**What should be displayed? Native arts in museums and on the runways[[1]](#footnote-1)**

By

Melanie King[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Abstract:** *This case study considers questions of how, what, and where Indigenous arts should be displayed and the responsibility museums and other public institutions have in representing other cultures. This case will also address cultural appropriation seen in popular culture as an extension of the issues created in part by collectors of Native arts in the public and private spheres and the result of divorcing Native objects from their original context. Additionally this case will explore how objections have been met and what this indicates about changing attitudes and values.*

**Part I: The art world and sports world collide**

The headline for the January 27, 2014 online edition of *Art in America* read, “Denver and Seattle Art Museums Make Super Bowl Bet.” The brief article went on to explain the banter between the directors of the Seattle and Denver Art Museums and the respective mayors of each city as the Denver Broncos and Seattle Seahawks were preparing to face-off:

This Sunday, Feb. 2, when the Seattle Seahawks and the Denver Broncos go toe to toe in Super Bowl XLVIII, the fates of artwork from the Seattle Art Museum and the Denver Art Museum will also hang in the balance. The winning team’s museum will be temporarily loaned a work depicting the vanquished mascot. (Cascone, 2014)

That Sunday, February 2, the Broncos were soundly defeated, resulting in the Seattle Art Museum hosting Frederic Remington’s *The Broncho Buster* (1895) from the collection of the Denver Art Museum for a period of three months, at the expense of the Denver Art Museum. In the months following the defeat of the Broncos, the Denver Art Museum’s *The Broncho Buster,* “considered an icon of the American West” (Cascone, 2014), was prominently on display in the Seattle Art Museum. In Seahawk green and blue, a placard was hung to commemorate this landmark event in the sports world.

**CONGRATULATIONS**

**SEAHAWKS!**

***Bronco Buster* on Loan**

**from the Denver Art Museum**

Thanks to the Seattle Seahawks and their Super Bowl victory over the Denver Broncos, this bronze statue got to ride across the west.

Because we won a friendly wager against the Denver Art Museum on the big game, this iconic work by Frederic Remington has been loaned to SAM for a three-month period.

We’re thrilled to celebrate the Seattle Seahawks victory by putting Remington’s *Bronco Buster* on view for you.

**Share photos on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter: #SAMvsDAM.**

**(Seattle Art Museum)**

On the adjacent wall was an object label that provided more specific information about Remington and the provenance of *The Bronco Buster*:

Frederic Remington was in his day and remains now the most famous painter and illustrator of the western cowboy. His early adventures in the far west introduced him to the Mexican *vaqueros*, admiring their derring-do as they fought to tame the wild horses, the *bronchos,* as they had done for generations. Remington realized that the iconic American hero of the open range actually originated with the cowboy’s Mexican forebears. He made his reputation painting the *vaqueros*, and in 1893 illustrated his account of a visit to the famous Bavicora Ranch, near Chihuahua, with scenes of their exploits.

Shortly, thereafter, Remington had an artistic awakening that changed the course of his career: paintings and drawings and the written word would eventually fade away, he wrote to his friend, western novelist Owen Wister – but bronze would abide forever. Having never previously modeled in clay, he produced, astonishingly, the dynamic *Broncho Buste*r*,* to be cast in bronze. Displayed for years in the window of Tiffany & Co. in New York, Gilded Age admirers eagerly ordered casts of Remington’s masterly *vaquero*. Some 150 casts were produced in Remington’s lifetime alone, making it truly his best known and enduring work of art. (Seattle Art Museum)

Certainly this is a piece with impressive historical significance and an object which the city of Seattle could continue to rally around as they basked in the victory of their beloved Seahawks over the Denver Broncos.

We can read this as a clever attempt for the world of high art to intersect with the excitement of the Super Bowl as the museums latched onto the coattails of the success or failures of their respective professional sports teams.

In discussing the rationale behind creating the bet, Illsley Ball Nordstrom Director and CEO of the Seattle Art Museum, Kimerly Rorschach, said, “I want the trophy of their mascot […] Then, I thought about what’s the equivalent in our collection” (cited in Bryson, 2014). Had the Broncos been victorious, they would have received, on loan, a “Native American bird mask that bears a strong resemblance to the Seahawks’ logo. Dating to around 1880, the red cedar forehead mask was made by the Nuxalk First Nation” (Cascone, 2014). Two days following the pronouncement of the bet, Keven Drews of The Canadian Press reported: “At B.C. First Nation’s request, Seattle Art Museum pulls mask from Super Bowl bet.”

Charles Nelson, a Nuxalk hereditary chief, responded in an interview with Drews: “I feel much better that the wager’s not happening […] It gives me comfort. It’s being shown the respect that it needs.” He continued as follows: “[C]ommunity members were upset because the mask was being offered as part of a wager, and the museum didn’t talk to the community. He [Nelson] said community leaders found out about the bet on social media and news outlets” (Drews, 2014).

