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To cite this version:

Marie Mauzé. Exhibiting one's culture: two case studies. The Kwagiulth Museum and the U'Mista Cultural Centre. European Review of Native American Studies, 1992, 6 (1), pp.27-30. hal-01324204

HAL Id: hal-01324204

https://hal.science/hal-01324204v1

Submitted on 31 May 2016

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MARIE MAUZÉ

EXHIBITING ONE'S CULTURE: TWO CASE STUDIES

The Kwagiulth Museum and the U'Mista Cultural Centre

European and North American museums are facing new issues dealing with the repatriation of stolen properties from formerly colonized countries. Over the last thirty years or so, Native Americans having realized their political and cultural situation have claimed their right to self-determination. Next to the implementation of treaty rights, the settlement of land claims, and the control over the exploitation of natural resources on the reserves, the restitution of Native American cultural heritage is becoming a major issue. Parallel to the awakening of Native people's political awareness a change of attitude has taken place within the dominant society. North American museums have been led to revise their policies and have returned illegally acquired ceremonial objects to their rightful owners.

In the context of such a new policy, the National Museum of Man (now the Canadian Museum of Civilization) in Ottawa has recognized the Kwagu'l's right of ownership[1] over what is known as the *Potlatch Collection*. This is a collection of ceremonial objects confiscated by the Canadian government in the spring of 1922 following the illegal celebration of a potlatch. Indeed article 14 of the *Indian Act*, known as the *Potlatch Law* (1884), set forth that any person having participated in a potlatch was guilty of misdemeanor and subject to a sentence of two to six months in jail. However, potlatches continued to be held, in secret, in spite of this ban. Around Christmas 1921, a large potlatch was organized at Village Island by the Nimpkish chief Dan Cranmer for the repayment of his wife's bride price. Between 300 and 400 people attended the celebration which lasted six days (Codere 1966). Despite the secrecy of its preparation, the Indian Affairs agent, William Halliday, heard about the ceremony and launched an investigation with the help of police and local informants. This time the authorities were determined to strike a fatal blow against potlatching—a few chiefs had been sentenced since 1884, but in most cases the charges had been dropped. Eighty-four people were charged with having violated the *Potlatch Law* by distributing gifts, delivering speeches, singing songs, and performing dances. When the trial was over, twenty-two people were sentenced to jail. Those who agreed to stop potlatching and to abandon their potlatch regalia were given suspended sentences. A total of about 500 pieces (masks, whistles, rattles, etc.),[2] among them fifteen coppers, were gathered by the Indian agent. He immediately sold some thirty-two of the best objects to George Heye for the Museum of the American Indian in New York. The remainder was shipped to the Victoria Memorial Museum in Ottawa (the later National Museum of Man). Part of the collection (about 130 pieces) was then transferred to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. The Kwagu'l received $1445 in compensation for the artifacts.[3]

In the mid-1960s the Kwagu'l began to press the National Museum of Man for the return of their ceremonial objects. After about ten years of negotiations, and favored by politicians' responsiveness to Indian claims and by the Museum's readiness to allow the collection's return to British Columbia, the Board of Trustees of the museum gave their approval for the restitution of the collection in 1973.

The repatriation was then subject to an agreement between the National Museum of Man and the Kwakwewlth District Council specifying that:

(1) the collection should be held in trust by Kwagu'l institutions and not returned to individual owners or their descendants for fear that the collection be dispersed by the sale of the pieces;

(2) since the collection was part of the Kwagu'l cultural heritage, it should be housed in an appropriate building with proper museum conditions.

Because of internal conflicts within the Kwagu'l community, the collection was then split between two local Native museums in accordance with family and "political" affiliations.[4] The Kwagiulth Museum in Cape Mudge, administered by the Nuyumbalees Society opened in June 1979; the U'Mista Cultural Centre,[5] administered by the U'Mista Society was inaugurated in Alert Bay in November 1980. Finally under the pressure of the Ministry of Indian Affairs,[6] the Royal Ontario Museum agreed to restitute its part of the *Potlatch Collection* in 1987 according to the same principles (Cranmer-Webster 1988). The challenge currently facing the Kwagu'l is to obtain the return of the 32 pieces which had been acquired by George Heye in 1922 for the Museum of the American Indian.

