



Rediscovering a Masterpiece

by Robert D. Forrest

Photography and Graphics
by Bill McLennan

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The large cedar boards lay on the floor of the concrete bunker that is one of the storage rooms beneath the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia.

They were wider and longer than the split shakes that marked the boundary of the back yard of my childhood but they had the same greyness of age that spoke of their ancient origin. Their surface was smoother; so smooth that even time could not have weathered them to such a degree.

Their massive size and their "finished" lumber surface indicated an incredible skill on the part of their craftsman creator. Over 11 feet in length and some over 18 inches wide (later I learned that one was originally 3½ feet wide), they had been hand split from some giant cedar log.

I watched the man at the far end of the boards carefully position his lights. He straightened up, looked at the boards, and bent once more to his lights. He turned them on.

There was something on the boards but the room was still dominated by the overhead lights and the pattern on the boards was uncertain.

Bill McLennan hurried past me to the far corner of the bunker and turned out the overheads.

I turned back to the boards and caught my breath.

Leaping across the Tsimshian house screen was the greyed outline image of a whale, alive and powerful.

The photoflood of lights raked across the smooth surface of the screen to reveal the design etched

into its surface by the combined effect of long vanished paint and the rigors of Fort Simpson weather.

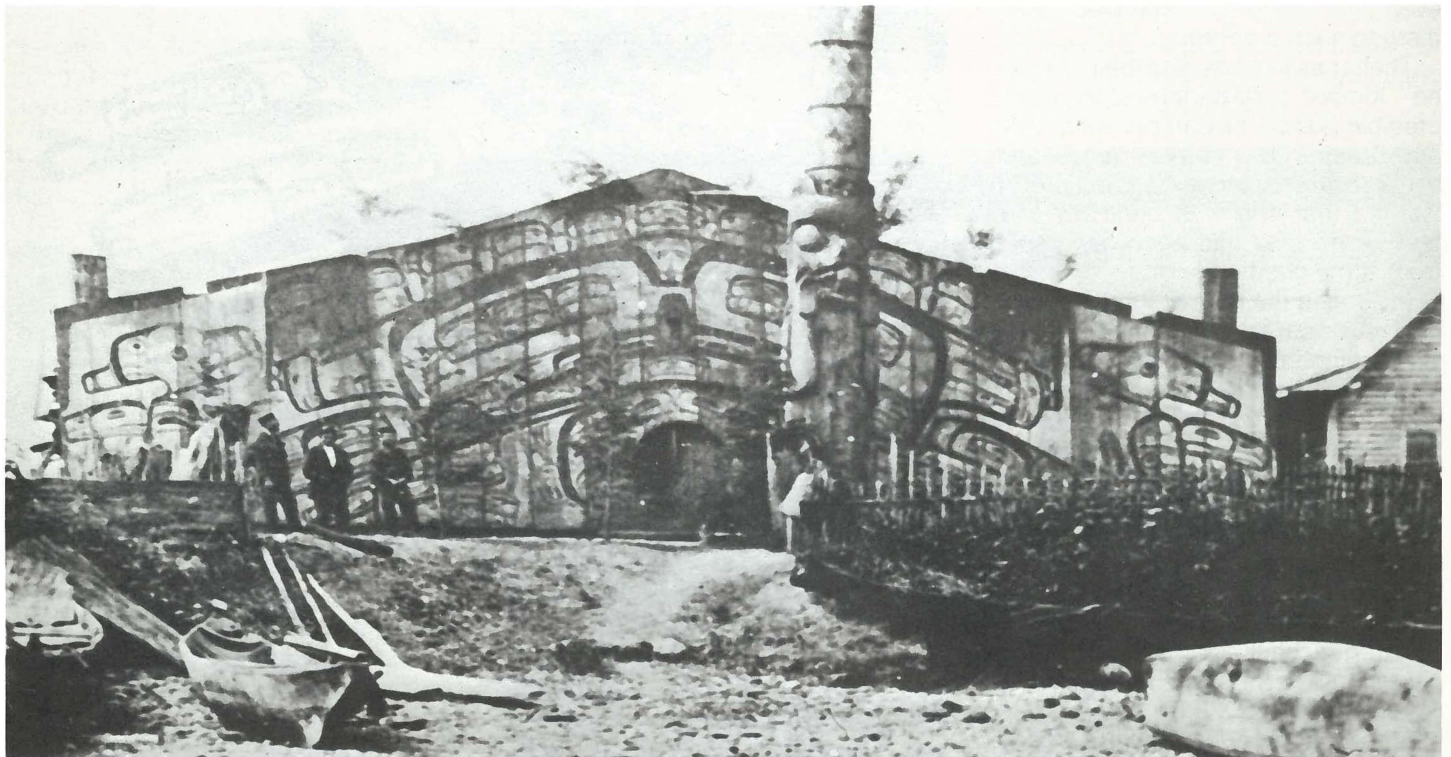
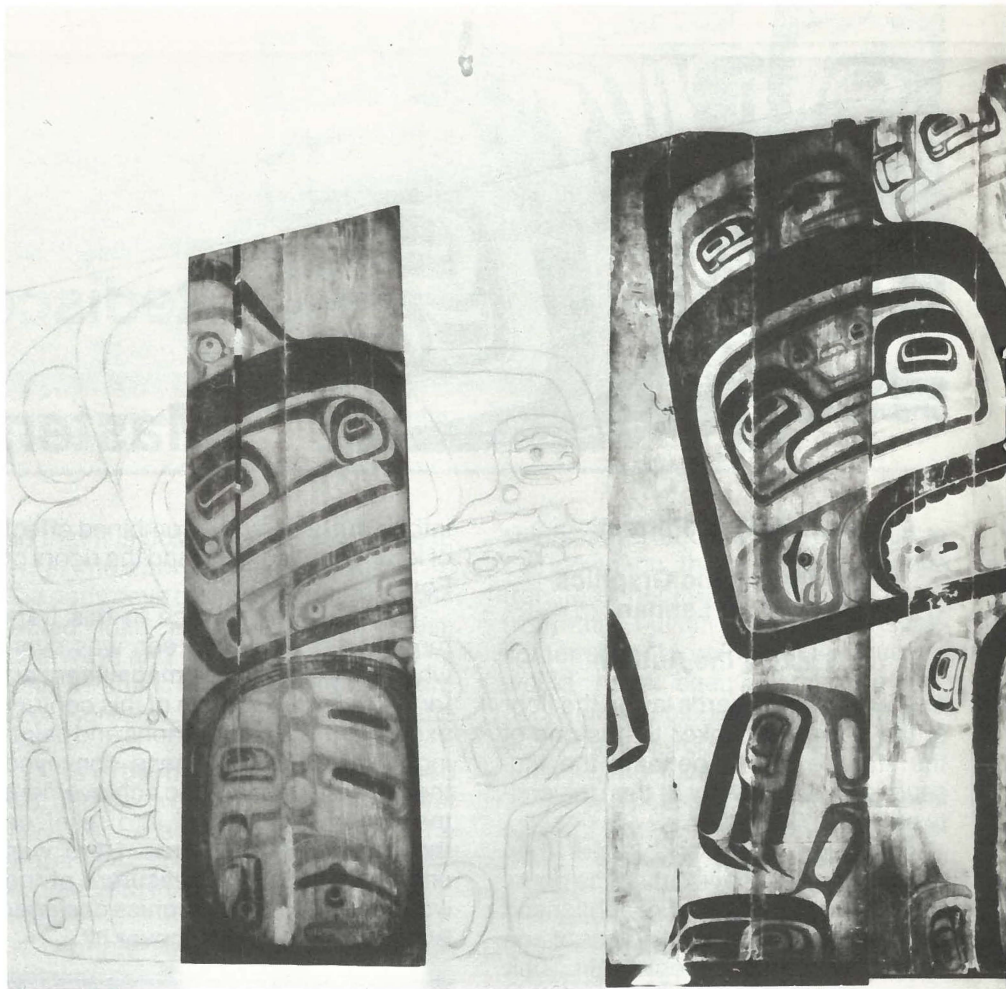
The power, the grace in this fragment of the house screen was overwhelming. Here was a magnificent art form lost to us for much of this century except in a few photographs and paintings. But neither of these conveyed the magnitude of artistic achievement that was there etched into relief on those grey cedar boards. Here was one of the great art treasures of the world. What had led graphics designer Bill McLennan to rediscover it?

