Museum Cultural Collections: Pathways to the Preservation of Traditional and Scientific Knowledge

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<th>Journal:</th>
<th>Arctic Science</th>
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<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>AS-2017-0001.R2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Article</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date Submitted by the Author:</td>
<td>03-May-2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete List of Authors:</td>
<td>Linn, Angela; University of Alaska Museum of the North, Ethnology &amp; History</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keyword:</td>
<td>museology, decolonizing museums, Alaska archaeology, Alaska ethnology, cultural heritage</td>
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<td>Is the invited manuscript for consideration in a Special Issue?:</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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https://mc06.manuscriptcentral.com/asopen-pubs
Museum Cultural Collections: Pathways to the Preservation of Traditional and Scientific Knowledge

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Abstract

Museums of natural and cultural history in the twenty-first century hold responsibilities that are vastly different from those of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-centuries, the time of many of their inceptions. No longer conceived of as cabinets of curiosities, institutional priorities are in the process of undergoing dramatic changes. This article reviews the history of the University of Alaska Museum in Fairbanks, Alaska, from its development in the early 1920s, describing the changing ways staff have worked with Indigenous individuals and communities. Projects like the Modern Alaska Native Material Culture (MANMC) and the Barter Island Project are highlighted as examples of how artifacts and the people who constructed them are no longer viewed as simply examples of material culture and Native informants, but are considered partners in the acquisition, preservation, and perpetuation of traditional and scientific knowledge in Alaska.

Key words: museology, decolonizing museums, Alaska archaeology, Alaska ethnology, cultural heritage
Introduction

The early *Wunderkammer*, or “cabinet of curiosity” of Europe from which our modern museums grew, attempted to assemble and categorize all of the rarities of the natural world (Impey and MacGregor 1987). The arrival in North America by Europeans changed the way they saw the world and their place within it, and the Indigenous residents of those distant lands with whom they came in contact became yet another curiosity to be collected, categorized, and organized. Over the decades however, those peoples whose cultures and lands were colonized by the dominant nations systematically began to lose major parts of their cultural heritage for the sake of collectors and institutions. The act of collecting was both a symbolic way of taking power and control over those people, but some have argued that the very act of placing those objects in a museum allowed the colonizers to also re-arrange, re-present, and re-distribute the people themselves (Smith 1999). When objects entered museum collections, they were typically viewed through the context of the collector, with an emphasis on their curatorial vision and travel exploits, rather than anything specific about the people or places associated with the objects. Little respect was shown to human remains, with skulls and bones exhibited in public galleries. Dioramas showed Indigenous cultures frozen in time, separated physically and culturally from those affluent Westerners who browsed the exhibition halls. A “golden age of museums” during the late 19th and early 20th century correlated with the development of anthropology as an academic discipline, as well as civic and national pride movements combined with affluence brought about by capitalistic ventures. World’s Fairs often featured Indigenous people and their...
material culture, driving a desire for “salvage anthropology,” which attempted to collect evidence of those Indigenous cultures before they became overly influenced by Western society.¹

Not surprisingly, few Indigenous museums² existed prior to the mid-20th century and the international movements that focused on regaining power and sovereignty over lands and cultural heritage. The establishment of UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 1945 marked a change in the ability to coordinate efforts and communications about cultural heritage and the value of protecting and fostering cross-cultural understanding (UNESCO “Introducing UNESCO”). Through their theme of “Protecting Our Heritage and Fostering Creativity” they have produced declarations that express international recognition for the need to protect both the tangible and intangible aspects of world cultures (UNESCO “Protecting Our Heritage and Fostering Creativity”) as well as the need to work with the world’s museums to improve the care of collections, expand what is collected (tangible and intangible heritage) and the relationships between institutions and the communities whose items they safeguard.

As many modern Indigenous and Indigenous Studies scholars promote (Smith 1999, Bowechop and Erikson 2005, Lonetree 2012, Cushman 2013, Geismar 2013), museums and archives that maintain the collections of Indigenous peoples require a re-examination of their very operation and philosophy, to “decolonize”³ the institutions. Historically, institutions rarely

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¹ There have been many excellent summaries of the development of anthropological museums over the past two centuries. It is not our intent to rehash that history, but to illustrate the basic context from which the University of Alaska Museum was born in the early 20th century. See Ames 1992, Cole 1985, Marstine 2006, Schwarzer 2006 for a few examples.

² Indigenous and tribal museums are understood to be institutions that are managed under the authority of a tribally-based governing authority, typically include collections that represent the local Indigenous peoples, and present interpretations that are based on highlighting culturally-relevant concepts rather than an object-centered approach focusing on functions and uses of objects (Lonetree 2012). This definition can also include cultural centers, where activities often feature hands-on approaches to the perpetuation of culture, not just preservation.

