

## The Great Box Project



The Great Box came to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, England, in 1884 when the Museum opened. It was part of the founding collection of objects received from General Pitt Rivers, who had owned it since at least 1874. It was displayed in London along with other parts of Pitt Rivers' collection before the museum in Oxford was opened and it was transferred there. We have no idea where on Haida Gwaii Pitt Rivers obtained the box, how it got to England, or which Haida artist made it. To the Museum, it is known as 1884.57.25, and as "The Great Box". To Haida people, it is a masterpiece of their artistic and cultural heritage.

Bentwood boxes have always been made on Haida Gwaii, by kerfing (cutting grooves in) a cedar plank and steaming the plank to soften the wood until it can be bent into a box shape. Boxes were made of different sizes and shapes; some were carved as well as painted. They were used historically to store potlatch and clan regalia, for displays of wealth and status, to store clothing and dance regalia, for food storage, for travelling. Large elaborate ones were sometimes used for the burial of chiefs, and were placed in notches in special mortuary totem poles. Small ones were even used for cooking: bentwood boxes can be made watertight, and with the addition of food and very hot stones, were used for boiling and stewing. Very large boxes were also used as drums.

Today, boxes are still made and used on Haida Gwaii. Though there were a few bentwood box artists on Haida Gwaii across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, box-making traditions were renewed with Haida repatriation initiatives beginning in the 1990s. when the ancestral remains are brought home, each individual is reburied in their own bentwood box, many of which have been made and decorated by Haida high school students working with Haida teachers. Box drums are also popular with dance groups, and as Haida song and dance traditions have been strengthened over the past few decades the sound of these instruments has become increasingly heard across the islands again.



'Sylvia Painting,' photograph by Nika Collison.

See 'The Bentwood Box Project' on the Haida Repatriation Committee website, which includes a photo-essay on box making and decorating:

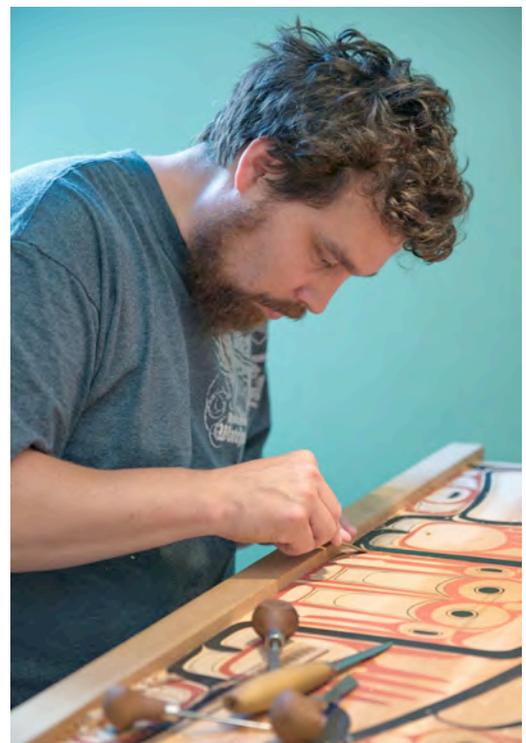
<http://www.repatriation.ca>

Many Haida artists today still learn the elements of their artistic heritage by copying box designs as part of their apprenticeship. Very few 'masterpiece' boxes remain on Haida Gwaii for apprentices to learn from directly, however: they are in museums far away.

While museums are very willing now to support Indigenous community access to collections, it is difficult for apprentices and emerging artists to afford the cost and time of spending time in cities far from home, museum by museum, to learn from the ancestors who carved the historic items that are now in collections. Photographs available online and in publications are more accessible, but problematic for carvers because they tend to flatten carved relief into a two-dimensional image, revealing little about the precise nature of cuts or the direction of carving, or even scale.

In 2009, the Pitt Rivers Museum hosted a large delegation of 21 members of the Haida Nation for several weeks in order to make its historic collections accessible to Haida people, and also to develop lasting relationships between the Museum and the Haida Nation. The Haida delegation included an hereditary Chief, elders and language speakers, Haida curators, members of the Haida Repatriation Committee and many artists. The carvers in the group, especially Christian White, Gwaai Edenshaw, and Jaalen Edenshaw, gathered about the “Great Box” in fascination and admiration when they saw it. They had a long conversation about its special nature and said they would love to carve a new version—but that they would have to do so with the original in the room with them, because it was so complex that they would have to continually refer to it as they worked.

Five years to the day, Jaalen and Gwaai were in the Museum’s seminar room—converted into a carving studio, complete with Tormek sharpener—and the historic box, carving the new box they had bent and shipped to Oxford a few weeks earlier.



The new box has gone home to Haida Gwaii, to be used in workshops with high school students, artists, elders and community members. Gwaai and Jaalen have transferred the knowledge and skill and vision of the historic artist of the Great Box into the new box, so that Haida people will have access to this information. We hope it will inspire new generations of Haida artists.



This project is a partnership with the Haida Gwaii Museum and has been generously supported by:



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