

A RESPONSE TO GLORIA FRANK

“*That’s My Dinner On Display*’:
A First Nations Reflection
on Museum Culture,” *BC Studies* 128
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The Editors:

I am writing to you concerning the article “‘That’s My Dinner on Display’: A First Nations Reflection on Museum Culture” by Gloria Jean Frank, which was published in the Spring/Summer issue of *BC Studies*. My concerns are not about the author’s legitimate personal reactions to this thirty-year-old exhibit. I am concerned, however, by the absence of research and an apparent willingness to distort museum history to critique “museum culture.” The paper was written while Frank was a student and under the supervision of University of Victoria faculty. While it is not my purpose to reflect on academic culture, I do find the standards of critical editorship somewhat weak.

One of Frank’s criticisms concerns the use of Edward S. Curtis’s photographic images at certain points in the exhibit, such as in the smallpox gallery. I hope that this letter will help your readers through Ms. Frank’s puzzlement with the Curtis materials and describe the lengths taken by the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM) to avoid presenting First Nations as “anthropological specimens” – a most unfortunate term that was recycled in the article. One of the things that Frank questions is the use in the exhibit of a short sequence from the 1914 Curtis film, *In the Land of the Head Hunters*. She makes no mention of the place of the film in the exhibit and the narration that goes with it but, rather, concentrates on the assumption that Kwakwaka’wakw people who participated in the film were coerced by Curtis and his assistant, George Hunt. It is important to note that the film was re-released in 1974 with Kwak’wala dialogue and songs to accompany the surviving silent film footage and that Kwakwaka’wakw people, some of whom appeared in the film in 1914, participated in

the soundtrack project in 1972, which took place at the RBCM. This is discussed by Bill Holm and George Quimby (1980, 16-17) as well as by Ira Jacknis (2000, 101). Frank is also concerned that the names of people who posed for the Curtis photographs that are used at certain points throughout the gallery are not on the exhibit labels, which, in keeping with the style of the time, are minimal. She is also concerned that the people are wearing old-style clothing and, in many cases, wigs supplied by the photographer. The problematic nature of the Curtis photographs has been questioned before, in particular by Christopher S. Lyman (1982). Curiously, this publication is not referenced by Frank, nor is Bill Holm's (1983) excellent rebuttal to Lyman.

The most serious charge levelled by Frank concerns the apparent absence of consultation with First Nations peoples: "it would make sense to give First Nations peoples some authority with regard to presenting the circumstances surrounding their lives." Frank writes that her own dinner is on display. Symbolically, this may be true, but it is actually Mrs. Emma Hunt's and Mrs. Elsie Williams' dinners that are shown. Mrs. Hunt and Mrs. Williams were among the First Nations consultants who participated in creating the exhibit.

In September 1972, Peter Macnair, the curator of ethnology who was responsible for the development of the exhibit, wrote to the executive director of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC), Bill Mussell. Macnair invited the UBCIC to participate in the planning of the new exhibits and to "find means of hiring Indian consultants to work with my staff in the actual detailed interpretation of Indian artifacts, social institutions, and the like." The Chiefs Council of the UNCIC appointed Phillip Paul and Simon Lucas to meet with Macnair to review plans. (This correspondence can be found in the RBCM Archives M-20, ORG.) In addition to the discussions that Macnair had with the UBCIC, at least twenty First Nations individuals were involved in the production of the exhibit.

The pithouse at the beginning of the exhibit is based on a museum project that resulted, with the help of Secwepemc elder Issac (Ike) Willard, in the construction of a pithouse at Shuswap Lake Park. Henry Hunt built the salmon trap in the underwater fishing diorama. (It is based on one that his relative, George Hunt, collected for the American Museum of Natural History, New York.) Tommy Hunt (Kwakwaka'wakw) provided the information about halibut gear and the species of salmon that are in the trap. Emma Hunt (Nuu-chah-

nulth/Kwakwaka'wakw) and Elsie Williams (Kwakwaka'wakw) gave the museum direction on the fish processing exhibit. Mrs. Hunt prepared the salmon, which was then cast for display. Mrs. Williams made the processed salmon and the barbecued clams, and she also provided the salmonberry and salalberry cakes. Mrs. Alice Paul (Nuu-chah-nulth) made and attached tumplines for baskets. (The first part of the exhibit was designed to show ways of life and technologies that owed nothing to European influence; one of the cedar-bark tumplines replaced a cotton example that was judged to detract from the illustration of ages-old culture.)

Four Haida artists – Primrose Adams, Reg Davidson, Carrie Weir, and Don Yeomans – were commissioned to make the boxes and other material in the Haida canoe exhibit. Mrs. Paul also contributed a cedar-bark mat and cape to that exhibit. The knives, the adzed board, and all stages of making a bent box shown in the woodworking exhibit were made by Henry Hunt and Richard Hunt, who at the time worked in the museum's Thunderbird Park carving program that was started in 1951 under the direction of Henry Hunt's father-in-law, Chief Mungo Martin. Doug Cranmer (Kwakwaka'wakw) was the model for the man working with the D-adze. The moccasins in the village headman exhibit were made by Mrs. Mable Joe of Shulus in the Nicola Valley.

