The case of Chief G'psgolox's totem pole

"Rescuing", keeping, and returning

by **Anders Björklund**

"Rescuing"

In the year 1872, Chief G'psgolox from the Kitlope Eagle clan of the Xenaaksiala/Haisla people (in Kitlope Valley, British Columbia, Canada) decided to have a totem pole carved and erected. In 1928 the pole was cut down on behalf of a Swedish consul to be shipped to Stockholm the following year.[1]

This was far from a single incident, as is well known. It has been estimated that some 125,000 objects from indigenous people in British Columbia were captured in a frantic collecting of "Indian curiosities". The operations were run by dealers of all kinds and orchestrated by both private collectors and museums around the turn of the 20th century.[2] Totem poles represented "big game" and were acquired by the great museums of Canada and the US. A few were even brought to important European museums like the British Museum in London and Museum für Volkskunde in Berlin. Here, the poles were transformed into impressive pagan icons that evoked both surprise and fear (which was exploited in European popular culture at the time).

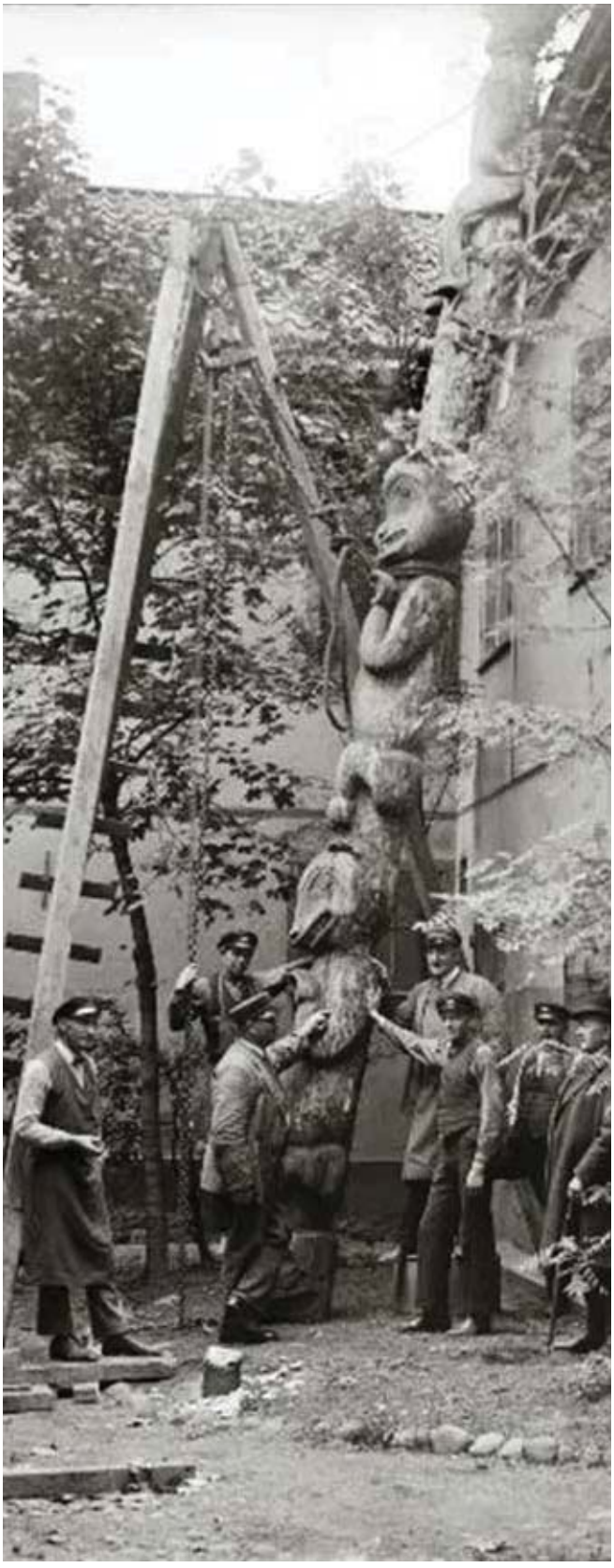
PHOTO: IVER FOUGNER/MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Chief G'psgolox's totem pole standing in Kitlope Valley. Indian agent Iver Fougner came across the pole, took a snapshot, and filed a report to The Department of Indian Affairs in 1927 together with the photo.

