

“THAT’S MY DINNER ON DISPLAY”:

A First Nations Reflection on Museum Culture

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INTRODUCTION¹

ONE OF THE FIRST MUSEUMS I visited was the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM) in Victoria. As a Nuu-chah-nulth person I was naturally drawn to its *First Peoples* exhibit. My initial reaction was one of delight. It was what historian Ludmilla Jordanova describes as typical: “childish awe at the stupendous variety of natural objects and artifacts.”² The visit left a marked impression on me – about where I came from and who I was. Later, when university studies set me on a path of critical reflection, that childish gaze shifted. Gradually I adopted a sharper view of museums as institutions holding the “captured heritage”³ of First Nations cultures. In her essay, “Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums,” Jordanova examines the ties between museums and knowledge. She argues that, although we learn things from museums, we still lack an understanding of how people perceive the objects they view: audience reactions can vary greatly.⁴ As a First Nations observer of the *First Peoples* exhibit, I identified with Jordanova’s point. These extraordinary objects in the glass display cases still have a voice; they still have force, and we continue to be influenced by them. They have a powerful effect on my culture. As Michael Ames, former director of the UBC Museum of Anthropology (MOA) notes, First Nations peoples are tainted by

¹ Special thanks go to Heather Gleboff, Alex Long, Laura Sjolie, Cari St. Pierre, Dr. Wendy Wickwire, and Dr. Paul Wood for their comments on early drafts of this article.

² Ludmilla Jordanova, “Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums,” in *The New Museology*, ed. Peter Vergo (London: Reaktion, 1989), 22.

³ From the title of the book by Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995).

⁴ Jordanova, “Objects of Knowledge,” 23.

their "ethnological fate of always being presented and treated as anthropological specimens."⁵

This article pursues these ideas, emphasizing the uniqueness of a First Nations perspective on the RBCM's permanent *First Peoples* exhibit. It explores the notion that many objects housed in this display may not be entirely defunct and antiquated. It also suggests a need to examine critically museum representations of First Nations cultures. The style of the article is personal, drawing on my reflections while guiding a non-First Nations group through the exhibit on 2 December 1997.⁶

MY TOUR BEGINS

"Mmm. That's my dinner on display," I say, as we approach the display case labelled "Technology, Food Quest/Coast, Processing" at the beginning of the "pre-contact" section of the exhibit. The case contains fishing items as well as what appear to be dried, split salmon, dried clams, and other traditional foods. "But First Nations people *still* fish," I explain to my group, "and they continue even now to process fish in ways similar to those displayed here." Kitty-corner to this display case is another, featuring more traditional fishing items. A whaling tool has been removed from this case for a special whaling exhibit downstairs, according to the notes on a label that stands in its place: "Artifact Temporarily Removed." "Ooo! That sounds ominous," I exclaim to my listeners, as I ponder its transfer to a new location.

Acting as a guide through the *First Peoples* exhibit made me realize my ability to convey a different view of First Nations history and cultures. I felt impassioned in the museum setting. I wanted to argue that First Nations peoples are not dead but still live in the here and now. I reflected on a statement by Deborah Doxtator, a Mohawk historian/museologist who curated the 1989 exhibit *Fluffs and Feathers: An Exhibit on the Symbols of Indianness* at the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario. "Real 'Indianness,'" she explains, "was represented in museums as all those traditions and technologies that anthropologists deemed to be existent before the coming of the European. To see change or European influence in the construction of an object was to see loss of culture, acculturation. As a result, exhibits

⁵ Michael Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), 79.

⁶ The group was comprised of graduate students from the Department of History, University of Victoria.

about Native cultures were invariably labeled in the past tense."⁷ I felt a need to offer some explanations during my tour so that our cultural heritage would not be seen as dead, reducible to "objects temporarily removed" or, worse still, displayed permanently in glass cases.

The museum's role in representing First Nations cultures has a history that is now more than a century old. It is a history embedded within colonialism. As the recent *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* notes, "we simply cannot understand the depth of these issues or make sense of the current debate without a solid grasp of the shared history of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on this continent."⁸ This report views the past as more than an academic problem.

