

Sotheby's, New York City

The Dundas Collection of Northwest Coast American Indian Art

by Lita Solis-Cohen
Photos courtesy Sotheby's

An article by Sarah Milroy appeared in Canada's leading newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, the day before Sotheby's sale on October 5, 2006, of the Dundas collection of Northwest Coast American Indian art. Milroy told Canadians that Canada's heritage was to be sold and what a tragedy it would be if it could not be saved for the nation. The story, suggested by dealer Donald Ellis of Dundas, Ontario, (named after the family of collector Dundas) galvanized financial support, which came at the very last moment and enabled Ellis to buy 28 of the 57 lots offered. The objects, many of them sacred to aboriginal tribes, will now return to Canada for the first time since they left in 1863.

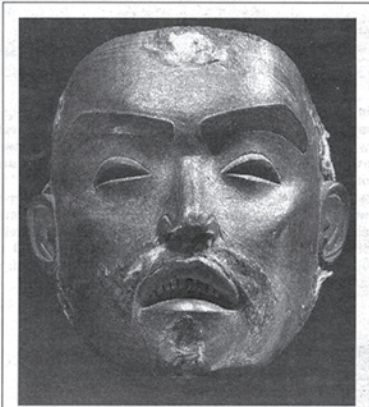
Ellis's determined bidding boosted the sale total to \$7,030,600, an auction record for a sale of American Indian art. Among his purchases, Ellis paid \$1,808,000 (including buyer's premium) for a riveting Tsimshian portrait mask (a record for any American Indian object) and \$940,000 for a Tsimshian or Tlingit club (often called a slave killer club) made of an elk or caribou antler, carved in the 18th century. Ellis spent a total of \$5,835,600 for the 28 lots. The sale was 100% sold.

Milroy told her Canadian readers of the tortuous negotiations over three decades between Simon Carey, a professor of clinical psychology in London, England, and museums in Canada, Britain, and the United States. Those museums were interested in acquiring the collection of artifacts his ancestor had bought from a missionary in British Columbia in 1863, but nothing had come of the negotiations.

Milroy urged Canadians to step up to the plate and save this historic cache for their nation. She quoted aboriginal leader James Bryant, a spokesman for the allied native tribes in Lax Kw'alaam and Metlakatla in northern British Columbia, who claimed their provincial governments had a moral obligation to try to save the collection. "These things need to come back to the people that made them in the first place."

David Roche, Sotheby's American Indian specialist, marketed the collection as "the last known field collection of Northwest Coast American Indian art in private hands." He said there was interest among American, Canadian, French, English, and Spanish bidders. The 80 objects, offered in 57 lots, had been collected by the Reverend Robert J. Dundas, a Scottish chaplain, on the morning of October 26, 1863, in Old Metlakatla on the coast of British Columbia near present-day Prince Rupert, from William Dundas, one of the most famous missionaries.

Dundas's descendants still retain Dundas's diaries describing the communities and detailing how the collection was acquired. The consignee promised that if an institution acquired the bulk of the collection, he would make the journals available to that institution for publication. Ellis said he



This Tsimshian polychrome wood portrait mask, painted black with rich green and red pigments in an abstract design, has remnants of applied fur around the mouth, below the ears, and on the forehead. It is pierced to accommodate hide straps for tying for wear. It measures 7¼" x 7" x 4¾" and was estimated at \$700,000/1 million. It sold for \$1,808,000 to Dundas, Ontario, dealer Donald Ellis, underbid by a phone bidder. The price is a record for any North American Indian object at auction. According to the catalog, most surviving portrait masks were collected before 1870. Ellis said history will show that the mask was a great bargain.



This Tsimshian polychrome wood headdress, probably depicting a mosquito, sold for \$340,800 to a buyer on the phone with C. Hugh Hildesley of Sotheby's. Donald Ellis said it was one of the lots he would have liked that got away.

cancer just 15 days before the sale and was in a London hospital.

