Building a Museum Without Walls: Native Worldviews Reshape Mission

In July 2001, more than a century after it was taken from Cape Fox Village near Ketchikan, Alaska, the Kaats totem pole, a 44-foot red cedar carving, was returned by the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) to its original home– the Native Alaskan community of the Cape Fox Tlingits. The pole, along with several 12-foot house posts and painted front of a Bear clan house, were taken in 1899 by members of a scientific expedition along Alaska's coast led by railroad magnate Edward H. Harriman. Those artifacts eventually entered NMAI's collection.

According to Jim Pepper Henry, NMAI's repatriation program manager, the Kaats totem pole is the largest item ever returned to a tribe under the National Museum of the American Indian Act of 1989— the landmark legislation that mandates the Smithsonian Institution to inventory, document and, if requested, repatriate culturally affiliated human remains and funerary objects in its collections to Native groups—and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA), which extended the provisions of the NMAI Act to all federally funded museums. So large, in fact, is the pole that NMAI staff had to arrange for a truck with a custom-built platform to transport it from the museum's storage facility in the Bronx to Seattle, where the pole was transferred to Ketchikan by barge.

For the Cape Fox Tlingits, the homecoming of the Kaats pole and other repatriated objects belonging to the Bear clan was an event of immense spiritual and historical significance. It was marked by a community-wide "potlatch," a traditional Tlingit ceremony featuring dancing, feasting and gift-giving. "The feeling [of the community] that day when the items were returned was one of jubilation," recalls Joe Williams, a Tlingit Eagle of the Killer Whal clan and president of the Saxman Tribal Council of the Cape Fox Tlingits at the time of the pole's repatriation. "You could absolutely feel the presence of the ancestors."

The repatriation of these objects brought a sense of closure to the mystery surrounding their disappearance from Cape Fox. While storytelling kept these sacred objects alive in Cape Fox's collective memory, the question as to their physical whereabouts had haunted the tribe for several generations. Says Williams, "When I was a kid—I'm sixty years old so it takes me back fifty years —I remember my dad telling stories about the items that had been taken. He talked about the Bear House and a couple of the

By Lynn Stern

Bear totem poles, and said he had absolutely no idea where those objects were."

The significance of these objects for the tribe goes far beyond their historical and aesthetic value as museum artifacts. The Kaats pole, in particular, is a vivid rendering of one of the Bear clan's most venerable legends: it tells the mythical story of Kaats, a Tlingit brave who leaves his family to hunt grizzly bear in the mountains, only to fall in love with a female bear that appears to him as a woman. The pole also memorializes and physically embodies the honor and complex social relationships active in its creation and raising. "Totem poles tell stories and show the wealth of a family," explains Williams, "In some cases you raise a pole to show to which tribe or clan that family belongs." With the recovery of the pole and other items, the Cape Fox Tlingits are once again in possession of the tangible materials that link the past and the living people of the tribe, validate clan identity and ensure continuity of tribal culture and community. Says Williams:

The returned items truly solidified the Bear clan, gave them position and stature, which was important. I'm very happy and pleased that the items were returned where they belong. Our children and grandchildren now have something to see which I never had growing up, hearing stories about these things. So that's a real positive in this return…And when the items are displayed, there will be opportunities for more storytelling.

BRINGING MUSEUM OBJECTS BACK TO THEIR CULTURAL CONTEXT

The return of the Kaats totem pole to the Cape Fox Tlingits is one of a dozen claims processed each year by NMAI's repatriation program. NMAI's deaccessioning of such prized artifacts from its collection through the repatriation process seemingly runs counter to the traditional institutional responsibilities of the museum as exhibitor, preserver and interpreter of cultural objects. Yet, bringing museum objects back to their cultural context—to the living communities that inspired their creation—is central to NMAI's mission as an institution dedicated to the development, maintenance and continuity of Native culture and community. As NMAI collections management specialist Terry Snowball explains, the repatriation of cultural objects to Native communities is key toward affirming and sustaining tribal identities and cultural traditions:

We're trying to align the context—the meanings of these items—with the actual objects. The physical removal and placement of an object upon a shelf doesn't necessarily remove it from its true context. That's what repatriation does in that sense— it reconciles issues related to the maintenance and perpetuation of a particular identity to

what's held in a sacred item…[Sacred objects] were the cornerstone of Native cultures—they perpetuated the myths, the stories, the languages, issues of origin and an understanding of what those identities were.

