

# Struggle for acceptance continues

Tom Hill thinks he's slowly but surely winning his 20-year battle to make Indian art "acceptable."

"In the early days, there was a reluctance to accept Indian art as art," said Mr. Hill. "I've struggled to have it accepted, not because it's Indian, but because it's damn good art."

Mr. Hill is president of the National Indian Arts Foundation and museum director at the Woodland Indian Cultural Education Centre. He has spent two decades trying to convince people in national art circles that Indian artists have something to say — "not only to people in their own communities, but to all Canadians."

He continues to wage the battle.

"Indian art is still not accepted

in the National Gallery of Canada," said Mr. Hill, who has been trying to change that situation since he worked in the National Gallery in 1967.

He said Inuit artists haven't faced the same exhaustive struggle. He believes that's because non-native people have controlled the Inuit art market, and have manipulated institutions to accept it.

But Indian people have always had to do it on their own, and art in Canada moves in circles that Indian people wouldn't have access to — the corporate boardrooms, said Mr. Hill.

"It was quite acceptable for us to be selling little things to the tourists, but to be able to make a major piece and comment about the world

we live in, that just wasn't acceptable."

Fortunately, times are changing, said Mr. Hill. One big victory was the first-ever exhibition of Indian art displayed in the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1984.

"The battles have not all been won, but I feel a lot more comfortable that those goals I started out with in 1967 have in fact been attained," he said.

It is argued Indian art shouldn't be hung just because it's Indian. The debate has centred around the question: "Is it good art?"

But Mr. Hill's view is that a lot of art is dismissed out of hand because it's Indian.

It has been criticized for being

"guilt" art and being "commercial twaddle."

Countering these critics, Mr. Hill argues other respected artists have been commercially successful without their artistic credibility being hurt.

"In most cases, most artists have to put bread and butter on the plate so they do things they know will in fact sell," said Mr. Hill.

And, he said, various Indian artists are now dealing with issues of concern to all society.

Some of them, like artist Carl Beam, dive into controversial subjects "that are issues we are all concerned with."

"That's a very positive movement," said Mr. Hill.



Expositor Photo

Tom Hill, museum director at the Woodland Indian Cultural Educational Centre, looks at The Great Tree or "the tree of peace," donated by Stanley Hill.