

Andrea Sanborn

*The ceremonial Mask of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations
from the British Museum -on long-term loan- to the U'mista
Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, British Columbia, Canada*

In this presentation I will recount the timeline and processes that were involved to first introduce myself and our Chairman William T. Cranmer to the British Museum in London, U.K. It was with the help of the Canadian Embassy in London that we were able to arrange this meeting. Following discussions with our own Board of Directors, I returned to London where the opportunity to meet first with Johnathan King, Keeper, Management of the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas and then with Director Neil MacGregor. This was following many letters back and forth between the U'mista and the British Museum and some letters on our behalf to the British Museum by interested members and visitors to the U'mista.

Through all of this correspondence and meetings I feel we mutually came to a better understanding of each others' responsibilities to the repatriation processes we were looking to undertake. Although the wheels of discussions moved slowly, we were at least going in the right direction to eventually develop a plan, have our Boards agree to our proposal and take some action towards a resolution of some sort.

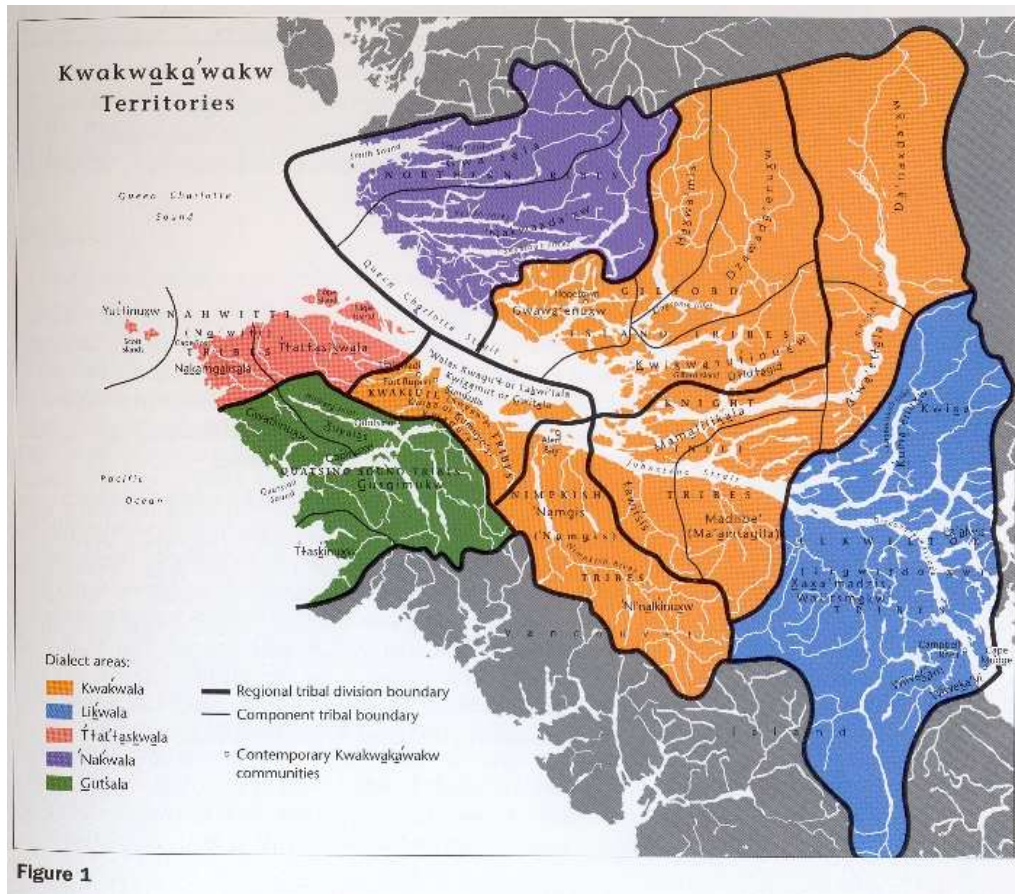
Through the Greek Embassy in Vancouver, British Columbia, Dr. Elena Korka from the Greek Ministry of Culture was made aware of our ongoing discussions with the British Museum and the eventual return of the Kwakwaka'wakw transformation to the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay. With much interest in the process leading up to the mask coming to the U'mista, Dr. Korka visited us in Alert Bay. I then joined her in Vancouver where we both spoke at a workshop arranged by the Greek Embassy at the Simon Fraser University downtown campus. Following this workshop Dr. Korka indicated that she would be contacting me again to arrange a time to meet in Athens. This conference to be held in Athens on the Return of Cultural Objects to their Countries of Origin is that opportunity and I will then speak in more detail about this interesting and exciting process with the British Museum.

