

# THE HAIDA AND THE HAIDA GWAI MUSEUM AT KAY LLNAGAAY

**Suuda Ganunsid, ad gina waadluuxan gan yahguudang  
Xaayda Gwaay, yaay iiji. To inspire understanding and respect  
for all that Haida Gwaii is.**

**Nika Collison and Scott Marsden**

## **In the Beginning**

We come from supernatural beings that came out of the ocean. Our world began thousands and thousands of years ago. Haida oral histories tell of these beginnings and the many events that followed, including the affairs of the notorious Raven. Welcome to our world.

*“This island was nothing but saltwater, they say. Raven flew around. He looked for a place to land in the water. By and by, he flew to a reef lying at the south end of the island, to sit on it. But the great mass of supernatural beings had their necks resting on one another on it, like sea cucumbers...It was both light and dark, they say.” - John Sky of the K'uuna K'iigawaay, Skidegate Haida Myths & Histories.*

Nika Collison, Associate Curator for the Haida Gwaii Museum examines the concept of art from a Haida worldview, *"In our language, as in many indigenous languages, there is no word for art because it cannot be separated from our way of life. It should be noted, however, that our language does have words to describe the act of creating art, such as gyaa k'id (to carve), kiiGuuxaay (to weave) and k'uudlaan (to paint). There are also words to describe aesthetic achievement in these mediums, such as hlgadxuunang (to carve deeply, i.e. on a pole) and maats'ilang (the carving of fine lines on a bracelet). We even have words to describe the people who create these works, such as st'iinl (those with clever hands, or who are good at whatever they do)".* N. Collison, (2006) pg. 63, Raven Travelling-Two Centuries of Haida Art, Vancouver Art Gallery, Douglas & McIntyre

Retelling Haida oral histories and addressing of other contemporary social issues concerning the politics of land, the environment and interdependent ecologies and Indigenous thought-worlds and politics of cultural heritage and memory is a critical part of the mandate of the Haida Gwaii Museum. Through the collections the Museum acquires, preserves and presents objects, archeological artifacts, art works and settler material culture all connected to the human and natural history of Haida Gwaii.

## **Saahlinda Naay ~ Saving Things House: The Haida Gwaii Museum**

Opened in 1976 and located in Skidegate, Haida Gwaii, the Haida Gwaii Museum is a community-driven institution that's become part of the Haida way of life. In taking direction from and working closely with the Haida Nation, the Museum has come to play a central role in the revitalization of Haida art and culture: supporting local artists; amalgamating an extensive collection of

Haida art, artifacts and archival materials; partnering with museums around the world; providing a centre for education; and serving as an economic hub for all of Haida Gwaii. We are also the only cultural facility on Haida Gwaii, and only one of 12 museums in BC, that has been designated as a Category "A" institution.

The Museum regularly consults and works with the community on all aspects of our operations, from creating exhibitions, programs and publications to core projects such as the repatriation of Haida ancestral human remains and cultural treasures, reconstructing genealogies, documenting ancient and contemporary Haida songs, promoting and preserving the Haida language and conducting oral history interviews with community knowledge holders.

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### **We care for and safekeep Haida objects and other knowledge held in our Museum on behalf of the Haida Nation.**

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Another key development regarding our Museum's relationship with the Haida community has been in the area of internships, which have proven to be very successful in providing excellent work experience and on-the-job training in the fields of arts and culture. In turn, these interns enrich our Museum with cultural knowledge and ways of looking at the world, as well as knowledge gained through their work in community-based research with Elders, artists and other community knowledge holders.

An extensive amount of work has been in partnership with other museums and the greater community, such as repatriation. Together with the Haida Nation, we've been one of the most successful in repatriating ancestral remains and cultural treasures. Since the mid-1990s, we've brought home over 500 ancestral remains from museums and private homes across North America, and in 2010,

repatriated our first ancestor from the UK. In doing this work together, both our Museum and the Haida Nation have been able to build strong relationships with organizations that continue to hold many of our most important treasures.

Over time, this work has led to a level of trust, understanding and companionship between the Haida and museum community. This trust has allowed the Haida and museums to move forward together, leading to Haida involvement in the development of exhibitions and interpretations, partnerships, sharing of information and resources, increased success in repatriation and the recognition of Haida scholars as equal to western scholars.

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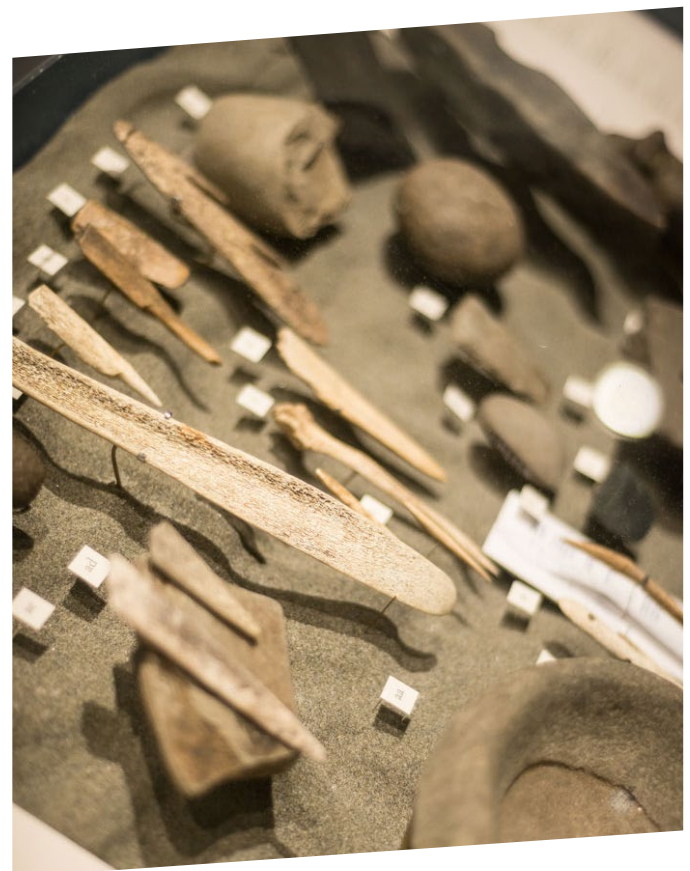
**These achievements have helped influence and support other First Nations and museums in working together, and create a complex, hybrid culture of First Nations and museums that is centered around mutual respect, understanding and cooperation, from which all of society can benefit.**

