

ART SEEN: Rare works by Charles Edenshaw head to market at Art Toronto

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Bracelet, silver, by Charles Edenshaw (Tahayghen) in a digital edition of ArtTO 2020 in an exhibition by Donald Ellis Gallery, Oct. 28 to Nov. 8. PHOTO BY JOHN TAYLOR /jpg

A unique collection of six works by the great Charles Edenshaw are being shown at the online Art Toronto art fair.

The works include model totem poles Edenshaw carved out of argillite, the black stone unique to one quarry on Haida Gwaii. There is also a pair of silver bracelets believed to be one of only two matched bracelets made by Edenshaw.

All the works were collected over the past 20 years by Donald Ellis. Ellis lives in Metro Vancouver and operates Donald Ellis Gallery in New York.

Edenshaw was a Haida artist who died in 1920. He's also known by his traditional name Tahayghen.

DEG is also showing other Northwest Coast art works and 19th century ledger drawings by Indigenous artists from south of the 49th parallel.

Ellis is a collector and gallerist who believes that Edenshaw wasn't just a great Indigenous artist but a great Canadian artist.

"I hold him up there with Lawren Harris," Ellis said in a phone interview. "He's up there with other great ones."

Ellis said Edenshaw's work stands out in so many ways.

"He was an innovator, a modernist, he was an astonishing craftsman," he said. "A remarkable talent."

Ellis said that when he was in his late teens or early 20s, Alan Hoover at the Royal BC Museum in Victoria showed him Edenshaw's works in storage. They included engravings, especially ones in silver.

Ellis explained that when an artist works in silver, the engraving tool creates a push line: a little mountain of metal left when the pressure is released and the artist stops engraving. The push line is only visible under magnification and can help identify works that aren't signed or otherwise known as the work of a particular artist.



Model Totem Pole, argillite, by Charles Edenshaw (Tahayghen) is being shown by Donald Ellis Gallery at ArtTO. jpg

“In Edenshaw’s engravings, he was so confident in his hands, you rarely see push lines,” Ellis said. “He would draw a circle or ovoid in one quick movement.”

In January, Ellis donated five Edenshaw works to the Vancouver Art Gallery: two bracelets – one gold, one silver – and three silver spoons.

In 2013-14, more than 200 of Edenshaw's works were shown by the VAG in a landmark exhibition .

Edenshaw's works are also in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and The National Museum of the American Indian, Washington D.C.

Ellis said he realized years ago that there was a disconnect in the market when he saw that bracelets by Haida artist Bill Reid sold for \$200,000 but similar quality works by Edenshaw went for only \$25,000.

Since then, Ellis said he made a conscious decision to buy every Edenshaw work that came on the market.

Of the 15 to 16 pieces available for sale during that time, he's been able to acquire all but a couple of them.

He said while there's an "enormous level of curiosity" in Edenshaw's work, the market "is in its infancy in a sense.

"I guess I have to say Art Toronto is a way to test the waters," he said.

"In all likelihood, I might end up donating five or six works to the National Gallery or to (Vancouver Art Gallery) subject to what happens with the building."

DEG is showing 19th century ledger drawings which were made by largely anonymous Indigenous artists from the Great Plains nations such as the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Lakota.

In many of them, horses figure prominently. When the animal was introduced by the Spanish to the Comanche in the 17th century, Ellis said, it led to major changes among all the aboriginal people in what later became the U.S..

Ellis said ledger drawings are “one of the most important aspects of North American art history and most people don’t even know they exist.”

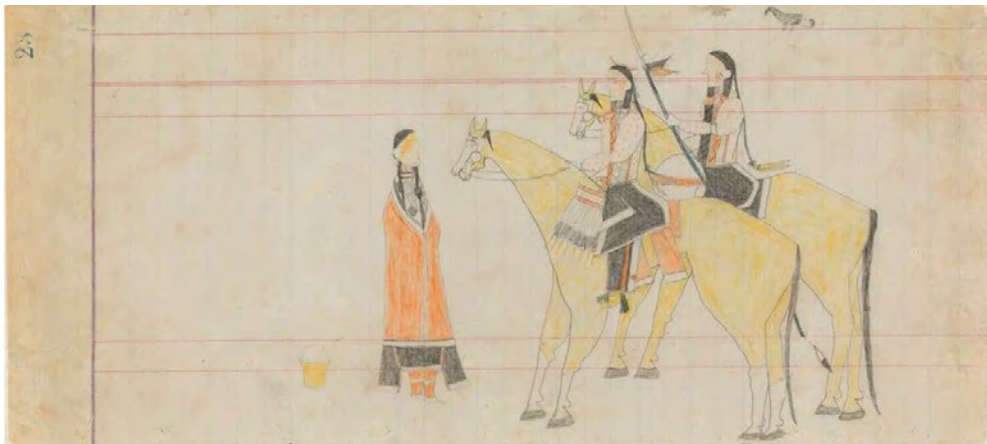
They’re called ledger drawings because accounting ledger books were a major source of paper for Indigenous people.

“The drawings are both records of actual events and articulate the cumulative acquisition of spiritual power and status,” the Donald Ellis Gallery said in a news release.

Donald Ellis Gallery will donate 10 per cent of all sales to Canadian organizations addressing the legacy of residential schools, supporting Indigenous education and mental health, and promoting reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. The gallery said clients can choose to support one of the following charitable organizations:

Indspire , The Legacy of Hope Foundation , or The Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund .

Art Toronto is from Wednesday, Oct.28 to Sunday, Nov. 8.



Ledger drawing, graphite and coloured pencil on lined paper, anonymous artist, Southern Cheyenne, circa 1885, is in an exhibition by Donald Ellis Gallery at ArtTO Oct. 28 to Nov. 8. PHOTO BY JOHN TAYLOR /jpg