ELLEN NEEL

THE FIRST WOMAN TOTEM POLE CARVER

GALLERY GUIDE

JANUARY 14-APRIL 1, 2017

CURATED BY WILLIAMS LEGACY CHAIR DR. CAROLYN BUTLER PALMER, WITH ADVISING CURATORS DAVID A. NEEL & LOU-ANN NEEL
We welcome each of you to this very special exhibition. We wish to acknowledge and thank the Songhees, Esquimalt and W’SANEC First Nations for always making us feel welcome in their ancestral lands; and we extend our sincerest thanks to Carolyn Butler Palmer, Caroline Riedel, and all the staff at the Legacy Art Gallery for all their work and their expertise in making this exhibit possible.

In addition to her business and professional roles, Ka’kasolas, Ellen May (Newman) Neel was a mother, grandmother, aunt, and eldest of Charlie Newman (Nulis) and Lucy James’ (La’laxsa) three daughters - Ellen, Margaret (Peggy) and Louisa.

While the ‘Potlatch Ban’ was not removed from the Indian Act until 1951, Ellen, with her uncles Chief William Scow and Mungo Martin, and other Kwakwaka’wakw people living in the Lower Mainland continued to conduct ceremonies that served as an act of ongoing governance that continues through their descendants to this day.

Ellen mentored and taught about our art and our culture to countless school children, emerging artists, and the general public in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. She was a true visionary, well ahead of her time in the way she saw the future of Kwakwaka’wakw art; and she was always ready to take on a challenge – especially when it meant that more people could understand and appreciate the ancient art forms of the Kwakwaka’wakw and other First Nations across Canada.

As exhibitions such as this begin to acknowledge the important work she carried out in her lifetime, we hope that her work and her vision will continue to inspire aspiring and practicing artists to enthusiastically pursue their creative and artistic dreams, as this is what keeps our cultures alive generation after generation.

Lou-ann Ika’wega Neel and David Tla’tlaklis Neel
Advising Curators

As some of the names are repeated across the generations, we have created a colour-coded system of labels that appear throughout the exhibition. Each colour represents a generation of artists as represented in the family tree.

The traditional names held by each member of our family come from their lineage through the peoples.

Each name flows from our family’s Kwagiulth and Kwickwasutaineuk Origin Stories, and each carries a range of roles, responsibilities, and obligations, balanced with rights, privileges, and prerogatives. As a family of artists, we continue to practice the art forms and cultural traditions of our people, and the contexts within which these roles, responsibilities, obligations, rights, privileges, and prerogatives are exercised.

Our names are an inherent part of our peoples’ social, political, economic, cultural, intellectual, artistic and legal systems, and we are each very thankful to our old people for allowing us to carry these names until it is time to place them on the next generation.

AN UNBROKEN LINE OF ARTISTIC TRADITION
ABOUT THE FAMILY TREE
THE NEEL FAMILY TREE

CHARLIE JAMES Yakuglas
1867 - 1938
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk

ELLEN MAY NEEL Ka'kasolas
1916 - 1966
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis

DAVID LYLE NEEL Tla'tla'klalis
1937 - 1961
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis

JOHN EDWARD NEEL Maqmawisem'game
1939 - 1971
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis

ROBERT CHARLES NEEL Xi'ganus
1939 - 1995
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis

CORA PHYLLIS NEEL Kwa'gaala
1941
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis

THEO ELLEN NEEL Lla'la'ixa
1942 - 2007
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis

PAMELA NEEL Gwa'gwa'da'gaala
1945
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis

AMY THERESA NEEL Ne'gega
1947
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis

DAVID ANTHONY NEEL Tla'tla'klalis
1960
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis

LOU-ANN FAITH NEEL Ika'wega
1963
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis, Mamalikullu

TRAVIS DAVID NEEL Pa'na'kwala
1969
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis

EDWIN NEEL Kasolas
1990
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis, Nuu cha nulth

ELLENA NEEL Ka'kasolas
1992
Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, 'Namgis, Nuu cha nulth
This exhibition commemorates the 100\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the birth of artist and carver Ka’kasolas, Ellen May (Newman) Neel (Kwagiulth, Kwickwasutaineuk, and ‘Namgis) and the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of her death. Born in Alert Bay (1916), she learned to carve from her grandfather, the eminent master carver Yakuglas/Charlie James (c.1867-1938) during the 1920s, at a time when the First Nations art of carving was criminalized under Canadian federal law. By the mid-1940s, Neel was raising her children in Vancouver, and within a decade she had established her own carving business and retail outlet, “The Totem Arts Shop” in Stanley Park where she taught her children to make art. Neel launched her carving career during the prohibition of the potlatch—a period when carving was rare and the idea of a woman carver was new. Neel’s revolutionary work has prompted many to call her “The First Northwest Coast Woman Carver.”

