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July 2017

**HISTORIC CHIEF'S CHEST JOURNEYS
BACK TO HAIDA GWAII FROM
THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY**

**LOAN ACCLAIMED AS PROGRESSIVE MODEL FOR COOPERATION
BETWEEN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND MUSEUMS**



A historic wooden Haida chest, acquired by the American Museum of Natural History in 1901, has recently returned on loan to Haida Gwaii off the coast of British Columbia in an innovative collaboration between the AMNH and the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay.

The 160 cm (63-inch)-long, 67.5-cm (27-inch)-tall chest was carved before 1880 by an ancestral holder of the title Gidansta, Chief of Skedans. It features intricate carvings representing the moon and a mountain goat on the broad sides, and grizzly bears at the ends.

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All three Crests are acquired from the Tsimsian while the moon is a prerogative of the clan Chief. In 1901, Gidansta sold the chest to a collector, Charles Newcombe, who in turn sold it to the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

The first public viewing of the chest included two days of potlatch ceremonies honoring the memory of the most recent Gidansta, Percy Williams, and the inauguration of the new holder of the name and title: Guujaaw, former President of the Haida Nation. The use of the chest in the potlatch ceremonies represents a creative collaboration between indigenous source nations and museums.

The chest, which is now exhibited in the “Ancient History of Haida Gwaii” section of the Haida Gwaii Museum, will be on public view until March 2018. Before traveling back to New York, the chest will be removed from the gallery for two months so that the present Gidansta’s sons Gwaai and Jaalen Edenshaw – both accomplished carvers – can study it and create a replica that will remain in the community.

“This project is a continuation of a long-term partnership between the Haida Gwaii Museum and the AMNH and provides a solid foundation for a strong relationship with museums that hold many of our most important cultural treasures,” said Scott Marsden, director of the Haida Gwaii Museum. “This important project continues to strengthen community pride in our culture, provide our community with opportunities to observe and reflect on the legacies of classical and contemporary Haida art, and the strengthening of Haida culture and identity.”

The chest has not been exhibited for more than 30 years. In advance of its trip to Haida Gwaii last month, the chest was prepared by conservators in the Anthropology Division of the American Museum of Natural History. It was stabilized for travel by securing and strengthening fragile areas. They also carefully cleaned the paint in several locations and replaced old restorations that were obscuring the original colors and design.

“Our museum is home to one of the most important collections of 19th- and early 20th-century Northwest Coast art and material culture, which we hold in trust as a legacy for the First Nations themselves and for the understanding and appreciation of a very broad public,” said Peter Whiteley, curator of North American Ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History. “This loan represents a new kind of partnership between indigenous source

communities and major museums, and one that is particularly important to us given our museum's ongoing collaborations with the Haida Nation."

"Our Nation and Museum have an almost 20-year relationship with the AMNH that began with the repatriation of our Ancestors," said Nika Collison, curator of the Haida Gwaii Museum. "Since then, we've worked together closely over the years to build a relationship based on mutual respect, understanding and trust; and to realize a number of mutually beneficial endeavors – an example being this collaborative loan, requiring our Haida Nation's laws and the institutional policies of the AMNH together to find a way for the chest to come home, be brought back to the life it was meant to have, and provide such educational and cultural opportunities. This collaboration has stepped our relationship up to the next level, an even stronger relationship. We look forward to bringing some of our belongings home permanently in the future, while maintaining and growing the respectful relationship that exists between our Nation and the AMNH."

Most recently, joint efforts by the American Museum of Natural History and Haida Gwaii Museum have included a series of projects to bring the perspectives and stories of contemporary First Nations communities directly into the historic Hall of Northwest Coast Indians in New York City and to highlight the Haida Nation and Haida Gwaii Museum.

A new digital installation in the American Museum of Natural History's Hall of Northwest Coast Indians, created in dialogue with Indigenous community members, introduces visitors to people of the Pacific Northwest Coast through photos and interviews, including one with the new hereditary chief, Gidansta. Assistant Curator Sean Young of Haida Gwaii Museum also regularly connects to New York visitors via a telepresence robot, offering virtual tours of the Haida Gwaii Museum and interpreting Haida items on view in AMNH's Northwest Coast hall.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY (AMNH.ORG)

The American Museum of Natural History, founded in 1869, is one of the world's preeminent scientific, educational, and cultural institutions. The Museum encompasses 45 permanent exhibition halls, including those in the Rose Center for Earth and Space and the Hayden Planetarium, as well as galleries for temporary exhibitions. It is home to New York State's official memorial to Theodore Roosevelt, a tribute to Roosevelt's enduring legacy of environmental conservation. The Museum's approximately 200 scientists draw on a world-class

research collection of more than 34 million artifacts and specimens, some of which are billions of years old, and on one of the largest natural history libraries in the world. Through its Richard Gilder Graduate School, the Museum grants the Ph.D. degree in Comparative Biology and the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree, the only such program at any museum in the United States. Annual physical attendance has grown to approximately 5 million, and the Museum's exhibitions and Space Shows can be seen in venues on six continents. The Museum's website, digital videos, and apps for mobile devices bring its collections, exhibitions, and educational programs to millions more around the world. Visit amnh.org for more information.

HAIDA GWAII MUSEUM

Opened in 1976 and located in Skidegate , Haida Gwaii. The Museum's mandate is to inspire understanding and respect for all that Haida Gwaii is. It has been created by the community and the Museum takes its direction from the Haida Nation but also incorporates settler history and the natural history of the island. It is a place of education and a space for reconciliation. The Haida Gwaii Museum is the only cultural facility on Haida Gwaii that is a designated Category "A" museum and is one of only 12 museums in BC with this significant designation. This provision provides our Museum with opportunities to exhibit professional artists on a regional, national and international scale, and allows it to purchase, with the assistance of federal funds, "nationally significant" Haida objects and art. The Museum is committed to showcasing and preserving Haida First Nations historical and contemporary art, culture and language that promotes the rich diversity of Haida Gwaii. During the last 30 years, the museum has worked closely with the Haida community on repatriation initiatives and other programs aimed at strengthening and supporting the growth of Haida culture.

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