

Where the Thunderbird lives

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In the Great Court of the British Museum stand two enormous cedar totem poles, acquired in the early years of the 20th century from the Northwest Coast of North America. One was made by the Haida people, the other by the Nisga'a, two of the nations who make up the rich and complex society which stretches through Alaska, British Columbia and Washington State in the lands which, today, are called the United States and Canada. But these are societies whose history stretches back at least 9,000 years, and which have been remarkably resilient in withstanding European and Russian incursion from the 18th century onward. They are not only the Haida and Nisga'a, but the Tlingit and Kwakwaka'wakw, the Tsimshian, Coast Salish, Nuuchah Nulth and Makah communities. Now for the first time the British Museum is bringing together objects from these cultures in an exhibition which not only showcases one of world's most recognisable artistic traditions, but demonstrates how cultural identity can endure even in the most terrible circumstance.

When I arrive at the museum to meet with Jago Cooper and Amber Lincoln, co-curators of the show, the installation is still in process; objects are being carefully nestled in the display cases, painted in a pale green wash to evoke the colour of fresh cedar bark. But the variety and range of what will be on show is already apparent, from objects which -- like the totem poles in the Great Court -- evoke the power and majesty of these societies, to domestic objects which combine beauty and usefulness in equal measure. In the first category are two potlatch "coppers", shield-shaped plaques about a metre in height, made from what was an exotic and valuable metal. The potlatch is a ceremony, often days long, of feasting, dancing, and the giving of gifts; these copper plaques, patterned with spruce gum in the distinctive "formline" design which is as distinctive to the Northwest Coast as intricate knotting is to the Celtic tradition, were a significant part of these ceremonies. But equally intricately worked is a basket used to catch fish: it is made of cedar twigs and cedar bark wrapped round the twigs.

Lincoln draws my attention to the way in which the bark is wrapped in an alternating sequence around the twigs: a technique which brings not only beauty but strength to the delicate net. From these two objects alone one can begin to grasp the sophistication of life on the Pacific Northwest Coast; as Jago Cooper, Head of Americas at the Museum, points out, the people of these cultures were able to build extremely complex and rich societies, all without the use of agriculture - - evidence of the bounty of this landscape of bays and islands. In this lush geography artists and craftsmen made works which are a source of wonder even today: look for the joins at the corners of the elaborately decorated Haida box on display, and you won't find them -- for there are no joins. The chests are made from a single plank of red cedar which is steamed until pliable; the two ends are then pegged together. The chests can be used for the storage of clothing or possessions: they can also be used as drums, for cooking, or for the purpose of burial. They are a good symbol for the extraordinary skill and adaptability of the cultures of the Northwest Coast.

The objects are arranged chronologically and geographically in the single room which contains the exhibition. One side moves from the earliest stone tools and historic weapons made in this region to the time of the arrival of Captain James Cook at the end of the 18th century; the other side features contemporary art and regalia from the museum's collections into the modern era. The latter addresses plainly the survival of what Cooper rightly calls cultural genocide: the often willed destruction of First Nation populations, both in Canada and the United States, by disease, by the residential school system, in which children were taken away from their families to "educated" out of their culture and beliefs; the attempted eradication of language and religious practice. One of these was the potlatch, banned in Canada from 1880 until 1951 -- over 70 years, an entire generation, long enough for a culture to vanish. Yet the exhibition opens with a video of a vibrant potlatch ceremony: the survival of the potlatch, Cooper says, was down to "people going into museums and studying, or grabbing a grandparent and asking questions; people were incredibly industrious when it came to restoring their culture." Evidence of that restoration and revival is the regalia worn by Chief Alver Tait in 2003, when the Nisga'a totem pole was first raised in the

British Museum after decades of storage. He and his wife Lillian performed a spirit dance “to bring life back to the ancestors in the totem pole because they had been resting for so long.”

And indeed, much of the material on show here has been seen less often than it might have been. In “Missing Continents at the British Museum”, a Radio 4 programme made last year (and still available on iPlayer), artist and former museum trustee Antony Gormley argued that the cultures of Africa, Oceania and the Americas are overshadowed in the museum by those of Europe and Mesopotamia, which take the lion’s share of the permanent displays. Temporary exhibitions such as “Where the Thunderbird lives” allow a wonderful glimpse of the museum’s hidden holdings -- some of it simply too fragile to be seen very often or for very long. At least one of the the objects on show, a gorgeous yellow cedar cloak collected in the last years of the 18th century on George Vancouver’s North Pacific Voyage, painted with an oystercatcher and two skate figure images, is a “once in a lifetime” object -- it can’t be exposed to light for long, so now’s your chance to see it.

Who made it? We don’t know. Some of these objects -- the “welcome figure”, carved with open arms that opens the exhibition, cannot even be attributed to a specific culture; “Northwest Coast Peoples, 19th century” is the only attribution available. That is of course true of many of the objects in the museum’s vast collection: we don’t know who made the Sutton Hoo helmet, or who carved the Rosetta Stone, and indeed the ownership of many of the objects the museum holds is itself a subject of often passionate debate. The past cannot be changed: it can, however, be acknowledged, as this exhibition gracefully does. For on display too is the work of contemporary artists who continue -- in diverse ways -- the traditions of their ancestors. What looks like a traditional Tlingit spruce root twinned basket is made from glass by contemporary Tlingit artist Preston Singletary; a pendant made from copper echoes the great potlatch coppers, but the image printed on the face shows a detail from a US \$5 bill; it is made by Tlingit artist Alison Bremner. There can be no doubt, from the evidence of this compact and fascinating show, that the Thunderbird still lives.

Where the Thunderbird Lives: cultural resilience on the Northwest Coast of North America
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