Adamant that First Nations art not be relegated to the past, Neel embraced new materials and forms as a means of expressing the living nature of her artwork. Over the course of her career, Ellen Neel carved small-scale and monumental poles, masks, and regalia. She also designed and created items such as table runners, coasters, trays, skirts, and designs for Royal Albert China and extended her repertoire to include wearable art such as bags, blouses, and skirts. Neel’s monumental poles were raised in France, Korea, Denmark, the United States, and in the Canadian cities of Stratford, Edmonton, and Vancouver.

In addition to art making, Ellen Neel held public office and was a regular contributor to The Native Voice news magazine. Her extensive body of work was featured in many local, national, and international newspapers and magazines. She is especially well-known for her keynote address delivered during the first B.C. Arts and Welfare Society conference at the University of British Columbia in April 1948.

Neel was no stranger to Victoria and Vancouver Island. Most notably, she participated in Mungo Martin’s 1953 potlatch, the first public potlatch since Dan Cranmer’s in 1921, which resulted in a number of people being prosecuted and sent to jail. Within this context, Martin reaffirmed Neel’s potlatch name Ka’kasolas and placed the names Tla’tlaka’lalis, Maxmawisem’game, Xi’xanus, Kwa’xala, La’laxsa, and Ne’gega upon her children David, John, Robert, Cora, Theo, and Theresa.

Although Ellen Neel was a prolific artist, she died in 1966 at only 49 years old. This exhibition seeks to honour her life and work and the artistic legacies that live on in the work of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren as represented by the different sections of this exhibition that include: Family Crests, Dzonaqua, Jewelry, the Wonderbird, Totemware/Totemland, Textiles, Silkscreen Prints, and Politics.

This exhibition celebrates a family of artists over six generations, including Ellen Neel and her grandfather Charlie James; Ellen Neel’s children: David Neel Sr., John Neel, Robert Neel, Cora Neel, Theo Neel, and Theresa Neel; Neel’s grandchildren: Tla’tlaka’lalis /David A. Neel, Ika’wega/Lou-ann Neel, and Pal’nakwala/Travis Neel; and two of her great-grandchildren Kasolas/Edwin Neel and Ka’kasolas/Ellena Neel.

Dr. Carolyn Butler Palmer, Curator
Williams Legacy Chair
Associate Professor, Art History and Visual Studies
IMAGE  ELLEN NEEL, KWAGUITL, FROM ALERT BAY AT WORK IN HER STUDIO, C. 1956, COURTESY OF LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA
During the time that I have been selling some of my work and the course of meeting some the people who deal in Indian artwork, I have come across some very odd ideas concerning it. When I was asked to speak at this conference, I saw a golden opportunity to present my side of the picture.

The point of mine, which I shall endeavour to illustrate, deals with the idea that efforts should be confined to the preservation of old work. This idea is a great fallacy where the art of my people is concerned! If our art is dead, then it is fit only to be mummified… packed into mortuary boxes and tucked away in museums!

To me, the art is a living symbol of the gaiety, the laughter, and the love of colour of my people—a day-to-day reminder that even we had something of glory and honour, before the white man came. Our art continues to live, for not only is it part and parcel of us, it can be a powerful factor in combining the best part of Indian culture into the fabric of a truly Canadian art form.

When the white man came, he brought with him saws, axes, hatchets, steel chisels and knives—paints in brilliant white red, green and yellow. There was no involved question of propriety as to whether the new tools should be used… rather they were seized on, avidly, and with startling results!

The golden age of totem art has arrived—totems sprouted at every village where formerly there had been few—Chiefs vied with one another in the giving of potlatches, making work for artists who flourished and plied their trade. New forms evolved… in short, the art was a living art. New techniques were adopted, new materials incorporated, new ideas were welcomed and used. I can find no instance where an idea, a material, or a tool was not used simply because it had not been used before.

Unfortunately, then began a period in which this growing and living manifestations of my people’s artistry was partially destroyed. Because of economic factors too numerous to mention at this time, an attempt was made to suppress the potlatch. The suppression of the potlatch emasculated the creative ability of the whole nation. The production of art was so closely coupled with giving of the potlatch that, without it, the art withered and almost died.

Were it not for the interest created by the tourist trade, the universities and the museums, we would no longer have any of our people capable of producing this art.