When McLennan first began working at the UBC Museum of Anthropology, he already owned a small collection of contemporary Northwest Coast prints. Invariably, he compared his modern silk screen prints with the designs on the ancient artifacts in the Museums collection. He had noticed many contemporary Northwest Coast artists use templates to achieve the symmetry of design which is so closely associated with Northwest Coast art. But he found that the designs on the artifacts in the Museum were in fact asymmetrical with the two sides,

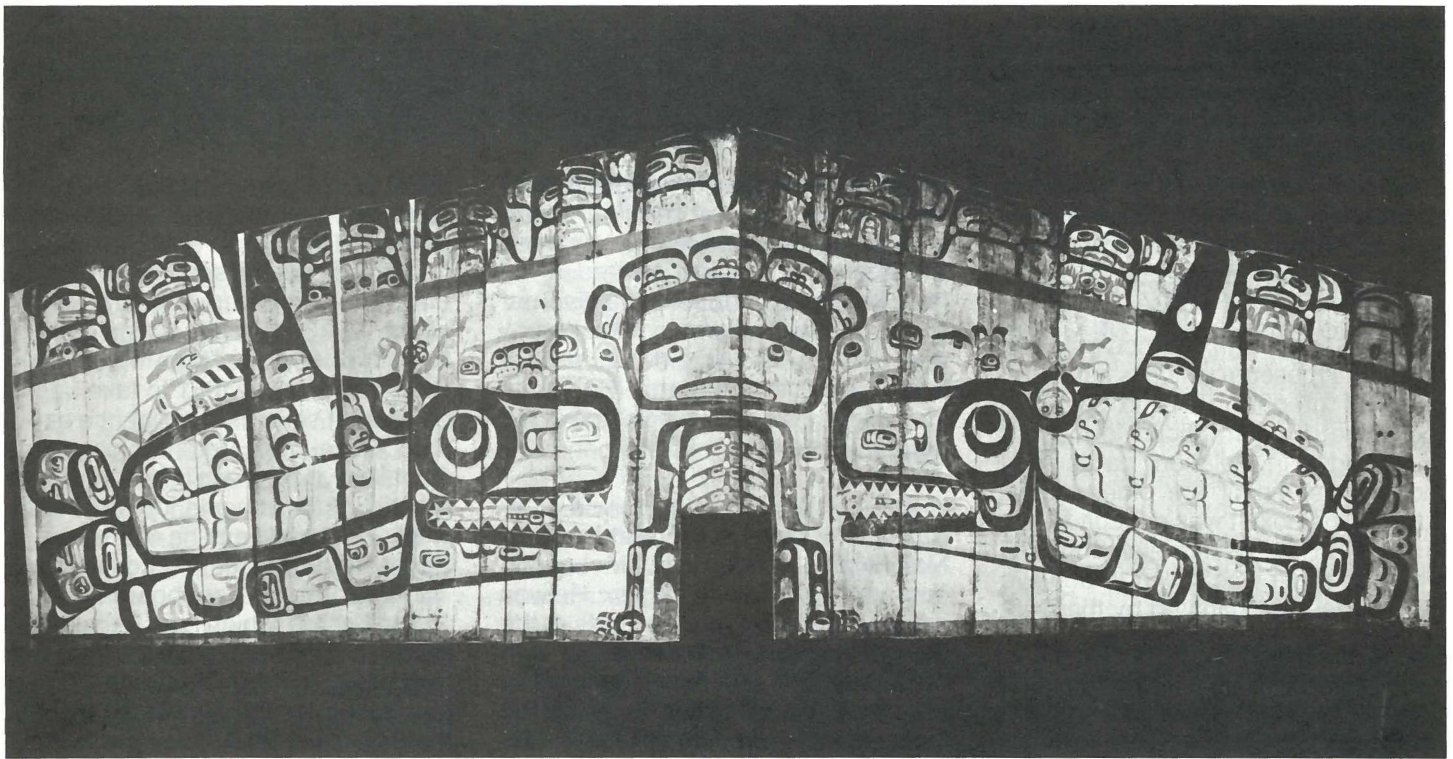
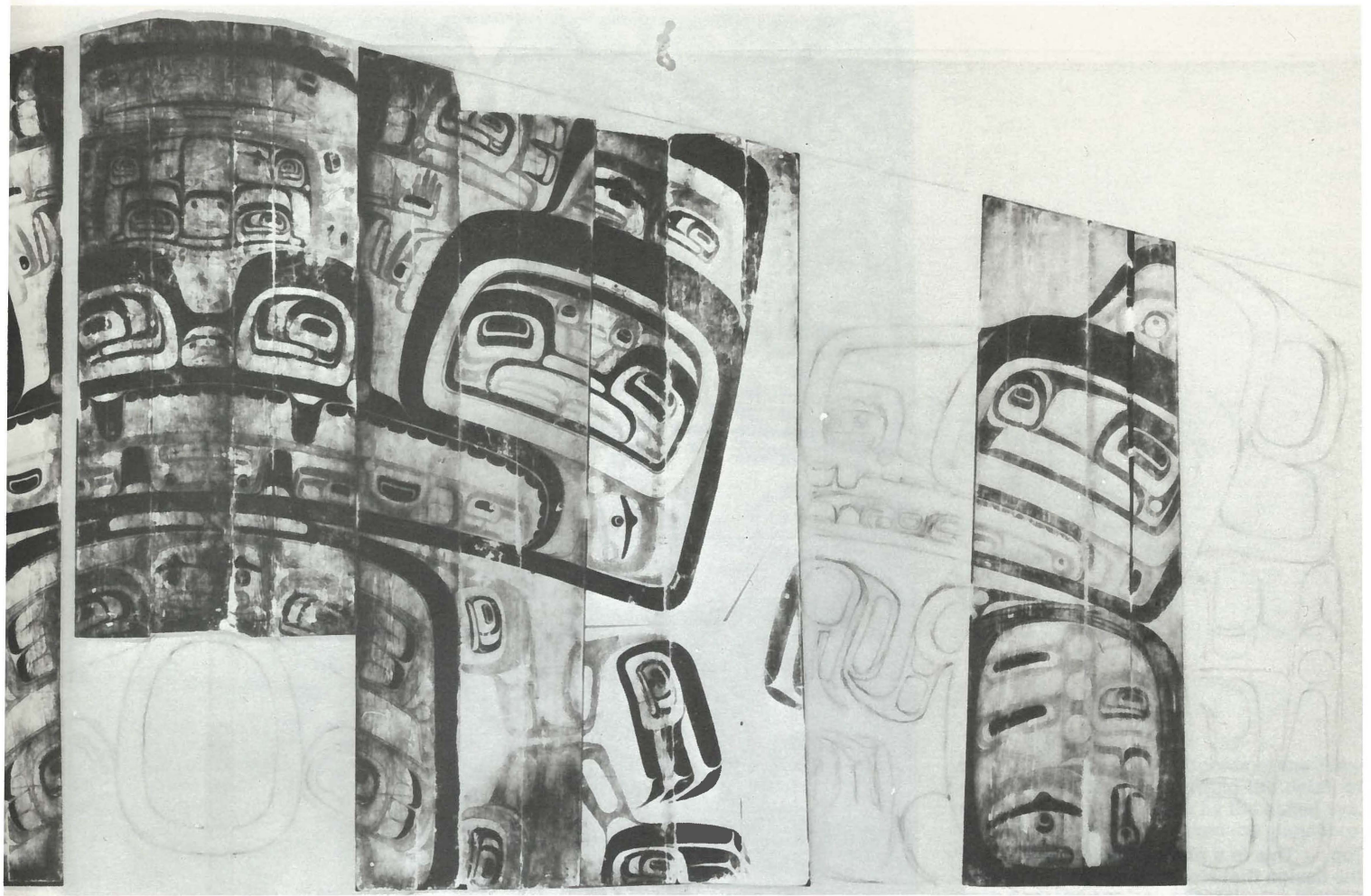


