



TAKU RIVER TLINGIT
First Nation



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140 Year old Taku River Tlingit First Nation Chilkat blanket Returns Home

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Last week, the Taku River Tlingit First Nation, whose traditional territory spans Alaska, northern British Columbia, and the Yukon, became aware that a Chilkat blanket collected from a Tlingit community on the Taku River in the 1880s was going up for auction at a prestigious Canadian art house.

Wayne Carlick, a Tlingit elder and a master carver in Atlin, and Ben Louter (Heritage Archaeologist), a settler who has long worked on heritage matters for the TRT government, started a GoFundMe campaign to bid on the piece, which was originally estimated to sell for \$15k-20k. The campaign didn't raise enough, but fortunately, a generous Atlin local named Peter Wright stepped in to loan the necessary funding. He ended up winning the auction on behalf of the First Nation—but at a steep price. Thanks to bidder #133, The final price came to a staggering \$38,000. It is a happy day for our community knowing that this piece of our history is coming back home. However, it is sad that our First Nation community and our friends have to put up this kind of cash to buy back what already belongs to us.

This blanket has a 'signature' that has been woven into the fabric that matches that of Mary Hunt exactly. Mary Hunt was Yanwulihashi Hit (Drifted Ashore Clan) of the T'aaku Kwáan (Geese Flood Upriver Tribe). The descendants of the T'aaku Kwáan today are recognized by the Canadian state as the Taku River Tlingit First Nation, although there are many T'aaku Kwáan relations in southeast Alaska as well.

Currently, hundreds of pieces of Tlingit art are kept in distant museums and private art collections. Most community members rarely have opportunities to engage with the art forms that their ancestors perfected, except as photos on the internet. Many of these pieces were collected by European fur traders and gold seekers after epidemic diseases had decimated Tlingit communities living on the Taku. Today, the Taku River Tlingit First Nation is actively working to repatriate artifacts and cultural pieces from museums and private collections.

The Taku River Tlingit First Nations are working with museums to transfer these pieces back to their original home.

Charmaine Thom
Taku River Tlingit First Nation Spokesperson

Quick Facts

This Chilkat blanket is made of woven mountain goat hair spun over a core of cedar bark string.

The wolf design on the blanket indicates that it belonged to someone from the Yanyèdi (wolf) clan.

These hand-woven garments took over a year to weave.

Chilkat blankets are a type of regalia that were often worn during dances and ceremonies.

At the auction, there was no information about the provenance of the blanket, other than the fact that it was Tlingit. This is very common in the indigenous art world, especially so for heritage objects and artifacts that were 'collected' early in the 19th century.

Elders in this community have shared stories about artifact collectors and their manipulative trade practices. Items of lesser value was frequently used as a bartering tool to obtain priceless regalia. It's safe to say that colonial collection practices in the 19th and early 20th centuries were nefarious at the best of times. Artifact collectors would often sell collections in batches to collectors or museums and would remove or obscure provenance and any info on how artifacts were obtained.

Taku River Tlingit should not be forced to pay art collector prices for something that was almost certainly 'collected' with a heavy colonial trade advantage.

Justin Trudeau, the current Prime Minister of Canada has admitted that the relationship between the Canadian state and indigenous peoples is genocidal in nature. There has been a huge push in recent years to block the re-sale of Jewish-owned art that was collected during the Holocaust, but so far the same metric of widespread repatriation has not been extended to indigenous communities.

In Canada, indigenous material culture is also split into different colonial compartments that directly affect communities negatively. For one, "art" and "archaeology" are split into separate categories. In British Columbia, according to the Heritage Conservation Act, the Province owns everything subsurface- including all indigenous artifacts and cultural features (such as fish traps, house depressions etc.). 99.9% of all

Taku River Tlingit artifacts are stored in the Royal BC Museum in Victoria or one of the other designated repositories, which are all located thousands of kilometers from Atlin, where most Taku River Tlingit folks live.

This summer there was a massive archaeological dig on a lake close to Atlin. Every artifact taken out of the soil was shipped to a distant repository. It is possible to have a community space designated as a provincial repository, but it is a labyrinthine and expensive process governed by the BC Archaeology Branch. Most First Nations communities in BC do not have the capacity or the funding to meet the Branch's requirements, so the reality is that these communities will not be able to engage with the cultural expressions of their ancestors.

Articles Referenced

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