

Acquiring and Exhibiting A Nuu-Chah-Nulth Ceremonial Curtain

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From Andy Warhol to Chief Alex Frank—

In this paper¹ we present the exhibition and associated public programming of a Nuu-chah-nulth (Nootka) ceremonial curtain² as a case study in collaboration between the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM) and the Native family of origin.³ This collaboration began with our initial research on the history of the curtain, was maintained through the negotiations for its exhibit, was realized in the public presentation, and continues today. To place this collaboration in theoretical context, it is necessary to review the current literature on the representation of Native Peoples by museums, an issue of increasing concern to all institutions holding Native artifacts. For nearly 40 years, the RBCM has been attempting to practice what much of this literature purports as new and innovative.

In recent years, Native People and non-native academics in the United States and Canada have become increasingly vocal in their criticisms of how museums and art galleries represent the cultural traditions of Native Peoples (Erasmus, 1988; Greer, 1989; Lavine, 1989:37). The academic contribution to this analysis of representation has been to specify techniques used in exhibits and texts which often unintentionally assign a low status to the cultures and arts of non-European, non-white peoples. These methods include miniaturization (Jonaitis, in press), decontextualization (Donato, 1988:315), self-reference (Dominquez, 1986:315), stasis (Fabian,

1983; Solomon-Godeau, 1989:122), depersonalization and generalization (Rosaldo, 1986:94–95). Ruth Phillips (1988) and James Clifford (1985), among other writers, have noted that exhibits about Native People typically present their material culture either as “authentic,” timeless, ahistorical products of anonymous, tradition-bound craftspeople (Carpenter, 1982) or as aestheticized objects appropriated by the modernist art system (Bunn, 1980:319; Clifford, 1985:169; Donato, 1984:591; Nairne, 1987).

In an attempt to end the monologic discussion around non-European art, scholars and museum professionals are beginning to include the “Native voice” in representations of their culture. Authoritative pronouncements from curator-experts, once the standard mode, are no longer acceptable (Clifford, 1985:176; Bennett, 1989:26; Phillips, 1988:66). Native Peoples are insisting that museums pay attention to their viewpoint, a viewpoint that they feel was once ignored at best and commonly disdained. This came out very clearly at the November 1988 conference “Preserving Our Heritage: A Working Conference for Museums and First Peoples,” co-sponsored by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association. Native Peoples there expressed a clearly perceived need for dialogue on the issue of presentation and insisted that their art and culture be recontextualized and seen as the product of living historical peoples with specific, known identities (McCormick, 1988). The recent *Fluff and Feathers* exhibit at the Woodland Cultural Centre, a Native Peoples’ institution in Brantford, Ontario, looks at the way in which Native Peoples have been stereotyped in North American popular and intellectual culture (Doxtator, 1988; Greer, 1989). Michael Ames has identified these developments as first steps toward cultural empowerment by Native Peoples and the positive response of the museum community as liberated museology (Ames, 1988).

Examples of this new museology can be seen in a number of recent museum programs in both the United States and Canada. Exhibit planning and content at the New York State Museum at Albany directly involves Native American cultural representatives who are empowered by the institution’s curators to veto the selection of objects proposed for exhibits on Native Peoples (Sullivan, 1989). *A Time of Gathering*, an exhibit at the Thomas Burke Museum in Seattle, Washington, included from the planning stages a Native Consultative Committee representing the major tribes of the State of Washington. The Burke also hired a Native Indian co-curator and a Native Indian protocol officer. The protocol officer set up a series of meetings with Native cultural groups across

the state to which the project's two curators took a proposal that had already been vetted by the Native Consultative Committee. These dialogues resulted in an exhibit that met both the institution's and the Native communities' needs (Wright, 1989, in press).

At the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, two Native People curated a photographic exhibit, *Proud to be Musqueam*. The traditional territory of the Coast Salish Musqueam Band includes the site of the Museum of Anthropology. In consultation with their community, the Native curators, Verna Kenoras and Lella Stogan, decided not to show images of ceremonial activity that the community considered private. Instead, they chose to celebrate the people of their band and exhibited 54 photographs representing every family in the band as well as community activity between 1890 and 1960 (Fisher, 1989).⁴

The extent of Native participation in exhibitions as described by this brief overview ranges from that of consultant through co-curator to sole curator. No exhibition relating to Native culture today can be designed without one or more consultants from the originating culture; relinquishing all control by granting full curatorial responsibility to Native People is rarely done but—as the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology has demonstrated—can be successfully accomplished.

