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Buy low Sell Haida

Now as always, the collecting of the native art of the Northwest Coast by whites is a story of fascination, greed and rampant desire. Since 1774, when the Spanish captain Juan Perez sailed the Santiago into the waters north of the Queen Charlotte Islands, natives and whites have been getting what they can from each other, and great art has arisen from the friction between the two.

The journals of Perez's second-in-command, Esteban Jose Martinez, reveal the mindset of those first European visitors, whose ships were met by flotillas of cedar canoes filled with Haida pressing for trade. Describing a ceremonial blanket offered to him by a chief in exchange for his red cap, Martinez wrote: "It is most elegant for having been made by a people without culture."

Notwithstanding such deplorable arrogance, the Spaniards clearly recognized the desirability of these objects. Perez and his men traded for the choicest things they could get their hands on, spiriting their treasures away to Madrid where some of them rest still in the vaults of the Museum of the Americas. For better or worse, a market was born.

Over the course of the intervening centuries, the appetite for the art of the Northwest Coast has waxed and waned. But these days, buyers are hungry and getting hungrier, responding at last to the power of the work. In Vancouver this weekend, in response to the opening of the exhibition Raven Travelling: Two Centuries of Haida Art at the Vancouver Art Gallery, five commercial exhibitions of Northwest Coast art are opening around town, with dealers hoping to ride the wave of opportunity. The respected Canadian tribal-art dealer Donald Ellis has teamed up with Andy Sylvester at Equinox Gallery to present a selection of contemporary and museum-quality historic objects. Douglas Reynolds is also showing new and old works, as is Uno Langmann Fine Art. Spirit Wrestler Gallery is exhibiting new pieces by Salish artist Susan Point, and the Inuit Gallery is staging a show of contemporary rattles. The gallery's website announces that the show opens at 10 a.m. (PT) today, with clients restricted from buying more than three pieces in the first 15 minutes of the sale. The city seems poised for a feeding frenzy.

But the big action in the Northwest Coast market has never been at home in British Columbia, or even in Canada, but in the auction halls of New York and London. Celebrated by the French surrealists in the 1920s (André Breton and Max Ernst were both collectors) and admired by the eminent sociologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the art of the Northwest Coast has always had a

special aura about it. "It is simply the most sophisticated of any of the tribal traditions around the world," says David Roche, head of tribal art at Sotheby's New York, and, when it comes to North American tribal art, "it tends to be the market leader."

Speaking particularly of the art of the northernmost parts of B.C. -- the work of the Haida, the Tsimshian and the Tlingit nations -- he adds: "There is a kind of drama in these pieces that you don't quite find anywhere else."

Steven Brown, a Seattle-based scholar in this area, concurs. "There is something about the refined power of the northern work," he says, "that is quite different than the spontaneous power to be found in the art of the south coast, or in, say, African art. There is a tension between restraint and release in the design that feels much more calculated and evolved."

Then how come, as Ellis says, you can buy these works of art for less than, say, production Tiffany glass, or mid-century modern furniture?

Prices have been rising, he says, doubling or sometimes tripling over the past 10 years for best-quality works, but they are still nowhere near where they should be.

Spoken like a true dealer you say? Consider this. At Equinox, Ellis and Sylvester are selling a walking-stick handle in the shape of a wolf's head by the historic Haida master Charles Edenshaw, a unique object exquisitely carved in walrus ivory some time between 1880 and 1910. It is being offered for $28,000. For context here: One of the least popular of Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe lithographs sold on April 29 at Sotheby's New York for $51,000 (U.S.). (They were printed in editions of 250.) A Canadian comparable: A small, comely but by no means spectacular A. Y. Jackson sketch -- and he pumped them out by the dozen -- was hammered down at Heffel two weeks ago for $40,250. Something is wrong here.

On some level, Ellis says, it's about racism, pure and simple, but it is also partly about the fact that most of the historic work is anonymous. "When it comes to buying art, most people are autograph collectors," he says. "It takes a lot of confidence and faith in your own eye to buy something when you don't know who made it."

All the same, the public is finally playing catch-up. Several market factors affect price, says Ellis -- that is, beyond that fuzzy, unquantifiable issue of aesthetic refinement. "What we have seen, increasingly," he says, "is that the early pieces, particularly those that have not been on the market before, are doing extraordinarily well, and there is a huge premium placed on

works that were made for ceremonial use, as opposed to trade." Ellis muses on the implications of this; objects made for trade, he says, were actually often more finely made, their aim being to demonstrate the artist's prowess. Is cultural virginity always the highest virtue?