The lunge for anthropological artefacts on the Northwest Coast took place between 1875 and 1925, a period now referred to as the "museum age." During these years commissioned collectors and others scamped through every corner of this region in search of all varieties of cultural objects. Anything and everything associated with traditional culture was gathered up and prepared for some form of preservation, scientific study, or display. As Douglas Cole explains in depth in his book *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts*, it was a movement whose goal was to fill a group of large, newly formed museums in Canada, the United States, and Europe. Competition was fierce. For much of the time, the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, the Field Museum in Chicago, and the National Museum in Washington, DC, led the race.

The conditions on the Northwest Coast at that time were ripe for museum collectors. Cole gives three explanations for this.⁹ First, the Northwest Coast was one of the only parts of North America where rich and striking material cultures could still be obtained in relatively complete form. Second, the changes brought on by Westernization (e.g., population loss due to disease and the introduction of European-manufactured goods) had generated a surplus of traditional material items. "There may have been," states Cole, "more *hamatsa* masks than society members to wear them."¹⁰ Third, the introduction of European tools and forms of wealth had stimulated "a florescence of artistic production" at the turn of the century. Many ethnological items were

⁷ Deborah Doxtator, "The Home of Indian Culture and Other Stories in the Museum," *Muse* 6, 3 (1988): 26-7.

⁸ Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, vol. 1, *Looking Forward, Looking Back* (Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1996), 31.

⁹ Cole, *Captured Heritage*, 294-5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*



Plate 1: This Edward Curtis photograph is a copy of the first photomural in the pre-contact section. Entitled "Nootkan harpooner, 1915," it appears alongside the Coastal food processing display on the mezzanine level. BC Archives, HP 074515."



Plate 2: This photograph is taken from Curtis's film, *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914). A short segment of the film featuring the arrival of the canoes replays continuously in the *First Peoples* exhibit. BC Archives, HP 074718.

not performing one scene “properly” that he actually “dressed-up” in costume and performed the scene himself. Because I knew these details about the film, I could not take it seriously.

As I watch other viewers transfixed by the film, I am tempted to blurt out the underlying story; instead, I convey this detail only to my group. It annoys me to think that Curtis may have shrieked impatiently, “You don’t know how to behave like an *Indian*. Get out of that blessed costume and let me show you how to be *you*.” Hmph ... Indeed, I do well enough on my own, Edward Curtis, but thank you anyway.

I take a deep breath in order to regain a grip on my own cultural identity. Aside from being slighted by this false representation, I can only guess that the Kwakwaka’wakw people at that time must have found Curtis amusing. Curtis pressed hard because he believed that Aboriginal peoples throughout North America were on the verge of extinction. He had joined the race to “fill the showcases of newly emerging anthropological museums throughout the continent with reminders of these ‘vanishing’ civilizations.”¹⁶ However, there are few written documents that present First Nations perspectives on this looting of culture.

¹⁶ Cheryl Coull and Theresa O’Leary, “One Man’s Bid to Shelve a Civilization,” *Beautiful British Columbia*, Fall 1997, 32.

a "renewable resource."¹¹ Any museum that did not compete in this scramble risked being left out and impoverished. "Impoverished!" Indeed, I can recall many times throughout my life feeling impoverished, deprived of the capacity to carry on "this culture."

But back to my tour ... My group suddenly finds itself surrounded by a series of larger-than-life Edward Curtis photomurals (plate 1). Our RBCM guidebook describes these as "glimpses of early Native life."¹² My eyes fixate on those words, and I nervously ask myself, "Where do I fit into this picture? What constitutes being *Koo us*¹³ (Nuu-chah-nulth for First Nations "people")? Am I *truly* rooted in First Nations culture?" Maybe not. I realize that certain parts of the *First Peoples* exhibit make me feel uneasy about my own identity.

As my group arrives at the next part of the exhibit, I draw their attention to the notice: "You Are Now Entering the Second Part of This Gallery... The Coming of the White People." A short clip from Edward Curtis's 1914 film, *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (retitled, in 1924, *In the Land of the War Canoes*) immediately catches our attention. Anthropologist James Clifford has commented on the effects of Curtis's film in this exhibit. He found the images of traditional canoes with masked dancers in the bows "mesmerizing" in their display of familiar masks and canoes in motion (plate 2).¹⁴ While the masks and canoes *are* mesmerizing, the real story behind the moving images is hidden from view. I convey this to my group.

