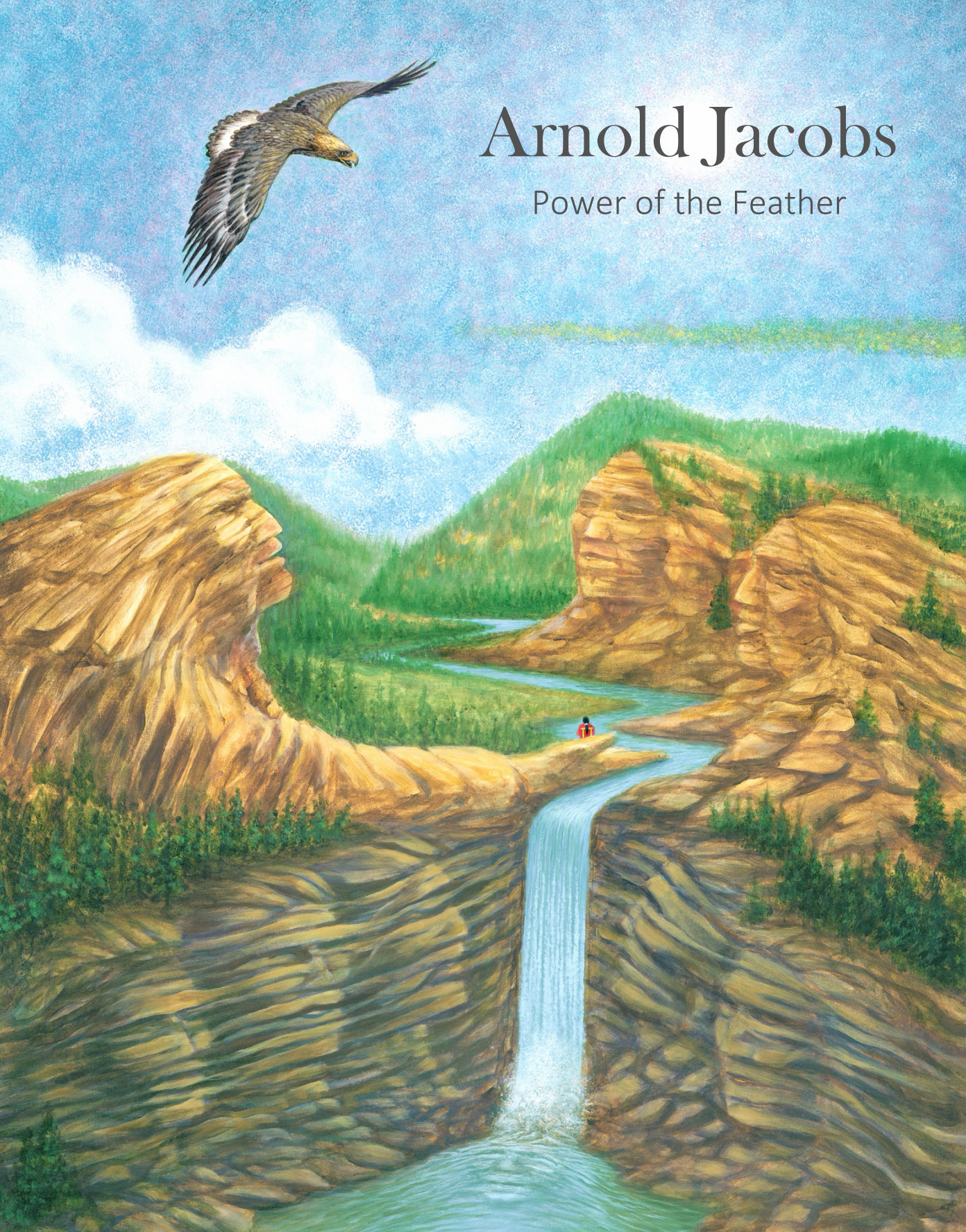


# Arnold Jacobs

Power of the Feather





Five Nations Carrier, acrylic on canvas (2007)

# The Beauty of My Culture: A Conversation with Arnold Jacobs

## With Matthew Ryan Smith, Curator and Head of Collections

*Matthew Ryan Smith (MRS): Can we begin with your childhood? Did you want to become an artist from an early age?*

Arnold Jacobs (AJ): Well, I don't think that I wanted to. When I was in grade four I knew that I could draw things because the teacher at the time would get me to draw on the chalkboard. I carried my feeling for art all the way through elementary school on the reserve. I went to a local high school in Caledonia. That's when I began to think about having a career in art because it's something I could do. I was content with that. I was thinking, "what kind of a job am I going to get?" I thought I should go to an art school. I went to Toronto and enrolled in Central Tech's art program. That's when I started thinking seriously about doing art as a career.

*MRS: When did you graduate from Central Tech?*

AJ: 1966. After I graduated from there I got a job right away at a packaging plant in Toronto. I worked there for two or three years. I was driving back and forth from my home on Six Nations and I did it for ten months. [Laughs]. The reason was my wife was a teacher and she didn't want to teach anywhere else but on the reserve. That's why we moved back to Six Nations. Then I saw this advertisement in the *Spectator* for a job in Hamilton at a graphics place and I applied and got the job. A little while after that I got a job with W. L. Griffin Printing in Hamilton doing all their artwork and graphic work. I worked there for fourteen years.

*MRS: What exactly were you working on during that time?*

AJ: We printed books. Dofasco [Steel company] used to have a pretty big booklet that they printed every three months, a coloured booklet. I had to do mundane tasks like paste-up. I also had creative work, too. There were smaller booklets and pamphlets. It's commercial work.

