



## BIOGRAPHY



### Daphne Odjig

Odjig was born in 1919 on the Wikwemikong Reserve on Ontario's Manitoulin Island to an Odawa father and English mother. Her artistic training began when rheumatic fever forced her to leave school at age 13. At home, her grandfather Jonas, a stone carver, and father Dominic nurtured her talent for drawing. Sometimes Jonas told traditional Potawatomi stories while they sketched and painted. Though she would spend her early adulthood disconnected from her heritage - in large part an effort to avoid racism - she never stopped making art. Art would become the most significant line connecting the phases of her life. In the exhibition catalogue, co-published by the Gallery and the AGS, Devine writes that, "The stories as much as the curvilinear drawing style she learned from her stone carver grandfather during her convalescence influenced Odjig's aesthetic and metaphysical concerns throughout her life."

Odjig was formally recognized as an artist in 1963 when she was admitted to the British Columbia Federation of Artists. The work that opened this door, the 1962 oil painting *Theatre Queue*, is telling: it has been described as an expressionist urban landscape depicting Odjig's cultural isolation. She was once quoted regarding this time in her life in a profile in *Equinox* magazine: "I so badly wanted to be able to say to you, 'I'm Indian, I was born on a reserve.' But because of the situation, I couldn't do that..."

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By the mid-1960s she and her husband Chester Beavon had moved to northern Manitoba where he worked as development officer in the community of Easterville, where Cree from the Chemahawin had recently been relocated. She created a series of highly detailed, pen-and-ink drawings depicting community life. She sketched dog teams, cabins, fishing yawls, and such locals as Verna George and Patsy Wood. In an interview with *Tawow* magazine, she spoke of her concern over the loss of traditional ways of living: "These portraits are not figments of my imagination, they are real people and actual places. These I want to live forever through the medium of art."

Her art changed. She began depicting allegories and legends and illustrated a collection of school readers called *Nanabush Tales*, published in 1971. *Tawow* magazine suggested that her acrylic painting *Thunderbird Woman* (1971) expressed "something of the violence and intensity" of the figure in the legend, who is transformed to a powerful creature, half-woman, half-bird, after being slain by a jealous man.

During this period Odjig's style was most closely associated with Norval Morrisseau's; the two, apparently working at first unbeknownst to one another, were seen as evidence of an "emergence" - a cultural shift, a new consciousness. But Odjig soon turned to history, becoming one of the first Aboriginal artists to address the colonial and post-colonial horrors visited upon her people.

Odjig would come to create legend paintings, history murals, erotica, abstractions, and landscapes using a range of techniques and materials but settling on acrylic as her medium, the one she would push hardest and furthest. The result: an oeuvre and a voice that cannot be characterized as purely Aboriginal, Canadian, or European in influence. Her work is now in private and public collections across Canada. Odjig is a member of the Order of Canada and widely considered the "grandmother of Aboriginal art" in this country. She ran an Aboriginal art gallery in Winnipeg for many years, and founded the short-lived but influential group known as the "Indian Group of Seven," which counted Morrisseau, Carl Ray, and Alex Janvier among its members.

For Odjig, true artistic freedom arrived as the 1970s came to a close. "She began to exhibit work that didn't necessarily speak about either her 'Indianness' or the history of her people, but about her feelings as a human being," says Bonnie Devine. This evolution can be seen in such works as *Two Ladies Quilting* (1982). "There's a thematic shift here, a different visual language," says Devine. "The space is metaphoric. The geometric shapes spread over the picture plane suggest people pulling together disparate elements and creating something cohesive."

It's the line, of course, always the last element applied to an Odjig, that brings it together in the end, and that Devine wishes she could extract from the paintings to see what tales it might tell on its own. But perhaps divorced from the interiors and colours it encloses, the line would lose its power. Odjig once said that the line brings her paintings to life. "If you looked at my painting before I got my formline on, you probably wouldn't distinguish what I'm doing. But by the time I got my formline on, everything is in balance, and it's there."

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Without the pieces of the painting - the pieces of life - to connect, the line has nothing to accomplish, nowhere to go. Odjig must know this better than anyone.

*Excerpts from Odjig's Lyrical Line by Anita Lahey, an article first published in the fall 2007 issue of Vernissage, the magazine of the National Gallery of Canada.*

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