In October 1863, the Reverend Robert J. Dundas of Scotland travelled up the coast from Victoria to Old Metlakatla, near Prince Rupert. There, he acquired seventy-seven “ceremonial objects” from the Anglican evangelical lay minister William Duncan, who, in a radical effort to eradicate Native beliefs and customs, had established the utopian Christian community with his Tsimshian followers. This was a time of increasing missionary and governmental pressures on Aboriginal peoples to assimilate, marked also by the devastating effects of a major smallpox epidemic in 1862. Survivors had relinquished their treasures and ceremonial practices as part of the price of admission to Duncan’s religious order. It was an exchange of the carved manifestations of clan histories and privileges for the promise of more powerful cosmologies – and access to new economies – during a period of profound social change.

Dundas took his collection to Scotland, and it remained in the family for generations until his great-grandson, Simon Carey, put it up for auction at Sotheby’s, New York, in October 2006. Sold amid urgent negotiations by Canadian private collectors, public museums and galleries, art dealers, the federal government, and Tsimshian leaders and cultural representatives, who collectively struggled to secure funds to “repatriate” the works to Canada, the now dismantled Dundas Collection fetched over US$7 million and set a new auction record for historical Northwest Coast artifacts.

Less than a year after the auction, the sumptuous book *Tsimshian Treasures: The Remarkable Journey of the Dundas Collection* was published, edited by art dealer Donald Ellis with contributions by three former curators, a journalist, and a Tsimshian artist. The book accompanied a cross-Canada tour of the artifacts successfully purchased by Canadian individuals, dealers, and museums. Having already made a 150-year passage from “curio” to “national heritage,” the objects once again began their journey in traditional Tsimshian territory, this time at the request of the hereditary chiefs of the Allied Tsimshian tribes of Lax Kw’alaams and Metlakatla. The chiefs used this platform to celebrate their treasures’ real, if temporary, homecoming according to ceremonial protocol, bringing into focus values not encompassed by the market and pointing to the difference between rights of ownership and the privilege of possession.

Through both text and image, *Tsimshian Treasures* performs a similar entanglement of discourses, classifications, and ways of valuing. In the book’s introduction, Ellis describes his repeated attempts, as a dealer specializing in historical North American Indian art, to acquire the Dundas Collection in the decades preceding the Sotheby’s sale: “it was immediately apparent to me that this group of objects, with their rich history, belonged to Canada and all Canadians. They had to be returned” (15). Ellis went on to play a pivotal role in rallying Canadian buyers to purchase
the works at auction and in facilitating the exhibition and publication. Here we are introduced to the book’s underlying and under-examined refrain: the importance of the collection as national patrimony. With the artifacts remaining out of the hands of contemporary Tsimshian people, however, debates over cultural property, market value, the institutionalization of Native heritage, and repatriation simmer beneath the celebratory rhetoric of homecoming and national belonging.

The history of the formation of the Dundas Collection, and the significance of these rare pieces to art historical and ethnological enquiry, is addressed in a series of essays by prominent experts in the field of Northwest Coast art: art historian Bill Holm, former Royal British Columbia Museum ethnology curator Alan Hoover, and researcher and former Seattle Art Museum curator Steven Brown. Holm points to the usefulness of the collection “in establishing the characteristics of northern British Columbia native art in the middle years of the 19th century” (16). Indeed, determining attributions of historical objects is an area of scholarship increasingly important not only to art historians but also to Aboriginal artists and communities striving to re-establish specific cultural styles and to identify heritage materials for repatriation. Hoover places the Dundas Collection within a context of historical collecting on the Northwest Coast, giving a detailed reconstruction of the circumstances surrounding the missionary’s acquisition of these materials. He also mines anthropological and archival sources in order to link objects depicting inherited crests to specific chiefs and clans. His effort to place artifacts within indigenous histories of use and ownership is a worthwhile contribution to existing studies of ethnological collecting, yet it lacks evident consultation with living clan members and cultural authorities. Brown, moreover, provides an object essay for each of the treasures highlighted in the book’s full-colour photographs. Through meticulous observations on aesthetic details and how these speak to the skills of their now-anonymous makers, he guides readers towards seeing the range of works through a connoisseur’s eyes. Again, the voices and perspectives of Tsimshian commentators could have helped readers to also see beyond the objects towards community-based understandings.

Particularly noteworthy in this volume are two essays that make a point of acknowledging the living culture, the authority of hereditary leaders, and the role of ceremonial practice today. Art critic Sarah Milroy offers a personal reflection on her journey to Prince Rupert for the opening of the exhibition. She situates the Dundas events within stories she encounters: the ongoing and complicated legacy of contact; the social and economic aspirations of both Native and non-Native residents; the “bittersweet moment” of the opening celebration, where James Bird, hereditary chief Txatkwatkw of Hartley Bay, spoke: “Today, all these things that we used every day are called artifacts. It seems strange to call them that” (33). Tsimshian weaver William White is given the book’s last word in his contribution, “N’luumskm ’Amwaal: We Respect Our Treasures.” He honours the Canadians who stepped forward to purchase the objects so that they could stay in this country as well as those who ensured that the treasures would be welcomed home according to Tsimshian protocol. “These pieces are our written history,” he concludes, “created from the trees that still grow
on our land ... While looking at this collection of art, we are reminded of who we are and who we will become” (136–37).

Collections like the Tsimshian treasures gathered by Dundas are fragments of a larger whole that cannot, of course, ever be reassembled. But attempts to strengthen knowledge and build new connections between the historical objects and originating communities can help direct attention to the intersecting and often competing ways in which cultural heritage is meaningful today. To this end the compelling photographs by Shannon Mendes, taken at the exhibition opening at the Museum of Northern British Columbia, focus less on isolated masterpieces than on the people they captivate, the separation between the two enforced by the glass walls of display cases. (Regrettably, the individuals in the photographs, like their historical counterparts shown in Hoover’s essay, are left unnamed.) But these treasures have crossed boundaries historically and are still doing so today. The histories and attributions given to the objects will continue to be debated by new generations of artists and researchers. Simultaneous claims of masterpiece and patrimony, and what is alienable and inalienable, will be argued about as the objects circulate through expanding art worlds. And books of this kind will remain market players themselves, adding value to the works they describe (and that may well resurface in international markets) while also shaping their fields of reception. *Tsimshian Treasures* is the lasting document of a remarkable collection that, like the artifacts now dispersed to new owners, takes its place in a journey not yet complete.