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CBC unearths controversy as Island First Nations artifact considered for TV

KATHERINE DEDYNA / TIMES COLONIST JULY 5, 2013

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A First Nations carved stone artifact of a seated figure documented to be about 2,000 years old was among the items that turned up at the Victoria audition for Four Rooms, an upcoming CBC reality show. Photograph by: Courtesy the Royal B.C. Museum

Comox cake-maker Jewel Kizuk brought a rare, ancient First Nations artifact to Victoria during the last week of June to be considered for a new CBC TV reality show based on buying and selling unique objects.

The bowl, up to 2,000 years old, is well known as the Harris Bowl, named for Kizuk's father, who found it in his Qualicum Beach backyard in 1988, says Grant Keddie, curator of archeology at the Royal B.C. Museum. The museum already has three or four similar seated figures on display and he'd love to see the Harris Bowl join them.

He said he was shocked to see that the CBC would be involved in promoting a show that could merchandise ancient artifacts. "Instead of emphasizing the bowl's knowledge value, it emphasizes monetary value. We're really against creating a market for ancient artifacts."

Kizuk's bowl was likely used for ritual purposes by what is now the Qualicum First Nations, and was found on their traditional territory, Keddie said. It was documented by an RBCM collections technologist more than 20 years ago, but current technology could likely pinpoint what it had contained, he added.

Qualicum First Nation officials said they are horrified a culturally significant item like the bowl would be part of such a program. They said the bowl should be offered to them or given to the museum for safekeeping.

The Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resources, which is responsible for heritage conservation in B.C., also has raised issues.

"The archeology branch is concerned that offering such items for sale, and attaching a monetary value to them, will promote illegal collection of artifacts and illegal excavations in protected archeological sites," said a ministry spokesman. "We are therefore respectfully requesting that this item not be offered at auction."

There are only about 50 such figurines in a huge swath of land from Puget Sound, the Island and the Fraser Valley, and nearly half of them are broken, Keddie said. "Each one of these is unique," he added.

He would never estimate how much such a bowl would be worth because he's concerned about antiques dealers and speculation and trade in items he would rather see in a museum.

"Our museum does not purchase archeological material," Keddie said. "And if someone phones us and asks what it's worth, we don't tell."

Among the rare aspects of the Harris Bowl is that its face looks neither human nor animal but mask-like "which is kind of neat," Keddie said. What appears to be a snake goes up the back of the figure's spine.

"This thing is made of really coarse material," he said. "It took a lot of ingenuity to make this thing with stone tools." He believes it was acquired by Kizuk from her father around 2008.

It is illegal under B.C.'s Heritage Conservation Act of 1994 to remove objects from a protected site without a permit from the province's archeology branch.

Branch director Justine Batten said the timelines associated with the bowl — found before the act was put in place — limit what can be done. "The province's only option would be to designate the bowl as a provincial heritage object, which would preclude the object from leaving the province but not from being sold. However, this artifact is not considered a good candidate for designation because the owners are unwilling."

Keddie added that the bowl can't leave the country without going through a permit process. "And the person selling it has to prove that they cannot find a Canadian buyer."

The CBC show, called Four Rooms, is scheduled to premiere in January. It involves four dealers of rare objects who examine items and then retire to their rooms, where the owners of the items are invited to make a deal.

Kizuk said many times during an interview that she has no agenda for the artifact, which she praises as "a beautiful piece of history that should be shared." She has no idea if the bowl will even be selected for the show and she is under no obligation to sell it, she stressed.

In her view, Four Rooms is more about showing objects to a cross-Canada audience than selling them. "It's just a show. It's just for fun."

The CBC website says Four Rooms is seeking "stunning, iconic or unusual" items for chances "to make the deal of a lifetime."

"CBC producers are on the hunt for Canadians looking to sell their family heirlooms and one-of-a-kind collections to four of the country's top art, antique and memorabilia buyers."

CBC spokesman Chuck Thompson said the producers of the show have seen "literally hundreds of objects" during their tour of the country, including art, antiques and memorabilia.

"They certainly won't shy away from anything controversial. In fact, they'll tackle head-on the reasons why individuals have those objects in their possession, how they got them and why they want to sell them."

All of that will be on camera, Thompson said.

"It's fair to say we'll discuss the ethics of dealing in controversial items, and more to the point in no way will Four Rooms glorify any controversial items or encourage selling practices that are deemed to be illegal or immoral," he said.

Kizuk was one of 22 people who brought their treasures to the Victoria Marriott Inner Harbour. Finalists are expected to be contacted by July 16 and flown to Toronto to record episodes.

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— With files from Jeff Bell

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