THE FRANK FAMILY CURTAINS: ACQUISITION TO PRESENTATION

For most museums, granting Native Peoples a voice in exhibitions is new; the RBCM has done it for decades. For example, in 1953 Chief Mungo Martin held a potlatch at the opening of the Big House he built on the grounds of Thunderbird Park, site of the Museum's outdoor exhibition of totem poles. In 1977, Chief Jonathan Hunt hosted a potlatch in the Museum following the opening of his Big House, which is the centerpiece of the Museum's major exhibit on B.C.'s Native Peoples. Both structures were built with the permission and full participation of the Martin and Hunt families.⁵ Although both are on Museum property, the families must approve our use of them for programs. These are but two examples of the institution's longstanding tradition of involving Native Peoples in displays of their culture. The following description of the exhibition of the Frank family curtain at the RBCM thus should be understood as our standard mode of interacting with Native Peoples. We recognize that as Native Peoples become increasingly empowered, their interests in and involvement with mu-

seums will change; we need to be flexible and to respond appropriately to these changes. Indeed, today we would probably interact with Mungo Martin differently than we did in 1953—as he would with us. The following narrative is a case study in how we responded to a particular situation that arose in 1988.

Acquiring a Ceremonial Curtain—In March 1988, we received Sotheby's sale catalogue for the April 28 auction of the North American Indian material in the Andy Warhol estate. Lot 2577, erroneously identified as a "Kwakiutl spirit-painted curtain," struck us immediately. Not only did we know it was a Nuuchah-nulth ceremonial curtain, but the imagery was very similar to a curtain we had acquired in 1986.⁶

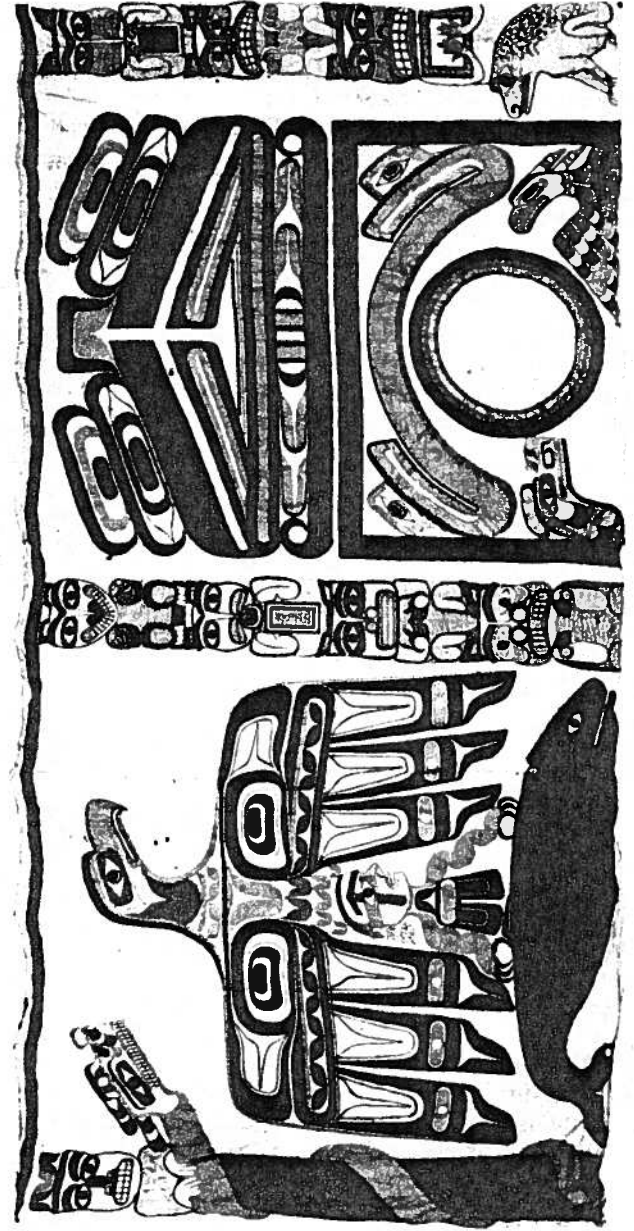
Both curtains are cotton sheets approximately four meters high and eight meters long, with nearly identical design and imagery. In each, three vertical totem poles divide the field into two roughly equal sections. In the left section, a thunderbird grasps the back of a whale; the torso of a man rests on the back of the whale. The right section is divided horizontally into two sections, the uppermost one containing a geometric motif and the lower one containing a box with several images. In the center of the box is a circular rainbow flanked at the left by a wolf's head and at the right by the head of a thunderbird. A double-headed lightning snake extends above these heads and the rainbow. The only compositional difference between the curtains appears in the treatment of the left-hand pole. In the 1988 version, a snake encircles a simple shaft surmounted by a frontal torso. In the more complicated 1986 version, the pole includes four figures, the lowermost one of which is a whale; here, the snake wraps around the two uppermost figures.

