

The
Raven and the
First Men

From Conception to Completion

Bill Reid is one of Canada's most distinguished sculptors. One of the greatest achievements in his illustrious career is the monumental sculpture, *The Raven and the First Men*. This sourcebook tells the story of how this masterpiece, beloved by Canadians and a favourite of UBC Museum of Anthropology patrons, came to be.

Photo: Ulli Steltzer



THE RAVEN AND THE FIRST MEN

From Conception to Completion

Prepared by Anne Cross

The Raven and the First Men: From Conception to Completion

UBC Museum of Anthropology Pacific Northwest sourcebook series

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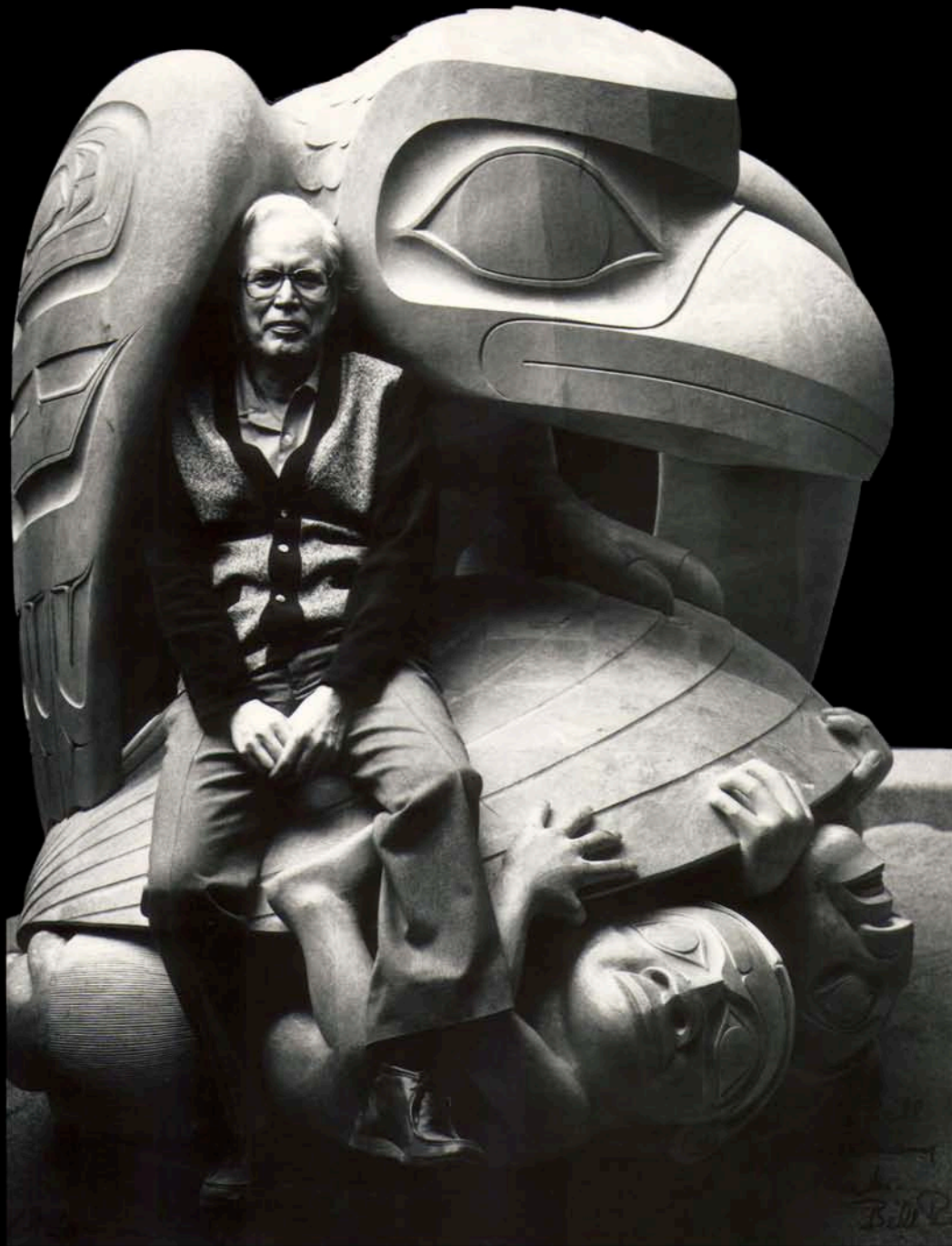
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Bill Reid quotations reproduced courtesy of the Bill Reid Estate

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The Artist

Bill Reid was born in 1920 in Victoria, BC. His father was an American of Scottish-German origin and his mother a Haida, born in Skidegate, and descendent of a lineage from T'anuu, Haida Gwaii.

