



The art world has lost a master carver, painter, teacher and mentor to young artists. John Livingston died from cancer on March 9, 2019 at the age of 67.

On Thursday, his lifelong friend Pamela Madoff remembered Livingston as a modest and unassuming man.

“It will be a challenge to write about him. I don’t think people will realize what we’ve lost,” said Madoff “Not only was John an extraordinary carver, but he was tireless in his support and mentoring of young artists.”

The former city councillor has photos of Livingston, working away behind the scenes. “When Chief Tony Hunt’s totem was installed in the conference centre for its grand opening, John is in the background, lifting and organizing, anything that would assist with the installation,” she said.

Livingston was not Indigenous by birth. His mother, Dorothy, was instrumental in creating the Victoria Native Friendship Centre and this brought Livingston into contact with a large urban Aboriginal community. Livingston became friends with Henry Hunt, whose father Mungo Martin was head carver for the Thunderbird Park carving program of the Royal B.C. Museum.

From 1971 to 1981, he and Calvin Hunt apprenticed with Tony Hunt Sr., carving totems at Thunderbird Park. Livingston learned the basics of design, tool techniques and hand skills. He worked on more than 25 large totems.

The two men kept in touch and worked together on large projects for the past 48 years. This year, they had three big jobs lined up, including a 60-foot totem in Port Alberni for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Hunt said Thursday, reached by phone at his Copper Maker Art Gallery in Port Hardy.

“His knowledge and skills were incredible. He’s truly going to be missed in the art world. Lots of young people looked to him for guidance because of his knowledge and his connection to the art world,” Hunt said.

Livingston was very good at replicating different styles — Tlingit, Bella Bella, Nisga’a. “He could copy any style of Northwest Coast art,” Hunt said. “He and I replicated many Kwakwaka’wakw-style poles.”

Hunt said he is most proud of the totem pole they carved at Broadmead Lodge that honours Canada's Indigenous war veterans. "It's one of our finest poles. We also carved a 25-foot feast dish for the Canadian Museum of History," Hunt said.

In 2017, Hunt adopted Livingston into their family. "He was my brother. We grew up together." Thirty chiefs were present to witness the adoption, said Hunt. "There was lots of support for what we had done for him."

Livingston's wife, Maxine Matilpi, said he believed in giving back to the art world. "Our ancestors passed it on from generation to generation and he believed in not being boastful about it," she said. "He was very humble about being an artist, when he was legally adopted into Calvin's family; it just solidified John belonging to the Kwakwaka'wakw people. Our people always considered him to be one of us." Hunt's nephew Mervyn Childs met Livingston in 1974 during a commercial fishing expedition with the Hunt family. "John was really, really generous with his knowledge and confidence," Childs said. "They gifted him with knowledge and he was prepared to share it. One of his biggest contributions was sharing his knowledge with students and tutors." Livingston's work is all over the Pacific Northwest, Childs said. "His story's big. It's too big to quantify here. He influenced and taught lots of people. The cultural integrity was deeply embedded in who he was and who he would become."

Livingston also worked as an appraiser and as a restorer. In 2011, Livingston and Matilpi did restoration work on Victoria's best-known totem in Beacon Hill Park. In 2013, they restored a pair of B.C. totems at Stanford University.

Livingston is survived by his 95-year-old father Edmund, Matilpi and five children from their blended family, Jason, Ann-Marie, Aubrey, Mandy and Carla, four grandchildren, sisters Mary, Ann, Jean and Ellen, brother Bill and his adopted family Calvin and Marie Hunt.

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The following article was published in the Globe and Mail two years before his death:

Noted Victoria artist John Livingston, who was also a fixer, contractor and onetime gallerist, devoted his life to weaving together disparate parts of his adopted Indigenous community with tools that included common sense, a list of extensive contacts and an encyclopedic memory.

