

*Totemic Landscapes and Vanishing Cultures
Through the Eyes of Wolfgang Paalen and Kurt Seligmann*

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The Surrealists established the importance of Oceanic and North American Indian Art—mainly Inuit, Northwest Coast and Southwest—in the 1920s. While Max Ernst and André Breton traveled through the Southwest in the 1940s, during their American exile, two members of the Surrealist circle, the Swiss painter Kurt Seligmann (1900-1962), and the Austrian-born artist Wolfgang Paalen (1905-1959) visited the Northwest Coast, respectively in 1938 and 1939. Both not only showed a strong interest in collecting artifacts but were also fascinated by Native American mythology and art, and their relationship to totemic thought. While the Surrealists did not leave a large body of publications explaining their relationship to Northwest Coast art and culture, the various documents left by Seligmann and Paalen allow us to delimit three implicit themes in their work as described below. This paper focuses on their writings, published and unpublished, and their photographic documentation as well as their own collections of artifacts. It examines from an anthropological perspective their visions of Northwest Coast art and cultures, which undoubtedly contributed to the development of their sensitivity to the outside world. In that framework, their scholarly contribution and treatment of ethnological data appear independent from their artistic practices. (Fig. 1) Two distinct figures come to light: Seligmann as an ethnographer in contrast to Paalen as a theorist. While they may differ in their conception of totemic landscapes, they share a common view on the future of the Northwest Coast cultures.

Discovering Northwest Coast Art

As early as the 1920s the Surrealists were attracted by Oceanic art but they

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Fig. 1. Kurt Seligmann, *Totems I*, 1938, india ink with feather brush and color on glass. Dimensions unknown. © 2008 Artists Rights Society

also appreciated Northwest Coast and Inuit (Eskimo) plastic expressions. The map entitled “The Surrealist Map of the World,” published in a special issue of the Belgian journal *Variétés*, (1929) reveals the geography of their imagination. In the Northern Hemisphere, Alaska, home of the Inuit and the Tlingit, and the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii), inhabited by the Haida, are given prominence as well as Labrador and Greenland. At that time, collections of Northwest Coast and Inuit artifacts were rather scarce in France, but the Surrealists became familiar with the art of that region during their trips to Great Britain and Germany where they were able to see some of the best pieces in ethnographical museums. They also got acquainted with Northwest Coast art through the anthropological publications of the Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology that could be bought in Paris and in other European cities. The poet André Breton and the writer Paul Eluard managed to assemble fairly important collections that they acquired from antique shops in London or Berlin, as there were very few objects from this area on the French market. In response to financial hardships, Breton and Eluard auctioned their “primitive” art collection at the Hôtel Drouot in July 1931. The sale catalogue entitled *Sculptures d’Afrique, d’Amérique et d’Océanie* shows that they were able to build a modest collection of Northwest Coast objects—33 pieces in total, among them six masks, seven carved horn spoons, five model totem poles, four argillite pipes and

other small sculptures.¹ During the thriving years of Surrealism, the strong interest in primitive art was expressed in individual or collective activities such as collecting, exhibitions, and publications of non-Western material in art magazines and journals such as *Documents* (1929-1930) edited by Georges Bataille, only briefly linked with the Surrealist group in the mid-twenties. Two significant books based on Northwest Coast art were published in Germany at that time: *Tlingit und Haida. Indianerstämme der Westküste von Nordamerika* (1922) by Ernst Fuhrmann based on the collections of several German museums: Hamburg, Dresden, and Bremen as well as the Museum of Natural History in Vienna.² Leonard Adam's *Nordwestamerika Indianerkunst* (1923) presented the Jacobsens' collections from the Berlin museum.³ Several years later, the anthropologist Franz Boas published his *Primitive Art* (1927) in Oslo.⁴ Among several exhibits, a major show, *L'Exposition surréaliste d'objets* (1936), staged by Breton at the gallery of the famous art dealer Charles Ratton, featured a seemingly heterogeneous grouping of Cubist and Surrealist works, ready-mades, found objects, curiosities of natural and artificial manufactures, and pieces from Oceania and the Americas.⁵ The previous year Ratton had organized in his gallery the first exhibit entirely dedicated to Eskimo and Northwest Coast art, which showed several dozens of pieces bought from George Heye, the founder of the Museum of the American Indian in New York.⁶ Within the Surrealist circle, the "discovery" of Native American art had occurred collectively as well as independently. Seligman arrived in Paris in 1929. He already knew the artist Serge Brignoni and within a few months he met Max Ernst, Jean Arp and, in 1932, Breton and other members of the Surrealist circle. Whether he had been exposed to Northwest Coast art in Swiss museums during his youth is not well established. He was of course aware of the collecting and exhibiting activities of the Surrealists in Paris, but first of all he was very enthusiastic about Adam's article published in *Cahiers d'art* on "Sculptures en bois de l'Amérique du N-O."⁷ On the other hand, Paalen was familiar with the Berlin Royal Museums' collections and probably also with those in Munich where he studied in the late 1920s, as well as those at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna. Paalen's interest in primitivism and America was rooted in German popular culture, which claimed a special relationship with the Indians and the New World. Germany had also a strong tradition of native performances or *Völkerschauen* that staged native specimens and native dances and crafts.⁸

Paalen also settled in Paris in 1929. Being close friends, Paalen and Seligmann were exposed to the intellectual and sensitive ambiance of the Parisian avant-garde circles, which influenced their tastes and inclinations in terms of their relationships to primitive art. In his introduction to Paalen's exhibition at the Galerie Renou et Colle in 1938, Breton poetically praised the Austrian-born artist's strong ties to the

Northwest Coast:

Le secret de Paalen est d'être parvenu à voir, à nous faire voir de l'intérieur de la bulle. La fenêtre donnait sur une place hérissée de mâts totémiques; non loin de la ville au nom magique: Vancouver couvert par le tambour des castors.⁹

In any case, Seligmann's idea to undertake a voyage to the Northwest Coast was triggered by his Surrealist environment;¹⁰ so too must have been Paalen's initiative to travel to British Columbia and Alaska, following in his good friend's steps.

