

William Jamieson

"Like a lighthouse for the arts in Toronto" – Kip McKesson

The tribal art world lost one of its endearing originals on July 3rd with the passing of Billy Jamieson, one day after his 57th birthday. The preliminary coroner's report lists cardiac arrest as the cause.

William Jamieson, known to friends as Bill or Billy, was employed by Canadian Customs and worked as a building contractor before finding his real vocation in the world of tribal art. Though he may be remembered as an engaging and enthusiastic collector of shrunken heads and other oddities, Bill was a serious dealer, at times obtaining record prices for his objects. Never one to shy away from publicity, he was in the process of completing the first season of a series for the History Television channel.

Since 1997 he had been a member (and Vice Chairman) of the Canadian Chapter of the New York Explorers Club. His membership was based on his interest and travels to the Amazon (five times between 1995 and 2001) focusing on the Jivaro's Shuar people. He is said to own the world's most extensive library and archival photo collection relating to the Shuar.

In an example of the business acumen that made him a successful dealer, Jamieson bought the Niagara Falls Museum in 1999. Among its riches were nine Egyptian mummies that he sold to Emory University's Michael C. Carlos Museum. Study confirmed that one of the mummies was that of Pharaoh Rameses I. It was eventually repatriated to Egypt with a PBS TV special covering the whole story.

In one of his many interviews Bill is described as a “modern-day treasure hunter, an ancient and tribal arts collector and dealer. ... Part P. T. Barnum, part Indiana Jones.... with a rock and roll sensibility.” Nowhere was this more in evidence than at the legendary Halloween parties held at his incredible (“collector chic” wrote the *Globe and Mail*) Toronto home occupying the entire floor of an old warehouse. The evening’s events began with the annual meeting of the Explorer’s Club at 7 pm and segued into the costume party later in the evening. Always fond of practical jokes, Bill once invited fellow dealer Kip McKesson to the Club meeting and party saying it was OK to come to the Club meeting in costume as “most people do.” When Kip and a friend showed up they were, of

course, the only two in costume for a meeting whose membership is rather obviously ‘upper class’.

I will always remember Billy as one of the most enthusiastic, energetic and non-judgmental people I have had the privilege of calling a friend and our condolences go out to his fiancée Jessica Phillips and his son Jordan.

As a final coda, there is some small, parting comfort to think that Billy would give a long, hearty laugh to know that the office of the Chief Coroner of the City of Toronto telephoned the studio of artist Mark Prent to determine if the white box they had found at Billy’s house contained a “real body.” It is actually a 1972 Prent sculpture made of polyester resin and fiberglass. As the Prents write, we “are confident that Billy would have approved.”

-- Wilbur Norman