Apparently, while staging this contrived dramatic production, Edward Curtis actually had a house built for the film, used the same stretch of beach repeatedly, had over twenty-one masks made, and had all of the male actors shave off their mustaches for fear that White audiences would not see them as authentic "Indians."¹⁵ Word has it that he became so frustrated with his Kwakwaka'wakw "actors" for

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Royal British Columbia Museum, *Royal British Columbia Museum Exhibit Highlights* (Victoria: Beach Holme, 1992), 18.

¹³ For lack of an adequate English translation, I use the Nuu-chah-nulth language here. *Koo us* means "I, or we as a living people"; *Nuu-chah-nulth* means "all along the mountains." *Maa malthni* refers to White people, or "drifters," – "people who drift on the water" – which further refers to those foreigners who first appeared as fur traders in Nuu-chah-nulth territories. Nuu-chah-nulth peoples then believed that these people had nowhere else to go but on the waters.

¹⁴ James Clifford, "Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 216.

¹⁵ Bill Holm and George Irving Quimby, *Edward S. Curtis in the Land of the War Canoes: A Pioneer Cinematographer in the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1980), 34, 52.

"Why does the museum not disclose the stories underlying Curtis's staged film?" asks one member of my group. "Museums, after all," she continues "are Western society's so-called trusted guardians of 'authentic culture' and the places where the cultural traditions of the world are preserved for the interests of future generations." Her question draws me back to my tour. I explain *my* concern regarding two things about this part of the exhibit. First, Curtis superimposed Western society's (and his) assumptions onto *our* cultural identities. Instead of presenting an image of the beliefs and customs of Northwest Coast peoples within the context of their individual cultures, he displayed them in ways that had meaning in *his* world. Second, museum exhibits are not static. They have their own histories, especially in instances in which one culture is represented by another.¹⁷ The *First Peoples* exhibit was designed to fill a large space at the new provincial museum facility opened in 1968.¹⁸ Someone involved in this process decided, for whatever reasons, that this segment of the Curtis film, devoid of an explanation of its context, would be an appropriate prop. This is now part of the exhibit's history.

Museums occupy a rather uneasy place in society. As Michael Ames points out, they are "the self-appointed keepers of other people's material and self-appointed interpreters of others' histories."¹⁹ Much controversy exists around issues of who establishes the right to regulate museum "culture." The example of the Curtis film's production is just one of many. Ames questions whether current practices are actually all that far removed from their early forms:

Museum exhibition techniques continue to impose academic classifications – our "glass boxes" of interpretation – upon diverse cultures. The sizes and shapes of these boxes have changed with the theoretical fashions within anthropology – ranging from progressive technology exhibits, comparative, cultural displays of family and work groups, and dioramas or stage sets to demonstrations and performances. They always remain anthropological boxes, however, "freezing" others into academic categories and to that mythical anthropological notion of time called the "ethnographic present."²⁰

¹⁷ I refer to Western culture as "another." "Another" is my own symbolic representation, since, in academic literature, "other" usually refers to First Nations.

¹⁸ Originally called, "First Peoples: Indian Cultures in British Columbia," it did not open officially until 7 January 1977. See Peter Corley-Smith, *The Ring of Time: The Story of the British Columbia Provincial Museum*, British Columbia Special Museum Publication 8 (Victoria, 1985), 46.

¹⁹ Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 140.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Given that those who interpret the past are generally the ones who gain from such endeavours, it would make sense to give First Nations peoples some authority with regard to presenting the circumstances surrounding their own lives. This move is certainly supported by contemporary theorists such as James Clifford.²¹ My criticism of the museum's use of the Curtis film and photographs derives from a personal objective – to free myself and other First Nations peoples from being displayed as yet another “anthropological specimen.”²²