Although the composition of both curtains is virtually identical, there are subtle differences in detail and color. We have already mentioned the differences between the imagery on the two poles. In addition, the whale in the 1988 curtain is solidly painted, whereas on the 1986 curtain the whale's ribs and flippers are depicted, as are small faces in its tail and lower back. The color of the paints used generates very different feelings. The greater amount of a more intense red on the 1988 curtain creates a liveliness and vitality not apparent in the more subtly colored 1986 curtain.

We became very excited at the possibility of acquiring a second curtain clearly related to the one already in our possession. This was a rare and not-to-be-missed opportunity, for no museum to our knowledge had two versions of the same curtain. The first task was to convince the administration of the importance of this acquisi-



The 1986 curtain. (Photo courtesy of the Royal British Columbia Museum, Negative # CPN 18277 V.I.)



The 1988 curtain. (Photo courtesy of Sotheby's, New York.)

tion, then to raise the money. We were successful in both endeavors and acquired the curtain on April 28, 1988.⁷

Sotheby's assured us that the auction of the Warhol collection would generate much attention in both the United States and Canada. The media, recognizing the public fascination with Andy Warhol, covered the auction with unusual interest.⁸ When the Canadian press discovered that the Museum had purchased the curtain, they hounded us for details. In response to the flurry of inquiries, the Museum found it necessary to issue a news release on May 19; had it not been for the pressure from the media, we would not have done this as it is not our practice to announce purchases in this fashion.⁹

The news release noted that the curtain was part of a continuing tradition and embodied the family history and prerogatives of a high-ranking Nuw-chah-nulth chief. The history and prerogatives could be verbalized only in a ceremonial context by the curtain's traditional owner. The news release left unanswered certain key questions such as "Who originally owned the curtain?" and "Why did they sell it?" Although we felt committed to answer these questions, we knew when we released the press statement that we neither had the authority to speak about the curtain nor the right to name the family without their approval.

Joint Planning for Presentation to the Media—On the day of the press release, we contacted the traditional owner, Chief Alex Frank, by phone. We notified him of our acquisition of the curtain from the Warhol estate auction and of the impending press coverage. We noted that we recognized his rights associated with the curtain and assured him that his concerns would be respected. We also told him that there was pressure on us from the media to unveil the curtain at a press opening when it arrived in Victoria and that we wished his participation. Chief Frank responded that he would have to consult his family regarding these matters.

This was the first of many conversations that we would have and continue to have with this family. As events unfolded, the family's participation in the unveiling proved impossible, as the date conflicted with the opening of the commercial fishing season. The family, however, gave us authority to proceed with this initial event. They also agreed to our including them in public statements and in announcing that a formal presentation of the curtain with the family would take place at a future date that would be convenient to them.

The curtain arrived in Victoria on June 29. On Monday, July 4,

we rolled it out on the floor of a classroom to present it to the press.¹⁰ The initial media coverage focused on the Warhol connection with questions such as "Why did he buy this curtain?" "Where did he buy it?" "What did he do with it?" However, once we announced the name of the traditional owner and stated that this curtain is part of a continuing tradition, the interest of the press changed. Always looking for a dramatic story, some reporters focused on what they imagined to be a conflict between the Museum and the family. For example, they called the Nuw-chah-nulth Tribal Council and pressed them for an answer to their queries on ownership. Newspaper articles quoted the executive director as stating that he "hoped the council could participate in deciding its use in B.C." (*Vancouver Sun*, May 29, 1988) and that, although they were happy to see the curtain back in British Columbia, the Council would rather have seen the curtain "displayed at their museum" (*Monday Magazine*, Victoria, June 2-8, 1988). Chief Simon Lucas, co-chairman of the Council at the time, was quoted as saying, "I think in time we will talk to the museum about having it in our [future] museum, but now it's in the safest place it can be" (*Victoria Times-Colonist*, June 19, 1988).

