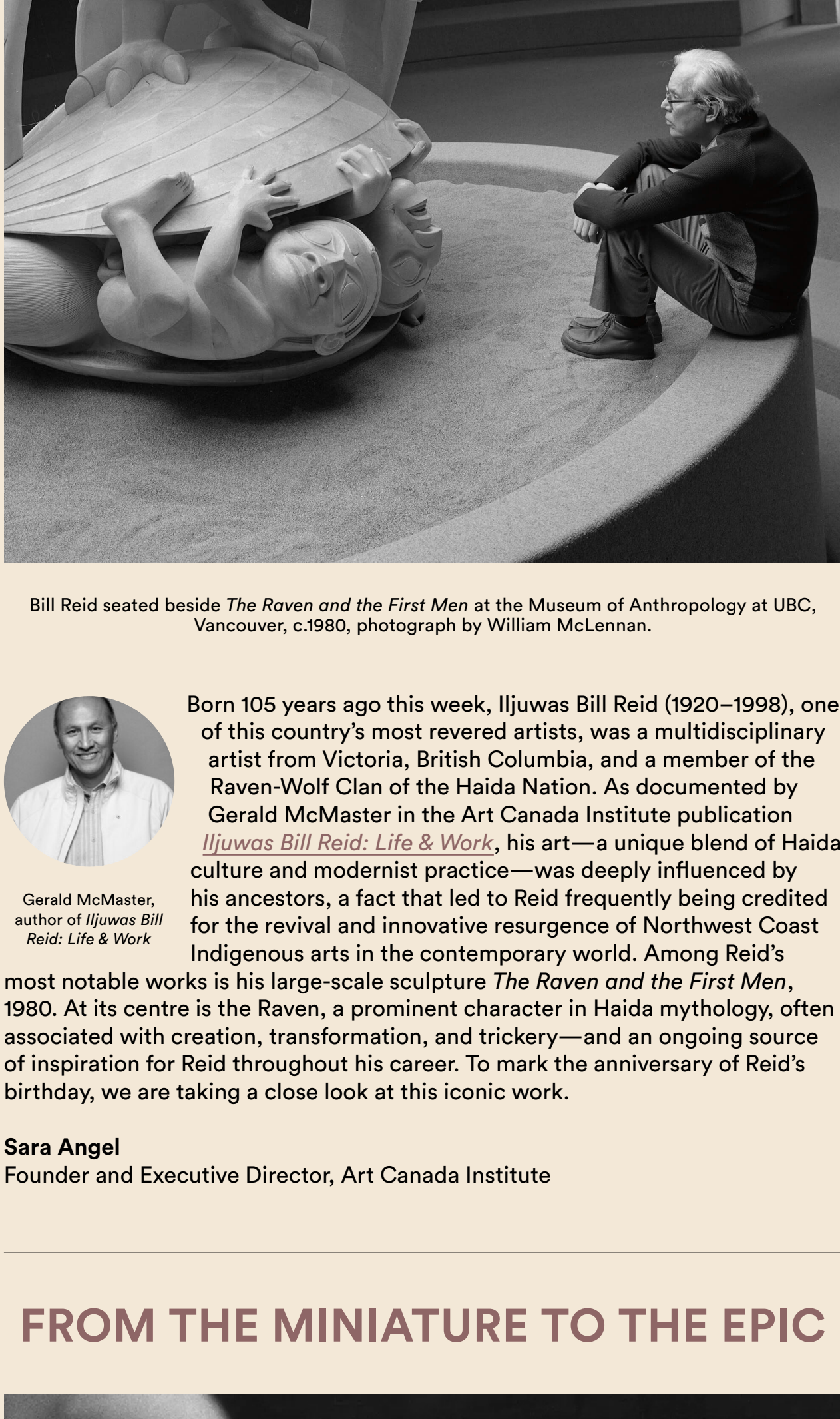


JANUARY 10, 2025

SPOTLIGHT: THE RAVEN AND THE FIRST MEN
THE ICONIC WORK BY ILJUWAS BILL REID*In celebration of Iljuwas Bill Reid's birthday, we take a close look at the monumental carving nearly forty-five years after its creation.*Bill Reid seated beside *The Raven and the First Men* at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver, c.1980, photograph by William McLennan.Gerald McMaster,
author of *Iljuwas Bill
Reid: Life & Work*

