

GUIDED BY THE MOUNTAIN



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SITUATION BRIEF # 58

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This essay provides Indigenous insights into the history and role of First Nations art as seen through the artistic legacy of the late TEMOSENTET Charles Elliott. It is excerpted from the exhibition catalogue JSINSET SWELOKE: family ourselves growing up (Saltspring Arts, 2022).

As I sit here writing, I can look across the Garry Oak grove and see this year's Fawn Lilies have wilted and the Camas have emerged. I have been a captive of WSANEC (Saanich) since I visited Vancouver Island at the age of seventeen. At least once a day my mind conjures up that summer evening in 1976 when I stood on the summit of YOS (the mountain above the MA,LEXEt (Malahat), facing east toward WSANEC. In that moment I was transformed at a cellular level and knew that one day I would return to live here. Three years later I did move from Ontario to this beautiful place, first living on MA,LEXEt, then LEQENEN (Lekwungen) territories, and for the last 15 years in the WSANEC village of WJOLELP (T'sartlip). It is like a dream every morning, when I open the curtains and see the place where I stood on the mountain when I was just a girl being pulled to this place where my life would unfold.

For over 30 years I have been devoted to my creative, curatorial and writing practice. Through my 26 years as founding Arts Manager and Special Advisor at First Peoples' Cultural Council I have been honoured to serve Indigenous artists and communities throughout B.C. and nationally. I now live, work, garden, and dream under the watchful eye of YOS, here in WASNEC where my Husband Andy Paul was born and raised. During the past 20 years, together we have built a life for ourselves and our now adult children. Although I've known TEMOSENTET, Charles Elliott Sr. as an artist since 1996, through my relationship with his Nephew Andy, he is now my Uncle. His family - including his Wife Myrna Crossley, son TEMOSEN, Charles 'Chazz' Elliott Jr. and Grandson Matthew Parlby-Elliott - are my family too. Therefore, my thoughts about their interwoven art practices are informed not only by artistic appreciation and professional regard, but a great affection that connects us to each other and to this beautiful land that holds us.



Dr. TEMOSENTET Charles Elliott O.B.C.

WSANEC ART RE-EMERGENCE FROM THE COLONIAL FLOOD

During the mid- to late-1800s, Canada's Federal Indian Act underwent numerous revisions with the intention of separating Indigenous People from our lands and each other, with the goal of destroying our cultures and ways of life. Like other Coast Salish Nations, WSANEC was heavily impacted by the colonial invasion into these accessible and beautiful southern coastal territories. In 1842 the Hudson Bay Company established Fort Victoria and seven years later a Royal Charter granted Vancouver Island to the company. James Douglas was appointed Chief Factor of HBC, and charged with negotiating treaties with Indigenous People, including the Coast Salish on the South Island. Disguised as a peace treaty meant to protect Indigenous land rights as settler society expanded, in 1852 a Douglas treaty with WSANEC was concluded through a deceptive process. That same year Douglas was also named Governor of Vancouver Island, holding both power positions until 1858 when the British Crown claimed British Columbia as part of Canada. The timelines of the HBC and Crown, discoveries of coal and gold, and imposed foreign legislation clearly illustrate the colonial effort to 'disappear' Indigenous People so they could claim the land and gain access to these coveted Earth elements. By 1859, when what became the Federal Indian Reserve system was set in motion, the Indigenous population had been decimated by smallpox, measles and other epidemics. By 1877, WSANEC People were being relocated from throughout their territory, which included CUAAN (Salt Spring), SKTAK (Mayne), SDAYES (Pender), SKEWEWIC (Saturna) and STOULCEL (San Juan) and other small Islands, onto four small reserve villages on what is now called Saanich Peninsula. This swift and aggressive occupation made way for settlements to emerge and spread throughout WSANEC homelands and waters. As the people were moved, their place names and relationships with the land and waters were systematically erased.

The imposition of strategic, oppressive legislation continued and in 1884 the Federal government's "assimilation and civilizing process" was increased when the Indian Act was once again amended to explicitly implement the destruction of cultures. This legislation included what is commonly called the Potlatch Ban which outlawed gatherings and cultural expressions related to ceremony and traditional governance. This law applied to all Nations, and by association incriminated what we now call 'artistic practices' including songs, dances, and all related ceremonial tools: regalia, masks, musical instruments, and other sacred implements. Ceremonial life was forced underground and if discovered by 'the authorities', participants could be jailed and ceremonial treasures burned, confiscated, stolen, or sold under great duress. This devastating law lasted in various forms until 1951 (not so long ago!).