Documenting the History of the Curtain—The press opening on July 4 committed us to a formal presentation, the details of which had yet to be worked out. As we were unable to discuss the presentation in person with the Frank family until the end of the fishing season in September, we took the opportunity during the summer to research the history of the curtain. To document properly this new acquisition, we needed to establish the relationship between the two curtains in our possession and to discover how each left the Native community.

Of the two curtains, only the one acquired in 1986 came with any provenance. We knew this curtain was from Neah Bay, Washington, and had belonged to the family of Charlie Swan, a Makah. The question that intrigued us was why and how someone from a different community and tribal group had a ceremonial privilege belonging to a chiefly family from the Tla-o-qui-aht (Clayoquot). Inglis first traveled to Neah Bay in August to interview the daughter of the late Charlie Swan, and then in September went to Opitsat to meet with the Frank family. The complexity of the history and interrelationship of these curtains became apparent in these interviews. The following narrative is a composite of information obtained from them. It is our reconstruction of events; the families may not be in agreement about some of the details.

The curtains are part of the inheritance of the Setacanim chiefly family. This family had strong connections to Neah Bay; for several generations, the men had married Makah women. At the turn of the century, Dr. Atlieu was the holder of the Setacanim title. When he died around 1915 with no male heir, his eldest daughter Annie kept the regalia associated with the chieftainship.¹¹ Sometime in the 1920s, Annie Atlieu made an unusual decision regarding this material. Rather than simply passing the curtain to her nearest male relative, Francis Frank, she commissioned two copies. One copy went to Francis Frank; the other copy went to Charlie Swan. The latter is the curtain the Museum acquired in 1986. The former was destroyed in a house fire at Opitsat in 1966.

Annie Atlieu gave the original curtain to a Neah Bay man named Shobid Hunter. He appears to be related to the Setacanim family, but it is not clear why he received the curtain.¹² The first evidence of this curtain is a photograph taken in 1926 at the Makah Day celebration in Neah Bay in which it is shown against the outside of a building (Densmore, 1939: plate 19a). Some time after this, Shobid Hunter's brother, James, borrowed the curtain, never to return it.

James Hunter used the curtain as a backdrop at dance performances in the Pacific Northwest. When he died in the mid-1950s, his widow sold the curtain to an Indian art dealer in Tacoma, Washington. A Quilleute man purchased it and subsequently presented it to the Pentecostal Church at a meeting in the eastern United States. Later, a New York Indian art dealer obtained the curtain and sold it to Andy Warhol, probably in 1978.¹³

A Jointly Planned Public Presentation—During our research, we realized that the Museum and the Native families do not share the same concepts of history. History to us is reconstructing past events. We endeavored to trace the chronology of the curtains by answering questions like "How are they related?" and "How did they leave the community?" We were also interested in establishing the meanings of the images depicted and asked, "What are the figures on the poles?" "What do they signify?" These were questions relevant to the academic and museum world and not concerns of the Frank family, who did not respond with much interest to our research. For them, the curtains documented family relationships that are depicted by images on the curtains. The curtains are kinship charts representing the generations of chiefly marriages. History to them is contemporary, embodied in living people who are descendants of these families.