The Seattle Art Museum quickly apologized and offered to bring the mask to Bella Coola to make an official apology. Dropping the Nuxalk mask from the bet, the Seattle Art Museum looked elsewhere within its collection to find a suitable replacement days before the Super Bowl:

“The friendly wager is still on, however. The Seattle museum said if the Seahawks lose it will send Denver a six-paneled Japanese screen from 1901, depicting a powerful eagle with outstretched wings” (Drews, 2014). Some might say the museum simply moved from one “exotic” culture to another. On a purely visual level, it is understandable why the Seattle Art Museum initially opted to bet the Nuxalk Raven mask since it resembles the Seahawks logo in its formline design. And the symbol of the powerful eagle on the Japanese screen within this context could be read as the power of the bird (seahawk) defeating the bronco.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, similar to the Nuxalk mask, this six-paneled screen has also been stripped of its original context. While not as injurious as the selection of the Nuxalk mask, one only has to skim the surface of the work of artist, Tsuji Kakō (1870-1931), and his contemporaries to learn that art painted during this time was largely nationalistic, leading up to Japan’s imperialist expansion and ultimately the widespread devastation and destruction seen during World War II. Again, the subtleties and context of the work are lost as the Seattle Art Museum sought to find an object that might align with the Seahawks on a purely visual level. For better or worse, the Seahawks were victorious so there was no need for further discussion regarding the merits of the Seattle Art Museum’s side of the wager.

Returning to the Denver Art Museum’s visiting “vanquished mascot” during its time in the Pacific Northwest, it was hard not to notice that Remington’s *Bronco Buster* sat at the entrance to the galleries which house objects contemporary with Remington: objects made by Euro-Americans celebrating the glory of the West. This also happens to be the series of galleries that one must walk through before entering the galleries where the Native Art collection resides.

Some may consider these gaffs to be relatively minor offenses; however, these are the kinds of issues that a more diversified approach to collecting, repatriating, exhibiting, discussing, and displaying art is working to mitigate. This example is helpful in reminding us as consumers of culture to think critically about how, when, and where objects are exhibited, and how we ourselves engage in consuming and appropriating other cultures for our professional or personal motives.

**Part II: Popular culture versus cultural appropriation**

As indicated by the fairly fast response of the Seattle Art Museum to pull the Nuxalk Raven mask from the Super Bowl bet, we can see that work has been done in the relatively recent past to acknowledge missteps and apologize. And yet, there are still too many instances of people making these blunders, further reifying the idea of Natives and Native arts and culture as something to be trivialized. All we need to do is turn on the television or computer, or open the newspaper or latest fashion magazine to see representations of Native culture being appropriated for use by outsiders in a manner that is disrespectful and entirely stripped of its original context or connection to a living, breathing, vibrant people. For example, one does not have to look too far to find debates regarding the continued use of Natives as the mascot for the Washington Redskins, as headlines ask:

“Are You Ready for Some Controversy? The History of ‘Redskin’” (Gandhi, 2013)

“A slur or term of ‘honor’? Controversy heightens about Washington Redskins. (Martinez, 2013)

“Should Oklahoma change its name in light of Redskins controversy?” (Brown 2014)

 “Washington Redskins’ mascot controversy makes Cleveland Indians’ Chief Wahoo look even more stupid and racist.” (Naymik, 2013)

The list goes on and on as professional sports teams, high schools, and states continue to debate whether or not they should continue to cling to racist relics of the past. As teams such as the Washington Redskins fight to maintain their identity, they seem unable to understand that with every jersey sold, every fan dressed up as a “Redskin,” and every “Native” inspired chant that they are re-inflicting wounds that have never been able to heal.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In November 2012, the same month as Native American Heritage month, musical group No Doubt released their video “Looking Hot.” The lyrics, which follow here do not provide any viable reason for creating a video beginning with tipis on the prairie and lead singer Gwen Stefani wearing a feathered headband, holding a staff. She then rides into an abandoned western town on a white horse in an all-white, Native-inspired outfit and is promptly dragged down the street by her band mates, dressed in all black, one with a Lone Ranger-esque mask, as they bind her hands above her head and stand guard with guns drawn. She begins to sing as the next scene cuts to the only ethnic minority member of the band (his family is from India), who is seen with hands behind his back in a prison cell. All of this takes place within the first fifteen seconds of the three minute and fifty-three second long video. The video is replete with stereotypical images of cowboys and Indians, elaborate headdresses, smoke signals, warrior-inspired imagery, and something that can only be described as a cross between a Native/Ska fire dance in the snow, leading to a head-to-head fight between the two sides.