We are gathered here at this conference to attempt to bring about, among other things, a resurgence of the creativity of the Native people. I strongly emphasize a point and, here, make it also my plea:

If the art of my people is to take its rightful place beside other Canadian Art, it must be a living medium of expression.

We, the Indian artist, must be allowed to create. We must be allowed new and modern techniques… new and modern tools… new and modern materials. For, in every instance, creative capacity has increased following the discovery and use of better materials. I don’t mean that we should disregard the old, only that we should be allowed the new.

I’d like to take the time to briefly examine some of the problems that I’ve encountered in attempting to produce my work.

In my family, carving was a means of likelihood. My grandfather was Charlie James—the famous ‘Yakuglas.’ He carved for over forty years. To his stepson Mungo Martin, he taught the rudiments of his art… and we, his grandchildren were literally brought up amongst his work. Totems were our daily fare. They bought our food and furnished our clothing. There was no problem of sale, since his work was eagerly sought after.
THE WONDERBIRD LEGEND

White Spot Restaurants commissioned Ellen Neel to carve The Wonderbird Pole in 1953. The pole was also featured on the company’s menus along with “The Wonderbird Legend,” authored by Ellen Neel.

“The Wonderbird Legend” was printed on the cover of White Spot menus and read as follows:

In the beginning, the men of the Pacific Coast were brown men and the totems were brown totems made of brown wood. With the coming of the white men came other white things also and among these white things was a white rooster.

The white rooster saw the birds and beasts so wonderfully carved on totems of the Kwakiutl and the Tsimshians. It became his great desire to be the first rooster to be placed on the top of the totem poles. He asked Chief Che-Che-Kin how this could come to pass.

“You will have to do something that no other rooster has ever done before,” said the Chief. “You will have to do something that neither Kolus, the Thunderbird, nor Hwahwasa the silver salmon nor Gwa-tum the great whale has ever done.”

Then the white rooster thought and thought in fact he thought so hard that he brooded. Now everybody knows what happens when a chicken broods. He lays an egg. When the white rooster thought so hard that he became broody, he did something that no rooster has ever done before. He laid an egg. A big white egg.

The white rooster was very proud of what he had done, and he took the egg to Che-Che-Kin. I have done what no rooster ever did before, eh, Chief…”

Quoted from the front page of a White Spot menu from the 1950s.

Now the situation is different. Curio dealers have so cheapened the art in their effort to profit, that I doubt if one could find single household where the authenticity of the art is important to them.

I have strived in all my work, to retain the authentic, but I find it difficult to obtain a portion of the price necessary to do a really fine piece of work.

This being so, it’s difficult to blame my contemporaries for trying to get enough from their work to live on… though I believe they are wrong in cheapening their heritage. Certainly, great work could be produced by the Native people if a true appreciation of their art could be installed into the general public. Only when there is an adequate response to efforts to retain the best of our art will it be possible to train the younger generation to appreciate their own cultural achievements.

As far as applying this art to everyday living… I believe it can be used to stunning effect on tapestry, textile, sports wear and in jewelry. Many pieces of furniture lend themselves admirable to Indian designs. Public buildings, large restaurants and halls have already begun to utilize some of this art. We need only to have some sort of organization to which architects, builders and manufacturers could go to guarantee authentic products. Both my husband and myself stand ready to contribute… we have plans, and we are willing to share.

I strongly believe that the Indian people, as a whole would gladly share… if only the dignity and honour of their personal crests could be preserved. And so we look confidently to the future… to bring a fuller, a better, a more dignified existence to the Native people of Canada. I personally look forward to being a part of the movement which brings these things to pass.

Ellen Neel
Keynote Address for the first B.C. Arts and Welfare Society Conference, University of British Columbia — April 1948
LIST OF WORKS

CHARLIE JAMES

Miniature Pole - Thunderbird & Sea Bear, c.1930, carved and painted yellow cedar. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

ELLEN NEEL

Bags - Two Handle & Drawstring Styles - Thunderbird Design, late 1940s-early 1950s, silkscreened coated burlap, designed by Ellen Neel, likely silkscreened by Theo Neel. On loan from Pamela Creasy Neel

Coasters - Killer Whale Design, late 1940, silkscreened coated burlap. On loan from Pamela Creasy Neel

Placemat and Napkin Set - Thunderbird Design, late 1940s-early 1950s, silkscreened cotton. On loan from Pamela Creasy Neel

