



SOTHEBY'S

Among the items in the Dundas collection of particular historical and artistic significance is a magnificent Tsimshian wood face mask, undoubtedly the star of tomorrow's sale. Estimated at \$700,000 (U.S.) to \$1-million, the price for the mask will probably go through the roof.

THE DUNDAS COLLECTION

Heritage goes on the block

Tomorrow in New York, the gavel drops on historical native art from B.C. But this is no ordinary auction, **SARAH MILROY** writes



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A Tsimshian rattle, likely used in shamanic rituals, is estimated to go for \$80,000 to \$100,000.

Tomorrow morning in New York, Sotheby's auction halls will be the stage for a historic struggle, the final chapter in one of the more fascinating and tortuous negotiations between a private collector and his courting museums.

The Dundas Collection of Northwest Coast American Indian Art is up for grabs, a cache that Sotheby's head of American Indian art, David Roche, describes as "the last important field collection of Northwest Coast art in private hands." The academics can't refute his claim.

The 80 objects were acquired by Rev. Robert J. Dundas, a Scottish chaplain, and they were obtained on the morning of Oct. 26, 1863, from one of the most famous missionaries on the coast: William Duncan. The setting was Old Metlakatla, near present-day Prince Rup-

ert, high on the mainland coast of British Columbia. Adding immeasurably to the collection's appeal is the fact that it is supported by Dundas's 250,000-word-long diaries, which describe in detail the communities on the coast as he encountered them and the particulars of how this collection was amassed.

Thus, the Dundas collection is a kind of historic document, a time capsule that reveals an aboriginal culture at a precise moment in time, and Canadian museums — from the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau to the Royal BC Museum in Victoria and Prince Rupert's Museum of Northern B.C. — are understandably anxious to see some or all of it come home.

Unfortunately for us, they're not alone in their interest.

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'The sale of these artifacts is ugly and deceitful'

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"Typically, I know who all the bidders are," Roche says of his predominantly U.S. buyers, "but this is a whole new set of people. There are new players here from Canada, Spain, France, England."

For the aboriginal community in northern B.C., and for scholars and interested Canadians, the prospect of the collection being scattered to the four winds is deeply troubling, just one more example of our indifference to aboriginal people and Canadian heritage. "These things need to come back to the people that made them in the first place," says James Bryant, a spokesman for the Allied Tribes of Laxkwalaams and Metlakatla. "They hold the history of the tribe that these objects belonged to."

For scholars, too, there is a loss. As the Canadian Museum of Civilization's director of ethnology and cultural studies, Andrea Laforet, puts it: "With each transactional event, there is greater and greater likelihood that some or all of the information will be lost." Expressing a frustration typical of many watching this story unfold, veteran Canadian tribal art dealer Don Ellis fulminates at the prospect of the collection bypassing Canada. "The crazy thing is," Ellis says, "everyone has known that this collection is coming to sale at Sotheby's for a year or more. Hell, George MacDonald was trying to buy this for the Canadian Museum of Civilization 20 years ago. It's an abomination."

How did we get here? The answer is complicated. Since 1960, the collection has been the property of Professor Simon Carey, a London-based clinical psychologist and the great-grandson of Dundas. In 1970, he inherited Dundas's diaries, and since then, he has preoccupied himself with researching the collection and attempting, without success, to resolve its future.

Over the intervening decades, Carey has fallen out of bed with such diverse suitors as the British Museum, the Smithsonian Institution, the Seattle Art Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, not to mention Canada's Royal Ontario Museum, the Royal BC Museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. To add a sad twist to the drama, Carey was diagnosed last week with inoperable cancer and given just months to live. In all

likelihood, the collection that has been his life's obsession will dissolve along with him.

One can well imagine how such a collection could take hold of the imagination. Three lots are of particular historical and artistic significance: a "slave killer" club of carved elk antler, a wooden clan hat with a carved frog motif and a magnificent Tsimshian mask, which will undoubtedly be the star of tomorrow's sale. Estimated at \$700,000 (U.S.) to \$1-million, the price of the mask will probably go through the roof.

Other highlights include a superb carved and painted wooden chest, exquisite ladles and spoons (many carved with small totemic figures), some doll-sized carved shaman figures, wooden clappers and a spectacular globular rattle, likely used in shamanic rituals.

Benjamin Carey, the 37-year-old son of Simon Carey, points out that the collection includes rare and highly charged ceremonial objects as well as more quotidian things (such as a feast dish topped with an American eagle and a bowl that features the likeness of a white sailor) that were clearly made for trade with white visitors. As such, the Dundas collection represents the full range of cultural production by Northwest Coast artists at that time. Presale estimates in the catalogue place the total value of the collection at \$4-million to \$5-million, but the achieved prices could come in far higher.

