

A Tale of Two Totem Poles – the challenge and complexity of Native art acquisition and stewardship

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ABSTRACT:

With interest in reflecting and incorporating Native American culture on its campus, Everett Community College (EvCC) commissioned a totem pole that was never completed. Poor communication led to major errors in decision-making and a subsequent totem pole, which was intended as a restorative measure, came with its own challenges. Exploration of the history of these two totem poles at EvCC is an opportunity to examine the complexity involved with these works and the intentional processes that must be developed to be effective stewards of art work that comes with inherent cultural implications.

I. Acquisition

As the president of Everett Community College (EVCC) in the early 1970s, Jeannette Poore was interested in acquiring a totem pole for the campus. At that time, the College had very little public art and no works by Native American artists although it occupied land that historically was part of the Snohomish tribal village of Hibulb. The Hibulb village was abandoned after the Point Elliott Treaty of 1855 when its inhabitants were removed to the Tulalip Reservation in nearby Marysville. EvCC did have strong programs in both anthropology and art with connections to Native American carvers in the region. Through these academic programs, President Poore became acquainted with Abner Johnson, a member of the Tlingit Raven Clan, who had learned carving as a boy growing up in Angoon, Alaska. President Poore approached Johnson about the possibility of commissioning a totem pole, with the idea that he would carve the work on campus so that students and employees could have the unique opportunity to learn directly from him and to observe the work as it progressed. Following many discussions with the President, Johnson developed a maquette or small scale model of his concept for a totem pole (Figure 1). As envisioned, the pole was to be carved in the traditional Tlingit style and colors and would incorporate two figures. The body of the totem pole would be a Killer Whale with a Thunderbird on the back, in front of the dorsal fin. The Thunderbird was included to denote the unity with other First Nations. According to Lowell Hanson, an EvCC art faculty member, “Extensive searching located the appropriate old growth cedar for the project. Spiritual leaders from the Tulalip Nation were involved in the selection, cutting and transportation of the log to campus.”² Interest in the pole grew and both President Poore and College employees donated funds to help make the project a reality.

When Johnson began his work in 1973, the first floor of the College Rainier Hall classroom building was not yet enclosed. This provided a wonderfully large and very public space in which Johnson was able to work (Figure 2). Employees, students and community members were able to observe and talk with

¹ Jeanne Leader was the Dean of Arts & Learning Resources at Everett Community College from 1998 to 2019. She was one of the founding members of the Art Collections Committee and served as chair until her retirement.

² Hanson, Lowell. Letter to Charlie Earl. 11 Nov. 2002. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

Johnson, to learn directly about his craft and culture. Work on the totem pole progressed well and the form of the whale slowly emerged from the cedar log.

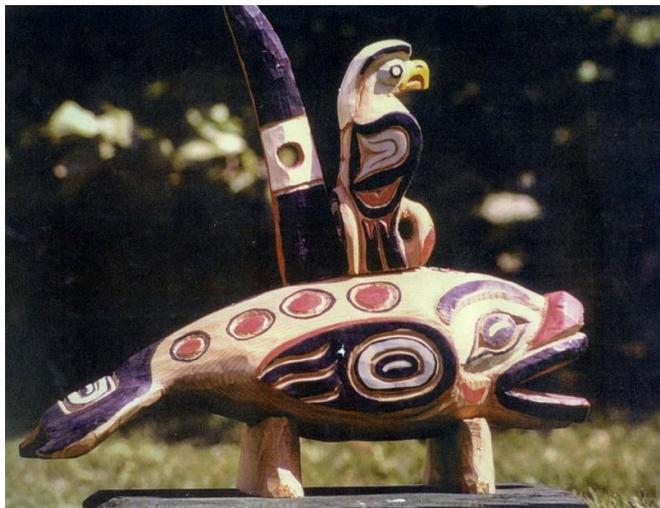


Figure 1 Design maquette carved by Johnson



Figure 2 Johnson at work early in the process

In 1975, due to declining health, he could no longer continue but by this point he had established its overall shape including a distinct mouth, fluke, and an indication of where he would place the whale's eyes and fins. As time passed, Johnson was not able to return to the work and the College received funding to enclose and complete the first floor of Rainier for classroom space. As a result, the pole was moved into storage for safekeeping (Figure 3). Although there were many discussions between art and anthropology faculty about how the carving might be continued, no additional work was ever done.