A Trip to the Northwest Coast

Kurt Seligmann and his wife Arlette left for Canada in June 1938 and traveled to British Columbia with a mandate from the Musée de l'Homme (in Paris) to bring back artifacts from this part of the world, poorly represented in the museum's collections.¹¹ Seligmann decided to settle in the Upper Skeena region. His choice was probably influenced by the ethnologist Marius Barbeau at the Canadian National Museum, a well-known figure who had already contributed to the museum's acquisition of a Nisga'a mortuary pole, known as the "Bear pole."¹² Moreover Barbeau had won a reputation for his inventory of Gitksan totem poles and his involvement in their conservation and restoration. He helped to set up a program based upon the idea of endangered native heritage. The main goal was to salvage totem poles because of their great value for promoting tourism in this region and generating revenues after the completion of the rail line from Edmonton to Prince Rupert in the late 1910s. The numerous Gitksan totem poles were particularly important because they were located on tourist routes and visible to the railroad traveler. By the same token, totem poles came to represent the symbols of Indianness for tourists. Native monumental sculptures were regarded as icons of British Columbia and were incorporated in the national heritage at a time when Canada was building its national identity.¹³

Seligmann stayed nearly four months in the small Gitksan community of Hazelton, which allowed him to settle into the situation. He left the area after having secured several ceremonial artifacts and a totem pole from the Wetsuwet'en village of Hagwilget on the Bulkley River, just a few miles from Hazelton.

In 1939, Wolfgang Paalen followed the Swiss painter's path to the New World. Fleeing Europe on the eve of World War II—his final destination was Mexico City—he dedicated several months to detour through British Columbia and Alaska in the company of his wife, the poet and painter Alice Rahon, and his friend

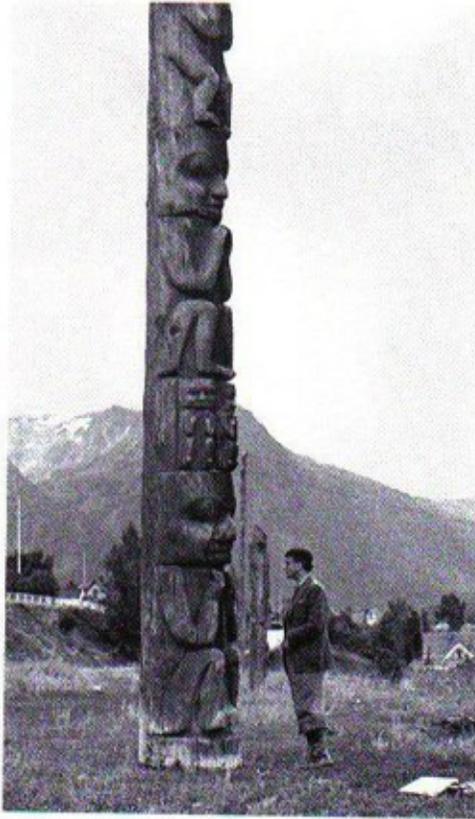


Fig. 2. Arlette Seligmann, Kurt Seligmann in front of a Gitksan Totem Pole, British Columbia, 1938
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and patron, the Swiss photographer Eva Sulzer. From New York via Montreal Paalen reached Ottawa, then Winnipeg and Jasper before hitting the Skeena River, where he only stopped a short while. He went on to Ketchikan, Sitka, Juneau and Wrangell (Alaska). En route to Victoria, he visited the Queen Charlotte Islands, home to the Haida, then stopped in Alert Bay, Gwayasdums (Gilford Island), and Village Island, three communities located in the territory of the Kwakwaka'wakw. In Victoria he met with the painter Emily Carr, well-known for her paintings of Northwest Coast totem poles, and the ethnologists G.T. Emmons and William Newcombe, with whom he corresponded while he was writing his essay on Totem Art.¹⁴ Like Seligmann, Paalen undertook his journey as a representative of the Musée de l'Homme. This allowed him to get some help from the National Museum in Ottawa to set up his route in British Columbia. A letter of recommendation from the Department of Indian Affairs facilitated his ability to meet with local Indian



Fig. 3. Eva Sulzer, Wolfgang Paalen painting in front of Tsimshian totem poles, Skeena River, B.C., 1939 © 2008 Eva Friedrich

agents and to visit native reserves in British Columbia.¹⁵ During this journey, Paalen managed to assemble a collection of exquisite pieces, some of which were published in the “Amerindian Number” of *DYN* in 1943 as well as in the exhibition catalogue *El Arte Indígena de Norteamérica* in 1945.¹⁶

Seligmann, the Ethnographer—Paalen the Theorist

As aptly noted by Stephan Hauser, Seligmann was fascinated both by Singhalese and Northwest Coast mythology and their “totemic meaning,” which accounted for the representation of the early state of mankind when men and animals were one species or when men were able to overcome their “bestial state” to create a human society.¹⁷ As for Northwest Coast mythology, Seligmann was struck by narratives that staged characters endowed with the capacity to transform themselves into various beings—human and non-human and vice versa—a process that was materialized on monumental sculptures called totem poles. He above all appreciated the carver’s skill to make these figures visible and alive:

Usually totem poles, [he wrote], face the water: carved figures, animals and monsters, with a blank gaze, look as if they are meditating. To understand their beauty they have to be seen in

their environment; the mysterious powers they give out, the enigma of their wide open eyes staring at the snowy horizons, and dark borders.¹⁸

The acquisition of a totem pole was not an easy undertaking, as Seligmann had to face the villagers' resentment to part with their family heritage: the Gitksan had a few years earlier resisted the restoration program—carried out jointly by the National Museum, the Department of Indian Affairs and the Canadian Railroad—for fear of being deprived of their hereditary rights at a time when the potlatch was banned, dancing prohibited, and land claim negotiations dismissed by the Canadian government. Donald Grey, the wet'suwet'en (Carrier) chief once described the rather paradoxical politics of the Canadian government towards native art and culture:

Quite recently missionaries burnt our poles. Today the government protects our relics and priests don't touch them anymore. They consider them as heraldic poles deprived of magic.¹⁹

Moreover, two years before his arrival in the region, a flood had inundated Gitksan villages and damaged many poles. Following this event, a spirit of renewal arose which led to the restoration and the ceremonial re-erection of some of the old poles by families who had the privilege to do so.²⁰ In that context, Gitksan people wanted to keep their poles.