Graphic Designer Bill McLennan of UBC's Museum of Anthropology tracing details of the cover design from high contrast photo enlargements. High contrast prints can be seen on the floor above McLennan's head. The tracings were made on large sheets of clear plastic. All photographs in this article are by McLennan except where noted.

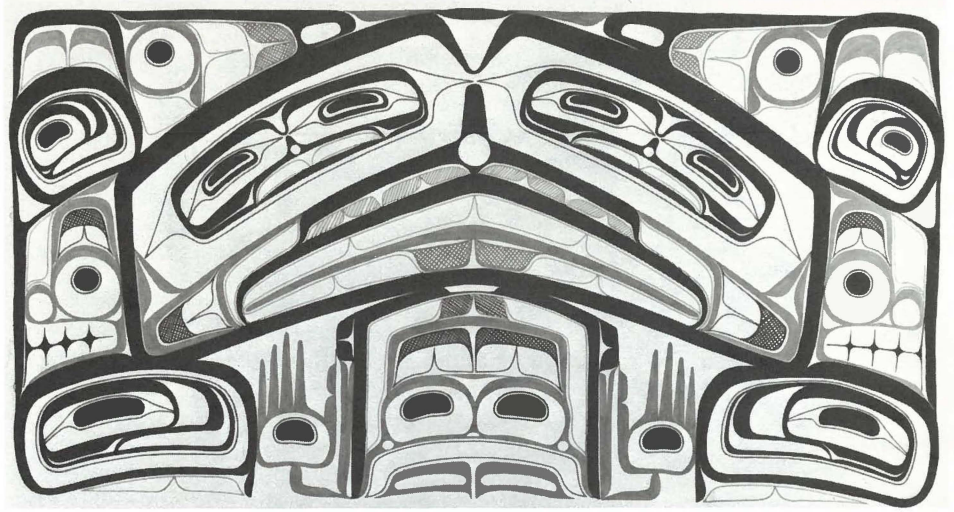
The first of the two Tsimshian Ceremonial House Fronts on which design detail has been rediscovered by the UBC Museum of Anthropology's Bill McLennan. The design details are clearly visible in this photograph on the boards which are in the University's collection. Details of the areas where the boards have either not been identified or are not in the collection of the University have been sketched in by McLennan after consultation with other experts including George MacDonald of the National Museum of Man and famed Haida carver Bill Reid. McLennan selected the area to the right above the door for the wrap-around cover design on this issue of *Heritage West* and placed the title of the magazine on it to create the feeling of unity between the ancient Tsimshian design and the modern title script. We think he was successful.



The only known photograph of a Tsimshian House Front in place at Fort Simpson on the Coast above present day Prince Rupert. An idea of the massive size of these ceremonial murals is given by the three men in the left of the photograph. The entrance way to the long house behind the screen is a round "mouth" and shows how the entrance was always an essential part of the design. Photo courtesy of the B.C. Provincial Museum, Ethnology Division, Victoria. Photograph No. 41.



The only complete existing Tsimshian House Screen or Front from Fort Simpson is now in the possession of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. It was one of two purchased for the Smithsonian in 1875. This set of boards and some other evidence indicate a possibility that the entire screen was painted white before the design was applied to the boards. Research on determining this continues. Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.



Top — This is a photographic rendering of the design that started it all. Bill McLennan wanted to isolate the design from the box at right and used infrared film which brought out detail that was no longer clearly visible. Close examination of the design, particularly the right and left centre details, show that it is not perfectly symmetrical which suggests that the original artist did not use templates to achieve his effect.



not in identical balance but so closely similar that the effect of symmetry was achieved.

His attention was drawn to one specific box. "I noticed the difference in the painted design, particularly one box in the museum which is a masterpiece of graphic art," he said. He found that it was difficult to discuss the designs in isolation, particularly those on some of the older pieces such as the box. It was difficult to talk in terms of the design elements and what the artist was trying to achieve without being dominated by the work on which the design appeared.

"It's easier to speak about a box because we know what a box is about, rather than a piece of very abstract design which we can't very well put a handle on, what the components are, what the creatures are, or even what the artist was up to."

