Caring for sacred and culturally sensitive objects

Miriam Clavir and John Moses

Caring for sacred and culturally sensitive objects is part of CCI's Preventive conservation guidelines for collectionsonline resource. This section presents key considerations related to sacred and culturally sensitive objects in heritage collections.

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Sacred/sensitive collections

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This section describes sacred and sensitive objects and collections and the cultural and ethical frameworks surrounding their care.

Respectful care

[A museum's] collection, in Maori terms, is not just the collection; it's also the Maori viewpoint. They're not just collections; they're ancestors." – Rose Evans [Footnote1]

Respect is the watchword in the care of culturally sensitive materials in museum collections. Ideally, standards of best conservation practice work with cultural standards defined by the originating community, in this way achieving a type of care based on partnership that protects both the tangible and intangible attributes of the heritage objects.

Sacred/sensitive objects: definition and examples

The diverse collections in museums reflect the diversity of society. The general public, in whose name museums preserve collections through the generations, includes cultural and spiritual communities for whom sacred/sensitive objects remain especially significant.

Which objects are considered culturally sensitive? Obvious examples are sacred or holy pieces used in ritual. They also include materials that are culturally restricted; for example, those seen or handled only by specific people such as initiates or medicine keepers, or by one gender only. Information on culturally sensitive materials may or may not be part of the documentation upon museum acquisition of the piece. Developing information on care can be part of consultations with representatives of the source community (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Carving of Masked Dancer, Skowkale Hall, Chilliwack, British Columbia.

Because of their sacred nature, modern Stó:lō (Salish) people do not allow photographs to be taken of masked sxwó:yxwey dancers. They have graciously consented to allowing use of this photograph of a carving of a masked sxwó:yxwey dancer found on the house post at Skowkale Hall.

Sacred and holy objects

What exactly is the meaning of "sacred" or of "holy"? These words may not be easily applicable to different belief systems. "Sacred" may include objects or places that are venerated, consecrated, dedicated or protected. "Holy" is often associated with a religion or a deity. Although not all ceremonies, or the objects used in them, are religious, they may remain highly culturally significant. Sacred places and objects may be revered in a larger sense, such as those associated with the actions of cultural ancestors, or those used in the individual sense of "sacred to the memory of…" Definitions of sacred and holy can be found in dictionaries, theology and anthropology texts, among others, but may also be found in the framing of some laws; for example, in the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* (PDF format). However the words are conceived, they are usually associated with sanctions to prevent violation of the beliefs. "Sacred" and "holy" necessitate respect.

Significance within a cultural context, power

The term "culturally sensitive" broadens concepts embodied in sacred and holy to include any objects demanding special respect because of their significance within their cultural context. The object's associations with a particular individual or group invoke protocols recognized by the whole community, which is, again, a demonstration of respect. For example, a New Zealand Maori cloak may still possess the *mana* or personal power of its owner, and an exact museum replica would be a different object. "Traditionally [western Plains] bundles are not the only objects which can be imbued with medicine or power. Certain types of shields and shield covers, head-dresses, pipes, drums, and various articles of clothing and personal adornment, can also function as physical manifestations of this concept of medicine" (Moses 1998).

In addition to the value obtained from their cultural context, some sacred and sensitive objects carry inherent power. Yet, what is inherent power? How does it manifest itself and what does this mean for people who come in contact with the object? An analogy for power might be found in the comparison between a sample of granite and a sample of uranium in a natural history collection. Both have a physical integrity that can be described by standard procedures, but the uranium has a powerful, invisible and intrinsic attribute. Those who know how to use it can do so for helpful, or for harmful, purposes. Those who ignore it can be damaged by it. Thus, there are strict protocols for handling it and using it. While power can be found in both sacred and sensitive objects, at the same time, similar objects in a different cultural community may not possess inherent power. A mask in Southwest Pueblo cultures may embody sacredness and have inherent power that does not die, yet a mask in Northwest Coast cultures may represent the rights and privileges of its wearer and can be replaced if it can no longer be danced. This example raises three interlocking concerns:

- To someone unfamiliar with the specific beliefs, the objects may appear to be similar because both are masks. They are both ceremonial and highly culturally significant. Each community, though, needs to be understood in its own terms.
- Regardless of the question of inherent power, both masks are associated with particular cultural protocols that museums are asked to respect.
- Although both objects may have been separated from their originating community for a period of time, this rupture has not necessarily diminished their importance or their power.