Born 105 years ago this week, Iljuwas Bill Reid (1920–1998), one of this country's most revered artists, was a multidisciplinary artist from Victoria, British Columbia, and a member of the Raven-Wolf Clan of the Haida Nation. As documented by Gerald McMaster in the Art Canada Institute publication *Iljuwas Bill Reid: Life & Work*, his art—a unique blend of Haida culture and modernist practice—was deeply influenced by his ancestors, a fact that led to Reid frequently being credited for the revival and innovative resurgence of Northwest Coast Indigenous arts in the contemporary world. Among Reid's most notable works is his large-scale sculpture *The Raven and the First Men*, 1980. At its centre is the Raven, a prominent character in Haida mythology, often associated with creation, transformation, and trickery—and an ongoing source of inspiration for Reid throughout his career. To mark the anniversary of Reid's birthday, we are taking a close look at this iconic work.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

FROM THE MINIATURE TO THE EPIC

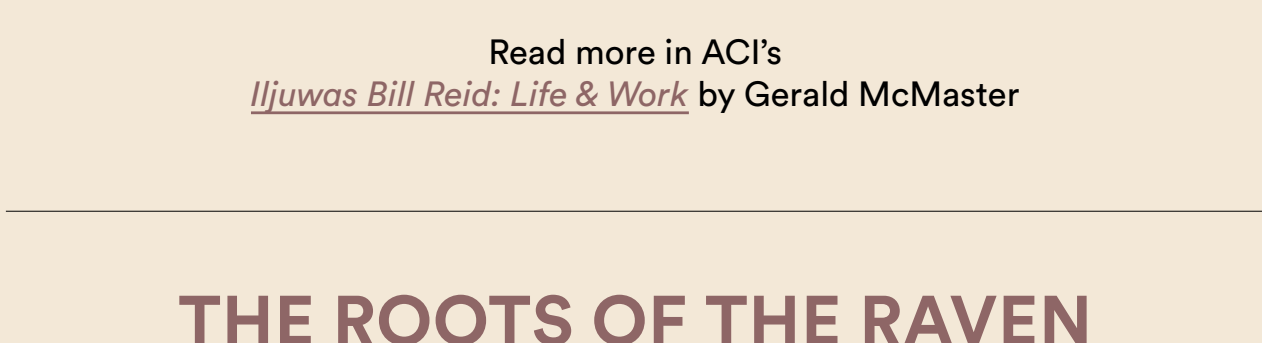
Bill Reid, *The Raven Discovering Mankind in a Clamshell*, 1970, Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver.

Reid's 1980 sculpture *The Raven and the First Men* first took form as the miniature carving *The Raven Discovering Mankind in a Clamshell*, created in 1970. In this early iteration, as McMaster explains, the Raven overlooks figures crawling from the clamshell displaying a range of emotions—fear, excitement, rejection—as they enter the new world. In Haida tradition, the Raven was known as a magical, complex, transformative, creative character, and Reid deeply identified with what the Raven stood to represent. Thus, throughout his career, as he navigated his identity and ancestry as a Haida Canadian, Reid created the Raven, the hero of Haida culture, in his own image.

