

Dr. Carolyn Butler-Palmer
Art History, University of Victoria

Photography and the Fashioning Ellen Neel's Indigenous Identity

Ellen Neel (b. 1916) is often characterized as the first woman carver of the Pacific Northwest. During the 1940s and 50s, she appeared in a series of photographs taken by *Victoria Times Colonist* photographer Jim Ryan. Some of these photographs depict Ellen Neel working with her children, painting or carving either monumental or miniature memorial poles. Others depict her as a cultural ambassador to dignitaries in British Columbia.

These images not only appear in period issues of the *Times Colonist*, but were reproduced in Phil Nuytten's 1982 book *The Totem Carvers: Charlie James, Ellen Neel and Mungo Martin*. Despite the thirty years difference between *The Colonist's* and Nuytten's, these two publications use Ryan's photographs to simply illustrate Neel's undertakings.

These photographs are, however, more complex images that deserved to be unpacked. This paper examines how Neel's use of attire in conjunction with Ryan's deployment of the conventions of photojournalism together fashion a very public identity as a mid-twentieth century Indigenous woman artist and noblewoman.