Whatever the difficulties were, Seligmann set his heart on the oldest and best preserved of four poles still standing in Hagwilget, remarkable for "its beautiful grey copper brown changing patina." His favourite, the so-called Kaiget pole, was worthy of being salvaged despite its deteriorated condition.²¹ With the moral support of Marius Barbeau and the help of the Indian agent at Hazelton he was able to secure the 16 meter pole from the village of Hagwilget. The pole is well-known to Parisians as it has been erected in front of the Musée de l'Homme since January 1939. It was reported in an article by the French Surrealist poet Benjamin Péret appearing in *Paris-Soir* (January 21 1939) that it was "The Tallest Totem Pole in Europe."²²

During his stay among the Gitksan and Wetsuwet'en, Seligmann behaved as an ethnographer. He interviewed native peoples, recorded several myths and legends, and took notes and photographs. He also sketched heraldic poles. The acquisition of the pole made him further aware of the stakes at work concerning claims of ownership. He attended several meetings to conclude the agreement with a payment of Canadian \$100 to be divided between six claimants. Furthermore to ward off the dramatic events that surrounded the removal of the Kaiget pole, he agreed to be



Fig. 4. Kurt, Seligmann Maps , Hagwilget, location of Chieddem Skaniisht pole. © 2008 Canadian Museum of Civilization

ritually adopted by the clan of the original owner through a symbolic marriage to a deceased woman of this clan.²³

Seligmann's scholarly work is honest and reputable. An unpublished typescript—untitled, undated—accompanied by maps of the Indian territory, drawings of Hagwilget showing the exact location of the poles and photographs of his informants and of the owners of the pole, etc.—can best be described as a short monograph of the Gitksan-Wetsuwet'en people.²⁴ It contains most of the information that would appear in his papers of 1938 and 1939. His major publication in the *Journal de la société des américanistes* (1939) reports the circumstances of the acquisition of the pole, and its history. It describes the various figures carved on it and their meaning in relation to the myth associated with it. The paper also comments on the carving style. Whether insecure about his real knowledge of native culture, or respectful of his informants' traditions, Seligmann never fails to provide their names as resource people. In the review *XXe siècle* (1938), he published a verbatim transcription (in broken English) of the myth that goes with the Kaight pole as he recorded it from Chief Donald Grey.²⁵ The recognition of a native person as an author should be credited to Seligmann's field practice. His third paper entitled "Entretien avec un Tsimshian" appeared in *Minotaure*, a journal "devoted to articles and artworks by or about the Surrealists." It recounts a conversation between Donald Grey and himself about European and Gitksan mythology, and how women are treated by monsters in mythic times. It is worth mentioning that the conversation reported by Seligmann displays an intercultural dialogue sustained by a reciprocal curiosity for each other's cultures.

By contrast, Paalen seems to have stayed aloof from local Indians, even while he used and credited Kwakiutl artist James Speck's Killer Whale watercolor for the cover of *DYN*'s "Amerindian Number." In his "Voyage Nord-Ouest," he does



Fig. 5. Kurt Seligmann, Kispiox totem pole, published in *Minotaure* 12-13 (May 1939). © 2008 Artists Rights Society

not record any specific intercourse with natives. It may well be that villages were deserted as people had gathered along the coast to work in canneries. In any case, it is my contention that Paalen was more interested in the Northwest culture as an object of study rather than with living people in a poor economic predicament. His reflection on Northwest Coast culture draws on written documentation as well as on objects rather than on fieldwork observations. As a fervent collector, Paalen is more concerned with scouring every curio shop he happens to discover, and hunting for artifacts rather than with recording myths and talking to people. As a matter of fact, Paalen's "diary" is full of notations about his latest acquisitions:

Very beautiful Haida mask. Beautiful thunderbird mask. Rain. Found a beautiful copper plate at Heilbronner's, smaller than the one without an etching, from Winnipeg, but with a beautiful engraved design, bought for 26\$. Also bought a necklace made of whalebone —necklace which Giacometti could have made while he was creating *The Palace at 4 pm*.

Evening, around 7 o'clock in Ketchikan. Lovely little port, bustling with activity: a curio-shop [sic] decorated with whalebones. Pruel's store. Large ceremonial hat with a fish design on it, which he does not want to sell; a simple box [sic]: \$ 20. Large copper plate [sic], the design entirely damaged, one side replaced: \$75.

In Sitka, he wrote:

Haley, an old gold digger, calls out to me in the street, he has heard that I'm looking for "Indian relics" [sic]. Seems like a wheeler-and-dealer. For \$ 30 he sells me a carved whalebone, very beautiful old piece. Very difficult to determine what it could have been used for (Rasmussen, in Wrangell, will tell me later that he believes it was a charm belonging to an "Indian Doctor" [sic]). A very old piece, made from a bone which had not been boiled [...]. Bought a bowl made of whalebone, a wooden ceremonial hat (most beautiful) and a very beautiful Tlingit headdress, from an Indian chief married to a white woman. Lovely wooden chest at Haley's.

He concluded,

Works of art are traps set for life – if the trap is well set, life is snared within it forever.²⁶

Paalen also recorded that he had found, at the back of Walter C. Waters's store in Wrangell, the marvelous "house front" which became one of the most outstanding pieces of his collection, now in the Denver Museum of Art.²⁷ He was so avid for artifacts that he felt no shame in acquiring masks and other items of "great rarity and antiquity" he had seen excavated by Waters and his sons from a shaman's grave with his own eyes. What we now consider immoral was still at that time a current practice.