 Go ahead and look at me

 ‘Cause that’s what I want

 Take a good look won’t you please

 ‘Cause that’s what I want

 I know you wanna stare

 You can’t help it and I don’t care

 So look at me

 ‘Cause that’s what I want

 Do you think I’m looking hot?

 Do you think this hits the spot?

 How is this looking on me, looking on me? (x2)

Go ahead and stare

 And take a picture please,

 If you need, yeah

 And I think that says it all

Chasing it and I don’t know why

I think about it a lot

 Better hurry, running out of time

 I think about it a lot

 I can’t tell anymore

 I don’t know what I’m looking for

 You know what I mean

 I think about it a lot

 Do you think I’m looking hot?

 Do you think this hits the spot?

 How is this looking on me, looking on me? (x2)

 Go ahead and stare

 And take a picture please,

 If you need

 And I think that says it all

 Running on empty

 But I have had plenty

 You’re complimentary but I’m just pretending

 Uniform, hide behind there

 This is my diversion

 Go ahead and stare at my ragamuffin

 You feel it, so fake it

 I dare that you take it

 One eye in the mirror

 Put on my veneer

 Could have sworn

 It’s a sure shot

 Are you under my convoy

 Head and stare at my ragamuffin

 Do you think I’m looking hot?

 Do you think this hits the spot?

 How is this looking on me, looking on me? (x2)

 Go ahead and stare

 And take a picture please, if you need

 And I think that says it all

 Do you think I’m looking hot?

 Do you think this hits the spot?

 How is this looking on me, looking on me? (x2)

 Do you think I’m looking hot? (x4)[[5]](#footnote-5) (AZLyrics)

The good news is her captive band mate was able to escape from the ropes that bound him, so he could reach the tomahawk in his pants, which he threw out the window, cutting the rope that bound Ms. Stefani. The video closes as she finally eludes her captors, running down the middle of town still wearing her all white ensemble of feathered headband, breastplate, fringed chaps, and high heels.

The outcry was immediate and was followed by this apology:

As a multi-racial band our foundation is built upon both diversity and consideration for other cultures. Our intention with our new video was never to offend, hurt or trivialize Native American people, their culture or their history. Although we consulted with Native American friends and Native American studies experts at the University of California, we realize now that we have offended people. This is of great concern to us and we are removing the video immediately. The music that inspired us when we started the band, and the community of friends, family, and fans that surrounds us was built upon respect, unity, and inclusiveness. We sincerely apologize to the Native American community and anyone else offended by this video. (spin.com, 2012)

In “An Open Letter to No Doubt, Supersonic Public Relations and Interscope Records in Response to No Doubt’s Video, ‘Looking Hot,’” dated November 5, 2012, Angela R. Riley, Director of the American Indian Studies Center and Professor of Law at the University of California, Los Angeles, responded to the incident. Some particularly salient excerpts, germane to our larger discussion, are highlighted here:

One particular challenge faced by American Indians in the United States is a perceived invisibility and a corresponding lack of understanding of the contemporary existence and relevance of Native peoples…This perceived invisibility holds numerous consequences for Native peoples, including perceptions that American Indians are mere historical relics, frozen in time as stereotypically savage, primitive, uniquely-spiritualized and – in the case of Native women – hyper-sexualized objects to be tamed. (Riley, 2012)

Riley goes on to situate the issues she sees facing American Indians with specific examples from the video:

The music video demonstrates the height of cultural misappropriation and a complete indifference towards and ignorance about contemporary Indian people. The video at once employs Native imagery and symbols, many of which still hold deep spiritual and ceremonial significance for Native Americans…while at the same time situating such imagery in a (largely inaccurate) set of depictions of Indians at the turn of the century as primitive peoples fighting cowboys (and losing) in the Wild West…Most importantly, however, the video is rife with imagery that glorifies aggression against Indian people, and, most disturbingly, denigrates and objectifies Native women through scenes of sexualized violence. (Riley, 2012)

Just over a year later, Chanel’s December 10, 2013 fashion show in Dallas, Texas included long feathered headdresses and a broche made of two feathers, one decorated with the black iconic Chanel double-C and the other in Native-inspired patterns, held together at the bottom by a pistol. Chanel’s response to the outcry that followed:

The Chanel Paris-Dallas Métiers d’Art 2013 collection is a celebration of the beauty of Texas. Native Americans are an integral part of Texas’s rich history and culture and the feather headdress, a symbol of strength and bravery, is one of the most visually stunning examples of creativity and craftsmanship. (Alexander, 2013)

A few months later, in March 2014, the following headlines appeared after Heidi Klum released photos of Germany’s Next Top Model competitors in elaborate headdress and face paint:

Heidi Klum faces “racism” backlash over “redface” Native American shoot: Germany’s Next Top Model issue apology. (Selby, 2014)

And then in June of 2014, fashion and music icon Pharrell Williams came under fire:

Elle UK is slammed by Native Americans over ‘disrespectful’ and ‘racist’ featuring Pharrell in a feathered headdress. (Abraham, 2014)

The examples are seemingly endless, and while for the most part the responses to said offenses are relatively swift, they do not prevent these missteps from continuing to occur. Why do these acts of cultural insensitivity and disrespect continue to happen? And why in many of the apologies issued, do the offenders see cultural appropriation as a way of honoring Native culture?

