Native works B.C. bound

VANCOUVER

More than 140 years after they were given up for God, the most prized items from the world-famous Dundas Collection of rare northwest native art are returning to their ancestral home in British Columbia.

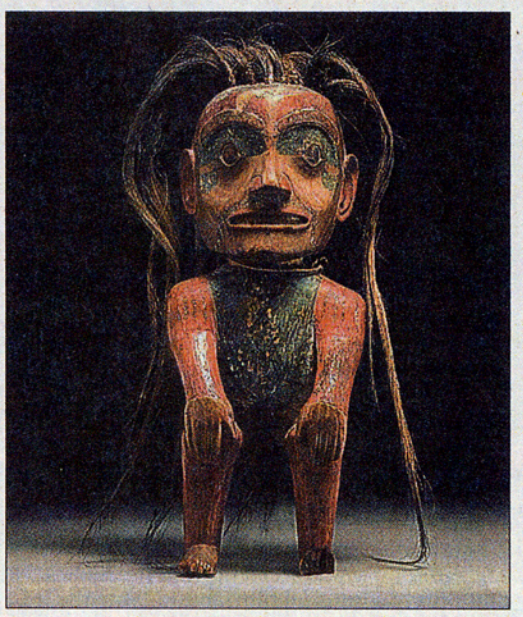
The 19 sacred artifacts of Tsimshian origin purchased at auction last week by two members of the Thomson family will be publicly exhibited at an undisclosed B.C. museum late this year or early next year.

The collection's permanent home is still undecided. Representatives for the family said that although some of the works may end up in the Kenneth R. Thomson collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the majority of the artifacts were always intended for British Columbia.

It has now been revealed that Sherry Brydson, niece of the late Ken Thomson and a resident of Victoria, was the previously unnamed Canadian philanthropist who stepped up to the plate at the last minute to repatriate the items to Canada and may have initiated the West Coast launch.

"We are already engaged in discussion with a British Columbia museum about an inaugural exhibition," said Donald Ellis, the Ontario-based art dealer who represented both Ms. Brydson and David Thomson at the Sotheby's auction in New York, in addition to buying four pieces for himself, five for the Canadian Museum of Civilization and two for foreign collectors at a total cost of $5.5-million (U.S.) "I am not at liberty to discuss which institution it is because the plans are not finalized," he said.

As Ellis explained yesterday, David Thomson, who in 2002 succeeded his father as the chairman of Thomson Corp., had always planned to bid on a small group of objects. But the night before the sale, after the Royal B.C. Museum in Victoria was denied a special government grant to purchase some of the items, he said he received an unexpected call from Thomson.



A Tsimshian polychromed wood shaman figure fetched several times its pre-auction estimate.

"He told me that his cousin Sherry had read an article [in The Globe and Mail] and was interested in discussing what it would take to bring these items back to Canada," Ellis said.

Brydson was not available for comment. But Jim Lawson, the head of her private investment company Westerkirk Capital, confirmed on the weekend that she was indeed the second buyer and that the family is currently collaborating to decide where the works should ultimately reside. "They belong to British Columbians," Brydson apparently told Lawson. "And we're going to make sure they stay here."

"The intention of the Thomson family is to keep the collection together," Ellis said.

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Tribes' spokesman hails repatriation

DUNDAS *from page R1*

He would not disclose which family members bought which items jointly or separately.

The Thomson-family-owned objects include a magnificent Tsimshian wooden face mask purchased for $1.8-million (a record for an individual piece of native North American art sold at auction), a "slave killer" club of carved elk or caribou antler adorned with totemic forms and a clan hat.

"The Thomson family is still trying to digest the acquisition. I don't think there is any specific plan other than trying to get this out in the public forum, beginning with an exhibition in British Columbia," Ellis said.

The collection's history stretches back to its acquisition in 1863, at Old Metlakatla, near present-day Prince Rupert, by Scottish chaplain Rev. Robert James Dundas from missionary William Duncan.

The 80 items ranged from sacred pieces used in spiritual ceremonies to tribal art created for the developing tourist trade. In 1959, after other members of the family deemed the collection to have no financial value, Simon Carey, a great-grandson of Dundas, took possession of the items and began to research them.

Over the past three decades, Mr. Carey held on-and-off negotiations for the collection with some of the world's top cultural institutions, including the Smithsonian, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. When Mr. Carey chose last spring to let the market determine the fate of the items, government-funded institutions read the tea leaves and realized the collection would likely end up outside Canada.

James Bryant, the spokesman for the Allied Tribes of Lax Kw'alaams and Metlakatla said that although he is dismayed by the commercial value placed on the items and millions of dollars that were made by the missionary's family, he is pleased that the items will be on display in B.C.

"That's what we wanted, for someone to keep them in Canada. And if they're willing to bring them back, we'd certainly appreciate seeing them."

Ellis also said the four pieces he privately purchased have already been reserved by various museums, at cost. It is hoped, he added, that they will all be included in the inaugural exhibit, along with another item bought by a private collector in Vancouver.

Representatives from the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria and the Museum of Northern British Columbia in Prince Rupert, which pooled their resources to successfully purchase a lone carved wooden spoon for $22,800 at last week's record-breaking auction, said they hadn't heard anything about an exhibit.

A spokeswoman for the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia also said she knew nothing. A call to the Vancouver Art Gallery was not returned.

With reports from Sarah Milroy and Simon Houpt.