According to Milroy's story in *The Globe and Mail*, the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, the Royal British Columbian Museum in Victoria, and the Museum of Northern British Columbia in Prince Rupert were all anxious to see the collection return to Canada, but none of them had enough funds to acquire all of it. Donald Ellis, well known in the U.S. for his stunning booths at the New York Winter Antiques Show, was quoted by Milroy as saying it was an abomination that the Canadian government and museums had waited until the last moment to mobilize their forces. "They knew the collection was coming up for a year or more, and in fact the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa [sic] had tried to buy the collection twenty years ago," he said.

Ellis made it his mission to galvanize support to acquire as much of the collection as he could for Canada. He credits Milroy's story in *The Globe and Mail* for making it happen. "At 7:30 the last night, I heard that we would not have federal or provincial support to buy the collection," he said. "The museum budgets were not adequate. We had just over two hundred thousand dollars available from three institutions. Then at eight p.m. I got a call telling me that the Thomson family of Canada would supply needed funds."

After the sale Ellis said he was bidding for two Canadian institutions, two American collectors, a Canadian

believes that as the biggest spender, he would have first negotiating rights for the journals.

According to Benjamin Carey, Simon Carey's son, who attended the sale, Sotheby's had been given until the end of May to sell the collection as a whole by private treaty, and, if unsuccessful, Sotheby's was to sell the collection at auction. Carey reiterated that if an institution was the winner, it would be given first access to the Dundas archives, which he hoped would be published along with a scholarly catalog. He said his father had been diagnosed with terminal



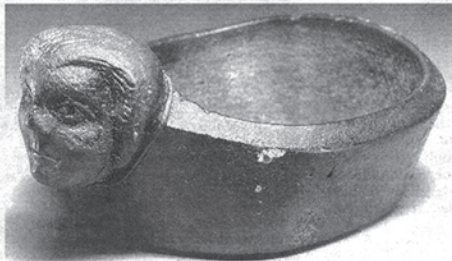
This was the costliest of four polychrome wood clappers Donald Ellis bought. In the form of a bird in flight, it sold for \$66,000. Two others clappers in the form of fish sold for \$51,000 each, and another fish clapper sold for \$30,000. They all are between 9" and 10" long. These instruments were clapped during a dance. Ellis said they are rare, and it had been several years since one has come on the market.



This Tsimshian polychrome 12¾" long wooden dish in the form of a halibut with a bald eagle on its lid, painted black, red, green, and white, sold to a Texas collector in the salesroom for \$30,000 (est. \$12,000/18,000). It was underbid by Donald Ellis.



This Tsimshian circular wood bowl resembling a bird with an upturned head, its tail carved with another bird with a projecting openwork beak, dates from the 18th century, according to Donald Ellis, who said it was his favorite piece in the sale. It sold to Ellis for \$273,600 (est. \$30,000/40,000).



This Tsimshian wood bowl carved on one side with a portrait head was probably made in the second quarter of the 19th century. Ellis said it may be a portrait of a missionary, and it is one of the earliest representations of a non-Indian in Northwest Coast art. It sold for \$24,000 (est. \$20,000/30,000). Ellis thought it the bargain of the sale.



This small (7¾" long) Tsimshian bone implement is a soul catcher. Dundas described it in his journal as a potent charm. Carved with a stylized form of a seated shaman figure, the soul catcher sold to Ellis for \$168,000 (est. \$12,000/18,000). According to the catalog-essay, it likely belonged to Chief Legaia, one of the great Tsimshian leaders of the Chimpean tribe in the 19th century.



Donald Ellis bought this Tsimshian shaman's rattle, carved in two sections, for \$430,400 (est. \$80,000/100,000). That topped the \$296,000 paid for another shaman's rattle, once owned by Fred Boschan, at Sotheby's in May 2006. Ellis said the Dundas rattle was an 11 on a scale of one through ten. It is a record for a rattle at auction.

collector, and a Canadian benefactor who had never bought in the field before. From his center aisle seat on the last row, Ellis was the most significant competitor at the sale.

