An internationally known artist, Lillian Pitt has displayed her sculptures, carvings, masks, wearable art, and works on paper for more than 20 years in exhibits in the United States, Europe, New Zealand, and Japan. The Center for Columbia River History asked Pitt to talk about her evocative work at its Celilo Stories conference, held in March 2007 to commemorate the 50-year anniversary of the inundation of Celilo Falls by The Dalles Dam.

Lillian Pitt is enrolled with the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation, and her work reflects the ancient as well as ongoing presence of Indian people along the Columbia River. Pitt incorporates into her work images of salmon, rocks shaped by water, shells, beaver-marked twigs, petroglyphs, and forms reminiscent of fishing nets and traps and fish-drying racks. She calls herself an "unschooled" artist who is largely "unfocused" because of her irregular training and propensity to work in a variety of media. But as the following interview and the accompanying images of her artwork reveal, these are also her strengths: the connections she makes between the artistry of her first career as a hairdresser and what she now does with clay and glass; her hunger to learn new techniques; her willingness to work with new materials.

KB: You grew up in Oregon on the Warm Springs Reservation as least in part and then ended up moving to Madras (a small town about 10 miles southeast of the reservation). What do you remember about being a kid?

LP: First of all was the freedom, the freedom to do whatever we wanted. No one had locked doors in the whole neighborhood, which was called Hollywood, a spoof on the poverty of our community and the wealth of Hollywood in California. In Hollywood all the kids were the same age and so we just ran around together, rode horses, and went for walks. I did not know I was poor until we were told that we were. Our lives were minimal—we had no indoor plumbing, no electricity in a one-bedroom house. My dad was manager of the Indian baseball team in Warm Springs, and so we got to travel all over the Northwest. I cannot believe the torture my mother endured with three of us kids in the backseat of the car! It was always an adventure—this was during the early 1950s when there was a lot of prejudice. In Mitchell or John Day there would always be a big brouhaha between the Indian and white baseball players. We kids would have to stay in the car.

It was Dad’s idea to move to Madras. Mom was a traditional Indian, one of the last of an endangered species, so to speak. She did not want to move because the community at Hollywood was hers and she did not speak English very well. We were not allowed to speak Indian because, again, it set us apart and Dad wanted us to blend in better. He wanted us to be able to live well with the dominant culture. I was in sixth grade when we moved. I went to Madras Elementary School and Madras High School—very uneventful.
KB: Did you get to take art classes in school?

LP: Not one. I never considered myself artistic. It was my sister who could paint and draw. I was the logical one, the good one, the one who never got into trouble. I never did try anything artistic all through my childhood, although I was a big daydreamer. I would go out and lie in the hills and watch the weeds grow. I never thought about doing anything creative other than existing.

KB: Did you have artists around you?

LP: My mom was a bead maker and my Auntie Mary worked on beads and hides. Everybody in Warm Springs did something; the women were never idle. It was always fun to go to their houses and watch them work, watch all their wonderful processes. If you wanted to learn, you could. My mom’s aunt tried to teach me twining—I think I was 11 or 12 at the time—and I just could not get it. I was at the age where my mind was not really focused on what she was trying to teach me. And she said, “Oh, ai [ ],” which is Sahaptin for “dumb.”

KB: One of the things I think is striking about your work is how much it is rooted in and expands upon traditional themes.

LP: The beading designs are so exquisite and so are the basket designs. To transform them into clay is much easier for me. As I am working in the clay, I am mindful of what I had seen as a kid—the love that [the women] had for what they were doing. I would get into a meditative state and it just seemed to flow through me.

KB: You left Madras for Portland right after you graduated from high school in 1961. Was Portland the big city?

LP: My cousin Elmer and I used to come down over the mountain to Portland to go to the movies. We would go up and down Broadway when they had all those fancy movie theaters, and we would go to one movie after the other all day and night. At the Chief Theater in Madras there was only one movie that would run for a month, and the film was really old and would always fall apart in the theater.

My cousin Juanita’s dad lived there—that was why we chose Portland. Living with him was rent-free. I was just 17 at the time. We picked berries and did a lot of swimming in the Sandy River. One day we were doing laundry and there was a beauty school across the street. I said to my cousin—Dee Dee was her nickname, “Dee Dee, let’s go to beauty school.” She thought about it and said, “Okay.” I started beauty school on October 10, 1962, when I turned 18. I just loved doing that. I loved the learning part of it, which included anatomy and physiology of the head and hands, and chemistry, and all wasn’t a talker. You cannot be a good hairdresser if you can’t talk to people, you know. The more you talked, the more tips you made, and we lived on tips. I learned to be really friendly. My dad was always friendly and funny and would charm people, whereas Mom was quiet and shy. I take after my dad.

KB: Did you experience racism while you were either training to become a beautician or once you began to work as a one?

LP: Absolutely none. It was not like Madras. Madras was terrible. Even the teachers were racist. It was such a painful experience with some of the teachers in Madras. They would tell jokes about Indians and say, “Lillian told me this joke.” The cheerleaders and students in the Honor Society never talked to me. Years
later I was doing a slide presentation and they all ran up afterwards and asked if I remembered them. It is so much easier to be nice than it is to be vengeful.

When I was halfway through beauty school I had to stop because of my back, and it took me two years to graduate instead of one. I was a hairdresser for about 20 years, and then I became a teacher, a hairstyle instructor. I had many back surgeries and then finally Social Security retired me. The State of Oregon sent me to Mount Hood Community College.

