

From a Child's Hand



The perspectives of residential school kids, expressed in paintings and preserved for decades, come to light and give added hope to the reconciliation process.

BY KIM WESTAD

On a spring day in 2012 a crowd gathered in a conference room in the Empress Hotel as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission prepared to hear the stories of survivors of the Indian residential school system, “the greatest stain on our human rights record” as Supreme Court Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin, LLD '05, put it.

Children’s paintings had been placed in several neat piles, divided by community. They were simple and evocative expressions of ravens, shorelines and lost homes.

The paintings were created by kids at the Alberni Indian Residential School in the middle of the last century and had mostly been forgotten. Now would be the time to start returning the paintings to their originators or their families and to shed light on their experience.

For visual anthropology Prof. Andrea Walsh, the unveiling presented an opportunity to collaborate with First Nations communities and contribute to the healing process.

It would become that, and more.

Child's eye view: Dr. Andrea Walsh with a painting done by Stuart Joseph, Hupacasath First Nation, at the Alberni Indian Residential School.

A lot of planning had gone into the unveiling of the artwork. Representatives from First Nations from around the province were involved. A group of ceremonial drummers were there. Hundreds of people were waiting.

Just as the drummers were about to start, an Indigenous woman came up to Walsh with a suggestion.

She said each individual painting ought to be carried in to the meeting room on its own. The paintings, she said, represented a person, not a community.

In a moment, Walsh found herself surrounded by dozens of Indigenous women. They stood, ready.

"The women brought the paintings in like each was the child who had painted it, holding them tightly," Walsh says, recalling the tears that began to flow. "Each painting had someone to care for it."

Robert Aller was an artist who studied with Group of Seven painter Arthur Lismer. When Aller died his estate gave UVic the artist/teacher's archive — boxes of papers, thousands of slides and what appeared to be children's art from the 1950s and '60s and preserved in nearly ideal condition.

When the university took possession in 2008, Martin Segger, BA '69, who was heading the Maltwood Art Museum and

Gallery at the time, recognized them right away. Segger had taken children's art classes from Aller in a Port Alberni park in the 1950s. He also knew the artist had volunteered at the Alberni Indian Residential School.

Segger contacted Walsh, BFA '91, who had been working on a similar project with the Osoyoos Indian Band to recover student art.

"Mr. Aller felt art was a way to emancipate the Indigenous children from the schools and to allow them to express what they knew as people. He didn't tell them what to paint but helped with technique," Walsh says. "I think he saw them truly as complete people, not these empty vessels into which culture was poured or, in the case of residential schools, extracted."

For the next two years, Walsh and her students, through an applied curating course, worked on making sense of the extensive Aller collection. Many of the

paintings had the name of the community the kids were from, along with the child's first name and often their age.

Reading through Aller's journals and notes, Walsh and her students determined that many of his students would likely still be alive and unaware their paintings existed. As well, Walsh thought there had to be more that could be done with the art

"The women brought the paintings in like each was the child who had painted it, holding them tightly. Each painting had someone to care for it."



By Jeffrey Cook,
Huu-Ay-Aht First Nation.



By Mark Atleo,
Ahousaht First Nation.

than just taking the paintings as artifacts from a particular era and place in time.

Serendipity stepped in. Walsh received an email from a friend who knew the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was looking for evidence of residential school experience directly from survivors or their families.

Walsh cold-called the TRC and it turned out that commission chairman, Murray Sinclair, was scheduled to speak at UVic. He scheduled an hour-long meeting with Walsh and left saying, "This is important. But the work has to start with ceremony," recalls Walsh.

She consulted the Salish elders on campus, particularly Deb George, the cultural protocol liaison. George and Walsh worked out protocols according to Salish teaching. They worked with Salish elders for more than a year on how the paintings could be brought into the public. A Salish blanket was woven. Walsh and several Salish elders met with hereditary and cultural leaders from the Nuu-chah-nulth Nation for permission to show the paintings, since they hadn't located the artists yet.

But how to do that? Walsh got a federal grant, enlisted the help of Legacy Gallery director Mary Jo Hughes, and set out to find a way to repatriate the art with its owners. It would be an act of reconciliation.

They connected with Indigenous elders and survivors. After months of detective work throughout the province (students at the Alberni Indian Residential School came from hundreds of miles away from their homes to Vancouver Island), over 75 per

cent of the paintings were returned, many at a celebration in Port Alberni in March of 2013.

Some of the artists were high-ranking chiefs; some had troubled lives. Some just said they didn't want to be part of it and that they had moved on for their own reasons.

