



## 7 Daphne Odjig

FCA OC PNIAI RCA WS 1919 – 2016

### Guarding Shield

acrylic on canvas, signed and on verso titled, dated 1989 and inscribed #24  
48 × 65 7/8 in, 121.9 × 167.3 cm

#### PROVENANCE

Lattimer Gallery, Vancouver  
Private Collection, British Columbia

#### EXHIBITED

Kelowna Art Gallery, *Daphne Odjig 100*, September 14, 2019 – January 5, 2020

AS MODERNIST ART was coming of age in Canada, Daphne Odjig (1919 – 2016) was having her emergent moment, observing art movements that would later inform her syncretic style. Her own coming of age was at an unwelcoming time for a young

Indigenous woman. At the start of the Second World War, she moved from the safety of her Anishinaabe community on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, to the bustle of Toronto, anglicizing her name to Fisher to increase the chances of finding work. Since a formal art education was out of reach, museum and gallery visits were how she acquainted herself with Western artists. She used the work she encountered to develop the sketching skills already nurtured by her grandfather, a stone carver, who embedded in her “the curvilinear drawing style” that “influenced Odjig’s aesthetic and metaphysical concerns through her life.”<sup>1</sup> Despite colonial obstructions, in Canada she has come to be known as the “grandmother” of Indigenous art, contributing to a global groundswell decentring a canon based on Eurocentric standards.

Although her early paintings and drawings in the pictographic style echo the sacred rock paintings found on and around Manitoulin, Odjig made no secret of the influence of Picasso, and the Cubist movement, on her work. As with many artists working post-war, Cubism provided both a process and an aesthetic that could be integrated with non-European visual culture in order to

fracture European hegemony. As countries were decolonizing, the vanguard movements taking place in Europe were a source of an evolving visual syntax that became a shorthand for dismantling political structures and confronting the status quo. Her artistic contemporary Norval Morrisseau termed her “Picasso’s grandmother,” and although she had claimed Picasso as her “favourite,” later even corresponding with him, her admiration was not without critique. In a 1979 interview she countered, “I always see *my own lines*. No one ever asked Picasso whether he was influenced by Canadian art, and yet look at his masks: Who’s to say Picasso hadn’t seen any of *our work*?”<sup>2</sup>

By the time of the interview, included in the catalogue for the Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre’s show *Daphne Odjig: A Retrospective, 1946 – 1985*, Odjig had established herself as a cultural force, co-founding the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. (PNIAI), also known as the Indian Group of Seven, which included Morrisseau, Jackson Beardy, Eddy Cobiness, Alex Janvier, Carl Ray and Joseph Sanchez. PNIAI asserted Indigenous presence into the exclusionary modern art scenes. Also by the late 1970s, Odjig had moved beyond Cubism, even “beyond the conventions ascribed to Morrisseau and the so-called Woodland or Legend School toward a singular, personal style.”<sup>3</sup>

In *Guarding Shield*, completed in 1989, Odjig comes into her own. Her style is evident and strong. The motion created by the unbroken flow of the willowy black lines demonstrates her perfected intimacy with her brush as well as illustrates Anishinaabeg cosmology: the interconnectedness of all beings with the elements. The palette is subdued yet pulsating. Vibrant red draws the eye up towards the skyworld with its canopy of trees, fresh and verdant, the composition “a visual representation of animism.”<sup>4</sup> The painting was last exhibited in 2019 to 2020 at the Kelowna Art Gallery, BC, as part of *Daphne Odjig 100*, marking what would have been her 100th year and in the final place she called home.

British Columbia was far from where she was born and raised, unceded Wiikwemikong First Nation, yet spiritually there was a connecting thread. She encountered other Indigenous world views similar to the Anishinaabeg as well as the shared impact of colonization. In moving to various locations in BC and Manitoba, she witnessed what Indigenous communities were facing—displacement from hydroelectric dams or clear-cutting of old-growth forests. The experiences led her to proclaim, “I am an environmentalist,” one of the first artists to do so.<sup>5</sup>

In almost a century of life, she garnered the respect of her contemporaries developing their own Indigenous modernist counterpoints to the West. Robert Houle (Anishinaabe) declared her “the matriarchal sentinel for other artists,”<sup>6</sup> and Bob Boyer (Métis) called her work “a truly modern Canadian art.”<sup>7</sup> Among five honorary doctorates and other accolades she was awarded the Order of Canada (1986) and the Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts (2007). Although in Odjig’s oeuvre there is “stylistic affinity” with Western art movements, in the catalogue for Odjig’s touring retrospective (at the National Gallery of Canada in 2009), Anishinaabe curator Bonnie Devine asserts, “However much her tendency towards abstraction would tend to justify comparison, it is instead the rich pictorial tradition



Installation view of *Daphne Odjig 100* at the Kelowna Art Gallery, 2019, with *Guarding Shield* installed on the left  
Courtesy of the Kelowna Art Gallery

and carefully preserved metaphysical structure of the Anishnabec that inform and underpin her style.”<sup>8</sup> Odjig’s reclamation of line, aesthetic syncretism, and Indigenous advocacy have made her endure as a formidable artistic presence of this land.

We thank Leah Snyder, digital designer and writer, The L. Project, for contributing the above essay. Snyder writes about culture, technology and contemporary art; she is a regular contributor to the National Gallery of Canada’s *Gallery* magazine and other Canadian art publications.

1. Bonnie Devine, *The Drawings and Paintings of Daphne Odjig: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2007), exhibition catalogue, 18.
2. Elizabeth McLuhan and R.M. Vanderburgh, *Daphne Odjig: A Retrospective, 1946–1985* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre and Centre for Indian Art, 1985), exhibition catalogue, 13 and 85, italics in the original.
3. Devine, *Drawings and Paintings*, 25.
4. Curator Stacey Koosel quoted in Sydney Morton, “Grandmother of Canadian Indigenous Art’ Honoured at Kelowna Art Gallery,” *Global News*, October 14, 2019, para. 14, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6003367/grandmother-of-canadian-indigenous-art-kelowna-art-gallery/>.
5. “Daphne Odjig Artist at the McMichael,” interview by Bonnie Devine, October 27, 2008, online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kH1WVKDw7x8>.
6. Quoted in Devine, *Drawings and Paintings*, 40.
7. Bob Boyer, “Daphne Odjig: A Lifetime of Changing Images,” in *Odjig: The Art of Daphne Odjig, 1960–2000*, by Daphne Odjig, Bob Boyer, and Carol Podedworny (Toronto: Key Porter, 2001), 12.
8. Devine, *Drawings and Paintings*, 25.

ESTIMATE: \$50,000 – 70,000