**Artist:** Chief Henry Speck - U’dzistalis (b. 1908 in Tlawit’sis. (Kwakwaka’wakw) community of Kalugwis, on Turnour Island, BC; d. 1971, Alert Bay, BC/Né en 1908 à Tlawit’sis. (Kwakwaka’wakw) community of Kalugwis, on Turnour Island, BC; d. 1971, Alert Bay, BC.

Born in 1908, Henry Speck was raised in the customary practices of his Nation. Previously referred to as Kwakuitl, the Kwakwaka’wakw Nation is a hereditary chieftainship and Speck followed his father, grandfather and great grandfather as chief, carver and dancer. In 1922 at the age of 14, Henry Speck was sponsored by his uncle, Chief Bob Harris as an initiate in the prestigious Hamatsa Society\(^1\) who practiced winter ceremony and dance. Speck was a fisherman in addition to being an artist until his father passed and he took up the role of chief. Henry Speck began painting when he met Gyula Myer, artist and gallerist, at Alert Bay. Myer, a collector in North West Coast art, encouraged Speck and others to experiment with painting on paper. According to Todd Ayotte, Associate Director, Derek Simpkins Gallery of Tribal Art, this was when the Kwakwaka’wakw ‘graphic tradition’ would develop.\(^2\) Interestingly, however, Speck draws from a long history of graphic painting on house screens, blankets, masks, boxes, etc. and it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that this was the beginning of an Kwakwak’wakw art history developing alongside existing traditional knowledges and cultural histories. Concurrently, Speck was one of the earliest artists to produce prints from his paintings through the New Design Gallery.

Speck continued to paint, carve and compose and teach ceremonial dance until his death in 1971. Through carving, dancing and painting the masks and creatures invoked in Dance, Speck’s practice was certainly interdisciplinary. The characteristics of Speck’s drawings refer directly to carving and painting traditions in relief and three dimensions. However, their depiction on a 2 dimensional plane with minimalist compositional strategies to indicate depth of field, perspective and movement, emerges out of the shift, in Northwest Coast contemporary art in the 1950s and 60s towards 2 dimensional translation of traditionally 3D works. Indigenous artists, alongside their non-Indigenous contemporaries, continued to explore customary practice through fusions of traditional aesthetics and formalism.\(^3\) In the context of Indigenous art history, Speck’s intersections between Kwakw’wakw cosmology and modernist aesthetics are seminal to the development of contemporary Northwest Coast Art.

Speck’s drawings are both documentary and abstracted: documentary, in that they represent cosmological creatures, what is made and danced by Kwakwaka’wakw artists, and they are

---


abstract in their dislocation from that reality floating in the white space of the paper. *Sea Eagle* is similar to the recently acquired *Double Headed Serpent* (46053) in that it represents, not a dance mask, but *Sea Eagle – Kwi-gwis*, a cosmological creature whose domain is the sea bottom. Indeed, *Kwi-gwis* translates from Kwak’wala into English as “eagle on the sea bottom.”¹⁴ The Sea Eagle is most often associated with stormy seas whirlpools and tides and is frequently depicted in transformation dance masks. They are said to appear to particular ancestors as visions, often with a song. The person who had the vision would carve a mask, compose the song and then share the experience in dance.⁶

Chief Speck painted several sea eagles, many seem to appear more like monsters than eagles. Interestingly, the work under consideration here lacks the characteristic dorsal fin creature that emerges from the back and rests atop the head, giving it more the appearance of an eagle. In the context of Kwi-gwis interaction with ancestors discussed above, it is interesting that Speck would paint the creature itself, in addition to carving and paintings of the masks.

Please cite in the following manner:


---


⁵ Macaulay Fine Art & Co. detail about the work. Email correspondence, Nov 5, 2015.