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Graduate's art part of Olympics

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Illustrations: Photo: Submitted / Kaska/Tlingit artist Dean Heron, a graduate of the First Nations Fine Arts Diploma program at NWCC, is featured in a new book of Aboriginal art by Canadian artists that will be displayed during the upcoming Vancouver 2010 Winter Games.

Northwest Community College (NWCC) and Freda Diesing School of Northwest Coast Art alumnus Dean Heron and his artwork are featured in a newly-published book of Aboriginal art inspired by the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Vancouver.

O Siyam is the official volume showcasing artworks by First Nations, Métis and Inuit artists that will be displayed at official Olympic venues -- some for the duration of the Games, others permanently. Heron's piece, both stunning in size and beauty, is called Northern Spirit. It will greet visitors at the lodge on Cypress Mountain in Vancouver, where it is displayed on a towering concrete wall.

"The space was huge," recalled Heron, who is Kaska/Tlingit. "I didn't know whether to paint on the wall or on canvass." Heron eventually settled for canvass -- with a twist. The work is painted on 20 canvasses and it depicts the front and backside of a snowboard, referencing historical paddle designs.

The book's feature on Heron (pages 64-65) states the old master artists of the Tlingit First Nations used art in the creation of everyday objects and that Northern Spirit pays homage to this tradition. Heron says the piece marks a first for him in that it's a true cross-over between traditional and contemporary. His first sketch, he adds, was rejected because it was too contemporary.

"VANOC (Vancouver Olympic Committee) wanted something more traditional, more West Coast style," Heron said. So the First Nations Fine Art program graduate went to the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria and pored over examples of traditional paddle designs.

He settled on a design that features a hand, to signal a welcome to visitors and a salmon trout head, in honour of the fish that has sustained the Tlingit for centuries. The piece is white, black and green-grey.

Heron responded to a Canada-wide request for proposals and, once accepted, he had to bid on which venue he wanted to be chosen for. Cypress Mountain will host freestyle skiing and snowboarding events.

The First Nations Fine Arts Diploma grad had just three weeks to finish his piece and he says he put in several 16-hour days to get it done, with some help from fellow Freda Diesing alumnus Todd Stephens.

Heron, who is currently working on art for the longhouse project on the NWCC Terrace Campus,

praised sponsor VANOC and the project in general, in which he got to meet nearly 100 fellow Aboriginal artists.

"I think (VANOC's) done a really good job including all of B.C., Canada and First Nations," he said. Heron's piece is one of a handful purchased by the Four Host First Nations and VANOC, meaning it will remain displayed at the mountain facility permanently.

"Dean deserves recognition for his fine talents and we are proud to have played a part in his development as an artist," said NWCC President Stephanie Forsyth. "His contribution will be seen by hundreds of thousands of people, giving him tremendous exposure. The book is an added bonus and really captures this terrific project."

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