Can the power considered inherent in some objects affect someone outside that belief system? There is no simple answer to this question. Respecting cultural protocols, though, is not asking people to believe, but asking them to respect those who do.

Differing perceptions of significance

Sometimes the usage of the words sacred and sensitive has been challenged, for example, in a context where "sacred" appears to contain more political rhetoric and less cultural tradition. This situation involves different perceptions of

cultural significance and authenticity, among other concepts, and becomes even more complex when it carries the moral overtones of "true or false." Differing perceptions can all be grounded in beliefs that need acknowledging.
An example of one object representing two realities occurred in a museum exhibit containing Navaho objects. Navaho consultants objected to a particular basket being displayed because it closely resembled sacred/sensitive material. The basket was a known reproduction and had never been used ritually. In addition, certain elements of it were evidently physically different from those of the "original" basket. So, in museum terms, the basket was not sacred. It had, however, sufficient conceptual authenticity for the Navaho consultants to believe that it should not be displayed, and it was therefore withdrawn from the exhibit.

Changes in cultural values over time

It is also important for those who care for collections to understand that cultural values attached to objects can change over time. Human societies impose values on their creations and surroundings. The preservation of tangible evidence can be viewed scientifically, concerning an object's physicality, and socially. What values does a society place on a particular object or on its appearance? Both the physical nature of material heritage and societies' tastes in what is important to preserve change over time for many reasons, and these issues are not completely separate. Here are two examples of change in perception and social values over time:

- A mounted natural history specimen in 1920, which received no particular care because it would have been replaced when it became unusable for research, can no longer be replaced because the species no longer exists or is protected. The few remaining museum specimens have greatly increased in evidentiary value, even if carpet beetles have seriously damaged their physical condition.
- A canoe that was once a utilitarian object among dozens being constructed is now the last remaining one from that community and is highly meaningful; it has become a culturally sensitive object.

It is not only the original situation or intended use of the object that determines whether it is regarded today as sacred/sensitive heritage, but the intervening passage of time and events.

Consultations with cultural stakeholders

Often, catalogue records do not describe the significance of the object as it is now. The records may also be incomplete, but in some cases, especially with older documentation, the information itself may be considered sacred/sensitive heritage that should be restricted.
Consultation with knowledgeable people, especially recognized representatives of the community (e.g. family, ceremonial society, as appropriate) is an important process in collections preservation. Outside of its cultural context, an object may look like an ordinary basket, but if, for example, it was used to hold the placenta of a newborn, it might be considered sacred/sensitive material.
Cultural materials with sacred/sensitive associations that have continued into the present are found in all types of collections, not just those from Indigenous sources. For example:

- The Catholic Church has protocols concerning the treatment of reliquaries.
- The repair of Jewish Torah scrolls may not be carried out by conservators unless they have received special training and community sanction. Similarly, the exhibition of Torah scrolls requires particular conditions.
- It is respectful to exhibit and store statues of the Buddha so that the Buddha's head is higher than surrounding objects.
- In exhibitions that include Islamic religious items, it may be necessary to consider whether human representation is allowed in proximity to these objects.

It is the role of museums to research and recognize the cultural and spiritual value of objects in their care and to implement the necessary protocols for culturally sensitive objects, allowing their collections to both present the

diversity of the societies they represent and to show the respect that such diversity requires.

Traditional care of sensitive Canadian Indigenous materials
John Moses, Delaware Band, Six Nations of the Grand River
This section deals specifically with Canadian Indigenous issues. It describes the nature of traditional care for sacred or restricted objects and provides advice on the forms it may take within the museum environment.