Paalen's collecting activities were based on a profound and sincere appreciation of Northwest Coast art—he enjoyed being surrounded in his home with works of art that he praised in his writings because of their beauty and their magic agency; and in the same way as Breton and other Surrealists, he was struck by the poetic import that Northwest objects were able to convey to him.

Paalen had prepared himself for the Northwest Coast journey. While in New York he had seriously studied the rich collections of Northwest Coast artifacts at the American Museum of Natural History. On May 29, 1939 he wrote to Breton, "Indian art museums are incomparably magical" ("Les musées d'art indien sont d'une incomparable féerie").²⁸ Two months later from Vancouver (August 21, 1939), just before leaving for California, Paalen sent a letter to Breton in which he explains the compelling call which drew him to the Pacific Northwest:



Fig. 6. Eva Sulzer, Interior of W.C. Waters Trading Post, Wrangell Alaska, 1939. © 2008 Eva Friedrich

Really off for Mexico, all arrangements made to leave from New York, the old longing for those regions of more than elective affinities took over. I looked and saw intensely. Some documents, several findings and, I think I have arrived at new ways of looking at this art, which is much greater than we suppose in Europe, the awareness of a long walk in a deeper darkness than that of the forest, which would allow me to catch sight of the last ray of one of the most amazingly splendid cultures in an impregnably wild nature—here we are at the end of our journey to the North-West.²⁹

His journey was rather fruitful as it somehow enhanced his way of looking at Northwest Coast art, a deep insight strengthened by his impregnation with the impressive natural environment. Paalen certainly wanted to share his meditations and experience with his fellow artists, poorly read in the cultures of the Northwest Coast. He did so through the publication of the journal *DYN*, which much better served Surrealist views on American Indian art than *VVV* a journal of “Poetry, plastic arts, anthropology, sociology, psychology” edited by Breton, Duchamp, Ernst and David Hare. *VVV* offered very limited room to anthropology, unlike Paalen’s *DYN*, read by young New York avant-garde artists Jackson Pollock, Adolf Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman.³⁰ As pointed out by Jackson Rushing, “Paalen had a sustained interest into the spiritual dimension of Native Art and expressed the idea that an understanding of myth and totemism was necessary to the development of a new consciousness for modernity.”³¹

In his well documented essay “Totem Art,” published in the “Amerindian Number,” a special issue of *DYN* (1943), Paalen explored the foundations of Northwest Coast art. The third part of “Totem Art”³² is a study of its own kind



Fig. 7. Wolfgang Paalen, “Totem Art” essay, *DYN* 4-5 (December 1943).

influenced by a psychological approach grounded in an evolutionist framework, with a Surrealist resonance already expressed in Breton’s Second Manifesto (1930). Breton explicitly emphasized that the impossible synthesis of apparent opposites in the Western world was achieved in the art of the so-called primitive peoples, in which there was no separation between the material and the immaterial, real life and dreams, two contradictory states which together can be conceived as expressing a “kind of absolute reality,” or “surreality.” Paalen held that to understand Northwest Coast art “we must enter into the world of the totem.” The fact that each thing in the so-called pre-individualistic societies is imbued with a “vital essence” explains in archaic societies, according to Paalen, “the facility of totemic identification which does not know the distinctions [sic] between human and animal traits”; “[...] all pre-individualistic mentality in whatever race, not distinguishing clearly the subjective and the objective, itself identifies emotionally with its environing world.” Paalen added: “And it is this affective identification which creates the magic climate in which totemism is to be found.” Rather than providing a general definition of totemism, Paalen focuses on how totemism is expressed in native societies. According to him, totemism linked to the integration of supernatural forces in human life is expressed, in various performances and artistic productions, through emotional mimetism.³³ However, as aptly remarked by Amy Winter, Paalen revised the Surrealist discourse as he “clearly cautioned against the ‘animistic theory which has not understood because it seeks to homologize pre-individualistic thought with occidental dualism’”;

for Paalen what seems to us dualistic in primitive thought should be viewed as an unstable equilibrium between complementary forces, which indeed are not clearly exclusive of one another.³⁴ In any case, Paalen as a man of his time considered that totemism “corresponds to a certain developmental stage of archaic mentality” and failed to view totemism as the expression of a specific relationship between man and nature that serves as a classification scheme; in doing so he confined the phenomenon within an evolutionist framework established by earlier scholars which associated totemism and magic thought. However, like other artists, the word “primitive” did not have a derogatory meaning; on the contrary the “primitive” world was envisioned as a desirable alternative to the “civilized,” as reiterated several times by Breton and the Surrealists.

Paalen’s perspective on Northwest coast art is to the anthropologist of the utmost interest. It is commonly known that Northwest Coast art has partly to do with the representation of the process of transformation between men and animals, and with making unseen things visible. For Paalen

Totem Art, which is essentially viril [sic], rarely creates monsters, those abortions of the imagination. In the Totemic world in which the animal is considered equal to man, the zoomorphic figuration, the mixture of human and animal traits is in no way repulsive.³⁵

Paalen further remarked that style develops more slowly in primitive societies than in Western societies as art in the former is “a collective task” whereas it is an “individual creative process” in the latter.³⁶ In reconsidering artistic creation, Paalen strongly stated in “The New Image,” the first paper to open the first number of *DYN*, that the notions of “beauty” or “ugliness” “are by no means universal but characteristically limited to a certain part of occidental culture.” He further brilliantly remarked that “the great anonymous Indian sculptors of the Northwest Coast, for instance spoke of their work in terms of ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’” which means this very conception “implies their perfect interrelations with the fundamental problems of the community which produces them.”³⁷ It may well be as suggested by Winter that “he propos[es] a greater role for art than decoration, entertainment, commodity and status symbol, or utility.” But if we analyze his statement in the Northwest Coast art context, it may as well mean that for an object to be “right” is to “look good.” As the Haida artist Bill Reid once observed about the craftsmanship of a canoe:

One characteristic of Northwest Coast art is paradoxical: things were

very functional, yet function was never permitted to interfere with aesthetics. [...] The sea produced the aesthetic because not only the canoe had to be functional, it had to be beautiful to be [...] If it looks good, it's good.