While in his twenties, Reid spent time with his maternal grandfather, Charles Gladstone, a carver and silversmith, who was the nephew and heir of the 19th-century Haida artist, Charles Edenshaw. It was the work of these and other Haida artists that inspired Reid to build on their legacy.

Already working in Toronto as a CBC radio announcer, Reid studied European goldsmithing in Toronto before returning to British Columbia in the early 1950s. By applying these jewellery techniques to Haida art, he pushed the old forms in new directions. Later, when he became afflicted with Parkinson's disease, he began working on a monumental scale, creating sculptures in wood and bronze with studio assistants.

Bill Reid was a pivotal force in bringing his ancestors' visual traditions into modern forms and to a wider public. He died in 1998.

A Haida Legend of the Raven and the First Men

According to Haida legend, the Raven found himself alone one day on Rose Spit beach, on Haida Gwaii. Suddenly, he saw an extraordinary clamshell at his feet, and protruding from it were a number of small creatures. The Raven coaxed them to leave the shell to join him in his wonderful world. Some were hesitant at first, but eventually, overcome by curiosity, they emerged from the partly open clamshell to become the first Haida.



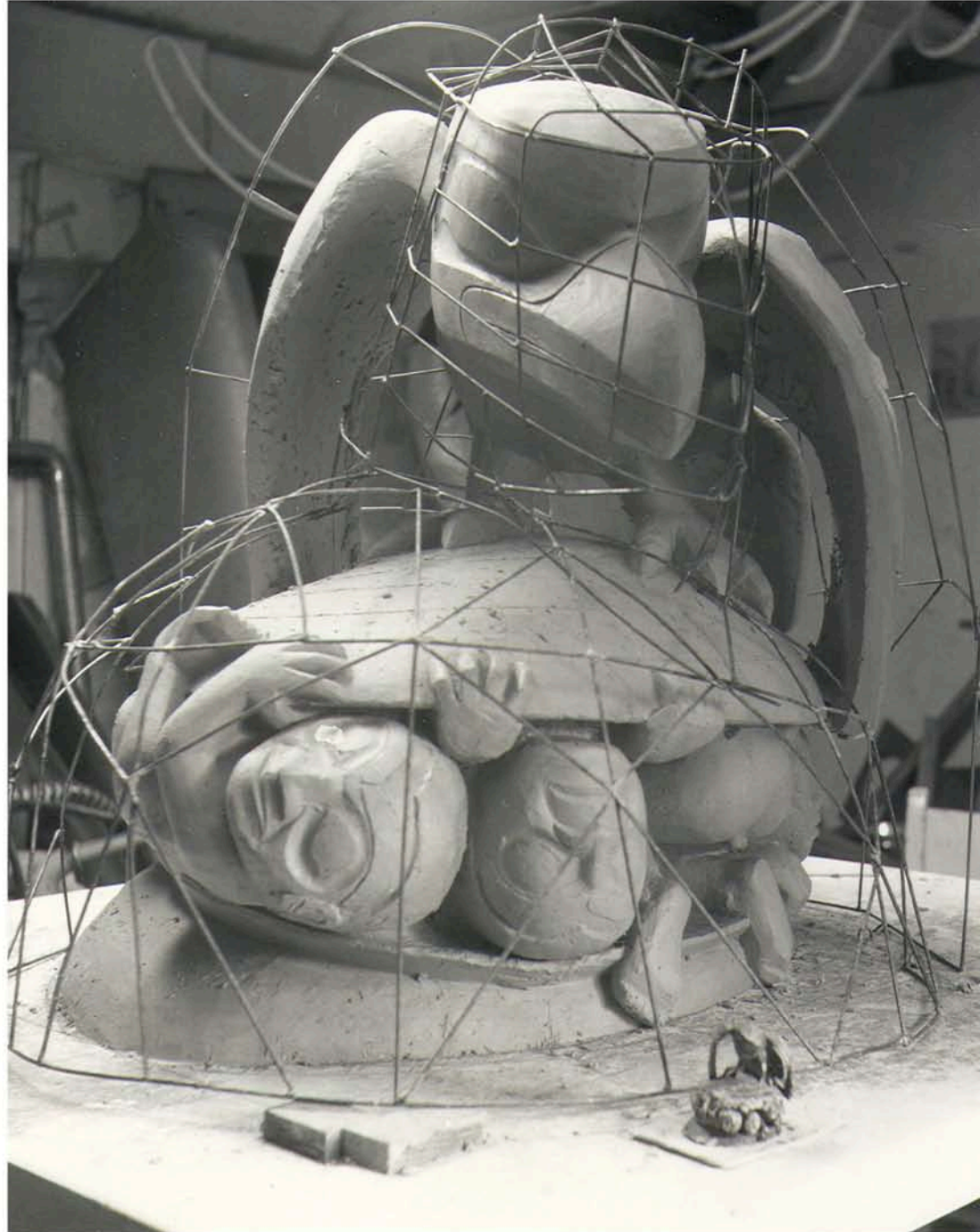
The Conception

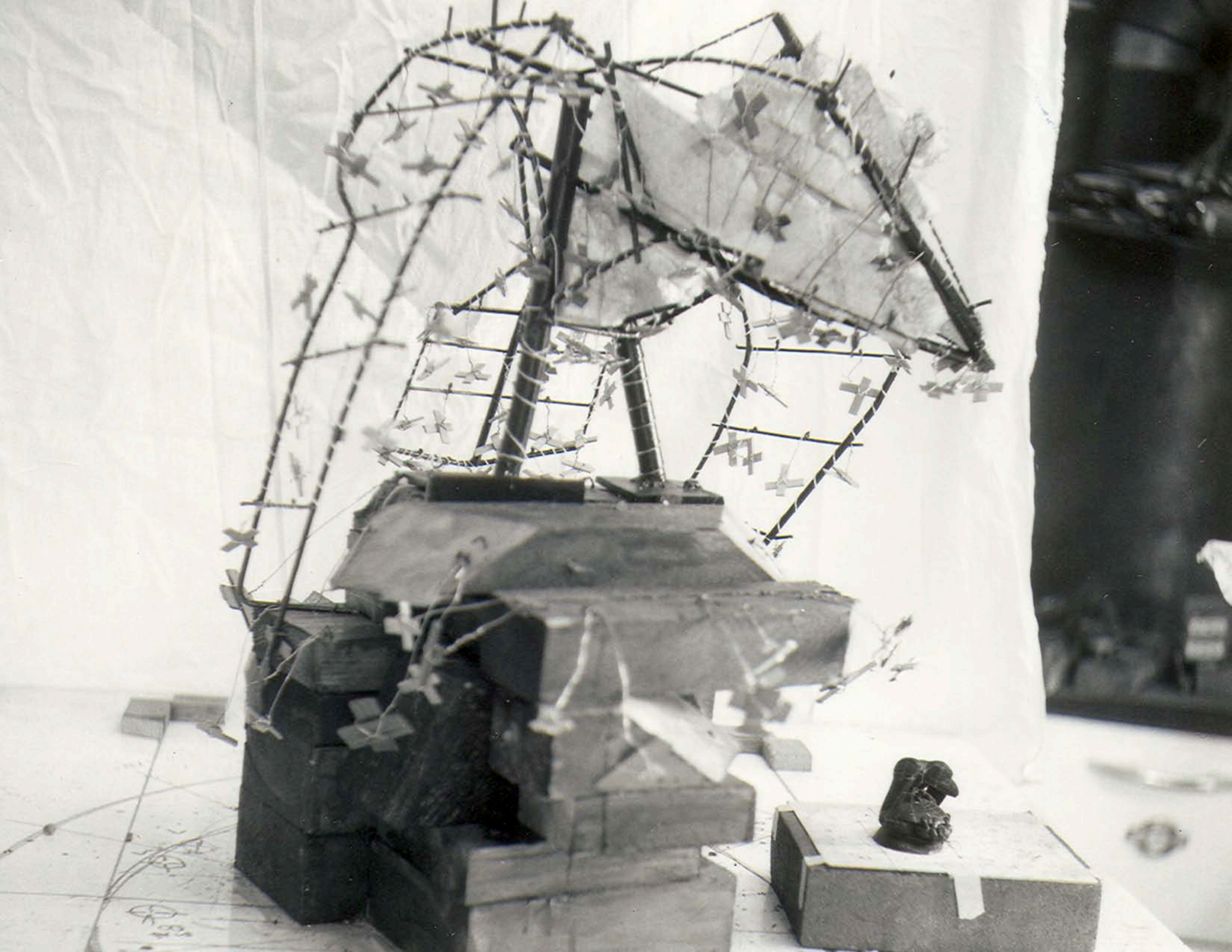
Bill Reid's monumental sculpture, *The Raven and the First Men*, began as a miniature boxwood carving inspired by the works of 19th-century Haida carver Charles Edenshaw.