Introduction
Sacred objects are objects of Indigenous material culture that are deemed holy or sacrosanct by virtue of their ritual or ceremonial associations. Depending upon the group in question, these can include a range of objects connected with drumming, dancing, smoking rituals, vision questing, fasting or traditional healing and sweat lodge rites. Within the originating Indigenous culture, access to objects of this sort is frequently restricted upon the basis of age, sex, achievement or prior initiation.

Traditional care
Traditional care encompasses the aspects of Indigenous daily living pertaining to the safekeeping of ritual or ceremonial objects which, to the extent directed by the appropriate Indigenous community members themselves, may be integrated into a museum's routine collections care practices and exhibition techniques.
Traditional care can take many forms. In its private, behind-the-scenes aspect within collections storage, it may involve the periodic smudging of objects or the ritual feeding of selected items such as masks. Smudging (Figure 2) is the exposure of ritual objects to the smoke from smouldering plant material such as sweetgrass, tobacco or sage. Ritual feeding might involve the application of vegetable oil or foodstuffs to the surfaces of objects.

Figure 2. Drawing by Dean Ottawa (from the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg community), illustrating a smudging ceremony.
In its public manifestation, traditional care might include displaying objects in a traditionally appropriate configuration (for example, with pipe bowls being separated from pipe stems) or ensuring that a traditionally appropriate plant or herbal offering is placed inside a display case, alongside the sensitive object in question (Figure 3). The use of the proper Indigenous language terminology in identifying objects in labels, text panels and other printed materials might also be considered a form of traditional care as well as a sign of respect.

Figure 3. Braided sweetgrass and tobacco.
In situations where museums are granted a mandate to discuss aspects of traditional spirituality or ritual life but are cautioned against the actual display of sensitive or sacred objects, specially commissioned contemporary artworks addressing these themes may offer a viable interpretive strategy (Figure 4).

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Figure 4. *Sky Woman*, installation by artist Shelley Niro.

At the First People's Hall, Canadian Museum of History, specially commissioned contemporary artworks are used to explain sacred or ritual themes. For example, Mohawk artist Shelley Niro's installation illustrates the Iroquois creation narrative.

As mainstream public museums undertake closer consultation and collaboration with their Indigenous constituencies and stakeholders, a number of scenarios warranting further consideration might emerge. These could include:

- Ensuring that exhibition content is appropriate when discussing Indigenous cultural issues.
- Requesting that certain objects be removed from public view or that access to them in storage be subject to additional restrictions.
- Examining the potential for repatriation claims.
- Introducing joint custody arrangements or co-management schemes within the museum setting.
- Allowing community members the opportunity to perform traditional care on behalf of portions of collections.
- Entrusting by community members certain aspects of traditional care to museum staff themselves.

The challenge in responding to such requests for the implementation of traditional care in the museum setting can be largely logistical in nature and lies in making the necessary rooms and equipment available and in ensuring or facilitating certain conditions and protocols, including privacy. These considerations are the result of embracing and respecting the longstanding traditions developed by Indigenous cultures across Canada to ensure the physical well-being of ritual objects. While these traditions obviously predate modern conservation practices, they are often analogous to mainstream care of collections and preventive conservation procedures. For example, they both encourage the use of custom containers and mounts to protect objects while in storage, and they both sometimes require the restriction of access to viewing and handling objects unless individuals have received specialized training.

Policies and rights

Conservation and collections management policies of individual museums must always be considered alongside the moral and legal rights of Indigenous peoples to gain access to ritual objects for the purposes of enacting traditional spirituality. In fact, current conservation ethics require that the physical and conceptual integrity of objects be preserved. In Canada, federal Indigenous land claims and self-government policies set the parameters within which Indigenous governments might negotiate law-making jurisdictions surrounding aspects of their culture, heritage and languages within their treaty-settlement lands. An increasing number of Indigenous governments have developed their own research ethics protocols touching on intellectual property and museum-related matters. Internationally, numerous provisions of the 2007 *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (PDF format) provide a statement of Indigenous rights to culture and heritage in the global setting. Applied to Canadian Indigenous objects, this translates into a balanced approach to preservation that integrates respect for community access, use and traditional care.