³ The authors recognize that there is an inherent problem with the term “decolonize” that includes assumptions based on a binary and combative perspective of interpretation and operations. However, given the pervasive overuse
reached out to ask for the input of the people whose collections were curated within. In
collections departments, the languages, organizational principles, and philosophy of care have
been centered on the dominant culture of the region. The concepts of ownership and access were
also solidly based in Western concepts of property law. These concepts are now coming into
question, and being revised, as the process of decolonizing museums and archives proceeds.
Since the 1990s, museums in the United States have become accustomed to inviting the
participation of tribal entities in relatively new ways, compared to the first part of the 20\textsuperscript{th}
century. Representatives of Indigenous groups are regularly asked to serve on teams to contribute
to exhibitions and programming, and to consult regarding the nature of collections in relation to
the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). More Indigenous artists and
community members are taking the initiative to contact museums and use the collections for their
own research and to reconnect with items removed from their home communities. These new
relationships are based on an understanding that each party is held to be an equal, and there is a
“sharing of skills, knowledge, and power to produce something of value to both parties,” (Peers
and Brown 2003), particularly for museums committed to establishing and maintaining new
relationships.

The obligations of cultural museum collections in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century include many that were
not considered even fifty years ago. Multi-vocality\textsuperscript{4} in exhibitions and programming, collections
access to constituents beyond formal researchers, loans to non-museum entities, use of

\textsuperscript{4} of the term at this time, we concede to use the phrase in relation to museum work to represent the processes of
sharing and transferring authority to those outside of the traditional museum staff, being open to new
epistemologies, examining processes embedded in traditional museum operations, and reassessing the very culture
of museums themselves. There exist no current standards, no shared vocabulary, no set of guidelines on “how to
decolonize your museum.” Each museum is charting new territory as they uncover what processes work in their
institution and community and the best we can hope for right now is to slowly move forward.
\textsuperscript{4} See Phillips 2003, for a comparison of community-based and mutivocal exhibition approaches.
collections from source communities\(^5\), special curation and handling restrictions, and co-ownership of objects are just a few. Alaskan museums are among the leaders in many of these areas, due to the unique cultural history of Alaska, the large Alaska Native\(^6\) population and a generation who are expressing greater desire to be involved in telling their own stories within the institutions of museums. In communities large and small, museum staff and Indigenous peoples are working together to change the power structure and create educational opportunities for young and old. In this article, we will describe the history of one Alaskan institution, which has worked to change its own process, quietly developing its way to a more open way of working, to following the new museology (Vergo 1989), and a more holistic understanding of cultural and scientific knowledge.

The Birth of the University of Alaska Museum (1915-1940)

In 1915, on a wooded hillside near the young city of Fairbanks, a crowd gathered to witness the dedication of a four-foot block of concrete. “A.A.C.-S.M. July 4, 1915, L.D. 5915” was imprinted on the cornerstone for the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines. Judge James Wickersham, Alaska’s delegate to Congress, had the idea to create the first college in his hometown of Fairbanks, while working in his Washington, D.C. office (Cole 1994). It would take two more years for the Territorial Legislature to establish and appropriate $60,000 for the school, and another five until it was officially opened for students. This center of education would also come to be the center of systematic collecting of Alaska’s natural and cultural history.

\(^5\) There are many ways to refer to the communities from which museum items originate, each of which has its own political implications. In this paper, we will use the term “source communities” after Peers and Brown 2003.

\(^6\) Alaska is home to 229 Federally Recognized Tribes and a population of over 140,000 individuals who identify as Alaska Native, approximately 19.3% of the state (U.S. Census Bureau) and many remain within their traditional territories, not being removed to reservations like in the lower-48 states.
Charles Bunnell, the first president of the university, was interested in Alaska’s history and “…set aside some of his relics for the institution. In 1925, the late C.L. Andrews, writer on Alaska and Bureau of Indian Affairs official, donated a small collection of Eskimo artifacts and other archaeological and ethnological material,” (Keim 1954). The following year, he showed the materials to a Bavarian-born self-trained archaeologist and paleontologist named Otto W. Geist, sparking an obsession that would drive him for the rest of his life. Geist ventured into the Bering Strait in 1926 and made the first official collections for what would become the University of Alaska Museum (UAM) (Fig. 1). For many years after, expeditions were sponsored by Bunnell and the University and tens of thousands of specimens relating to archaeology, ethnology, history, and paleontology began to be cataloged and examined. The word got out about this small but important museum in the middle of Alaska, and researchers began to flock to Interior Alaska to see the collections and undertake fieldwork.