"John could always somehow bring all sides together," said Martin Segger, the former director of art galleries and collections at the University of Victoria. "If you had problems or issues, be it in the field of restoration or acquisitions or the carrying out of a commission on time, you'd turn to him."

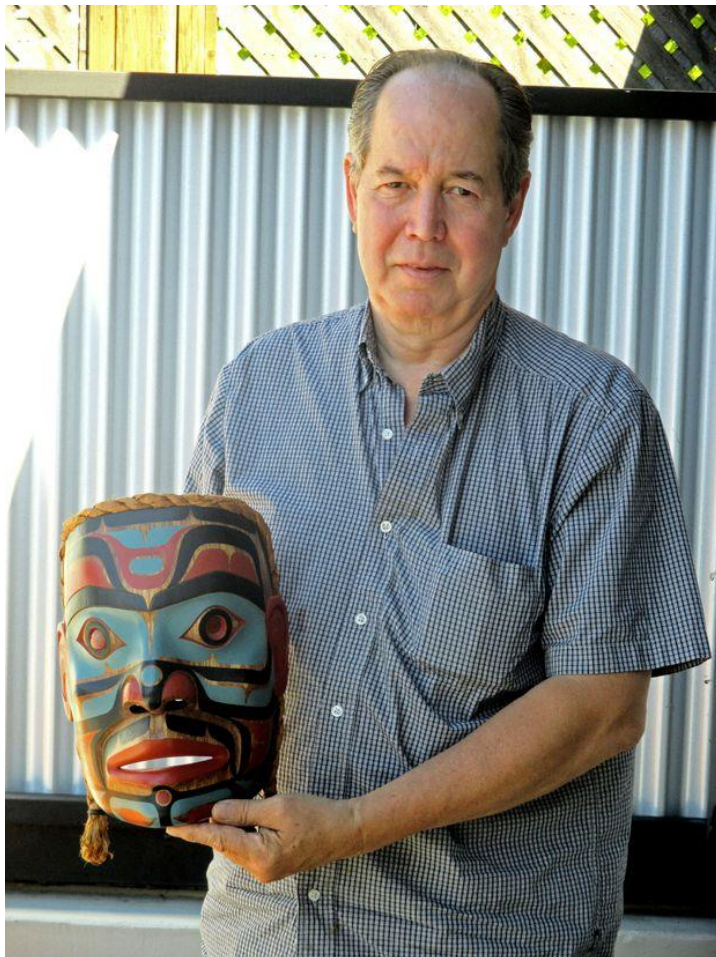
A tall, lanky white man who was in high school when he first met the members of the Hunt clan, the Kwakwaka'wakw family that would later adopt him in a formal ceremony in the "Big House" in Fort Rupert, Mr. Livingston died on March 9 in Victoria of complications from cancer. He was 67 years old.

"I didn't grow up with my siblings because they were so much older. Instead, John was my brother and my best friend," said Calvin Hunt, an internationally renowned carver of totem poles who, with his wife, Marie Hunt, opened the Copper Maker Gallery in Port Hardy 30 years ago. "We worked together for 48 years, arguing, drawing and changing things on the fly. It was comfortable and challenging and wonderful all at once. We were like an old married couple.

"I'll miss his knowledge, his great sense of humour and his willingness to be there for anybody," Mr. Hunt continued. "John really understood how a culture was supposed to be."

Indeed, Mr. Livingston understood the culture so deeply, Kaleb Child, the director of indigenous education for the provincial education ministry, invoked the image of the cedar tree, which is at the root, or heart, of Kwakwaka'wakw life, when describing his friend.

"John was that connecting braid of cedar rope, a mastermind of professionalism who, with his cultural knowledge and humility, was an ambassador for our communities."