Vancouver industrialist Walter Koerner, a strong supporter of the arts and sciences, commissioned Reid in 1973 to create a larger version of this miniature for the new Museum of Anthropology.

Bill Reid holding the carving, *The Raven Discovering Mankind in a Clamshell*, 1970.
Photo: Ulli Steltzer.



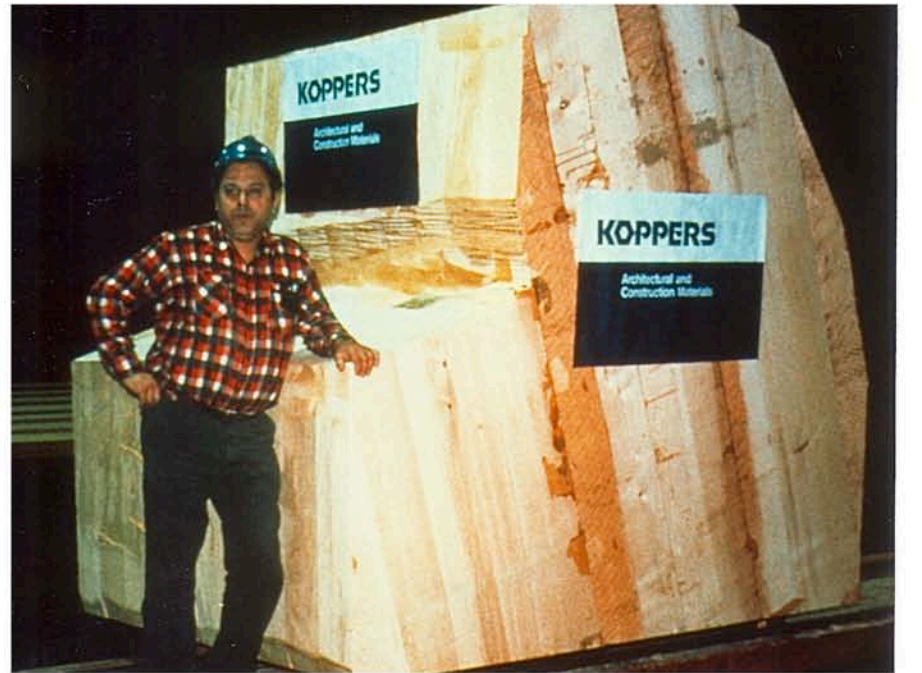




The Preparation

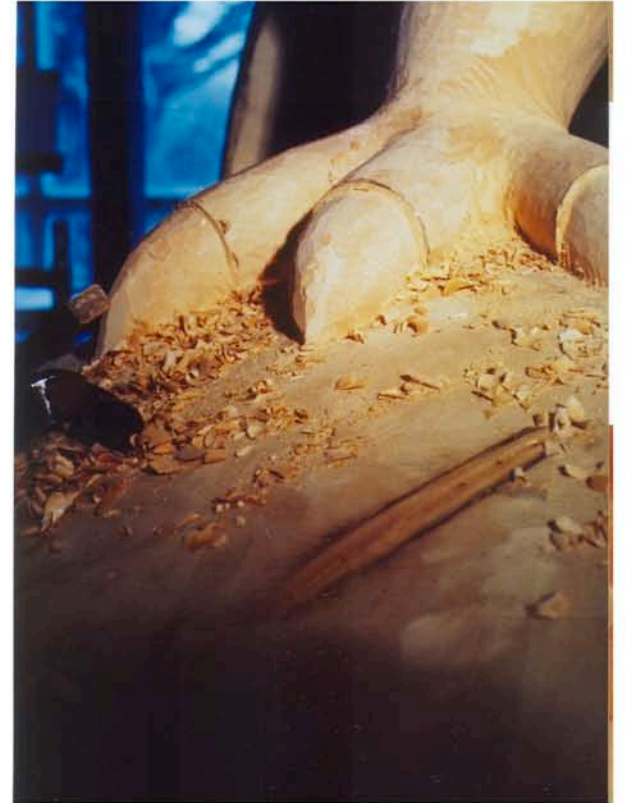
Finding the wood for *The Raven and the First Men* was difficult. Initial plans to use a section of red-cedar log proved to be impractical for a number of reasons. A block approximately 2.1 meters in diameter and free of rot or other defects could not be found.