In the young discipline of archaeology, Alaska was promising to hold many answers and to be a source of even more questions including how the development of Arctic human adaptations and cultures developed and spread across northern North America and Greenland. National museums and their collectors began taking notice and the University and its museum were poised to be central players in the work. The man hired to research the vast collections made by Geist, to establish the anthropology program, and direct the museum in 1935, was Froelich Rainey. “With the thoroughness of a nineteenth-century naturalist, Geist collected everything. … In the few buildings of the new university at College, Alaska … there was not

7 The authors acknowledge that there are concerns within the decolonizing literature regarding the terminology used by anthropologists, archaeologists, and museum professionals to describe the tangible heritage of Indigenous peoples. As with other pragmatic elements associated with this paradigm, there exists no current set of standards or a shared vocabulary that works for all parties and all the populations represented in diverse collections like those at the UA Museum. For the sake of this article, we will use the more traditional museum terminology that references “objects,” “artifacts,” “collections,” and “specimens.”
even a room to unpack in, to say nothing of storing such collections. My first step was to sort out those cases of excavated and labeled specimens, then dig a large hole out back of the main building and rebury a large part of the rest,” (Rainey 1992). After that first winter, Rainey went on to excavate some of the most intriguing sites in Alaskan archaeology including the Ipiutak site in northwestern Alaska and the Dixthada and Campus sites in interior Alaska (Larsen and Rainey 1948; Rainey 1939).

Originally mentioned by Rasmussen with the results of the Fifth Thule Expedition,8 the Ipiutak site, excavated in the 1930s and ‘40s would provide collections and findings that would be important to both archaeological and ethnological studies (Rainey 1947; Larsen and Rainey 1948). At the time of excavation, Ipiutak was the largest and among the oldest settlements in the American Arctic and “its discovery has led to a reconsideration of all the known theories regarding the origin of the Eskimo,” (Larsen and Rainey 1948). The collections (over 10,000 artifacts (Fig. 2) and 500 skeletons) were divided among the sponsoring institutions: the University of Alaska, the Danish National Museum, and the American Museum of Natural History. Several notions of prehistoric Arctic life at that point revolved around the perceptions that the landscapes and resources were barren and scare and could not support larger populations of people, let alone a relatively complex society (Rainey 1941). The Ipuitak site questioned those notions with the large number of houses and graves and what appeared to be a systematic layout of a village and cemetery. The collections reflected a wide variety of hunting and fishing technologies, an elaborate artistic tradition, and perceived social complexity (e.g., social status

8 In 1924, Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen completed his famous cross-arctic expedition, the Fifth Thule Expedition. Arriving in Point Hope, Alaska in 1924, Rasmussen and his colleagues found he could understand the language of the Inuit people the entire distance of the trip. The publications resulting from the expedition helped support theories about the origin of the Inuit people and their migrations eastward from the Bering Strait (Rasmussen et. al. 1925; Rasmuson 1999). These questions drove a great deal of the early archaeological and ethnological collecting activities in Alaska.
and warfare) that was previously unrecognized in other prehistoric arctic cultures in North America (Rainey 1941; Mason 2006). The question became, and still remains, how the Ipiutak people relate to later Arctic cultures, both prehistoric and historic.

Back in Fairbanks, arguably one of the most important archaeological sites was discovered by local students on the campus of the University of Alaska, while digging post holes for the freshman bonfire (Cole 1994). The site was the first prehistoric occupation recorded in the Fairbanks quadrangle, and its microblades and wedge-shaped microblade cores provided the first archaeological evidence linking Native Americans to Asia, long perceived by many researchers to represent the remains of the earliest human colonization of northern North America (Nelson 1935; Rainey 1939; Mobley 1991).

The growing visibility of Alaskan archaeology and ethnology at UAF provided eager students unparalleled access to excavations of archaeological material as well as opportunities to interact with and learn from the diverse Indigenous people across the arctic and subarctic communities. Students who excelled at the university and went on to become leaders in the discipline included Ivar Skarland, J. Louis Giddings, James VanStone, and Wendell Oswalt, among others (Cole 1994). UAF anthropology faculty and visiting researchers, such as Edward Hosley and Helge Larsen, also made significant contributions to the collections at the museum and to our knowledge on Arctic cultures.

The University of Alaska Museum distinguished itself from the two other museums that existed in the state at the time: the Museum of Natural History and Ethnology in Sitka, established by Dr. Sheldon Jackson in 1887, and the Historical Library and Museum for the

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9 A list of past UAF Anthropology graduate students is posted at http://www.uaf.edu/anthro/past-students/.
10 Known since March 1892 as the Sheldon Jackson Museum (Jacqueline Hamberg, pers. comm. 30 December).
District of Alaska\textsuperscript{11} in Juneau. From these very early days, the fieldwork that generated collections at UAM was prompted by intellectually complex research questions, reflected in academic publications and exhibit displays as well. The galleries served the local community and university student body, while the systematic collections provided resources for researchers in the growing discipline of anthropology.

UAM was a prominent institution, rivaling national museums such as the American Museum of Natural History, National Museum of Canada (now, the Canadian Museum of History) and the Danish National Museum, in bringing Arctic cultures to the forefront of anthropology and museum studies. Arctic cultures were known primarily through exploration literature and museums exchanged artifacts with other institutions to bring the far flung reaches of the world to people before air travel was widely available. UAM led several scientific expeditions into the American Arctic to understand how people live in what was thought of as such a harsh, unfriendly, and desolate place as the arctic. At the forefront of these expeditions was the ever-present quest to identify the earliest inhabitants of the Americas.