*MRS: You left Griffin in 1984 to pursue your art career. First you opened a gallery in the basement of your home before launching the well-known Two Turtles Gallery in Ohsweken. Can you talk about opening your own art business?*

AJ: When I had that job at Griffin in Hamilton I was thinking about my elementary school years. No one taught us anything about our culture. We had native teachers but they didn't know anything, either. It's because over half of them were Christian and they didn't learn about our culture. There was only one teacher and he spoke the [original] language but he wasn't at our school. I knew that he tried to teach some of the kids some of the words. That was the reason I wanted to engage my culture, to get people thinking about their culture.

MRS: Some of those teachers must have gone to residential school, which is why they weren't teaching Haudenosaunee language or culture?

AJ: Yes, right.

MRS: I think your work is unique because it combines commercial illustration, Haudenosaunee culture, and contemporary art practices. Looking back, how do you see these connections, this entanglement between your commercial work, your people, and your artwork?

AJ: I wanted to show that our culture works today. We don't have to stick to doing artwork that we did a long time ago. I wanted to do things contemporary so that our images still work today, in today's fashion, and not necessarily looking at it the old way, as "primitive." That's why I wanted to do things my own way, to have my own style, though I



Comes the Peacemaker, acrylic on canvas (1985)

don't paint in one style. I paint realistically, graphically, and mystically.

MRS: Your artwork often features the clan system, animal imagery, and traditional stories. These are drawn from your knowledge of Haudenosaunee oral history and cultural teachings. Is there a philosophy behind your work, something that you strive to convey with every artwork?

AJ: When I was brought up, my parents and I both went to the Cayuga longhouse. That's where traditional people go. They learned the ceremonies that we do. Our culture is nature-oriented, acknowledging the four seasons. I do silverwork, too. I call it Wild Bling. That is where our culture comes from, from the wolf and the deer, from the wild, from nature. I wanted to bring these symbols into my art, what they mean to us as Haudenosaunee people, and bring them to others with a contemporary look.

MRS: The eagle and the white pine are probably your most common subject matter. Can you talk about the relationship between them and why you return to these images again and again?

AJ: It's because we had a sacred man come to us, he was known as the Peacemaker. He came with a message to our ancestors to stop fighting. He came by water in a canoe carved out of white stone. I have a painting that shows that. The message of peace that he brought was a white pine that he would plant in every village – a white pine because of its aroma, because it smells nice, and because it always stays green so that the message of peace doesn't grow old. The eagle is a special symbol because of its duty to watch over the tree. He would warn of any danger that came along.

He would give off a scream. Because the eagle flies so high, he was also regarded as the Creator's messenger. That's where the image of the eagle comes in. I show that in a lot of my paintings.

*MRS: When we first met at your home, you mentioned how Māori leaders from New Zealand visited Six Nations and spoke about art as a form of medicine. Can you elaborate on that here?*

AJ: The people that came here from New Zealand were the traditional people who came to visit our traditional people. I'm sure you've seen them play rugby...

*MRS: They do the haka at the beginning of the match.*

AJ: Yes, they carry art in their bodies. One of their cultural leaders was talking to one of ours, his name is Leroy "Jock" Hill, and Jock told me that they regard artists on the same level as doctors. Doctors are supposed to heal people and artists are supposed to carry the messages of medicine and the teaching behind it. Art saves the culture.

*MRS: New research proves what they have known for many years, that looking at art and making art impacts the brain and body in positive ways.*

AJ: Oh yes.

*MRS: What do you think is most difficult about being an artist?*

AJ: You still have your own life to live and art takes time. If you're really serious about it you will spend that time on your art no matter what. There's a lot of thought that goes into creating an image on a flat surface.



Creator's Messenger, acrylic on canvas (2000)

*MRS: What advice would you give to emerging artists from Six Nations, Brantford, and beyond? Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous?*

AJ: I think you need to have a strong interest in art anyway but you have to work at it. You have to study more. The more you are working at it the more you are teaching yourself. That's how I learned. To me, I had to challenge myself to see how I could use art to reach more people.

*MRS: I think challenging yourself is really good advice especially because people take the easy path sometimes.*

AJ: That's right.

*MRS: This is your first solo exhibition at a public art gallery in several years. What would you like audiences to walk away with after seeing your work?*

AJ: I hope they appreciate what I'm trying to say with my pictures. It's not something that's made up, it's been carried on by our people for many years.

## Artist Biography

Arnold Jacobs (b. 1942) is an Onondaga (Turtle Clan) artist and condeoled confederacy chief living on Six Nations of the Grand River territory. He graduated from the studio art and design program at Central Tech in Toronto in 1966. Jacobs was later employed as a commercial artist for W. L. Griffin Printing in Hamilton for fourteen years. In 1984, he opened a commercial art gallery in his home before launching Two Turtles Gallery in Ohsweken, which sold his original artwork and promoted emerging Six Nations artists.

Jacobs is recognised for applying historical Haudenosaunee teachings to his commercial work, pendant jewellery, prints, paintings, and sculpture. He remains committed to empowering Indigenous youth through visual art and sharing Six Nations cultural practices with the world. From 2001 to 2008, his award-winning “flying eagle” design was embossed on Air Canada’s Boeing 767 jet, and in 2019 he was awarded the Ontario Arts Council’s Indigenous Arts Award. Jacobs’s work resides in private and public art collections in Canada and the United States including the Smithsonian Institution (Washington, DC), Iroquois Museum (Howes Cave, NY), Canadian Museum of History (Hull, QC), and Woodland Cultural Centre (Brantford, ON).



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Cover: *Discussing the Environment*, acrylic on canvas (2000)

Back cover: *Deliverance of Sky-woman*, giclee print on paper (2000)

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