This paper will trace the path of our transformation mask from its origins in Alert Bay, BC from 1921 through the years until it ended up in the British Museum in London, GB and finally back to Alert Bay in 2005. We will follow an eighty-four year journey including many impacts on the thousands of years of the culture of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations of northern Vancouver Island in Canada. We can only imagine what distress the spirit of the transformation mask carried while it was separated from the spirit of the culture of the Kwakwaka'wakw. We can easily understand the impacts of similar circumstances upon other world

cultures over the last few centuries. We have come to understand that the very soul of our culture remains fragmented until all the pieces can be reunited, repatriated and returned home. The foundation of this process is our cultural language, kwak'wala. Without our language we cannot be the Kwakwaka'wakw. Give us back our language, give us back our cultural ceremonial masks and regalia, give us back our spirit and only then can our culture be whole again. The spirits of our ancestors can then be at rest as we will then have u'mista and we can continue rebuilding our culture, our lives and become whole again. Without reunification, without repatriation we cannot be whole. How can world histories make sense if they remain in pieces, spread about the world with their fragmented stories? Let us all tell our own stories. Let us build our own histories. After all they are ours and we will share them in friendship, living together in this world with peace and understanding. Let the spirits of our ancestors be at rest now. We must maintain the cultural and historical information of our ancestors for the future generations of children to come. Everyone has the right to know where they belong, what cultural privileges they hold and what songs, dances and legends they can celebrate in their lives. U'mista's mandate is to ensure the survival of all aspects of the cultural heritage of the Kwakwaka'wakw.

Andrea Sanborn

Executive Director of the U'mista Cultural Centre, Canada



Kwakwaka'wakw territories map. Photo credit: U'mista Cultural Society



Alert Bay circa 1880. Photo credit: Provincial Archives of British Columbia



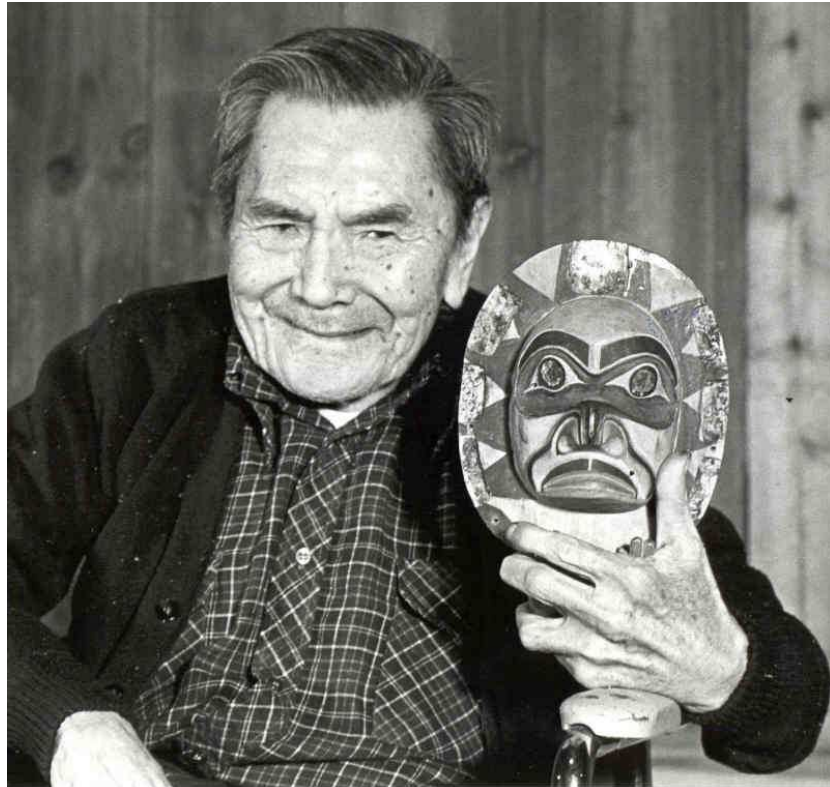
Photo credit: Confiscated masks 1922 in Alert bay Parish Hall. Provincial Archives of
British Columbia