First Nations people in British Columbia have now been the subjects of museum displays and anthropological study for over a century. Finally some are beginning to question the entire process. Doxtator argues that, while society in general supports the continuation and preservation of Native cultures, it also expects that cultural objects from the past be “preserved” in glass cases with humidity controls and be separated from community use.²³ Chief Bernard Ominayak of the Lubicon Lake Band, in an interview concerning the subject of appropriation, suggests that “if you're keeping an artifact you have to have the consent of the aboriginal people and make sure the true picture is shown.”²⁴ Ruth Phillips, director of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, notes that such comments from the indigenous community stress the need for “better contextualization of historical objects, one that is connected to the realities of contemporary Native life rather than a mythic past.”²⁵ Ames also does a good job of distilling and presenting the First Nations perspective:

What is significant is that by the 1980s, after one hundred years and more of boxing others, museums (and their academic counterparts) are only now beginning to hear what the objects of classification, especially those same indigenous groups, have been saying all along: they want out of the boxes, they want their materials back, and they want control of their own history and its interpretation, whether the vehicles of expression be museum exhibits, classroom discourses, or scholarly papers, textbooks, and monographs.²⁶

²¹ James Clifford, “On Collecting Art and Culture,” *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 215–51.

²² Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 79.

²³ Doxtator, “The Home of Indian Culture and Other Stories in the Museum,” 27.

²⁴ Ruth Phillips, “Indian Art: Where Do You Put It?” *Muse* 6, 3 (1988): 65.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 140.

Museums impart strong impressions of First Nations peoples to the outside world. Ironically, for many people, this will be their only contact with First Nations cultures. Considering that they operate from positions of such power, what sorts of recommendations can we, as members of First Nations communities, make to museums? In the case of the RBCM, a few minor changes would go a long way. Its guidebook notes of the Curtis photos in the *First Peoples* exhibit that: "Faces convey powerful impressions. The names and deeds of these individuals are lost to us."²⁷ Contrary to the guidebook, however, the names and deeds may not be entirely "lost" to us. The second photomural on the left wall of the mezzanine, just past the entrance to the pre-contact section, features an image of two women in cedar-bark apparel by the water's edge (plate 3). The name of the woman on the left was not "lost" to her daughter, Alice Paul; nor was it "lost" to me. It was "Virginia Tom." I knew the name well because both Virginia and her daughter Alice came from Nuu-chah-nulth territory. I lived for some years with Joe Tom Junior and Regina Tom. Alice Paul was Joe Tom Junior's aunt and so visited many times. She often spoke of her mother, Virginia Tom, who had posed for Edward Curtis. Alice had spotted photographs of her mother in a variety of sources, including books and postcards, but none had named her. So it was a very exciting day when Alice Paul arrived at our house with a book, Ruth Kirk's *Wisdom of the Elders*,²⁸ that finally included Virginia Tom's name in the photograph's caption. The photograph of Virginia Tom and, for that matter, the photographs of other First Nations people on display obviously convey different meanings to me than they do to most people moving through the exhibit. As the case of Virginia Tom illustrates, even a limited amount of community research might reveal that the names and deeds of others among those faces on display are not "lost to us."²⁹ For my group, at least one of the images now conveyed some individuality.

The Curtis photographs generate lots of discussion. Everyone agrees that they shed light on such things as the shift from traditional to

²⁷ *Royal British Columbia Museum Exhibit Highlights*, 18.

²⁸ Ruth Kirk, *Wisdom of the Elders: Native Traditions on the Northwest Coast, The Nuu-chah-nulth, Southern Kwakiutl and Nuxalk* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1986), 15. Alice Paul told Ruth Kirk, "I always see her picture ... Everytime I look at the books, she's there. But they never use her name, just 'Hesquiaht woman.' But I know her name. It's Virginia Tom." At the time of the photo, her mother was working in a cannery in Clayoquot and her father had shipped out on a sealing schooner. Her mother had been picked to pose "because she could make those bark clothes and the baskets. Make them real fast."

²⁹ In fact, some of the names of the individuals portrayed in the Curtis photographs are available in the records of the museum's own photographic archives.