As the collections grew, the data associated with the collections came from both Indigenous sources as well as from the settler populations. For example, Albert Kulowiyi, a St. Lawrence Island Yupik man and former manager of the Reindeer Commercial Co. of Savoonga, traded approximately 80 items to the museum in the 1940s as compensation to the university for allowing local Yupik people to use a generator left following excavations. These include some of the earliest signed ivory carvings from Savoonga. Accession records indicate that while museum staff and researchers sought input from Alaska’s Native people in order to accurately represent the collections being assembled, the relationship was a typical one of museums and Indigenous

\textsuperscript{11} Known since the early 1960s as the Alaska State Museum.
people of the early- and mid-twentieth century, where collections and data came into the museum and cash went to the Native people. The UA museum, unlike that conceived by Sheldon Jackson\textsuperscript{12}, was not overtly created as a place for Indigenous people to learn about their ancestors, but rather more for the students and researchers of anthropology, mostly from settler communities.

**A Period of Transition (1940-1990)**

Following the period of increasing militarization of Alaska (the years preceding and following WWII) and the early days of statehood\textsuperscript{13}, the University museum continued to play an important part of the University of Alaska, as archaeologists and anthropologists documented past cultures and languages and collected their material remains. Exhibits conveyed the distinct and unique cultures of Alaska’s Indigenous people, by highlighting the various elements of people’s daily lives (e.g., tools, hunting equipment, skin sewing, basketry) from the days prior to contact with settler populations. The interpretation was typical of the time: labels with a curatorial voice with little to no input from the cultures from which the objects originated.

As the American Civil Rights movement brought to prominence the experiences of minorities, the University of Alaska Museum created a public project aimed at showcasing objects and stories of Alaska’s Indigenous people in order to bring to light the local impacts of acculturation, partially as a result of the education policies created by Dr. Sheldon Jackson. In 1970, the University of Alaska Museum began the Modern Alaska Native Material Culture

\textsuperscript{12} Sheldon Jackson wrote of his museum, years after its creation, that he started it after a group of visiting academics observed that the curios of southeast Alaska were being bought by outsiders, and “that in a few years there would be nothing left to show the coming generations of natives how their fathers lived,” (Jackson 1893, quoted in Cole 1985). This foresight of preservation of objects to benefit the Indigenous people themselves, would be unique for late-19th-century collecting.

\textsuperscript{13} Alaska became a state on January 3, 1959.
(MANMC) Project (NEH grant no. PO-60-70-3762). Conceived of in two phases, the first aimed to purchase objects and identify information that documented the change to Alaska Native material culture as seen in contemporary technology (Rowinski 1972). The second phase sought to establish “interest and pride in this achievement of preserving traditional elements of a culture while in the midst of changing situations by returning material and information to villages in the form of interpretive packages,” (Rowinski 1972b). This was the museum’s first attempt to collect objects of the everyday, and it is these ordinary things that provide the best insights into the cultural changes occurring daily in rural villages across the state. Researchers traveled into several regions of the state to work with people from the Unangax (Aleut), Yup’ik, Iñupiaq, and Gwich’in Athabascan cultures. Hundreds of objects were collected for the museum, mostly as purchases, and standardized information recorded about the individual who provided the object. This information was then used in subsequent exhibits that were developed expressly to travel around the state, in both urban and rural settings, teaching people about the Alaska beyond the urban centers.

Another major transition for the cultural collections at UAM occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s beginning with the passage of several federal laws seeking to document and preserve cultural resources (i.e., historic properties and archaeology sites), which led to drastic increases in the volume of collections requiring curation and establishing more formal relationships between federal agencies and repositories. The Reservoir Salvage Act of 1960, Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966 (and its accompanying regulations 36 CFR Part 800), and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 signaled a fundamental

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14 Field cards provided researchers a way to collect information like the name and birthplace of the consultant, their age and cultural designation. The name of the object collected and the Indigenous word for it were also recorded phonetically. Additional notations include information like the amount of time needed to make the item, how many generations of individuals used the piece, or whether it had been made specifically for the MANMC project.
shift in how the United States federal government viewed cultural resources and Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian heritage. Together these laws place an emphasis on protecting archaeological sites as a type of nonrenewable resource important not only because of their link to Native American history but also for the scientific information these sites contain about the past. Under these laws, federal agencies are required to document and evaluate the significance of cultural resources on the lands that they manage, and on non-federal lands if federally funded construction projects and activities have the potential to impact significant cultural resources.

