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# THE IMPACT OF ACCESS: PARTNERSHIPS IN PRESERVATION

AINSLIE HARRISON, KELLY MCHUGH, CHUNA MCINTYRE, AND LANDIS SMITH

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last several decades, increased access to collections and museums has opened the possibility for long-term relationships with Native consultants. These ongoing partnerships encourage a true dialog, thus allowing us to better preserve both the tangible and intangible aspects of museum objects. Such a partnership has developed between Yup'ik artist Chuna McIntyre and conservators at the Smithsonian Institution. Mr. McIntyre's working relationship with Smithsonian conservators began in 2007 with the joint National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) and National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) Anchorage Project consultations and continued in a number of other projects, including the restoration of a Yup'ik mask for the NMAI *Infinity of Nations* exhibit and NMNH Arctic Studies Center Recovering Voices programs. The focus of these collaborations involved comprehensive documentation (including traditional knowledge and language preservation), treatment decisions, and restorations. The mutual trust and respect fostered by the well-established partnership with Mr. McIntyre aided in each of these projects by ensuring that all perspectives were considered in the decision-making and treatment process.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 HISTORY OF ACCESS TO MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

For many museum professionals working with ethnographic collections<sup>1</sup> providing access has become an underlying principal and commitment. The nature of this access has changed over the years as societal expectations of cultural institutions, laws and academic methodologies have evolved. Only decades ago ethnographic and natural history museums were closed to those who were considered outsiders: anyone other than academics, researchers, and curators. This included the Native descendants of those who created the objects housed in these museums.

Over the last several decades, museums have become increasingly open and inclusive, particularly with the enactment of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990. NAGPRA required American institutions with ethnographic and archaeological materials to contact Native communities, many for the first time, for the purpose of repatriation. While NAGPRA has helped push many institutions in the direction of inclusiveness, there have been many other international policy documents and museum mission statements that go further in acknowledging the rights of Native people to active involvement in the interpretation and preservation of their material culture. There are a number of excellent publications that discuss the legislation and codes of ethics addressing these issues in more depth and an abbreviated list of key policy documents is provided here (Clavir 1996; Clavir 2002; Edmunds and Wild 2000; Peers and Brown 2003; Bell and Napoleon 2008; Heald 2010; MCarthy 2011).<sup>2</sup>

The acceptance and implementation of these ethical principles has resulted in a framework of 'consultations' and 'advisory committees' within the museum context. While there are many issues still to be resolved in regard to the consultation process, namely the tendency to rely on an individual or committee to represent an entire culture, it provides a foundation for increased dialogue and wider perspectives. This relates particularly to museums such as the Smithsonian Institution (SI) that are largely geographically separated from their Native constituency and so must find mechanisms of communication that are inclusive and practical. As

these strategies continue to develop, new ideas are incorporated, such as object consultations via video conference, and a commitment to more long-term relationships with cultural representatives.

As museums seek to become more multi-vocal and inclusive, employment of Native museum professionals has provided an effective means to help achieve this goal. While employment of indigenous museum staff within institutions creates an environment of diverse cultural values, it is often necessary to supplement their specialized knowledge when projects involve cultures and subjects outside of their areas of expertise. In these cases, partnerships with Native consultants can offer similar benefits to working with permanent staff, including mutual trust developed over time, and the ability to engage in an ongoing dialog. The atmosphere of openness and problem-solving fostered by these relationships allows us to better preserve both the tangible and intangible aspects of cultural objects. Through such collaborations, it is also possible to provide improved access not just to the collections, but to all of the inter-related aspects of museum work: curation, conservation, exhibit development, public programs and education.

## 1.2 EXPERIENCE OF ACCESS TO MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Chuna McIntyre, a Central Yup'ik artist, dancer, garment maker, storyteller, and musician, first travelled to New York to see the Yup'ik collections at the Museum of the American Indian (MAI) as a high school student in the 1970s (well before the name, location, and mandate of the museum were changed with the 1989 NMAI Act). Seeing the Yup'ik collections displayed at the MAI and at other museums he visited, Mr. McIntyre relays that he felt privileged to view these wonderful objects, gratitude that they had been preserved, but also frustration at finding himself always "on the other side of the glass." While he believed each piece had stories to tell, he knew that they could only be known through access to the objects; by seeing them on all sides- front, back, inside and out.

