OBJECT MATTERS: CONSIDERING MATERIALITY, MEANING, AND MEMORY

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Report from the Fall 2017 Anthropology of Museums class

How do Indigenous objects in museum collections “speak” to those who create, collect, curate, display, and observe them? The material traces in these objects obviously evoke connections to particular aesthetic values, beliefs, and practices, but do they also retain memories of the artisans who created them? Can these objects communicate across cultural and temporal boundaries? Do they have agency, outside of the people who handle them? How might the Native American objects in the Penn Museum, in particular, represent a “bundle of relations” that entangle collectors, collections, and communities?[1] Students in my Fall 2017 “Anthropology of Museums” course at the University of Pennsylvania have been considering these questions while examining a selection of evocative Native American objects in the American Section of the Penn Museum.

Bill Wierzbowski and Margaret Bruchac in the arctic collections of the Penn Museum. Photo by Lise Puyo.
Selecting Objects

At the start of the semester, students walked through the Penn Museum’s “Native American Voices” gallery to get a sense of the range of Indigenous objects curated by the Museum. Then, Curators and Keepers Lucy Fowler Williams and Bill Wierzbowski led us on several tours through storage, opening cabinets and drawers that revealed a fascinating array of objects influenced and shaped by various locales (from arctic to tropical, forest to ocean, regional to tribal, etc.), and intentions (from clothing to adornment, ritual object to tool, communal to personal, etc.). We also scanned the multi-tribal selection of objects that had been set aside for rotating display in the “Native American Voices” exhibition, and discussed how and why specific objects were selected by the curators to represent and communicate the themes of that gallery.

The selection process for objects to study this semester was, intentionally, somewhat random. While cross-walking through the collections, we noticed some unexpected correspondences. For example, in the arctic collections, we came across a magnificent doll, with an elaborately beaded coat and hood that precisely matched the style of adult clothing, even down to the pattern of cutting hides. While revisiting feather headdresses, we spotted several feathered hats composed entirely of duck bodies and wings (one from the arctic, one from the woodlands) and other hats adorned with a multitude of tiny feathers.

During the collection survey, students were encouraged to consider objects that intrigued them, regardless of the complexity of the object or the depth of available information. Some objects seem to speak quite loudly, boasting elaborate color schemes and materials that immediately capture our attention, inspiring a sense of awe and a recognition of beauty. Other objects are more elusive, almost silent. Most have labels identifying a particular tribe, or region, or era, but some of the most interesting objects have little apparent history attached to them. They were clearly deemed valuable enough to be collected and carried to the Museum, but the actual circumstances of their origins and travel are somewhat mysterious.
In preparation for this object exercise, students have been reading about the histories of ethnographic museums with an emphasis on object ontologies, curatorial practices, and restorative methods in museum research. They have also read critical studies of museological collecting and repatriation.[2] During the early years of salvage anthropology, collecting and cataloging practices routinely separated people from objects, objects from communities, and communities from their stories. Objects were sorted in ways that imperfectly reflected (and often distorted) Indigenous origins and meanings. In the absence of consultation with Indigenous knowledge-bearers, objects were sorted by type, collector, geographical region, or culture area, obscuring personal names and tribal identities, and creating labels that still cause confusion in collections today.[3] Other collecting categories—like “art” and “artifact” and “tourist object”—further distanced objects from the cultures, communities, and artists that created them.[4] Over time, as these objects were handled by generations of curators, faculty, students, and others, new stories and new interpretations emerged.

For objects that have minimal provenance data, we backtrack through the collections to look for similar materials, consult research publications, cross-walk through archives, and seek other sources of evidence that might illuminate these objects. Students have been learning techniques for critical observation by combining material analysis (elements, construction, design, condition, etc.) with documentary evidence (texts, photographs, correspondence, publications, etc.). We consider ethnographic data and non-material evidence (community memory, oral traditions, ecosystems, etc.), including insights shared by Native American consultants. We also examine the histories of the collectors and museums themselves. This research aims to expand our understandings of object lives, using insights and information gathered from both inside and outside of the Museum.

Bill Wierzbowski shows a photograph of the Museum collection as it appeared in the 1890s, arranged in glass cases and along the walls in the vaulted gallery of Furness Library (now Fisher Fine Arts Library). Photo by Margaret Bruchac.

