression forced them to move West. They resettled in Vancouver, where Mildred lived and painted the Indians of the British Columbia Coast until her death in 1967. By 1934, she had painted more than one hundred portraits and village scenes of the Plains Indians, all of which were brought with her to the Coast. Over the next thirty years she added depictions of special events and ceremonies such as the Sun Dance, paintings of the B.C. potlatches and weathered totems and many more portraits of Indian elders.

Like Carr, named Klee Wyck by her native friends, Thornton was honoured with Native names, five in all. The Kwakiutls gave her the name, 'Ah-oo-mookt' which means, 'the one who wears the blanket because she is of noble birth,' and made her a princess of the Eagle Clan. But the name she treasured most was 'Owas-ka-ta-esk-ean' given her by the Saskatchewan Crees in 1942; it means 'putting your most ability for us Native People.'

During the thirty years Thornton spent painting the Native Indians, she developed many close friendships with them, giving them and receiving in return many gifts. The gifts she received, along with artifacts she had purchased during her travels, including buttons, blankets, totems, carvings, baskets and masks, constitute a major collection of Native art, most of which now belongs to the Provincial Museum in Victoria.

Thornton's paintings brought her considerable renown during her lifetime. She exhibited her work across the country with the Royal Canadian Academy, Ontario Society of Artists, Montreal Art Association, and at the Canadian National Exhibition. Her reputation as an artist likely led to her appointment as the art critic for the *Vancouver Sun* (a position she held for sixteen years until her retirement in 1959). In recognition of her efforts to preserve the history of Canada's Native Indian culture, Britain made her a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in 1954. Other honours bestowed on her include presidency of the Canadian Women's Press Club and membership in the Native Sisterhood of B.C.

Thornton painted a number of landscapes and portraits which were not on the Indian theme. These were the only works she would sell, not because she received no offers to buy her Indian paintings, but because she refused to part with the works individually, believing they must remain together in Canada and preferably in B.C. She called her more than three hundred works, 'The Indian Collection,' and stored them in a Vancouver vault during her lifetime. Although she received offers to buy the Collection from West Germany, the British government and the United States, she would not allow it to leave the country because she believed it represented an integral part of our Canadian heritage.

Although she had the support of many M.L.A.'s and interested citizens' groups, the B.C. government refused to buy what has been called 'the most comprehensive collection of Indian paintings in existence,' and would only accept it as a donation.

Consequently, Thornton died a very bitter woman on July 27, 1967. At the time of her death, 'The Indian Collection' was being exhibited and enjoyed in Vancouver as part of a Centennial tribute to Canada's Native people. In her bitterness, Thornton had drawn up a will requesting that all her paintings be burned upon her death. Fortunately, this was not carried out.

The Collection has now been dismantled and dispersed. The National Gallery, the Glenbow-Alberta Institute, the McMichael Gallery and the Vancouver Art Gallery each possess a handful of her works. Others are being sold to private collectors.

It is ironic that Emily Carr's work was unknown during her life but after her death is acclaimed internationally; Mildred Thornton was honoured during her life-time and yet is almost unknown now. Significantly, the art of both women has not received the attention it deserves. Emily Carr's canvases are decaying in Vancouver for want of restoration funding and Mildred Thornton's unique collection has been dispersed against her will. It is interesting to speculate what would have happened to their works if they had both been men.

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1 Reg Ashwell, 'Tribute to a Lady who Painted Indians,' *The Vancouver Sun*, April 8, 1971, p. 5A.

2. Mildred Valley Thornton, *Indian Lives and Legends*, Vancouver: The Mitchell Press Ltd., 1967, p.xiii.

3 Ibid., p.xii.

4 Reg Ashwell, op. cit.

5 From an interview with Jack Thornton in Vancouver, December 2, 1978.