*Livingston, seen here in 2016, was born in Vancouver, on the Northwest Coast of British Columbia, Canada in 1951.*

John Edmund Livingston was born in Vancouver on July 21, 1951, the eldest of Edmund and Dorothy Livingston's six children. His father, who was from New York, was a geological engineer who often travelled for long stretches as part of his work as a groundwater hydrology specialist for the B.C. government. His mother, from northern New York State, was ahead of her time, a feminist with a master's degree in social work and a somewhat laissez-faire attitude when it came to raising her offspring, if only because her husband was absent much of the time because of his work and, for much of young John's childhood, she always seemed to have a baby at her hip.

"We moved a lot in those early years and there was a kid born at each stop," said

Ann Livingston, one of Mr. Livingston's four sisters and a long-time advocate for the downtrodden in Vancouver notorious Downtown Eastside. "Besides Vancouver, there was Nelson, then Salmo and Kamloops before we finally moved to Victoria."

The family had no television and the Livingston children led “free-range” lives before the term was ever popularized. Sometimes young John, a top student and strong athlete who swam and played Little League, overstepped whatever bounds existed, such as the time in Kamloops when he dove off a wooden railroad bridge into the Thompson River below.

“When the police told our mother what had happened, her heart just stopped,” Ms. Livingston recalled. “There was no more jumping off of bridges.”

In 1962, the family moved to Victoria, where the father continued to work for the provincial government until the marriage fell apart; he became a consultant, moving back to the mainland and leaving the family behind. For her part, Ms. Livingston became a psychiatric social worker with Saanich Mental Health and for years supported grassroots causes such as anti-poverty and social-housing programs. From her early example, the children learned to look outward; making friends in different communities, forging lasting relationships and, for young John at least, developing a lifelong passion for native art and culture.

In 1965, while in his mid-teens, Mr. Livingston began a carving and design apprenticeship at the Royal British Columbia Museum under the tutelage of carver Henry Hunt and his son, Tony Hunt. Painstakingly, through the nicks, cuts and callouses, he learned about choosing a log, about carving, paints and patinas, and tool techniques and restoration.

Three years later, after finishing the apprenticeship, he immersed himself in the métier full time and, with Tony Hunt, opened a Victoria gallery in 1969 that would help push Indigenous art out of kitschy tourist shops and into a world frequented by monied collectors who understood, or wanted to understand, what the two men were trying to do.

Called Arts of the Raven, the gallery was a place where quality was the rule, no matter how much, or little, an item cost. The two men had high standards, although Mr. Livingston, typical of his nature, tended to give most of the credit to his friend and mentor.

“If something was bad, [Tony Hunt] would say so, just like that,” Mr. Livingston told The Globe and Mail after Mr. Hunt died in December, 2017. “You’d get this snowball effect, with Tony teaching people and his students teaching others, so that directly and indirectly, he influenced a huge portion of artists working today.”

Yet, so did Mr. Livingston. Mervyn Child, a carver who works with Calvin and Marie Hunt at the Copper Maker Gallery, said: “Johnny taught us confidence. He instilled it in us, and always continued to build on it, no matter how many years had passed. He was that generous.”

Although the gallery closed in 1989, a victim of its own success and the subsequent higher rents in the city’s downtown core, Mr. Livingston carried on, steeping himself ever further into his adopted culture. Over the years, he was given a number of special names and his life partner was Maxine Matilpi, a creator of button blankets and hereditary chief, whom he called “Loved One.” Together they created a raucous, energetic family that included his two children from previous relationships and her own.

His work with artists from other Indigenous nations – Haida carvers Robert Davidson and Don Yeomans, and Musqueam Coast Salish artist Susan Point, among others – served to enhance his reputation as one who made projects better and helped bring them in on time.

For his own work, his primary medium was wood; he had an unerring eye for logs and was able to determine quickly if they should be carved in the round or with a flat back. He was also an accomplished painter who managed to release more than 50 limited-edition prints.

“As an artist, he was meticulous and as a consultant, if he thought there was a better way, he would say what he was thinking,” Calvin Hunt said. “Most times, people would listen.”