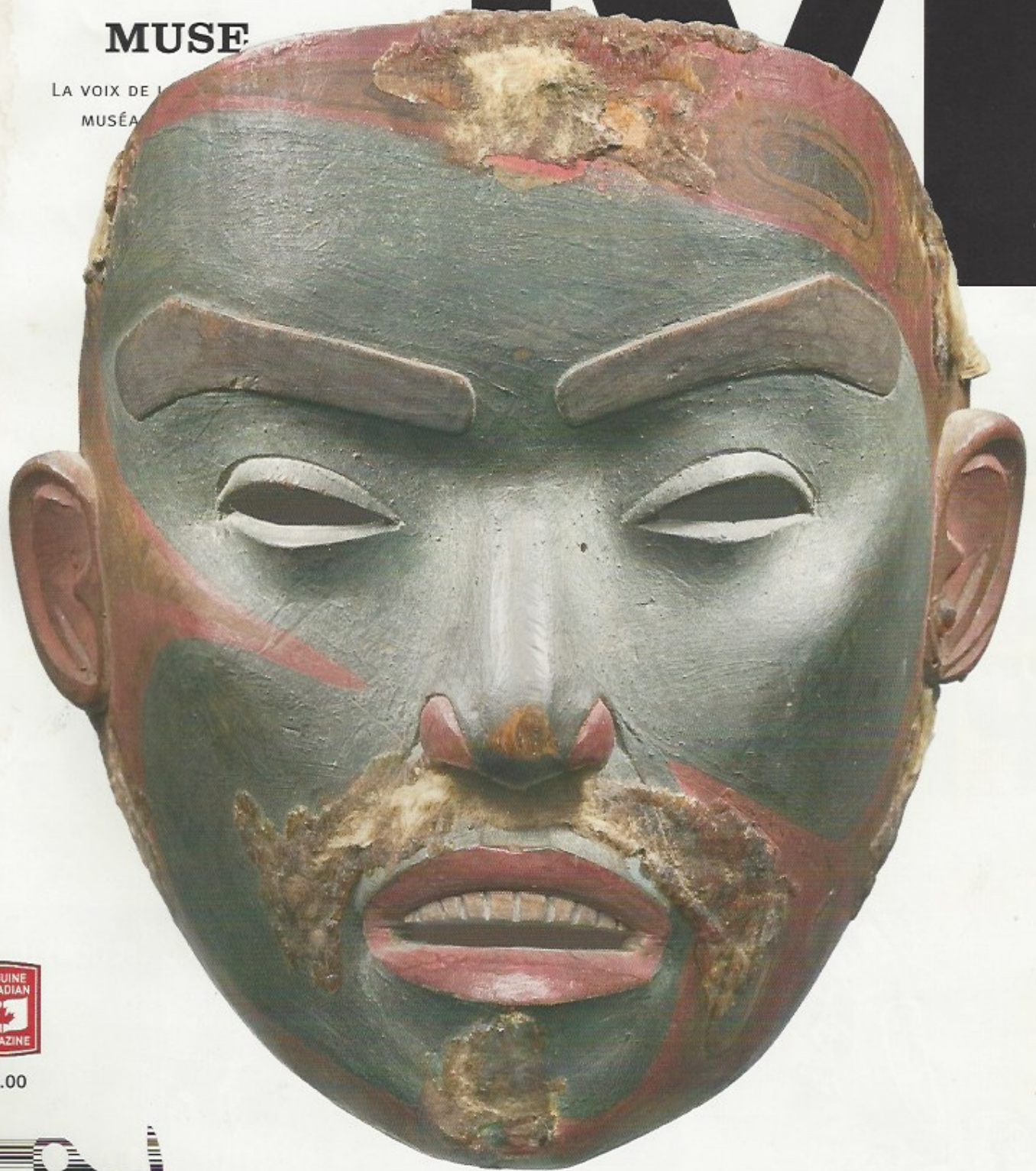


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## Treasures of the Tsimshian Trésors des Tsimshians

CANADIAN MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION • ASSOCIATION DES MUSÉES CANADIENS





Wooden bowl, with eyes made from abalone shell, depicting an eagle.

## Treasures of the Tsimshian from the Dundas Collection: A successful partnership

Grant Hughes, Susan Marsden, Sampson Bryant

All photos by Frank Tancredi, courtesy of Donald Ellis Gallery, unless otherwise noted.



The Gwis'amiihlgigohl Dancers perform at the first opening of *Treasures of the Tsimshian* at the Museum of Northern BC. Photo: Lonnie Wishart, courtesy of the MNBC.