The regalia worn by the mannequin of the Nisga'a chief is, in large part, from the Frank Bolton family of Kincolith. The Nisga'a artist, Norman Tate, sought approval on the museum's behalf to exhibit the objects. Mr. Tate also modelled for the mannequin on which much of the regalia is seen. Permission to display was sought and received from many of the traditional owners of the masks seen in the cosmology display, including the Schooner family from Bella Coola (Nuxalk) and Chief Peter Smith from Turnour Island (Kwakwaka'wakw). The First Nations voices that tell the stories of the masks are those of Emma Hunt, Monica Paul (Nuu-chah-nulth), and Ed Tatoosh (Nuu-chah-nulth). Advice was sought from Neil Sterrit (Gitxsan) as to the appropriateness of exhibiting images and artefacts associated with Gitxsan and Nisga'a shamanism.

The extreme population loss suffered by First Nations peoples through exposure to communicable European diseases is a key part of the history that is referenced by the exhibit, but it is a difficult subject. Enlarged pages from early newspaper accounts of the outbreak of smallpox in Victoria Harbour in 1862 are used to document

the beginnings of that epidemic and the expulsion of First Nations people who spread the terrible disease northward. First Nations perspective and commentary on this incomprehensible tragedy is given by the Haida artist, Bill Reid. Reid wrote the words that are spoken in the gallery of faces, and it is his powerful voice that you hear.

Another section of the exhibit is dedicated to the suppression and survival of the potlatch. Henry Hunt worked with the designers to ensure the correct positioning of the masks in the Winter Dance showcase and posed for the partial mannequins that support them. The masks were made by Mungo Martin. Permission was sought and received from Chief Peter Knox, Mungo Martin's heir, to use these masks in this museum context. Tommy Hunt directed the creation of the *Potlatch* showcase and supervised details such as the way the silver bracelets are tied to the sticks on which they are displayed.

The Kwakwaka'wakw big house that dominates the central hall of the *First Peoples Exhibit* is the house of Chief Kwakwabalasami, Jonathan Hunt. It was built with his permission and constructed by his son, Henry Hunt, and his grandson, Tony Hunt. The songs that are heard in the house are used with the permission of the owner. Similarly, the songs heard in Nwalagwatsi (the Cave of the Animals) are used with permission. Kwakwaka'wakw singers were hired to tape all the songs appropriately. The Nwalagwatsi exhibit is presented with the permission of the Kwiksootainuk First Nation, within whose territory the cave is located. The right to display the animal kingdom masks in the cave was obtained from Chief Peter Knox, the heir of Mungo Martin who owned this prerogative.

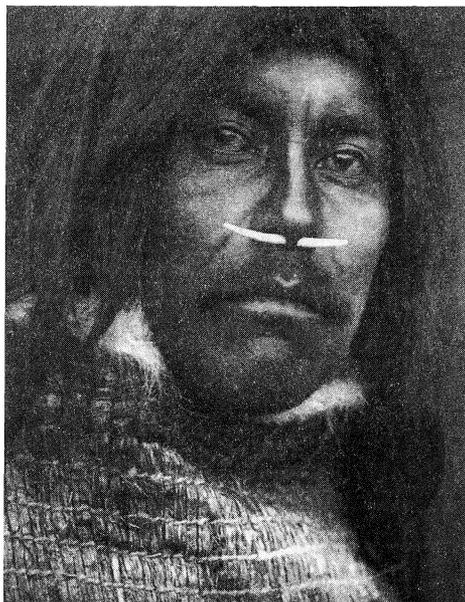
Around the central hall are casts of petroglyphs. They were made with the permission of the First Nations in whose traditional territory the petroglyphs are located. Casts were provided to each of the First Nations who participated in the project.

The above is only a summary, but it points to a significant involvement by First Nations people in the production of the RBCM's permanent *First Peoples Exhibit*. Information can be found in the museum's records; former museum staff who were involved in creating the exhibit can be consulted. Marjorie Halpin's 1978 review of the *First Peoples Exhibit*, published in the Canadian Museum Association's *Gazette*, is not referenced. (It would have been interesting to read Frank's comments on this review of more than twenty years ago.)

The RBCM does not presume to produce exhibits about First Nations subjects without active First Nations involvement and the presence of First Nations voices and concerns. The recent exhibit, *H=uupuK#anum_Tupaat: Treasures of the Nuu-chah-nulth Chiefs* (see Black 1999), is an example of our putting that commitment into practice. The information presented above demonstrates that this commitment is a long-standing tradition at the RBCM (see Hoover and Inglis 1990).

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Edward Curtis, "Francine Hunt of Rupert" in Gloria Frank, "That's My Dinner on Display," *BC Studies* 125/126 (Spring/Summer 2000), 176. BC Archives, HP 074505.