



Article: Practical aspects of consultation with communities

Author(s): Jessica S. Johnson, Susan Heald, Kelly McHugh, Elizabeth Brown, and Marian Kaminitz

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Compilers: Virginia Greene, David Harvey, and Patricia Griffin

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PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF CONSULTATION WITH COMMUNITIES

Jessica S. Johnson, Susan Heald, Kelly McHugh, Elizabeth Brown and Marian Kaminitz

Introduction

The third and final building of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) opens on the National Mall in 2004. This facility in Washington DC and its two sister facilities, the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland and the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City, were mandated by The National Museum of the American Indian Act in 1989. The NMAI's intangible 'fourth museum' was conceived of as a connecting cord between the museum and native communities, through people, technology, and collaborative programming. This 'fourth museum' is the practical way the mission of NMAI is carried out. NMAI acknowledges Native cultures as the living, first person voice of the National Museum of the American Indian. This paper describes how NMAI's mission intersects with conservation in practice, during preparation for the Inaugural exhibits of the Mall museum.

The three major inaugural exhibits, "Our Universes," "Our Peoples," and "Our Lives," illustrate the principle that Native communities are the authorities of their own philosophies, histories, and identities. These exhibitions are being prepared through partnerships with representatives from twenty-four native communities. In all stages from curatorial concept to design development to conservation, NMAI staff members are working directly with Native people to develop and prepare these exhibits, and are learning the history, usage, and proper care of the artifacts. The challenge in conservation (as throughout the museum) is to balance institutional practices with the concerns of Native communities [1].

Conservation consultations are required by the programming and mission mandate of the museum [2]. The Assistant Director of Cultural Resources, exhibition curators and the conservation staff all view developing this approach as a priority. From a budgetary standpoint, consultations were possible because of generous support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Though NMAI Conservation had collaborated with community groups in specific situations throughout the 1990's, these first, systematic consultations have paved the way for an overall shift in the way exhibits are developed at NMAI, and in the way NMAI conservators do their work. The processes evolve with each consultation and the staff has found some early assumptions were off the mark. One of the greatest difficulties has been for each conservator to find their own comfort level with this approach, based on past experiences and personalities.

The work of the NMAI Conservation Unit fits within the continuum of change going on throughout conservation and museums, and has been actively addressed at many AIC conferences (e.g. JAIC 1992) and in a number of publications (e.g. Smith 1993, Odegaard 1995, Clavir 2002). Very recently, a review in *IIC Reviews in Conservation* (Viñas 2002) discusses how conservation has shifted from an idea of Truth towards the notion that the function, use or value of an object is what is being preserved. Throughout the conservation profession there is a growing belief that the people affected by a conservation process (the 'stakeholders') should be part of the process used to make the decisions (Viñas 2002). NMAI is very specifically identifying our primary constituency (the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere) as the stakeholders, and the communities who hold the knowledge and expertise to properly identify how objects should be cared for and conserved. How this idea is put into practice is the on-going challenge.

Conservation Consultations

In developing the various community-curated exhibits, NMAI curators contacted an academic scholar who helped them identify people to contact in the community. Once a community agreed to participate, a small group from the community (called “selectors”) worked with the curators to develop their section of the exhibit. For the conservation consultations, the lead NMAI curator contacted community selectors and asked them to recommend community members who would be appropriate for the conservation consultations. Often the conservation consultants are artisans - mask makers, beadworkers, or quillworkers - but sometimes they are elders, tribal leaders, or one of the selectors.

The conservation consultation is an integral part of the bigger exhibit development process. Conservators work very closely with curators who are already in working partnerships with the communities. The conservation work is a natural extension and outgrowth of already established relationships. In most cases, the lead curator makes the initial phone or email contact to potential conservation consultants. If they agree, the conservation liaison for a particular exhibition works with consultants to make arrangements for travel and work out other logistics. Frequent phone calls or e-mails with the consultants while making these arrangements help to establish a relationship prior to meeting them in person.

People arrive in Washington, D.C. with varying levels of travel experience. An effort is made to make them feel comfortable by meeting them at the airport, picking them up each morning to come to the CRC, and sharing meals. The NMAI consultation team (usually the curator and 3 conservators) is kept small to facilitate the information sharing and record keeping, and to avoid imposing a tremendous institutional presence.

Our Native colleagues and interns at NMAI have impressed upon us the importance of sharing meals as a way of showing respect and hospitality. Members of the conservation staff not participating directly in the consultation are invited to share lunch with the consultation team. On the last day of the consultation, a potluck is held in honor of the guests.