Whether it is Chanel’s statement, “We deeply apologise if it has been misinterpreted or is seen as offensive as it was really meant to be a tribute to the beauty of craftsmanship” (Alexander, 2013), or No Doubt’s short-lived post on their official website “In Regards to Our ‘Looking Hot’ Music,”[[6]](#footnote-6) the Seattle Art Museum, Pharrell Williams, Heidi Klum, the Gap,[[7]](#footnote-7) Victoria’s Secret,[[8]](#footnote-8) Urban Outfitters,[[9]](#footnote-9) Coachella and other musical festival attendees,[[10]](#footnote-10) and etcetera, the apologies are coming forth more quickly. However, these series of on-going offenses have their roots in deeper issues that continue to shape a perspective wherein Native peoples are viewed as “historical relics.”

**Part III: Historical Precedents, Collecting and Displaying Native Objects, and Legislation**

In understanding the attitudes behind the incidents illustrated above, we should consider how these sacred objects, and by extension the culture and traditions embodied in these objects, have been removed from their rightful owners. Examining the provenance, or the origin and associated history of each object, is important to consider when encountering all objects but is crucial when thinking about how Native objects have ended up in public institutions or private collections. Understanding the events surrounding the time when an object was made or when it arrived into a specific collection is essential to this discussion, which we will explore next.

Within the last few decades, progress has been made as Natives have worked to have objects that were confiscated or stolen returned. This has involved addressing how objects have entered collections, from the first encounters with Europeans, to things that were collected by seemingly well-intended anthropologists who plundered graves and sacred sites, to items that were paid for by individuals who intended to display them on the walls or in the hallways of their private homes.

**Legislation approaching the end of the Twentieth-Century**

Approaching the end of the twentieth-century, two significant laws were passed signaling a shift in how Natives would be able to reclaim their history and have a more active voice in telling their own stories. The first step was the passing of Public Law 101-185, the “National Museum of the American Indian Act,” which established the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington D.C., on November 28, 1989. The National Museum of the American Indian Act was created because prior to this, there was no single museum within the Smithsonian conglomerate dedicated exclusively to Native peoples. The NMAI also served the purpose of bringing together the collections of the Heye Museum of New York and the Smithsonian Institution in addition to working to determine the origins of over 18,000 human remains (NMAI).

The second, and perhaps more significant step was passing the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which became law on November 16, 1990 (Public Law 101-601; 25 U.S.C. 3001 et. Seq.). Passing NAGPRA “provid(ed) a process for museums and Federal agencies to return certain Native American cultural items – human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony – to lineal descendants, and culturally affiliated Indian tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations” (NAGPRA). The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act established formal processes and Native rights to human remains and ritual objects associated with burial ceremonies (NAGPRA).

Until the passing of the National Museum of the American Indian Act, the Heye Museum held one of the largest Native American collections in the world, with more than 1,000,000 objects in addition to an extensive library (NMAI). The origins of the collection began with George Gustav Heye (1874-1957), who first began collecting in the late-nineteenth century. By 1906 he had over 10,000 objects and by 1916 had amassed over 58,000 objects, ultimately leading to the founding of the Museum of the American Indian in New York City (History of the Collections). The overall intention behind establishing the Museum of the American Indian was to “gather and to preserve…everything useful in illustrating and elucidating the anthropology of the aborigines of the Western Hemisphere, and to disseminate by means of its publications the knowledge thereby gained” (History of the Collections).

From the time of the earliest museums dedicated to Native peoples, there was already an intentional separation of culture from the people. It also is important to note that as Heye and other collectors from North America and Europe were gathering objects to be housed in museums or private homes, Native peoples were continuing to face extreme oppression and forced assimilation, often at the hands of those who were “preserving” their culture.

**“Kill the Indian and Save the Man”**

As collectors were continuing to amass objects and anthropologists continued to study Natives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, there was an on-going intentional and methodical attempt to control and exterminate Native culture and identity. One manner in which this was carried out in the United States was through education.