Plate 3: This Edward Curtis photograph of two Nuuchahnulth women in cedar-bark attire is a copy of a prominent photomural in the exhibit. The woman in the canoe was identified by Alice Paul as *Virginia Tom*. Royal BC Museum, PN 5419

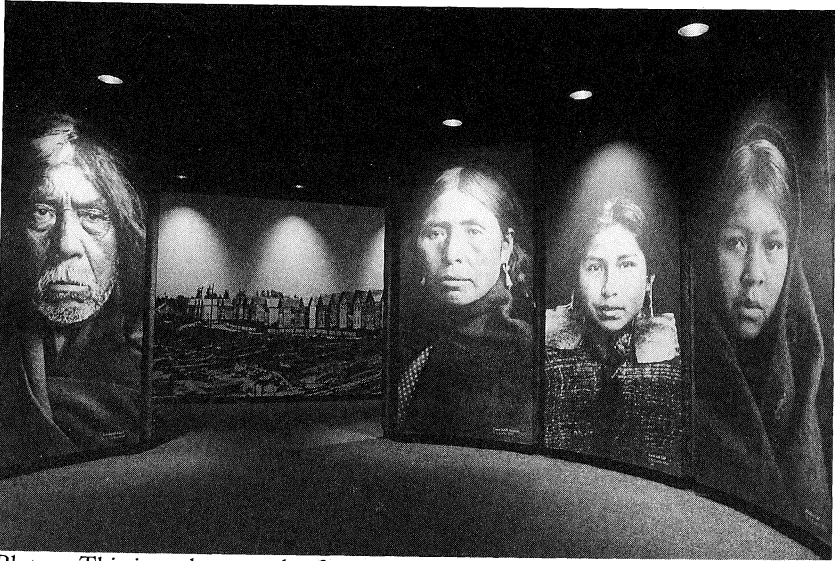


Plate 4: This is a photograph of a portion of a portrait gallery in the *First Peoples* exhibit. Royal BC Museum, PN 13200/IIA

modern life – Virginia Tom’s cedar-bark apparel was given up for Western-style dress, her canoe for motorized vessels, her basket for a handbag containing the cash necessary for trips to grocery and hardware stores. However, saying that she yielded to modern conveniences does not, by any means, imply that she abandoned her cultural language, knowledge, practices, and convictions. I use the example of myself to illustrate that the simple adoption of European clothing and conveniences does not require the abandonment of one’s culture.

The Curtis photographs raise more questions. One small section of the exhibit features huge wall-mural portraits of eight nameless individuals labelled “Coast Salish Woman,” “Kwakiutl Girl,” “Haida Girl,” and “Kwakiutl Man,” etc (plate 4).” Four females on the right face four males on the left. There are a number of striking features about these photographs. Although this small portrait gallery introduces the “Demography/Post-contact” section, any links between these individuals and the times – circa 1914 – are masked by neck-high woolen blankets or cedar-bark capes. The faces of all four men, displayed together on the left wall, are framed by loose, unkempt, shoulder-length hair, creating a look of “wildness” (plate 5). Three of the men may be wearing wigs. Each of the four women is portrayed with neatly tied-back hair, creating a more groomed effect (see plate 4). One individual, described only as “Kwakiutl man, 1914” wears a