The College eventually moved the unfinished pole to a play area that was part of the campus Early Learning Center (ELC). The rationale behind location of the pole at the ELC is unknown but the whale form quickly became a beloved part of the preschool environment and children enjoyed climbing on and around it. A photograph of Abner Johnson, taken in October of 1994, shows him standing in front of his totem pole at the ELC location (Figure 4). Following a long illness, the noted carver passed away on September 29, 1997.³

³ Abner Johnson did complete a story pole for Seattle Pacific University, which was rededicated on that campus in the fall of 2016.



Figure 3 Totem pole in maintenance storage



Figure 4 Abner Johnson at the ELC

II: Regulations and responsibility

In the fall of 2002, a licensing evaluator made an onsite visit to the EvCC Early Learning Center and the College became aware that it would need to make repairs to the whale so that the play area would be in compliance with safety regulations. On October 2nd, the ELC Director submitted a facilities work request citing that the “wood whale has gaps and protrusions” that must be “filled or removed.”⁴ Without any communication or planning with the Director, the totem pole was suddenly gone. On October 29th, a College employee contacted the College president when she saw what appeared to be the mid-section of the pole by the maintenance building. Vice President of Administration, Anne Pflug, contacted the Maintenance Department and reported in a memorandum of November 12th that “the nose and tail sections are gone,” leaving the main part of the body which was about six feet long and 3 ½ feet in diameter.⁵ The word quickly spread, both on campus and throughout the community, about the loss of the whale.

Art instructor Lowell Hanson met with EvCC President Charlie Earl and provided important background about the history of the carving in an effort to counteract the misinformation that was circulating around the campus. Earl sought advice from tribal leaders at the nearby Tulalip Tribe and began to formulate ideas and options about how to approach reparation and specifically what to do with the remaining pieces of the whale. College administration proceeded very slowly in its decision-making, ostensibly so that no other institutional errors would result. President Earl engaged the United Native American Council (UNAC) student organization and its faculty advisors Earl Martin and Wendy Houston to advise him “of a culturally appropriate response” because this organization was the campus group

⁴ Davidson, Kelly. Facilities work request to Dale Hensley. 29 Oct. 2002. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

⁵ Pflug, Anne. Memorandum to Dale Hensley and Mark Stewart. 12 Nov. 2002. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

most representative of Native Americans and perhaps would have the best perspective and network to consult with tribal leaders.⁶

Nearly a year passed until October of 2003 when Lisa Johnson-Blackhorse, the daughter of Abner Johnson, wrote to President Earl to express her concerns. She raised questions about ownership and who should make decisions about the Killer Whale. In a letter of response, Earl said that the “actions that led up to this situation are unfortunate and regrettable.” He said that after consulting with community leaders in the area and Alaska, the College

...“has chosen to follow the cultural protocols normally reserved for clan commissioned poles. These traditional practices influence and guide our actions in honor of the Tlingit culture. To date, the plans under consideration include a ceremony to put to rest the former pole and commissioning a new pole to replace it with a pole inspired by your father’s original design.”⁷

Johnson-Blackhorse continued to pursue the question of ownership, requesting records from the College and eventually asked that the whale be returned to the family.

Over a period of two full years, President Earl continued to gather information and feedback from both inside and outside the College, communicating regularly with Johnson’s relatives and seeking advice from Tlingit tribal leaders. In a March 10, 2004 letter to UNAC President Cassandra Main, Earl described the disparity of opinions about how to move forward and decided to delay a planned burning ceremony in an “attempt to address the unresolved issues with all the interested parties.”⁸ In addition to the continued feedback and involvement from UNAC, specific guidance came from Mark Jacobs, Tlingit Killer Whale Clan Leader, and his son Harold Jacobs, Cultural Resource Specialist from the Central Council Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. Harold Jacobs spoke to the controversy over the ownership and disposition of the pole in a memo of May 13, 2004 when he said:

At no time do children have a say so over the disposition of something their father made. At no time do the children dictate to the clan (owner) how an object is to be handled, that was either their fathers or even made by their father.... This pole was made for ECC and remains so. I have never known a family to claim an object made by the artist, especially in regards to Tlingit culture. It is the “owner” who has the final say so, that is the clan, but in this case the College. It is their property.... ECC, finish the work you have started, and we will continue to work with you.⁹

⁶ Earl, Charles N. Letter to Louise Runnings. 18 Feb. 2004. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

⁷ Earl, Charles N. Letter to Lisa Johnson-Blackhorse. 31 Oct. 2003. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

⁸ Earl, Charles N. Letter to Cassandra Main. 20 Mar. 2004. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

⁹ Jacobs, Harold. Memorandum to Everett Community College. 13 May 2004. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

It was not until March 20, 2005 that EvCC held a private burning ceremony, coordinated by UNAC and the Tulalip Tribes. The College planted a cedar tree at the site in remembrance of all that had transpired.

III: The new commission

As promised and in conjunction with the delayed disposition of the original totem pole, the College continued on its planned course to make reparations. President Earl again looked to UNAC and its faculty advisers to lead the commissioning of a new work that would be inspired by Abner Johnson's original design. Sweetwater Nannauck, a local Tlingit community member, assisted the club by soliciting interest from local carvers and providing input based on her own observations and those of other Tlingit community members. Seven carvers were approached and two finalists were asked to submit a written statement describing their interest in the project. According to a report from UNAC faculty advisor Earl Martin, the criteria for selection included:

- Clan and tribal affiliation, preferably Tlingit
- Artistic talent and ability
- Experience in totem pole carving
- Approval by the family/clan
- Price per foot
- Availability
- Willingness to work with the College to make it an educational and informative project
- Knowledge of proper protocol and cultural values
- Cultural integrity and reputation within the Tlingit community
- Local Washington artist¹⁰

In May of 2004, UNAC recommended to President Earl that artist Odin Lonning receive the commission. Originally from Juneau Alaska and of the Eagle Shark Clan through his Tlingit mother, Lonning shared the surname of his Norwegian father. He became interested in Tlingit art after seeing traditional dance performances as a young child and was influenced early on by cultural centers in Ketchikan, Haines and Sitka. He had earned commissions for art work beginning at the age of twenty. Seeking a deeper understanding of the culture essential to his artwork, Lonning started dancing and learning traditional songs. He first danced with the Juneau Tlingit Dancers in 1992 and later with Seattle-based Ku-Tee-Ya Dancers. A resident of Vashon Island, his work in both traditional and contemporary media included carved wooden boxes, bowls, wall panels, masks, paddles and totems, paintings, drums and ceramics, etched glass and copper, applique and leather dance regalia and graphic design for jewelry, fabric and leather furniture. He had recently completed a six foot Bear Mother story pole for clients in Chicago. In his statement, he reflected that he felt he would be "upholding Abner Johnson's legacy as a teacher."¹¹

¹⁰ *Possible Carvers for the Killer Whale Totem Pole*. May 2004. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

¹¹ Lonning, Odin. Email to Earl Martin. 31 Oct. 2003. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

The College entered into a standard Washington State personal services contract with Lonning and he received payment in the phases customary to public art projects: upon submission of detailed drawings, after evidence of 25% completion, 50% completion, 75% completion, and upon final installation. After approximately eighteen months of work, the new pole was ready to be installed at EvCC. UNAC collaborated with President Earl to plan a small campus event that would be followed by a larger community dedication in conjunction with the 9th Annual Coastal Gathering on October 1, 2005. The program of activities over two days included remarks by Odin Lonning and performances by Tlingit dancers who had traveled to Everett from Alaska for this special event. A tribute to Abner Johnson and the original pole was a central part of the campus unveiling (Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 5 Totem pole upon installation in 2005



Figure 6 Community dedication event

Throughout this period of introspection and planning, EvCC employees became increasingly concerned that works of art, including the totem poles, be managed consistently and carefully. The arts program faculty and administration approached President Earl with the suggestion to form an Art Collections Committee that included students, faculty, staff and administrators. The new committee had the express purpose of continued development of the art collection as well as stewardship of existing pieces. It was fortunate that such a committee was established as the Killer Whale/Thunderbird pole needed close oversight almost immediately.