On October 5, 2006, the Dundas Collection, a superb collection of Canadian First Nations artefacts, was sold, 77 objects in 57 separate lots to 20 separate bidders for an unprecedented \$7 million US. For almost three decades, museums and Northwest Coast First Nations had tried to return this collection to Canada. In 2006 they again marshalled their efforts, this time attempting to form a coalition of museums, governments and the Tsimshian First Nation to ensure public access for all Canadians to this world-famous collection. Unfortunately, the grand dream was not to be.

However, in the months following this unprecedented sale, a different but unique and generous partnership came together to ensure that the bulk of these objects should return to BC's West Coast from which they were removed 143 years earlier. Together, the Allied Tsimshian Tribes of Lax Kw'Alaams and Metlakatla, the Museum of Northern BC (MNBC), the Royal BC Museum (RBCM), the Donald Ellis Gallery, and Westerkirk Works of Art Inc. worked together to bring some of the artefacts back to BC, and to create the exhibition, *Treasures of the Tsimshian from the Dundas Collection*. Their story is fascinating, and reflects strength of mind, and generosity of spirit.





This comb is an outstanding example of Tsimshian formline design.

## The Tsimshian

The success of *Treasures of the Tsimshian* cannot be truly appreciated without some understanding of Northwest Coast First Nations society. For millennia prior to the arrival of the first missionaries, the Tsimshian and other Northwest Coast First Nations had a sophisticated system of democratic governance, a highly decentralized system of groups of extended families called Houses. This is still so today. Each House is led by a chief and his oldest sister or matriarch, passes down its names and status through the matrilineal line, owns its own territory, records its own history and is responsible for its own wealth. Each House is also expected to host feasts or potlatches to formalize its social and political identity. Regalia and other ceremonial objects are worn and displayed at these feasts to convey the history and status of the Houses and their lineages. These ceremonial objects, although considered by many solely as artefacts or works of art, still play their ancient role in Tsimshian society.

Since the arrival of the first Europeans, succeeding colonial governments have done everything in their power to end the hereditary system of governance and to replace it first with the Indian Agency, and then with the Band Council system. It is a testament to the strength of the culture of the Tsimshian and other Northwest Coast Nations that they continue to pass on their identity, culture and society.

During this exhibition, the acknowledgement by everyone involved of the living culture, the role of ceremonial objects in Tsimshian society, and the leaders authorized to make decisions is one of the great successes of the exhibition.

## The Dundas Collection

The so-called Dundas Collection came to be as a result of the first wave of colonial government led by Christian missionaries. In 1862, the Tsimshian population was devastated by the smallpox epidemic. That same year, fifty Tsimshian people, mostly members of the Gitlaan tribe, moved from Lax Kw'alaams to Metlakatla, the site of the Gitwilgyoots tribe's traditional winter village. They were Christian followers of the Anglican lay missionary William Duncan, who had arrived at Fort Simpson five years before. Duncan wished to isolate the Christians from traditional Tsimshian life by starting a new community. For Duncan, Christianity was an either/or proposition; those who moved to Metlakatla had to follow rules that included giving up feasting and everything it involved, including all their regalia and other ceremonial objects.

In 1863, Scottish clergyman Robert J. Dundas visited Metlakatla and purchased some of these pieces, what he called "Indian curiosities." The collection remained in Britain in his family collection for 143 years, owned most recently by his great grandson Simon Carey.





Mask with moveable jaw and eyes, depicting a raven.

## Partnerships

In the spring of 2006, it was rumoured that the Dundas Collection was again to be offered for sale, this time at Sotheby's in New York. The search for auction funds began. James Bryant, on behalf of the Tsimshian First Nation, initiated the partnership that developed between the MNBC, the RBCM, and the Tsimshian.

On September 19, 2006, after several months with no response from various levels and departments of government, Grant Hughes (of the RBCM) received news that some funding remained in the Moveable Cultural Property Program.

On September 26, with the support of the Allied Tsimshian Tribes of Lax Kw'Alaams and Metlakatla, the RBCM and the MNBC applied to the Moveable Cultural Property Program for \$3.9 million US – the estimated value of the collection objects of interest. The proposal included a \$40,000 commitment from the RBCM. The partners also applied for \$2.2 million from the Province of British Columbia.

