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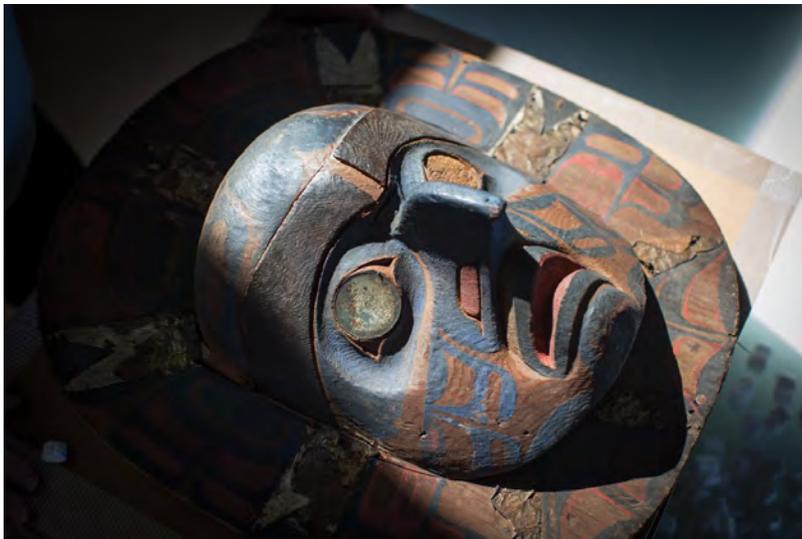
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Almost 100 years after being seized and sold, a Kwakwaka'wakw sun mask returns to B.C.

For nearly 100 years, through mirrored eyes carved from cedar, the Kwakwaka'wakw sun mask witnessed worlds it was never meant to see. Seized during an infamous raid on a potlatch in remote British Columbia, then improperly sold, the mask spent time in New York, and ended up in Paris in the possession of one of the world's most famous anthropologists. It remained in France for decades. But on Saturday, after nearly two years of negotiations, a ceremony is planned to welcome it to the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, B.C. U'mista means "the return of something important" in Kwak'wala, and the museum houses other returned artifacts from that potlatch, including masks.



The Kwakwaka'wakw sun mask was seized during an infamous raid on a potlatch in remote British Columbia, then improperly sold, and spent decades in France before being returned home to B.C.

DARRYL DYCK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

"We, of course, want all of the masks to come back, and every time we hear of one that's been found it, of course, makes us all that much happier," says 'Namgis Chief Bill Cranmer, board chair at U'mista.

“It’s kind of like healing. Because when they took all these masks away, it took quite a big part of us away.”

Donald Ellis, a Canadian dealer in Indigenous art for nearly 45 years, orchestrated the mask’s return, negotiating the sale and putting up his own money – a six-figure sum, he says – to buy the mask to bring it to U’mista. The homecoming was timed to coincide with the July 20 opening of a major exhibition, *The Story Box: Franz Boas, George Hunt and the Making of Anthropology*. Boas and Hunt conducted field work among the Kwakwaka’wakw people in the 19th century; this exhibition, which recently closed in New York, was brought to U’Mista thanks to funding from Ellis and others.

An agreement to buy the mask was made months ago. But by Tuesday, it was nowhere near British Columbia and Mr. Ellis was anxious.

“I’m trying to do something good,” he said, “and [in the process] I feel like I’ve lost five years off my life.”



Donald Ellis, a Canadian dealer in the field of historical Indigenous art, examines the Kwakwaka’wakw sun mask after unpacking it in West Vancouver, on July 18, 2019.

DARRYL DYCK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Mr. Ellis’s involvement with the mask dates back to 2017, when an academic, Marie Mauzé, told him a story over dinner in Paris. She had been asked to assist in the auction catalogue entries for a group of Northwest Coast objects at Christie’s. Among them was the sun mask, which Ms. Mauzé recognized

from photos taken after it was seized in 1921. “You can’t sell this,” she said, as Mr. Ellis recounts.