**Considering NAGPRA**

The Penn Museum, like other archaeological and ethnographic museums, houses Indigenous objects that are potentially subject to repatriation claims under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).[5] The most obvious category for repatriation includes Indigenous human remains, in which case museums must conduct provenance research and consultations to identify the affiliated tribal nation. Similarly, any determinations about the cultural affiliation of sensitive objects are best made through consultations with related tribal nations. At the Penn Museum, known NAGPRA-sensitive objects are not made available for routine study in a classroom. Instead, they are housed separately, so the curators and staff can conduct the necessary consultation and research.[6]
It should be noted that the students in the “Anthropology of Museums” class are not expected to conduct repatriation research, even though we hope that some of the insights we recover might be useful in this regard. During our collections survey, we do not intentionally seek out items with unusual spiritual significance or cultural sensitivity. But, that being said, funerary objects, sacred items, and objects of cultural patrimony are not always easy to recognize in museum collections in the absence of identifying data and consultation.

**Speaking With Objects**

Crucial information can sometimes be recovered by studying non-Indigenous processes of object collection, circulation, and representation. So, in this class, I introduce students to the practice of what I call “reverse ethnography”—critical analyses of the historically situated actions of the collectors. What did these people have in mind when they encountered Indigenous people? What were their intentions and economic strategies? Why did some Native American individuals collaborate with collectors? How were their relationships influenced by specific social and cultural differences and theoretical concepts? How can a better understanding of the collectors help us to better understand the collections? [7]

“Wigwemat, birch bark basket...on sides, maple leaf, a sacred tree which gives its sap and sugar.” Sewing basket (70-9-04) collected by Frank Speck from Anne Cesar, River Desert Algonquin, c. 1927, Penn Museum. Photo by Margaret Bruchac.

With these and many other questions in mind, after the students and curators have selected an assemblage of objects, we gather in the Collections Study Room to embark on the process of studying those objects. We start with close visual analysis. I tell students to examine an object’s materiality first, before inferring anything about meaning, primarily to guide them away from making snap judgements based on preexisting categories and stereotypes. We move slowly, taking in all of the minute details and making notes on the raw materials, processes of construction and decoration, and evidence of condition and repair. Our questions include (but are by no means limited to) the following:

- What kinds of materials and technologies make up this object?
- How are specific ecosystems and relations with other beings evoked in this object?
- Are there any old observations or assumptions that need clarification or verification?
- Does the evidence of making, using, and repairing this object suggest the place, people, and circumstances in which it was handled?
- Are there any comparable objects in the Penn Museum collection, or in other museums?
- How has the object been curated, where is it housed, and what assemblage is it part of in the Museum?
- Who handled this object before you (artisan, community, collector, dealer, museum staff, scholar, etc.)?
- How has the Museum’s knowledge about this object been constructed and communicated?
- What meanings have been generated by this object? Can the object speak for itself?
New insights and unexpected queries always emerge through this practice. For example, one object with magnificently detailed artistry has virtually no provenance data associated with it. Several of the objects we are studying entangle multiple communities, having been loaned from the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, exchanged with the Denver Art Museum, or purchased from a private collector. Each object offers an intriguing glimpse into its community of origin.

Over the next few weeks, as students compose their blog articles, they will discuss their observations and findings, along with any theories they developed that might explain certain parts of each object’s history. They will also pose questions that further research and consultation might be able to answer. Watch this space for future articles forthcoming from this class.

*Articles published by the 2017 Museum Anthropology Class:*

Anastasia Hutnick: “Baffin Island Inuit Doll: Dressed to Care”


Katherine Ku: “Song of the Abalone: As Heard from Different Ears”

Margaret Bruchac and Katherine Ku: “Levi Levering’s Headdress: Blurring Borders and Bridging Cultures”

Malkia Okche: “Beyond the Frame: Acce Blue Eagle in the Penn Museum”

Malkia Okche: “Living Tradition: The Penobscot Root Club”

Sheridan Small: “Traces of Culture in Traces of Paint: Key Marco Deer Figurehead”

Margaret Bruchac and Sheridan Small: “A Vision of Color: Contextualizing a Peyote Rattle in Time and Space”

*Also see articles from the 2015 Museum Anthropology Class:*

Margaret Bruchac: “Deep Description and Reflexivity: Methods for Recovering Object Histories”

Margaret Bruchac: “The Speck Connection: Recovering Histories of Indigenous Objects”

*Sources Cited:*


Accessed May 1, 2018 on-line at: https://www.penn.museum/blog/museum/object-matters-considering-materiality-meaning-and-memory/