



SUSAN POINT

People Amongst the People

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For many, “Stanley Park” is a place of refuge and relaxation, removed from the bustle of city life, yet still within easy reach. It is core to Vancouver’s international presence; tourists rent bikes and cycle its perimeter, admire its towering trees, and visit the totem poles at Brockton Point by the busload. For others, myself included, Stanley Park is not only a park, but a place of ancient history, of spiritual power, of economic and social connections, and a place of dispossession.

Musqueam artist Susan Point speaks to this way of knowing in *People Amongst the People*. These three monumental gateways are located at the famed totem pole display in spapəyəq (near Brockton Point),¹ once a village inhabited by our ancestors.² Stanley Park was declared a British military reserve in 1863 and remade as a park in 1888. These processes, of claiming, mapping and renaming, rendered the inhabitants squatters in their own homes, facilitating their removal and ultimate eviction in 1931. Simultaneous with this dispossession was the installation of totem poles from northern Indigenous communities.³ This display at Stanley Park is indicative of a larger trend in Northwest Coast Indigenous art history, wherein Coast Salish forms were once dismissed as inferior to northern styles.⁴ Thus, local communities were displaced physically and representationally.

It was not until 2008, with the installation of *People Amongst the People*, that the distinct art form belonging to Coast Salish peoples, including the three local Nations—the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh), and Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish)—were represented in this highly visible location. The placement of Point’s work at this site can be seen as symbolic of her important contribution to the reclamation of visibility within Coast Salish territories and in Northwest Coast Indigenous art.

The imagery on these gateways makes subtle references to their surroundings. Weaving motifs speak not only to the historic tradition of wool weaving amongst our communities in general, but also gesture toward nearby sfiłəwəq^w (now Second Beach), where women gathered diatomaceous earth, used to

prepare the wool of mountain goats and woolly dogs. An image of a mask dancer alludes to its relationship with χ^wayχ^wəyə (near Lumberman’s Arch). Herring and orcas, two species once prominent in the Inlet’s ecosystem, are depicted. Much like historic Coast Salish compositions, portrayals of human and beyond-human beings are portrayed in an interconnected, non-hierarchical manner, conveying a sense of reverence and reciprocity.

Historically, our communities did not create totem poles, instead producing monumental carvings in the form of house posts and freestanding figures. These gateways represent the internal structure of Coast Salish architecture—carved house posts located inside longhouses with their supporting cross beams. The exterior planks of these houses were removable, enabling both expansion of the longhouse and seasonal rounds to different locations. Families temporarily left the essential structure of a house, bringing the planks and other belongings along with them. To me, these are more than gateways, or welcoming figures; they also symbolize homes in their most basic state. Point has noted she views *People Amongst the People* as “reinstating the Salish footprint upon our traditional lands.” Perhaps they are the footprint of an ancestral home, ready to be rebuilt and made whole.

— Jordan Wilson

¹ As a Musqueam community member, I use hənqəmiñəh place names and spelling conventions to refer to these locations; members of other communities use their own conventions. [Editor’s note: The Tsleil-Waututh language is also based in hənqəmiñəh. The Squamish know these places as Pápiyek, χwáyχway and St’it’ewekw’ respectively.] ² I connect to my great-great grandmother, Matilda Cole (née Pete), who lived at spapəyəq. ³ The first totem poles were installed nearby χ^wayχ^wəyə in 1924 as a tourist attraction, and moved to nearby spapəyəq in 1960. These poles originated in Kwakwaka’wakw, Haida, Nisga’a, and Nuu-chah-nulth communities. ⁴ Coast Salish is a term historically ascribed by anthropologists to a broad spectrum of communities situated in Southwest British Columbia and Northwest Washington state.

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Image *People Amongst the People*, 2008 (detail). Photo: Alan McMillan



About the Artist

Susan A. Point, O.C., RCA (1952–) is a descendant of the Musqueam, the daughter of Edna Grant and Anthony Point. She draws creativity from her ancestors' stories and has forged a personal style experimenting with non-traditional materials and techniques. Susan is proud to be an Officer of the Order of Canada (2006) and she received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal (2012) for her contributions to Canada. In 2017, the retrospective exhibition *Susan Point: Spindle Whorl* was presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery. In 2018 she received the Audain Prize for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts. She is a recipient of honorary doctorates from the University of Victoria (2000), Simon Fraser University (2008), Emily Carr University of Art and Design (2008), University of British Columbia (2009), and Capilano University (2020). In 2020 she also became a Chevalier in the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, Order of France, French Ministry of Cultural Affairs. She has created monumental public artworks for the University of British Columbia, Vancouver International Airport, the City of Richmond, the City of Vancouver, and others.

Above Susan Point. Photo: Kenji Nagai

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The City of Vancouver acknowledges that it is situated on the unceded traditional territories of the x^wməθk^wəy̓əm (Musqueam Indian Band), Sḵw̓xw̓ú7mesh (Squamish Nation), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh Nation).



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Cover image *People Amongst the People*, 2008 (detail). Brockton Point totem site, Stanley Park, Vancouver, British Columbia. Photo: Alan McMillan

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