The last Potlatch, Songhees. Courtesy City of Victoria. Archives

At the same time Indigenous cultures were being oppressed, in the late 1800s the study of 'Indians' and the creation of museums was on the rise. Ethnologists and anthropologists wanted to capture the 'disappearing Indians' and the most untouched cultures. These 'experts', with biased and limited understanding, mistakenly dismissed the Coast Salish and branded their cultures and arts as less authentic than those of the northern Nations. This resulted in a lack of appreciation for the complexity of Coast Salish artforms and for decades this attitude remained as an undercurrent, even lingering in the minds of some other Indigenous artists and art professionals. From this colonial history and climate, and only 20 years after the Potlatch Ban was lifted, during the 1970s Coast Salish artists like Simon Charlie, Cicero August, Susan Point, Stan Greene and Charles Elliott emerged into public view with a commitment to the cultures their Ancestors had protected. By the late 1990s their strong voices could no longer be ignored and the prevailing dismissal of Coast Salish art finally started to unravel. These artists' focus on Coast Salish stories, visual conventions and style has contributed to Coast Salish cultural survival and resurgence. More specifically, TEMOSENTET's work expresses WSANEC relationships, values, and ways of knowing. The artworks bring those understandings into the physical world as living WSANEC identity that reflects the beauty of the land, Ancestors and Teachings back to his family, community and Nation.

A FAMILY OF ARTISTS - WSANEC ART NEST

When TEMOSENTET, Charles Elliott was a child he learned about hard work and knowledge creation from his parents. His Mother WELTIMIYE, Beatrice Elliott was an artist who drew her own elaborate knitting patterns. She also taught Charles to carve little whistles from maple branches. His Father, PENA (Dave Elliott) showed him how to make model canoes at the beach on WSANEC Inlet, down

the hill from where some family still live. Made in a very particular way with sails and rudders, these tiny vessels would return to shore every time they were launched. Charles tells the story of one particular day when his father took him for a walk down to the beach.

"In the distance I heard a rhythmic noise, 'pung-k ... pung-k ... pung-k.: I asked him what I was hearing, and he said, 'Just wait, you will see.' As we arrived at the beach and turned the corner, there was what I had heard Late Phillip Thom carving a canoe. I knew then, at a young age of 10 or so, I wanted to be a carver."

Later in life, as a young man working various jobs while continuing to carve, Charles' Father PENAC: visited him in a dream and reminded him, "Don't let the fire go out." Since then, Charles has devoted himself to life as an artist with an unwavering commitment to the pursuit of true WSANEC art. Charles emerged as an artist during the time when Coast Salish art was still undervalued and seen as inferior to the northern styles. Flying in the face of that attitude, Charles continued building his artistic skills while studying and advocating for Coast Salish art, especially within WSANEC territory. Although primarily self-taught, he acknowledges the early encouragement and influence of others, including Simon Charlie, Cicero August, and Willard Joseph. He was already committed to the research and rebirth of Coast Salish art in his community when he was gifted photographs and slides depicting historical and ancient Salish artworks held in museums. Those images combined with the stories and Teachings heard throughout his life and infiltrated his imagination and work. Some early carvings include Feast Bowls inspired by ancient Salish stone bowls carved in the form of animals or seated human figures. Charles's bowls represent the artist simultaneously exploring, and creating to understand and integrate this visual language. His early expressions of WSANEC stories through an authentic

Coast Salish aesthetic resonated with his community. Throughout his life he has been called upon to create Masks, Rattles and Memorial Markers for cultural and ceremonial purposes. It's always an honour to create these cultural pieces and although they are some of his most important works, they are not meant to be shared with the general public. TEMOSENTET was one of the few who cleared a path for WSANEC, and other Coast Salish artists in the '60s, '70s and '80s.



During that time, while some Nations engaged in public displays of culture, the Coast Salish remained understandably protective of their ceremonial life and there has always been great care about publicly sharing or commodifying culture, songs, and dances. It's important to understand what this meant to a young artist like TEMOSENTET when he was starting out. As he was compelled to reawaken the artform as an expression of the stories and knowledge he was also required to thoughtfully navigate his People's deep sense of privacy. The

combined historical forces of cultural privacy and outside disregard for Coast Salish art surely contributed to the fact that until recently, totem poles from other Nations were raised throughout Lekwungen and WSANEC without the consent of the people on whose territory they were being raised. Artists like Charles are to be credited for advocating to bring these acts of erasure into public consciousness. This is now being remedied as a strong Coast Salish public presence stands throughout the territories with representation from artists including TEMOSENTET, Butch Dick, Doug, Perry and Tom Lafortune, and Chris Paul.

