

PRESTON SINGLETARY

ARTIST

Glass artist, Preston Singletary, is a member of the Tlingit /'kɪŋkɪt/ people **indigenous** to the North American Northwest Coast and Alaskan region. Before turning to glass, Singletary's ambition was to become a rock star and make his living as a musician. However, his close friendship with Dante Marioni helped to change the course of his life's work. Marioni encouraged Singletary to take a job as a night watchman at the Glass Eye Studio in Seattle. Within six months he worked his way onto the day shift and worked on production teams. While at Glass Eye he worked with and learned from some of the leaders of American glass art – Benjamin Moore, Dale Chihuly, and Lino Tagliapietra to name a few. However, it was not until Singletary began to draw upon the Tlingit heritage, passed on to him through the **matrilineal lineage** from his great-grandmother, that his art began to be recognized as his own.



ARTWORK

Singletary's early work making traditional blown glass vessels looked so similar in style to the artists he was working with that they were often given credit for his work. In the mid 1980's Singletary began to research and learn more about his heritage. He studied the Tlingit culture, artforms, and stories, which he began to incorporate into his glassblowing as a means of reinventing himself. Initially he used the **formline** design structure unique to Northwest Coast Art to "decorate" bowls and vessels with **iconography** that referenced objects of his cultural heritage. The designs would be transferred through an **engraving** or **carving** process of masking and sandblasting blown glass objects. His later work becomes more sculptural allowing for a more direct narrative within the form of an object, rather than only on the surface of the object. Singletary often sculpts symbolically significant animals, canoes, masks, and human figures which are later carved in the form line style.



Tlingit Hat, blown and sand carved glass, 7" x 15.5"

"GLASS IS A TRANSFORMATIONAL MATERIAL... FOR OUR TRIBAL COMMUNITY IT IS ALSO A TRANSFORMATIONAL MEDIUM THAT IS BREAKING THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEWPOINT"- PRESTON SINGLETARY



Supernatural Being, blown & carved glass, 13" x 12"



Red Eagle, blown & carved glass, 25" x 14" x 6"



Travels on Water, blown & carved glass, 11" x 20" x 6"

He has also explored other methods of producing sculptures in glass such as casting. Glass casting is a process of using molten glass to fill a mold which is then allowed to solidify.

Kiln casting is one form of casting in which a raw glass material is melted inside a very hot oven – a kiln – to fill a mold. Molds can either be filled directly or by a specially constructed reservoir which allows the molten material to flow into the mold.

Through collaboration with David Svenson, a woodcarver, he produced some of the world's largest cast glass sculptures with his three *Family Story Totems* (right).



Salmon, cast crystal, 5" x 14" x 1"



Family Story Totem (Amber), cast lead crystal
86" x 24" x 17"



Weaver's Welcome, cast glass and metal, 125" x 42" x 24"

"MY CAREER AS A GLASS ARTIST HAS SORT OF MORPHED INTO BEING A CULTURAL AMBASSADOR TO SOME DEGREE." - PRESTON SINGLETARY

WORLD & HISTORY

Singletary's work bridges the divide between what is historically considered fine art and what is historically considered "primitive" art and "craft." The definition of fine art is very tricky. In the contemporary art world, the term "fine art" encompasses a wider variety of mediums and styles than what is traditionally included in the **canon** of Fine Art. Indigenous art is often referred to as primitive and has been seen to lack the sophistication of work that has been canonized as Fine Art. Similarly, glass, along with trades like masonry, are also excluded from the fine art canon because they were considered trades or crafts.

The view that indigenous art is not sophisticated is outdated and prejudicial. For instance, the formline design style of Northwest Coast Art follows specific rules and traditions in the creation of designs and artwork. Though many historical objects and artifacts were intended for practical use, the sophistication of design decoration is clear.

Similarly, many trades and crafts were excluded from fine art due to the intentional function of the work produced. The mid-20th Century saw an exploration of glass as an art medium. Artists were no longer only producing functional objects, but sculpture as well.

However, the stigma that originally excluded these artforms from consideration as Fine Art persists in some circles.

"[Singletary is] a pioneering artist in what can be called "modern heritage art."

**~Patricia McDonnell, Director
Wichita Art Museum**



Meditations with Fire,
cast bronze, cast glass disc, 40" x 10.5" x 6"

A CLOSER LOOK

This is the Glass Blower **totem**. In the center you can see me holding a glass blowing pipe and riding a Killer Whale, which is my **crest** symbol and represents my Tlingit family. We are nestled in an Octopus or Kraken, which symbolizes the fluid nature of molten glass. The bird figure toward the top is an Eagle which is the **moiety** that is my side of the Tlingit tribe.

In between the Eagles wings represents my dearly departed friend Joe Benvenuto, who was my right-hand man and close friend for over 20 years. He is shown holding a basket. It's safe to say that without Joe's support and friendship during the development of my career I would not be where I am today as an artist.

The top glass piece represents the sun or fire which we know is part of what sustains our lives, and for glass blowers, creates the material that we all work with. "Meditations with Fire" is my poetic title in which I have found all of my creative inspiration working alongside with and learning from other artists and glass makers.

This **totem** was conceptualized and designed by me and carved and collaborated on with David Franklin (Non-Indigenous). David helped me realize this sculpture through collaboration and his exceptional carving skills.

-Preston Singletary

VOCABULARY

Indigenous: 1) originating in and characteristic of a particular region or country; native (often followed by to). 2) Indigenous - relating to or being a people who are the original, earliest known inhabitants of a region, or are their descendants.

