

# The Potlatch

*"When one's heart is glad, he gives away gifts. It was given to us by our Creator, to be our way of doing things, to be our way of rejoicing, we who are Indian. The potlatch was given to us to be our way of expressing joy."*

*Agnes Alfred, Alert Bay,*

Since time beyond recollection, the Kwakwala speaking groups had expressed their joy through the potlatch. The word "potlatch" comes from Chinook jargon, a trade pidgin formerly used along the coast. It means "to give" and came to designate a ceremony common to peoples on the Northwest Coast and parts of the Interior. The potlatch ceremony marks important occasions in the lives of the Kwakwaka'wakw: the naming of children, marriage, transferring rights and privileges and mourning the dead. Guests witnessing the event are given gifts. The more gifts distributed, the higher the status achieved by the potlatch host. It is a time for pride - a time for showing the masks and dances owned by the Chief giving the potlatch.

Although there was no immediate opposition to the potlatch at the time of initial contact with the white man, such opposition began to grow with the coming of missionaries and government agents. Frustration over unsuccessful attempts to "civilize" the people of the potlatch led officials, teachers, and missionaries to pressure the federal government into enacting legislation prohibiting the ceremonies. The first version

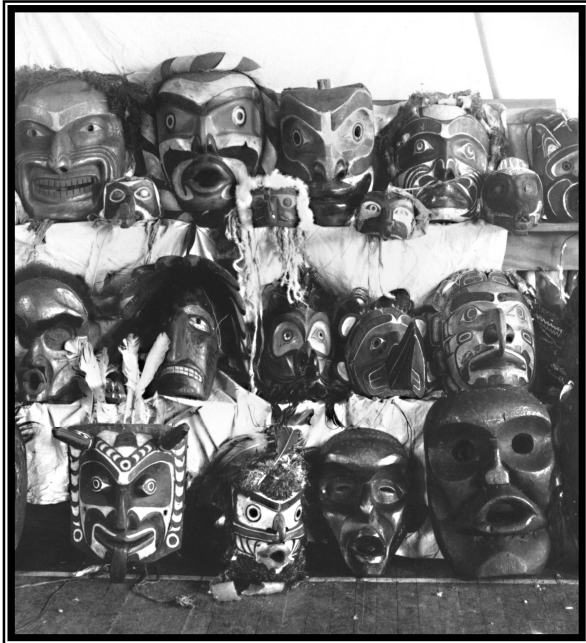
of the law was passed in 1884, but was difficult to enforce because of the vagueness of its wording. Later, the law was revised and following a large potlatch held at Village Island in December 1921, forty-five people were charged under Section 149 of the Indian Act. Of those convicted of offenses including making speeches, dancing, arranging articles to be given away and carrying gifts to recipients, twenty-two people were given suspended sentences. The sentencing was based on the illegal agreement that, if entire tribes gave up their potlatch paraphernalia, individual members of those tribes who had been found guilty would have their sentences suspended. Three people were remanded for appeal and twenty men and women were sent to Oakalla Prison to serve sentences of two months for first offenders and three months for second offenders.

The ceremonial regalia, including coppers, masks, rattles and whistles, were gathered up by William Halliday, the Indian Agent in Alert Bay, who had been largely responsible for the mass arrest. Inventoried and crated, the artifacts were sent to Ottawa. There, the collection was divided between the Victoria Memorial Museum, now the National Museum of Man in Ottawa, and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Some objects were set aside for the personal collection of Duncan Campbell Scott, then Superintendent General of Indian Affairs. Approximately thirty objects were sent to George Heye, a collector from New York, before the material left Alert Bay.

For some years the potlatch went "underground" to evade further prosecution under the law. In Fort Rupert, for example, people favored stormy weather as a suitable time to hold potlatches, knowing that neither the police nor the Indian Agent could travel in such weather. The Kwakwaka'wakw continued to hope that the anti-potlatch law would be repealed. However, when the Indian Act was revised in 1951, Section 149 was simply deleted.

Since 1921, those who had lost their treasures had not forgotten their loss. The first real efforts to repatriate these objects were started in the late 1960's. A few years later, the Board of Trustees of the National Museums Corporation agreed to return that part of the Potlatch Collection held by the National Museum of Man. The return was conditional on the construction of museums in Cape Mudge and Alert Bay. In 1979, the Kwakiutl Museum in Cape Mudge was completed, followed by the opening of the U'mista Cultural Centre on November 1, 1980. Each institution received approximately half of the objects returned.

The only permanent exhibit in the U'mista Cultural Centre is that of the Potlatch Collection in the Big House. Visitors are invited to enter the exhibit from the right, as a dancer does at potlatch ceremonies. The objects have been placed more or less in order of their appearance at a traditional potlatch. The story of the persecution of our people under the potlatch law is contained in letters, petitions and reports, which form part of the exhibit.



*Part of Potlatch Collection displayed in Parish Hall, Alert Bay 1922  
Photo courtesy of Royal B.C. Museum PN 12189*

## The meaning of U'mista

*In earlier days, people were sometimes taken captive by raiding parties. When they returned to their homes, either through payment of ransom or by retaliatory raid, they were said to have "u'mista". The return of our treasures from distant museums is a form of u'mista.*

## Visit the U'mista Cultural Centre

Opened in 1980, the U'mista Cultural Centre houses one of the finest Collections of elaborately carved masks, depicting the Potlatch Ceremony of the Kwakwaka'wakw. The Centre offers other exhibits of traditional and contemporary artifacts. The well-stocked Gift Shop carries high quality jewelry, carvings, silkscreen prints and other items produced by Kwakwaka'wakw artists and crafters.

Visitors may view two award-winning films produced by the Centre, dealing the Potlatch prohibition and cultural survival.

For guided group tours of exhibits please contact the Centre at the address or telephone number below.

### Open Year Round Hours

May (Tuesday after Victoria Day)  
to September (Labour Day)  
Daily 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM

September (after Labour Day) to  
May (before Victoria Day)  
Monday to Friday 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM

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## U'mista Cultural Centre



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