Earrings - Thunderbird Design and Brooch - Otter Design, late 1940s, red cedar and acrylic paint. On loan from Pamela Creasy Neel

Figurine with Candy Dish Souvenir, Thunderbird Design, c.1945-1960, carved red cedar, acrylic paint, and pressed glass dish. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

Otter Figurine, c.1955, red cedar and dark stain. On loan from Travis Neel

Hand Puppet - Bear, c.1964, brown terry cloth, cedar and acrylic paint. On loan from David A. Neel

Hand Puppets - Tlisala (The Sun), Dzonaqua, Old Man, Tsukum (Cedar Man) c.1950s-1960s, red melton and navy blue wool, plastic buttons, cedar and acrylic paint. Gift of Judith Lawrence to UVic Legacy Art Galleries

Letter Opener - Woman from the Bear Clan Holding Sculpin c.1950s, carved red cedar with acrylic paint. On loan from Pamela Creasy Neel

Mask - Dzonaqua, 1962, carved red cedar. On loan from Travis Neel

Miniature Pole - Thunderbird, c.1945-1960, carved red cedar. On loan from Travis Neel

Miniature Pole - Thunderbird and Dzonaqua, c.1945-1960, carved red cedar. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

Miniature Pole - Thunderbird and Dzonaqua, c.1945-1960, carved red cedar and acrylic paint. On loan from Pamela Creasy Neel

Miniature Pole - Thunderbird and Man, c.1945-1960, black resin cast. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

Miniature Totemland Pole (Thunderbird, earth and human figure), c.1955-1960, carved red cedar and acrylic paint. On loan from Pamela Creasy Neel

Totemland Pole (Thunderbird, earth and human figure), c.1955-1960, carved red cedar and acrylic paint. On loan from David A. Neel

Notecards- Kolus (Baby Thunderbird), Hok Hok, Raven, Squatting Thunderbird, c.1948. Private lender

Pendant & Brooch - Thunderbird and Whale, 1966, red cedar and dark stain. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

Scarf with Crest Design, c.1950s, serigraph on silk. Courtesy of the Royal BC Museum

Scarf with Family Crest, “An Original Totem-wear Design,” c.1950s, serigraph on silk. On loan from Cora Beddows

Scarf with Illustrated Clan Legend, “An Original Totem-wear Design,” c.1950s, serigraph on silk. On loan from David A. Neel

Scarf with Split Raven Design, c.1950s, serigraph on silk. Canada Council Acquisition Grant, Acquired from the collection of Vincent Rickard, UVic Legacy Art Galleries

Serigraph printing screen & wooden frame for Eagle Design, c.1950s. Courtesy of the Royal BC Museum


Whale, c.1940s, carved red cedar. On loan from Travis Neel

Wonderbird Totem, 1953, carved and painted red cedar. Commissioned by and on loan from the collection of White Spot Ltd.

ELLEN NEEL’S CHILDREN

DAVID NEEL, SR.

Dzonaqua (Northwind), c.1959, acrylic on board. On loan from David A. Neel

Thunderbird and Whale, c.1959, red cedar and stain, restored by David A. Neel and Edwin Neel, 2016. On loan from David A. Neel

JOHN NEEL

Wall Plaque - Kwagiulth Salmon, c. 1960s, carved and stained red cedar. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

Pendant – Copper with Inlaid Stone, c. 2002, sterling silver. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

ROBERT (BOB) NEEL

Bracelet - Killerwhale, 1978, sterling silver (1.75” wide) and Bracelet – Killer Whale, 1981, sterling silver (1.5” wide). On loan from Lou-ann Neel

Pendant - Abstract Form-Line Feast Spoon, 1978, sterling silver. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

Pendant – Sun (Tlisala), c. 1970s, sterling silver. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

Pendant - Thunderbird, 1977, sterling silver and 14k gold. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

Miniature Feast Spoon, c.1970s, carved red cedar. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

THEO NEEL

Blouse with Design Based on an Ellen Neel Original, n.d. Private lender.

THERESA NEEL


Reprint of Ellen Neel’s Split Raven Design, 1972, serigraph on paper. Courtesy of the Royal BC Museum

ELLEN NEEL’S GRANDCHILDREN

DAVID A. NEEL

Humming Bird and Bear Necklace and Earrings, gold and sterling silver. On loan from the artist.