Born out of this legislation are regulations (referred to as 36 CFR 79) requiring that federally-owned archaeological collections meet a minimum of professionally established curation standards. 36 CFR 79 sets these standards, which include the selection of a viable repository, rules for collection access, loans, and other uses of the collection. Beginning in the 1970s UAM became the de facto repository for archaeological collections from state and federal lands in Alaska. During the 1990s UAM entered into formal agreements with the State of Alaska and most federal agencies to act as an official primary repository for archaeological collections recovered from Alaska’s public lands. These formal agreements spawned a major period of growth in the archaeological collections that continues today (Odess 2007). Projects such as the archaeological surveys and excavations during the environmental studies for the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System project (Cook et al. 1977), Susitna-Watana Hydroelectric studies (Dixon et al. 1985) and the inventories on Alaska’s US Army-managed lands (Bacon and Holmes 1980; Dixon et al. 1980) have produced a large volume of collections and a wealth of ethnohistoric information (e.g., place names and land and resource use patterns) and historic documentation that were gathered under the guise of these acts and regulations.
The Modern Period at the University of Alaska Museum (1990-Present)

The “modern period” at the University of Alaska Museum is reflective of movements within anthropology to support more community based research, hoping to meet the needs and questions of Indigenous peoples around the state. Beginning in the early 1990s and the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA, Pub. L. 101-601, 25 U.S.C. 3001 et seq., 104 Stat. 3048), consultations with Alaska Native groups became federally mandated. For the first time, the museum opened the accession files for the anthropological collections to people across the state, sharing the information and inviting representatives from villages to consult with staff and identify potential items for repatriation.

The result was a series of new conversations between the museum and tribal representatives, with new ways of understanding the value of material culture to both the source communities and the museum and academic staff. Between 1990 and 2008\textsuperscript{15} the museum completed 22 repatriations with 25 Indian Tribes, Alaska Native Villages and Corporations, and Native Hawaiian Organizations. The museum has also repatriated 445 sets of human remains, 3150 associated funerary objects, and 95 unassociated funerary objects, as well as 4 objects of cultural patrimony/sacred objects. Finally, the museum has participated in nine consultation museum visits with 17 Indian Tribes, Alaska Native Villages, and Corporations. Each year, dozens of Alaska Native artists, students, Elders, and youth, visit the collections for informal and formal research activities.

\textsuperscript{15} Around 2004 the museum lost its designated NAGPRA coordinator, with responsibility for all consultations and grant writing falling on the two departments. With no designated funding to support the work, and much of the large collections having been repatriated, less NAGPRA-related work has occurred since this time.
In 2014, UAM was awarded a grant by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (grant number MA-30-13-0494-13) to migrate collections data into Arctos, the online collections management solution used by all of the natural history collections at UAM. This move further opened the specimen records data and holdings to the public, given that Arctos is wholly online and edited in real-time. For the first time ever museum staff, students, researchers, Alaska Native communities, and any interested member of the public can search the UAM cultural collections anywhere in the world with an internet connection. Collections can be searched in a number of different ways including: by the names of makers, by the names of communities, by object names, by the names of collectors, by archaeological sites, by geographic regions, or by material types. This allows anyone who is interested to see exactly what items and what information are in the holdings of the museum.

The benefits of an open access database system like Arctos are numerous. Providing public access to our records allows any interested party to improve the richness, completeness, and accuracy of documentation, whether it be a member of an Alaska Native community adding contextual information to an ethnographic object collected from their village, or an archaeologist adding details about a site they excavated 50 years ago. For Alaskan communities, this open access to collections and documentation also allows for the use this information to enrich and aid in educating and passing on to future generations their own histories. The incorporation of user-generated knowledge and the addition of Indigenous descriptions and documentation of collections is a primary tenet of the decolonizing paradigm.

Researchers and students benefit from a database system like Arctos because it allows them to personally search the collections on their own time using their own methods to learn about the collections first hand and better develop their research. Museum objects benefit
through the complex and sophisticated ways that information and artifacts can be linked together in Arctos. Individual or groups of objects and information can be linked through any number of different research projects, exhibits, books, articles, photographs, movies, student papers, Native consultations, loans, and/or class visits. Staff members at the museum benefit in that less time is required executing database queries for others and more time is available to spend caring for collections. UAM as a whole benefits in that it brings us closer to having a unified collection management system among all of the cultural and natural history departments. Ultimately, Arctos will serve UAM well in the coming years as we work to not only to make museum collections more accessible to the general public, but also more relevant.

Faculty and staff, since the late 1990s, have placed a high priority on collecting and preserving the intangible cultural heritage that goes along with the material culture physically preserved in our collection. Intangible cultural heritage can be defined as those “traditions or living expressions” transmitted between generations of peoples, including things like “oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts,” (UNESCO 2003). It is this important information that helps to contextualize museum collections, and turns anonymous objects collected by individuals who didn’t think to record primary information, into artifacts that reference real people with personal stories and histories. It is the information contained in the specimen remarks, or noted in letters from the makers and collectors, that explains the “how” and “why” objects were made, collected, and ultimately accepted into the museum’s collections to be preserved in perpetuity, as well as why they were important to the communities and families associated with the objects’ histories.
Over the past fifteen years, a number of projects have demonstrated the museum’s willingness to work in a more cross-cultural manner, by sharing authority and limiting the rigid rules of museum professional standards. In the section below, we will highlight three major projects undertaken as collaborations between source communities and museum staff and researchers. These projects highlight the value of collecting and retaining both the material culture and the intangible cultural heritage found in Alaskan museum collections.