Going back to school, I found I had never learned proper studying habits and so the school suggested I take all these helpful courses, which I did, and it was so much fun. It was just like playing, you know. I could not get enough of school. We had group therapy, and I learned about myself. I learned that I was an individual, a unique individual. I learned that I had something to say, and there was a forum in which to say it. It was wonderful. Anita Davis would come to group on Thursdays all dusty and dirty. I said, “What is it that makes you so messy?” She said, “I’m taking ceramics. You should join me.” It was love at first touch. I was hooked, obsessed—the first thing I have ever been obsessed about. I dreamt about it. It was magic.

I did not have a clue what to make, and that was the beginning of finding out who I really am. My first pieces included a Yupik mask that I saw in a catalogue from an Alaskan show and a Northwest coast mask that I saw in a Franz Boaz book, but not of my culture. So I went back to Warm Springs and talked to the elders. I went to Lucinda Smith.

She had a visitor from the Yakama Reservation who knew my dad’s mother’s family. She even knew my grandmother’s Indian name, and my aunt’s Indian name, and where we were from. I said, “I have this image. Where is this image? It keeps haunting me.” She told me it was Tsagaglalal [an female Indian spirit petroglyph in what is now Horsethief Lake State Park], and that she overlooked the village where my great-great-grandmother lived. This was a profound revelation for me.

Finding Tsagaglalal was a very emotional experience. I realized that my family wamany big changes and that I was a product of all that. It goes back 10,000 years. Every time I create a She Who Watches, or Tsagaglalal, I try to make her the very best I can to honor the obvious vision of the person who created her image so long ago. The petroglyphs were put there for a good reason—to tell stories. The people who made them knew exactly what they were doing. It has made my life so complete, just seeing this image of Tsagaglalal. I will be forever grateful to the elders who told me about her.

KB: When did you first declare that you were an artist?

LP: I am still working on that! I am an unfocused, uneducated, unschooled artist. I do not strive to become an artist in the white man’s world. I just want to be able to create whatever it is I want to do and that which honors my ancestors. I really do not care what the white world thinks, although most of my buyers are white people and I am very grateful to the people who like my work enough to pay thousands of dollars for it. They think I am an artist. I work with my head, heart, and hands, and that, I learned in beauty school, is what an artist does.

KB: I am really struck with the parallels that you make between the artistic work you were doing in beauty school and the work that you do as an artist.

LP: You know, it was always the women in the Columbia River Gorge who were the economic leaders. We did the trading, we set the prices, we determined who could buy or sell what. I think I have a little bit of that horse-trading sense in my genealogy. I thank my ancestors for that. The Chinook people were very
good traders. They were able to make a living for hundreds of years by trading everything. And then with Celilo we had the salmon as our economic source as well as our spiritual source, and I did not know that either until my mid 30s. It was something I took for granted. We took Celilo for granted. It's like Mount St. Helens; it's a mountain, we thought—it will always be there. It's Celilo—it will always be there. But man and nature change things. that women did on the river.

LP: I am thinking of the ancestors when I am putting an installation together. The women loved shells, they loved stringing shells, and so I string all the shells. Oh, so much work! And then the rocks and all the different things that women loved—women still love today because they are all things of beauty. And then the salmon—men put up the racks, but it was the women who filleted and dried the salmon. It is just amazing how strong they were.

KB: Tell me about your collaborations and teaching.

LP: I love collaborating because I am working with great minds. They bring more to the piece than I bring by myself. It is a treat to teach the young ones. A couple summers ago I taught the kids at Warm Springs how to do drypoint prints. We went to the Columbia River Gorge and to Maryhill Museum; I got them books, and we went to the petroglyphs, and they got to draw whatever they wanted. They did drypoints and Maryhill was nice enough to give them a show, which they just loved because I was also teaching them about how to be a professional artist. At the opening they were able to talk about their work. It is a good feeling to be able to carry something on. Even when I teach non-Indian students, they are bringing to the table their ancestry and an appreciation of need somebody who speaks from the heart and the head and the hands about their particular truth, which is not based on any political force, any amount of money or any social or political group. You need an honest assessment of the world, and I think artists are essential to that. You cannot control artists because they have to speak from the heart.

Katrine Barber is assistant professor of history at Portland State University, an associate at the Center for Columbia River History, and author of Death of Celilo Falls (2005).

Sidebars on "She Who Watches" & Lillian Pitt’s art

Legend of Tsagaglalal (pronounced “tsa-ga-gla-lal” and meaning “She-Who-Watches”)

A women had a house where the village of Nixluidix was later built. She was chief of all who lived in the region. That was a long time before Coyote came up the river and changed things and people were not yet real people. After a time, Coyote, in his travels, came to this place and asked the inhabitants if they were well or ill. They sent him to their Chief who lived up on the rocks, where she could look down on the village and know what was going on. Coyote climbed up to the house on the rocks & asked, "What kind of living do you give these people? Do you treat them well or are you one of those evil women?" "I am teaching them to live well and build good houses," she said. "Soon the world will change," said Coyote, "and women will no long be chiefs." Then he changed her into a rock with the command, "You shall stay here & watch over the people who live here." All the people know that Tsagaglalal sees all things, for whenever they are looking at her those large eyes are watching them.

—From Stone Age on the Columbia River by Emory Strong (1959)
Lillian Pitt (Warm Springs Confederated Tribes) graduated from Mount Hood Community College, Oregon, with an associate of arts degree. Best known for her ceramic masks, she has exhibited nationally and internationally. Pitt's works are in the permanent collection of the Washington State Historical Society; Portland Art Museum; the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, Seattle; the Heard Museum, Westphalian State Museum of Natural History, Münster, Germany; and the City of Oguni, Japan.

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