Orca and Wolf, 2015, acrylic on canvas. On loan from the artist

Mask of Ellen Neel, 1990, carved alder with acrylic paint, abalone shell earrings. On loan from Camosun College, Department of Visual Arts


The Trial of Tears, 1991, serigraph on paper. Private lender
**LOU-ANN NEEL**

*Dzonaqua*, 2015, Frosted acrylic. On loan from Lily Erford

Pendant - *Salmon Trout Head*, 2002, sterling silver with onyx. On loan from the artist

*Pendant and Earrings - Wolf*, 2016, sterling silver. On loan from the artist

*Four Noble Women*, 2000, serigraph on paper. Gift from the collection of George and Christiane Smyth, UVic Legacy Art Galleries

*Weaving of Four Realms*, 2007, serigraph on paper. Gift from the collection of George and Christiane Smyth, UVic Legacy Art Galleries


**TRAVIS NEEL**

*Pendant - Thunderbird Copper*, 2013, sterling silver. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

**ELLEN NEEL’S GREAT GRANDCHILDREN**

**EDWIN NEEL**

*Ghost Mask*, 2013, carved red cedar. On loan from the artist

**ELLENA NEEL**

*Kawaii*, 2015, acrylic on canvas. On loan from the artist

*Remember the Children*, 2015, mixed media on melton wool. On loan from the artist

**CANADIAN MINT COLLECTOR COINS**


**UNKNOWN ARTISTS**

*Bracelet - Eagle Design and Brooch - Thunderbird Design*, sterling silver jewelry worn by Ellen Neel, c.1945. On loan from Lou-ann Neel

**PHOTOGRAPHS AND MOVING IMAGES**

*Crowd Watching Kwakiulth Carver Ellen Neel Working on a Totem Pole*, 1953, AM281-S8-: CVA 180-2315

*Ellen Neel, Mungo Martin, and Group After Potlach*, December 14, 1953, Courtesy of the Neel family

*Ellen Neel Presenting ‘Totemland’ Pole to Ballerina Maria Tallchief* c.1956, Vancouver Public Library Archives, William Cunningham, photographer for The Province, VPL 62667, Reproduced with permission of the Vancouver Public Library

*Kwakiulth Carver Ellen Neel Carving a Totem Pole*, 1953, Courtesy of City of Vancouver Archives, AM281-S8-CVA180-2361 and 62

*Neel Family Working to Complete Poles for Westmount Mall*, Edmonton, 1955, Courtesy of Vancouver Public Library

*Portrait of Theresa Neel with Dzonaqua Mask*, n.d., Frank Swannell photographer, Image I-68947. Courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives

*Westmount Mall, Ellen Neel Poles*, Edmonton, c. 1955, Courtesy of Provincial Archives of Alberta

*Westmount Mall, Ellen Neel Pole in Blanket*, 2015, Courtesy of Andie Palmer

Film excerpt from *The Totem Carvers*, Jack Long film-maker, 1957. Courtesy Travis Neel
The Neel and Newman families wish to acknowledge and thank the Coast Salish peoples for always making us feel so welcome in their ancestral lands. Our families and communities have been connected for many decades, and we continue to work together to transfer the artistic and cultural teachings of our respective nations to the next generations of artists and cultural leaders.

There are many individuals who have helped transform the idea of an exhibition about Ellen Neel into a reality.

The Williams Legacy Chair would like to thank the members of the Neel and Newman families for allowing works from their personal collections to be shown in this exhibit; for their generosity, encouragement, knowledge, sense of humour, and for being a family of artists. I extend my thanks to Ellen Neel’s daughters Cora, Pamela, and Theresa, grandchildren David, Lou-ann, and Travis, her great grandchildren Ellena and Edwin; and to Elders Lily Erford, Vera Newman and Chief Edwin Newman for their guidance, help, and support.

We would also like to thank individuals at the University of Victoria for their support of this project.

**FACULTY OF FINE ARTS**

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Gillian Booth  
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Ava Hansen, Emerald Johnstone-Bedell, Amy Smith, and Lorilee Wastasecoot  
*Curatorial Assistants*

I am especially grateful to the individuals and institutions who have lent images and objects in support of this exhibition:

- British Columbia Archives
- Camosun College
- City of Edmonton Archives
- City of Vancouver Archives
- Judith Lawrence, Donor
- Library and Archives Canada
- Rick Erickson, Lender
- Royal British Columbia Museum
- Vancouver Public Library
- White Spot Ltd.

And finally, to Michael Williams’ bequest to the University of Victoria for making this exhibition possible.

**Dr. Carolyn Butler Palmer, Curator**  
*Williams Legacy Chair, Associate Professor  
Art History and Visual Studies*

**Lou-ann Ika’wega Neel and David Tla’tlaklalis Neel**  
*Advising Curators*