Read more in ACI's

[Iljuwas Bill Reid: Life & Work](#) by Gerald McMaster

A BLEND OF ARTISTIC TRADITIONS

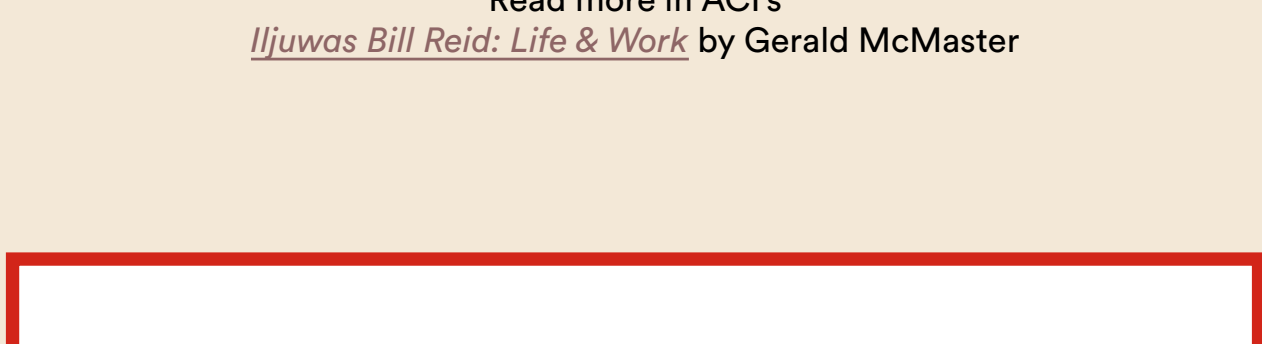
Bill Reid, *Hinged Raven Bracelet*, c.1955, Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver.

The inspiration for *The Raven and the First Men* can be traced back to the 1950s, when Reid, who then worked as a broadcaster for the CBC, began making jewellery, in which he blended Haida traditions and twentieth-century art. Reid valued the significance of jewellery in Haida culture and how the stories and images created on bracelets represented the individual wearing them. In *Hinged Raven Bracelet*, c.1955, Reid depicts the Raven, marking one of his earliest engagements with this hero of Haida culture. He would go on to create a large series of images that celebrate the Raven throughout his career, before he turned his attention to the Raven's role in the Haida creation story.

Read more in ACI's

[Iljuwas Bill Reid: Life & Work](#) by Gerald McMaster

THE ROOTS OF THE RAVEN

Bill Reid, *The Raven and the First Men*, c.1955, Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art, Vancouver.

The roots of the sculpture *The Raven and the First Men* also stretch back to the engraving *The Raven and the First Men*, c.1955. In it, Reid depicts the Haida creation story and celebrates the moment when the clamshell opens. The faces emerging from the form pop out in an orderly fashion and share an expression of shock or intrigue as they experience their new world for the first time. In the print, the Raven is positioned next to the clamshell rather than perched on its top, as in Reid's later sculpture. This change in composition would support Reid's desire to present the Raven protectively towering over the clamshell and the figures inside. McMaster elaborates on Reid's connection to the Raven, explaining that, like the Raven, his "path to becoming a well-known artist and of service to the Haida people was full of twists and turns that could not have been foreseen."

Read more in ACI's

[Iljuwas Bill Reid: Life & Work](#) by Gerald McMaster

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A KIND OF ARTISTIC POTLATCHING



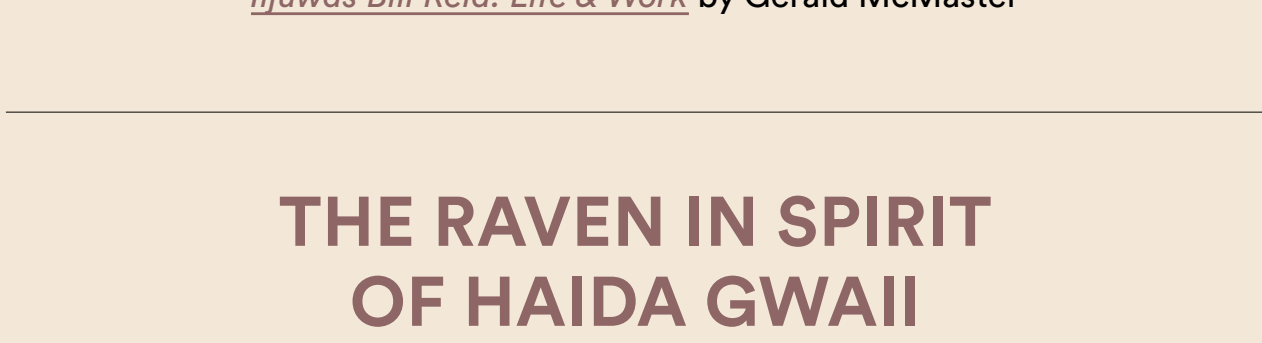
(From left to right) Jim Hart, Reg Davidson, Bill Reid, and George Rammell working on the nearly completed *The Raven and the First Men* at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver, 1980, photographer unknown.