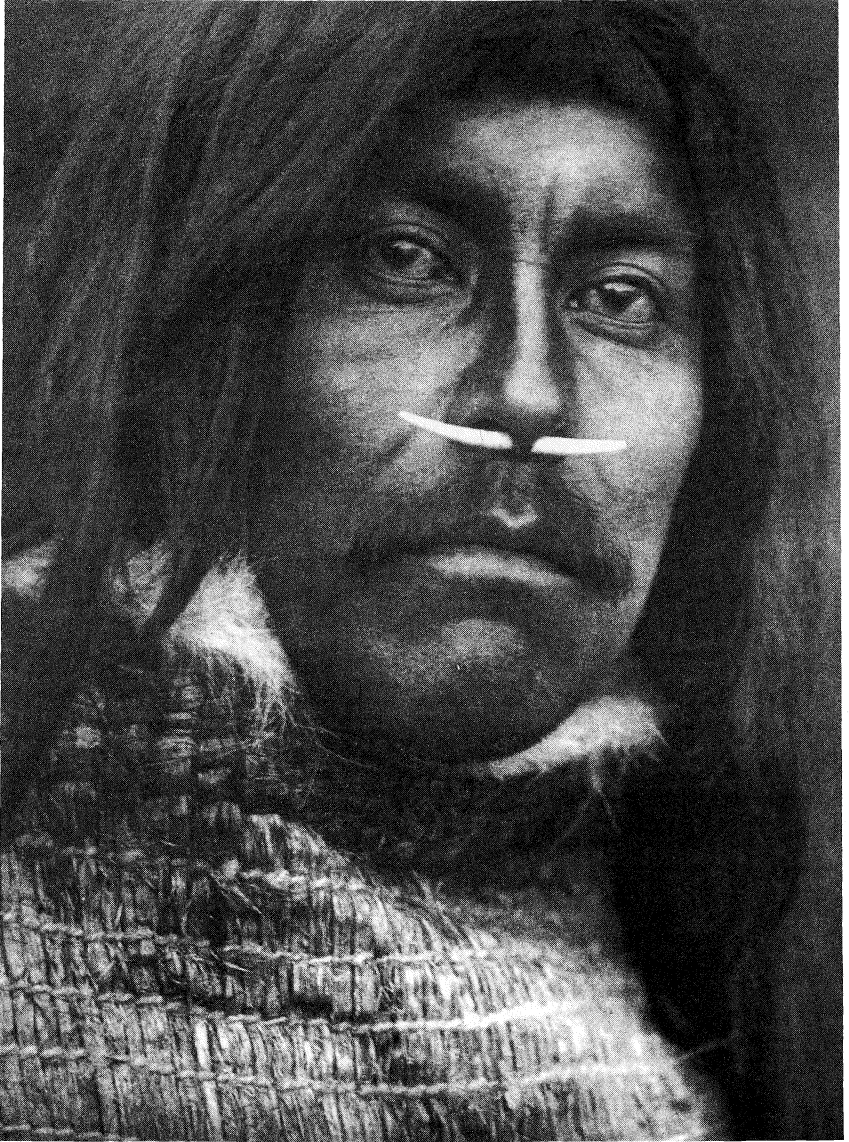


Plate 5: This Edward Curtis photograph entitled “Kwakiutl man, 1914” features one of the four males displayed on the left wall of the small portrait gallery in the exhibit. His hair has a wig-like appearance; his nose ornament is probably air-brushed; and his cedar-bark cape masks all signs of Western dress. BC Archives, HP 74472.

nose ornament, which, on close examination, looks distinctly air-brushed (plate 5).³⁰ The "Kwakiutl girl" wears a pair of large abalone earrings, similar to a pair worn by an older "Kwakiutl woman" featured in well-known Curtis photographs published elsewhere (plate 6).³¹ My group notices these details. Perhaps the capes, jewellery, and wigs came from Curtis's bag of costumes and accessories, which he was said to carry with him from community to community. The "Nootkan harpooner, 1915" in one photograph (see plate 1) wears a cedar-bark cape similar in detail to that worn by numerous others featured in Curtis's Northwest Coast photos, for example, Virginia Tom's companion (plate 3), Francine Hunt (plate 6), the "Kwakiutl man" (plate 5), and the "Kwakiutl girl" (plate 4). How many traditional codes of dress were broken by this "dressing-up" drill? The Curtis photos demonstrate how much information is simply being left out of the exhibits. While they may be beautiful, they do not express the thousand words behind the image.

Some First Nations communities have established their own museums in the hope of filling them with repatriated artefacts. The Kwakwaka'wakw community at Alert Bay, near the northern tip of Vancouver Island, is one of these. Some years ago it founded the U'mista Museum with the objective of taking back its cultural lives – past, present, and future. Ironically, I was recently in their museum simply to pass the time while waiting for my sister's rehabilitation ceremonies to begin in a nearby building. We were there to witness her reclaim her own identity and culture. The visit to that museum, however, triggered thoughts of repatriation. I imagined Kwakwaka'wakw elders from the Alert Bay area singing in appreciation of the return of their hallowed treasures. Gloria Cranmer Webster, a long-time director of the U'mista Museum, explains that the notion of "taking back" motivates everything about this museum. It fit with what my sister was doing that day:

³⁰ Nose rings were rare on the Northwest Coast by 1914.

