

SOMETHING FROM MY PAST THAT I SAW AND RECOGNIZED

Renewed Efforts in Repatriating and Exhibiting Art from Residential and Day Schools





Left: There is Truth Here exhibit at Legacy Art Galleries, 2017. Photo credit: Holly Cecil

Opposite Page: Painting by Charles August

Bradley A. Clements & Andrea N. Walsh

Small moments with small groups in small museums can make big differences.

Viewing the collection of the late artist Robert Aller that had been offered for donation, Caroline Riedel of the University of Victoria Legacy Art Galleries (Legacy) noticed bags full of children's paintings on newsprint paper. The artworks had been created in Indian Residential Schools (IRS) and on reserves where Aller had facilitated non-curricular art-making sessions from the 1950s to the 1970s. When Martin Sager, then the director of the Legacy, recognized the potential significance of the paintings, this became the first of many interventions that led the Legacy, Coast Salish and Nuu-chah-nulth Elders, Survivors, and community members, and University of Victoria (UVic) faculty, staff, and students to collaboratively repatriate them to their creators.

This group, now called the Residential and Indian Day School Art Research Collective (RIDSAR), received a BCMA Award of Merit in 2016 for collaboratively repatriating and exhibiting the Alberni paintings. Our work, however, continues. From close-to-home exhibits (Legacy 2013, 2017; Alberni Valley Museum 2014-2015; Museum of Vancouver 2019) and projects, to contributing to the Canadian History Hall (Canadian Museum of History 2017), to initiating repatriation to Survivors of the MacKay IRS in Manitoba, RIDSAR's story remains one of small groups making big differences in and beyond BC. As RIDSAR expands and renews, we reflect on the group's ongoing work towards repatriation and reconciliation, to date and to come.

Widening a Crack in the Darkness

Those who attended Robert Aller's art-making sessions in the Alberni IRS remember them as moments of expression that was otherwise

stifled by the institution's violent oppression. As a child, Gina Laing (Uchucklesaht) observed several art sessions from a distance before determining that they were safe to attend. Like other Survivors, Laing remembers the sessions that she did attend as rare embers of happiness in her dark years at the school. Aller became outspokenly critical of the system that the children who he volunteered with were forced to live within. He traced "the sadness of the Indian children [...] to the fact that they are away from their homes and parents, boarding in schools 10 months of the year." Aller tried to create a very different environment in his sessions. "All I do is create an atmosphere then go sit in a corner," he explained in one interview, "I never use the words 'do,' 'don't,' 'correct' or 'not-QUITE-right.'"

Children's belongings were confiscated in IRS. By keeping paintings that were made in his sessions, Aller preserved belongings that might otherwise have been destroyed. When his collection was donated to UVic,

the importance of returning the paintings to their creators was recognized. Thankfully, the paintings had the artists' names and ages penciled on them so – with the help of Survivors, Elders, community leaders and members; UVic faculty, staff and students; Aller's documentation, and some serendipity – artists were identified and invited to a Truth and Reconciliation Commission-funded feast in Port Alberni. There, in March 2013, legal ownership of the paintings was returned to Survivors or their families in a public repatriation ceremony. At the opening of *We Are All One* (Alberni Valley Museum 2014-2015), Jeffrey Cook (Huu-ay-aht) expressed the importance of reclaiming his childhood painting: "when we left [IRS], we just left with what we had. We never took any of our personal belongings home because they generally threw them away. [...] That's why I become pretty emotional when I see and talk about it, because that is something from my past that I saw and recognized." Considering the incredible importance of these paintings to those who had made them, Walsh was amazed when many who had reclaimed their paintings requested a partnership

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— Gina Laing, IRS Survivor

to have them cared for at UVic and exhibited publicly. "I want to tell my story," Laing explained, "I want people to hear right from the victim and find out what happened. To understand what I went through, and feel it too."

With Survivor participation, several exhibits have resulted – *To Reunite, To Honour, To Witness* (Legacy 2013), *We Are All One* (Alberni Valley Museum 2014-2015), and *There Is Truth Here* (Legacy 2017) – along with presentations in classrooms, gatherings, and community venues throughout BC, at national and international conferences, and research projects. The moment of light that Aller and a room of children sparked with paintbrushes and newsprint has been pried wider as those children, now adults and Elders, have re-claimed and re-presented their paintings and stories.

Forward Momentum

Since RIDSAR's research, repatriation, and curatorial work was recognized with a BCMA Award of Merit in 2016, this work has continued and expanded.

Although their work is rooted in local communities and their museums, Alberni Survivors also accepted an opportunity to share their testimony at a national level. When curators at the Canadian Museum of History began to consider how to represent the genocidal history and unfolding aftermath of Canada's IRS system in the Canadian History Hall, the federal museum's largest signature exhibit, they turned



to the paintings and stories of Alberni Survivors. While visiting the national capital for the closing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015, eight Survivors and intergenerational Survivors who had reclaimed paintings recorded interviews at the museum. They spoke about their difficult childhood memories of IRS, their struggles since then, their reclamation of their paintings, and the healing that they have begun. Since the Hall opened in 2017, these



interviews have been displayed between one of Christi Belcourt's stained glass windows representing IRS history and the headdress that Phil Fontaine (then-national chief of the Assembly of First Nations) wore during the Prime Minister's 2008 apology for the IRS system. Curators and Survivors are now collaborating to turn their interviews into educational materials that may be used across the country.

