

Michael Ames

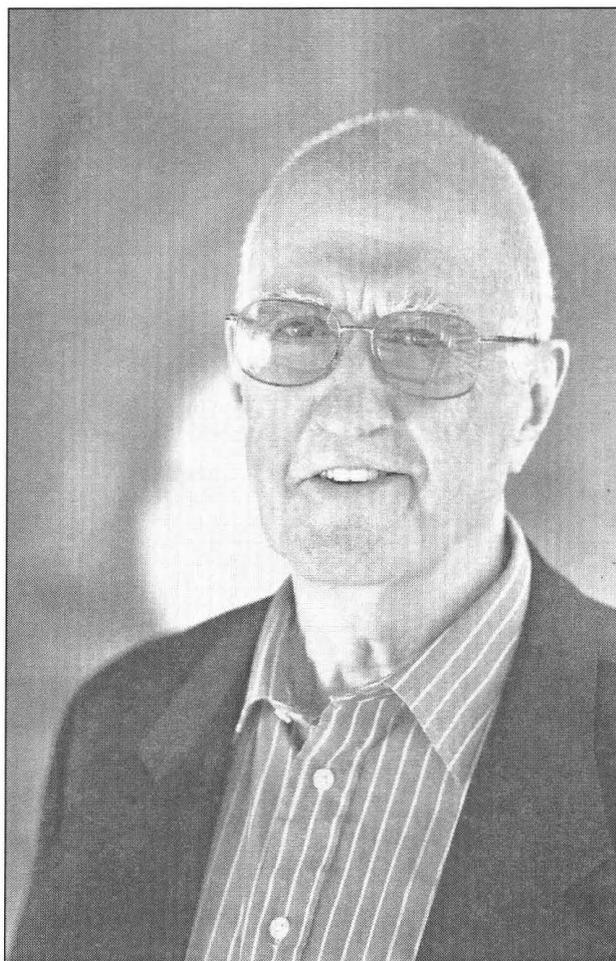
(June 13, 1933 - February 20, 2006)

Michael M. Ames was an anthropologist who studied Sri Lankan Buddhism, social change and development. He was Director of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (MOA) from 1974 to 1997 and from 2002 until 2004. He received the Order of Canada (1998), the Weaver-Tremblay Award for Applied Anthropology from the Canadian Anthropology Society (1994) and was elected as a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada (1979).

During his tenure over a hundred exhibits were mounted at MOA. Nineteen of these were archaeology exhibitions—examining the past of cultures from local First Nations, to Japan, Peru and the Classical World.

Over his term as director MOA was at the forefront of innovative museum practice and achieved an international reputation. Michael oversaw a paradigm shift in the relationship of museums and First Nations communities. These shifts are always contentious and often uncomfortable for those who live through them. However, Michael steered a steady, determined course, working with First Nations and particularly with the Musqueam Indian Band, on whose traditional territory the museum sits, to create a new understanding of collaboration and of museum practice. Opening in 1995, two groundbreaking archaeological exhibits were at the heart of these changes: “Written in the Earth: Coast Salish Art” curated by David Pokotylo and Margaret Holm and “From Under the Delta: Wet-Site Archaeology in British Columbia’s Lower Fraser Region” curated by Kathryn Bernick. During the research and development of these exhibits the first memoranda of understanding between MOA, the Laboratory of Archaeology and the Musqueam Indian Band were signed. For many today it is hard to imagine creating an archaeology exhibit without community input but before these exhibits it was the norm.

While Michael rarely spoke of it, he had actually participated in an excavation, working for Carl Borden at the Marpole site in the mid-1950s before graduating from UBC and heading to Harvard for his doctoral research. While he never again participated in an archaeology project, he understood the concerns and was at times supportive of the practice. In 1988, a backhoe operator excavating a water hazard at the Beach Grove Golf Course noticed cordage and basketry poking through the pile of muck he had removed. A hasty salvage excavation was organized of materials from what became known as the Water Hazard site (DgRs-30). Many organizations were involved in this work including the ASBC. The Museum of Anthropology lent Ann Stevenson to assist in the fieldwork.



Michael was never afraid of boundaries and was prepared to tread where others might fear to go. For example, in 1978, Michael and Marjorie Halpin (a Museum curator) co-hosted the “Manlike Monsters on Trial: Early Records and Modern Evidence” conference. Focusing primarily on the elusive sasquatch, this conference engaged scholars, amateur enthusiasts and the “lunatic fringe” as presenters.

He was a strong supporter of First Nations’ aspirations and firmly believed that museums had a responsibility to originating communities beyond collaboration on and repatriation of objects of cultural heritage. He was involved in many such initiatives including: The joint Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association Task Force, “Turning the Page: Forging New Relationships between Museums and First Peoples;” The Native Youth Program, where he was a strong supporter of Hilary Stewart’s work with Madeline Rowan; the Aboriginal Cultural Stewardship Program; the UBC First Nations Language Programme advisory committee; and Musqueam 101.

We will miss you Michael.

Sue Rowley