

HAROLD PFEIFFER 1908–1997



Harold Pfeiffer. Photo by Rowley Murray.

Harold Samson Pfeiffer died in Ottawa on 12 April 1997 from a stroke, following successful heart surgery. His well-attended memorial service was held in the Ottawa Unitarian Church. Harold was born into a socially prominent, well-to-do family in Quebec City. He inherited business acumen from his father, and from his mother, who supported the Grenfell Mission, an abiding interest in the aboriginal people of the Arctic.

In 1925, Harold began to study art and met Marius Barbeau, the first of several eminent artists and ethnologists who became his friends and mentors. The financial crash of 1929 ruined Harold's father. After working on the resurrection of the family business, Harold went to Europe to continue his studies. After his return, he lived as a dealer in various items of art and as an interior decorator, continuing his sculpture all the while. Despite his boundless energy, Harold suffered all his life from respiratory problems and was considered too frail for active military service during World War II. He undertook the dangerous work of bomb testing, until fumes made him too ill to continue. He then joined a military special service unit as an organizer of handicrafts and entertainment, with officer rank and uniform.

After the war, Harold taught crafts at McGill University. During the mid-1950s, he became an occupational therapist at hospitals in Quebec City and Edmonton. In 1954, he made his first portrait of a Native Northerner, young Ilya, a patient at Parc Savard hospital. The friendships made with patients gave him a valuable entrée to northern communities, and his teaching of weaving, carving, and other art forms made a contribution to the northern Native art industry of the present day.

Also in 1954, Harold made his first journey north on the patrol ship *C.D. Howe*, as an x-ray assistant, liaison officer, and sculptor—the first of several northern tours. In 1956 he joined the National Museum of Man, mainly as an organizer of exhibitions, but continued his sculpture. In 1967, the Riveredge Foundation of Calgary purchased several of Harold's bronze portraits of aboriginal people and commissioned him to do more. On one trip, he met the then Commissioner of the Northwest Territories, Stuart Hodgson; the meeting resulted in a friendship and several assignments to portray aboriginal people around the polar world.

Although Harold portrayed many eminent people, he had a special empathy with elderly Native people such as his favourite model, Satkatsiak of the Spence Bay region, with her weathered face, tattoos, and tales of the old days, good and bad. Harold rightly saw his bronze portraits as an indelible record of a vanishing way of life. Many of them can be seen in the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife and at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary.

Throughout his life, Harold travelled. His nephew and pilot, the late Reg Pfeiffer, flew Harold to sites in Alaska and Arctic Canada, and Harold went around the world several times as artist-in-residence aboard an educational cruise ship. He was a raconteur, a humorist, an unabashed name-dropper, a keen observer, and a good listener. His talents served him well in 1988, when he obtained access to Chukotka as a guest of the Soviet government, and completed his collection of portraits of indigenous people around the Northern Hemisphere.

Harold was a member of the Ottawa Arctic Circle and often entertained in his house, amid a plethora of bronzes, carvings, and paintings. During recent years, he worried about the disposition of his remaining busts and carvings, and was saddened by the theft of some of his works and the deaths, in India, of some of his young fellow passengers on the cruise ship. He was happy, however, to know that his memoirs would be published: *The Man Who Makes Heads with His Hands*, launched in Ottawa on 16 September 1997, contained an introduction by Stuart M. Hodgson, CC. I hope that the book brings to Harold a measure of recognition and acclaim that evaded him during his lifetime.

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