Survivors' stories and paintings are also being shared in BC museums. When BCMA delegates gathered in Victoria for their 2017 conference, many visited There Is Truth Here at the Legacy, an exhibit of children's artworks from the St. Michael's, Alberni, and MacKay IRS and the Inkameep Day School. Conversations between Walsh, the curator, and museum professionals who had been moved by the exhibit matched with Survivors' interests to continue to create collaborative

Alberni IRS Survivors with their paintings at the repatriation feast.

Photo credit: Andrea Walsh

1. Gina Laing taking her painting from Mary Jo Hughes, director of the Legacy Gallery

Photo credit: Andrea Walsh

2. Sockeye Salmon, Mark Atleo, Ahousaht First Nation, n.d., Tempera on paper, from private collection of Mark Atleo

3. Untitled, Amelia Wavey Saunders, York Factory First Nation, Cree, n.d., Tempera on paper, from the Robert Aller Collection

4. Tommy Cheekie, Sayisi Dene First Nation, Dene, n.d., Tempera on paper, from the Robert Aller Collection

5. Patricia, Age 5, n.d., Tempera on paper, from the Robert Aller Collection

6. James Wastasecoot, Peguis First Nation, Cree, n.d., Tempera on paper, from the Robert Aller Collection

7. Untitled, Phyllis Tate (1944-1975), Ditidaht First Nation, n.d., Tempera on paper, from private collection of Shelley Chester



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exhibitions. These conversations culminated in three upcoming RIDSAR-directed exhibitions of residential and day school art: the Museum of Vancouver will host *There is Truth Here*, expanded with objects from their own collections (April-December 2019), and the Okanagan Heritage Museum and the Kelowna Art Gallery will feature a new, joint exhibition of Inkameep Day School artwork titled *Our Lives Through Our Eyes: Nk'Mip Children's Art* (January-April 2019).

In the summer of 2018, Alberni Survivors in partnership with the Alberni Valley Museum were awarded a provincial grant to write and publish a book of their

art and stories. The project aims to make the book available in schools throughout BC, as well as for sale through the Alberni Valley Museum to raise funds for future Survivor-led initiatives.

As Alberni Survivors continue to engage the public, another repatriation is just beginning. Aller also facilitated art-making sessions and kept paintings from the MacKay Indian Residential School, near his hometown of Dauphin, Manitoba. In an interview given to the *Ha-shilth-sa* newspaper, Walsh mentioned this other collection that needed to be repatriated.

Walter Wastasecoot (York Landing Cree), a MacKay Survivor,

discovered the interview online and phoned UVic. His subsequent conversations with Walsh sparked an initiative that now involves Survivors from the MacKay IRS and their family members. Lorilee Westasecoot (Peguis), who was then studying at UVic, and her aunt, Dr. Jennie Wastasecoot (Chemawawin/York Landing Cree) of the University College of the North in Thompson, Manitoba, are now collaborating with Cree and Dene Survivors in northern Manitoba to repatriate their fifty-nine paintings to them.

The link between the repatriation of the Alberni and the MacKay IRS paintings is a strong one. Mark Atleo, who reclaimed his childhood



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ANDREA N. WALSH, PHD

Andrea Walsh is a visual anthropologist at the University of Victoria. She has led Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada funded research and exhibition projects focused on Indian Residential and Day School art collections across Canada since 2000. Walsh was inducted as a Truth and Reconciliation Commission Honorary Witness in 2012.

BRADLEY A. CLEMENTS, MA

Bradley Clements is a Canadian of English and Scottish decent, and a Curatorial Intern at the Legacy Art Galleries on Lekwungen territory. As a RIDSAR research affiliate, Clements has studied curations of residential school history in partnership with Survivors at the Alberni Valley Museum and the Canadian Museum of History.

painting, and Wally Samuel Sr., who advised in the Alberni repatriation – both Ahousaht Survivors of the Alberni IRS – travelled to Thompson with Walsh and Wastasecoot in August of 2018 to share their experiences with MacKay Survivors considering how to re-claim and re-form relationships with their paintings. The Alberni Survivors are also collaborating through RIDSAR with Laurentian University to repatriate paintings – created by Ojibway and Algonquin children who worked with Aller in the late 1960s and early 1970s – to communities around Manitoulin Island and Golden Lake, Ontario.

In 2017 the Legacy closed for a day to host almost forty Survivors of multiple residential and day schools and their families for a gathering in the exhibit space of There Is Truth Here. Those gathered shared experiences with each other: of making, reclaiming, and exhibiting their art. Seventeen years of work through small museums and with Indigenous communities was sutured to personal stories of healing and resilience. At the end of the day it was clear that the success of RIDSAR's work with collections and small museums lay in the ways that we have worked to strengthen our relationships based on respectful care for each other.