Anaktuvuk Pass Kayak Re-Covering Project – 2003

In 1972, Simon Paneak, a Nunamiut elder from Anaktuvuk Pass, sold a caribou skin covered kayak to the University of Alaska Museum. (Fig. 3). It was a replica of the kayaks the Nunamiut used during World War II when they were forced to revert to hunting caribou by boat, partly as a result of the limitation on ammunition. The kayak was made with lumber shipped from Fairbanks, and covered with skins sewn by Simon’s wife Susie Paneak and Ellen Hugo. The untanned skins, when exposed to the dry Fairbanks weather, shrank significantly and tore apart. For decades, the kayak was exhibited in the Gallery of Alaska at the University of Alaska Museum. But the damaged appearance weighed on the minds of the staff and the people of Anaktuvuk Pass. In 2003, under the direction of Roosevelt Paneak, the son of the original makers, museum staff returned the kayak to Anaktuvuk Pass to undergo a refurbishment. It was important that the kayak come back to Anaktuvuk Pass for this project, rather than bringing the

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16 The UAM is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, and therefore is committed to following professional standards and best practices as determined by peers and the accreditation commission. However, as we have found, there are times when particular projects require a loosening of these standards in order to comply with cultural best practices and the desires of community members. These standards are set by the profession and the needs of our constituents make up part of that profession. As such, they are constantly evolving. UAM will continue to work with national and international groups to better understand where concessions are best made in order to be culturally responsible as well as doing what is best for the preservation of the collections.

Nunamiut craftspeople to Fairbanks. It symbolized the primacy of the shared knowledge held by
the community members of Anaktuvuk Pass, and the trust we had that they knew best for an item
created by their own people. Roosevelt Paneak spoke of the importance of this gesture: “This
way they can be right with it and actually touch it, and see their craftsman or craftswomen at
work,” (Mayer 2003).

Beginning in May, when the kayak first arrived in the community of approximately 300
people, museum staff from both UAM and the Simon Paneak Memorial Museum (SPMM)
worked to compile information about the history of the kayak, the context of the legendary hunt
during WWII, the people who worked on the original, as well as assisting the modern residents
who would be responsible for making the replacement covering. The entire process was filmed
by award-winning documentary filmmaker and curator of film, Leonard Kamerling, and his
assistant Takashi Sakurai. In addition, award-winning photographer James Barker documented
the daily activities. Over the summer months, the kayak stayed in the community, eventually
being taken out on the lake near the village to celebrate the successful completion of the project.

The benefits of this project had tangible results, in the repaired kayak that went back on
exhibit upon its return to the museum and continues to be examined and appreciated for its
craftsmanship and artistry. The intangible benefits continue to be felt as well, through the
improved relations with members of the Anaktuvuk Pass community, the personal satisfaction
and accomplishment project participants achieved, and the pride the Nunamiut participants
gained by engaging with a cherished piece of their history. (Fig. 4) Through the direction of
Roosevelt Paneak, the family got to give back something to the memory of their namesake: “I
think [Simon] would be happy that something like this was being undertaken. And bringing it
back here, had he been here, I think he would be very happy that there is an interest in such a craft,” (ibid).


For five years, the museum participated in a partnership with UAF’s Oral History Program, where invited Native elders visited the museum to examine objects in the ethnology and history and archaeology collections. The museum benefitted from sharing our collections with source community members, the majority of whom had never been to the museum before, by gaining new information that could be added directly to catalog records for objects viewed. Community members shared their knowledge of construction methods, of artists and family connections, of important historical events represented by the holdings at the museum, and many other memories. Many were surprised by what collections we had, and what we did not have, from their home villages.

Information gained during these visits include the corrected names of individuals listed as artists. Nunamiut names that had been spelled phonetically by original collectors were corrected and spelled according to the standardized orthography for Iñupiaq. Anecdotal information about the use of items provides insights into social customs. For example, a sled model collected in 1950 by Helge Larsen was elaborated on by a story about how “riders of the sled would use *itchalik* poles in the sled to keep people from falling off. Say *cha* to dogs to go left and *yha* to go right, “come ha” for come back. Lastly they used to clap their hands together to make the dogs run faster.” Another item, a bag made from ground squirrel containing items cataloged as “game

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pieces”\textsuperscript{19} were described as two different games. One called \textit{imigliuqutk}, is a whirligig-type game. The other was something similar to horseshoes, where two teams of people stand on either side of a stick while their partner tries to get their bone piece closest to the pin or stick.

For five years, accompanied by researchers from UAF’s Oral History program, museum staff connected in a personal way with the people whose cultural heritage are being preserved at the museum. Through these visits, the specimen records were improved in accuracy and in texture, in providing information not available to or recorded by the original collector. The more of this primary and experiential information added to the records, the more personalized the information becomes and the more the source communities are seen to take ownership of the museum collections. The museum itself is recognized as beneficial to the people.