With his cell phone at his ear, Ellis bid on 30 lots and was successful on 28 of them. He bought eight of the top ten lots, including the three top ones, which he said were of extraordinary historical and aesthetic significance. The Tsimshian portrait mask that sold for \$1,808,000 is of the highest aesthetic merit. The so-called slave killer club that sold for \$940,000 is one of only 14 known. The wooden clan hat carved with a frog and a human face, pictured on the catalog cover, brought \$660,000 from Ellis. The Tsimshian shaman's rattle, which he said was an 11 on a scale of one through ten, cost him \$430,400. All four are records for their forms.

Ellis said he got everything but two major lots he wanted. He was underbidder for the polychrome wood headdress in the form of the head of a mosquito, which sold for \$340,800 to a phone bidder. A large Tsimshian polychrome wood chest that had some wear on the bottom sold for \$318,400 in the salesroom.

A wooden bowl, called a grease dish, in the form of a bird with an upturned head, for which Ellis paid \$273,600, nine times its low estimate, was one of his favorites. "It is one of the earliest wooden bowls I have encountered," he said.

A feast dish, carved with a portrait head thought to be that of a missionary, was Ellis's bargain. Estimated at \$20,000/30,000, he got it for \$24,000. Ellis bought

all four wooden clappers in the sale, one in the form of a bird and three in the form of fish. He said they are extremely rare. He paid \$66,000 for the bird clapper and \$51,000 each for two fish clappers and \$30,000 for the other fish.

After the sale, Benjamin Carey said that as a child he and his sister played with the collection as toys. They had not been aware that some were ceremonial and religious objects and others were made 100 years earlier for trade with white visitors. "I remember as a kid in school doing a program on red Indians and wearing the mask and holding the rattle," he said. "My grandmother and great-aunt were going to throw them out, until my father told them they would look nice on his wall. He saved them in 1959."

In 1970 Simon Carey acquired his great-grandfather's journals dating 1859-65 along with a photograph album from the time. "It was not until the Hooper sales in London in the 1970's that we were aware these things had any value," said Benjamin Carey. Then his father began his 30-year project of trying to sell the collection, hoping to keep it together.

Benjamin Carey said he was pleased with the results "and that it would make his father's last months comfortable."

Canadian institutions rarely ask a dealer to bid for them at auction. For example, when acquiring the bulk of the Southesk collection of Plains aboriginal art at Sotheby's in May 2006 (M.A.D., August 2006, p. 20-C), Dr. Bruce McGillivray, director of the Royal Alberta Museum, did the bidding on the collection that James Carnegie, the

9th Earl of Southesk, had brought back to Scotland from Canada in 1859 and 1860. The government of Alberta and the Department of Canadian Heritage gave the funds, \$1.1 million, so the museum in Edmonton could acquire 29 of the 30 lots. (McGillivray did not attempt to buy the Blackfoot hide shirt, which sold to a private collector for \$800,000, scoring the record at that time for American Indian art at auction by topping the \$684,500 paid for a Tsimshian wooden face mask at Sotheby's in November 1999.)

Apparently, the Southesk sale emptied provincial and federal Canadian coffers, and when the Dundas collection came to auction, significant funds were not available. In the tradition of American museums that depend on private funding, a Canadian family came through to save the day.

According to Ellis, the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, acquired five items with a total price tag of \$87,600. The Museum of Northern British Columbia in Prince Rupert acquired a polychrome wooden spoon for \$22,800.

Several days after the October auction, *The Globe and Mail* published a story by Alexandra Gill, who reported that 19 objects were acquired by two members of the Thomson family and will be publicly exhibited. The collection's permanent home is not yet decided, though the majority of the artifacts were always intended for British Columbia. It was also revealed that Sherry Brydson, niece of the late Kenneth Thomson, whose collection was given to the Art Gallery of Ontario, was the Canadian philanthropist who stepped up to the

plate at the last minute to repatriate the artifacts to Canada.

At the sale Ellis represented Brydson and David Thomson, who succeeded his late father as chairman of Thomson Corp. The Thomson family bought the portrait mask, the club, and the clan hat. In addition to buying four of the relatively minor pieces, which he offered to the Canadian Museum of Civilization at his cost, Ellis bought directly for the Canadian Museum of Civilization. He also was the agent for a Canadian private collector who bought one thing and for American collectors who bought two.