The acquisition of Chief G'psgolox's pole placed the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm on par with these far more famous institutions, and the museum hereby became an institution of national pride, as emphasized by the high-ranking dignitaries who visited the totem pole inauguration ceremony in 1929.

Recently, new research has broadened the understanding of what was actually going on when the pole left the "Indian reserve" in 1928. The Swedish General Consul in Montréal had in contacts with the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences discussed the possibilities of acquiring a totem pole for Sweden. A query was sent to the Swedish Consul in British Columbia at the time, Olof Hanson (1882–1952), asking if it would be possible to find a suitable totem pole. Hanson had become a successful businessman in Canada after his emigration from the small mountain village of Tännäs in the county of Härjedalen where conflicts between nomadic Sami people and farmers were frequent.[3] From his early years he had therefore met problems connected to ethnic groups and their cultural heritage, and he may have been influenced by the idea of "the vanishing race" – the belief that indigenous people were destined to die out following contact with western culture. At the same time – within this evolutionary paradigm – it was considered important by ethnographic expertise to "rescue" some of the material culture in order to be able to visualize "early stages" of human civilization.

It was the Norwegian emigrant Iver Fougner (1870–1947) who (with unnamed helpers) actually chopped down the pole. Fougner was employed as an Indian agent and and was thus a contact person between the authorities and indigenous peoples in the vast district. In the 1920s, the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa had started to take action to prevent the export of Indian objects – among them the expressive totem poles, which were thought to stimulate a small but emerging tourist industry. This may explain why the Scandinavians decided to go for the G'psgolox totem pole – it stood in the isolated Kitlope Valley, seldom visited by strangers. So, when Fougner sent a photo of this totem pole to the Canadian authorities to seek export permission, he wrote: "The reserve is uninhabited and very isolated. The chances are that the pole if not removed, after some time will fall down and be destroyed."[4] And he got his permission.



The G'psgolox totem pole was chopped down and shipped to Stockholm, where it was erected outdoors in the museum yard immediately after its arrival in the spring of 1929. The media was enthusiastic, and museum visitors stood in line for weeks to get a glimpse of the exotic object.

PHOTO: MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Keeping

It is not surprising that the director of the ethnographic collections in Stockholm was proud when he presented the pole for interested and impressed museum visitors. Based on the accompanying documentation, the object was declared to be a "Ceremonial pole," a monument that celebrated Chief G'psgolox's encounter with a spiritual being. However, the museum building was old and had to be shut down and the pole was also in bad shape. It was soon taken down and put in storage.

After resting for fifty years in an old stable, the pole was sent to wood conservators at the Vasa Museum where it was investigated by specialists, cleaned, x-rayed, and sprayed with chemicals to prevent rot, mold, and insects. Finally, a substance was applied as a foundation on the rugged old wooden surface of the pole, which gave it a smooth and antique brownish color. After this thorough makeover (and makeup), it was transported to the brand new National Museum of Ethnography that opened to the public in 1980. Here, the roof of the second floor had – with considerable expense – been made ten meters high in order to accommodate the tall pole. Once again, the totem pole was visited by ministers and ambassadors and celebrated as an object of great value for museum visitors of all ages as well as for museum professionals and researchers.

The new museum was deeply involved in the ongoing work on professional guidelines, presented through the International Council of Museums (ICOM).[5] Here, discussions in favor or against repatriation were often on the agenda. The then-director at the Museum of Ethnography Karl-Erik Larsson was an eloquent advocate for a liberal view of this subject already in the 1970s. This was mirrored also among the museum staff. For example, a senior museum teacher wrote in 1992: "It would by no means be a pedagogical loss if the old pole would be replaced by a new one. On the contrary, it should be an advantage for us to be able to stress that the art and traditions of the Northwest Indians have survived and developed. And on top of that we will get a possibility to tell about a repatriation case."[6]

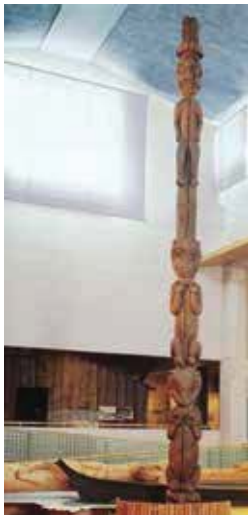


PHOTO: TONY SANDIN, MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY

A new building for the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm opened to the public in 1980. The roof of the second floor was built ten meters high to house the tall pole, which – after half a century of storage – was presented to Swedish museums visitors.