In 1879, Captain Richard Henry Pratt, founded the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, believing that through education it was possible to assimilate Natives. This was the first in a brutal education system designed to “kill the Indian and save the man” (Marr, Part 1: Indian Boarding School Movement). From the 1880s through the 1920s, these federally run boarding schools “included a military style regimen, a strict adherence to English language only, an emphasis on farming, and a schedule that equally spilt academic and vocational training” (Marr, Part 3: Boarding Schools), all of which were designed to strip Natives of their language, culture, and identity so that they would become “civilized” and co-exist in harmony with Euro-Americans.

As Pratt and others worked to remove all traces of Native-ness there was significant doubt about the efficacy of programs such as these dedicated to assimilating Natives. The 1886 Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior includes the following comments by John B. Riley, Indian School Superintendent, which emphasize “complete isolation” as they key to potential success:

However excellent the day school may be, whatever qualifications of the teacher, or however superior the facilities for instruction of the few short hours spent in the day school is, to a great extent, offset by the habits, scenes and surroundings at home – if a mere place to eat and live in can be called a home. Only by complete isolation of the Indian child from his savage antecedents can he be satisfactorily educated. (cited in Bear)

In addition to being methodically stripped of language, culture, freedom, and identity, this was a population that from the point of first contact had been dramatically impacted by not only hostile takeover but viruses imported from foreigners. Around the same time the Seattle Art Museum’s Nuxalk Raven Mask was made, in 1880, the Native population in the Pacific Northwest had declined over seventy-five percent over a period of almost one hundred years.

At the point of initial contact in the Pacific Northwest, the Native population was approximately 150,000 people. Between 1769-80, approximately 60,000 people died in a small pox epidemic, and by 1880, the population was reduced to fewer than 35,000 – the same time the Nuxalk Raven Mask was created (Jonaitis, 52). While the Native population was dramatically and irrevocably impacted, it was still alive.

**Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian**

In 1997, in conjunction with the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Smithsonian, *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian* was published. “Written exclusively by Smithsonian Institution staff, [this report] shows how curators, historians, exhibit specialists, and educators at the ‘Nation’s Museum’ have responded to the challenge of building a modern museum” (Henderson and Kaeppler, 1).

The editors of *Exhibiting Dilemmas*, National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian anthropologist, Adrienne L. Kaeppler and Amy Henderson, Smithsonian Historian tackle issues of authenticity by examining the “new social history,” highlighting marginalized peoples, reinforcing stereotypes, in addition to looking at repatriation of collections (Henderson and Kaeppler, 2). This “new social history,” which moves to give voice to otherwise voiceless peoples, has forced museums to reconsider their values and place in the world:

The transformation of the museum from reliquary to forum has forced curators to reassess their role as cultural custodians. Increasingly, curators must ask if museums retain the responsibility of validating and confirming tradition. Who has the authority to interpret history to the public – indeed, who “owns” history? (Henderson and Kaeppler, 2)

Within this collection of essays is “Zuni Archangels and Ahayu:da: A Sculpted Chronicle of Power and Identity” by William L. Merrill and Richard E. Ahlborn, both of the Smithsonian Institution. This story begins with one of the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of Ethnology’s first scientific expeditions, in which scholars were dispatched to the American Southwest to observe the Zuni between 1879-1884. One outcome of this expedition was the plundering of sacred images and objects in the name of documentation, observation, and preservation (Merrill and Ahlborn, 182). While many objects were removed from the Zuni Pueblo, the removal of four statues were at the center of this particular debate: two from the one hundred year old Catholic Church (Saints Michael and Gabriel) and two Zuni carved figures which are

…living embodiments rather than mere physical representations of two spiritual beings who were brought into existence in the ancient past through the agency of the Sun Father. The purpose of their creation was to aid the Zunis during their migrations in search of the Middle Place, which they eventually found at the current location of the Pueblo of Zuni. These beings, who are twin brothers, were endowed with vast powers that could be directed toward bringing rain and prosperity or unleashed to help the Zunis defend themselves against their enemies and overcome other obstacles. (Merrill and Ahlborn, 181)

The story of how these objects were removed is unclear, but one of the youngest members of the expedition Frank H. Cushing was initiated into the Zuni Bow Priesthood in 1881. This may have been mutually beneficial for the Zunis as the induction of Cushing would grant them access to someone with connections to the Anglo-American community, which continued to further encroach upon their territory (Merrill and Ahlborn, 189).

While dispatched to collect and study the Zuni Pueblo on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution, the anthropologists on this mission (Cushing included) opted to keep the Ahayu:da they collected in their private collections. Merrill and Ahlborn suggest this is because the anthropologists “may have regarded these images as ethnographic trophies or souvenirs that, because of their exotic appearance and esoteric associations, enhanced their own image as explorers with access to the most hidden corners of American Indian culture” (Merrill and Ahlborn, 187-188).