Bill Reid using calipers to measure the base of his monumental sculpture *The Raven and the First Men*, c.1978, photograph by Bill McLennan.

Creating the enormous *The Raven and the First Men* proved complicated, as there was no suitable block of wood large enough for Reid to carve from. Thus, a cube was engineered from 106 cedar beams. For the project, Reid, who struggled with his health, employed the help of several young Haida and non-Haida artists (above left). This collaborative approach not only facilitated the work but also deepened Reid's connection to his Haida culture, which values community support. As McMaster explains, since Reid could not do the work alone, it "resulted in a kind of artistic potlatching—a gifting that afforded many the opportunity to be involved, to learn, and to remember."

[Learn more about the creation of *The Raven and the First Men*](#)

CREATION STORY

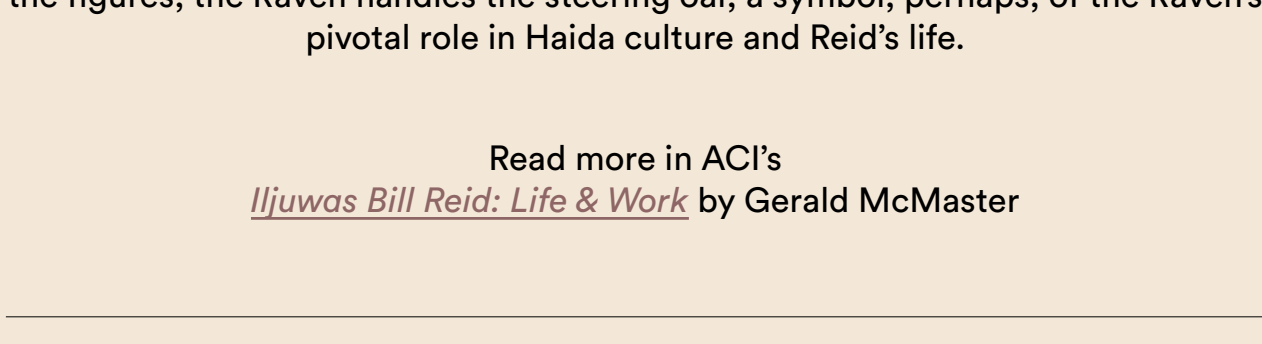
Bill Reid, *The Raven and the First Men*, 1980, Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver.

The Raven and the First Men represents Reid's interpretation of the Haida creation story, which centres on the Raven (Xhuuya), the mythical figure from Haida tradition who created the first humans of Haida Gwaii and their land. As described in Robert Bringhurst's book *The Raven Steals the Light* and also discussed in McMaster's *Iljuwas Bill Reid: Life & Work*, the Raven is "greedy and mischievous, but also helpful and creative. He not only released humans into the world from a clamshell but also brought light (knowledge) to the world."

Read more in ACI's

[Iljuwas Bill Reid: Life & Work](#) by Gerald McMaster

THE RAVEN IN SPIRIT OF HAIDA GWAI

Bill Reid, *Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, 1986, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau.