\textit{Barter Island Project (2015-ongoing)}

The Barter Island project established a unique foundation of collaboration between local communities, federal and state agencies, industry representatives, cultural resources management specialists, and museums within the framework of a regulatory project. The collaboration developed from Section 106\textsuperscript{20} consultations during ExxonMobil’s Point Thomson project as the potential effects of resource development to historic properties were being considered. Regulators and project managers agreed that historic properties within the immediate project area could be protected from direct project effects, but that indirect effects (such as changes in the visual and auditory properties and feeling of the surrounding landscapes) potentially would need to be mitigated. However, as the community of Kaktovik supported protecting sites from direct

\textsuperscript{19} \url{http://arctos.database.museum/guid/UAM:EH:UA72-012-0009AF}

\textsuperscript{20} Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) requires projects that are funded or permitted by Federal agencies to take into account the effects of their undertakings on historic properties.
effects, they were also concerned with properties and sites closer to the community and away from the project area. The project focused on a reciprocal mitigation approach to Barter Island sites, rather than putting effort toward mitigating indirect effects on sites far away from the community and a cultural exchange began to evolve. Residents and researchers were able to reconnect with the collections from sites closer to the community, helping bolster local elementary and secondary education programs that preserve and advance their rich Inupiaq cultural heritage. Archaeologists, museum professionals, and industry representatives were able to learn from community members about important local cultural initiatives and how to be helpful collaborators and advance progress as the community passes on heritage.

For many years, the community had expressed a desire to reconnect with collections that were excavated from Barter Island in 1914 (Fig. 5) by the pioneering Canadian archaeologist Diamond Jenness (1914, 1958) and curated at the Canadian Museum of History (CMH). The community wished to use artifacts and representations of artifacts from the area to pass on to younger generations knowledge about their heritage, and to create exhibits at a cultural center showcasing their history to visitors for the growing local polar bear tourist industry. Archaeologists and industry representatives worked with teachers and students to bring artifacts from collections that were gathered by residents from the area surrounding the sites where Jenness excavated (Fig. 6), and from collections from the UAM. 3D imaging of artifacts from these personal collections\(^\text{21}\) was used to communicate the value of learning science and computer skills, and different ways to appreciate material culture and heritage in telling the story of their history. Project intern, and current student at Ilisagvik College in Utqiagvik (Barrow), Madeline Gordon found the possibility of a new future through this project. “It was really fun working

\(^{21}\) The 3D image files of the objects from local personal collections were given to individuals, the school, the North Slope Borough, and the tribe.
with the archaeologists. It was really fun. And I’ve gotten really interested in archaeology. And I hope I can actually make it a good career,” (ExxonMobil 2015).

The project culminated in the return of the Barter Island collections excavated by Jenness to Alaska for the first time in over 100 years. This iconic collection was loaned from the CMH to the UAM, where local community cultural experts visited and assisted researchers in the documentation and re-analysis of the collection. The collections represent a way of life extending back at least 1,000 years, and include antler arrowheads, ivory harpoon heads, copper and slate ulu knives and other remarkably well-preserved artifacts. Cultural experts and archaeologists discussed the use, social history, and meaning (including Iñupiaq names for objects and objects’ uses) and significance of objects, as well as recent changes in local ecological systems that relate to the technology displayed in the collections. Many of the historical and scientific questions that were generated in the discussions around these collections, and the shared concerns about passing on the intangible knowledge that access to collections can generate, overlapped among the project partners. 3D modeling and high-resolution photography of artifacts and a newly developed context about the 1914 excavated materials allowed the community to further connect with the collections and helped to emphasize heritage and new ways to learn about the past.

Marie Rexford, a Kaktovik community partner, expressed the importance of connecting with artifacts. “Our ancestors were very smart in making all these objects without the tools that we have nowadays. It will help our kids know where they come from, where we come from,” (ibid.).

The project’s melding of science and traditional knowledge was in keeping with the collaborative nature of the initial Jenness research, and brought new life and understanding to these items. The project succeeded in ensuring the cultural resources management decision-making process involved real consultation. Kaktovik’s community input on the cultural
significance of considering Barter Island historic properties and collections during indirect
effects mitigation was critical, and agencies, industry, archaeologists, and museum professionals
collaborated as partners in the outcome. The relationship between the partners has continued to
grow, as we work together on exhibits and publishing the analysis of the collections, as well as
the successful repatriation of human remains and burial items from sites at Barter Island and the
surrounding area.

Why These Relationships Matter

In an era when cultural organizations are spending a great deal of time justifying
themselves to funding sources and communities alike, the University of Alaska Museum is
demonstrating the value through our actions. From taking a leading role in the 1990s in
NAGPRA consultations to the current plans for the Gallery of Alaska renovation where
Indigenous groups will be asked to partner in the telling of their own stories, staff are attempting
to shift the power dynamics to a collaborative way of collecting and curating objects and
information.

