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THE GREAT BOX AND ITS CHILD

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THE GREAT BOX AND ITS CHILD: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN MUSEUM OBJECTS GO HOME?

One of the real questions that all museum ethnographers have is: what happens if an important heritage item is restored in some way to a community of origin? There is often a great deal of tension around the repatriation process itself, and our attention is drawn to repatriation processes, but what happens afterwards, to the object, and to relationships around it?

In March 2018, I attended a potlatch on Haida Gwaii in which a respected activist, artist and political leader stepped into a hereditary chieftainship. As part of the potlatch, I witnessed the new version of the Great Box [PRM 1884.57.25]—a masterpiece Haida chest carved in the mid-nineteenth century—used as the historic box would have been had it not been collected by General Pitt Rivers before 1877.

The Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) has been working with Haida people since 1998. Shortly before I arrived to take up post as Curator for the Americas and Lecturer in the School of Anthropology, a Haida delegation visited to request the repatriation of an ancestral remain in the PRM collections. It was an opportunity for us to build a relationship around PRM's collection of what Haida people call ancestral treasures. Since 1998, Haida people have visited nearly every year. Haida artists, curators, researchers, language speakers and language learners (Haida language is endangered), hereditary chiefs, matriarchs, and leaders in training have come to the PRM to learn from ancestral treasures, to enrich the Museum's understanding of the objects, to assist in creating educational programs, and to lecture.

In 2005, my doctoral student Cara Krmpotich went to Haida Gwaii to do her fieldwork on the effects of repatriation processes on Haida society. I visited her during the fieldwork, which allowed me to strengthen relationships with the Haida Repatriation Committee. I also gave presentations about changing legislation in the UK to do with repatriation of human remains, something of great interest to the Haida Repatriation Committee. When the committee hosted me for supper, we had fun thinking about all the research we could do with the Haida material at the PRM, and only half-jokingly decided that they should all visit.

A few years later, with funding from a Leverhulme International Network Trust and the Haida Repatriation Committee, twenty-one Haidas came to the PRM and the British Museum to work with Haida material culture and to form lasting relationships with those institutions. The three-week visit was a marathon for everyone and involved preparatory photography, record enhancement, and

cleaning of some 800 objects in total. It led to a book (Krmopotich and Peers 2013), an online video about the project (Everything was Carved), a Flickr site, and a symposium, which brought together Haida people and UK museum representatives who manage Haida collections.

The PRM part of the project culminated in the formal presentation of the written request by Haida people to repatriate their ancestor. Accepted by then director Michael O’Hanlon, the request was approved and in the summer of 2010 I accompanied the ancestor and the Haida delegation who came to escort him home to Haida Gwaii. We were met by other PRM and BM staff to finish the Leverhulme project with a series of community workshops and presentations. We also had the privilege of participating in the burial ceremony for the ancestor in the community cemetery at Old Massett. Picking up the shovel and helping to bury him seemed to exemplify what museum anthropology was all about: relationships, collections research, and dealing with the past in the present in ways that actually changed things. On a calm summer evening that week, the combined PRM/BM/Haida team paddled together in Bill Reid’s canoe LooTaas, part of the great renewal of Haida material culture in the late twentieth century that involved bringing community knowledge and knowledge in museum collections together. Paddling together also seemed like a metaphor for where we all wanted museum/Indigenous relationships to go.

Inspired by one object they saw at the PRM on the 2009 visit, accomplished carvers and brothers Gwaai and Jaalen Edenshaw wanted a chance to study the techniques used by the master artist of the Great Box. They said that to do so, they would have to make a new version of the box, with the historic artist/box in the room to teach them. When they carved a full-sized totem pole for Parks Canada a few years after the visit, they retained several very large planks when they squared off the back of the pole, thinking that someday, they might have the chance to work with the Great Box. In 2015, with funding from the ESRC Impact Acceleration Fund, Canada Council for the Arts and Gwaii Trust, Jaalen and Gwaai made a blank bentwood box to the same dimensions as the historic one and then packed up their carving tools and followed it to Oxford. For the next month (we could get them a visa for only 30 days), they carved in twelve-hour shifts, replicating the depth, direction, and angle of every carving stroke. They managed to get one long carved side finished and half the other side; the shorter ends are just painted and could be done at home with the aid of 1:1 photographs supplied by the PRM. During their intense learning, they also researched the historic box’s provenance, scanned museum databases around the world online looking for images of ‘sibling’ boxes by the same artist, and gave talks to PRM staff and community groups. I had the privilege of invigilating the historic box while it was in the ‘carving studio’—the Museum’s repurposed seminar room—with them, spending long days, evenings and weekends in the room while they worked and learned. It was a time of intense learning for everyone involved¹.