IV: Rapid deterioration

By the spring of 2006 and less than a year after the installation of the new totem pole, the Art Collections Committee received comments from employees and students about its condition. Reports included concerns that the paint was peeling and the figures seemed to be loose (figure 7). Committee Chair Jeanne Leader contacted Odin Lonning and he acknowledged problems with the sealant and use of wood fill. Concerned about the rapid change to the totem pole, the Committee sought assistance from Landrieu Conservation to review the piece and make recommendations about its condition. The conservator noted that the dorsal fin and the eagle “seem to be poorly attached” and that the wood putty used at the joints between the whale’s back, the fin and the eagle “is cracked and severely deteriorating.” There were indications that the wood “might not have been properly cured by weather exposure before it was carved.” Wood putty appeared to have been used in many places, including the

fill cracks and to create relief in some areas. The conservator recommended that the totem pole be moved to an interior location.¹²



Figure 7 Totem pole spring 2006



Figure 8 Totem pole spring 2007

By the fall of 2006, deterioration of the pole was increasingly visible even to the casual observer. Many discussions and meetings with Odin Lonning followed and he shared with the College that dry rot was evident in the wood at the time of the carving. He had tried many techniques to deal with the condition of the wood, including the use of wood putty to build up some surfaces. Water was penetrating beneath this fill, causing rapid deterioration. By the spring of 2007, extensive peeling was evident and the white wood fill on the tail was increasingly apparent (Figure 8). During that summer, pieces of the Thunderbird detached themselves (Figure 9). Lonning continually communicated with EvCC and the Art Collections Committee and came to campus numerous times for meetings and work on the pole. In the fall of 2007, he successfully re-attached the fallen pieces to the Thunderbird, removed peeling paint, cleaned the entire pole, and re-stained the tail to a solid black.

By June of 2009 and despite these efforts at stabilization, new problems continued to appear. Wood pieces on the tail broke off, showing even more wood fill beneath the surface (Figures 10 and 11). The College again sought advice from Odin Lonning as well as art conservation experts. The focus continued to be on prevention of further deterioration. Because there was such significant loss and absence of solid wood surface, restoration was not an acceptable option. Such an approach would have involved removing all of the paint and putty and either building up the surface or carving into the wood to create new relief. The extent of work required would interfere with the original design and carving. The Art Collections Committee, in consultation with now College President David Beyer, determined that to be too intrusive to the original work.

The location of the Killer Whale/Thunderbird pole outside of the Parks Student Union Building also was problematic due to the construction of new entry steps and ADA ramps for that building which was scheduled for the summer of 2011. The Art Collections committee recommended to move the totem

¹² Landrieu, Corine. Condition report to Jeanne Leader. 23 Ap. 2006. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

pole to storage and to use that opportunity for another evaluation of it by a conservator. The conservator noted the extensive wood loss around the eyes, in the middle of the back, along the lower left side and on the tail. "There are horizontal cracks throughout, and numerous area of deteriorating fill particularly on the back of the whale ... there are numerous wood losses which have been filled extensively."¹³ The report also described the detachment of material and appearance of rot behind some of the fill. A proposal for repairs was estimated at \$5,500, approximately half the cost of the original commission.



Figure 9 Detachment of ears



Figure 10 Totem pole condition as of June 2009



Figure 11 Detail of wood loss

V. Searching for Solutions

The following November, the Art Collections Committee recommended to President Beyer that the pole be re-sited to the campus arboretum. After considering potential locations and in consideration of the pole's condition, the Committee believed that the arboretum would provide a natural setting in which it could continue to deteriorate without further interference. The Committee considered the words of George Bennett Sr., a Tlingit tribal member who had commented during the controversy about decisions related to the Abner Johnson whale totem pole. In an email, Bennett said: "Totem poles are treated as if they were alive, we talk to them, we respect them, and when they begin to age and lose their fine colors and details because of the elements, our belief is never to interfere with mother nature's process."¹⁴

As a result, the pole was moved to a new location near Baker Hall. The Art Collections committee also established that this same principle of stewardship would apply to the Universal Totem Pole that is located at the east entry to the Olympus Hall administration building. This totem pole, which was installed in 1992 has been cleaned and stabilized, with minimal impact to the original carving. In keeping with this philosophy that it should age in place naturally, it has never been re-painted.