Consultants often give a blessing before beginning work with the collection, and before meals. Consultants are also asked if they plan to perform a smudge, a ceremony that involves burning, so that fire alarms can be turned off.

Awareness, Sensitivity and Communication

A consultation is about communication. As with any human interaction there are layers of history, experience, and personality that go into a discussion filled with as much non-verbal communication as words. Most consultations last two to three days. Setting aside several days allows everyone to become more comfortable and improves understanding of the information. Many of the internal post-consultation lab discussions have centered on how the conservators understand all the layers of interaction and how personal interpretations affect the ability to communicate.

In general, the personal perspective of the conservators is that our mission is to support and strengthen Native peoples. However, when viewed from the perspective of Native people we may appear very different. We are representatives of the Smithsonian Institution, which has a long and troubled history with Native peoples. We live and work in Washington, D.C., center of the United

States Federal government. None of the conservators are Native (except for three preprogram interns who have worked with us during this process.) Most of the conservators are women. While these factors cannot be immediately changed, those differences can be identified and individuals can work to be aware that they can affect the interactions of the consultants with the lab.

As conservation training focuses on materials and technology, the conservators relied heavily on the curators to provide guidance in how to structure the consultations. Our skills in these areas expanded as the process progressed. One of the things learned early in the process was that individuals must be aware of how they listen. NMAI participants have also learned to say very little in the beginning of the consultation in order to reinforce that the power to make decisions about their cultural material resides with the consultants. Like any professional interaction, people come with a variety of levels of experience and expertise, as well as with various personalities, which shape the way the consultation proceeds. Most importantly, individuals have learned to be flexible - so consultations have a loose structure and room for a lot of variability depending on the personalities involved. For example, Juan Antonio Panecura, a Mapuche consultant who is a teacher, wanted to structure things like a classroom, so the NMAI participants picked up their pencils and took notes; whereas a Kiowa consultant, Marcie Davilla, led an impromptu workshop on cleaning hide.

It was also clear from many of the consultations that most of the time people view these objects in a familiar way. There is a level of comfort and ease, reinforcing for us that these items are not anonymous museum artifacts. A common link throughout all the consultations was one of creation – the consultants were mostly artists themselves and were very excited to see these objects and talk about the way they were made. Individuals shared their knowledge on topics such as weaving techniques or how to make rolled fringe. These consultations presented rare opportunities for NMAI conservators and curators to understand first hand various technological aspects of our collection.

Throughout the consultations individuals worked to be conscious of how they phrased questions and the words that were used. We found that there are many ways to phrase a question when trying to elicit information about treatment. One can ask: How would you treat this? How do you care for this type of object? Should I clean this object? Should I fix this? There are also a lot of words that conservators use that are very specialized vocabulary, which have little meaning to non-conservators including: treat, consolidate, stabilize, and adhere.

To put these ideas in a different perspective, what if you ask: Should I clean this object? Well, what if someone came up to you and said: Should I clean this house? You would say yes, wouldn't you – that would be great. But what if someone came up and said: Should I clean your grandmother's house, and it was just after she had passed on, and you hadn't yet had time to go in and take a look around and settle your memories, or go through her papers, or breathe that last fragrance of her perfume. Would you still say yes? What if they asked instead: Is it important for this house to be clean? You might have a very different answer.

In general, we learned that yes-or-no questions were constricting and not useful. We try and phrase questions which enable people to give their opinion and reasons for their ideas, so we understand more clearly how to care for their objects. We have also come to realize that in many cases when we were asking how to treat an object, what we really want to know is: How does the community want this object to look?

The phrasing conservators used when asking questions sometimes resulted in answers that were difficult to carry out. For example, when asked what should be done with a large, cracked, though currently stable, wooden bowl, one of the Mapuche consultants recommended that it be covered with horse fat. It would be more effective to ask: Does it matter that this bowl is cracked?

What is done when a consultant asks the conservators to do something that is outside of regular conservation methods and materials? For example, when they recommend a cleaning method or material that, from the perspective of a western-trained conservator, will cause damage in the long term. What if someone requests repair that no one in the lab feels they have the skills to carry out?

First, through more conversation the conservators try to understand if the specific material used to do the cleaning or consolidating is important, or if it is the appearance or effect of the material. The conservators will then introduce materials used to achieve the same effect and see if that is acceptable to the consultants. In general, the conservators have gotten better at being able to have discussions and share information, but it all comes down to a personal level of comfort (and everyone has different points where they feel uncomfortable). The times where no one in the lab feels they have the skills to execute the level of restoration the consultants would like, the consultants have been asked to carry out the treatment, while conservators document what is done.