The market for weaving -- spruce root, cedar bark and textiles -- is an area of particularly explosive growth. In the first decade of the 20th century, Brown says, you could buy a woven hat by Isabella Edenshaw (generally understood to be the best weaver of her era), decorated by her husband Charles, for around $5. These days, they can fetch more than $50,000. The same is true for textile work -- that other area of traditionally female endeavour. In the 1970s, a best-quality Chilkat blanket sold for between $1,000 and $5,000; it could now sell for $100,000 or more.

The other factor of increasing importance is provenance (a verifiable history of ownership), and not just because of the risk of forgery. "People like the stories," Ellis says. The world auction record for a Northwest Coast work stands at $684,500 (U.S.) for a Tsimshian mask sold at Sotheby's New York in 1999. (The only North American aboriginal object to beat this auction price was also from our part of the world: a Blackfoot embroidered shirt that was sold last month at Sotheby's for $800,000 [U.S.]) But this record will likely be beaten handily this fall, Ellis says, by another Tsimshian mask, this one collected in 1863 along with approximately 80 other objects at Old Metlakatla (on the mainland) by Robert J. Dundas, the priest aboard the British vessel HMS Grappler. "This is the last great field collection still in private hands," says Sotheby's Roche. Importantly, Dundas's detailed journals have been preserved by his heirs, and they describe not just the collecting of the objects but the environment of these coastal communities at that time. This kind of document is solid gold.

Other important objects in the Dundas collection include a spectacular clan hat, and some antler clubs, one of which is the earliest known to exist, but it's the mask that takes the cake. "There is a moment of aesthetic arrest, here, that can only happen when you look at a great work of art," says Roche. "It gives you chills." The catalogue, with its price estimates, will be released in August, but Ellis expects the mask to clear the $1-million mark with ease.

Will these objects make their way home to Canada? Not likely. When Ellis sells his Northwest Coast materials, it is seldom to Canadians. (More surprisingly, until this week, he has never sold to a client in British Columbia.) At Sotheby's, Roche has had the same experience: "The vast majority of private collectors who are buying these pieces at auction are in the United

States," Roche says, "and some in Europe," mostly buying small objects -- "a mask or carving that can go on a table under your Rothko," as Ellis puts it.

The tide may be turning, though. In May of this year, the Royal Alberta Museum spent $1.1-million acquiring 29 of the 43 available lots in the sale of the collection of James Carnegie, the ninth Earl of Southesk, a choice array of aboriginal works by Cree, Blackfoot and other Plains people collected in the mid-19th century. "This is the first time this has happened," says Roche.

If the market for historical art is heating up, so too is the lively trade in the work of living Northwest Coast carvers and other artisans, and the benefit of this is now flowing back to the native communities where these art forms were born. According to Douglas Reynolds, the major mid-career artists such as Jim Hart, Don Yeomans, Robert Davidson and Reg Davidson are receiving so many commissions for major monumental works that it is increasingly difficult to keep their smaller works in the gallery; they don't have the time to make them. Prices for these pole commissions can run from $300,000 to $500,000 and up.

These days, the most-talked-about commissions on the coast are the poles being carved for the infamous British contemporary artist Damien Hirst (he of the shark preserved in formaldehyde); 12 poles by Reg Davidson, who works in Old Massett (one 40-footer, just completed last week, plus 11 10-foot house posts), and five 30-foot poles (one each) by Tim Boyko, Robert Davidson (Reg's brother), Ben Davidson (Robert's son), Don Yeomans and Doug Zilkie, a white carver who has trained with the Haida. Rumours are circulating that the price for Robert Davidson's pole tops $600,000.

These are precedent-setting prices.

In Old Massett, Reg Davidson recounts his easy-going meeting with Hirst, an exotic stranger who brought catalogues of his own work along with him to Haida Gwaii, communing with the artist over a seafood dinner. The poles are intended for Hirst's homes in Mexico and England.

According to Davidson, the project is likely to have far-reaching implications for the art of his people. "Haida art is recognized around the world already," he says, "but this will even broaden the interest more. It will change the market because of who he is. The people who watch him will say -- if he likes it, then maybe I'll buy it too."