NMAI's unique focus on the care and preservation of Native cultures represents a fundamental shift in the role of the museum, one in which institutional mission is about people and living cultures, not just collections. In pursuing that mission, NMAI strives to balance Native worldviews and museum standards as guiding principles in the repatriation process and in the care and representation of material artifacts in its collections. In doing so, NMAI is pushing the boundaries of conventional museum practices in curation and collections management, setting forth a new concept of the museum as public institution that emphasizes stewardship and service in the context of living cultures. This new concept of the museum, as described by NMAI director W. Richard West, is predicated on "shared authority":

NMAI is seeking, consistently and methodically, to share its authority with those whose voices, views, and cultural expertise it feels are equally authentic and valid. I believe that an approach based upon shared authority can enhance dramatically the quality of the museum's work because it widens and deepens the scope of museum scholarship, exhibitions, and public programming—and thus rebounds to the direct benefit of those millions of people who walk through museums every year.

NMAI'S REPATRIATION PROGRAM: COLLABORATION, CONSULTATION AND COOPERATION

While NMAI's repatriation program helps Native communities like the Cape Fox Tlingits recover artifacts of cultural patrimony and sacred objects vital for the renewal and perpetuation of tribal life, the program also serves as an important entry point for the development of mutually enriching ties between NMAI and the tribe from which that object originates. The interchange that occurs between museum staff and tribes through the repatriation process ensures Native involvement in the care and interpretation of cultural objects, as well as their presentation to broader audiences. Says NMAI deputy director Doug Evelyn, "Repatriation is critical to our efforts to build lasting relationships with Native communities. Nurturing these relationships is one of the ways we bring forth Native voices to the general public."

To that end, NMAI's repatriation policy sets forth protocols and procedures aimed at fostering trust and partnership between the museum and Native constituencies engaged in the repatriation process. Collaboration,

consultation and cooperation are the principles guiding that process. The repatriation process is initiated by a request to NMAI from a tribal group for an inventory of relevant materials in the museum's holdings. Once the tribe has determined items eligible for repatriation, NMAI arranges a one- to two-day visit—at the museum's expense—to its state-of-the-art Cultural Resource Center in Suitland, Maryland for tribal representatives to review the objects in the museum's collection. During that visit, tribal delegations can access NMAI archives to review museum records about the object's origins and acquisition.

To accommodate the viewing and handling of culturally sensitive materials by visiting tribal delegations, NMAI's Suitland facility is equipped with private indoor and outdoor ceremonial spaces where traditional and religious leaders can interact with objects in the traditional ways. These ceremonies often include "smudging," a purification ritual in which museum-bound objects are blessed as sweet grass or cedar is burned. Joe Williams describes how the Cape Fox Tlingit delegation, upon viewing their tribe's sacred objects for the first time at NMAI, made introductions and sang traditional songs of welcome:

We all introduced ourselves because the presence of our ancestors wouldn't know who we were—they needed to know who we are and how we had become attached to these items. For those introductions you say who you are, who your mother is and who your father is from the mother's side. We were pleased that the items looked well cared for. We apologized for them being away from the homeland for so long. And there would come a day very soon that they will be home. Then we sang several songs of welcome.

Consultation is a key component of the repatriation process. During their visit, tribal delegations can confer, if desired, with researchers, curators or other museum professionals about the history of an object. Consultations with tribal leaders often yield first-hand information that contributes to the museum's knowledge about the Native communities represented in its collection. "A lot of the people that we bring in are still speaking the language; they can talk about their myths, about the origin source, the meanings of the songs," says Terry Snowball. "This is what benefits the staff."

Likewise, curators and conservators glean important insights from tribal visitors about the meanings of specific objects in the collection. As Jim Pepper Henry notes, "Objects have varying degrees of significance to tribal communities. A basket—otherwise unremarkable for its aesthetic qualities—may be identified by tribal representatives as a powerful

emblem of their clan. We learn more about an object through the repatriation process than when its sits on a shelf." Once objects are selected for repatriation, the tribe submits a formal claim to NMAI's Repatriation Committee with documentation that demonstrates a cultural affiliation to the material in question. An independent research report is generated by a repatriation researcher and serves as the basis for the NMAI board of trustees to make a final decision about the deaccession and repatriation of the object under consideration.

