

BEST PRAC TICE

Giving Back | *Community Projects and Restitution in the Pacific Northwest*

Donald Ellis, a renowned Canadian art dealer who founded his gallery of historical Native American art almost five decades ago, has long been confronting issues that plague the art market. Nowadays, he dedicates his time to supporting individuals and projects that contribute to Indigenous stewardship of land, art, traditions, knowledge, and language.

Devoted to offering artworks from the Yup'ik, Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian and other Indigenous nations for sale, the Donald Ellis Gallery began in what was very much a niche market in the 20th century. Based in Canada and the United States, the gallery quickly diversified its activities to undertake more public-facing initiatives that could reach a wider audience, such as publications and exhibitions for non-specialists. Through these endeavors, the art dealer aimed to showcase the creativity and dexterity so vividly manifested by Native North American artists. Focusing on letting the works speak for themselves, Ellis has always avoided an anthropological approach to historical Indigenous arts, instead centering on the visual and material qualities of the objects on display.

From his interactions with visitors and careful observation of museum crowds, Ellis got to witness how art can change people's perspective of Native American cultures and populations, in particular in places that lack—or lacked at the time—a strong Indigenous presence. The encounter of both Native and non-Native people with these objects was impactful, provoking sensations of pride, respect, wonder, and fascination, sometimes even bringing people to tears. According to Ellis, the powerful face-to-face between people and objects is an opportunity to open conversations, even in today's polarized climate.



Philanthropism came organically following these experiences with the general public. Ellis wanted to give back to the people whose ancestors made the art that captivated him. Disappointed by the lack of dialogue between the art market, academia, and museums in the field of Indigenous arts, Ellis gradually stepped away from the world of “fine arts” in favor of community-oriented enterprises to further his goal. This transition materialized in two ways: on one hand, by donating artworks he owned to groups and institutions by offering support for the restitution of Indigenous cultural heritage to descendant communities, and, on the other hand, by helping finance Indigenous-led projects beyond the art world.

The initiatives backed by Ellis stem from personal relationships woven over the years with a variety of artists, elders, knowledge-keepers, and professionals. Rather than making unilateral decisions, his philanthropic pursuits are the product of thoughtful conversations with committed Indigenous leaders and practitioners. For example, Dana Claxton, renowned Lakota artist and head of the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory at the University of British Columbia (UBC), was a key instigator of the Beau Dick scholarship, a \$20,000 award established in memory of the eminent Kwakwaka'wakw wood carver Beau Dick (1955-2017). This scholarship, which aims to support a Kwakwaka'wakw female student, is one of two funded at UBC by the art dealer, together with the Donald Ellis scholarship in Art History, Visual Art and Theory.

Over the last few years, the Donald Ellis Gallery has been collaborating with the Haida Gwaii Museum (British Columbia), one of the first Indigenous-run and -owned cultural institutions in Canada, that spearheaded the restitution of Haida remains and objects under the leadership of museum director Nika Collison. In 2019 and 2021, the art dealer also helped to reconstitute a Sun Mask and a Kwakwaka'wakw architectural house plank to the U'mista Cultural Center in Alert Bay (British Columbia). More recently, through a combination of donations and sales, Ellis transferred his personal collection of artworks from the Pacific Northwest to the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa), an institution which made the largest acquisition of historical Indigenous art in the history of Canada last year and hired a number of Indigenous administrative and curatorial staff around this topic.

Since the pandemic, Ellis has been involved in a manifold project close to his heart: Nawalakw, a Kwakwaka'wakw land-based healing, cultural, and language center nestled in the ethereal Great Bear

rainforest (British Columbia). Dedicated to protecting local traditions and promoting food and land sovereignty, Nawalakw will bring stable employment to the region in addition to teaching younger generations about their Kwakwaka'wakw heritage.

The culminating point of Donald Ellis' journey will come true in the upcoming years, with his gallery ceasing its commercial activities to become a foundation. While not pretending to set an example, Ellis hopes that the activities of the soon-to-be foundation will encourage other art dealers and professionals to develop projects and personal relationships that engage respectfully with descendant communities. Through its ever-evolving trajectory, the Donald Ellis Gallery demonstrates that the art market and activism are, indeed, compatible enterprises. Efforts can continuously be made at the individual and collective level to listen, learn from, communicate with, and help finance Indigenous projects for a more diverse and just future.

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Kwakwaka'wakw artist, Sun Mask, c. 1880
Donated to the U'mista Cultural Center in Alert Bay (Canada).
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