So why have Simon Carey's previous efforts to sell the collection run aground? Notwithstanding the family's protestations to the contrary, it seems that price has been a point of contention. For example, James McDonald — now teaching at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince Rupert but formerly a curator of ethnology at the ROM — remembers money as the principal sticking point in the museum's negotiations in 1991.

Benjamin Carey insists, however, that money has not been the key issue. More intractable, he says, has been his father's desire to see the objects on permanent display in perpetuity as a stand-alone collection, the kind of donor-centred arrangement that is increasingly unpopular in museums seeking to retain maximum flexibility in the display of their holdings.

The winning museum, he says, would have also needed to promise a scholarly catalogue on the collection and to have made the commit-



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The Dundas native art collection features a club of carved elk antler that's estimated at \$450,000 to \$500,000.

ment to publish Dundas's diaries. According to one insider, the Dundas collection was for sale as a whole by private treaty (a private sale through the auction house) until May 30 of this year for about \$5-million, but no one was able to get Simon Carey to the altar.

As the years have gone by, tempers on all sides of these negotiations have become frayed. In the British press, Carey has been a colourful commentator on Canadian museums. (Sample quote: "The Canadians are awful about their heritage. The bureaucracy is very mean.") For all his barbs, he has in turn taken his fair share of abuse.

George MacDonald, the former director of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, was particularly piquant in his public criticisms of Carey, accusing him in the press of game-playing and avarice. One native leader who requested anonymity recounts: "In the end, Carey would have nothing to do with

anyone in Canada. He got beat up by the museums, and then he got beat up by the Tsimshian Tribal Council. They had two shots at the collection and they blew it. They called the poor guy a thief. I think in the end he just decided, 'To hell with it.'"

Will Canadian museums make a final run at this collection?

Aboriginal leaders in northern B.C. certainly feel that the federal and provincial governments, and their respective museums, have a moral obligation to try. "The sale of these artifacts is ugly and deceitful," Allied Tribes' Bryant says. "They were taken for nothing, and now they will be sold in a high-priced auction so that the missionary's great-grandson can get rich."

Historically, the Department of Canadian Heritage has played a significant role in assisting Canadian museums in such moments of duress, through its Movable Cultural Property grants program. But as Len Westerberg, a media-relations

spokesman at Canadian Heritage, confirms, the \$1.2-million (Canadian) annual MCP program has been severely depleted by a year of unusual opportunity in the auction world.

In May, for example, the Royal Alberta Museum successfully engineered the \$1.1-million acquisition of the bulk of the Southesk collection of Plains aboriginal art, another outstanding field collection that came up for auction in New York. Roughly half of the funds came from Canadian Heritage. "Only \$60,000 remains [in the MCP program] for the rest of the 2006-07 fiscal year," Westerberg says.

The Royal BC Museum in Victoria and the Museum of Northern British Columbia have made a joint request for an MCP grant in support of a Dundas acquisition, he says, but it's clear that they will need a big cheque from the province to have any success. The Canadian Museum of Civilization is also rumoured to be poised to enter the bidding, though Westerberg says it has made no application for assistance from the MCP program.

For economic reasons alone, the B.C. government may have good cause to help the western bidders. The collection could anchor tourism in Prince Rupert — which is undergoing a major port expansion to better accommodate cruise ships. As well, the Tsimshian people are moving forward in their treaty negotiations with the B.C. government. Such objects, if owned by the province (and its provincially funded museums), could turn out to be important bargaining chips.

Of course, it's not just the Canadian museums that are interested.

There's the list of international jilted lovers from the past 30 years cited above, any of whom might make another pass at this collection, or parts of it. The new Musée du quai Branly in Paris is also rumoured to be in active pursuit.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, there are the private dealers, and the private collectors, such as the de Menil family in the United States, who have collected extensively in this area for decades. Newspaper reports in past years have cited two prominent Canadian families — the Thomsons and the Westons — as would-be buyers, and tomorrow they may get back in the ring. Such patrons could arguably save the day, buying part or all of the collection as a promised gift for a Canadian institution.

But Don Ellis isn't counting on such largesse any time soon. "I'm a proud but tired Canadian," Ellis says. "I'm tired of how we behave up here about our own cultural patrimony. We have the expectation in this country that the government should fund this entirely. In the U.S., the museums would be going to the private buyer for a donation. That's how you get things done these days. This is just head-in-the-sand stuff."

With a report from Val Ross.