And then something startling happened. People said they would retain official ownership of their painting, but they wanted Walsh to take care of the actual artwork at UVic so it could be used for education.

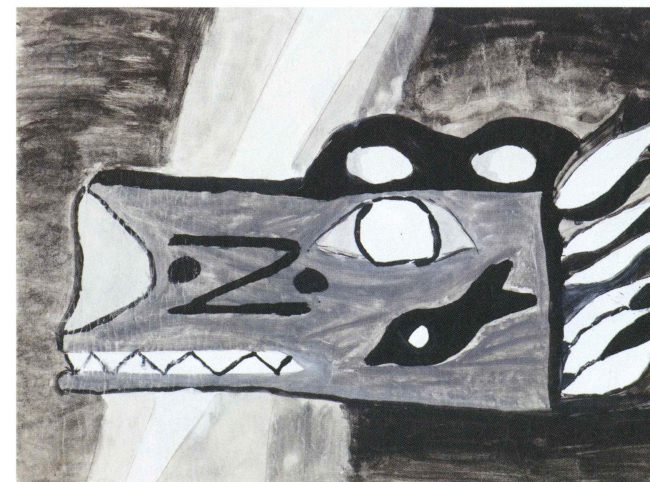
"Most of the collection was returned to us that night. It was completely unexpected," Walsh says. "We found ourselves in this amazing position of collaboration and a starting point that truly felt like it was on equal ground. The paintings became long-term loans through their generosity."

The project has led to documentation of more than 20 other similar collections in Canada after Walsh contacted 1,100 museums and archives. She has a network of institutions and cultural workers that curate what might be termed "difficult knowledge."

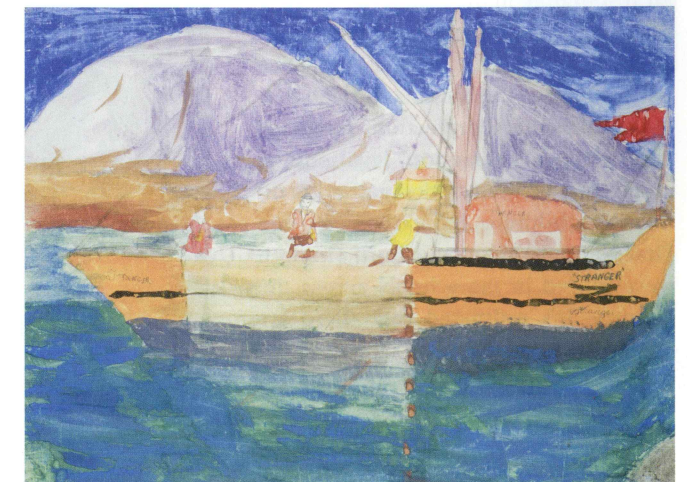
"I have students who are seeking a greater understanding about the residential schools," Walsh says. "Through the voices of survivors, and the artworks they created as children, students are gaining new perspectives on their identities as Canadians. But I also have students who have a horrible time working through what they didn't know."

The art project is a good avenue into teaching younger people about Canada's history, she says.

"I hear teachers say they don't know how to teach about this. Children's art is an amazing way to embark on conversations



By Phyllis Tate,
Ditidaht First Nations (here and right).



with youth. Kids can understand what it might be like to be away from their parents for a long time. We can talk about the schools by talking human to human."

Marie Wilson, one of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's commissioners, said her experience with the TRC will stay with her the rest of her days but it's the kids' art that brought a much-needed dimension.

"We had a lot of archival material from the federal government and the churches, but we didn't have the children's point of view," Wilson says. "With the art, we have a historical record in the voice of the children — done when they didn't have another form of speaking. (It) was one of the most uplifting elements of my work as a commissioner. There was a feeling of hope and the possibility for people to be able to see each other in new ways."