The main goal of Native museums in general is to preserve cultural heritage by preserving artifacts. Such objects are seen as embodying a traditional "authentic" culture of the past. In this respect, Native peoples have adopted wholeheartedly the eminently Western idea that tradition and heritage are manifest in material objects (Dominguez 1987:550). Culture is not envisaged as an immediate aspect of everyday life, but as an abstract reference whose nature is constantly reworked and adapted to changing specific situations. By stressing different aspects attributed to tradition the Kwagiulth Museum and the U'Mista Cultural Centre each have accordingly created specific identities through the display of the potlatch artifacts. These two identities, rather than being exclusive from one another should be seen as complementary.

The Kwagiulth Museum

The museum is located in the middle of Cape Mudge village, in the vicinity of the church and the community hall, between the graveyard and the soccer field. The notion that the Kwagiulth Museum is concerned simultaneously with the past, the present, and the future is expressed in the architecture of the building. The right-hand side of its

Fig. 1 The Kwagiulth Museum. Photo: Marie Mauzé, 1987.

front explicitly evokes the traditional big-houses in use until the turn of the century; the left-hand side consists in a circular bare wall demonstrating "the idea of continual change in the Kwakiutl way of life" (Joseph and Man 1980). The overall shape of the museum is directly inspired by that of a sea snail. In the center of the winding staircase joining three floor levels is a totem pole erected in memory of Billy Assu, a former local chief. The spiral movement begins outside the building in the form of a log palisade reminiscent of the protective walls erected around villages in the days of intertribal warfare. The materials used for the construction of the museum are largely traditional: within the building, roughly hewn fir logs support heavy overhead beams; outside, the walls are covered with cedar shakes which allow the building to blend in harmoniously with its surroundings (Fig. 1).

Upon entering the museum, the visitor is greeted by two anthropomorphic wooden figures: statues used in former times to welcome guests to the potlatches. The main gallery floor is reserved for the *Potlatch Collection* which is presented in glass cases so that the objects are visible from several angles. Each of the pieces is labeled and classified not by type or category (masks, rattles, etc.) but according to its owner. One case, sometimes two, are devoted to each of the owners, according to the importance of his or her collection. Each piece is identified and is given its name in the Kwakwala language. According to the Nuyumbalees Society members, the owners' names are clearly labeled so as to bestow honor upon them. The walls are decorated with archival photographs of Kwagu'l villages taken at the turn of the century. A large basement room is set aside for the display of temporary exhibits organized by the museum staff as well as traveling exhibits assembled by provincial or national Canadian museums. Community events, meetings, and workshops (such as, e.g., a button-blanket making class) are held in that same room.

The U'Mista Cultural Centre

The U'Mista Cultural Centre of Alert Bay gives onto the beach, in the neighborhood of the former missionary school (now an administrative building). It has the shape of a "big-house," whose front is painted[7] with a "thunderbird-and-whale" design similar to that of a former big-house in the village. Two doors can be opened onto the beach where people assemble on ceremonial occasions (Fig. 2).

Inside the museum, a long corridor whose walls are decorated with old photographs of Kwagu'l villages, leads to the *Potlatch Collection.* Village photographs are paired with texts recounting the creation history of the tribes of the Kwagu'l, thus showing that in spite of the fact that Kwagu'l people speak the same language and share a common culture, they are made up of many local groups with their own traditions and history.

Near the entrance of the gallery one can read recollections by elders who witnessed the surrender of the regalia in the late spring of 1922. The space of the gallery itself corresponds to the enclosed area of a big-house in which traditional ceremonies took place in the past. In the dim light of this "potlatch-house," the ceiling of which is supported by heavy beams and posts, the visitor may take time to become familiarized with the exhibited objects. The artifacts, displayed on iron stands placed on raised platforms where the guests would sit during a potlatch, are like "guards" attentive to people coming in and out of the room. The "big-house" gallery in which children are taught dances and songs and stories by community elders is used for educational purposes.

