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Deep Description and Reflexivity: Methods for Recovering Object Histories

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Deep Description and Reflexivity: Methods for Recovering Object Histories

Abstract
This semester, students in my Anthropology of Museums class learned new methods for analyzing objects in museum collections by using both “deep description” and “object reflexivity.” Students were trained to combine material analysis, ethnographic data, archival research, and critical scholarship to identify and document object histories. They also gained practice in examining methods of construction, curation, and display that reflect the shifting historical relations among Indigenous people and Indigenous objects in museums. As a result, these students generated thoughtful insights that cast new light on old objects in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Disciplines
Anthropology | Social and Behavioral Sciences
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Deep Description and Reflexivity

The notion of “deep description” borrows from Clifford Geertz’s “thick description,” a method of densely observing and recording human behavior and discourse. It might seem illogical to apply this to objects where the makers are absent, but traces of human activities can often be readily observed through micro-analysis of small details: the choice of material, shape of a bead, turns of a weave, patterns of wear, and modes of repair. Each of these can signal the intent of an artisan; some of these serve as signatures of particular traditions, cultures, knowledges, and communities. Objects also reflect environments. So, for example, in the midst of a grueling winter, our observations of the practical nature of Arctic fur garments evoked a much deeper respect for Inuit technologies.
When studying objects, I encourage students to reflect upon, and assess, what we “know” about objects in a collection based upon what we are told. Drawing upon the use of reflexive approaches in the social sciences, I direct students to interrogate the influence of previous scholars and scholarship and to look past the exhibit labels to discover a deeper story. In addition (without over-romanticizing) they are asked to reflect upon phenomenological experiences and “object reflexivity.” What might an object feel, sound, and smell like? What music emerged from this drum? How does the fringe move when this garment is danced? Which way did the threads twist in the hands of this weaver? Does the smell of smoked hide evoke the warmth of the fire? Are the plants that produced the dyes visible in the colors of the stamp?

**Adventures in Collections**

The first stage of this project began in the classroom, by viewing clips from early 20th century films of Arctic expeditions. Then, we moved into the Penn Museum collections, for a broad survey of materials collected during the Museum’s seminal Arctic expeditions to Alaska, Greenland, and Labrador, with American Section Keeper William Wierzbowski as our guide. At first, students were overwhelmed by the dizzying array of objects, grouped by type and by region, with targeted expeditions and incidental acquisitions commingled. Within a short time, however, they had narrowed their choices to a selection of roughly a dozen objects for close study.
During the next class session, in the Museum’s Collections Study Room, students spent the first hour in silence, narrowing their focus to a single object that attracted their attention. They took extensive notes on construction, and condition, noting minute details that became more visible only after close material analysis. They listed ideas for the type of information they would need to add context to these objects, and where that information might be found. They also considered how knowledge of this object could be constructed by different types of viewers: Indigenous artisans, museum collectors, art dealers, etc. They toyed with theories that might explain certain aspects or uses of this object, and listed questions that further research might answer.

Students also scanned the Penn Museum’s online databases, where objects can be digitally sorted by number, type, region, etc. However, they quickly learned that object labels, sorting processes, and categories in museums are rarely simple and straightforward. Object identifications result from (and reflect) the social negotiations that take place before and after objects arrive in collections. Despite the apparent efficiency of a database, subjective processes of organization can cause small bits of data to be overlooked. That data might include crucial Indigenous names, knowledges, and relationships. For example, the broad classification of “Eskimo” can blur distinct and important commonalities and differences between “Innu” and “Inuit” peoples. Native names can be confused if individuals go by Christian, Indigenous, married, and/or other names.

The nature of salvage anthropology was such that items were frequently scattered among...
different museums, often without clear records of their tribal identities and symbolic meanings. In some cases, provenance data was preserved in museum archives, but detached from the objects on display. Items that passed from one collector to another may have been separated from the field notes that identify them. Most confusingly, it is quite common for different museums (and auction houses) holding similar items from the same region to assign different interpretations and values. Thus, data housed in one museum can often shed light on poorly identified objects in another museum.

In general, curators and scholars tend to sort collections in ways that match their interests, focusing on some objects while ignoring others. Speculative and incomplete data can influence modes of identifying objects over time, and small details can be overlooked. Hence, a person seeking an Inuit walrus tusk opium pipe from the Arctic could easily miss that “Oriental-style” “tobacco pipe” with the absurdly small hole.

**Applying Restorative Research Methods**

How then, does one recover data and restore Indigenous meanings? How can students be directed to review scholarship on unfamiliar objects? Since reflexive research calls for attention to the influence of position and personality, I advise my students to work in a way that may sound backwards: examine the object first, and examine the scholarship second. There is a logic to this. When students examine an unfamiliar object, without preconceptions, they can notice small details that might otherwise be overlooked; the object can, in a sense, “speak” for itself. When students are guided to read research articles first, someone else is speaking. Thus, students may be subtly (or not so subtly) influenced to uncritically accept conclusions that might not accurately reflect the materiality of the object itself. Too early exposure to what is “known” can get in the way of generating new questions. The emphasis here, of course, is to generate factual observations and insightful questions that can point the way to further research (while avoiding leaping to random conclusions).
After writing a preliminary description and draft blog entry, students were directed to research all existing primary sources. Alex Pezzati, Senior Archivist in the Penn Museum Archives, was especially helpful in walking us through notes, correspondence, photographs, field notes, and articles from the Van Valin and Gordon Arctic expeditions. On their own, students also researched secondary sources. Whenever publications answered their questions (or raised new ones), they backtracked references to discern where other scholars had derived their knowledge. Then, students rewrote their original observations, adding references, correcting errors, and noting any additional possibilities for nuanced interpretation and further research.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, students were reminded to reflect upon the makers of these objects and the memories of the communities they came from. Indigenous artisans had particular interests in mind when each of these objects was created. Ethnographic collectors, who sought to fulfill particular research goals and aesthetic desires, often imposed their own interpretations. Some Indigenous objects in museums reflect processes of separation, more than processes of creation. Thus, crucial information about Indigenous context may be recovered by both examining the practices of the historical community that created the object, and by understanding what that object means to living Indigenous communities today.
In the end, all of my Museum Anthropology students were remarkably successful in recovering new (and old) data about seemingly silent museum objects. Each of them wrote insightful research reports and blog posts summarizing their observations, while posing new research questions that have yet to be answered. Check out their intriguing blogs in these posts from “Beyond the Gallery Walls”:  

Michele Belluomini: *Kuskokwim Dance House*  
Monica Fenton: *The Lady in Furs*  
Alexandria Mitchem: *Getting a Handle on the Past: An Arctic Bow Drill*  
Sarah Parkinson: *Searching for Stories: Patiently Listening to an Iñupiaq Pipe*  
Elizabeth Peng: *Fashion: Fur, Flowers, and Flannel*  
Pauline Saribas: *Quillwork-embellished “Cree” Coat*  
Enika Selby: *Alaska Harpoon Rest: Supported by Bears, Whales, and Chains*  

Also see:  

Margaret Bruchac: *Iñupiaq Smoking and Siberian Reindeer*  
Margaret Bruchac: *Ladies in Fur: Traveling Through Time*