For example, a Lakota consultant, Cecilia Fire Thunder, removed water-damaged fringe from a pipe bag, and replaced it with new semi-tanned hide fringe. Because this object was in a section of the exhibit talking about gift giving, the consultants felt the piece should look its best. It would never be given as a gift in its previous state. Very briefly, Cecilia cut off the fringe, and then a conservator stabilized the remaining rawhide tabs so they could stand the stress of new hide being threaded through the holes. The fringes were replaced by Cecilia and toned by a conservator, and then the hide was cleaned using a traditional method, white corn meal. The whole process was documented through standard conservation methods of photography and written reports.

Documentation

Each consultation is recorded on audio tape. After the consultants have departed, the information is compiled into notebooks of notes and images, along with background material such as maps, bibliographies and information about the exhibit concepts. As the entire conservation staff treat all the objects, not just those in the consultation, these notes are vital in ensuring that the treatments follow the consultants' wishes. The audiotapes are also reviewed to clarify gaps in the notes, and tape indexes are created. Individuals have found it useful to return to the original tapes as small nuances and subtleties can be lost in rapid note taking. The images taken during the consultation are also extremely useful both for treatment as well as display design and mountmaking as they often illustrate how a community uses or wears an object.

Sometimes, after visitors leave and treatments are begun, more questions arise. In cases such as this the information provided about other objects is relied upon to gain a sense of the group's approach to repair. Discussions about the issues take place with the curator and conservators who participated in the consultation. If the appropriate treatment is still not clear the representative may be contacted for clarification.

Continuing Partnerships

By maintaining partnerships with our consultants, the conservation staff hopes to insure that the communities maintain an active and guiding voice in the care of their objects in NMAI's collection, not just in the exhibit at hand but also in future ones. However, at the same time it is important to keep a balance between wanting to stay in contact and respecting the visitors' time and privacy. This is usually a matter of being sensitive and listening to people's reactions to e-mails or phone calls with questions.

Although this phase of the process has just begun a few ideas have been helpful. At the end of the consultation each consultant is given a small gift such as a NMAI T-shirt or book. Each consultant is given a packet of printed digital photos taken during the consultation. This small give-away shows our gratitude and respect for the willingness of the consultants to travel far from their homes and share their knowledge. It has also been useful to keep our consultants updated with the progress of their objects in the exhibit, such as sending an e-mail when all the objects have been treated, or when mount making has begun. Small gestures like holiday cards are also used to stay in touch over time.

While the process of having the consultations may seem very time-intensive the lab has found that it often saves time during the treatment phase. Much less time is spent doing library research to identify objects and materials. In many cases, consultants have asked us not to perform treatment that we would routinely do otherwise, such as filling cracks, cleaning, or repairing tears. In a few cases, the consultants have requested that treatment not be done because we are not from the culture.

It has been a great honor and a pleasure to work with the many people who have come to advise the NMAI during the preparation of the Mall exhibits. Everyone involved in this process has learned a great deal from the consultations. The approach of the NMAI Conservation Unit and of individual conservators is very different than three years ago when this process was begun. It is our hope that this is the first step in a process that will lead to a more active roll of the Native Communities in the conservation and preservation of their cultural material. The process will continue to evolve with new projects and new circumstances. The results of this work will be available for viewing in the new Mall museum, due to open on the Equinox, September 21, 2004.

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Endnotes

1. NMAI Consultants were asked to sign a waiver so that their image and information can be used for the development of the Inaugural Mall exhibits. However, it is the policy of the NMAI that this waiver does not cover the use of this information beyond that purpose. Therefore, no images of consultants will be used in this publication.

2. NMAI Mission Statement. “The National Museum of the American Indian shall recognize and affirm to Native communities and the non-Native public the historical and contemporary culture and cultural achievements of the Natives of the Western Hemisphere by advancing – in consultation, collaboration, and cooperation with Natives – knowledge and understanding of Native cultures, including art, history, and language, and by recognizing the museum’s special responsibility, through innovative public programming, research, and collections, to protect, support, and enhance the development, maintenance, and perpetuation of Native culture and community.”

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Authors’ Address

National Museum of the American Indian, Cultural Resources Center, 4220 Silver Hill Road, Suitland, MD 20470. (301)238-6624, Fax (301)238-3201