

PRESS RELEASE

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Pitt Rivers Museum curator wins Social Sciences Knowledge Exchange grant

The Pitt Rivers Museum is delighted to announce that Dr Laura Peers, Curator of the Americas Collection at the Museum, has won a Social Sciences Knowledge Exchange grant.

'Learning from the Masters: the Great Box Project' explores how university museums such as the Pitt Rivers Museum in partnership with geographically distant Indigenous museums (in this case the Haida Gwaii Museum and two affiliated artists) might provide access to heritage treasures, and how knowledge exchange might occur across cultural boundaries around museum objects.

Knowledge will be unpacked from what is known at the Pitt Rivers Museum as the Great Box, a 19th century Haida masterpiece. Two Haida carvers, Gwaai Edenshaw and Jaalen Edenshaw, will travel to Oxford to make a new version of the box. When these carvers first saw the box during a visit to the museum in 2009, they noted that the artist was such a master of Haida formline that he was playing with it, and that the only way to reclaim such mastery would be by making a box in the presence of the original one, so that the original could teach by close physical inspection and analysis during the making process.

Gwaai and Jaalen will do a residency at the Museum this coming September to carve a new version of the box and work with public audiences. The new box will travel back to Haida Gwaii with them and become the focus for conversations with artists there, to enable the knowledge in the box to flow back to the Haida community.

The project is the latest in a series of engagements between Haida people and the Pitt Rivers Museum. A delegation of 21 Haida people came to the Museum in 2009 to work with all 301 Haida objects in the collections, including the totem pole, and to forge lasting relationships that would serve the needs of both Haida people and the Museum.

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Notes for Editors

- Dr Laura Peers is Curator of the Americas Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum as well as a Reader in the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford. Her work involves linking heritage items in museum collections with contemporary Indigenous communities, and studying relationships between museums and Indigenous peoples.
- A book about the process of the 2009 visit and its implications for museums has recently been published: Cara Krmpotich and Laura Peers, *This is Our Life: Haida Material Heritage and Changing Museum Practice* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013).
- Jaalen Edenshaw and Gwaai Edenshaw carved a major totem pole raised on Haida Gwaii in 2013. A video on the project is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vT4Yc9ask58>
- A video and more information of the 2009 visit to the Pitt Rivers Museum is available at: <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/haida.html>
- The Pitt Rivers Museum is one of Oxford's most popular attractions, famous for its period atmosphere and outstanding collections from many cultures around the world, past and present. Admission, exhibitions and events are FREE.
- The Pitt Rivers Museum was founded in 1884 when General Pitt Rivers, an influential figure in the development of archaeology and evolutionary anthropology, gave his personal collection of 20,000 items to the University on condition that a museum was built to house the material, and that a post was created to lecture in anthropology. Today the collection numbers some 600,000 items, and the Museum remains an active department of Oxford University doing and supporting research and teaching in archaeology and anthropology.

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