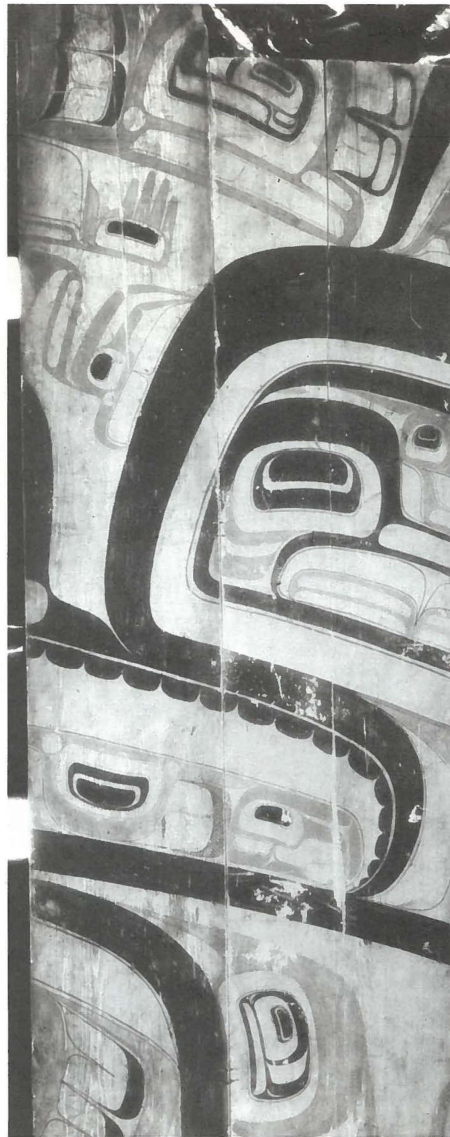
McLennan began to look for a technique to remove the painting photographically and transfer it to paper so the design would be isolated away from its vehicle and could be discussed without the influence of the "box", ware, or the oils and dirt that had accumulated over the years. "So, it was at this time I started using some of my graphic arts films."

Already familiar with the use of infrared film from his work at the H.R. MacMillan Planetarium, McLennan now applied its use to the box. He was delighted with the results. Parts of the design that had faded severely with the passage of time were restored to full detail. He was able to apply the technique to other items in the Museum's collection and recapture detail that was no longer visible. The reason for this was the extreme sensitivity of infrared film to the red end of

the light spectrum which allowed it to capture detail that had totally disappeared to the naked eye.

At this point, the second actor in the drama of rediscovery appeared on the scene. Dr. George MacDonald of the National Museum of Man in Ottawa arrived in the fall of 1981 to take up the position of scholar in residence at the UBC Museum of Anthropology. MacDonald had long been interested in the artistic achievements of the Northwest Coast Indian and he expressed interest in the Museum's collection of Tsimshian house front boards.

The boards, which form parts of two major design groups and probable fragments from several others, were purchased for the University by H.R. MacMillan in 1948. They came from the collection of Dr. George H. Raley who probably obtained them from the Fort Simpson area in the late 19th or early 20th century. No written record



Far Left — Three of the boards of the Tsimshian House Screen showing the detail of the cover design as seen by the naked eye. The photograph was taken on panachromatic film.

Left — The same boards and design elements photographed with infrared film. Note how the details of the design are brought out in this photo.

has yet been discovered to date their acquisition by Raley or their production by currently unknown Tsimshian artists. The boards were initially stored in the Main Library until their transfer to the UBC Museum of Anthropology after its completion in 1976.

Fort Simpson was established by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1833 on the Nass River and moved a year later to its present location on the coast just north of Prince Rupert. The coastal Tsimshian relocated in a single settlement around the Fort, leaving their villages in the Prince Rupert area. Their probable reason was that the guns of the Fort provided protection from possible raids by the Haida and other coastal tribes made rich and aggressive by the sea otter trade with European and American traders.

The resulting community was the largest Indian settlement on the Coast

until the rise of Victoria later in the century. The eight tribal chiefs of the new settlement vied for control of the interior fur trade and one of the forms that competition took was the creation of the great ceremonial house screens. Each chief would show his prestige by having one or more of the massive house screens created for himself.

During the period from the establishment of Fort Simpson in the 1830's until the decimation of the community by smallpox, cholera and other diseases in the 1860's, Dr. MacDonald speculates that as many as 50 of the massive screens may have been created. In 1875, two complete screens were acquired for the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and after that several segments of other screens were purchased by private collectors and have since found their way into public collections here in Canada. However, at this time, no complete screen is

known in Canada.

MacDonald suggested to McLennan that the techniques he had been using on smaller pieces in the Museum's collection might reveal something of the design on the boards of the Tsimshian screens. It was some time before the graphic designer was able to turn his attention to the boards. When he did, the infrared film cut through accumulated dirt and oil to reveal much more than anyone had hoped or expected. The evidence of the negatives was that the boards contained an elaborate system of design beneath their surface dirt.