In 1976, Rayonier Canada Limited donated 106 fine-grained yellow-cedar beams to create a workable carving block. The beams were then air dried for eight to twelve months and, with the assistance of Forintek Canada Limited, kiln dried for a further two months. Wood technologists at Koppers International Canada Limited laminated the beams into a four-and-a-half-ton block, measuring eight by eight by seven feet.



The Carving

In the fall of 1978, Bill Reid, with the assistance of other artists, began the sculpture. The first forms to be carved were the Raven and the clamshell. George Norris and Guujaaw (Gary Edenshaw) roughed out the shape, sculptor George Rammell carved the men, and Haida artists Jim Hart and Reg Davidson contributed to the final tool finishing.







Bill Reid and sculptor George Rammell carving the small humans.

Referring to his interpretation of the First Men in the sculpture, Reid (1984) remarked:

The little creatures have been given much more individuality than they were in the earlier carvings... much more representational anatomy, and much more movement.



Left: Guujaaw, Haida artist.

I see them as unformed, having all the potential of being human but having no way of achieving that until they emerged from the clamshell. And yet, of course, I depicted them as though they were of different personalities and different ages and so on. But I didn't think about this beforehand. I just went ahead and did it, and that's the way it turned out. So I guess there are lots of paradoxes which I'll leave for other people to unscramble.

Bill Reid (*Celebration of the Raven*, 1981)



It's hard to understand how you arrive at a design. It's far too complicated to get any overall picture of. I have a sort of waking nightmare... to get this thing just about completed, and the last day to discover one little part that doesn't quite fit with the adjacent part.

Bill Reid (*Pacific Report*, 1989)



Bill Reid using callipers to measure the base of the Raven sculpture.

The Installation

When *The Raven and the First Men* reached its final state, it was carefully moved from the carving shed on the UBC campus to the Museum of Anthropology.

Museum architect Arthur Erickson designed a special area in which the sculpture was to be installed. Because of the monumental size of the three-dimensional piece, it was necessary to remove the skylight over the Museum's rotunda and lower the sculpture down by crane.

Once in position, the sculpture was screened off from the public until it was completed by Reid and his assistants.







Opposite page: Bill Reid with the sculpture in the Museum's rotunda.
Above, left to right: Jim Hart, Reg Davidson, Bill Reid, and George Rammell working on the nearly-completed sculpture.

The Raven and the First Men

Doris Shadbolt, in her biography of Bill Reid, writes that his sculpture "...has stepped out of the ancestors' frame of arrested time into real time where events take place and creatures move in dramatic interaction... the composition moves and twists from within..." (1986: 141-2).

... When you see it [*The Raven and the First Men*] in its large scale,... there's an awful lot more of gesture and motion and so on... The beautiful, contained anticipation of action which is characteristic of the good Haida art of the past has been sort of released, to some extent. People are actually doing something, moving around, which is really very much of a European concept of sculpture... There's been this attempt to simulate life, to capture a dynamic moment in sculpture.

Bill Reid (*Celebration of the Raven*, 1981)



...It wasn't long before one, then another of the little shell brothers, timidly emerged. Some of them immediately scurried back when they saw the immensity of the sea and the sky and the overwhelming blackness of the Raven. But eventually curiosity overcame caution and all of them crept or scrambled out. Very strange creatures they were, two-legged like the Raven. There the resemblance ended. They had no glossy feathers, no thrusting beak, their skin was pale and they were naked except for their long, black hair on their round, flat-featured heads. Instead of strong wings they had stick-like appendages that waved and fluttered constantly. They were the original Haidas, the first humans.

Bill Reid (*Pacific Report*, 1989)



The Dedication

On April 1st, 1980, His Royal Highness, Prince Charles, unveiled and dedicated *The Raven and the First Men*.

