

Tsimshian Treasures: The Remarkable Journey of the Dundas Collection.* Donald Ellis, ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007. 144 pp.

Reviewed by Christopher F. Roth

This sparsely arranged, visually pleasing volume—an exhibit catalogue enhanced with several essays—lands amid one of the more controversial museum exhibits in the recent history of Canadian First Nations art: forty Tsimshian artifacts that spent decades hidden in private hands and surrounded by myth and rumor, surfacing on the auction block in New York in 2006 and fetching a world-record take (\$7 million) for a Native American collection.

The pieces were originally collected in 1863 on a visit to Metlakatla, British Columbia, by the Rev. Robert James Dundas. He procured them from William Duncan, the dissident Anglican lay missionary who ran the tiny Tsimshian village as a utopian fiefdom. The circumstances of the transfer are murky, as is the story behind Duncan's having them in the first place: his job was not to hoard or sell objects but to eradicate the Tsimshian customs they represented. The spotty written record (more on that below) leaves it unclear whether or not Dundas bought them outright.

For 143 years the objects were in the Dundas family's possession. They decorated the family's billiard room and children played charades with them. Dundas's great-grandson, Simon Carey, who eventually brought them to auction, at one point had to stop his mother and aunt from throwing the collection away. He died nine days after the auction.

I recall the impotent anger expressed in Tsimshian communities when word of the impending auction emerged in 2006, especially considering that some of the objects had belonged to the legendary chief Paul Legaic. Legaic's rejection of "heathenism" under Duncan's influence was the pivotal point in the Christianization of the Tsimshian. Alan L. Hoover's contribution to this volume, "The History of the Dundas Collection," describes the historical and cultural context satisfactorily for the nonspecialist, connecting the written record with what can be discerned from the objects themselves, though Tsimshianists will find some of his occasional dips into the ethnographic record to clarify details of Tsimshian heraldry unsatisfyingly preliminary.

A few pages from Dundas's own diaries are reproduced in the volume but in tantalizingly short excerpts. There is no mention of the controversy over Carey's son's refusal to make the full texts of the original diaries, which are still in England, available to scholars.[1] One can only wonder, as Tsimshian leaders ramp up their anger over the circumstances of the objects' acquisition: what are Dundas's descendants hiding?

There are no answers to such questions in *Tsimshian Treasures*. Most of the essays (the powerful concluding essay by the Tsimshian weaver William White is an exception) to some extent set aside the collection's weightier implications for repatriation, sovereignty, and the politics of

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cultural representation. This is because this volume is in a sense a peace treaty between warring sides: Tsimshians and their allies who feel collectors and distant museums have no right to the pieces, versus collectors and exhibitors who feel the matter is now settled. For example, the contribution by Sarah Milroy, a *Globe and Mail* reporter, on the ceremonies surrounding the objects' unveiling at the Museum of Northern British Columbia (an institution that works closely with Tsimshian chiefs) alludes to controversy but seems more like a travel-section feature story, ending on an upbeat, redemptive note.

The major question for many Tsimshians is whether the objects were stolen or given up freely. Answers are inherently elusive. To suggest that Legaic was somehow coerced into abandoning his traditions for Christianity bucks the emerging trend in missionary studies in general and Tsimshian studies in particular, highlighting indigenous agency in missionization. Indeed, amid today's Tsimshian cultural renaissance, it is hard to imagine a powerful chief surrendering his hereditary privileges to adopt Christianity and white culture. Older Tsimshians may find such ambivalence about one's own culture sadly familiar. But was Legaic even authorized under Tsimshian law to surrender objects that in another sense belong to the rest of his lineage (who, mostly, did not convert at that time)? Or do his descendants and fellow tribesmen now have an automatic claim? And what about objects with no clear lineage provenance? Duncan did not quite use force to convert the Tsimshian, but he was not above, for example, claiming that Metlakatla's loss of only five lives in a smallpox epidemic, while nearby "heathen" Port Simpson lost 250, was God's will. Maybe he believed it himself. But, for a culture convinced of a relationship between disease and spirit power, isn't Duncan's use of those arguments a kind of coercion?

Amid these serious moral and legal questions, it is jarring to read Donald Ellis, the Ontario collector responsible for the collection's auction, write about another kind of repatriation: his eagerness to see the objects sold to Canadian collectors rather than (perish the thought) Americans or other foreigners. For him, bringing the objects from England to Ontario is repatriation enough. Anyone familiar with the complex Tsimshian system of lineage property rights will wince reading Ellis's assertion that "this group of objects ... belonged to Canada and all Canadians" (p. 13). Whether it is land or culture or artifacts, First Nations people by now know what is really intended when an outsider claims that something of theirs "belongs to everyone." Reading White's cogent words in this volume and looking at Shannon Mendes's stunning (but, frustratingly, uncaptioned) accompanying photographs of Tsimshian elders marveling at the Dundas Collection in the Museum of Northern British Columbia, one thing is clear: Tsimshians feel proud of these objects, but they also feel robbed.

Note

1. See: Alexandra Gill (2007) "Native Treasures Travel without Companion Diaries." *Globe and Mail*. May 3: R3.

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