

FIRST NATIONS ART

A relic of Captain Cook comes home

A philanthropist donates a ceremonial club obtained by the explorer at Nootka Sound in 1778 to UBC's Museum of Anthropology

MARK HUME VANCOUVER

A small, hand-carved ceremonial club that Captain James Cook collected on Vancouver Island while searching for the Northwest Passage has been returned to the West Coast after a 234-year absence.

The piece, both a work of art and a historical relic, had disappeared into private collections in England and later the United States before Canadian philanthropist Michael Audain acquired it and donated it to the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology.

At a news conference at the museum on Tuesday, Mr. Audain — who through the Audain Foundation for the Visual Arts has donated more than \$20-million to Canadian galleries and museums over the years — said the return of the *hawilmis*, or chiefly treasure, is an important cultural event.

"I must confess I had little sleep last night because this is one of the most exciting days of my life," Mr. Audain said moments before Anthony Shelton, director of the museum, unveiled the club as part of its permanent collection.

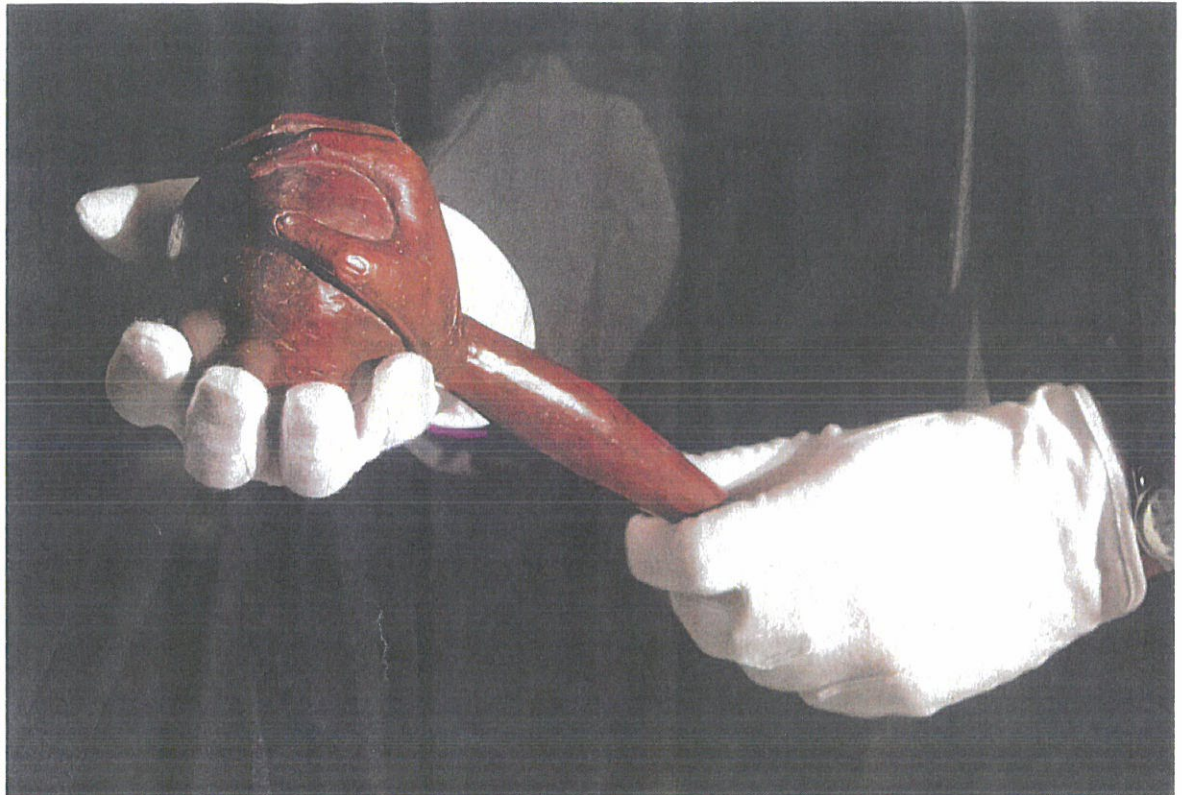
Mr. Shelton described the piece as "an extraordinary, exceptional object with a tremendous amount of power and presence."

At about 45 centimetres in length, the elegantly carved, yew wood club depicts a hand gripping a sphere. It was a ceremonial object but also a functional tool, which may have been used to kill halibut or seals.

The club was made by an aboriginal Northwest Coast artist some time in the mid-1700s and came into Capt. Cook's possession when he stopped at Nootka Sound in 1778.

Capt. Cook, who traded with the people in Friendly Cove, was killed in Hawaii in 1779 on his voyage back to England. His personal possessions were turned over to his widow, who sold the club to a museum, and from there it passed into private collections.

Mr. Audain said he was in New York several months ago when he was contacted by Donald Ellis, an



Philanthropist Michael Audain describes the club as 'the most important first nations work that I've ever encountered.' DARRYL DYCK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Ontario art dealer who is one of the world's foremost experts in the field of antique Native American art.

Valued at \$1.2-million, the club, the last privately held object from Capt. Cook's collection, had been obtained by Mr. Ellis, who knew that in that single piece two of Mr. Audain's great passions — his love of Pacific Northwest native art and his fascination with history — came together.

In an e-mail, Mr. Ellis said he had been aware of the piece since he was a boy, but only managed to acquire it late last year from the estate of a U.S. dealer.

"It is the singular most important object I have handled in my 35-year career," he said.

Mr. Audain said he was deeply grateful to Mr. Ellis for giving him first option to buy the piece and place it back in a museum where the public can see it.

"This is the most important first nations work that I've ever encountered," Mr. Audain said. "It's important in terms of world history, the history of exploring, and it's also important in terms of the culture of the Northwest Coast."

He said works of native art that predate first contact with Europeans are rare, and the association with Capt. Cook and his ill-fated voyage of discovery makes it even more valuable.

Asked how he felt when he first saw it, Mr. Audain took a deep breath.

"A tremor of excitement went through my body and I said, 'Can I touch it? Can I hold something in my hand that James Cook must have held?'" he said.

Mr. Audain, chair of Polygon Homes Ltd., a B.C. company that has built more than 20,000 houses in the Lower Mainland since 1980, did his due diligence before making an offer.

"I was shown a provenance which goes back through 11 owners, all the way back to Elizabeth Cook, the widow of James Cook ... so there's no question that it's authentic," he said. "We know exactly who's owned it for all that time."

Margarita James, president of the Land of Maquinna Cultural

Society, was on hand to represent the Mowachaht-Muchalaht people, whose ancestors greeted Capt. Cook in Friendly Cove.

A shudder went through her when she first saw the club and, with Mr. Sheldon's permission, held it.

"It was a very emotional moment," she said. "For a lot of us that live in the community these aren't just objects. These were used by our people. It's a connection to them."

Ms. James said her band is hoping one day to have a museum of its own so that historical works of art can be repatriated to the community and help draw tourists.

With a report from James Adams