Confiscated masks 1922 in Alert bay Parish Hall. Photo credit: Provincial Archives of British Columbia



St. Michael's Residential School, Alert Bay, BC circa 1930Photo credit: Provincial Archives of British Columbia



Mr. Sam Scow with his repatriated Pakiwe', 'Namgis First Nation, Alert Bay, BC

Photo Credit: Vickie Jensen



U'mista Cultural Centre 1908, Alert Bay, BC Photo Credit: Nouska Komlosy



Potlatch Collection at U'mista Cultural Centre, Alert Bay, BC Photo credit: U'mista Cultural Society



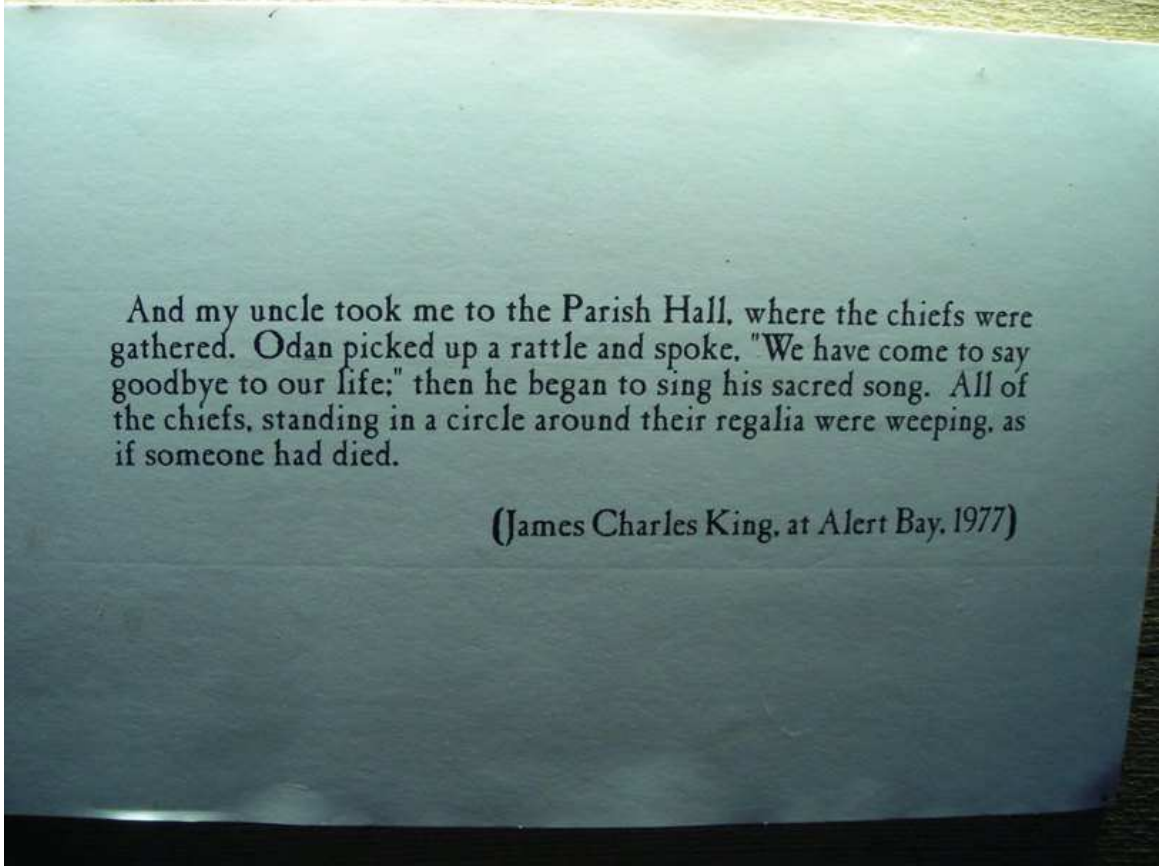
Potlatch Collection at U'mista Cultural Centre, Alert Bay, BC Photo credit: U'mista Cultural Society