PHOTO: TONY SANDIN, MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY

In March 2006 the replica of Chief G'psgolox's totem pole was erected outside the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. The Swedish Minister of Culture Leif Pagrotsky, Haisla chiefs, and the former NHL captain Börje Salming attended the ceremony together with hundreds of museum visitors.

PHOTO: TONY SANDIN, MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY

After the decision to make a replica totem pole for the Swedish museum, four carvers arrived in Stockholm in 2000: Henry Robertson (center), his nephews Barry Wilson (left) and Derek Wilson (right), and his granddaughter Patricia Robertson. They all belonged to the Raven clan (as did the old pole's original carvers in the 1870s, hired by Chief G'psgolox of the Eagle clan).

Returning

The process of restitution of the pole started when the museum received enquiries from Canadian museums, beginning already in 1989. Two years later, a delegation from the Haisla and Kitlope people visited the museum and demanded that the "stolen" pole be returned to them. In 1994 and after an intense debate, this was agreed to by the Swedish Government. No receipt could be found proving that the pole had once been bought. Moreover, the value of the totem pole as heritage was judged decisively greater for the Haislas compared to average Swedes. But even though two replica poles were carved (financed by Swedish and Canadian funds and a local sawmill who donated the cedar logs) by the Haisla – one raised in the location where the old pole once stood, and the other one presented to the Swedish museum – the actual restitution of the old pole was postponed because the Swedish Government wanted to be assured that once in Canada it would be preserved for the future. At last, in 2006, the G'psgolox totem pole began its journey back on board a ship, sponsored by a Swedish transport company.

According to mutual agreements that led to the decision to the repatriation of the pole, it should be preserved by the Haisla people as a unique item of cultural heritage. And that seemed to work well when the pole – as no suitable museum facilities were available – was placed on display indoors at a shopping mall close to the Haisla's village. Here, it was surrounded by school children who listened to the elders telling the history of the pole, the Eagle clan, and the Haisla and Kitlope people.

In 2012, however, the highest-ranking chief in the still existing Kitlope Eagle clan – all descendants from Chief G'psgolox of the 1870s – decided that it was time to let the old pole rest. It was transported to an old graveyard up in the Kitlope Valley, where it was left to disintegrate.

Epilogue

It should, of course, always be important to undertake thorough research before taking action in acquiring or restoring objects for or from museum collections. Many agents with different agendas can be found in these different discourses. With some luck, historical documentation might uncover facts that shed new light even on acquisitions made a long time ago – as in the case of the G'psgolox totem pole.

After a second look into the archives (some ten years after the repatriation), it became evident that the Indian agent Iver Fougner had in fact been a dealer with artifacts and that he visited deserted villages and graves in search of antiquities. Based on newly found photographic documentation, one can also question if Fougner really told the whole truth when he described the reserve as uninhabited and the pole as deserted. Fougner reported in 1927 that he had been at the spot "some years ago." The land surveyor Frank Cyril Swannell – traveling in the area in June 1921 – took a series of photos (now at the Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria) with captions that instead tell us about a camp with a mortuary pole.[7] Tents and sheds surrounded the pole, and there were boats on the shore. Evidently, if visited at the right time, this was not a deserted place but

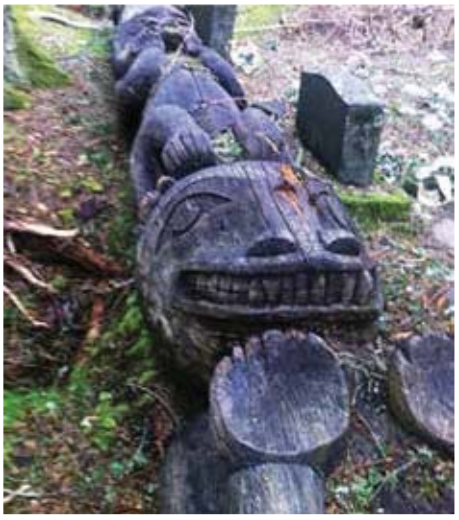


PHOTO: TONY SANDIN, MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY

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(Left) In 2012 the G'psgolox totem pole was left to lie at an old graveyard in Kitlope Valley. The wood is quickly decomposing despite earlier conservation efforts, and a bear has gnawed on one of the carved figures (according to archival notes from 1928 representing "a grizzly bear in the water").