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The Museum's principal research, collecting and presentation focuses on the recovery of art, objects, knowledge and documentation pertinent to Haida history and contemporary culture. Secondary priorities are collecting and research related to the natural sciences of Haida Gwaii and the history of Canadian settlement. As with our Haida community, the Museum conducts work in consultation with the greater Islands' community.

**Top Right:** *Haida Halibut Hook, c. 1860-80, on display at the Haida Gwaii Museum.*  
Photo Credit: Jason Shafto

**Bottom Right:** *Archaeological Collection, Haida Gwaii Museum.*  
Photo Credit: Jason Shafto



The work of the Museum includes:

- Support the surrounding community of researchers and educators who preserve and practice our cultural knowledge.
- Reconstruct genealogies, record ancient and contemporary Haida songs, and digitize oral histories.
- Uphold Haida art and culture, invigorating the continuity of inspirational artistry that has borne our community through the centuries.
- Protect the memory of Haida Gwaii so the Islands' Community can understand where it comes from and where it is going.
- Promote Haida Gwaii's compelling contributions to the coast, Canada, and the world by partnering with museums worldwide.

The Museum plays an important role in making arts and heritage more accessible and in raising public awareness of the importance of the heritage and history of Haida Gwaii and the unique way of knowing from the Haida perspective. We house a unique and comprehensive collection of historical

and post-contact archival materials, made accessible to the public within a setting that evokes the community identities of both Haida and settler communities on Haida Gwaii. Our collection includes ancestral and contemporary Haida works, both utilitarian and ceremonial, settler pieces, audio recordings of Haida songs, histories and stories as given by Haida elders in both Haida and English languages, and a plethora of photographs.

In our Museum, Haida treasures serve many important uses in addition to the usual museum functions of exhibit, research, educational programs and conservation. For example, in our collection policy some pieces are used within Haida ceremonies, feasts, and other significant events.

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**We work hard to make these pieces available for special uses while maintaining our responsibility to care for these objects and maintain their security.**

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*Above: Haida Gwaii Museum's permanent exhibition.  
Photo Credit: Jason Shafto*

## Everything Depends on Everything Else

The underlying theme running through all permanent exhibitions is the complex link between the land, the sea, human beings and the Supernatural Beings that give Haida Gwaii its incomparable natural and cultural character. Every object, art work and archeological piece offers a narrative focusing on its aesthetics, construct, cultural use, and history as derived from our focus on community-based research. Where possible, lineage and/or personal connections for each piece are revealed.

Exhibit messages encourage a holistic learning experience by cross-cutting the traditional museum boundaries that separate our experiences of the natural and cultural worlds. Scientific information, natural specimens, Haida knowledge, oral history and art are brought together in the same exhibit context.

Other aspects of the permanent exhibitions include the following:

- Working with Elders to promote the learning and preservation of X̱aayda Kil, the Haida language
- Permanent exhibitions featuring a world-class collection of Haida art spanning the late 1700s through to today, including the works of Bill Reid, Robert Davidson, James Hart, Isabel Rorick, Evelyn Vanderhoop, Charles Edenshaw, and many other talented artists
- Public programs focusing on Haida art and culture, and contemporary issues pertinent to Haida Gwaii
- An extensive photographic archive of Haida Gwaii's people and places
- An excellent representation of the flora and fauna of Haida Gwaii
- A Visual Arts Gallery featuring exhibitions by local, national and international artists.

The concept of reconciliation between First Nations and Museums should be of vital concern to all of us in the museum community. The collective voice of the Haida as a viable, significant contributor — not only to the history and future of First Nations communities, but also as this relates to the history and future of Canada — is recognized, celebrated and presented at the Haida Gwaii Museum. We humbly propose that this relationship could be explored as an example for other museums and First Nation communities in BC.

***Haa'wa /Thank you.***

***Jisgang, Nika Collison, belongs to the Ts'aahl eagle clan of the Haida Nation. She is Associate Curator of the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay – specializing in Haida art, history and culture. Over the past 15 years Collison has had the honour of working with her community in the creation of several major exhibitions and publications. She serves as a senior negotiator for the Haida Repatriation Committee and works to build partnerships with museums world-wide. Collison is a traditional singer and student of all things Haida.***

***Scott Marsden is currently the Executive Director at The Haida Gwaii Museum. Previously, Scott was Curator at The Reach Gallery Museum Abbotsford from 2008 – 2013 and was Director/Curator at the Yukon Arts Centre Public Art Gallery from 2002 – 2007. Marsden recently earned his Doctorate of Philosophy, Education Studies specialty in Art Education at the University of Victoria, has a Master of Fine Arts degree from York University and is an Associate of the Ontario College of Art and Design University in Toronto.***