

THE LEFT HAND OF CHARLES JOSEPH'S TOTEM POLE RETURNED TO THE MMFA WITH A LETTER OF APOLOGY

The Museum withdraws its complaint and thanks all those
who helped bring the piece back



Montreal, October 2, 2019 – The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) is relieved to announce that the left hand of the totem pole that was removed Friday, September 20 in an act of vandalism was safely returned last night. The Museum will thus be able to fully restore the artwork by Kwakiutl artist Charles Joseph, which proudly adorns the front of the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion on Sherbrooke Street.

“It is reassuring to observe the return of wisdom and clarity following an evening of inebriety... The letter of sincere apology that we received from the transient delinquents shows us that art educates and sensitizes us to all of the most important issues, notably our reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The MMFA therefore withdraws its complaint,” declared **Nathalie Bondil**, Director General and Chief Curator, MMFA. *“This incident is also a testament to our fellow citizens’ attachment to the powerful Residential School Totem Pole sculpted by Charles Joseph. His work, which has stood before the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts since the outdoor exhibition Balade pour la Paix in 2017 has become an important symbol, particularly at this moment in our country’s history, when we are trying to mend the ties of our shared memories. We firmly believe that public art not only embellishes our lives but helps raise a necessary awareness. Thank you to those brought the hand back. Thank you to the many people who spread our message, the web surfers, the media, and the Mayor of Montreal! Thank you to everyone... for the hand you played.”*

The people who removed the hand carefully deposited it on the Museum’s doorstep on the night of October 1 to 2, along with a letter of apology. Among other things, it states that they regret the offence caused to everyone by their thoughtless gesture, and that they were unaware of the meaning the totem

pole represents. Full of remorse, they decided to return the hand. The artist and owner of the work on loan to the MMFA are very pleased with this conclusion. The MMFA accepts their apology and withdraws its complaint. Below is an excerpt of the letter left at the Museum.

“Firstly, we would like to apologize to all those who were offended. At the time, we were not in a sober state of mind, and we had no idea what the totem pole was ... After we realized what this stood for and represented for so many people, we immediately felt sick to our stomach ... We would like to let all know that in NO WAY, SHAPE OR FORM was this done in spite ... We were simply ignorant of what it symbolized, and have decided we 100% needed to return it. ... We are sorry, so sorry for any pain and anger we have caused. Love for all people.”

This episode has ended on a positive note, demonstrating once again the power of art.

About the Residential School Totem Pole

Charles Joseph

Born in Alert Bay, British Columbia, in 1959

Residential School Totem Pole

2014–16

Red cedar, acrylic paint

H. 1,524; W. 762; Diam. 152.4 cm

Torn from their families and placed in residential schools run by various religious orders between 1820 and 1996, Canada’s Indigenous peoples were victims of a cultural genocide, recognized by the Government of Canada on May 29, 2015. This totem pole pays tribute to all the children—Joseph included—all too familiar with the humiliations and suffering meted out at these institutions.

The totem may be a token of reconciliation and commemoration. It is the symbol of the Northwest Coast’s Kwakiutl people, and their strong sense of identity and pride. Joseph’s *Residential School Totem Pole* depicts, from top to bottom: family members of the totem’s patron; a cedar ring, which symbolizes safety and security; the wild woman, who represents female tradition and culture; the killer whale, guardian of memory; the raven, who represents the collusion between Church and State; the bear, for its strength and wisdom; the fox, who bears witness to the past; the Kulus, those large black ravens who, according to legend, created the islands on Canada’s Northwest Coast by throwing pebbles in the sea; the two-headed serpent perches at the top, with its wings outspread in a cross.

In addition to being a sculptor, Joseph also works in the fishing and forestry industries to support his family. As a child, he spoke only his mother tongue, Kwakwala, before learning English. Joseph is extremely committed to the preservation of his culture. The legacy he wishes to leave future generations includes the revitalization and propagation of Kwakiutl traditions. His work supports the regeneration of his culture, which could have been destroyed by colonialist policies and practices, and contributes to the re-appropriation of the traditional ways, lifestyle and identity.

Images: Charles Joseph (born in 1959), *Residential School Totem Pole*, 2014-2016, red cedar, acrylic paint. 1,524 (h.) x 762 (w.) (max. width with wings) x 152.4 cm (diam.). Private collection.

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About the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Drawing over 1 million visitors annually, the MMFA is one of the most visited museum in Canada and North America. Its highly original temporary exhibitions combine various artistic disciplines – fine arts, music, film, fashion and design – and are exported to the four corners of the world. Its rich encyclopedic collection, displayed in its five pavilions, includes international art, world cultures, decorative arts and design, and Quebec and Canadian art. The Museum has seen exceptional growth in recent years with the addition of two new pavilions: the Claire and Marc Bourgie Pavilion, in 2011, and the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion for Peace, in 2016. The MMFA complex also includes Bourgie Hall, a 460-seat concert hall, as well as an auditorium and a movie theatre. The MMFA is one of Canada's leading publishers of art books in French and English, which are distributed internationally. The Museum also houses the Michel de la Chenelière International Atelier for Education and Art Therapy, the largest educational complex in a North American art museum, enabling the MMFA to offer innovative educational, wellness and art therapy programs.
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