Following repatriation approval, NMAI arranges for the return of the objects to the tribe, where they may be displayed in tribal museums or reintroduced into ceremonial use. In the case of Cape Fox, the Kaats pole and other repatriated items will be exhibited in the tribe's newly constructed community hall. In some instances, tribes may wish to have NMAI transfer property rights but retain the object until the tribe has prepared a suitable storage facility or burial area. As NMAI board chair Dwight Gourneau explains, "If we have [an item] of religious or ceremonial importance to the tribe, many times they don't have the facilities that we have at the Smithsonian for the care and security of these items. They may even go through the repatriation process but ask us to be the caretakers…they only use objects for ceremonial purposes."

NAGPRA: A NEW ERA IN MUSEUM-NATIVE AMERICAN RELATIONS

The emphasis on cooperation and consultation with Native groups that characterizes NMAI's repatriation program stands as a model for American museums grappling with the challenges of fulfilling NAGPRA's mandate. In the thirteen years since NAGPRA's enactment, museums have faced the immense task of inventorying their Native holdings and formulating policies and protocols for the repatriation of sacred objects to tribal communities. NAGPRA has also challenged museums to open their doors to greater participation by tribal communities in the care and representation of Native artifacts.

For Native Americans, NAGPRA represents a kind of "cultural justice," providing them with a legal remedy for the recovery of their ancestral materials that museums have held for more than a century. It affirmed Native Americans' right to physical and intellectual control over their cultural heritage and acknowledged their authority in how Native culture is represented. As Jim Pepper Henry says, "I look at NAGPRA as 'human rights' legislation…it tipped the scale back to Native Americans who didn't have much of a voice in the disposition of their material culture and the remains of their ancestors."

Initially, NAGPRA was met with skepticism and trepidation by both sides. Tribal leaders feared bitter clashes would ensue with museums as they tried to reclaim these objects. Likewise, museums were concerned that their entire collections would be gutted as they were forced to return huge numbers of artifacts. For the most part those fears proved to be unfounded. Dwight Gourneau describes NMAI's thinking at that time:

Early in the discussions with NMAI's board—and our trustees come from broad and diverse backgrounds—there were deliberations about whether we were going to be flooded with requests. I'm sure some trustees had a concern that we were going to open the doors and let a lot of valuable objects and materials flow out…but that has not occurred. I suspect that's a general concern to many museums that have holdings. If you open the floodgates, a lot of these valuable materials are going to flow out the door….

What we've learned over the last ten years or so are that some of the concerns and fears of those charged with the retention of these objects within museums have not been validated. Only the objects that really have significant importance to the tribal groups have gone back home.

NMAI has distinguished itself in the museum field by its expansive interpretation and implementation of the NMAI Act and NAGPRA legislation. From the outset, NMAI placed a high priority on the return of human remains and funerary items; nearly all of the estimated 150 items of human remains in the museum's possession have been returned—a process, as Dwight Gourneau notes, NMAI undertook with great sensitivity to the participation of the Native communities involved. NMAI is one of only a few museums in the U.S.—and the only one that is a federal agency—that is actively repatriating objects throughout the Western Hemisphere. NMAI's proactive approach to the return of objects to tribal communities sets it apart from other museums. As Duane Champagne, NMAI board member and repatriation committee chair explains:

NMAI has been a forerunner in thinking about repatriation issues. The museum started very early with a policy that they would return all the objects that a community could make a reasonable argument for returning. The emphasis on actively seeking communities and negotiating with them and returning anything of any sacred significance was broadly interpreted in favor of the communities. There's been a very deliberate and active process to return things that were stolen or were required by sacred societies or objects of cultural patrimony for the tribes. In particular there was a commitment right from the very beginning to return all ancestral remains

located within the museum. We've been very different from any of the other museums in that way.

While the repatriation of human remains and sacred objects from other institutions has proceeded at varying levels of speed and intensity, many museums and tribal leaders agree that NAGPRA has had an unexpectedly positive impact on museum-Native American relations. One of the most significant outcomes of NAGPRA is the relationships being forged between museums and tribal communities through the repatriation process. "NAGPRA impels museums to consult with tribes…to sit down face-to-face," says Doug Evelyn, "It provides a framework for developing better lines of communication and fostering greater understanding and dialogue between museums and Native communities."