For an object to be “right” is to be “well made” in the sense that the design or figure carved on it should be imbued with some kind of charge that gives life and power to the images which in turn exercise agency and affect the people who will be in contact with that object.³⁸

While declaring that totemism is strongly rooted in social life, Paalen maintains that on the Northwest Coast contemporary totems degenerated into crests or “coats of arms,” and as a consequence lost their significance. But at the same time he argues that totem poles “form the vertebral columns of myths and landmarks of social life.”³⁹ Paalen’s outline on the antiquity of totem poles, and his research on 18th-century travelers’ accounts are worth considering. They give consistency to his essay and contribute to a coherent picture of Northwest Coast society.⁴⁰ “Totem Art” should be appreciated for Paalen’s praise of Northwest Coast art, which echoes Claude Lévi-Strauss’s personal and poetic essay entitled “The Art of the Northwest Coast at the American Museum of Natural History,” published just a few months earlier. Paalen remarks on the “marvellous richness” of this art, pointing out that “many of [its] achievements [...] had not been surpassed in any other culture.” He singles out several types of artifacts he admires the most, among them Kwakawaka’wakw potlatch figures which he declares “could be ranked with the most powerful works of Byzantine art,”⁴¹ while Lévi-Strauss foresaw that Northwest Coast art would in a short time be exhibited in art museums among the arts of Egypt, Persia and the Middle Ages. Time has proved he was right. “Totem Art” was well received by Paalen’s fellow artists and friends. As Gustav Regler remarked: “Totem Art” is “a study about the native art of the north-west-coast, highly appreciated by leading authorities in this field as the first serious discussion of the age and the psychological problem of this art.”⁴²

Totemic Landscapes

The expression “Totemic landscape” must be taken literally to account for Seligmann’s relationship to Northwest Coast landscapes. In that respect, it is more adequate to use the set phrase “Land of the totem poles” to describe Seligmann’s rapport with this part of the world: the aim of his trip was admittedly to collect a pole, but also to experience the presence of totem poles in situ. This experience is transcribed in images of totem poles captured through the lens of his camera.



Fig. 8. Kurt Seligmann, Kaiget totem pole, Gédem Skanish [on the right] , British Columbia, 1938. © 2008 Artists Rights Society.

Seligmann and his wife took many field photographs that convey a feeling of sadness – ruins in deserted places with no living soul around; the photographs illustrating his 1939 article show the Kaiget pole standing at the edge of a ravine in an empty village with run-down buildings and collapsing roofs. A picture of Kitwancool renders the same atmosphere: memorial poles, some still standing, several tottering or fallen, in an abandoned village with dilapidated houses. This atmosphere is even more striking in the photograph that shows two isolated poles by a river-bank, as symbols of a long-gone splendor. Seligmann’s photographs have a scientific value as they record the Gitksan-Wetsuwet’en poles’ condition at a certain period of time, but through photographic documentation the photographer intentionally brings out his idea of a dying culture.

Paalen, wrote André Breton, “has incarnated [a] way of seeing: of seeing around oneself and within oneself.”⁴³ This is remarkably true of his totemic period that extended from the late 1930s into the early 1940s. Around 1937, he created a series of paintings of “totemic style” which represented empty, silent, and still spaces, bathed in a blue-green light evocative of a primordial state where “forms are in the process of becoming,” and childhood memories take the mythical aspect of Northwest Coast totem poles.⁴⁴ His journey to the Northwest Coast fulfilled a strong and mysterious urge to discover landscapes with which he was already intimate.



Fig. 9. Wolfgang Paalen, *Paysage totémique de mon enfance*, oil and fumage on canvas, 1937. © 2008 Gertrud and Harold Parker, Tiburon, CA

His visionary painted landscapes turned out to be the blueprint of the scenery of British Columbia and Alaska, as described in “Voyage Nord-Ouest” (only recently published) and “Paysage totémique” which appeared in fragments in four issues of *DYN*.⁴⁵ Regler writes that Paalen “[...] was no less surprised when he found with what certainty he had felt the light and atmosphere of the country around Sitka in his “Fata Alaska [painting],” before actually seeing it.”⁴⁶ The landscape he discovers on his journey shapes up as the literal transposition of his preconceived vision. In “Voyage Nord-Ouest,” he remarks:

The scenery becomes very beautiful, from Jasper onwards. Jade green water. Tall firs, cedars. Dead grey trees. Small sandy shores littered with branches [...]. Smell of the forest and grass. It's perfectly still, the most beautiful green colour, velvety grey-green (like in my paintings), green on ancient gold [...]. Astonishingly, the scenery resembles my paintings more and more; here are the vast forests of my dreams, the vast forests of North America I always dreamt to see.⁴⁷

He adds:

(Near Ketchikan, Alaska): Forest with silver grey trees, in the same

range altogether as very old whalebones. Remarkably twisted trees, ‘natural’ totem poles (‘ready-mades’[sic]). Exactly like in some of my paintings—even before I could utter the slightest comment about this similarity, Alice and Eva had ‘recognized’ it.⁴⁸

Paalen’s intimate relation to Northwest Coast landscapes expresses itself in a series of images filtered through his sharpened senses: sight, smell and sound are called upon to bring out these very images produced with a Surrealist appreciation:

The twilight country, the only one that provides light in this torpid summer of 1939, the ‘Northwest Coast’ of the American continent, replete with totemic columns at the confines, unfurls waves of sweeping dark green foliage up to the edge of a steel-blue ocean. Beneath the impregnable vaults of its ageless forest, always profuse with bears, eagles, and wolves, are hidden the scarified wrecks made by people with copper moon faces.