The objects are presented by categories (coppers, masks, rattles, etc.) and arranged according to the order in which they appear during potlatch ceremonies. No owner's name is given; the rituals in which the pieces figure are not mentioned. To understand the display one has to be a Kwagu'l or knowledgeable about Kwagu'l culture. All the artifacts are intended to represent Dan Cranmer's potlatch, the very celebration that led to the confiscation of Kwagu'l chiefs' regalia. Extensive texts printed on large labels inform the public about the history of the banning of the potlatch, the confiscation following the trial of 1922, and the repatriation of the potlatch artifacts. Information is provided by Indian agents and missionaries' reports, chiefs' petitions against the implementation of the Potlatch Law, elders

Fig. 2 The U'Mista Cultural Centre. Photo: Marie Mauzé, 1987.

and community members' testimonies such as the following:

> "We were free because the masks had been taken. It must have been as if the masks had paid our way out of jail. It was said that they would be returned, that they could not stay forever. So the old people were told when the masks went. What they did to us because of the potlatch was terrible. Now, they are telling us to do it when in the past they made us suffer so much, which is why we have forgotten our ways because all of our tribes were afraid. Now they are strongly urging us to show how things were done in early times. They, the White people" (Agnes Alfred, June 1978).

Both museums have a gift shop. Visitors may buy postcards, books, and various arts and crafts such as masks, jewellery, silkscreen prints, or T-shirts by local artists inspired by traditional motifs. One also finds a wide range of souvenirs such as carved wooden plaques, wall hangings, miniature totem poles, etc., aimed mainly at tourists, but which Native people also buy for themselves in order to decorate their homes.

Two Approaches[8]

The Kwagiulth Museum chose to honor the elders and noble men of the Lekwiltoq and Mamalilikulla tribes who surrendered their potlatch regalia. In doing so, the museum makes a double statement: in Kwagu'l society, ceremonial artifacts do not belong to a group as a whole, but to their owners, the chiefs as individuals. As Harry Assu, the son of Billy Assu, one of the most preeminent Lekwiltoq chiefs, puts it:

> "All our stuff that was brought back from Ottawa is in glass cases in the museum according to the family that owns them. That's what the masks and other things mean to us: family ownership. We are proud of that. It tells our family rights to the people. With our people you don't talk about what rights to dances you've got; you call the people and show them in the potlatch" (Assu with Inglis 1989:106).

The spirit of the potlatch is retained, frozen in time: the display demonstrates rights and privileges that were validated at least seventy years ago. Indeed as James Clifford (1990:40) writes: "The museum speaks for family rights to the (Kwagiulth) people." At the same time the exhibit reinstates the local hierarchy. By putting forward chiefs' names associated with the highest positions within the hierarchical system in the 1920s, it legitimizes claims of the descendants of these chiefs, today's Native elite's claims to decision making positions at the community level. Indeed those born of noble families intend to preserve the prestige enjoyed by their ancestors. The Kwagu'l who wish to make the democratization of Kwagu'l society the necessary condition of Native cultural "renaissance" are far from having reached their goal.

Neither the Kwagiulth Museum nor the U'Mista Cultural Centre raises the question of the legal status of the potlatch artifacts. The objects are on permanent loan to "tribal" institutions as the result of an agreement that binds the Indians to the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Royal Ontario Museum.[9] From the Native point of view, the potlatch collection is part of their cultural heritage; this does not mean that it is tribal *property.*

The Kwagu'l shared a common culture. The potlatch represents the encompassing institution which governed religious, ceremonial, social, economic, and political spheres of their society. The U'Mista Cultural Centre presents the history of the potlatch during the colonial period; it portrays the struggle of Kwagu'l people against the Canadian government that, from the 1880s onward, tried to control every aspect of Indian life. The cultural resilience of the Kwagu'l is exemplified by Dan Cranmer's potlatch, whose organization challenged White authorities. Instead of featuring family claims, the U'Mista Cultural Centre speaks for the prestige of one chief, Dan Cranmer, whose greatness is not only praised within the Kwagu'l community[10] but is also made manifest beyond it.