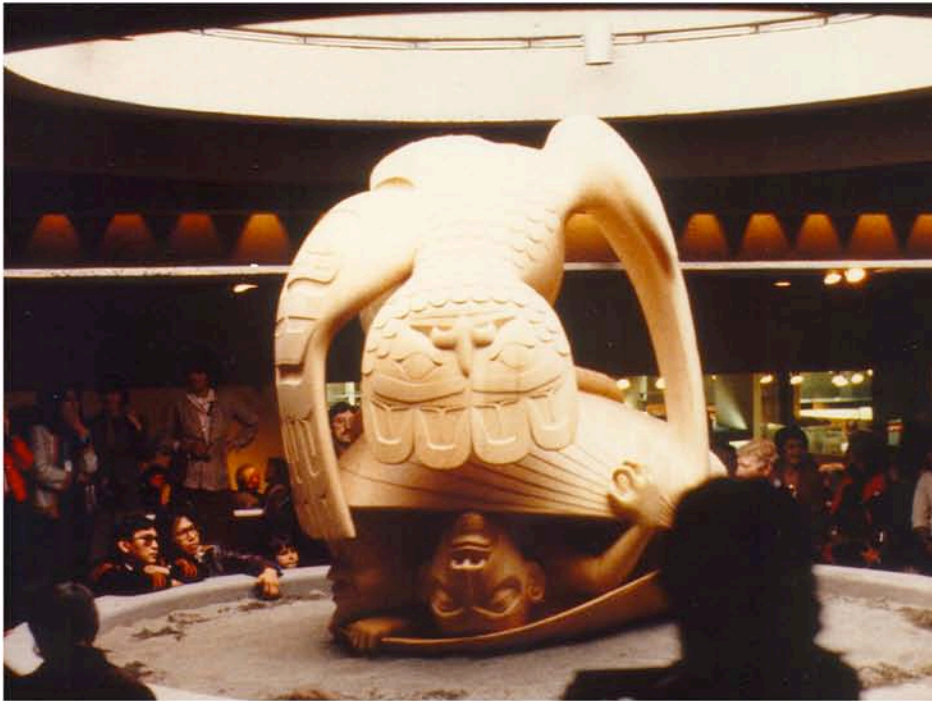
On June 5th, 1980, the sculpture was celebrated by the Haida people and their guests.

In September 2004, the Bank of Canada issued a new \$20 bank note depicting *The Raven and the First Men* as part of the Bank's *Canadian Journey* series, designed to celebrate Canada's history, culture, and achievements.



Left: His Royal Highness, Prince Charles, unveiling *The Raven and the First Men*.
Right: Bill Reid addressing the crowd on June 5th, 1980.





Left: Opening of *The Raven and the First Men* dedication, June 5th, 1980.
Right: Claude Davidson and young Haida singers, June 5th, 1980.

The Raven and the First Men has since become a favourite attraction for visitors.

Many experience delight while others are awed by the hovering supernatural Raven. Their responses affirm the power of Northwest Coast art to touch the emotions of people from different cultures (Duffek 1986: 3).

Speaking of his interpretation of the Raven over the past years and how it closely intertwines with his own worldview, Reid (*Two Worlds*, 1983) says:

I have created the Raven in my own image over the years and insist that mine is the version of this personality that is correct—well, at least it is correct as far as I am concerned. It suits my own attitude toward the world and its people to believe that the Raven is this completely self-centred, uninvolved bringer of change, through inadvertence and accident, and so on. I certainly and deliberately introduced a great deal of variety into the people in the clamshell, which I suppose grows out of growing up in an individualistic society we profess to have. It's a version of the Raven myth for today, not for the time when it was created.



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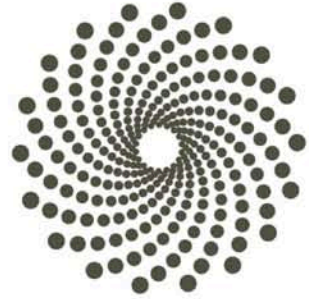
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About the Museum

MOA. A place of extraordinary architectural beauty. A place of provocative programming and vibrant, contemporary exhibitions. A place of active exploration and quiet contemplation. A place of world arts and cultures.

The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia is world-renowned for its collections, research, teaching, public programs, and community connections. It is also acclaimed for its spectacular architecture and unique setting on the cliffs of Point Grey.

To extend our role as public and research institution, we have just completed a major expansion and renewal project, creating amazing new opportunities for research, teaching, and public enjoyment. Visit us soon, and visit us often - there's always something new to experience at MOA!





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