"We want to know whether you have come to stop our dances and feasts, as the missionaries and agents who live among our neighbours try to do. We do not want to have anyone here who will interfere with our customs. We were told that a man-of-war would come if we should continue to do as our grandfathers and great-grandfathers have done. But we do not mind such words. Is this the white man's land? We are told it is the Queen's land, but no! it is mine. Where was the Queen when our God gave this land to my grandfather and told him, "This will be thine"? My father owned the land and was a mighty chief; now it is mine. And when your man-of-war comes, let him destroy our houses. Do you see yon trees? Do you see yon woods? We shall cut them down and build new houses and live as our fathers did. We will dance when our laws command us to dance, and we will feast when our hearts desire to feast. Do we ask the white man, "Do as the Indian does"? It is a strict law that bids us dance. It is a strict law that bids us distribute our property among our friends and neighbours. It is a good law. Let the white man observe his law; we shall observe ours. And now, if you come to forbid us dance, begone. If not, you will be welcome to us.

(Chief of the Kwagu'l, to Franz Boas,
October 7, 1886)

Kwagu'l Chief statement to Franz Boas 1886

Photo credit: U'mista Cultural Society



And my uncle took me to the Parish Hall, where the chiefs were gathered. Odan picked up a rattle and spoke, "We have come to say goodbye to our life;" then he began to sing his sacred song. All of the chiefs, standing in a circle around their regalia were weeping, as if someone had died.

(James Charles King, at Alert Bay, 1977)

Jim King statement about confiscation of ceremonial masks and regalia. Photo:U'mista
Cultural Society



Introduction to our transformation mask at the British Museum

Photo credit: Trustees of the British Museum



Closed version of our transformation mask at the British Museum

Photo credit: Trustees of the British Museum



Johnathan King, receiving gift of drum with the transformation mask design

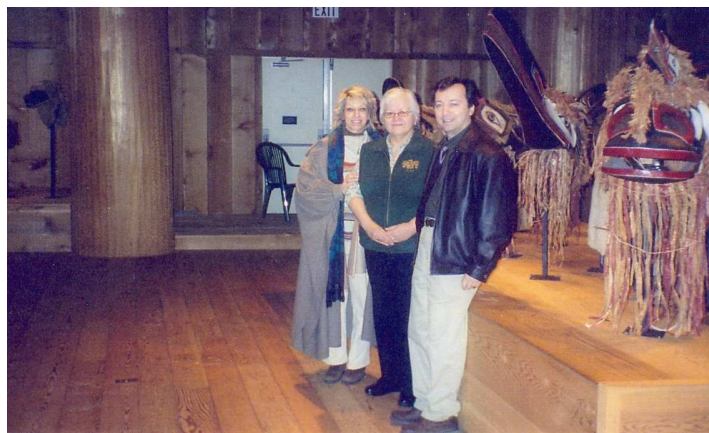
Photo credit: Marie Mauze



Andrea Sanborn and Johnathan King at 25th Anniversary celebration of the U'mista Cultural Centre, Alert Bay



Chief Don Assu, Chief William Cranmer and Madame Aube Elleouet with repatriated yaxwiwe' Photo credit: U'mista Cultural Society



Director Elena Korka, Greek Ministry of Culture, Andrea Sanborn, Executive Director, U'mista Cultural Centre, George Aravositas, Consul of Greece in Vancouver, BC at U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, BC. Photo credit: U'mista Cultural Society



Elder Harry Walkus in language instruction. Photo credit: Vickie Jensen



Youth Kwakwaka'wakw dancer. Photo credit: Sharon Eva Grainger



Kwakwaka'wakw artist Johnathan Henderson, Alert Bay, BC Photo credit: Paul Bourget



Kwakwaka'wakw artist Stephen Bruce, Alert Bay, BC. Photo credit: Chris Cheadle



Gathering for a Potlatch circa 1900 Photo credit: Provincial Archives of British Columbia



Celebrating repatriation in 1980 Photo credit: U'mista Cultural Society