Those relationships have led to greater involvement by Native communities in the care, interpretation and presentation of cultural artifacts held in museums, including NMAI. Says Duane Champagne:

The lead that NMAI has taken in repatriation is part of that example. There's been active negotiation with Native communities and active solicitation of their perspective and understanding about objects, and the return of objects on any occasion when it seemed reasonably appropriate—even perhaps beyond the letter of the law—because it was the right moral thing to do. Lots of museums are looking at this process—it's such a different turn of understanding. But ultimately I believe they want to be caretakers of objects, rather than storing trophies from Native communities… [they] want to have living museums with Native people helping them present the material and interpret it for the education of the general public.

FROM CONNOISSEURSHIP TO STEWARDSHIP: MUSEUMS RETHINK MISSION

The museum as "a living institution" and "caretaker of objects" are notions that seemingly collide with the conventional model of museum as repository and authoritative interpreter of cultural relics of the past. By opening up dialogue between museums and Native constituencies, NAGPRA has compelled the museum world to rethink those fundamental assumptions and, in particular, their obligations with respect to the collections of Native cultural material they hold.

Museums have historically viewed themselves as holding collections for the benefit of the broader public, rather than specific constituent groups. NAGPRA represents an acknowledgement that cultural institutions holding the patrimony of living people have a duty to support,

collaborate and interact with respect to those particular constituents. It points to a more expansive idea of museum as public institution—one that emphasizes stewardship and service within the context of living traditions.

Martin Sullivan, executive director of Historic St. Mary's City Commission and repatriation expert, points out that NAGPRA was a leading reason, though not the only one, for museums to look at stewardship. Since the publication of the American Association of Museum's report, *Museum for a New Century* in the 1980s, says Sullivan, there has been a movement in the field to strengthen museums' connections to community. Over time the museum's core mission has evolved from connoisseurship to stewardship. That new thinking, he adds, has been reinforced by the priorities of national funders, such as the Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Fund and the Ford Foundation.

Sullivan notes that the concept of stewardship is gaining wider acceptance, not only among museum professionals but boards as well: "Not only staff but boards are coming to an understanding of NAGPRA within a larger set of principles… Boards are becoming more diverse—they include not just collectors or connoisseurs of objects but people in the community who embrace the understanding that a museum's mission is about people, not objects."

Repatriation has also raised broader issues about how museums can be respectful and responsible stewards of the religious and culturally sensitive materials in their collections. As Sullivan notes, "The field is looking at the larger question of museums as secular entities which find themselves requiring the stewardship of privileged knowledge and culturally sensitive objects." Longstanding assumptions about ownership, exhibition, interpretation and care of sacred objects in museums—which involve basic conservation and archival methods—are now being called into question in relation to the sacred materials and religious practices surrounding them. These issues are significant not only to museums of religion or those devoted to Native cultures, but to art museums, natural history museums, science museums and museums of anthropology.

NMAI's unique vision as "an institution of living cultures" and its leadership role in repatriation are influencing field-wide discussions about best practices in the stewardship of sacred objects. Alison Edwards, project director of the Religion and Arts Initiative at Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR), acknowledges NMAI's influence and its ripple effect on the broader museum field:

Since the beginning of our research initiative we have been orbiting NMAI and its policies and precedents. In 2001, CSWR held a conference, Stewards of the Sacred, built around NMAI's mission, philosophy and policies. A lot of international museums [participating in the conference] recognized that this is not just a Native American issue—there was recognition of cultural things and their relationship to living things.

NMAI is taking a leadership role in the museum field in that regard…It views itself as an instrument for the expression of culture, thinking of its collections as living things—the premise of the museum builds from there…

MANAGING CHEMICAL AND CULTURAL RISK

While the NMAI Act and NAGPRA have spurred a reexamination of the museum's role as public institution, the practical implications of repatriation have led to unforeseen consequences and new challenges concerning the management of culturally sensitive collections. Repatriation has radically altered the way museums do business, compelling them to modify conservation and storage methods to account for Native understandings about the nature of the objects in their collections. That raised a host of ethical dilemmas for museum conservators when Native care methods conflicted with standard museum preservation practices. In addressing these concerns, NMAI endeavors to strike a balance between the museum's obligation to preserve the integrity of objects in its custody and Native communities' concerns for the spiritual and physical care of their cultural material.