(Right) The copy of Chief G'psgolox's totem pole in front of the Museum of Ethnography. The fascinating story of the repatriation is presented at the stand nearby.

rather a campground where the nomadic Kitlope people used to stay during the fishing and hunting seasons.

A closer look at the Indian agent's own photo of the G'psgolox totem pole also calls for new interpretations. There are remains of a fence on both sides of the pole, which – according to contemporary and later voices – was standing guard in front of an old grave yard. The pole was facing the Kitlope River, and it was visible to everyone who approached the river bend, safeguarding the area. The G'psgolox totem pole was hardly a "Ceremonial pole" as the Swedes were led to believe in 1929, but rather a "Mortuary pole" or a "Sentinel pole."

NOWADAYS, AS THE OLD pole is gradually decomposing in the woods, there are certainly questions raised among both museum visitors and professionals about the rationality of this case of repatriation. But the archival findings and the new interpretation make it easier to justify the process. If the pole was equivalent to a grave monument for a clan that is still in existence, should it not be up to them to decide if the pole should be saved for the future ("the white man's way"[8]) or be given back to Mother Nature (the Haisla and Kitlope people's way)?

The Swedish museum was at the time unaware of the documents (and conclusions) mentioned above, and it reached the decision to work for a repatriation of the pole based on values that had become shared by many museums with ethnographic collections and in dialogue with indigenous people.[9] The museum tried every option to preserve all objects in its possession, but at the same time wanted to have safe collections without connections to old wrongdoings. Moreover, this was a meeting between a totem pole soaked with holiness and a secular museum system not able to fully comprehend its spiritual load.[10] And, consequently, no one could foresee that the pole would be carried out to the woods to rot.

"THIS WAS A MEETING BETWEEN A TOTEM POLE SOAKED WITH HOLINESS AND A SECULAR MUSEUM SYSTEM NOT ABLE TO FULLY COMPREHEND ITS SPIRITUAL LOAD."

When the Swedish government in 1994 had decided to return the totem pole, it was given "as a gift" to underline that this was a unique and one-time occasion and would not act as a precedent. As mentioned above, it was also stated as a condition that the pole should be safeguarded for the future. Among the Haisla – where potlatch traditions were still in good memory[11] – this was considered extremely impudent. One spokesman said, "They wanted to 'gift it' back to us, and that almost tipped (things) /.../ I mean, how do you make a gift of something that was stolen?" And another: "We continued to negotiate and let the museum know that when we give a gift there is no attachment."[12] With such statements as background, an overview of the exchange of gifts that took place certainly proves that the Haisla – in spite of their anger – were mostly successful. The repatriation from Sweden of what they considered to be a stolen pole could hardly be classified as a real gift, while the replica pole sent to Sweden certainly was a gift of high value. In this perspective, sending the old pole back to Mother Nature (and thereby finally bringing it out of circulation, but with its spiritual power intact) might be described as the final blow.

Nonetheless, the repatriation of the totem pole became a sort of win-win situation from which there is a lot to learn. By allowing the destruction of the original pole following its return to the Kitlope Valley, the focus upon material culture among Western museums was certainly challenged and made visible by the Haislas, who rather emphasize intangible heritage such as dances, rituals, and oral traditions. It is even questionable if a totem pole with its sculptured spirits can be "owned" at all by any human being as it mediates between

man and nature: "Our culture is, when it falls, let it go. Mother Earth will cover it. And when that thing is no longer there, a new one will come." "For we do not own the land, so much as the land owns us."[13]

The final outcome of the totem pole exchange also added new fuel to the old museological debate on authenticity. What is the value of the old pole compared to the copy? One answer is that the old pole certainly was authentic for the Haisla and Kitlope people, impregnated as it was with meaning and historical references. But the replica pole that was gifted by the Haisla and today stands in front of the Museum of Ethnography is authentic for the Swedes, telling a comprehensive story loaded with connotations for cultural historians, researchers in museology, and the visiting public.

