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Two dozen rare pieces taken from British Columbia in 1863 fetch $5-million (U.S.) at Sotheby's

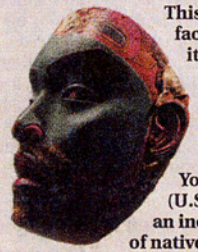
# NATIVE ART TROVE HEADS HOME

BY SIMON HOUPT, NEW YORK

More than two dozen rare items of northwest native art will be returning to Canada for the first time since they were taken from northern British Columbia in 1863, after members of the Thomson family suddenly stepped up to the plate, spending more than $5-million (U.S.) during a record-setting auction at Sotheby's in New York.

The objects, which are expected to find a home at the Art Gallery of Ontario, include a magnificent Tsimshian wooden face mask purchased for $1.8-million, including Sotheby's buyer's premium, a slave killer club of carved elk or caribou antler adorned with totemic forms, which went for $940,000, and a clan hat, purchased for $660,000.

The mask set a record for an individual piece of native North American art sold at auction, more than doubling the previous mark. The auction set an overall record, becoming the first sale of so-called American Indian art to fetch more than $7-million.



**This Tsimshian wood face mask, a marquee item in the Dundas collection of Northwest Coast American Indian art, sold at auction yesterday in New York for $1.8-million (U.S.) — a record for an individual piece of native art.**

Last night, David Thomson said his family purchased the items with the memory of his late father, Kenneth, in mind. Before his father died last June, he donated a wealth of Northwest Coast and Inuit art to the AGO, which is in the midst of a massive renovation to add space for his collection.

Kenneth Thomson, the former chairman of The Globe and Mail, was the architect of a global media empire, as well as a passionate art collector and supporter of the arts.

"This was right into the centre of his psyche and his aesthetic. These objects that I selected, frankly, he knew of them — from poor photographs, from descriptions — but of course he passed away long before we knew the collection would be sold publicly."

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

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# Prices were expected to be too high for Canadian bidders

ART *from page A1*

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 research on their significance.

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 of Canada.

Mr. Carey is in a London hospital with cancer. His son Benjamin, who recalled playing as a five-year-old with the face mask and club, represented him at yesterday's auction.

The repatriation astonished observers in the cultural community who had expected that the high prices would prove to be out of the reach of Canadian bidders, primarily poorly endowed public institutions.

The Thomson family was represented at the auction by Donald Ellis, a private dealer based in Dundas, Ont., who also bid on behalf of two U.S. collectors and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. He had been hoping to represent the Royal B.C. Museum but a special grant request made by the museum was denied late Wednesday, putting it out of the race for the pieces of Canadian heritage.

Only minutes after Mr. Ellis heard the bad news from the B.C. museum, he got a call from a Thomson family member who reportedly had been prompted to step forward by an article in Wednesday's Globe and Mail. In the article, Mr. Ellis, who said he has worked for more than 20 years to bring the pieces to Canada, decried the Canadian dependence on government funding for cultural support.

SOTHEBY'S

**Members of the Thomson family bought these items, among others, yesterday during a record-setting auction at Sotheby's in New York. The pieces are among more than two dozen rare items of northwest native art that will return to Canada for the first time since they were taken from northern B.C. in 1863.**

"I have no desire to be the lead hand," Mr. Thomson explained. "It would be of immense relief to me if other wealthy individuals could step up to the plate and also partake of, and celebrate, and ultimately preserve Canadian culture.

"I know the government is under tremendous pressure; there's been a lot of criticism. There were very few funds available for this auction; I'm in no position to be critical. Life is life; governments make priorities. But at the end of the day we're Canadians — this is a defining moment, and we need to, all of us, share in it."

The Canadian Museum of Civilization acquired five items with a total price tag of $87,600. The Museum of Northern British Columbia in Prince Rupert acquired a Northwest Coast polychromed wooden spoon for $22,800.

The auction at Sotheby's Upper East Side headquarters was a breathless affair with often spirited bidding that sometimes shocked the assembled crowd of about 70. Among Mr. Ellis's successful bids were $273,600 for a Tsimshian circular wooden bowl resembling a bird, $251,200 for a polychromed wooden headdress of Tlinglit or Tsimshian origin and $204,000 for a Tsimshian wooden comb that carried a pre-auction estimate of $10,000-$15,000.

There is one more piece of the Dundas collection that was not up for auction yesterday, but is of intense interest to Canadian research institutions: the 250,000-word journals of the clergyman from 1859 to 1865.

Mr. Ellis said he had been led to believe that being yesterday's big spender gave him first negotiating rights for the journals. "We moved the way we did with the assumption that we would now get the opportunity."