The partners agreed that the first \$100,000 acquired would go to the MNBC as it is in the traditional territory of the Tsimshian. Any funds above \$100,000 would be divided equally between the MNBC and the RBCM. Full information, research access, and potential exhibition opportunities would be shared for each object acquired by either museum.

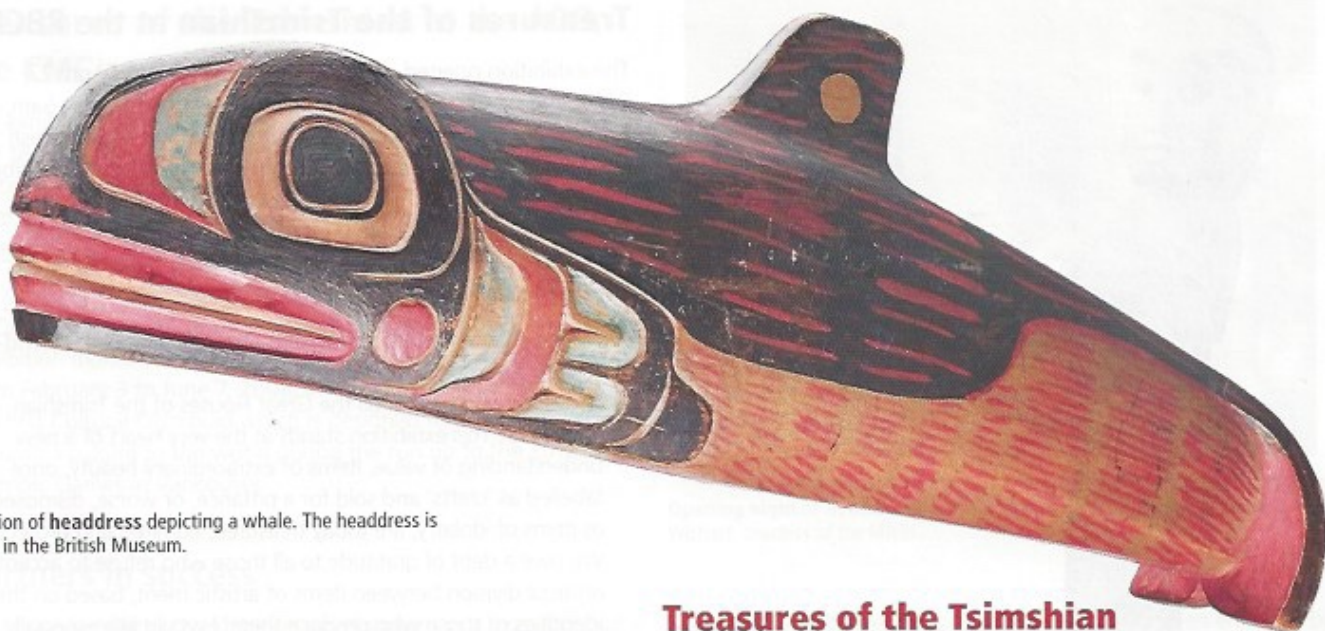
## The auction

The date of the October 5, 2006 auction loomed. At this point no funding decisions had been finalized. Regardless, in case any funds came through at the eleventh hour, the RBCM engaged Donald Ellis of Donald Ellis Galleries as an agent and Grant Hughes travelled to New York City. The MNBC was also represented there by their agent Howard Roloff. As part of the plan, each museum had different priority lists.

The day before the auction, Grant Hughes received a call stating that no provincial funds would be available. Later that afternoon he received a second call from the Moveable Cultural Property Program to say that their remaining budget – \$60,208.41 – would be available as necessary within the Program's guidelines. Thus, with the RBCM's \$40,000 contribution, the partnership had a total of \$100,000 – approximately 2% of the funds required to bid actively on the major objects. As per the group agreement, the funds were to be used by the MNBC.

From 10:00 am to 11:10 am on October 5, 2006, Sotheby's auctioned off the Dundas Collection in 57 lots at world record prices. With the available funding and the financial assistance of the RBCM, the MNBC acquired a carved Tsimshian ladle (see p24). Each of the other priority artefacts sold for sums considerably higher than the funding available. Donald Ellis, who also represented a number of other purchasers, acquired 28 of the lots for various bidders.





Section of headdress depicting a whale. The headdress is now in the British Museum.