An emerging area of Indigenous rights discourse and Canadian legal doctrine is the obligation of governments to consult with, and where necessary, accommodate the interests and concerns of Indigenous groups when undertaking any activity which might be construed as having an impact upon inherent Indigenous rights or contingent treaty rights, including traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights. In the context of public museums, this can manifest itself in the obligation of museums to consult with Indigenous representatives when developing exhibition content and other programming or policies having Indigenous experience as its subject matter, not just as an example of museum best practice and building respectful collaborative relationships, but as a formal legal requirement.

Visiting delegations

Visiting delegations will often include individuals who are themselves talented traditional craftspeople and artisans. Thus, when such people visit collections, the curatorial, conservation and collections staff stand to benefit from the insights and knowledge that they can share. This interaction enhances understanding of collections and places the material more securely in its context.

When Indigenous delegations visit collections for the purposes of traditional care, the following considerations may need to be taken into account:

- Special temporary working spaces can often be set up within registration spaces or other collections working areas with a minimum of disruption.

- Prior arrangements must be made with security staff to deactivate smoke detectors in advance of smudging ceremonies, and museum staff in general should be advised of the activities. Access to a small fire extinguisher and/or sand bucket are useful precautions in advance of a smudging ceremony.
- To achieve maximum privacy for the visiting delegation and museum staff directly involved, arrangements can usually be made to have traditional care visits occur before or after normal museum working hours, or during weekends.
- For handling of objects, collections staff will need to ensure ample padded table space. Rolling racks (with fabric coverings for added privacy, if requested) will be needed for transporting objects in and out of storage areas and work rooms.
- Delegations should be consulted in advance of their visit, so that other necessary materials can be supplied; for example, matches, a fireproof pot suitable for smudging and an appropriate receptacle for disposal of ashes.
- After a ritual feeding, a request may be made that any leftover foodstuffs be discreetly disposed of in some outside location on museum grounds.

Pest control

Indigenous communities have recently been requesting that pest management intervention be limited to visual inspection for signs of insect activity and, in some cases, freezing. The use of anoxic environments (for example, carbon dioxide enclosures) and pesticides or other chemicals is seldom deemed appropriate. Ritual feeding, which may entail the introduction of minute quantities of foodstuffs into storage areas or exhibition spaces, poses no threat in areas that are otherwise known to be pest-free initially.

Information resources

In general, the range of sensitive Indigenous material culture frequently encountered in collections includes objects associated with traditional healing and sweat lodge rites, fasting or feasting, smudging, seasonal agricultural, fishing or hunting rites, drumming, smoking, medicine and medicine bundle ceremonies, vision questing, and rites and ceremonies associated with puberty, birth, death and naming. It is important to recognize when advice and counsel with Indigenous community members and representatives is desirable or necessary. In many cases, contact with those who might be in a position to offer comment on sacred/ritual themes can be established at a personal level.

The staff of many larger institutions can also be contacted. The conservation of culturally sensitive objects of Canadian Indigenous origin (Indian, Inuit or Métis) is informed by ethical standards outlined in two public documents: *Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples* (PDF format) and "Appendix E: Ethical Guidelines for Research" (PDF format), which is a section of the final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. These documents articulate a commitment among public institutions housing Indigenous collections. Staff of these institutions can be expected to act as a resource for the following issues:

- improved standards of consultation, access and training with respect to their institutions' Indigenous constituencies and stakeholders;
- knowledge of the collecting history of their respective institutions;
- knowledge of historic and contemporary Indigenous issues regionally and nationally; and
- awareness of any points of intersection between these factors that might impact their institutions relative to Indigenous stakeholders.

Museum staff who are unfamiliar or unaware of the Indigenous demographic in their region, province or territory, can readily obtain information through web resources such as the Government of Canada's Indigenous Community Profiles. This portal provides links to the national and regional Indigenous cultural and political organizations, individual First Nations band council governments and the range of federal, provincial and territorial government departments and

agencies with Indigenous mandates.

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Footnote

Footnote 1

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