Names from afar blinding with snow like the train of the ermine headdress of the old tlinghit chiefs, giving way on approach to names with the sound of wooden bells in the felt hand of an endless dew: Haida, Bella Bella, Bella Coola, Kwakiutl, Nootka, snow blinding as the ermine train of the chiefs’ headdresses, those names that ring as clearly as the sound of a xylophone.⁴⁹

In Paalen’s mind, these images—conjuring up visions and sounds, are impregnated with the magic light irradiating Northwest Coast masterworks, a light with the quality of white ceremonial headdresses or Eskimo masks.

This was the first time in his life that Paalen had ever seen heraldic poles in their original context, and his reaction was a mixture of amazement and disappointment. While he was filled with admiration at the sight of the first “assembly of totem poles” whose stunning beauty in the twilight inspired his highest praise, he was at the same time stupefied to discover “atrocious new totem poles, as ugly as can be” in Sitka. However his poetic description of heraldic poles conveys his experience of the real essence of Northwest Coast art: figures carved on poles are vibrating with life. This accounts for the ability of the carver, as Lévi-Strauss once remarked, “to translate into eternal chef d’oeuvre the fugitive emotion of man...”⁵⁰ Paalen’s encounter with heraldic columns inspired in him these words:



Fig. 10. Eva Sulzer, Wolfgang Paalen at a shaman's grave, Masset, B.C., 1939. © 2008 Eva Friedrich

Profiles of people and beasts inextricably intertwined, all dimmed in the evening light, issued from innumerable hatchet blows as precise as a wolf's incisors sinking into its victim, the totem poles stand tall, as if they were lances from a gigantic battle painted by Ucello [...].

and

The naked spines of some mythological great communal life outdoors, these totem poles are infused with the sense of tragedy as long as the shadows they cast.⁵¹

Paalen's landscapes are "totemic" in the sense that they are inhabited by living creatures that have the capacity to transform themselves: bears, eagles, wolves, ravens are both animals and animal crests. Even trees may appear under a different guise. Paalen experienced a "totemic" moment when walking through the forest near Kispiox. As he was reaching a clearing he was struck by the sight of a group of totem poles standing in the open; he soon realized they were only burnt skeletons of trees mutilated by flames, which gave them the appearance of intertwined heraldic columns. At this very minute, a raven sat on the top of one of those "emaciated"



Fig. 11. Eva Sulzer, Haida totem pole in the forest, British Columbia, 1939. © 2008 Eva Friedrich

trees and stayed still, like the figure of a carved raven. Paalen recognized in the bird the Northwest mythical figure of the raven which brings light to the world which he compared to Prometheus, the figure of Greek myth, in “Birth of Fire,” another short essay he published in the “Amerindian Number.”⁵² Paalen’s perception grew out of his imagination nourished by his knowledge of Northwest Coast mythology and art. That “totemic moment” is a vital experience in which dream and reality are united.

Vanishing Cultures

Seligmann and Paalen made their own assessment of the widely spread preconception about the disappearance of the Indian, a discourse held since the earliest decades of the 19th century. They may also have been influenced by Marius Barbeau’s views on the vanishing Indian race, which were expressed in newspapers as well as in his scholarly publications, and simply by what they observed. Texts by both artists, photographs by Seligmann and his wife, and some three hundred exposures taken by Paalen’s companion Eva Sulzer,⁵³ offer a telling testimony to this pessimistic narrative. In photographs, villages are totally deserted, native people

are absent, totem poles are picturesque ruins, soon to be buried under luxuriant vegetation: totem poles stand as melancholic remnants of a formerly flourishing culture. Seligmann caught a glimpse of native people's demoralization when listening to Donald Grey, who lamented the passing of his culture as a one-way phenomenon—so that the younger generations are no longer interested in legends nor feel the magic of the carvings. Instead, the old chief remarks, they are attracted by the magic of bicycles, trains and movie theatres, and “show no respect for the elders, who jealously keep to themselves their ancient secrets.”⁵⁴ This observation about the appalling predicament of native cultures is further strengthened by the accompanying illustrations to the text: a Kwakwaka'wakw graveyard at the edge of a wood; Haida carvings rotting in a forest and a Bella Coola (Nuxalk) dancer almost invisible in the vegetal background. These pictures convey the idea of a distant past, dead for ever. It is as if native cultures' destiny, in the process of decrepitude, was to return to nature.

A striking aspect of Seligmann and Paalen's discourse on vanishing cultures was their straightforward denunciation of colonialism, a political outlook they shared with their Surrealist friends—first of all with Breton who claimed that Surrealism was allied with non-Western peoples because colonial history had mistreated them.⁵⁵ Paalen believes that art is so deeply rooted in social organization and belief systems of the Northwest Coast that it could not survive the attack of missionaries and the implementation of a repressive policy by the Canadian government. He emphasizes that “[...] we must not always, in discreet silence, overlook the fact that what remains of these creators of Totem Art in British Columbia live even today under continued religious persecution. [...] in this region no important manifestation of indigenous life is tolerated [...] the ceremonial festivals which formed the nucleus of the social life of these tribes are strictly forbidden.”⁵⁶

In that context art could no longer fulfil its function and lost its strength and meaning. It was therefore bound to decadence. Artists turned to the production of curios for the tourist trade. These souvenirs represent, he insists, “the decadent stage at which great art loses its *raison d'être* and degenerates to trifles.”⁵⁷

Seligmann and Paalen were not the first painters to visit the Northwest Coast. Beginning around 1910 Emily Carr had captured the essence of Northwest Coast monumental art and made the natives the subject of her paintings. She abandoned her project later on, after encountering Marius Barbeau and several Canadian artists of the Group of Seven who, under Barbeau's influence, had transposed in their paintings the myth of the vanishing Indian. Seligmann and Paalen translated what they regarded as a hopeless but living reality in their texts and photographs. They avoided painting “literal” totem pole landscapes. While Seligmann was concerned

with salvaging what was left of a dying culture, Paalen envisioned Northwest Coast art as the magnificent expression of archaic societies bound to degeneration if not complete death under the pressure of assimilation. In the European vision, heraldic poles stood both as symbols and metaphors of Northwest Coast culture as further exemplified in the Surrealist-inspired essay (1946) published by the art critic Claude Duthuit, who shared in exile with Breton and his friends the same passion for assembling Northwest Coast art collections. Duthuit agreed with Seligmann and Paalen's earlier testimonies:

These memorial columns of legend and ostentation were felled, abandoned, sold, in the prime of life between 1880 and 1900, in accordance with the orders of the gospel of the humble and the poor, eventually introduced in these regions, and closely followed by the civil code supported by a vigilant administration. Some totem poles continue to decay in their native country, desolate when darkness retreats, on a deserted shore or at the outermost bounds of the snow, against the steely mantle of the pine trees.⁵⁸

As Europeans, far from the realities of the Americas, Seligmann and Paalen failed to explore or acknowledge native resilience to colonial policy, but each in his own way contributed to make Northwest Coast art known to a most certainly small audience, genuinely inspired by its richness and greatness.

