

HERITAGE

A West Coast icon comes home after round the world journey

Ceremonial club given to explorer Capt. James Cook returns to B.C. thanks to philanthropist Michael Audain

BY JOHN MACKIE

VANCOUVER SUN

As a child, Michael Audain was fascinated with the story of Capt. James Cook, the first European explorer to land in present-day British Columbia. As an adult, he's been fascinated by the art of first nations on the northwest coast, and helped repatriate many historic items to the province.

Now, he's brought home one of the most important native artifacts in Canadian history: a ceremonial club given to Cook by the Nuu-chah-nulth people of Vancouver Island in 1778.

The club was unveiled Tuesday at its new home, the Museum of Anthropology at the University of B.C. It is the first time it's been back in Canada

since it left 234 years ago.

The small, exquisitely carved piece features a hand grasping a globe. It's fashioned out of a single piece of yew tree, and was probably carved with stone tools, or perhaps mussel shells. It is valued at \$1.2 million.

"This is the most important first nations work that I've ever encountered," said Audain, who added "a tremor of excitement went through my body" when antique dealer Donald Ellis showed him the club in New York City.

"I said 'Can I touch it? Can I hold something in my hand that James Cook must have held?'"

There are other items from Cook's visit to Nootka Sound in museums in London, Vienna and Berlin. But the club was the only known item in private

hands. Ellis offered it to Audain first, because he wanted it to come to Canada.

"My intention was to sell it to Michael," said Ellis, who is from Dundas, Ont., but has residences in New York and Vancouver. "I wanted this to come to Canada. I have been aware for decades that there's not a Cook object in a Canadian collection."

Cook's visit to Nootka Sound was his only stop in B.C. during his three famous voyages of discovery; he was killed in Hawaii a year later. The club returned to England with his ship, the HMS *Resolution*, where it was given to his widow.

It has had 11 owners, including the Leverian Museum in London and antique dealer George Terasaki in New York. Ellis purchased it from

Terasaki's estate last year.

"It's the most important object I've ever owned, in 35 years of doing this," he said. "I've had more expensive things, and perhaps more beautiful things, but in terms of significance and importance, it's by far the most important object I've ever had the ability to handle."

The Nuu-chah-nulth were represented at the press conference by Margarita James, president of the Land of Maquinna Cultural Society.

"Institutions and museums have a different take on objects," she said. "For us, the first nations, they weren't just objects, they weren't just things, they were things we used, part of our life. For this first one to be returned from the Cook collection — that's big."

Debra Sparrow of the Musqueam nation said the club "was carved with a purpose, it was carved with a use. Therefore it is not an object, it is a reflection of a people's history, and the spirit of our people moves through there. If you look at that hand, it's like the hands of our ancestors are connected."



JASON PAYNE/PNG

UBC Museum of Anthropology director Anthony Shelton on Tuesday unveils a carved club, given to Capt. James Cook in the 18th century by the Nuu-chah-nulth in Nootka Sound.

Audain's Foundation donated \$827,000 to the purchase of the club. The chair of Polygon Homes has now donated about \$26 million to arts and cultural groups and institutions.

"[The club] is important in terms of world history, the history of exploring," said Audain.

"It's also important in terms of the culture of the northwest coast. There aren't too many so-called pre-contact works in British Columbia, let alone any works from Captain James Cook."

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