Formline: term coined by Bill Holm to describe the indigenous art of the Northwest Coast of North America distinguished by the use of characteristic shapes referred to as *ovoids*, *U forms* and *S forms*.

Iconography: subject matter in the visual arts, especially with reference to the conventions regarding the treatment of a subject in artistic representation.

Engrave: a physical process of removing material to create a mark upon the surface.

Carve: a physical process of removing material by cutting deeply and carefully into the material for the purpose of changing its physical shape.

Canon: 1) a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works. 2) a body of principles, rules, standards, or norms.

Totem: a natural object or animal that is believed by a particular society to have spiritual significance and that is adopted by it as an emblem.

Crest: 1) the plume or identifying emblem worn on a knight's helmet. 2) a heraldic representation of the crest.

Moiety: one of two basic complementary tribal subdivisions

STRUCTURAL FRAME

1. Describe Preston Singletary's work to someone who cannot see it.
2. How do you think Singletary makes his sculptures?
3. How do light and color affect the artwork?
4. What is significant about the size of some of Singletary's work?
5. How is formline used in Singletary's work?

SUBJECTIVE FRAME

1. What do you think is represented in Singletary's work?
2. What does glass make you think about?
3. What stories can you infer from Singletary's work?
4. Who do you think is Singletary's intended audience? Why?
5. Why do you think Singletary sees himself as a cultural ambassador?

CULTURAL FRAME

1. Singletary often collaborates with other artists. How is collaboration connected to his work?
2. In what ways can you relate to Singletary's work on a personal level?
3. What changes for the art when an audience understands or does not understand the iconography in an artwork?

POST MODERN FRAME

1. Why is it significant that Singletary chooses to work in glass?
2. Share your thoughts and feelings about the following statement: Neither Indigenous art nor glass art are considered Fine Art.
3. What other cultures or artforms do you know of that are excluded from the Fine Art canon?

WORKING IN WOOD

a comparison

"My life has had some bumpy roads. I didn't know who I was. But when I started carving totem poles, I began to feel connected to my people, my history, my culture. My work makes me feel like I'm part of the big picture." – Tommy Joseph

Tommy Joseph is a Tlingit woodcarver who specializes in traditional design techniques handed down through generations. However, many traditions were almost completely lost as white European settlers sought forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples – especially their children. Children were forcibly removed – or kidnapped – from their families and sent to residential homes where native languages, religions, and cultural practices were forbidden and resulted in severe punishment if practiced.

Tommy Joseph started carving at a young age thanks to cultural classes taught by his tribal elders. He would often steal his mother's steak knives to practice. Today he uses chainsaws and traditional tools he crafts himself. He carves traditional totem poles with contemporary themes. The people of the Northwest Coast have no written language so totem poles served as guideposts and markers that could be seen from a canoe on the water. They named settlements, told of land claims, or stood as monuments or memorials for specific people, tribes, or events. Some poles are even used for ridicule. Totem



The Kiks.adi Memorial pole, red cedar, 35 ft.



Trump ridicule pole, red cedar, 11.5 ft.








Male figure with Human/Man helmet

poles are created using interlinked characters that tell a story. Joseph also researched Tlingit armor in preparation for the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the 1804 Battle of Sitka. He began carving replicas of the wooden helmets he researched in twenty museum collections and then began carving his own designs, too.

Comparing Singletary and Joseph

- 1) How do the artists' approaches to their shared heritage differ?
- 2) How might the materials each artist uses limit his design possibilities?
- 3) Should the work of Singletary or Joseph be considered lesser than art traditionally considered Fine Art?
- 4) How does each artist bridge tradition with the contemporary in his art?
- 5) How has the history of forced assimilation influenced the artistic development of Singletary and Joseph?
- 6) What are thoughts about preserving tradition and/or living in a contemporary and global society?

ART MAKING IDEAS

- 1) **Glass Relief Tile:** Students will design and create a relief sculpture to be kiln cast in glass.
 -  **Things to consider-** Reliefs should be sculpted in plasticine. Kiln casting glass requires plaster silica – a mask or respirator should be worn while mixing. Not all glasses are compatible – be sure to use glass from a single source or with the same coefficient.
- 2) **Soap Animal Carving:** Students will carve an animal sculpture of their choosing and design from a bar of soap.
 -  **Things to consider-** Students need to design a piece before carving. The design will need to be transferred to the soap. Carving requires shape knives.
- 3) **Personal Design Language Development:** Students will develop specific design rules that will dictate the structure of images and produce an artwork based on those design rules.
 -  **Things to consider-** Rules may be about shapes, color usage, line placement. They need to be clear and easily understandable. One should be able to deduce the rules from analyzing artwork.
- 4) **Personal Heritage Exploration:** Students will choose a part of their heritage to explore and develop an artistic motif connected to that heritage. Students will produce a series of artworks incorporating the motif.
 -  **Things to consider-** A motif may come directly from a traditional artform or created based on the students own impressions. The motif should clearly link artworks to each other and to their heritage.
- 5) **Class Heritage Quilt:** Each student will create a symbol representing his or her heritage on a square of muslin. The squares will be sewn together by the class in a quilting bee.
 -  **Things to consider-** Allow students the freedom to decorate their quilting square with whatever materials they wish to use to express their unique heritages. *Class quilts may be auctioned off for a school fundraiser.

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