Merrill and Ahlborn also posit that the anthropologists felt “justified” in removing the objects because tourists and collectors from other institutions (in North America and Europe) would collect them, if they did not. Additionally, they were tasked with recording Zuni culture, of which Ahayu:da was an integral aspect, and perhaps because new images of Ahayu:da were created every year, it is possible that they regarded them as less valuable, and/or hoped that the removal of a couple would go unnoticed (Merrill and Ahlborn, 188). Upsetting as this is to our current sensibilities, these practices “were very much in keeping with accepted collecting practices and the Victorian presumption of cultural authority and superiority of the late nineteenth century” (Merrill and Ahlborn, 188).

In the 1980s, Zuni religious leaders officially requested that their images be returned.

Some Zuni religious leaders had concluded that the disasters that had plagued the world since the removal of the Ahayu:da from their shrines might have resulted because the proper religious officials had been unable to direct the power of these Ahayu:da to more positive ends for the benefit of all humanity, in keeping with the goals of Zuni religion. (Merrill and Ahlborn, 194)

In March 1987, the two Ahayu:da images were returned to the Zuni after being documented by the Smithsonian Institution with the permission of the Zuni Pueblo. Headlines from the *Los Angeles Times* read, “War Gods Are Finally at Peace: After 13 years, Zuni Indians have reclaimed the last of 67 religious statues known to have been in the hands of museums and collectors” (Haederle, 1991).

In addition to the two Ahayu:da in the possession of the Smithsonian Institution, others were returned from the estate of Andy Warhol, the Tulsa Zoo, Brooklyn Museum, Denver Museum of Natural History, just to name a few of the 35 museums and private collections in the United States that held Ahayu:da. This does not include other European collections that had yet to be returned as they are outside of the jurisdiction of the United States legislation (Haederle, 1991).

Writing in 1993 about the history of the two Ahayu:da returned from the Smithsonian, William L. Merrill, curator of western North American ethnology at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, recalls the Ahayu:da returning home:

In a gentle rain at dusk, the *a:pilha:shiwani* (bow priests) installed two wooden images of the twin gods, *Ahayu:da*, in a shrine on a mesa overlooking Zuni Pueblo. As they sprinkled sacred prayer meal over the Ahayu:da, the priests instructed them to protect the A:shiwi (Zuni people) from harm and use their powers to bring fertility and good things to all the peoples of the world. (Merrill, et al., 523)

**U’Mista Cultural Centre**

With over 1,000,000 objects in the Heye Museum of the American Indian collection alone, it is difficult to comprehend the lengths Native peoples have had to go to, and continue to go to in order to guarantee the return of their possessions.

Another case to be considered in this narrative are the Kwakwaka’wakw of present-day Alert Bay, British Columbia, who successfully reclaimed sacred objects confiscated in 1921. While the circumstances under which they were taken and returned is slightly different from that of the Ahayu:da, it helps to expand our understanding of the on-going challenges facing Native communities within this larger context.

From 1884 to 1951, potlatches were deemed illegal in Canada, making participation in a Potlatch a misdemeanor. The language of the original law follows:

Every Indian or other person who engages in or assists in celebrating the Indian festival known as the “Potlatch” or the Indian dance known as the “Tamanawas” is guilty of a misdemeanor, and shall be liable to imprisonment for a term not more than six nor less than two months in a jail or other place of confinement. (U’mista: The Potlatch Collection History)

In 1921, Chief Dan Cranmer hosted a large, extravagant potlatch, which led to the arrest of forty-five people. Twenty-two people were given suspended sentences, as part of an agreement, which required them to surrender their potlatch paraphernalia (U’mista: The Potlatch Collection History). The local Indian agent, William Halliday learned about the event from an informant, which led to the confiscation and sale of what has become known as the “Potlatch Collection” to various museums and collectors (Jonaitis, 224). Initially these pieces were held in the Anglican Parish Hall in Alert Bay, where for a fee, people could view the regalia. Thirty-three of these objects were subsequently sold to Mr. George Heye (of the New York City, Museum of the American Indian, future collection of the National Museum of the American Indian) and the largest part of the collection was split between the Victoria Memorial Museum in Ottawa, Canada and the Royal Ontario Museum (U’Mista: The Potlatch Collection History).

With the revision of The Indian Act in 1951, the ban on potlatches was lifted, allowing tribes to legally host potlatches once more and work to reclaim that which was taken in the preceding years. However, it was not as easy as simply returning the confiscated regalia to their original owners; in fact, the “Potlatch Collection” held by the National Museum of Man (formerly the Victoria Memorial Museum) would only return the objects in their collection with the guarantee that a museum be established that would house and properly care for the collection (U’Mista: The Potlatch Collection History).

With great effort, the Kwakwaka’wakw created the U’Mista Cultural Centre and successfully negotiated the return of objects from The Royal Ontario Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian. They also have one mask on long-term loan from the British Museum; however, there are pieces whose location are still unknown, so they have not yet and may never find their way home.