Ellis said it is likely that the collection will be split between two institutions but that it will be exhibited in 2007 at the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria. Arrangements are being made for it to travel to other Canadian institutions. "It has been a pretty big deal up here," said Ellis. "Canadians now know that they can play a role in bringing things home."

"It worked out far better than I dreamed," said Benjamin Carey after the sale.

James Bryant, spokesman for the allied tribes in Lax Kw'alaam and Metlakatla, British Columbia, was paraphrased in Gill's article for *The Globe and Mail* as saying that "although he is dismayed by the commercial value placed on the items and the millions of dollars that were made by the missionary's family, he is pleased that the items will be on display in B.C."

For more information about the auction, contact Sotheby's specialist in American Indian art, David Roche, at (212) 606-7250 or see the Web site (www.sothebys.com).



This 14" long Northwest Coast polychrome wood headdress, Tlingit or Tsimshian, has a domed helmet emerging from the head of a bear painted red, green, and black against a natural ground. It sold to Donald Ellis for \$273,600 (est. \$70,000/100,000).



Bidding was heavy for this large (31 1/2" long x 18 1/2" high) Tsimshian polychrome wood chest, but Ellis did not compete for it. It sold on the phone for \$318,400 (est. \$70,000/100,000). The carved design is of interlinked zoomorphic profiles and other forms.



This very rare Tlingit or Tsimshian 18 1/2" long club, made from an antler of an elk or caribou, is carved with a series of totemic devices, such as the projecting "blade" in the form of a wolf with a slightly parted mouth, flaring nostrils, and animated eyes. It has a rich honeyed patina and is thought to be the earliest object in the collection, dating from the 18th century. It sold for \$940,000 (est. \$450,000/550,000) to Donald Ellis, who battled phone bidders and a Spanish dealer in the salesroom. It is the second-most expensive American Indian item sold at auction. Ellis bought the other club in the sale, also made from an antler, for \$108,000. He said in 30 years in business he has handled only four clubs, and there are only 14 known. Only two have appeared at auction in the last 50 years.

Just 4 1/2" high, this Tsimshian wood comb is carved in relief on each side with designs, one representing a bird, perhaps a raven, with a down-turned beak. It sold for a surprising \$204,000 (est. \$10,000/15,000) to Donald Ellis, who said the client who was on his cell phone just wanted it. Another comb, carved with the face of a bear, sold to Ellis for \$19,200.



This Tsimshian polychrome wood mask in the form of a bear's head, probably a raven, is 12" tall x 14 1/2" deep. Ellis bought it for \$120,000 (est. \$35,000/55,000).



This 8 3/4" long Tsimshian horn effigy ladle carved with an animal's head, probably a bear with a ferocious expression, sold for \$51,000 (est. \$10,000/15,000) to a Spanish dealer in the salesroom.



Donald Ellis battled Sotheby's Hugh Hildesley's bidder on the phone for this Tlingit polychrome clan hat, carved with a spotted frog and a human face. It is missing its basket ring. It sold for \$660,000 (est. \$350,000/550,000). In the classic flaring conical form for a clan hat, it measures 9 1/4" high x 13" wide and represents a clan's crest animal. It was exhibited at a museum in Manchester, England in 1870 where Sir A.W. Franks, a keeper at the British Museum, sketched it. His drawing is in the British Museum. Lieutenant Commander E.H. Verney, who accompanied Dundas in 1863, also acquired a significant group of native artifacts, many of which are now at the British Museum.



Benjamin Carey is shown on the right shaking hands with Donald Ellis after the sale. Ellis's wife and business partner, Mary Ann Bastien, looked on. Solis-Cohen photo.

Donald Ellis said this wood crest in the form of a whale belongs on a headdress that is now part of the Verney collection in the British Museum. It sold for \$45,000 (est. \$12,000/15,000). Ellis was the underbidder. "I stopped bidding because I thought the British Museum might be bidding," he said. "I was going to buy it and give it to them. The heirs of Lieutenant Commander E.H. Verney, who accompanied the Reverend Robert Dundas on his trip, gave his collection, including the helmet missing this whale crest, to the British Museum, and the museum has been after it for years."