Shortly after that dinner, she e-mailed an archival photo to Mr. Ellis. It shows the mask displayed with other treasures in the Anglican Parish Hall in Alert Bay after they were taken on Christmas Day, 1921.

Potlatches were banned in 1885. But in remote B.C., these vital cultural ceremonies, which involve feasts and gift-giving, were sometimes held nonetheless, with lookouts keeping watch for government officials known as Indian agents. On Dec. 25, 1921, ‘Namgis Chief Dan Cranmer – Bill’s father – held a large potlatch on remote Village Island east of Alert Bay. (The ‘Namgis are Kwak’waka’wakw.)

Indian agent William Halliday got word and officials descended on what has come to be known as the Cranmer Potlatch, arresting participants and confiscating some 750 items.

“My father didn’t speak too much about this business because it really affected him, especially feeling so bad that people had to go to jail because of what he did,” Mr. Cranmer says.

This incident, Mr. Ellis says, “was, in many ways, the poster child for Canadian colonial behaviour.”

The items were transported to Alert Bay and displayed; admission was charged. Most were later sent east, many to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and what is now the Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa.

Almost all of the artifacts have since been returned. U’mista, which opened in 1980, was designed to house returned items from the Cranmer Potlatch.

But the sun mask was sent on a different path. Halliday sold it, with more than 30 other pieces, to George Heye in New York, who established the Museum of the American Indian in 1916. Halliday was not permitted to sell these objects and was reprimanded for doing so.

Heye ran into financial troubles and many works from his museum were sold. The sun mask’s museum catalogue card indicates “whereabouts unknown,” according to Mr. Ellis.



The sun mask, shown on the bench, in the middle row, was taken in the Parish Hall December, 1921 after the seizure following the government banned Potlatch ceremonies.

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It has now been discovered that the mask was brought to France after the Second World War by the world-renowned anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and sold at auction in 1951 to collector Pierre Vérité. His son, Claude Vérité, inherited it and offered the mask at Christie's, according to another collector, Pierre Amrouche. Mr. Amrouche, who lives in Paris and Togo, says Claude gave it to him in 2017, after which he kept it in his Paris living room.

Two years of negotiations to bring the mask back to B.C. took a twisted path. A benefactor who had offered to help buy it backed out. Mr. Ellis decided to purchase it himself for U'Mista.

"I have a pretty strong sense of right and wrong," Mr. Ellis said of his motivation during an interview at a Vancouver hotel on Tuesday. "I want this to show that ... dealers are not all bad guys." Also, he says, he has done very well and wanted to do something to give back.

That has caused him some stress. A few minutes after explaining his reasons for doing this, he checked his phone.

"What the hell," he said to himself.

The mask, which had been shipped from Paris that morning, was supposed to be at the FedEx hub in Memphis by then, en route to Vancouver. Instead, at midday on Tuesday, it was in Philadelphia. Mr. Ellis was to head north on Friday morning for Saturday's ceremony.

“Is it worth it, all this pain and suffering,” I asked him.

“Right now, no,” he said. “But it will be.”

On Thursday, it was. A box containing the mask was sitting on the kitchen table of Mr. Ellis’s oceanfront home on Howe Sound, and he was finally about to see the treasure he spent nearly two years fighting for. Some packing peanuts spilled out. And then: “Wow,” he said several times under his breath.

The mask was larger than Mr. Ellis had expected, and older; the hand-cut nails on the back suggest it was made circa 1870. The one remaining mirrored eye – meant to reflect firelight and sun – had largely disintegrated, and while much of the paint had faded, the underside of the nose, protected from daylight, showed a bright blue.



The mask was brought to France after the Second World War by the world-renowned anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and sold at auction in 1951 to collector Pierre Vérité.

DARRYL DYCK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

“When I see this now, it’s really well painted, beautifully painted.”

Mr. Ellis picked it up and examined it, front and back, then laid it on the table, face up. Light streamed in from the ocean-facing windows and the skylight. And for the first time in nearly a century, the mask was basking in the B.C. sun, just a few hours from home.