While the U’Mista Cultural Centre can be seen as a victory in terms of reclaiming the cultural history that was once taken away, it still does not heal the wounds of the past. The creation of the U’Mista Cultural Society and return of the Zuni Ahayu:da should be celebrated; however, there are still many objects that continue to exist outside and far away from their intended use and homes. These objects were not created with the intention of placing them behind glass, to be gawked at, or admired by people from outsider cultures. Many of these objects are sacred, are to be used by people who have the right to know the stories, to use them, and perform the associated rituals.

**New Trends in Museums and Curatorial Practices**

In 2004, James Clifford, Professor of History of Consciousness and founding director of the University of California’s Center for Cultural Studies wrote “Looking Several Ways: Anthropology and Native Heritage in Alaska” in which he discussed what larger societal shift is behind the return of the Zuni Ahayu:da, the creation of the U’Mista Cultural Centre, and creating a space for Native voices to come to the forefront:

The complex, unfinished colonial entanglements of anthropology and Native communities are being undone and rewoven, and even the most severe indigenous critics of anthropology recognize the potential for alliances when they are based on shared resources, repositioned indigenous and academic authorities, and relations of genuine respect. (Clifford, 5).

The notion of undoing the “colonial entanglements” is not an easy endeavor, and yet it is at least a possibility now as the examples considered above can be seen as indicators of progress, but is it enough?

Amy Lonetree’s 2012 *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* traces the development of tribal museums, which the U’Mista Cultural Centre would be classified. Lonetree says that tribal museums “often emphasize Native American survival and cultural continuance: the obvious, yet powerful reminder that ‘we are still here’” (20). One of the sites Lonetree explores in this text is the Mille Lacs Indian Museum of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe in Onamia, Minnesota. The story of this museum began as a trading post, when Harry and Jeanette Ayer sold Native arts and crafts to tourists in 1919, then eventually turned the post into a museum (Lonetree, 35). The Ayers donated their land and 1,400-artifact collection to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1959 (to be renamed the State Indian Museum), even though “many in the community believe(d) that the Ayers acquired the land under dubious and unethical circumstances” (Lonetree, 36). During the early days of the State Indian Museum, the exhibitions “tended to use outdated ethnographic subject headings, and objects were placed on pedestals and mounted in glass cases. All of the interpretive text was presented in a distant, third-person, curatorial voice and the Mille Lac Ojibwe’s perspective on their history was notably absent (Lonetree, 36). Over the period of seventeen-years, Mille Lacs Band members became involved in the process of shifting the narrative from a largely pre-twentieth-century perspective, told from a Euro-centric perspective in addition to advocating the removal of sacred objects from public display (Lonetree, 37-38). [[11]](#footnote-11)

Amy Lonetree, associate professor of American Studies at the University of California Santa Cruz is well positioned to assess the shifts in this museum, as she was on the staff of the Minnesota Historical Society from 1994-95, just prior to the reopening of the museum in 1996 and has continued to work with the museum. (Lonetree, 31-32). In this iteration of the museum, one shift she identified is that voices of “collectors, photographers, traders, historians, anthropologists, and government officials who interacted with the Mille Lacs Band are not given prominence in interpretation. Their voices are secondary to those of the Band members themselves” (Lonetree, 52).

An important question that Lonetree raises in *Decolonizing Museums,* as she has observed the Mille Lacs Indian Museum since its opening, is to what extent should museums critically interrogate the impact of Euro-Americans on Native communities?

“While I remain very impressed with the quality of the exhibitions at the Mille Lacs, questions arose for me about the interpretive program there. The Mille Lacs Indian Museum is effective on so many levels, yet how successful has it been in offering an analysis of colonialism and its ongoing effects in the community?” (Lonetree, 70)

Lonetree raises an important question here—yes, we are seeing progress, but is it enough? What story should be told? Is this not an appropriate time to address colonialism and its impact? When should this story be told, by whom, and how?

**Returning home**

In case we needed further reminders of the deep connection these artifacts have to the people and their land, the Zuni Pueblo spoke of the need to control the powers of the Ahayu:da, whose separation from the land were behind the larger calamities that had occurred as a result of their removal.

In the fall of 2013, approximately 500 objects, dating back 2,000 years that had been collected in the 1950s by the University of Washington and held in the Burke Museum, were returned to their home in the new Suquamish Museum. As they were being transported by ferry from Seattle to Bainbridge Island, the ferry was surrounded by almost three dozen orcas. The Suquamish Tribal Chairman, Leonard Forsman, said of the killer whales,

[T]hey were pretty happily splashing around, flipping their tails in the water. We believe they were welcoming the artifacts home as they made their way back from Seattle, back to the reservation... We believe the orcas took a little break from their fishing to swim by the ferry, to basically put a blessing on what we were on that day. They are fisherman, just as we are. (The Seattle Times, 2013)

**IV: Now what?**

Every object has its own history and living memory from the moment it comes into existence. The objects discussed here have histories that have been filled with terror, loss, sadness, and detachment. Returning the objects to their rightful owners and places of origin is part of the process in healing, but as we have seen, this is not an easy process. Even as objects are returned, the trauma of their history remains as part of the memory of that artifact.

