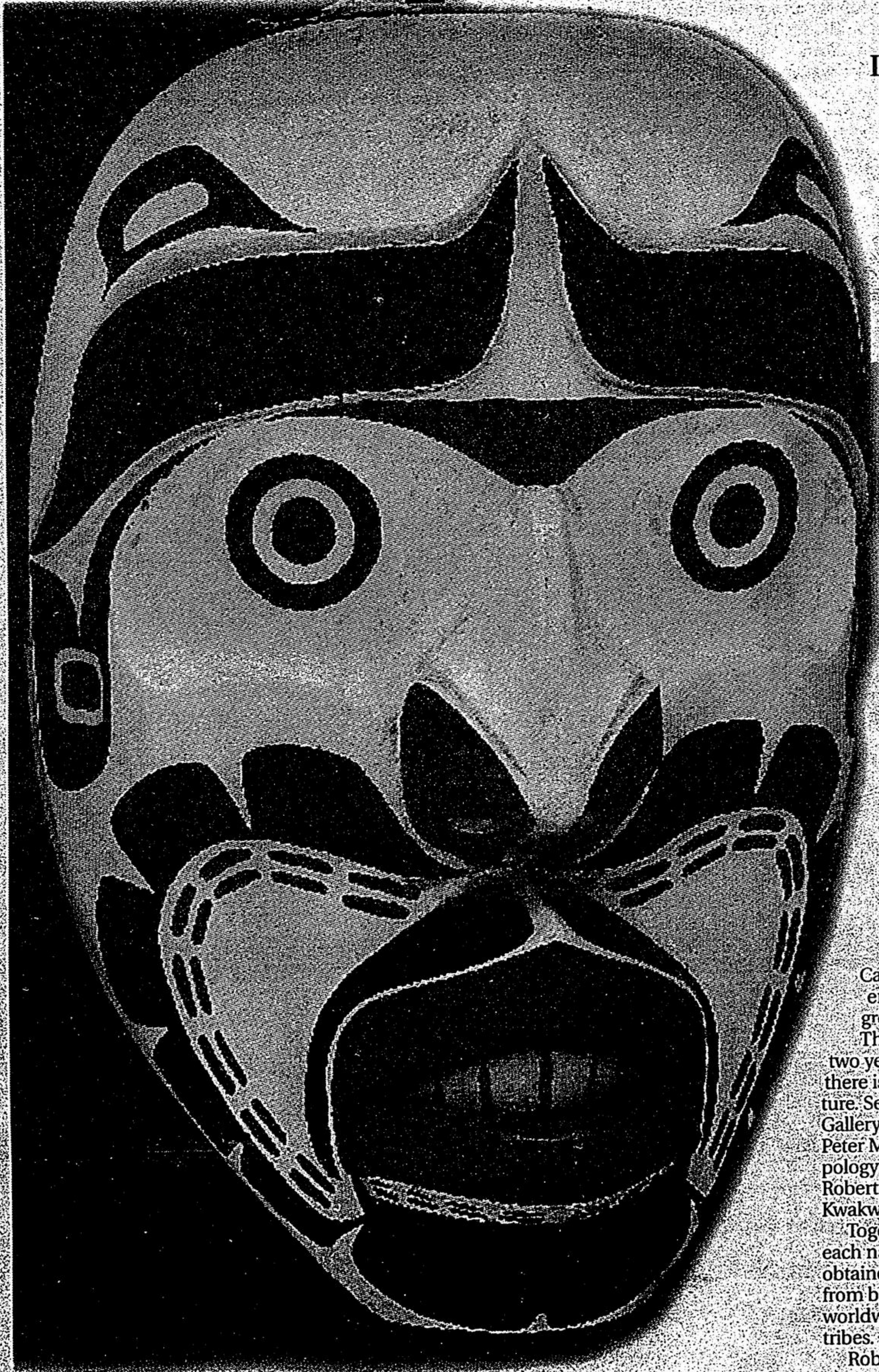


LEISURE

The spirit of the masks



I went down to the underworld with the chief of the ghosts

Therefore, I have supernatural power

The chief of the ghosts made me dance

Therefore, I have supernatural power

He put a beautiful ornament on my head

— A VERSE FROM A KWAKWAKAIWAKW GHOST SONG

BY PAM CHIOTTI
CORRESPONDENT

There is much to see beneath the masks that grace the walls of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection.

Once you start to understand the cultural significance of the spiritually powerful exhibit, you will feel the warmth of the fire. You will smell the scent of sweet tobacco. You will hear the pounding of the drum.

You will have entered into a realm where legend, spirit and art become one.

Until Feb. 28, the McMichael gallery in Kleinburg is showcasing Down from the Shimmering Sky: Masks of the Northwest Coast, an exciting, thought-provoking exhibit of one of the most intricate, meaningful and moving art forms of the First Nations community.

This exhibition affords central Canadians an opportunity to visually embrace a vital part of this country's great heritage.

The idea for the show was conceived two years ago in British Columbia, where there is a rich history of First Nations culture. Senior curator of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Bruce Grenville, worked alongside Peter Macnair, former curator of anthropology at the Royal British Museum, and Robert Joseph, a curator, writer and Kwakwaka'wakw chief.

Together with a team of advisors from each nation the show represents, they obtained rare and exquisitely carved masks from both private and public collections worldwide and from 10 coastal Indian tribes.

Robert Joseph hopes Down from the

Shimmering Sky encourages tolerance by increasing understanding of native culture and beliefs.

"We need to build bridges between a native society and a larger society," he maintains. "Many tribes could see the benefits of sharing their history with white people as a way to carry on (the Indian way of life) and earn greater respect for it."

Coast Salish masks, however, are not part of this exhibition because of that tribe's reluctance to allow their most private and treasured possessions to be put in a glass case for public viewing. The masks were always shrouded in secrecy and never publicly displayed. They were only worn during private ceremonies known as potlaches.

The wearer never revealed his true identity because the instant a mask was placed on his face, he represented a particular spirit. Therefore, this public display is an oxymoron of sorts.

Contradictions aside, Joseph hopes the exhibit inspires young native people to learn more about their culture. "We want them to see the intent and purpose of these objects. For too long, we ignored our own history and our own culture. It's just a crime."

There is much to see behind the esthetic beauty of the more than 150 carvings on display. Down from the Shimmering Sky is not just an exhibition. It is a commemoration of First Nations' culture.

"They (the masks) are a celebration of a living culture that hasn't disappeared," Grenville says. "The culture is steeped in history and continues today."

"The colourful and intriguing objects symbolize a dimension of cosmology as interpreted by coastal Indians," according to Joseph.

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