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1 The catalogue presented 310 numbers in total; besides the Northwest pieces, the list included 135 pieces from Oceania, 80 pre-Columbian, 13 ivory objects from Alaska, and 30 from Africa.

2 Hagen i.W und Darmstadt: Folkwang Verlag.

3 Berlin: Verlag Ernst Wasmuth.

4 Oslo: Instituttet for Sammenlignende Kulturforskning, H. Aschehoug.

5 The exhibit presented pieces acquired by Ratton.

6 Marie Mauzé, "Aux invisibles frontières du songe et du réel. Lévi-Strauss et les surréalistes : la 'découverte' de l'art de la côte nord-ouest," *L'Herne*. 82. Lévi-Strauss, ed. *Michel Izard* (Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 2004), 153. See also Florence Duchemin-Pelletier, "Surréalisme et art inuit: la fascination du Grand Nord," in this issue.

7 *Cahiers d'art*, 9: 1934; see Stephan E. Hauser, *Kurt Seligmann 1900-1962. Leben und Werk* (Basel:

Schwabe & Co, 1997), 147.

8 For a detailed discussion of early primitivist influences on Paalen, see Amy Winter, "The Germanic Reception of Native American Art: Wolfgang Paalen as Collector, Scholar, and Artist," *European Review of Native American Studies* 6 (1), 1992: 24; Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen, DYN and the American Avant-Garde of the 1940s*, PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 1995; and Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen. Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde* (Westport, Conn. and London: Praeger, 2002), 17-24.

9 "Wolfgang Paalen, Non plus le diamant au chapeau ..." published in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* followed by "Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme" and "Fragments" (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 137-138. Breton's introduction originally published in London Bulletin 10. See translation by Winter, in Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen, Artist and Theorist*, 64. "It was Paalen's achievement in seeing, in enabling us to see, from within the bubble. The window gave onto a space bristling with totem-poles, not far from the town with the magic name, Vancouver, covered by the water-drum of the beavers."

10 Hauser, *Kurt Seligmann*, 147.

11 Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1995), 23.

12 In 1929, Barbeau bought the "Bear pole" from the family of a deceased chief name Kwakspp (Kwa'xsuu) on behalf of Sir Henry Thornton, the president of the Canadian National Railways. He suggested that the pole be given to the French government for the Musée de l'Homme. See Anne Chapman, *Mâts Totémiques, Amérique du Nord, Côte Nord-ouest* (Paris: Catalogues du Musée de l'Homme, 1965).

13 Aldona Jonaitis, "Totem poles and the Indian New Deal," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* IX (2), 1989: 237-252; Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage, The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1985); Leslie Dawn, *National Visions, National Blindness. Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006).

14 For Paalen's itinerary, see his "Voyage Nord-Ouest," first published by Christian Kloyber and José Pierre in *Pleine Marge* 20, December 1994. Discussed in Winter, "Germanic Reception," in *ERNAS* and Winter, *WP: Artist and Theorist*, Chapters 1 and 8. Paalen's "diary" was published in German in *Wolfgang Paalen. Zwischen Surrealismus und Abstraktion*, ed. Dieter Schrage, Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig (Vienna and Klagenfurt: Verlag Ritter, 1993). See also Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*, and S. Rohlfesen Udhal, *Carr, O'Keffe, Kablo. Places of their Own*, 1990 (New Haven: Yale University Press).

15 Winter, "Germanic Reception...": 21 ; *WP: Artist and Theorist*, 85-86; Paalen, "Voyage Nord-Ouest," *Pleine Marge* 20: 13.

16 *DYN*, Wolfgang Paalen, ed., nos. 1-6 (1942-1945); Amerindian No. 4-5 (December 1943); *El Arte Indígena de Norteamérica, Exposición celebrada en el Museo Nacional de Antropología del XX de Marzo al XX de Abril de 1945*, ed. Miguel Covarrubias and Daniel F. Rubin de la Borbolla; Introduction, René d'Harnoncourt, (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de antropología e historia); National Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution; see also Marie Mauzé, "Du côté du merveilleux," *Art Eskimo et de Colombie britannique. Collection James Economos* (Paris: Sotheby's, 11 juin 2008), 42-45.

17 See Hauser, *Kurt Seligmann*, 146. Seligmann, "Imageries cinghalaises," *Revue du XXe siècle*, May/June 1938.

18 Untitled typescript, n.d., Canadian Museum of Civilization, Library and Archives, Fonds Kurt et Arlette Seligmann (Vü-C-103M). Mauzé, trans. I would like to thank Yannick Meunier for sharing with me his research on Seligmann at the Museum of Civilization.

19 Seligmann, 1939, "Entretien avec un tsimshian," *Minotaure* 12-13 (May 1939). Republished in *Pleine Marge* 22, Décembre 1995: 93-96.