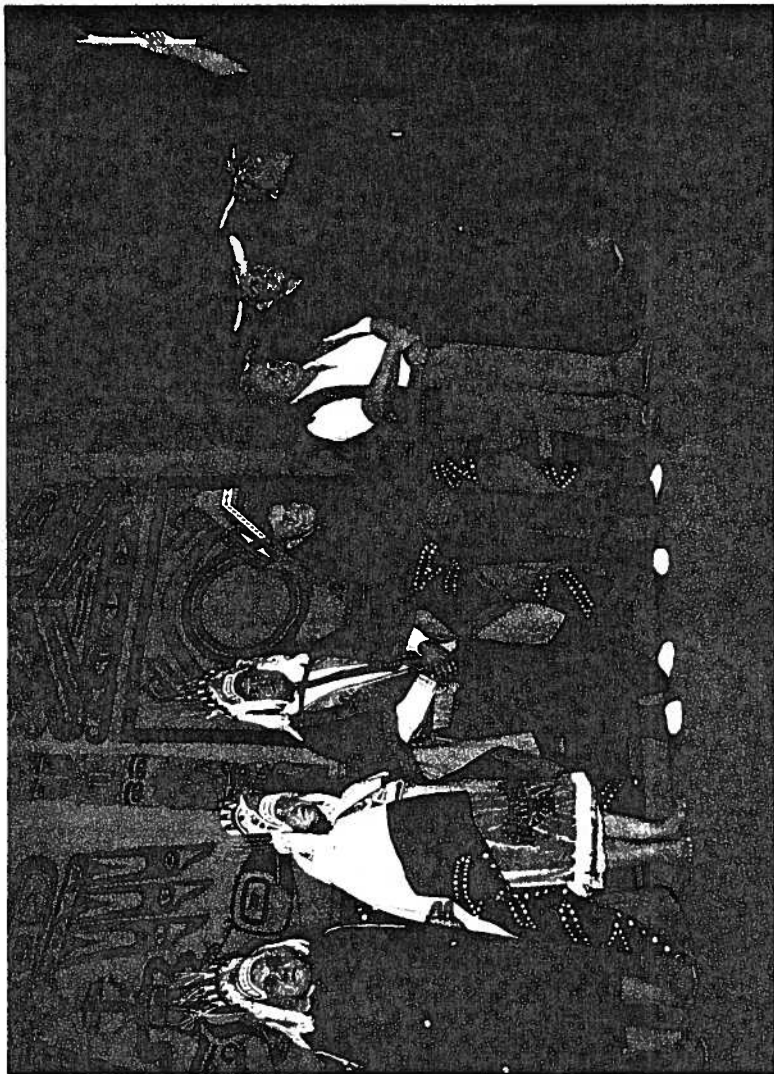
As we shared information about our respective concepts of history as embodied in the curtains we both grew to respect the legitimacy of the other's position and established a meaningful dialogue and partnership. The most fruitful aspect of our partnership was the formal public presentation of the curtain in which both the Frank family and the Museum shared authority in designing the exhibit and arranging for the opening. In September, during face-to-face meetings with the family, we agreed to a division of labor concerning the celebration: the Museum would take responsibility for the exhibit, while the family would organize the events at the opening. Throughout, each group was to keep the other informed of our respective plans. As it turned out, we were able to maintain a very open and honest dialogue.

In October, we presented the exhibit design to the family for approval. At this time, the divergent values of the Museum and of the Frank family became clearly evident. The plan included the display of both curtains; the 1986 acquisition was to be hung vertically, while the 1988 curtain was to be mounted on an angled platform below and under the first. The conservators had determined that because the 1986 curtain was newer and in better condition, it could be displayed vertically, but the older and more delicate 1988 curtain had to be displayed at less than a 45-degree angle. The family expressed concern about the angled presentation since curtains are meant to be hung vertically. We explained the conservators' concerns about the curtain's fragility, which—although accepted—was viewed as peculiar.¹⁴

The exhibit provided both an opportunity to educate the public about Nuu-chah-nulth culture and to emphasize the authority of the family of origin over the objects in the exhibit. The label copy for the two curtains read:

Despite the fact that these curtains left the community the ownership of the rights and privileges have been retained by the family. These curtains are exhibited with the approval of Chief Alex Frank and his family.¹⁵

Two display cases accompanied the curtains, one on Warhol and one containing artifacts acquired with the 1986 curtain. The case devoted to Warhol's previous ownership of the 1988 curtain displayed a photograph of the Pop artist, the catalogues from the April 28, 1988 Sotheby auction, half a dozen Campbell Soup tins, and his silkscreen of Canadian hockey icon Wayne Gretzky. The label for this case was titled "Andy Warhol: Pop Artist and Obsessive Collector." It stated:



Opening prayer of the press conference. December 7, 1988. Center: Chief Alex Frank; left: Alex Frank Jr., Mrs. Columba Frank, Mrs. Irene Ward (Neah Bay); right: Francis Amos, Dixon Sam, Stanley Sam, reciting prayer. (Photo courtesy of the Royal British Columbia Museum, Negative # PN17730-2.)

To Andy Warhol the Nuu-chah-nulth curtain was simply a work of art he wanted to possess. As far as we know he was not interested in either its history or its maker. The curtain remained unpacked for the ten years Warhol owned it. Its whereabouts only became known with the auction of the Warhol estate in April, 1988.

