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**“More surreal than the Surrealists”
Vancouver Art Gallery Exhibition Highlights the Surrealist Fascination with
Indigenous Art of the Pacific Northwest**

VANCOUVER, BC – It is said that when Surrealist André Breton first saw an indigenous mask from the Pacific Northwest, he called it “more surreal than the Surrealists.” During the 1930s and 40s, Breton and many of his Surrealist colleagues were intrigued and became avid collectors of this art and, in some cases, visitors to British Columbia and Alaska. For the first time in an exhibition, *The Colour of My Dreams: The Surrealist Revolution in Art* brings to light the Surrealists’ fascination with First Nations art.

The Surrealists’ passion for Pacific Northwest First Nations art began in New York, where many artists fled as Europe slid from the First World War into fascism and a new conflict. Surrealists were drawn to the ‘authentic’ quality, inventiveness of form and visual brilliance of First Nations art. Some of the movement’s members collected, wrote about and even exhibited their own work alongside First Nations art from British Columbia and Alaska. To Breton, the turn toward so-called primitive art and thought was a necessary response to the “great social and moral crisis” of the era. Breton and other Surrealists saw Europe and the West more broadly as a failed society, where the triumph of rationalism brought conflagration and vast human suffering. The Surrealists – including Max Ernst, Enrico Donati, Kurt Seligmann and Wolfgang Paalen – saw something in the Aboriginal art of the Pacific Northwest which they felt held the secret to revolutionizing what they viewed as the depleted Western imagination. Said Breton in 1946, “today, it’s above all the visual art of the red man that lets us accede to a new system of knowledge and relations.”

The Colour of My Dreams includes a spectacular Kwakwaka’wakw headdress from Alert Bay, British Columbia, which once belonged to Breton; five Yup’ik masks from Alaska, two of them formerly of the collection of artist Enrico Donati; and many other remarkable works – all displayed near the masterworks of the Surrealists who collected them. The Alert Bay headdress was first created to be danced by a Kwakwaka’wakw chief in the Peace Dance. It was confiscated in 1922 by the Canadian government after being used in a potlatch – a traditional native feast – which was then a banned ceremony. The headdress made its way to New York by various sales and was purchased by Breton in 1964. Breton’s daughter Aube Elléouët-Breton returned the item to the Kwakwaka’wakw in 2003, where it is now part of the permanent collection of the Umista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay.

The Yup’ik people live in southwestern Alaska, and created masks which were danced in the *quasgiq* or men’s communal house during the winter to help portray encounters with creatures in the material and the spirit worlds. On exhibit as Yup’ik Complex Mask, one of the Donati masks is known to the Yup’ik as “The Mask that Brought the South Winds.” Another depicts a central concept of Yup’ik cosmology: the shaman’s journey to the spirit-world in search of good fortune for his people in the coming year. Donati bought these masks in the 1940s, and they hung in his studio for more than sixty years, inspiring his art. Two of the Donati Yup’ik masks in the exhibition recently made international news when they sold for a record-breaking \$4.6 million at auction. Additionally, the exhibition displays the remarkable notebook of Surrealist associate Robert Lebel, replete with ethnographic drawings of works collected by the artists.

The small New York gallery of Julius Carlebach was a treasure trove for the Surrealists’ collecting passion. Max Ernst, who liked to purchase a work of North American or



Kwakwaka’wakw
Yaxwiwe’ (Peace dance
headdress), c.1922
maple, abalone, paint, cloth,
ermine fur, sea lion whiskers
Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver
Art Gallery

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY
750 Hornby Street, Vancouver
www.vanartgallery.bc.ca

MEDIA CONTACTS

Carolyn Jack
Communications Manager
604-970-3234
cjack@vanartgallery.bc.ca

Dana Sullivant
Director of Marketing and
Communications
604-662-4721
dsullivant@vanartgallery.bc.ca

Oceanic art each time he completed a canvas, first discovered Carlebach's in 1941 when he saw a carved Haida spoon in the window. Ernst became a regular customer and soon brought many of his Surrealist colleagues to Carlebach's to buy masks and other items for their own burgeoning collections. Surrealist associate Isabelle Waldberg wrote in 1943, "We threw ourselves into the poetic atmosphere of the Eskimo masks: we breathe in Alaska, we dream Tlingit, we make love in Haida totem poles. Carlebach's on 3rd Avenue has become the place of our desires."

For two of the Surrealists, painters Kurt Seligmann and Wolfgang Paalen, the fascination extended beyond intellectual interest to real world exploration. In 1938, Seligmann and his wife Arlette spent four months in northern British Columbia. Working for Paris' Musée de l'homme, Seligmann acquired ceremonial objects and a sixteen-metre Wetsuwet'en totem pole, which caused a sensation when first exhibited in Paris. He interviewed elders, recorded stories and myths, drew maps and images of poles, and took photographs. He later published some of his writings. Seligmann's seminal travels are illustrated in *The Colour of My Dreams* by a selection of never-before-exhibited documentary photographs of his trip to British Columbia.

Inspired by Kurt Seligmann's journey to the Pacific Northwest, Austrian Wolfgang Paalen made a similar trip in 1939. Paalen, his wife Alice Rahon and their friend Eva Sulzer travelled up the coast to Alaska, and met with renowned British Columbian artist Emily Carr several times while visiting Victoria. As he described in a letter about the journey to André Breton, Paalen was overcome by "the feeling of a long march through a seclusion, deeper than that of a forest..." The scenery reminded him of what had already emerged from his own imagination onto canvases like *Voyage Totémique*.

Colin Browne's insightful essay "Scavengers of Paradise" in the newly-published book for *The Colour of My Dreams: The Surrealist Revolution in Art*, brings into focus the Surrealists' enduring and complex relationship with this art. In his essay, Browne outlines the many ways that the Surrealists engaged with First Nations art objects – as collectors, as buyers and suppliers to museums, and as exhibitors – and assesses how to consider this engagement today.

"Where some see a profound appreciation for the ceremonial art of indigenous peoples," writes Browne, "others find misguided Eurocentric amateurism or, even worse, an ignorant, paternalistic form of appropriation, the familiar utopian projection of social, political and religious renewal onto North American Native culture... But (the Surrealists) also actively campaigned against French imperialism and colonialism and boycotted the lavish 1931 Exposition Coloniale in Paris. Breton declared his position clearly in 1945: 'Surrealism is allied with people of colour, on the one hand because it has always been on their side against every form of white imperialism and banditry, as demonstrated by the manifestos published in Paris against the Moroccan War, the Colonial Exhibit etc; on the other hand because there are very deep affinities between so-called 'primitive' thought and the Surrealist thought: both want to overthrow the hegemony of consciousness and daily life, in order to conquer the realm of revelatory emotion.'"

The Colour of My Dreams catalogue devotes an entire section to exploring this important component of the exhibition, with essays by Colin Browne, Andreas Neufert, Yves Le Fur, Marie Mauzé and Robert Houle.



Yup'ik
Complex Mask, 1800-1905
wood, feathers and white and red pigments
Private Collection, Courtesy
Donald Ellis Gallery, Dundas,
ON and New York, NY. Formerly
Enrico Donati Collection.

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