TEMOSENTET's works are now in collections far from home and around the world. He carved a talking stick for Nelson Mandela and was one of three contributors to the Queen's Baton for the 15th Commonwealth Games in 1994. He has continued to add to his vast body of two-dimensional works in the form of limited-edition serigraph prints. Locally he is most recognized as a prolific Master Carver of monumental public artworks that live throughout WSANEC and Lekwungen. The 1989 entrance to LAU, WELNEW Tribal School on West Saanich Road is composed of a welcome pole, building facade, and a massive Eagle with its wings forming a protective canopy over the walkway at the entrance to the school. His house posts, welcome figures and poles stand in locations that include Victoria International Airport, Saanichton Thrifty Foods, and the University of Victoria. A glorious six loot carved spindle whorl sculpture hangs on the exterior of the Esquimalt Public Library, works at Saanich Peninsula and Royal Jubilee Hospital in Victoria carry the intention to support healing. The All Nations' Healing Room at Jubilee Hospital was designed in consultation with Indigenous Elders and is inspired by a Coast Salish longhouse. It is a safe comfortable space for Indigenous People to engage in ceremony and spiritual practice while at the hospital healing or dealing with trauma or loss. This purpose is made visible and

supported by artwork created by TEMOSENTET and Douglas Lafortune, with both contributing to the entrance and interior of the space. Charles carve the right-side door and house post for the entrance, and the QELENSEN (Eagle) and SQTO (Raven) panels and SEL,SEL,TEN (Spindle Whorl) for the interior space.



All of Charles' artworks in public places reflect WSANEC identity back to his people and encourage other Indigenous People who live here. At the same time they serve as visual ambassadors that reach out to others, reminding us all where we are and that the WSANEC Nation People are still here.

In 2002 TEMOSENTET was commissioned to carve three of the four house posts that stand at the entrance to Mary Winspear Centre in Sidney, B.C. Representing the four WSANEC villages through stories that honour ancient living relationships to the land and waters, TEMOSENTET carved the WJOTLEP (T'sartlip), BOKECEN (Pauquachin) and WSIKEM (Tseycum) House Posts. WSANEC

artist Doug Lafortune carved the STAUTW (Tsawout) House Post.

TEMOSENTET's WSIKEM House Post is of particular interest when considering the WSANEC relationship to CUAN. It tells the story of a young WSANEC man who travelled throughout the territory as a messenger for the people. With a Wolf as his companion, he ran, walked, and sometimes swam to the islands. Once, as he prepared to cross the water from the beach at TEWEN (Land's End) to CUAN, his Wolf companion pleaded with him not to go - he was afraid and didn't want to swim the channel. Witnessing this, XALS, the Creator, saw it as an act of cowardice and turned the Wolf to stone to sit on the beach forever. TEMOSENTET's WSIKEM House Post serves as visual documentation of that event and carries one of the hundreds of WSANEC stories about their relationships to, and names of, the land and waters throughout their territory. These depictions of Ancestral figures and animals lift up WSANEC core Teachings for living a good life. These works carry and breathe new life into Ancestral Knowledge and strengthen those understandings for future generations. For Indigenous People living within the WSANEC and Lekwungen territories, and the Coast Salish and WSANEC People especially, TEMOSENTET, Charles Elliott is a cultural treasure, Scholar and Master. He has consistently shared his knowledge with other artists, community members, university professors, researchers, and students. He has been a practicing artist for over 50 years. For more than 25 of those years he has consistently taken on apprentices and mentored countless young artists. Traditionally that's the way Coast Salish knowledge is carried across the generations and kept alive. Charles has always seen this role as an integral aspect of his practice and says,

"... my art is the reflection of our family and Salish Teachings - our culture that is handed down. My children learned by watching, which was how I was taught. Carving is more than just art - it includes history, math and science. I am thankful for being given the gift of practicing something that is part of my culture. I am

thankful to have been able to pass these teachings to my children and others whom I have had the privilege of sharing with."

Observations

- Indigenous artistic practices are both the carriers and transmitters of generations of cultural heritage. They constitute both tangible and intangible heritage. Today, in the hands of a new generation of artists, ancestral knowledge survives and is communicated to both its keepers, First Nations People, but also the Settler and visitor communities. Greater Victoria political and cultural institutions therefore need to encourage and support both traditional and emerging Indigenous artists.
- First Nations government needs to encourage and support the local studio/workshop system, particular to ensure the passing on of knowledge and skills across generations.
- The work of TEMOSENTET and his family provides an example for others in how artistic creative practices can conserve cultural heritage. Thought needs to be given as how this process can be preserved and presented to the general public. The region should consider examples such as Whistler, British Columbia, which has developed the First Nations "Lil'wat" cultural interpretive centre.

Sources

Rose Spahan and Cathy Chareles WherryJSINSET SWELOKE: family ourselves growing up (Exhibition Catalogue: Saltspring Arts, 2022).