In the other case were displayed three masks and three whistles that are part of the Frank family regalia. A 1929 photograph of the masks being worn with one of the curtains in the background also was included.

The label copy for the exhibit intentionally did not explain the curtains' history or meaning. Our position throughout the partnership was that we did not have the authority to interpret and communicate information relating to the prerogatives of the family. This was a responsibility of the family, who would present the history and meaning of the curtain during the opening.

The Opening—Wednesday, December 7, was set for the opening. Although we defined its parameters, namely location and time, the Frank family had complete control over the agenda. The program consisted of two events, a one-hour press opening in the Museum foyer in the afternoon and a longer public presentation in the 550-seat Newcombe Auditorium in the evening. The press opening was staged for television coverage and was witnessed by an overflow public audience. The program opened with a prayer, followed by the speaker for Chief Alex Frank, who gave a brief history of the curtains' meaning. Members of the family then performed a selection of four songs and dances owned by Chief Frank.

Both the family and the curators participated in the evening program. Nearly half of the audience was Nuu-chah-nulth. The event began with short presentations by the authors on the history of the acquisition of the curtains by the Museum and our reconstruction of their history since they left their communities of origin. Although the family had graciously agreed to let us tell our story, their primary interest was, of course, their own narrative explanation of the curtains and their importance to their family history. The speaker for the Frank family presented their history and meaning by referring to images on the curtain; for each one, an individual who was a descendant of the past marriage alliance represented by the image was called up on stage and seated. The four-hour event culminated in the performance of many songs and dances. The event turned out to be a great success. The audience seemed to appreciate seeing a real-life event conducted by Native People rather than a theatrical production. The Frank family was pleased



Irwin Frank performing the Changer Mask Dance. (Photo courtesy of the Royal British Columbia Museum, Negative #PN17729-34.)

to have had the opportunity to publicly communicate their history. The Museum was pleased with the positive public and media feedback, and we were personally gratified with the positive results of our extended dialogues with the family.

CONCLUSION

Current theories of museological practice dictate the inclusion of the "Native voice" in exhibitions. What we realized during this project was that a partnership of the sort the RBCM engaged in with the Frank family implies more than just dialogue about the story line and/or an invitation to perform at an opening. It involves a partial relinquishing of control. Certainly we recognize the rights and privileges of Chief Alex Frank and have agreed that any use of the curtains will be made only with his knowledge and approval. The relinquishing of control during the Frank family event went beyond this appropriate acknowledgment of a chiefly family's rights to determine the treatment of their own heritage; it allowed the family to take full responsibility for a public event sponsored by the Museum. Although there had been considerable discussion with the family about our expectations about their program, we could not and did not tell them what to do. We did ask them to let us know what they were planning but did not insist on changing any of those plans.

If museums wish to enter into partnerships with Native Peoples, they must be prepared to relinquish authority. This is more than a dialogue; it is a commitment to genuinely include Native Peoples in the process of creating exhibits and public programs relating to their culture. Without this commitment, museums will continue to be viewed as exploiting Native Peoples and will find themselves isolated and increasingly trying to justify their monologic positions. Relinquishing control, however, has the potential to cause considerable anxiety amongst museum professional and managerial staff. An institution that has its name on a program and presents it to a largely white audience typically wants to control its content and length. We did not have such control at the Frank family event.

The success of this event for the public, the Frank family, and the Museum was in large measure a result of the nature of the partnership between the family and the institution. During our discussions, dialogue was open and honest. We came to respect each other's areas of expertise and developed a deeper understanding of each other's concerns and agendas. We, for example, came to appreciate the complexity of family relationships and the need to reaffirm them at ceremonial occasions. The Frank family, most of

whom had never before entered a museum, learned about conservation, exhibition, and the demands of public programming. What museums—particularly those in areas farther from Native communities than the RBCM—need to recognize as they form the kind of partnership we have described is that the relationship is a long-term one that must continue to address issues brought forward by either partner. Consequently, the Museum must be prepared to assist the family in the validation of their position in the community when the time arrives. This is the measure of an alliance of equals.

Some may consider the relinquishing of authority we have described as a loss of control. Certainly by doing what we did, we yielded some power over public programming. The Museum, however, benefited from what might be perceived as a loss. By "doing the right thing," by turning over a program to a Native group, and by explaining our actions to the press and public, the RBCM endeavors to practice a museology that is responsive to the concerns of Native People. Thus relinquishing control in a specific context maintains our Museum's reputation as a respectful institution in both the Native and the museological communities.