The new Great Box went home to Haida Gwaii. A few days later, Jaalen and Gwaai took it to the Old Massett High School to use in teaching an art class. This was the first significant impact of the box's return: using a Haida masterpiece to teach Haida art to Haida youth. The box has continued to inspire artists, and many other Haida people, in informal visits in Jaalen's carving shed and exhibitions at the Haida Gwaii Museum and the Bill Reid Gallery in Vancouver.

When Jaalen and Gwaai told me that their father, Guujaaw, was going to become the hereditary chief *Gidansda* for the Ravens of Skedans, and that the box would feature in the potlatch held to mark this transition, I hoped very much to attend the event and see the new Great Box in action. Having never before had the chance to attend a potlatch, I was delighted when the formal invitation arrived.

A potlatch is an event involving a change in status: a wedding, a funeral, an adoption, becoming a chief. The host clan invites, feasts and presents gifts to guests, who witness the business conducted, provide collective support for it, and are responsible for affirming the business afterwards. In my case, I affirm that Guujaaw is now Chief *Gidansda*, and I was with about a thousand people who saw it done, so it's true. The host clan's specific crests are displayed in dance and song and regalia. A totem pole, also with the clan's specific crests, may be carved and raised to commemorate the event.

I had been told that the Great Box's child would feature in the potlatch. As a curator, I see masterpiece-level Haida art held motionless in displays by elaborate supports, or wrapped in tissue paper in acid-free boxes. I've learned that when such items are performed by Haida people—old masks brought to the face and danced, ancient hats worn on the head, gambling sticks used to gamble with—something very special happens. This was initially a source of professional tension, but I have learned to treasure these magical moments when long-dormant treasures come to life. Those moments of cultural renewal are precisely what the 1884 revisions to the Indian Act, the Potlatch Ban, tried to kill. The historic Great Box was removed from Haida Gwaii during the years of missionisation, assimilation policies, and residential schools. That's how most of those ancestral treasures sitting on shelves got to Oxford. Those rare, magical moments when items are danced, when they move, when they are lovingly held by Haida people, affirm that although hearts were often broken during those years, Haida culture was not. If it went quiet, like the masks on shelves, it has been woken again and is dancing.

What happens when a long-absent masterpiece comes home?

The new box sat in front of the chiefs' table, front and center in the action. Its riveting design was echoed by the designs on the chief's seat and the banner behind the chief's table, taken from sibling boxes identified by Gwaai and

Jaalen Edenshaw as having been made by the same artist. That's when I saw another impact of the box's return: the scholarship of artists, whose knowledge in hand and eye enables reconnections between items in collections on different continents and gathers designs for renewal and remaking.

The meal was served to the chiefs by host clan members who made their way around the box, carrying plates of seafood, coffee pots and water jugs. People came up and admired the boxes, took pictures; occasionally someone came and spent a long time going around every side of the new box, mesmerized. At the pivotal moment in the ceremony, the new box was used as it was meant to be: as a box of treasures, from which the new chief's regalia was unpacked by his women relatives as they lovingly dressed him during that moment of transformation.

It was where the historic box was meant to be, if it had not been removed from Haida Gwaii. The new box sat, powerful and beautiful, between chiefs and coppers and dancers, hearing Haida language and song, watching the aunties visit, admiring the excellent pies, smelling seafood. At one point, a toddler being given her Haida name danced to her naming song in front of it, bouncing up and down in a room filled with love and happiness. The Great Box took it all in. There was no hole in the room where it should have been. The Great Box's child has come home.

Across our nearly two decades of working together, Haida people have trained staff and students in the UK through this relationship. Many of those staff and students have gone on to other institutions, spreading their learning across the profession. This has not always been an easy relationship. PRM staff who facilitated the 2009 research visit had to learn about facilitating Indigenous performative handling on such visits, about how important such visits are to communities of origin, about what our responsibilities to such communities are as people who care for their ancestral treasures. We still struggle in our relationship: as I write this, PRM staff have just debated whether we can take the terribly fragile, and terribly important, Raven Travelling mask off display for a Haida researcher, weighing the pros and cons of a very difficult decision affecting both mask and researcher (it came off display). We will struggle with repatriation claims and with other tensions in the future. Can we put a 3D rendering of a Haida ancestral treasure online without making it possible to 3D print the item by unscrupulous art dealers who might use it as a prototype to take to Asia and have multiple carvings made for sale? How do we liaise with changing leadership in the Haida nation? It has been a process of intense learning and transformation for the PRM, necessary to the integrity that an ethnographic museum must bring to its special work. To ensure the process continues, the PRM has established the Origins and Futures Fund [<https://www.campaign.ox.ac.uk/pitt-rivers>] to support research visits by Indigenous community members to Oxford to work with their material heritage. The first recipient of this bursary, Haida weaver Lisa Hageman, visited in January 2018, to learn and to continue to teach us.

Notes

1. See: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/haidabox>

References

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