Finally, can this case of close to a hundred years of "rescuing, keeping, and returning" in any way be described as successful? My answer is yes, with a reservation. The long-lasting negotiations between the Haisla and the museum resulted in new friends, contacts, and exchanges of ideas. Sometimes misunderstandings based on cultural values colored the discussions, but it was ultimately a valuable educational process. Also, if counting totem poles the outcome is acceptable, with old and new totem poles – in varying conditions, to be sure – on both continents. Therefore, looking into the acquisition project as well as the restitution process, we will come to one and the same conclusion – there are absolutely some positive results from this long, costly, and complex story, but really, Chief G'psgolox's old totem pole should never have left the Kitlope Valley in the first place.

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references

1 This paper is a revised version of an article published by the author in 2015: Anders Björklund, "The Restitution of Chief G'psgolox's Totem Pole: An Inter-cultural Meltdown or a Win-win Process?" in *COMCOL Newsletter*, No. 29 (December, 2015). A comprehensive monograph on the subject based on interviews and archival material from Canada, Sweden, and Norway has been published as Anders Björklund, *Hövdingens totempåle: Om konsten att utbyta gåvor* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2016). An English edition is discussed under the preliminary title *Chief G'psgolox's Totem Pole and the Art of Exchanging Gifts*. Important analyses for the understanding of the case are found also in Stacey R Jessiman, "The Repatriation of the G'psgolox Totem Pole: A Study of Its Context, Process and Outcome," in *International Journal of Cultural Property*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2011), 365–391.

2 Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1985).

3 Lennart Lundmark, *Stulet land – svensk makt på samisk mark* (Ordfront, Stockholm 2008).

4 Letter from Iver Fougner to The Secretary, Dept of Indian Affairs, Ottawa 16.12 1927. Public Archives, Indian Affairs. RG 10, Vol 4087, file 5077-2B.

5 The International Council of Museums (ICOM) was created in 1946 to promote ethics, standards, and best practices for museums. Through its current 30 committees (for example, the International Committee of Museums and Collections of Ethnography – ICME) guidelines have been adopted under a common *Code of Ethics for Museums*, the latest version revised and adopted 2004 (www.icom.museum).

6 Quotation from Mikael Hammelev Jörgensen, *Förhandlingar om kulturföremål. Parters intressen och argument i processer om återförande av kulturföremål* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2017, 165). (Author's translation.)

7 Frank Cyril Swanell, Royal BC Museum and Archives, Victoria.

8 Quotation from Chief Cecil Paul in the documentary film *Totem: The Return of the G'psgolox Pole* (National Film Board of Canada, 2003).

9 A critical discussion on these subjects is found, for example, in Tiffany Jenkins, *Keeping their Marbles. How the Treasures of the Past Ended Up in Museums… and Why They Should Stay There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

10 I want to thank professor Irina Sandomirskaja at Södertörn University for this line of thought. Discussing the logic of religious cults, she draws attention to a possible parallel – the sacred meanings and history of icons in the Orthodox Church compared to a secular market with other scales of measuring value. Thanks also to assistant professor Carl Marklund for important remarks in finalizing this paper.

11 Potlatches were ceremonial feasts practiced by indigenous people of the Northwest Coast of Canada. Property as well as social status were distributed in these ceremonial feasts, sometimes including property being destroyed by its owner in a show of wealth. A classic ethnographic study of the potlatch tradition is Franz Boas, *The Social Organisation and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians* (Washington 1895).

12 Both quotations are from Anders Björklund, *Hövdingens totempåle – om konsten att utbyta gåvor* (Stockholm 2016), 129.

13 First quotation from Haisla Chief Cecil Paul 2014, in Anders Björklund, *Hövdingens totempåle – om konsten att utbyta gåvor* (Stockholm 2016), 176, second quotation from "The Haislanuyum – a Haisla protocol" (Kitlope-declaration, www.fngorvernance.org). There are several examples where museums restituted objects knowing that they would be destroyed upon arrival. The Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm repatriated a cranium from the collections to be burnt at the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre in Hobart. The Denver Museum of Nature and Science returned "viangos" (memory poles) to Kenya to be decomposed outdoors. First Nations in Calgary demanded in 1998 archival material to be destroyed because it should never have been materialized or made available for everyone. For a discussion, see for example Miriam Clavir, *Preserving What is Valued: Analysis of Museum Conservation and First Nations Perspectives* (Leicester: University of Leicester, 1997).