- 20 Margaret Seguin and Marjorie Halpin, *Potlatch at Gitsekukla. William Beynon's 1945 Field Notebooks* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).
- 21 Seligmann 1939, "Le mâ-totem de Gédem Skanish (Gyaedem Skanees)," *Journal de la société des américanistes*, vol. XXXI: 124; Untitled typescript, n.d., Canadian Museum of Civilization (Vii-C-103M).
- 22 Marie Mauzé, "Les objets nord-amérindiens dans les collections françaises," *Sculptures. Afrique Asie Oceanie Amériques* (Paris: Réunion des Musées nationaux, Musée du quai Branly, 2000), 28-33. The Kaiget pole was moved to the new Musée du quai Branly in 2006.
- 23 Hauser, *Kurt Seligmann*, 149.
- 24 Untitled typescript, Museum of Civilization, (Vii-C-103M).
- 25 "Keigyett: Myth of the Totem of Gyadem Skanees." This is the myth of the family of the "mountain-man," as the Carrier chief Donald Grey (Semo-Kierl-Kiamek of Hagwelget) dictated it to our collaborator Kurt Seligmann, *XXe siècle*, ed. anglaise, Paris n° 5-6, 1939: 8. Marius Barbeau Coll. Northwest Coast Files, Totems (B-F-194), Canadian Museum of Civilization, Library, Archives and Documentation.
- 26 "Voyage Nord-Ouest," *Pleine Marge* 20: 21, 24.
- 27 See Winter, *WP Artist and Theorist*, 164, for this object, which is actually a potlatch screen, used for dramatic presentations.
- 28 Written from Long Island, Correspondence Paalen-Breton, Bibliothèque Jacques-Doucet, BRT.C. 2231.
- 29 Ibid., BRT.C. 2232.
- 30 See Winter, *WP Artist and Theorist* on Paalen's impact on the NY avant-garde; and Winter "Wolfgang Paalen, DYN, y el origens del Expresiónismo Abstracto," in *Wolfgang Paalen: Retrospectiva* (Mexico City : Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Alvar y Carmens T. de Carrillo Gil, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1994, 125-53); and "Wolfgang Paalen, DYN, und die Entstehungsgeschichte des Abstrakten Expressionismus," in *Wolfgang Paalen: Zwischen Surrealismus und Abstraktion*, Museum Moderner Kunst Wien (Vienna: Verlag Ritter Klagenfurt, 1993), 145-80.
- 31 W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 121.
- 32 The third part of "Totem Art" has been commented upon by several scholars, see for example Aldona Jonaitis, "Creations of Mystics and Philosophers: The White Man's Perception of Northwest Coast Indian Art from the 1930s to the Present," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 5 (1981); Winter, "Germanic Reception." In her 2002 book (*WP Artist and Theorist*), Winter has a full chapter entirely dedicated to the 'Amerindian' issue of *DYN* (Chapter 8); Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile*; Rushing, *Native American Art*.
- 33 "Totem Art," *DYN* 4-5 (December 1943): 18, 22, 19-20.
- 34 "Totem Art": 21-22; Winter, *WP Artist and Theorist*, p. 168.
- 35 "Totem Art":26. "Viril" here means that sculpture is done by male artists while weaving or basketry is a female art.
- 36 According to Winter, (personal communication), at the beginning of *Art as Experience* (1958; reprint of 1934 edition), 7, John Dewey (whom Paalen was then reading) discussed Amerindian cultures and found that in them the arts "were part of the significant life of an organized community, which arose from the conditions of that community's experience."
- 37 "The New Image," *DYN* 1 (April-May 1942): 7.
- 38 Bill Holm and Bill Reid, *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast. A Dialogue on Craftmanship and Aesthetics*

- (Austin: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, distributed by the University of Washington Press, 1975), 76. See also Marie Mauzé, "L'éclat de l'halotidie. De la conception du beau dans les sociétés de la côte Nord-Ouest," *Terrain* 32, 1999: 92-93.
- 39 "Totem Art": 12.
- 40 Paalen was assisted in his research by W. Newcombe who provided him with a complete and well referenced documentation; see Winter, 1992, 1995, 2002.
- 41 *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 24, 1943: 175-182. "Totem Art": 13. The potlatch figure owned by Paalen is now part the collections of the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York.
- 42 Gustav Regler, *Wolfgang Paalen* (New York: Nierendorf Editions, 1946), 36. According to Amy Winter, Paalen is the author of the text published under Regler's name, or the book is a collaboration that most likely was edited by Regler; see Winter, *WP Artist and Theorist*, xviii-xix.
- 43 "A man at the junction of two highways," in *Surrealism and Painting* (Boston: Museum of Fine Art Publications, 2002), 138.
- 44 José Pierre, *Domaine de Paalen* (Paris: Galanis, 1970); see also Regler, *Wolfgang Paalen*, 32.
- 45 See Winter, *WP Artist and Theorist*, 217-218: "Paysage totémique I," *DYN* 1 (1942): 46-50; "Paysage totémique II, De Jasper à Prince Rupert": *DYN* 2 (1942): 42-47; *DYN* 3, "Paysage totémique III, De Jasper à Prince Rupert (suite)": 27-31; and "Rencontre totémique, Fragment de paysage totémique": *DYN* 6: 50-51. These texts were republished in *Pleine Marge* 20, December 1994: 35-50.
- 46 Regler, *Wolfgang Paalen*, 36.
- 47 "Voyage Nord-Ouest," *Pleine Marge*: 15-16.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 49 "Paysage totémique," *DYN* 1, 1942 p. 46. The English translation of the paragraphs is drawn from Winter, *WP Artist and Theorist*, 217.
- 50 "The art of the Northwest Coast at the American Museum of Natural History," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1943, 6ème série 24: 181.
- 51 "Paysage totémique I": 36, 37.
- 52 "Birth of Fire," *DYN* 4-5: 71.
- 53 See Winter, "Germanic Reception."
- 54 "Entretien avec un Tsimshian," *Minotaure* 12-13: 67.
- 55 "André Breton, *Conversations. The Autobiography of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 193.
- 56 "Totem Art": 18.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 Claude Duthuit, "Le don indien sur la Côte nord-ouest de l'Amérique (Colombie britannique)" [1946], *Représentation et présence. Premiers écrits et travaux 1923-1952* (Paris : Flammarion), 315-319; Rushing, *Native American Art*, 54; Winter, "Germanic Reception."