

# Photographers on Museums and Photography

**A**lthough this issue of *MUSE* is primarily devoted to the collection of photography, the importance of the process of the medium, and a recognition of it as an essential component of museum work, undoubtedly has an effect on collection practices.

The essays that follow are written by museum photographers and curators who use the medium in their daily work. The essays range from the philosophical to the practical and provide valuable information on the current use of photography in the museum environment.

## A Case for Photographic Repatriation

BILL MCLENNAN

**N**orthwest Coast Indian artifacts have been collected avidly by individuals and museums since the first Europeans made contact in the mid-18th century. The ravenous collecting of this art form coupled with depopulation and suppression of Native culture eventually left only a remnant of the material culture in British Columbia.

Many of these artifacts still exist in public and private collections around the world. The renewed pride of Native people in their heritage and a growing appreciation by British Columbians of the Northwest Coast has led to the desire to repatriate the art.

The problem is, however, that artifacts in public collections are unlikely to be deaccessioned, it is costly to borrow them, and artifacts that do become available on the open market command an extremely high price.

Photography is a partial answer to this dilemma. It may be the only alternative if the objects cannot be borrowed or purchased. More important, in some cases photography can sometimes reveal more than the object itself. An example is the use of infrared film to photograph the paintings that were applied to house screens and bentwood storage boxes. These paintings depict, in a stylistic manner, crest figures and events from the myth time. A patina of dried oils and soot

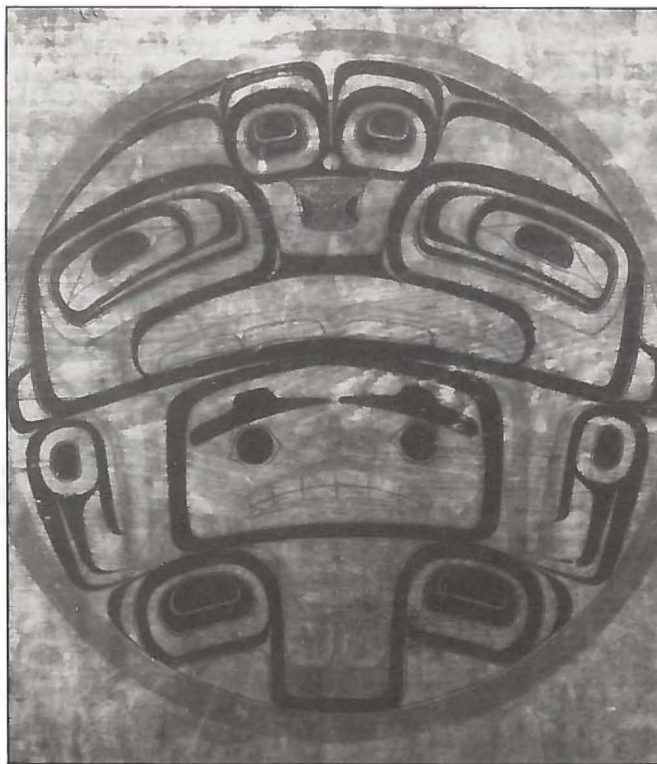


Bill McLennan demonstrates the use of infrared photography at a UBC Museum of Anthropology open house.

Une démonstration par Bill McLennan sur l'utilisation de la photographie infrarouge lors d'une journée d'accueil au UBC Museum of Anthropology.



(1)



(2)

from age and use often covers the artifact and obscures the original composition that was painted with earth pigments — magnetite-black and hematite red. The ability of these pigments to absorb heat is not affected by the patina, and the infrared film registers the difference between the areas of heat absorption and reflection. The resulting photographic image reveals paintings that otherwise would be partially or totally obscured.

This exciting revelation, along with the quest of contemporary Northwest Coast artists to re-establish the vitality of this two-dimensional art form, led to the development of the UBC Museum of Anthropology's Image Recovery project. To date, we have photographed 1,200 different artifacts from 22 museums and private collections.

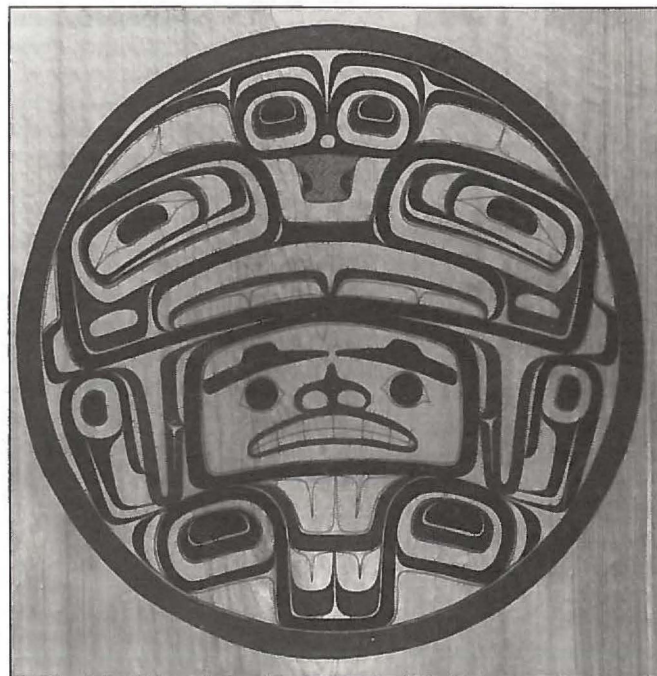
This repatriated image bank is making possible, for the first time, an in-depth examination of compositional relationships, iconographic representations and stylistic nuances. The eventual result will be a better understanding of tribal and individual style and a greater appreciation of past Northwest Coast Indian artists.

An exhibit and publication are planned, and eventually a video disc or other random access systems will be developed to allow maximum accessibility to these repatriated images.

BILL MCLENNAN works as designer/photographer at the UBC Museum of Anthropology.

The painting on this Northwest Coast Indian bentwood box, from the collection of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, has been retrieved through the use of infrared photography. (1) Shows the image as the eye sees it; (2) the image as the infrared film depicts it and (3) is the painting as reconstructed by Lyle Wilson (a Northwest Coast Indian artist) using the image produced by infrared photography.

La peinture sur ce coffre de bois recourbé et fabriqué par les Indiens de la côte Nord-Ouest, de la collection du Field Museum of Natural History de Chicago, a été retrouvée au moyen de la photographie à l'infrarouge. L'une (1) nous présente l'image telle que l'oeil la perçoit. Une autre (2) nous montre l'image telle que révélée par la pellicule infrarouge et enfin, une troisième (3) nous présente la peinture reconstruite par Lyle Wilson (un artiste indien de la côte Nord-Ouest) à partir de l'image produite par la photographie à l'infrarouge.



(3)

Bill McLennan