While we have seen more progressive responses, the manner in which Native culture was systematically stripped as Euro-Americans worked to assimilate Natives and the idea that Native culture needed to be hermetically sealed and studied by outsiders has contributed to the manner in which people presently continue to view Native peoples as relics of the past.

If we return to the Super Bowl XLVIII Nuxalk Raven Mask, the No Doubt video, Pharrell Williams’s Elle UK magazine cover, the Chanel fashion show, and the Washington Redskins, these reoccurring offensives are clear reminders that the voices of Native peoples continue to be silenced. As discussed here, there have been important markers in changing the narrative, but it is clear that a larger societal shift still must happen, lest we continue to see more Chanel fashion shows, popular music icons, and football fans replete with headdresses and war paint.

The steps taken by the Zuni Pueblo, the Kwakwaka’wakw, and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe are part of the process of unraveling these “colonial entanglements,” but what else should be done to attempt to navigate these complicated steps to recoup this history? It might be ideal to have all objects returned to the descendants of their creators but who would be responsible for tracing the provenance of each object? What about tribes that cannot afford to build a state-of-the-art museum? What about tribes that are not federally recognized? What should happen to objects that reside outside of the jurisdiction of the tribes?

What role should museums and galleries play in working to reunite objects in their collections with their original owners? To what extent are they responsible for conducting this work? What guidelines should be created for museums to continue to display sacred works? Ultimately, how do people on all sides of this conversation respond to cultural exchange and appreciation in a respectful manner?

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1. This case was produced with generous funding from the Nisqually Tribe. Any and all opinions expressed in this case are solely the responsibility of the author. For teaching notes and other cases visit the Enduring Legacies website at [www.nativecases.evergreen.edu](http://www.nativecases.evergreen.edu). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Melanie King is a faculty member at Seattle Central Community College. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “The eagle is a symbol of power and strength [and] [a]n eagle on a rock in the sea expresses a visual symbol of a hero who fights a long battle by himself” (Fang, 66). The object the Seattle Art Museum selected to replace the Nuxalk mask was *Sound of Waves* by Tsuji Kakō (1870-1931), a six-paneled Japanese folding screen with gold and *sumi* ink on paper (67 5/16 x 144 in.) (Seattle Art Museum), painted in a Chinese traditional style. See Mike Boehm’s January 30, 2014 Los Angeles Times article, “Denver, Seattle museums put artworks on the line in Super Bowl wager” for an image of *Sound of Waves*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the following case studies for more on issues surrounding the use of Natives as mascots see:

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repealed.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The “Looking Hot” video was quickly pulled down as soon as complaints were issued but presently it can be found online: http://vimeo.com/70491022. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to Spin.com, which posted an article about the No Doubt video on November 3, 2012, the day after the video was released and subsequently pulled, they included quotes from the apology issued by No Doubt, which has subsequently been pulled from the official No Doubt website. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. From *The Guardian*, October 16, 2012: “Gap’s ‘manifest destiny’ T-shirt was a historic mistake.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. From the Los Angeles Times’ November 13, 2012 issue: “Victoria’s Secret apologizes for use of Native American headdress.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. From NPR.org April 5, 2012: “The Navajo Nation is accusing the retailer of trademark infringement. Members say Urban Outfitters sold goods that used the Navajo name and symbols without permission.” This case is particularly interesting as it cites the Indian Arts and Crafts Act as grounds for suing Urban Outfitters. See Tina Kuckkahn’s “Indian Identity in the Arts” case for more on the Indian Arts and Crafts Act. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is one of numerous examples of critical commentary on the wearing of a headdress to musical festivals and by other popular icons over the summer of 2014: “This means war: why the fashion headdress must be stopped.” From *The Guardian*, July 30, 2014, and the banning of feather headdresses at Bass Coast in British Columbia in August 2014: “‘Trendy’ Native American headdresses are banned from Canadian music festival in a bid to ‘respect the dignity of Aboriginal people.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “For example, a display describing the Midewiwin Society, the original spiritual practices of the Anishinabe, included disrespectful and erroneous information. It also featured culturally sensitive ceremonial objects…During the exhibition-planning process for the new museum (1993-96), the community advisory board – comprised predominantly of elders – recommended that all things associated with the Midewiwin religion, including objects, music, clothing, and symbols, not be displayed.” (Lonetree, 37) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)