

Land, sea, sky



The Spirit of Haida Gwaii: The Jade Canoe by Haida artist Bill Reid carries 13 mythological figures and was inspired by 19th century argillite carvings of miniature canoes transporting animals and humans
 All images Vancouver Airport Authority unless stated

Artworks are often placed to awe and inspire onlookers, but Vancouver International Airport has gone a step further – using art to showcase the rich and cultural heritage of the region’s indigenous people. **Howard Slutsken** visited the hub to admire the view...

Art in airports is nothing new. However, Vancouver International (YVR) has taken the concept to new levels, designing its terminals around massive pieces of art created to reflect indigenous traditions and the stunning local landscape. “Airports are more than just buildings and runways and parking lots,” Rita Beiks, curator of the YVR Art Programme, told *Airports of the World*. “They encompass the spirit and capture the imagination of the community.” Sitting at the mouth of the Fraser River just a few miles south of downtown

Vancouver, YVR was built on the traditional lands of the Musqueam people. Much of the art on show today was commissioned from Musqueam artists as part of the Canadian gateway’s efforts to strengthen its relationship with the local First Nations community. In the late 1980s, as YVR transitioned to an independent airport authority, then-site manager, Frank O’Neill, led the shift to a new theme for the facility – ‘Land, Sea, Sky’ – the main motifs of indigenous art. “They were starting to imagine the sense of place the role that public art can play, showing the rich cultural

heritage of the indigenous people of British Columbia,” explained Beiks. Now, 30 years later, the airport has a permanent collection of more than 210 pieces of art, anchored by the spectacular *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii: The Jade Canoe* by Haida artist Bill Reid. The impressive bronze masterpiece, possibly Canada’s most photographed piece of public art, is the focal point of the International Terminal and the building was designed around it, part of a design strategy YVR has maintained throughout its decades-long terminal redevelopment. “The artists and artwork are chosen



Left: International passengers arriving at Vancouver are greeted by the Musqueam Welcome Figures, by Musqueam artist Susan Point. The figures were inspired by historical Coast Salish house posts



Below Left: The Musqueam Welcome Figures frame Flight (Spindle Whorl) by Susan Point, at the entrance to YVR’s customs hall. Their back panels reveal the artist’s innovations on traditional images and motifs



Below: Flight (Spindle Whorl) is carved from red cedar and presented in a setting of water and stone, symbolic of the land. The eagle, a symbol of power, is designed around the image of a man whose arms are raised, welcoming visitors and also gesturing flight

Right: As a transition from Vancouver's Canada Line rapid transit station, Don Yeomans' multi-part installation Celebrating Flight welcomes the different people and cultures that come together at the airport, featuring Haida forms, Celtic knot-work and Chinese characters



Top middle: The dramatic Transformation Mask by Kwakwaka'wakw artist Stan Wamiss depicts Raven, Trickster and the malevolent spirit Bak'was, and is displayed in a setting worthy of any art gallery



Below: In the Pacific Passage, a diorama of an ancient First Nations village, passengers arriving from the USA take photos of the Hetux, or Thunderbird, by Connie Watts, an artist of Nuu-chah-nulth, Gitksan and Kwakwaka'wakw ancestry Author



Above: Net Work by Eric Robertson hangs from the International Terminal's roof. The silver-coloured fish are made from cast aluminium and steel, and reflect the importance of herring to the local marine ecosystem Author



Left: Even the light fixtures reflect the integrated design strategy of Vancouver, resembling a log boom on the nearby Fraser River



before the building is designed. The artist sits down with the design team and it's all worked on together," said Beiks.

A Musqueam welcome

When arriving passengers enter the Canada customs hall, they pass through the Musqueam Welcome Area, which features the red cedar spindle whorl and Musqueam welcome figures by artist Susan Point, flanked by four large weavings representing the art of the Coast Salish people.

"When people come into Canada, they arrive in British Columbia and they are first welcomed by the Musqueam people," said Beiks.

A varied collection

Throughout YVR's terminals, artwork is both prominently and subtly displayed – everything from huge totems to animal carvings to schools of fish swimming in the building's rafters.

Some pieces, such as Kwakwaka'wakw artist Stan Wamiss' magnificent Transformation Mask, are displayed in a dramatically lit, near-gallery setting, while others invite closer inspection in one of 51 smaller display cases

scattered near boarding areas. Even the carpets are artworks – with a pattern that echoes a log jam on the nearby Fraser River, mirrored by the seemingly haphazard arrangement of the linear light fixtures illuminating the building.

However, not all of the airport's art reflects the country's indigenous people – YVR's Disney Collection is a favourite among young passengers, and The Flying Traveller by Patrick Amiot and Brigitte Laurent is a humorous sculpture that harried passengers can appreciate.

Beiks is justifiably proud of YVR's collection and admits that other facilities are envious of the airport's integrated approach and art strategy.

"We've commissioned these huge, large-scale works, most often the largest works that these artists have done to date. They're permanent installations, and how they're integrated into the architecture's interior design is really what makes YVR so unique," she said.

"The art at YVR is not there for decoration. These are timeless pieces that have meaning and tell a story.

"And that's what YVR does so well – it tells the story of who we are and where we live."

Left: As travellers clear security for Vancouver's A and B domestic gates, The Rivers Monument by Marianne Nicolson bids a dramatic farewell from Vancouver, its glass-etched poles representing the Columbia and Fraser Rivers