FOOTNOTES

1. Versions of this paper were presented by Hoover and Inglis at the 7th Native American Art Studies Association Biannual Conference, Vancouver, August 24, 1989, and at the 43rd Canadian Museums Association Conference, Edmonton, Alberta, June 23, 1990. We have benefited considerably from the criticism and insights provided by Aldona Jonaitis, vice-president for Public Programs, American Museum of Natural History.
2. A ceremonial curtain is a large cloth hanging with painted images depicting the history and rights of a chiefly family. It is displayed at ceremonial events, where it hangs at the back of the hall and forms the backdrop to the ceremonies.
3. Chief Alex Frank, a ranking chief of the Tla-o-qui-aht (Clayoquot), is the traditional owner of this curtain. This paper and the events it discusses would not have been possible without the permission and support of Chief Alex Frank and his family. Although we have attempted to be as accurate as possible in this paper, there may be errors in fact or interpretation. Any such errors are our responsibility and in no way should prejudice Chief Alex Frank.
4. Another interesting example of cooperation is the Living Arctic exhibition (1987–1990), the result of a partnership between Indigenous Survival International and the British Museum of Mankind (King, 1989).
5. The Museum has a letter of agreement with descendants of the Martin family and a contract with the Hunt family which explicitly recognizes the hereditary rights of the family in terms of the paintings and carvings associated with the houses. The Museum has been given the right to exhibit these prerogatives but does not claim ownership of them.
6. The 1986 curtain was acquired along with associated masks and whistles from a dealer in Seattle. Funds were provided by the Friends of the Royal British Columbia Museum and the Canadian Cultural Property Export and Import Review Board, Ottawa.
7. Funds for this purchase also were provided by the Friends of the Royal British Columbia Museum and the Canadian Cultural Property Export and Import Review Board, Ottawa.
8. For example, the cover of *Newsweek*, April 18, 1988, featured a photo of Andy Warhol with the headline "Art for Money's Sake."
9. We purchased the curtain because of its importance to the collection; we exhibited the curtain in part in response to media pressure and in part to capitalize on it.
10. This was done at the insistence of the conservators due to the fragility of parts of the curtain.
11. In Nuu-chah-nulth practice, women can hold chiefly titles but must relinquish them on marrying.

This is because a woman typically leaves her village to reside with her husband. Chieftainship must remain in the village; consequently, men keep the title.

12. There is a formally posed photograph of Shobid Hunter standing behind a seated Dr. Atlieu and Annie taken between 1896 and 1903 at Neah Bay (Marr, 1987:63).

13. We spoke to the dealer on several occasions, but he was unable to recall from whom, where, or when he obtained the curtain.

14. An interesting subtheme not developed in this paper is the relationship of conservators and Native Peoples. For conservators, objects are to be preserved; for Native Peoples, objects are to be used and traditions celebrated.

15. The loss of the curtains (or any ceremonial artifact) does not alienate the related history, songs, and dances. These rights, however, can be given away, for example, when a chief gives his daughter one of his privileges upon her marriage.

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Museum Systems and How They Work

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Multi-institutional systems are found at local, state, federal, and university levels. Some are independent nonprofit systems; others are government agencies; a number are public/private partnerships; and still others are university based. Increasingly, systems are being considered as a means of starting, funding, upgrading, marketing, and/or coordinating two or more institutions.

Systems range from being highly centralized to loosely decentralized. Many were initiated by local museums to obtain public support; others were started to administer networks of museums and sites. Still others were created to provide needed cultural services or to help implement agency missions. Quite a few started with a single institution.

The systems with the longest histories are the Smithsonian Institution and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, both founded in 1846. Among the newest are the Memphis Museum System and the Baltimore City Life Museums, founded in 1983 and 1985, respectively. The National Park Service is the largest network, with more than 300 museums, visitor centers, and exhibits.

A sampling of current systems follows. Descriptions of what they are, what they offer, and how they work—and how well—have been augmented by individuals within the various systems in response to the author's request.

LOCAL SYSTEMS

City and county systems tend to be centralized. Some are operated with local governments, while others are private nonprofit museums that receive some of their funding from local government sources. A few are a combination city or county agency and a private nonprofit. Services provided by the principal museum or system headquarters vary from system to system.