Excited by the importance of the discovery, Bill McLennan systematically photographed the whole collection of boards using infrared film. Later, he rephotographed them using high contrast orthochromatic film while raking their surface with high intensity light. The resulting series of

photographic strips of the individual boards then had to be pieced together much like a jigsaw puzzle using whatever clues of interconnecting design elements there were or the binding marks where they had been held together to locate correct positions.

The work took weeks. McLennan was assisted by Dr. MacDonald, renowned Haida artist Bill Reid, Museum Curator and Archivist Audrey Shane and Museum assistant Kerry Baisley. As they worked, it became apparent that the boards formed two almost complete house screens with parts of other less complete screens also in the collection. Finally, to make certain that the pieces all fit together and to avoid distortion resulting from the variance in the individual photographs, the boards were rephotographed in their groups. The "fit" was confirmed.

McLennan next turned his attention to filling in the missing elements of the designs. Here again he was able to call on MacDonald and Reid for assistance. He was able to use the basic principles of symmetry to photograph the mirror image from one side of the design and place it in the corresponding position in the overall design. One of the sets of boards had only a few pieces missing and forms the most complete Tsimshian house screen known in Canada.

Once he had established the basic design, McLennan turned his attention to the colours of the original painting. He re-examined the infrared photographs and then examined the boards themselves with a microscope to locate any traces of pigment which could tell him the nature of the colours used.

Finally, once he had gathered all of the information he could in these ways, McLennan put the results together in a large acetate tracing half the size of the original. As he coloured in the design, one of the great masterworks of world art, lost for over a hundred years, was revealed.

Work on these boards and the others in the collection continues. Museum Conservator Mirian Clavir has begun work on pigment analysis in the hope that an approximate date of origin can be established for the boards. McLennan feels that computer scanning and enhancement may help to further understand the house screens.

The design illustrations in this issue

of **Heritage West** are the first appearance in print of these important Tsimshian designs.

The importance of the achievement of Bill McLennan and his colleagues at the UBC Museum of Anthropology cannot be overstated. As Dr. George MacDonald put it, "The recreation of these screens represents a major episode in the recovery of Native artistic

traditions in Canada, of significance on an international level, comparable to those of the monuments of the Ancient World."

The UBC Museum of Anthropology plans to continue work on the boards in collaboration with the Museum of Man, Ottawa and scientific assistance of Canadian Conservation Institute.



The talents of three experts were needed to put together the lost design of the Tsimshian Ceremonial House Screen. From left, Haida carver Bill Reid, Archaeologist George MacDonald and Graphic Designer Bill McLennan.

Bill Reid was born in Victoria where he received much of his formal education. His mother was a Haida Indian whose family lived at Skidgate Mission on the Queen Charlotte Islands. He spent much of his early years in the broadcasting industry and, before leaving the CBC in 1958, he wrote and narrated a television documentary on the salvaging of the last of the totem poles on the Charlottes. He also wrote and narrated a film on a major exhibition of Northwest Coast art at the Vancouver Art Gallery called "People of the Potlach."

In his early twenties, Reid's interest in Haida art was stimulated by his contacts with his grandfather, himself a Haida silversmith who had studied with the great Charles Edenshaw. Reid studied jewellery making in Eastern Canada and later, in London. His achievements include a 56 foot totem pole which was the first erected in his mother's village in over 100 years, and the massive wood carving of "The Raven and the First Men" which is on display at UBC's Museum of Anthropology. It was his understanding of traditional Northwest Coast art that led to MacDonald and McLennan asking for his assistance with the work on the Tsimshian Screen.

George MacDonald (standing behind Reid) was formerly Chief of the Archaeological Survey of Canada and is now Senior Scientist (Archaeology) at the National Museum of Man in Ottawa. MacDonald was in the first of a two year exchange at the UBC Museum of Anthropology while working on the Screens but has returned to Ottawa to coordinate construction of the new Museum of Man.

Bill McLennan (right) was educated in Vancouver and worked for the Vancouver Museum and the H.R. MacMillan Planetarium in design and photographic production from 1968 to 1976 before moving to the UBC Museum of Anthropology in the same capacity. Photograph by Moya Robinson Waters.