

21 April, 1969

Dr. William C. Sturtevant,
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Washington, D.C.

Dear Bill:

Thanks very much for sending the photograph of the painted house front collected by James G. Swan in 1875. I haven't had as much fun since the Arts of the Raven show.

I can't as yet say where it is from, but my guess is Port Simpson, a Tsimshian village. Also, I am quite sure the painter was a Haida, and his name was Edenshaw.

There is a document written by James G. Swan which may provide the answer, but I do not have access to it. It is listed as "Official Report as Commissioner to Procure Articles for the Centennial Exposition", Appendix, William Gouverneur Morris Report, 45C:3s. Senate Executive Document 59". Perhaps you have access to it. It is listed in the bibliography of the Millers' book "Lost Heritage of Alaska". I am also in touch with a woman who has just finished two books about Judge Swan: Mrs. Lucile McDonald, 11855 Holmes Point Drive NE, Kirkland, Wash, 98033. I phoned her on Friday and received a note from her today, but it wasn't very satisfactory. She says that Swan in 1875 collected a lot of things, including a huge canoe at Port Simpson and a 30 by 20 foot Indian lodge at Alert Bay. I'll write her again about the house front.

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Based on style (including 'stigmata'), your great big fun-filled painting was done by the same man who painted the huge "Bella Bella" canoe in the American Museum (see Inverarity, Fig. 239), and the wall partition from the Tlingit village of Kluckwan (see Barbeau, Haida Myths, Fig. 262). I think he also did the Raven Screens in the Denver Art Museum, from Hoonah, Alaska. And of course he did a lot of chests, boxes, dishes and other things, if I am right.

The main figures could well be Tsimshian crests of the Gispewadwada phratry. The big animals are of course Killer Whales, but they could be a special crest of two whales colliding. The human-like figure in the centre may be the Sun, but I'm not sure.

Artistically, the big figures and the overall arrangement are not very great, having nothing of the overall control of positive and negative space seen on chest designs. Where the artist really shows his hand is in the details, and tracing the minor things that are going on is a great deal of fun. One characteristic of the man (and maybe others of his peers) was the overall appearance of bilateral symmetry while making all the details on the two sides different. Pick any two details or sub-fields on the two whales, and you'll find he treated them differently. He did the same on his box and dish designs. There are all sorts of faces, full-face, profile, or punned, and these are pretty diagnostic of the man. Notice the crazy little upside-down humans coming out of the whales' spouts, and the attenuated little men (?) lying on the whales' backs. He was in a good mood that day and really had himself a ball.

Bill Holm is still not convinced that this great

range of material which I see as the work of one man is a single individual's style. I guess he still sees a number of artists involved: Bella Bella, Haida, Tsimshian and Tlingit. We had a bit of a debate last month when I showed slides at the Northwest Anthropological Conference in Victoria, and we have plans to work the material over during the summer. You will no doubt want to ask his opinion of the house front, and he might well come up with an answer different from mine. For me, though, it was a beautifully rich piece of the jigsaw puzzle, and I am convinced it was the work of that man.

Needless to say, I implore you to send whatever other photographs and slides you have, and any further information that comes to light. I shall pursue the matter with Mrs. McDonald, to see if Swan gave any more data that would be of help.

Your question whether it is "Canadian" or "American" could be interpreted in different ways: what would you call all the stuff that was collected from Tlingit villages but was made by Canadian Haida, or made by a visiting Canadian Haida? Are the Raven Screens "Canadian" if Charles Edenshaw painted them on a trip to Alaska? If I am correct that GE painted it at Port Simpson, then it is 100% Canadian, but so what? That's your problem, but I would appreciate it if you would let me use the picture in solving my problem: the realm of Edenshaw.

Yours sincerely,

Wilson Duff,
Associate Professor.