## A Canadian success story

The day after the auction, Grant Hughes received a call from Donald Ellis on behalf of Westerkirk Works of Art Inc., the new Canadian owner of many of the objects from the Dundas Collection. Ellis inquired if the RBCM would consider hosting an exhibition of the works. The exhibition would also include objects acquired by other Canadians, including collector David Thomson. After rapid consultations, the RBCM responded that, yes it was interested, but first and foremost must consult with the Allied Tsimshian Tribes for input and advice, as they hold the cultural authority for the objects themselves. From this beginning the new owners were willing and generous partners in what would become the exhibition *Treasures of the Tsimshian*.

On October 25, Grant Hughes, Susan Marsden of MNBC, and James Easton of Westerkirk Works of Art Inc. travelled by ferry from Prince Rupert to Lax Kw'Alaams to meet with the chiefs and elders of the Allied Tsimshian Tribes of Lax Kw'Alaams and Metlakatla. At that meeting the museums sought guidance about hosting an exhibition, and the Allied Tsimshian Tribes stated that they would support the exhibition and be there in their regalia – a protocol which reflects the highest honour the chiefs can bestow on people from other cultures – as long as the exhibition opened first at the Museum of Northern BC, in the traditional territory of the Tsimshian First Nations. All partners fully supported this request, and the exhibition development began.

The collective decision to take direction from the hereditary chiefs and matriarchs of the Tsimshian was a formal acknowledgement that the cultural authority for the objects remains with the Tsimshian peoples. Once welcomed back to their land of origin, among the people who created them and invested them with meaning, the spirits of the objects would come alive again.

## Treasures of the Tsimshian opens at MNBC

March 1, 2007. The opening events in Tsimshian territory at the Museum of Northern BC began with a private unveiling of the exhibition for the chiefs, which was followed by a procession of the chiefs and a moving welcome ceremony of dance, song, speeches and gift giving. In heartfelt language the chiefs spoke of their frustration in seeing their objects, which a foreign people once told them were evil, become collectibles, then world class works of art. However, they also spoke of their enormous gratitude to the new owners for their acknowledgement of the Tsimshian as a people with a living culture and society, gave gifts to honour the individuals and institutions who had looked beyond their own culture and fully acknowledged that of the Tsimshian. Following the ceremony, the Gwis'amiilhgigoh! Dancers performed, and local artists and visitors from other nations, museums, and cultural institutions shared thoughts, feelings, and songs. The exhibition continued at the MNBC to April 14, 2007.

Sampson Bryant, Nahimgii'aks, the Tsimshian artistic director at the MNBC reflected the feelings of many when he said:

My experience of the Dundas Collection is one that stands out as a highlight in my life that will stay with me forever. When it arrived at the Museum of Northern BC the fascination of seeing the objects for the first time with the naked eye gave me a feeling of happiness – before this I had only seen them as pictures in a book. The happy feeling was: "Yes, they finally made it back home." As a dancer and singer I can see how every mask was danced and what stories each would tell. The private viewing by elders and chiefs was one of education for me as they discussed how they were used and who the rightful owner was; as they talked I could hear and see their excitement as they viewed each piece. Having my dance group not only open the exhibition, but drum and lead in our chiefs of the Tsimshian nation made this a very special highlight in my life.





Wooden ladle with shamanic figure.  
Now in the collection of the MNBC.

## Treasures of the Tsimshian at the RBCM

The exhibition opened at the Royal BC Museum on April 27, 2007, and was attended by local Songhees Chief Robert Sam, her Honour Iona Campagnolo, Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, 15 hereditary leaders from the Allied Tsimshian Tribes, the Tsimshian Gwis'amiihlgigoh! Performers, William White (a Tsimshian representative on the board of the Museum of Northern BC), Royal BC Museum CEO Pauline Rafferty, lenders, guests and the public.

Her Honour summarized the feeling of many people in attendance with her speech, as she said:

This is a proud day for all the Great Houses of the Tsimshian Nation . . . This exhibition stands at the very heart of a new understanding of value. Items of extraordinary beauty, once labelled as 'crafts' and sold for a pittance, or worse, dismissed as items of idolatry, are today treasured, admired and protected! We owe a debt of gratitude to all those who refuse to accept an artificial division between items of artistic merit, based on the identities of those who produce them. I would like especially to thank the new owners of the collection for their philanthropy in assuring that these works of art remain in Canada as part of the patrimony of this land and its original peoples.

Despite the broad perspective, kind words, and support of the Tsimshian chiefs, the following headline appeared in the *Globe and Mail*:

Native leaders vent outrage at opening  
Alexandra Gill, Victoria – Old grievances die hard. That was the lesson to be learned at the Royal BC Museum this weekend, after a gala ceremony to celebrate the opening of *Treasures of the Tsimshian* from the Dundas Collection turned into a dour political snubbing.

