



# THE CULTURAL SANCTUARIES FOUNDATION

Protecting the Protectors



*Potlatch masks from the U'mista collection representing the orca and the mythical huxwhukw worn by Rylin Brotchie and, in the centre, the sun as carved by Tim Alfred and worn by Trevor Isaac*

## We have another milestone to report.

It is not long since we issued our last newsletter announcing the official opening of our Eagle Hunter Cultural Center in Mongolia but hot on the heels of that, we want to tell you about another important Cultural Sanctuaries project... this time working with the Kwakwaka'wakw community on the Western coast of British Columbia in Canada.

It is important to explain some of the background. Like many other First Nations tribes in Canada, the Kwakwaka'wakw community in Alert Bay was dealt blow after blow in the 19th and 20th centuries. First came the introduction of smallpox and other European diseases in the 1800s which wiped out so many communities, including 75% of the Kwakwaka'wakw people. Then came the Indian Act which, among other injustices, in 1885 banned the potlatch ceremony which lay at the heart of Kwakwaka'wakw culture but which was referred by one missionary as "by far the most formidable of all obstacles in the way of Indians becoming Christians or even civilized". Then came the residential school - to which First Nations kids were sent to separate them from their families, culture and language - built on the island in 1882 and not closed until the 1970s; not demolished until 2015.

Visiting Alert Bay over a period of many years, we have learnt much about the wounds and traumas of those years but also much about the resilience and strength of the Kwakwaka'wakw people.

One example relates to the remarkable return of what is known as the Potlatch Collection. When Dan Cranmer hosted a potlatch on Christmas Day 1921, he did so in secret. Potlatching was still against the law in Canada and local officials, on hearing about the Cranmer Potlatch, were determined to punish those who had attended. They charged 45 people under the potlatch ban and the community was made to hand over all of its potlatch masks and regalia in exchange for the accused being spared imprisonment. Hundreds of masks and other sacred items were confiscated. The Kwakwaka'wakw community, including Dan's son, Chief Bill Cranmer, who we had the pleasure of meeting a few years ago, and the incredible team at the U'Mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, which includes other members of the Cranmer family, have

worked tirelessly for decades to track down and repatriate almost all of the confiscated masks and regalia and it is a joy to see the Potlatch Collection back where it belongs in the community.

When we sat down with the U'Mista team in April of this year to discuss the community's priorities now that most of the repatriation is complete, one message rang out loud and clear - the need to protect the Kwakwaka'wakw's language Kwakwala is urgent. While there is a huge appetite to learn it among the Alert Bay population, few fluent speakers remain and much work is still to be done to finalise a dictionary and to record and then teach the language together with its songs and stories.

We committed then to team up with U'Mista and their Ni'noxola Authority of Speakers to support the language revitalisation work. Thanks to the incredible generosity of our benefactors, we have been able to deliver on that commitment. We have provided the audio, video and other tech equipment that the project needs and we are building a recording studio pod, all the better for the team to have the right environment to record and promote the Kwakwala language. We have also documented many of U'Mista's potlatch masks and photographed the Speakers in a series of portraits which will hang in their honour on the walls of the studio when it opens by January.

We feel very honoured to have been able to do our part in helping to protect and celebrate the Kwakwala language and know that the U'Mista team will continue to do a fantastic job in supporting the Kwakwaka'wakw community as it continues to right the wrongs of the past.

We were also honoured personally to be invited to a potlatch hosted by Chief Matt Willie during our last visit to the island. Photographs were not permitted during the two day-long ceremony in the Big House but the sights and sounds of the event are still swimming before our eyes. The power of this culture and the way that it is being embraced and celebrated by the younger generations after centuries of attempts to crush it are truly astounding.

Thank you and, in the Kwakwala language, Gilakas'la.