

# Artistic Air Flair at YVR

*story & photography by Ken Donohue*

Vancouver International Airport (YVR) is neither a museum nor an art gallery. So says the Vancouver International Airport Authority. But strolling through the terminal buildings of this busy airport you could be forgiven for thinking you are in either. In fact, before meeting with Rita Beiks, director of the YVR Art Foundation, I wandered through the domestic and international terminals to appreciate the impressive collection of art that has become a distinctive fixture at YVR (*Airways*, August 1999).



Most visitors to YVR are probably oblivious to the three totem poles, carved nearly 40 years ago, that stand between the car park and the international terminal, set among a garden of trees and a small pond, a quiet and peaceful setting that more than 17 million people pass each year. These totems are just a foretaste of what awaits travellers inside the buildings.

In the domestic terminal, where the exhibit *Supernatural World* waits to be admired, you will be impressed by carvings from three of the most acclaimed artists in British Columbia (BC): Dempsey Bob, Robert Davidson, and Richard Hunt. YVR's motto, 'Land, Sea, Sky', is represented in this collection. Resting on a bed of stones and surrounded by water sits Hunt's *Killer Whale*.



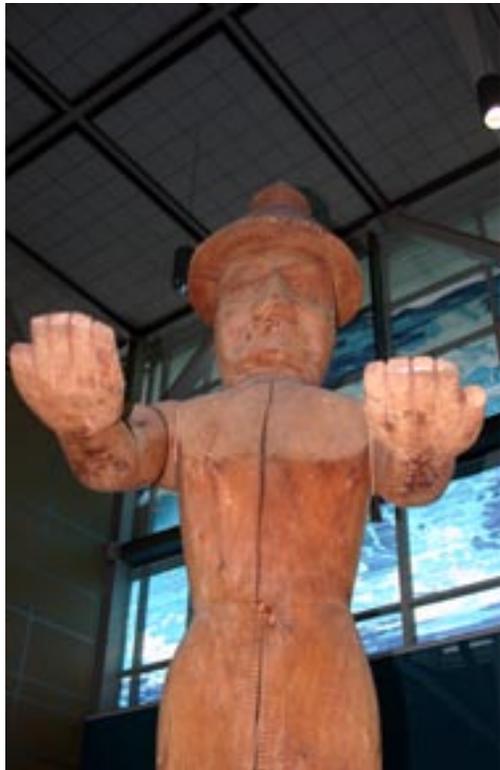
In First Nations lore, killer whales are said to represent the spirits of high-ranking chiefs. Standing alongside is the legendary thunderbird, and soaring high above is the raven and eagle. Symbolizing the land is Bob's 7ft (2.1m) *Bear-Human Mask*. Probably nowhere else in the world is it possible to see such magnificent works in a public place like this.

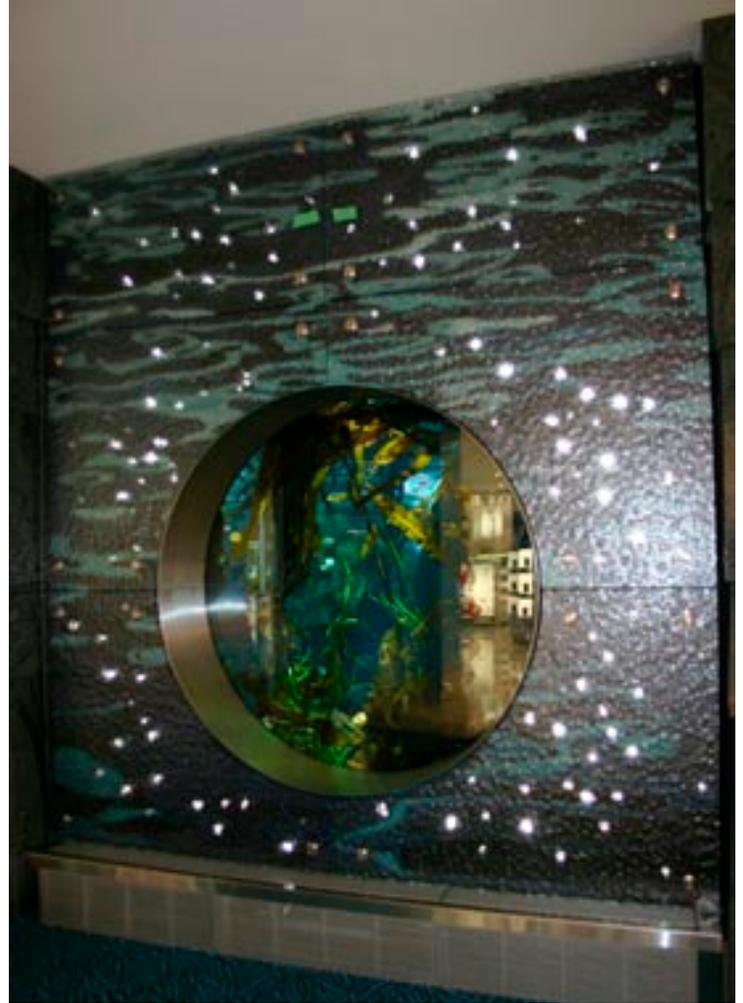
Bill Reid's iconic piece, *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii: The Jade Canoe*, has been a meeting place for travellers from around the world since 1996. Located in the international terminal, this was YVR's first piece of art and cost the authority C\$3.5 million. Cast in bronze with a jade green patina, 13 supernatural creatures are featured in an ancient Haida dugout canoe. A similar piece, in fact the first of these remarkable sculptures, can be found at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC.