The response to this article was one of disbelief and dismay. The well-known Tsimshian weaver William White wrote to the paper, stating:

The reporter has undermined an event that was significant in its show of respect for the museum world as well as for the Thomson family. I feel violated by her under-developed eyes and ears as pertaining to Tsimshian culture and protocols. Ms. Gill has taken a beautiful ceremony and turned it ugly with her total lack of knowledge regarding what actually happened. [...] The Tsimshian have already afforded the private collectors a high degree of respect by thanking them publicly at the first opening of the exhibition in Prince Rupert. If the Allied Tsimshian Tribes wanted to "snub" someone they would simply not show up at the event. Instead our chiefs showed the lenders, museum staff, and visitors the ultimate form of respect by wearing their ceremonial regalia.

His letter was not published. Despite the negative story that was subsequently picked up by other newspapers, *Treasures of the Tsimshian* enjoyed a successful run at the RBCM. By the time the exhibition ended on July 4, the museum was visited by over 100,000 people.



## Treasures of the Tsimshian at the AGO, the CMC and MOA

The exhibition formally opened at the Art Gallery of Ontario on July 18. At a ceremony on August 1, 2007 the AGO invited representatives of local First Nations to do an invocation, a song, and a dance for the Tsimshian delegates, who included chiefs Wayne Ryan and James Bryant of the Allied Tsimshian Tribes.

On November 1, the exhibition opened at the Canadian Museum of Civilization where it continues until January 7, 2008. The exhibition makes a final stop at UBC's Museum of Anthropology, from February 3 to June 7, 2008, in coincidence with the start of the first Cultural Olympiad which is designed to present British Columbia culture to the world during the run up to the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver.



Opening night of *Treasures of the Tsimshian* at the MNBC. Photo: Lonnie Wishart, courtesy of the MNBC.

### Partners in success

For those familiar with exhibition development in a cross-cultural and multi-partner environment the completion of this initiative in less than six months from the auction to the opening of the exhibition in Prince Rupert is somewhat remarkable.

From the beginning, the principal understanding was that the Dundas Collection is the traditional cultural heritage of the Tsimshian First Nation. Despite issues of legal ownership and physical possession, the primary commitment of the project was to be guided by the Allied Tsimshian Tribes in the location of the exhibition opening, the related ceremonies, and their attendance at opening events held by borrowing institutions. At each opening the hosts and guests were honoured by the presence of the chiefs and elders and moved by their powerful words, and at each opening the chiefs honoured the generosity of the purchasers in returning the collection to Canada.

The exhibition was made possible by the commitment of Westerkirk Works of Art Inc. and the Donald Ellis Gallery, and the lenders of 37 objects that came together from 11 sources. A Canadian private investment firm, Westerkirk Capital, provided the financial support for the initial curatorial research, for travelling the collection to Prince Rupert with in-kind sponsorship of the BC Ferries Corporation, and for the creation of the custom showcases for travelling the exhibition. James Easton, of Westerkirk Works of Art Inc. played an important role in ensuring the concerns of the Tsimshian were met. Many staff and participants contributed time in excess of regular work hours.

Since the auction, *Treasures of the Tsimshian* has been enriched by the addition of artefacts that were originally purchased by other buyers. The Museum of Northern BC purchased two additional bowls with financial assistance from Gary Bell and a Movable Cultural Property grant, the Royal BC Museum purchased one sheep horn ladle with financial support from Dr. Elizabeth Kennedy, and Westerkirk Works of Art Inc. has purchased and loaned 10 horn spoons and a bent corner bowl for the remainder of the exhibition tour.

The Tsimshian leaders and representatives graciously provided many days of their time to consult, support, attend and participate in many aspects of the exhibition preparation and were the true inspiration behind the exhibition.

It has not escaped many that the opportunity for the Dundas Collection to be acquired and then exhibited for the Tsimshian peoples, British Columbians, and indeed all Canadians, was very nearly missed. The funding made available to public museums was only a tiny fraction of what was needed. We are all fortunate that the actions of a few Canadians have enabled the collection to be kept substantially together, studied, documented, and shared through the exhibition *Treasures of the Tsimshian from the Dundas Collection*.

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The book, *Tsimshian Treasures: The Remarkable Journey of the Dundas Collection*, published by Donald Ellis Gallery and Douglas and McIntyre, is available at bookstores and [www.donaldellisgallery.com](http://www.donaldellisgallery.com).

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