The repatriation of objects has been complicated by the discovery that many of these items have been chemically contaminated. As late as the 1960s, it was common practice for museums and collectors to preserve artifacts—and to ward off bugs and rodents—by applying a variety of toxic pesticides, including mercury, arsenic and the now banned DDT. These chemicals proved an effective means of preservation, assuming that these artifacts would always remain in museums, under glass or in storage. Yet, with the reintroduction of museum objects into ceremonial use, some tribes have discovered that their most sacred objects could potentially poison them.

To mitigate the potential health risks objects may pose, NMAI routinely tests for pesticide residue on all objects considered for repatriation. NMAI conservators have developed a variety of inexpensive non-invasive methods to detect the presence of pesticide residue while keeping the integrity of the object intact. They are

also experimenting with new techniques to neutralize and eliminate toxic residues from culturally sensitive objects. NMAI has introduced alternative non-toxic methods—known as Integrated Pest Management System—for the physical preservation of objects in its collections.

While NMAI strongly encourages the testing of objects under consideration of repatriation, some tribes may view that process as culturally inappropriate. In all cases, NMAI conservators work closely with tribes to understand how ceremonial objects are intended to be used and advise them on precautions they may need to integrate into these rituals to minimize health risks.

The spiritual care of objects is an important and innovative component of NMAI's collections management practices. Some objects are understood by tribal elders to have sacred power that makes it inappropriate for people without special authority or training to handle them. "Cultural objects have a life force," says Terry Snowball, "and the museum tries to respect this." If these objects are purposefully or inadvertently "mismanaged," they may bring harm to the individual responsible for the infraction or to persons closely associated with that individual. NMAI refers to that concept as "cultural risk."

To minimize cultural risk factors, NMAI has developed "cultural care" practices that address the storage, treatment and disposition of collections in the possession of the museum that are associated with tribal communities. Cultural care procedures are crafted in close consultation with tribal leaders who possess specialized knowledge about the spiritual care of objects. Such practices take into consideration gender restrictions that may apply to the handling of certain objects. Tribes may also request that objects in storage be oriented toward a sacred site or cardinal direction. Terry Snowball, a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation in Wisconsin, describes the storage of a drum used in his tribe's Dream Dance religion:

The decoration of the drum determines its orientation. The northern half of the drum is blue, and on the southern half it's red… there's usually a yellow path in the middle which signifies the path of the sun. It always has to maintain those particular orientations.

To protect the staff working in close proximity to spiritually potent objects, traditional leaders perform blessings at NMAI four times a year, usually coinciding with the seasonal observances of the equinox and solstice.

In addition to formulating collection management practices that honor

Native understandings about the physical and spiritual care of culturally-sensitive objects, NMAI is also devising protocols with respect to the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge shared by tribes through the repatriation process. As Jim Pepper Henry points out, NMAI must carefully negotiate its educational mandate without compromising certain types of privileged information entrusted to the museum by tribes. That is particularly true in the case of NMAI's work with tribes on the re-interment of human remains, where secrecy about the burial site and funerary ceremonies is deemed paramount. The notion of privileged information also extends to knowledge about the museum's collection. In its work on various exhibition, research, and collections documentation projects, NMAI appreciates that tribal representatives believe certain information regarding cultural items and practices cannot be shared and will not be divulged.

SHARING EVOLVING MUSEUM POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Thirteen years after NAGPRA's enactment, the development of policies and practices for the management of culturally sensitive collections, and effective models for museum/tribal community cooperation, represents a relatively new frontier for the museum field. A number of museums, including NMAI, are attempting to cull their collective experience with NAGPRA. These efforts identify best practices for the curation and conservation of culturally sensitive materials, and standardize policies and procedures to bring consistency to the way institutions behave vis-à-vis tribal communities.

One such effort is the Museum Partners Project Working Group (MPP), a research initiative sponsored by CSWR at Harvard University. Over the past two years, MPP's three core partners—NMAI, the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology and the Alutiiq Museum & Archaeological Repository in Kodiak, Alaska—have held a series of convenings to share evolving practices in the care, exhibition, and interpretation of culturally sensitive material.

A unique aspect of the project, says MPP coordinator Alison Edwards, is the involvement of the entire staff at each museum to link expertise and resources across institutions. Project participants are developing guidelines for the care and exhibition of religiously significant materials that will be disseminated to the wider museum field. By documenting and sharing these practices, says Edwards, MPP participants hope to contribute to a re-envisioning of the museum as "an ambassador and steward of culture."

