
What about Sacred Objects?

The presence of American Indian sacred objects in museums continues to raise questions about their preservation and care for museum professionals and American Indian communities. These questions, which relate to standard collections management and conservation, speak to the diversity of tribal cultural practice and acknowledge the tensions that exist between predominately Western standards of collections care and tribal cultural practices. How should these object be cared for while in museums, and who prescribes the care?

In the years following the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), museum professionals have become increasingly aware of the significance that some cultural objects have for American Indian communities. Through consultations, museums have had the opportunity to hear directly from tribal representatives about their preferences for storing, displaying, and caring for tribal objects. The steady growth of tribal museums and cultural centers over the past ten to fifteen years has also presented these organizations with similar challenges of how to care for objects. In this chapter I discuss some of the issues regarding the care of sacred objects in museum collections.

Museums by their very nature, isolate objects from human societies in order to preserve them for future generations. Some may argue that museums are changing, especially in light of the collaborations and increased communication that NAGPRA had led to among tribal communities and museums. And the unique methods of museum practice that tribes are employing in their own cultural institutions. The removal of objects from their original contexts, however, is key to this discussion, and it continues to be an underlying tenet of the museum field. Sacred objects in museum collections have been lifted from their original context to further the museum's goal of preservation or education, not to further their fulfillment as sacred objects.

Recent research into the nature of sacred collections suggests that it is possible to view sacred objects in light of their original purpose by using the following general categories of use: Physical Use, Symbolic Use, and Life Ending Use. Physical use implies that the sacred object requires handling or physical touch by a knowledgeable religious or cultural practitioner to engage the object's sacred attributes. Symbolic Use suggests that the object may not possess sacred attributes but is culturally significant to the tribal community base on its age, association with a ceremony or a historic tribal leader, or even craftsmanship. Life Ending Use is employed by religious or cultural practitioners to ritually end the life of an object in order to cease its sacred attributes.

Undoubtedly tribal and non-tribal museum professionals have been able to observe some of these different categories of use in the museum, especially if they have engaged

in consultations with tribal representatives. Tribal museum professionals may recognize these types of special use from their own tribal traditions. The categories are very simple and are outlined here to provide a minimal sense of the different uses or contexts sacred objects have for tribal communities. Museum professionals may find the conceptualizations of use helpful in clarifying different care practices.

Some non-tribal museums have elected to apply tribal cultural practices to their existing collections care policies. In some instances, tribal religious leaders have carefully instructed these museums about the care of objects. In other cases, museum staff have observed or witnessed the practices of tribal representatives who have offered to care for the objects. Regardless of how these practices have been learned, it is important for non-tribal museums to know the difference between *active practice* and *passive accommodation*.

Active practice is reserved behavior that only a knowledgeable religious or cultural practitioner can engage in with regard to formal interactions with the sacred object. It is important to remember that the handling of sacred objects is not arbitrary for tribal communities. Generally, only certain individuals with the proper training and authority can handle objects that are imbued with great religious or supernatural attributes. *Passive accommodation* allows the museum staff to accommodate the active practice of a religious or cultural practitioner.

For example, a group of tribal representatives accompanied by one of their recognized religious leaders asks to see an object in the museum's collection that they consider to be sacred and imbued with its own life essence. Upon seeing the object, the religious leader reaches for it, opens it, and begins to use the contents. Before the object is put away, the practitioner may ask the museum staff if an offering, provided by the practitioner, can be placed near the object for a period of time.

The key to this scenario is that the practitioner, not the museum staff, engaged the object or employed active practice. Also, the offering is specifically made by the practitioner to the object. The offering is not made or provided by the museum staff. If the museum staff choose to leave the offering on or near the object, they are passively accommodating the request of the practitioner.

During the past several years, numerous articles and presentations at professional meetings have suggested guidelines for methods of ritual care, such as feeding, the placement of an offering, gender restrictions, and handling guidelines, which can be codified and used by museums. It is appropriate for museums to consider that by incorporating ritual elements of care into existing collections management practices, museum staff are essentially prescribing religious practice that should be relegated to

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individuals who have knowledge of such rites. In most cases, tribal representatives are requesting that museums offer passive accommodation; they are not asking museum staff to conduct rituals on their behalf once they leave the museum.

Given the wide variety of tribal religious practices and worldviews, it is essential that museums refrain from applying what they learn from specific tribal representatives to other objects in the collection that have not been the focus of consultation. Further, museums should not second-guess the authority or recommendations of the tribal representatives they are consulting in regard to learning the best way to care for sacred objects. On the other hand, museums should not incorporate tribal methods of care or indicate their willingness to do so if the museums lack the resources to carry out recommendations.

Tribal museums that are created by and for their communities are in the best situation to provide tribally specific methods of care to sacred and significant objects in their collection. Usually, tribally specific museums hold collections with which they are directly associated, thus eliminating the need to generalize on the nature or purpose of an object. Tribal protocols can prevail and can dictate other methods of museum practice, such as using the tribe's language in accession and catalog records. Consultation with tribal religious leaders and practitioners is the most effective method that museums, tribal and non-tribal can use to determine what special care an object may require, should it stay in the museum.

Since the passage of NAGPRA, museums have sought to "do the right thing" by engaging in repatriation consultations and opening the door to dialogue that offers alternatives to collections care. Sacred objects, however, often require special care that cannot be reduced to a list of "do's and don'ts." The very notion of sacred is not static and, in fact, is subject to change. While having such a list of guidelines is appealing, it simplifies the profound nature and purpose of these objects.

For virtually all sacred and significant objects in museum collections, tribal or non-tribal, the type of care is subject to the context in which the objects are currently situated. In the post-NAGPRA years, neutrality can be the most important form of respect that museums can demonstrate.

Neutrality takes into account the diversity of human belief and cultural expression and acknowledges that no single belief is privileged over another. For museum professionals, this means providing effective museum standards of care. In those cases where a relationship is established with knowledgeable religious and cultural practitioners and where resources are available, museums should also passively accommodate tribal cultural practice, until such time when the object returns to the community where its purpose is activated and fulfilled.