The YVR Art Foundation was established in 1993 to foster and develop Northwest Coast Native art. The foundation acts as an advisor to the airport and supports a scholarship program for aboriginal youth who are interested in learning technique and skills from a native elder. "A lot of people questioned the Airport Authority when they purchased *The Jade Canoe*," remarks Beiks. "It was a brave move, but we are able to provide a wonderful opportunity for artists. Renowned carvers, such as Dempsey Bob, would never have been able to showcase their work because corporations and government aren't commissioning large pieces of art." YVR has more than 200 pieces in its collection.

Over the past decade, YVR has amassed the world's largest private collection of Northwest Coast Native







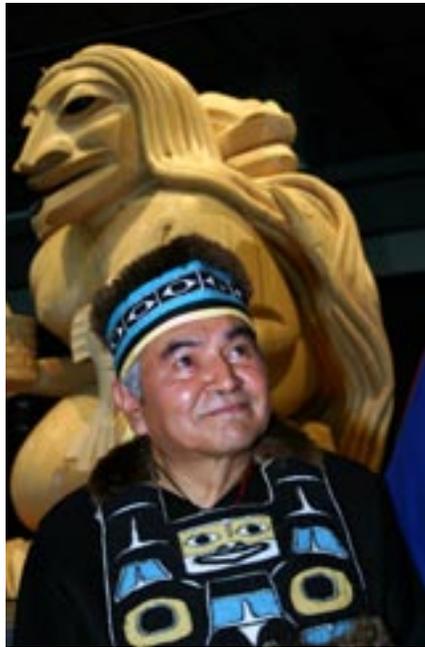
and Inuit art. And while Native art is the predominant genre, passengers will also find other unique pieces from local artists. Even the carpet and architecture of the terminals reflect the airport's artistic spirit. The green and blue carpet and the overhead lighting in some areas represent logjams common to the coastal waters of BC. And the support posts throughout the terminal buildings symbolize trees in a forest.

Construction of the international terminal, opened in 1996, provided the 'canvas' for the airport to showcase

art from around the province. YVR has a strategy when it comes to art, and all of its projects are done with design. With hues of greens and blues, it was a painting of BC's forest, mountains, and sea by Canadian 'Group of Seven' artist Lawren S Harris that provided inspiration for the terminal's color palette.

With every new expansion project undertaken at the airport, more than 1% of the budget is dedicated to art. That's when the VIAA comes to Beiks and the foundation. "We put a lot of forethought into the types of art we want





to display,” says Beiks. “Art as decoration doesn’t work well. Pieces are much more effective if they are integrated into the architecture.” Beiks notes that it was difficult in the beginning for the art world to take the ‘airport as gallery’ concept seriously. Many galleries weren’t interested in loaning pieces to YVR, probably thinking that an airport was a little too pedestrian for serious artists. It’s a different story today, as artists and galleries are eager to have their work displayed at the airport. “There is a great sense of pride when an artist is part of YVR’s collection,” says Beiks. “They have an audience of millions...we’ve taken art to where the people are.”

Art has been strategically placed throughout the airport, and while you will find spectacular displays in the public areas, many pieces are within secure areas (airside) and can be viewed only by passengers.

The airport also has 42 display cases where art is

showcased on a rotating basis and available for purchase by the public. This includes everything from a table made from an old propeller, a uniquely designed dresser that looked as if it came from the set of a Dr Seuss movie, or the C\$20,000 cashmere Haida dress that a man from California bought for his wife.

Beiks tells *Airways* that the airport wants to give passengers and visitors a lasting impression. Larry Berg, YVR’s CEO, echoed that sentiment when asked why art is important for an airport. “We’re delivering a sense of place,” enthuses Berg. “You know when you come to our airport that you are some place different. So many airports look alike. When you come to YVR you know that you aren’t in Cleveland or some other generic-looking airport.”

In fact, international travellers soon realize what an extraordinary place they are in when they enter the





Musqueam Welcoming Area and descend the escalators to customs. Water cascades down a stone wall behind the 6m (19.7ft)-diameter *The Spindle Whorl*, carved from red cedar by Susan A Point. This piece represents traditional images of the Coast Salish people who still live and fish along the Fraser River, which surrounds the airport. Two 5.5m (18ft)-high figures, a male and a female, greet people from around the world. The intent is for the Musqueam, who have lived on the land where the airport is located for thousands of years, to welcome visitors before their official greeting by Canadian immigration and customs officials. Visitors can also admire two 5m (16.4ft) weavings that took a year to create. The work in this area was created by Coast Salish women artists.

In June 2007, YVR unveiled its latest project: a C\$200 million expansion of its international terminal. Not only can the airport now accommodate the Airbus A380, but passengers will be dazzled by the look and feel of the expansion, which includes four large-scale art pieces, a 60m (197ft)-long creek, and an 114,000l (29,500USg) aquarium, home to some 850 sea creatures indigenous to BC. A 3,800l (1,000USg) jellyfish tank, complete with 100 moon jellies, greets arriving passengers. Inspired by nature and the ocean, YVR created a structure that travellers can relax in and enjoy as opposed to one that people might rush through on their way to a flight.

Carved from yellow and red cedar, Dempsey Bob's *Fog Woman and Raven* are the central pieces in this area, and were unveiled in front of 600 guests following a

traditional Musqueam dedication ceremony. *Fog Woman* represents one of nature's most amazing journeys the return of salmon to spawn in the river of their birth after spending years in the ocean.

YVR is in the midst of a one billion dollar construction program, and Larry Berg tells *Airways* that the artistic thematic will continue as long as he is CEO. Meanwhile, the next time you are at YVR allow some extra time to admire this wonderful collection. ➔