

Indigenous Heritage and Public Museums: Exploring Collaboration and Exhibition in Canada and the United States

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Indigenous Museology

- Indigenous Museology is a body of ideas and techniques that are employed within museums who collaborate with descendant communities to manage heritage.
- By being active participants in museology, Indigenous people are changing museum missions, exhibitions, philosophies, priorities and methodologies.
- Museum collaborations with Indigenous peoples have been fruitful in helping museums understand how to properly care for objects according to cultural sensibilities and to honor Indigenous rights over the presentation and interpretation of heritage.

Museum exhibits increasingly contain intangible heritage that is the intellectual property of descendant communities.

This study emphasizes the rights of Indigenous people to manage their heritage within museums.

Methods

- An in-depth ethnographic study of four institutions with collections of Indigenous material.
- Extensive interviews with museum staff at each location.
- Critical analysis of visual examination of collaboratively-created exhibits to observe the inclusion of “native voice” and other evidence of collaboration.

What does Indigenous Museology Look Like? Case Studies in Collaborative Exhibit Creation



Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Honolulu, HI

Exhibit Focus: Hawaiian Hall

Method of Collaboration: Project steering committee that included Native Hawaiians, and staff that included Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners.

Result: A multi-faceted exhibit that presents Native culture from a Native Hawaiian point of view, including chants, art, and some curatorial content.



Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Yellowknife, NWT

Exhibit Focus: Gallery Renewal (“North and South Gallery Dioramas”)

Method of Collaboration: Extensive collaboration with communities, but often after exhibit plan was created.

Result: Primary focus on animal scene, with detailed cultural information in “reader rails” and side cases. Details the cultural use and context of animals depicted.



Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria, BC

Exhibit Focus: First Peoples Galleries

Method of Collaboration: Some close collaboration when created in 1970s. Input varies by section of exhibit, general acknowledgement that updates are needed.

Result: Primary focus on artistic merit of BC First Nations, some political content in recently updated sections.



Denver Museum of Nature and Science, Denver, CO

Exhibit Focus: North American Indian Cultures (“Crane Hall”)

Method of Collaboration: Various as sections are updated. Mostly informal.

Result: Collections arranged by geographic region, two diorama scenes with some inconsistent inclusion of Native perspectives.

Research Questions

How have changing views on Indigenous heritage rights affected methods of collaboration to create museum exhibits?

- How were collaborative methods developed and how have these changed over time?
- What collaborative methods are currently being employed?
- Is collaboration visible in the final exhibit product?

Study Goals

- To explore how critical heritage theory (including Indigenous archaeology), community-based methods, and collaborative practice are employed in North American museums.
- To encourage the further development of Indigenous Museology and the creation of culturally sensitive and accurate representations of Indigenous cultures.
- To develop a set of recommendations that will encourage the expansion of museum-based collaborations and to suggest how Indigenous perspectives on heritage may be successfully conveyed to museum visitors.

Preliminary Results show that there is a range of methods employed in collaborative exhibit creation. Full and early partnerships may lead to greater inclusion of Native voice and worldview.