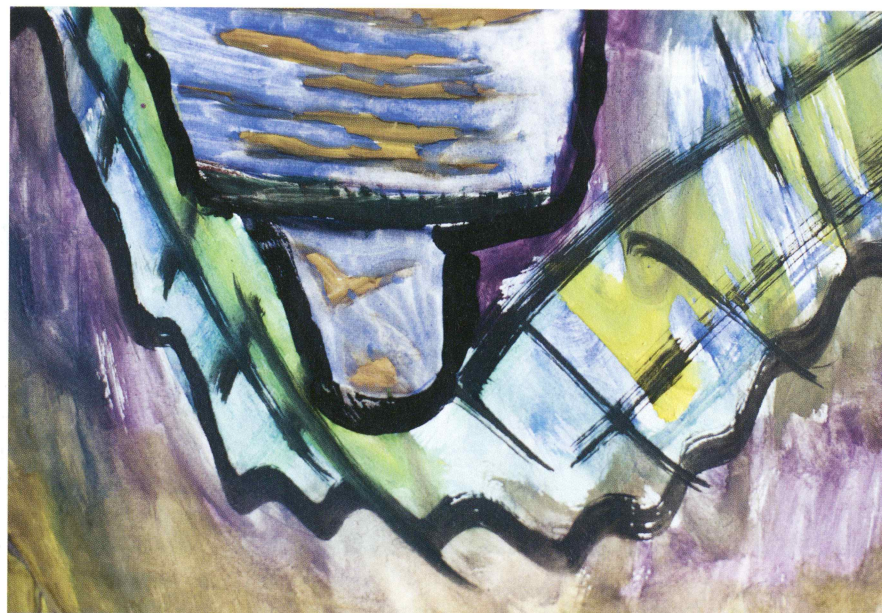
Art is also a strong way to communicate complex messages on different levels.

"We walk into an art gallery willing to be transformed," Walsh says, one of 44 honorary witnesses for the commission. "We don't really want to come out the same. Reconciliation, too, is about being transformed. It's about moving beyond where you started and coming to know a situation or a person differently."

"It's not just about how these paintings of the past exemplified the history of residential schools. It's about witnessing a painting and standing in the space of a child that was there. Through the art, you witness the life of an individual. It's a much different way of reflecting on the residential school legacy."

The TRC has put forward a framework for responding to the historical injustice of the residential school system and for addressing persistent social justice issues among First Nations through better child welfare protection, language and culture preservation, legal equity, and improved information gathering on missing children. More than 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were placed in 130 schools across the country. It's estimated that there are 80,000 living survivors.

Arthur Bolton,
Tsimshian First Nation



Robina Thomas, PhD '11, director of the university's Indigenous Academic and Community Engagement program, says the art project has been "one of the most powerful projects" in which she's been involved.

But Thomas says it's just as important to understand the context, "the colonial underpinnings of residential schools in which these paintings originated. What I mean is the project cannot be taken up as 'cute children's art' but (should be) taken up with the colonial project of residential schools."

Wally Samuel attended the Alberni residential school for seven years, enduring abuses he chooses not to talk about. "We didn't learn this from books," he says. "We lived it."

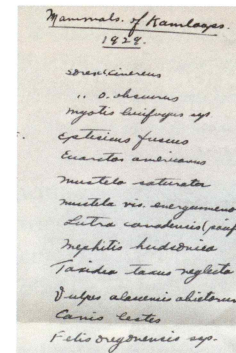
Now in his late 60s, the art makes a difference. "Right now, most of the people that suffered are elderly and old and that's how people see them, even in my culture. But when you see these paintings, you realize that they were just kids."

Jeff Cook was also a youngster at the Alberni Indian Residential School and he was in the crowd that day at the Empress in 2012. "I remembered the child I was," he says. His painting, a raven on newsprint with poster paint, is the only thing he has from his childhood.

When he got back home, Cook, who is hereditary chief of the Huu-ay-aht First Nation, decided to recreate the raven on his ceremonial curtain, its symbols telling his family's history. With a few brushstrokes with his adult hand he tried to bring back some of his earliest memories. His hand shook. ↑

THE COLLECTION

Eye on the Ecology



A career's worth of naturalist Ian McTaggart Cowan's journals, photos, books and footage from his TV shows are now in the university's Special Collections and University Archives, offering a wealth of scientific insight on diversity and a changing climate.

McTaggart Cowan's studies contributed greatly to the natural history collection of the Royal BC Museum, he taught zoology at UBC, and his popular CBC TV documentary series — *The Living Sea and the Web of Life* — generated awareness about nature and wider appreciation for conservation.

UVic Libraries has also launched a digital collection of thousands of handwritten field notes

documenting the work of the "father of Canadian ecology" and his colleagues.

"It's very unusual to have observations that are accurate down to the day, and for such long periods of time. This is where the McTaggart Cowan journals are so amazing," says Dr. Brian Starzomski, who holds the McTaggart-Cowan Professorship of Biodiversity, Conservation and Ecological Restoration in the School of Environmental Studies.

McTaggart Cowan was a chancellor of UVic from 1979-84. An endowed scholarship was named for him and his late wife, Joyce. ↑

Mountain goats, Jasper.
Field notes, 1929.
Mountain lion, Banff.
Seals, Le Conte Inlet,
Alaska.