

monuments “have been a big success with plenty of positive feedback. Now we have a physical place where people can go and commemorate.”²¹⁸

Bearing witness to the child:

Children’s art from the Alberni residential school

The story of a small collection of children’s art created at the Alberni residential school in the 1950s and 1960s demonstrates how recognizing and respecting Indigenous protocols and practices of ceremony, testimony, and witnessing can breathe life, healing, and transformation into public memory making through dialogue, the arts, and commemoration. The story has deep roots within the family histories of the Survivors and in the oral history and community memory of the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples.

The paintings from the Alberni residential school are part of a larger collection of Indigenous children’s art donated to the University of Victoria in 2009 by the late artist Robert Aller. As a resident of Port Alberni, British Columbia, Aller initially volunteered his time to teach art classes to selected students outside of the regular curriculum at the residential school. He was hired by Indian Affairs to teach art between 1956 and 1987 at the Alberni school, and also at the McKay residential school in Dauphin, Manitoba, as well as in Aboriginal communities in several other provinces.

There are over 750 paintings in the collection, including 36 paintings from the Alberni residential school. Aller also donated to the university his private papers, and hundreds of photographs, slides, and archival documents that detail his teaching philosophy and approach to art. Aller did not agree with the philosophy behind the residential schools. He saw art as a way to free students from their everyday environment and as a way for them to express their creativity, through either traditionally inspired works, or paintings that used the theories and ideas of the contemporary art world. The paintings from the Alberni residential school portray images of landscapes, people, animals, masks, and traditional stories, as well as some images of the school itself. Most of the artists signed their paintings, putting their age next to their name. In this sense, the children stand out; the anonymity that depersonalizes so much of the residential school history is removed.

In 2010, University of Victoria’s Dr. Andrea Walsh, who was in the early stages of a research project on the art collection, met with the Commissioners and we urged her to begin her research with ceremony. She turned to two Elders from the First Peoples House at the university to guide her in this process: Tousilum (Ron George), who is a residential school Survivor; and Sulsa’meeth (Deb George), his wife. They helped her to reach out to Survivors, Elders, and chiefs in Port Alberni in Nuu-chah-nulth territory when the group travelled there with the paintings. As community members leafed through the paintings drawn by children’s hands so many years ago, memories were shared about the artists, the school, and the parents and communities they had left behind.