³¹ Curtis's photographs of the older woman (see plate 6) appear in numerous sources. See, for example, Edward S. Curtis, *In a Sacred Manner We Live: Photographs of the North American Indian*, with an introduction and commentary by Don D. Fowler (New York: Weathervane, 1972), 123; see also Daniel Francis, *Copying People: Photographing British Columbia's First Nations, 1860-1940* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1996), 59. Francis identifies the woman as Francine Hunt, wife of George Hunt of Fort Rupert. She also appears without a nose ring or bracelets wearing European-style clothing in a photograph by J. B. Scott (*Copying People*, 69). According to Francis, the portrait "Kwakiutl girl" in plate 4 is from a village at the head of Knight's Inlet (65).



Plate 6: Curtis took a series of photographs of this woman sitting in this pose. According to one source she is "Francine Hunt of Fort Rupert." Note that her abalone earrings and cedar-bark cape are similar to those worn by the "Kwakiutl Girl" featured in the portrait gallery of the *First Peoples* exhibit (see plate 4). Wife of George Hunt, she also appears in Plate 1 of Ira Jacknis's article in this issue. BC Archives, HP 074505.

We do not have a word for repatriation in the Kwak'wala language. The closest we come to it is the word *u'mista*, which describes the return of something important. We are working towards the *u'mista* of much that was almost lost to us. The return of the potlatch collection is one *u'mista*. The renewed interest among younger people in learning about their cultural history is a kind of *u'mista*. We are taking back, from many sources, information about our culture and our history, to help us rebuild our world which was almost shattered during the bad times.³²

It is the shattered times, the bad times, that dominate the mainstream public historical record of First Nations lives. The exceptional wisdom in First Nations communities, to a large degree, is unknown to the non-Native community. The stories behind the masks, regalia, canoes, whaling gear, and cedar-tree products remain silent. First Nations peoples are establishing their own museums, in part, to replace the image of the "vanishing Indian" with their own stories of revival, remembrance, and struggle. James Clifford challenges mainstream museums to follow this example.³³ At the RBCM permanent *First Peoples* exhibit there is no logical reason for not displaying extensive community-generated commentary alongside those Haida poles and Nuu-chah-nulth masks. Such supplementary details, along with stories of the collectors and "informants" and so on, would strengthen rather than undermine the displays. As Jordanova explains:

Museum labels offer a plurality of taxonomies pertaining to authorship, authenticity, antiquity, value, originality, significance. It is important to recognise that although labels offer a context within which the item in question can be "read," this context is limited, selective and manipulative, since it generally invites visitors to perceive in a particular way. Accordingly, works by unnamed hands are seen and evaluated differently from those by known "masters" – the label that names a maker confers value and status, and thereby constructs a setting for the item.³⁴

³² Gloria Cranmer Webster, "From Colonization to Repatriation," in *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, ed. Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1992), 37. Gloria Cranmer Webster translates "U'mista" as the return of something important. When I wrote that my sister was taking back her culture, I was totally unaware of the connotation of the term "U'mista."

³³ Clifford, "Four Northwest Coast Museums," 214.

³⁴ Jordanova, "Objects of Knowledge," 24.

Before I know it, my tour comes to an end and I stand in the central part of the exhibit surrounded by totem poles and glass cases. My body is weary – weary not from actually walking through the exhibits but from absorbing so much First Nations “past” in such a short space of time. I find a place to sit and think to myself, “Where do I go from here? What can I do?” For a few moments I sit quietly waiting for an answer.

Suddenly, a group of people swarms into my subdued space. These people appear to be students. In a loud voice their instructor tells them to “watch for lines,” “watch for detail” in the totem poles, masks, drums, canoes, Maquinna hats, and so on. I get it. They are taking in a lecture on how to carve out our culture in the form of food samples – ice figurines into totem poles, gingerbread houses into longhouses, little radishes into masks, and chocolate candies into various Northwest Coast designs. Surprisingly, I am not resentful, for I realize that these people are not stealing ideas. They are innocently trying to bridge two cultures.

I head out of the *First Peoples* exhibit and into the museum gift shop, which is full of Christmas novelties for the fast-approaching holiday. Having browsed there earlier, I know exactly what I want to buy. I select a ceramic tile on which is painted a striking image of Santa Claus in his sleigh flying over “the bridge” with his reindeer – all decked out in artistic Northwest Coast design. Eccentric though it may be, it distills the essence of my RBCM experience – that of two cultures on a collision course.