Show signals cultural renaissance for Coast Salish

By Sheila Farr
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Seattle has missed the boat when it comes to honoring the region's Native American heritage.

The symbols of civic pride placed at the Pike Place Market and Pioneer Square actually trace to the Haida people, of southern Alaska and coastal British Columbia. "The totem poles tell a story — they're beautiful — but they're not indigenous to our area. It has nothing to do with us," says Cecile Hansen, chairwoman of the Duwamish Tribe, whose renowned chief the city of Seattle is named for.

She and other Coast Salish people hope to set the record straight when an unprecedented exhibition opens Friday at Seattle Art Museum. "S'abadeb — The Gifts: Pacific Coast Salish Art and Artists" showcases the living culture of some 70 tribes and groups — including the Duwamish, the Suquamish, the Muckleshoot, the Tulalip, the Puyallup, the Saanich and the Cowichan peoples — whose territory once encompassed the Puget Sound region, together with the sites of Seattle and Vancouver and Victoria, B.C.

The show is unique because it erases the artificial boundary between Native American and First Nations groups in Canada and the U.S. and offers greater understanding of a cultural heritage that has long been overlooked."We all come from different areas, but we are all Native American people. We're family. We're the indigenous people of the territory," Hansen says. She made it clear her support for the project was based on its including everyone.

With that in mind, Seattle Art Museum curator Barbara Brotherton sent letters to Coast Salish tribes and advisory groups, inviting them to participate in planning the show. Some 40 people came together and worked through all the issues that normally would fall to the curator and museum staff: choosing a theme, selecting objects, interpreting the objects and deciding what kind of message they wanted the exhibition to convey.

They chose early examples of weaving as well as rare contemporary mountain-goat-wool garments woven by Susan Pavel and Bill James. Baskets from the 19th century, used for clam gathering, berry picking and food storage, contrast with baskets by contemporary masters who use traditional methods to create new forms.

"We hope to provide a platform for accurately understanding the traditions of Coast Salish people," says Brotherton, who organized the exhibition. "We want to demonstrate that they are unique, important and meaningful in their own way, without comparison to other Northwest groups; that they have these really long, deep traditions."

After decades of suppression, Northwest Native cultures have been steadily rebuilding, she says. "There is a tremendous renaissance in Salish culture occurring right now."

Wisdom of elders

That rebirth is evident not only in the revitalized traditions of carving, weaving and basketry that distinguish the Coast

Salish, but in the work of young artists like Matika Wilbur, of Swinomish/Tulalip heritage. While studying photography at the Rocky Mountain School of Photography in Montana and the Brooks Institute in California, Wilbur began a project close to her heart: documenting tribal elders.

“For the last four years, I’ve been photographing different tribal elders from Coast Salish tribes, pairing the images with quotations from them — just to spread the message that there are living, breathing contemporary Native people that are thriving,” said Wilbur, 24. “I work a lot in Los Angeles, and a lot of people there don’t know anything about sovereignty, about tribal people existing in society.”

Wilbur said she felt utterly displaced when she left the familiarity of “the rez” and encountered an alien set of social norms at school.

“I grew up in a unified society where we all had the same values. I’d talk to my classmates and think, ‘What do you mean you don’t believe in a higher power?’ ... It was necessary for me to re-evaluate everything about my whole culture. Is there anything that culturally defines me?

“When I went back, I asked those questions to the elders. I remember one told me: ‘It doesn’t matter what religion you believe in, just believe in the good, and that’s OK.’ “

In “S’abadeb” (pronounced Sah-BAH-deb), Wilbur’s photographs of tribal elders will hang near early-20th-century photographs by Edward Curtis, who used props and costumes in many of his stereotypical images of Native Americans. The idea of contrasting the work was presented to Wilbur by curator Brotherton, and the young photographer showed her contemporary sensibility by embracing it.

“A lot of people think [Curtis’] work is controversial because they say it was so staged. As a photographer, personally I think everything is staged. The world is as we see it, not as it is ... The way you and I view a bowl of ice cream could be different because of our associations.”

Wilbur thinks the contrast between the different visions will be informative. “You have an inside perspective and an outside perspective, and a time difference. I think the words people read will help them connect.”

Cultural treasures

Objects in “S’abadeb” were loaned from dozens of public and private collections. Some pieces were originally collected by Capt. George Vancouver in 1792 and are returning to the Northwest from abroad. Among the treasures are an 18th-century carved potlatch figure and a food dish in the shape of a human body, borrowed from the British Museum. An early-19th-century model canoe revisits the Northwest from a museum in Scotland. A carved bone figure from the Burke Museum dates to before 1200 A.D.

These artworks anchor the show and reveal what Coast Salish aesthetics were like before European contact. In the

course of the next century, Native lives changed irrevocably. Diseases ravaged the population; people were shifted from their homes to reservations; children were taken from their families to boarding schools and forbidden to speak their own language, wear traditional clothing, or practice their religious beliefs and customs.

“It’s an amazing thing to wrap your head around,” Brotherton said. “More changes took place in that 100 years than in the previous 6,000.”

In the past, museums often displayed Native American artworks with little sensitivity to the private nature of some objects. One obvious difference that sets “S’abadeb” apart is an acknowledgment that not every cultural treasure is meant for public viewing.

Joey Caro of the Penelakut Tribe in British Columbia served as an adviser for “S’abadeb.” He says the discussions about what was appropriate for display sometimes got intense.

“There were long debates and talks about how to proceed on the sacred regalia. They had the sacred rattles — it’s an inherited right for people to use these rattles. They are for sacred work, not for entertainment. Equally as important are the spirit masks. ... These are considered living objects, and you have to be careful how you relate to them.

“For many hundreds and thousands of years [Coast Salish] have been practicing these ways. There’s a path you have to follow. If you stray from that, you lose your prestige, you lose your power. So, there was a huge debate: How can we share it and still protect it?”

Brotherton says that’s why she convened such a large group of Native consultants. “That process assured as much as possible that there wouldn’t be objects or discussions that are of a private nature or aren’t appropriate to display in a museum. Some people may lament and say, ‘Those are great things, those masks and rattles, why can’t they be shown?’ The fact of the matter is that they exist in an arena that is carefully controlled ... and that has to be respected.”

In the exhibition, visitors will encounter seven empty pedestals, with labels and recorded sound to help convey a sense of ideas or objects that don’t belong in an art exhibit. One pedestal references the repatriation of ancestral remains that have been unearthed at building sites or excavations.

“What we’ve done,” Brotherton said, “is create an empty pedestal with the sound of artists carving boxes, like the hundreds of boxes that have been made for reburials. Then the label says, ‘It is time, more than time, for our ancestors to be brought back to a place that’s warm and comforting.’ “

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