Both museums are concerned with the reconstitution of what they judge to be the "traditional" context of the confiscated pieces and address themselves more specifically to a local and even larger (White) public. Their museographic approaches are, however, as different as their policies[11] regarding the access to collections, the implementation of educational programs, the promotion of cultural activities, the hiring of directors,[12] the collaboration with major Canadian and American institutions, etc. These differences derive from political and cultural choices underlying the establishment of these two museums.

NOTES

Parts of this article were originally presented in a paper read at the XIth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, August 1983, in Victoria, B.C., Canada (Mauzé 1983). I would like to thank Dr. Michael Houseman for reading the manuscript.

1. The Kwagu'l of British Columbia are better known as "Kwakiutl." This term, used in the anthropological literature, is better phonetically rendered as "Kwagu'l" or "Kwagiulth." It is also spelled "Kwakwewlth" by the Department of Indian Affairs. The term refers to a linguistic group composed of twenty or so village groups or "tribes." It also designates a specific tribe, the Kwagu'l of Fort Rupert. The U'Mista Cultural Society of Alert Bay promoted a new word: "Kwakwaka'wakw," literally "those who speak Kwak'wala" to describe all the village groups.
2. The surrendered objects belonged to the chiefs of the following "tribes": Mamalilikulla, Nimpkish, Lekwiltoq, Lawitsis, Kwagu'l of Fort Rupert, Denaxdaxw, Kwiksutinuxw, Dzawadenuxw, Maamtagila.
3. Whistles were paid for at the rate of $1 each, masks for between $2 and $5. No compensation was ever made for the coppers. Several chiefs refused the cheques written by the Dept. of Indian Affairs.
4. See Cranmer-Webster 1979; Mauzé 1983, 1988. The Kwagiulth Museum is housing the Lekwiltoq artifacts and parts of those belonging to Mamalilikulla chiefs.
5. The word "Nuyumbalees" means 'beginning of all legend' and refers to the history of the Kwagu'l people. The term "U'Mista" is explained by the U'Mista Centre in the following way: "In the days of warfare between Kwagu'l groups, prisoners of war were treated as slaves; when they returned to their villages, either upon payment of a ransom or after a retaliation raid, the Kwagu'l said that they had 'U'mista'." That word is almost unknown to present-day Kwakwa'la speakers.
6. Although the objects of the Potlatch Collection were cared for by the National Museum of Man and the Royal Ontario Museum, they were (and still are) the property of the Department of Indian Affairs (see Cranmer-Webster 1988:44).
7. The artist is Doug Cranmer, the son of Dan Cranmer.
8. Clifford rightfully associates the approach of the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology with that of the Kwagiulth Museum on one hand, and the Royal British Columbia Museum with that of the U'Mista Cultural Centre on the other. The first one values the aesthetic content of exhibited objects; the second one focuses on a historical treatment of the display of artifacts. Indeed, the UBC Museum designed the Kwagiulth Museum display while the RBCM designed the U'Mista Cultural Centre permanent exhibit.

9. See part 2 of the agreement between the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Kwagu'l people's representatives.
10. Dan Cranmer's role in the organization of the 1922 potlatch is challenged by some members of the Kwagu'l community; see Sewid-Smith 1979.
11. For many years, the director of the U'Mista Cultural Centre has been Gloria Cranmer-Webster, daughter of Dan Cranmer, trained in anthropology. So far the Kwagiulth Museum has hired five White directors. One will easily understand that each of the museums is placed under the influence of one or two major Kwagu'l families.
12. This aspect is analyzed by Clifford (1990).

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