Museums are, by definition, a Western concept intimately connected to the process of
colonization. However, as museums change the way they see their collections, and shift from
being “vaults” where precious items are locked up in the dark, to being more “useful”\textsuperscript{22} spaces
where visitors become users of the collection, where individuals can connect deeply with ideas
and objects, staff will need to change the way they see their role at the museum as well. Curators
will no longer be the ultimate authority, but rather partners in the acquisition and preservation of

\textsuperscript{22} Lath Carlson, Director of the Living Computer Museum in Seattle, advocated for the idea of “The Really Useful
Museum” at his 2015 Keynote address at the Museums Alaska / Alaska Historical Society annual meeting in
Cordova, Alaska.
objects and knowledge, seeking advice and input from source communities and finding ways to balance the needs of constituents and the objects themselves.

As visitors increasingly become users of the collections, there has been an observable change in peoples’ perspectives about the value of storing objects in a museum. Community members of different generations may still experience conflicted feelings about their cultural heritage being housed in a museum in Fairbanks, but we’ve seen a greater number of guests come away with an appreciation for the role a large central museum can serve in Alaska. This is especially true when individuals experience the emphasis placed on a holistic understanding of heritage preservation – not just the objects but also the stories, songs, symbolism, and other intangible elements associated with the objects. Informal visits and formal consultations with Indigenous groups also provide a platform to talk about scientific research on collections and how science can complement and sometimes corroborate oral history, ultimately leading to a better understanding and a more complete picture of the past.

Conclusions

While no museum in 2017 can serve as the perfect model of a totally decolonized institution that balances Western concepts of preservation with Indigenous values of cultural perpetuation, there are many in Alaska who are attempting to open channels of communication and share both their own histories and legacies in order to move forward towards a better system. The University of Alaska Museum has had its own challenges in the years since its inception, but the staff over the past several decades are looking at new models and developing partnerships that respond to the needs of communities. Only through dialogues and relationships can we identify what communities are not represented in our collections and what people from those
regions want preserved for future generations. Projects like the Gallery of Alaska renovation are moving forward with the assistance of a dedicated community liaison to present the overarching concepts for the gallery to rural communities across the state. Our wish is to engage in conversations about the direction, the themes, and objects that are selected to tell the various histories of Alaska’s diverse peoples.

Future projects could include a follow-up to MANMC, with a set of goals developed jointly between the communities and the museum, with greater emphasis on stories and intangible cultural heritage. Examples of museums repatriating knowledge and virtual collections have occurred in Alaska and Canada, and more projects like this are certainly warranted. Community initiatives started through the IPinCH (Intellectual Property in Cultural Heritage) project at Simon Fraser University (http://www.sfu.ca/ipinch/) demonstrate that community-based projects involving partnerships between Indigenous communities and museums, so both groups gain from the work, have a greater likelihood to result in an increased respect between groups and a more meaningful experience for all involved. The desire for change is occurring and staff will look towards leaders in the field to bring change to Alaska where it is clear that museums and cultural preservation can have a positive influence on the health and well-being of communities.

Acknowledgments
The authors thank the community members whose dedication to cultural heritage have made this article possible, and we thank the previous staff of the UAM on whose efforts and work we continue to build. We also thank two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier draft.
References


ExxonMobil. 2015. Kaktovik Cultural Resource Initiative. 4:11.


Figure Captions

Figure 1. Display case in the offices of President Charles Bunnell, ca. 1927. Courtesy University of Alaska Museum.

Figure 2. “Ipiutak Rake” collected by Helge Larsen. Point Hope. UAM no. UA72-49-1. Photo credit: Brian Allen. Courtesy University of Alaska Museum.

Figure 3. Simon Paneak with his kayak frame in 1972, Anaktuvuk Pass. Courtesy of Lewis Binford Collection, Special Collections Department, Pickler Memorial Library, Truman State University.

Figure 4. Roosevelt Paneak prepares to test the re-covered kayak while project participants and community members look on, 2003. Photo credit: James H. Barker. Courtesy University of Alaska Museum.

Figure 5. Aiyakuk, Qovun and Ipanna, digging ruin on west sandspit of Barter Island, northern Alaska. Taken June 1914, Diamond Jenness, Canadian Arctic Expedition. Canadian Museum of History (formerly Canadian Museum of Civilization), Historical Photos 37146.

Figure 6. Marie Rexford sharing her personal collection in Kaktovik, July 2013. Photo credit: Chris B. Wooley.

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177x99mm (300 x 300 DPI)
Figure 2. "Ipiutak Rake" collected by Helge Larsen. Point Hope. UAM no. UA72-49-1. Photo credit: Brian Allen. Courtesy University of Alaska Museum.

177x106mm (300 x 300 DPI)
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101x67mm (300 x 300 DPI)
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177x119mm (300 x 300 DPI)
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177x133mm (300 x 300 DPI)