Haida Gwaii, 1986. As McMaster explains, the thirteen characters seated in the canoe provide "an index to themes embodied by Reid throughout his lifetime, many of whom reappear throughout his entire body of work." Nestled among the figures, the Raven handles the steering oar, a symbol, perhaps, of the Raven's pivotal role in Haida culture and Reid's life.

Read more in ACI's

[Iljuwas Bill Reid: Life & Work](#) by Gerald McMaster

INSTALLATION OF AN ICON



Top: Bill Reid at the Haida celebration held at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC on the occasion of the installation of *The Raven and the First Men*, Vancouver, 1980, photograph by William McLennan.

Bottom: Bill Reid with Haida Gwaii community members at the Haida celebration held at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC on the occasion of the installation of *The Raven and the First Men*, Vancouver, 1980, photograph by William McLennan.

On June 5, 1980, the Museum of Anthropology at UBC hosted a ceremony to celebrate the completion of Reid's monumental carving *The Raven and the First Men*. At the unveiling, Haida people and their guests, His Royal Highness Prince Charles, and the artist were there to mark the momentous occasion. Nearly forty-five years later, this iconic carving is still on display.

Read more in ACI's

[Iljuwas Bill Reid: Life & Work](#) by Gerald McMaster

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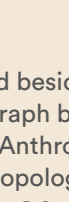
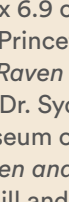
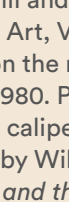
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Image Credits: [1] Bill Reid seated beside *The Raven and the First Men* at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver, c.1980. Photograph by William McLennan. Collection of the Audrey & Harry Hawthorn Library & Archives, Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. William McLennan fonds (a035127c). Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. [2] Bill Reid, *The Raven Discovering Mankind in a Clamshell*, 1970, boxwood, 7 x 6.9 cm. Collection of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. Gift, 1986 (Nbt.488). Courtesy of Princeton University Library, New Jersey. © Bill Reid Estate. Photo credit: Ulli Steltzer. [3] Bill Reid, *Hinged Raven Bracelet*, c.1955, gold, 4.3 x 5 x 6 cm. Collection of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. Dr. Sydney Friedman and Dr. Constance Livingstone-Friedman Collection, 2011 (2923/1). Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. © Bill Reid Estate. Photo credit: Kyla Bailey. [4] Bill Reid, *The Raven and the First Men*, c.1955, silver engraving on paper, 9.5 x 18 cm. SFU Bill Reid Collection, Vancouver, Bill and Martine Reid Founding Collection (2002.1.58). Courtesy of the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art, Vancouver. © Bill Reid Estate. [5] Jim Hart, Reg Davidson, Bill Reid, and George Rammell working on the nearly completed *The Raven and the First Men* at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver, 1980. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. [6] Bill Reid using calipers to measure the base of his monumental sculpture *The Raven and the First Men*, c.1978. Photograph by William McLennan. Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. [7] Bill Reid, *The Raven and the First Men*, 1980, yellow cedar, laminated and carved, 188 x 192 cm (height x diameter). Collection of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. Walter C. and Marianne Koerner Collection, 1980 (Nbt.1487). Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. © Bill Reid Estate. Photo credit: Jessica Bushey. [8] Bill Reid, *Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, 1986, plaster and metal, 389 x 605 x 348 cm. Collection of the Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau (92-51, IMG2016-0169-0038-Dm). Courtesy of the Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau. © Bill Reid Estate. [9] Bill Reid at the Haida celebration held at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC on the occasion of the installation of *The Raven and the First Men*, Vancouver, 1980. Photograph by William McLennan. Collection of the Audrey & Harry Hawthorn Library & Archives, Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. William McLennan fonds (a035179). Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. [10] Bill Reid with Haida Gwaii community members at the Haida celebration held at the Museum of Anthropology at UBC on the occasion of the installation of *The Raven and the First Men*, Vancouver, 1980. Photograph by William McLennan. Collection of the Audrey & Harry Hawthorn Library & Archives, Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver. William McLennan fonds (a035181). Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver.