

Peace, recovery, clarity

Roy Henry Vickers reflects on his artistic journey over four decades

By Jennifer Foden

When reflecting back on more than 40 years as an artist, Roy Henry Vickers's most memorable and treasured accomplishment is his road to recovery.

Once a substance user, Vickers overcame his addiction 24 years ago. "In 1992, my most successful year as far as earnings, I set out to find some peace and order in my busy life," recalls Vickers. "I found that road to recovery back in '92 and established a solid base as a sweat lodge leader and found my spiritual journey of peace." In 1994 he created VisionQuest, a non-profit organization designed to help individuals struggling with various addictions.

As a 70-year-old B.C. First Nations artist, carver, speaker, author, publisher, designer—Vickers has a long list of accomplishments. In 1987, the provincial government gifted an original Vickers painting, *A Meeting of Chiefs*, to Queen Elizabeth II on a visit to Vancouver for the Commonwealth Summit. In 1993, proofs of his print, *The Homecoming*, were the province's gift to then American president Bill Clinton and Russian president Boris Yeltsin. He has created more than 20 totem poles, which was for '94 Commonwealth Games in Victoria). In 1998, he received the Order of British Columbia, and, in 2006, was made a Member of the Order of Canada.

Vickers was born in Greenville on the Nass River and raised in Hazelton (450 km northwest of Prince George), Kitkatla, and Victoria. He says his B.C. roots have impacted his work, giving him knowledge and inspiration. "The Tsimshian, Haida, and Kwakwaka'wakw lineage, added to the English, continually give me insights and inspiration from the land and people," he says. "We are part of all our ancestors, our ancestors are part of the land. We are connected to the Earth, our mother."

This Pacific Northwest inspiration is present in all his art—from painting and carving to printmaking and beyond. His work can be found in collections and galleries around the world, including the Eagle Aerie Gallery in Tofino, which is owned by Vickers. He has also published several books showcasing collections of his artwork.

His newest book, *Peace Dancer*, co-authored by Robert 'Lucky' Budd, tells the legend of some children, who, thousands of years ago in the village of Kitkatla, capture and mistreat a crow while pretending to be hunters. This disrespects the Chief of the Heavens, who creates a powerful storm to flood the village. The villagers are forced to abandon their homes, and, as sea levels rise, they promise to teach their children about the value of all life. When the rain stops, the villagers appoint a chief to perform the Peace Dance at future potlaches to pass on the story of the flood and to teach future generations about respect. *Peace Dancer*, the fourth and final installment in Vickers's bestselling Northwest Coast Legends series, is a beautiful combination of storytelling and art. It not only features a story that, according to Vickers, should "remind us that we should walk with respect on our journey through life on this tiny planet no matter where we live," it is illustrated by 18 new works of art by Vickers himself.

On a long career:

"Seventy years old! It's hard to believe I left Ksan School of Art back in '74 to embark on a career as an artist. My art teacher, Mr. West, back in 1966, told me I would need to discover myself and express myself from the uniqueness of who I am."

On advice to emerging artists:

"The greatest advice at this point would be to work hard with the gift that is given to you. Find the uniqueness that is you, get to know yourself and create from your uniqueness. You are the only person in the world that can do that. Another way I say this is, 'Stand in the strength, truth, and beauty of who you are and create from that place.' Find a way to look in the mirror and say, 'I love you in all your imperfections.' The harder you work, the greater the reward. Our gift to the world is what we do with the gift that is given to us."

On his personal favourite:

"I do not have a favourite piece of art. Each creation is a unique and special story. I always use the analogy of my children: I have no favourites—they are all my favourites!"

On how his struggles in early life impacted his work:

"We who walk this Earth have four faces in life: the face of the baby, who is dependent on caregivers; the face of youth, who are called to overcome the challenges of life; the face of the middle-aged, who come to understand that life is not just about challenge and enjoy the ever-present humour; and, lastly, the face of the elder, who becomes attached to the spiritual aspects of life. As an elder, I look back on the addictive personality and calamity of my personal life and see the healing journey and how the healing has brought a humility and peace in knowing I continually strive to be a better human being.

My healing gives a dimension to knowledge that enables my vision to be clear. Clarity of vision attached to inspiration impacts my creativity with strength and resolve. The great impact of all this on my life's work is keeping me aware of the short time we have to live and contribute, and a growing desire to teach through all avenues available." ◀



◉ Roy Henry Vickers. Photo by his co-author Robert "Lucky" Budd.

◉ Eagle in Moon painting by Roy Henry Vickers.

