

Sitka's World-class carver

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FOR COAST WEEKEND

It is the hands and strong forearms that alert us to the artist's ways. Yes, they are muscular, but not like a fisherman's, or even an athlete's.

These are woodcarver's hands, and years of dedication and toil have shaped and transformed cedar bolts and 50-foot cedar trees into some of the most distinguished and handsome art objects to be found on the planet. By all artistic standards, Tommy Joseph is an artist of distinction.

Art is form. Art is design. And composition and line form. Art speaks to the heart and soul and releases emotions like spirits from a magic box — in this case, Pandora's bentwood box, exquisitely shaped and carved by First Peoples, and by Joseph himself. The designs are ancient.

In museums around the world, as far away as Paris, St. Petersburg, Russia and many other major centers in America, Tlingit and Northwest coastal art holds the respect of art critics and the public alike. Cedar boxes, masks, helmets, weavings, intricate fishing lures, cedar hats and robes, canoes and totem poles — all are crafted in exquisite design that emotes a hidden response one might define as "the power of art." All this delivered, part and parcel, from First Nation Peoples who have carved and designed for thousands of years.

Joseph is often the guest of honor, lecturer and demonstrator in both famous civic centers and small native villages that punctuate the Northwest coast. Art remains a measure of a human quest to express oneself, to step beyond the common and extract a story or message. To impact. Joseph has that down cold. Even his small items like pipes (shaped by the Tlingit people from the barrels of Russian rifles as early as the 18th century), miniature canoes and ceremonial eating bowls reflect back on traditional carving while spiking deep modern expression. And his totems, rising majestically into a miasma of ever-changing skies of the Pacific Northwest, cry out

for an emotional response.

Joseph lost his father when he was 6 years old. He barely knew his grandfather, a respected elder among the Tlingit people. In a third-grade workshop, Joseph picked up a carving knife and whittled out a traditional native halibut hook. He was captivated, and has never relinquished the joy of that first carving.

His mother began to complain. "Tommy, she would say, I need my kitchen knives back," Joseph said. But no one could hold back a welling in the belly that Joseph felt when sharp steel peeled away layers of soft cedar and freed the captured forms inside.

Joseph is in a constant quest to study the artwork of his ancestors. He haunts museums, seeking them out across America and Europe. He is always a welcomed guest. Those institutes include the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, the American Museum of Natural History, and others in Paris and Moscow.

Does all this go to his head? One friend who knows him well spoke candidly, "the man is humble but strong." And so has been my experience. The artist is proud, both his pride and determination etch his strong face, his steady brown eyes.

We discover his totems in Southeast Alaska and beyond, and obviously in Sheet'ka (Sitka), where 14 stand, dominating the city like five-story buildings. The Tlingit outpost predates the famous pyramids of Egypt, shaped, stone by stone, with many of the similar hand tools Joseph utilizes today. Think about that. 10,000 years. Nomadic people traveling before the great North American glaciers and establishing this refuge in this lovely archipelago, and then, sticking to home like glue.

Pit his carvings against Rodin or Bernini, against modern sculptors like Louise Nevelson or Pablo Picasso, who, incidentally, adored and borrowed ideas from indigenous peoples.

Joseph's art may not bring in \$30 million a pop, but his pieces lack nothing when singing their song; when reaching out to touch us, body and soul.

Though, at times, modern in their adaptation, Joseph's art mirrors a besieged culture that retains the proud heritage of a remarkable First Nations People. The Tlingit.

And Joseph has never forgotten his own. 



Tommy Joseph.



Joseph at work.



Photos by David Campiche

A totem carving by Tommy Joseph in Sitka, Alaska.