¹³ Landrieu, Corine. Memorandum to Jeanne Leader. 30 May 2011. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

¹⁴ Bennett, George J. Email to Harold Jacobs. 4 May 2004. Files of the EvCC Art Collections Committee.

In the spring of 2016, students in the 1st Nations Club (formerly UNAC) approached the Art Collections Committee with concerns that in its location by Baker Hall, the Killer Whale/Thunderbird totem pole appeared to have been discarded. The students expressed that in the current site and set back from the major walkways across campus, no one was likely to see the pole. In conjunction with the club adviser and interested employees, the Art Collections Committee re-visited the history and decisions regarding the location. The club proposed establishment of an Indigenous Plants Garden with the potential to place the Killer Whale/Thunderbird pole within an environment that would both raise its visibility on campus and still provide a natural setting.

When the Art Collections Committee chair and the 1st Nations Club Adviser took the proposal to the EvCC Board of Trustees in the fall of 2016, it received enthusiastic support as an approach that would both honor the work of Odin Lonning and further develop the College's attention to Native American culture and experience. A site for the garden was chosen near the east entrance to the Parks Student Union and students did the first plantings in October of 2016, creating a new space in keeping with their stated goals of "remembrance, learning and inclusivity."

In December of 2016, the Killer Whale/Thunderbird totem pole was carefully placed within the Indigenous Plants Garden where it was ringed by three old growth cedars (Figure 12). It remained important to evaluate the totem pole on a regular basis; the Thunderbird became completely detached by the summer of 2019 and was re-seated by a conservator the following fall. The 1st Nations Club has committed to additional plantings as well as new benches to reflect the natural environment. Planned enhancements to signage will aid students and visitors in understanding the history of the pole and the considerations that have influenced its management.



Figure 12 Totem pole and adjacent Indigenous Plants Garden

VI: Campus Learning and Legacy

In conclusion, it is important to note some of the developments at EvCC and within the Native community over the last decade. In August of 2011, the Tulalip Tribes opened the Hibulb Cultural Center and Natural History Preserve. This interactive space features both permanent and temporary

exhibits, two classrooms, a longhouse, a research library, certified collections and an archaeological repository. This Center has helped to increase the visibility of the Tulalip Tribes within the community and provides invaluable resources about local Native history and culture. The College has expanded its Diversity and Equity Department significantly including an executive level administrator and the institutional mission statement, strategic plan and core themes reflect a commitment to diversity. As of 2019, it has become standard practice to open workshops and conferences with an acknowledgement that the College is located on land that once was part of the Hibulb Village. It also has been noted by the EvCC Art Collections Committee that although the College art collection includes modern metal works of art by artist James Madison, who is a Tulalip Tribes member, EvCC has never commissioned a traditional carving from the Native American community that once made its home on the site of the College. EvCC is in the planning stages for two future buildings that provide significant opportunities to incorporate information and art work related to the Hibulb Culture.

For Everett Community College, stewardship of these totem poles has been a challenging journey. There were no clear choices or elegant solutions but rather vastly conflicting opinions and interpretations of what was culturally meaningful, sensitive and appropriate. While human error has made an impact, good intentions were equally evident. The lessons learned are many fold and emphasize the critical nature of planning and communication as well as the special considerations that must be made when managing works of art that have inherent cultural considerations. On a regular basis, students, employees and visitors to EvCC continue to raise questions about the care and condition of the totem poles. These are prominent works of art that add to the campus environment and although signage can provide some information, conveying the history and decisions regarding their care is complex. Developing this case study, with the support of College administration, has been one way to ensure that the story would not be forgotten and could continue to be explored.