Mr. McIntyre's experience with museums has evolved greatly since the 1970s, particularly over the last two decades as he has worked with various levels of access to museum collections. Initially he found the collections inaccessible; eventually, he was allowed into the collections but without the authorization to actually touch any of the objects. Working within these constraints, Mr. McIntyre collaborated with the University of Michigan, School of Information to create a virtual restoration program in which Yup'ik objects could be completed with the click of a mouse. A pair of dance fans with missing and damaged plumes, for example, can be restored using the interactive DVD by pressing a button until the desired amount and types of virtual feathers are added (fig. 1). Mr. McIntyre embraced this new tool, saying "The Yup'ik are not squeamish about using new things. We find them exciting and they help us augment our culture and our place in the universe." Using this technology, it is possible to reunite the Yup'ik objects with the materials and attachments they were meant to have, allowing their stories to come to life. In the restoration computer program, the objects are now "properly attired" in their feathers and plumes, if only virtually.

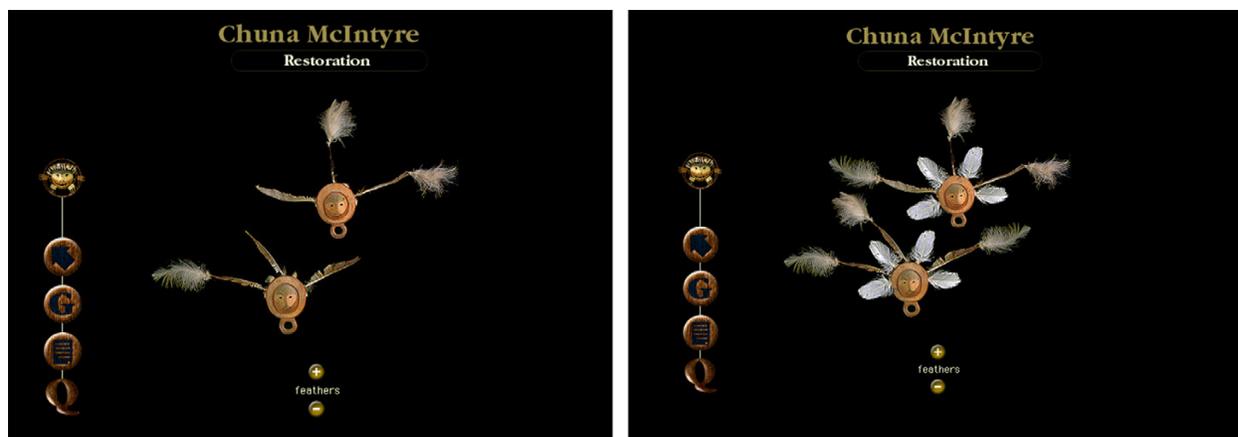


Fig. 1. Virtual restoration of a pair of dance fans from the DVD  
 “The Living Tradition of Yup’ik Masks: An Interactive Presentation”

The first opportunity for Mr. McIntyre to work hands-on with a collection of Yup’ik objects came with the restoration of dance masks in the Eugene Thaw collection at the Fenimore Museum in Cooperstown, NY. Mr. McIntyre was asked to refurbish this collection as many objects were damaged or missing original attachments. In some cases, fur and feathers were worn or missing, preventing them from serving their true purpose, whether to move and sway with the dancer, or represent the celestial bodies with their whiteness. The precise number of attachments on Yup’ik objects is also significant and their loss can therefore misrepresent the meaning of that object. Mr. McIntyre relished the opportunity to help the masks and dance fans convey the story they were originally meant to tell by replacing lost pieces and adding new, bright feathers and other culturally appropriate materials.

As a youth, when Mr. McIntyre asked his Grandmother why it was so important to the Yup’ik to adorn themselves with so many accoutrements, she replied “We do it for our ancestors. We do it for them out of respect. It makes them happy to see us beautiful.” The wearing of labrets, necklaces, masks, and dance fans, whether for ceremonial occasions or for everyday, is always done with purpose and meaning. These objects all play an important role in Yup’ik culture and society; like many of the world heritage sites recently visited by Mr. McIntyre, such as the Pyramids of Egypt, Angkor Wat in Cambodia or Machu Pichu in Peru, they are expressions of our shared humanity. Seeing the reconstructed columns at Petra and conservation projects at other monuments around the world, Mr. McIntyre was struck with the importance of restoring the objects we care about. He makes the observation that with increasing globalization, these world monuments, though they belong to their respective countries, also belong to all of us, to be enjoyed by the world community.

## 2. CASE STUDIES

### 2.1 THE ANCHORAGE LOAN PROJECT

Mr. McIntyre first began collaborating with the NMNH and NMAI on the Anchorage Loan Project in 2007. This project was a long-term loan of over 600 objects for The Smithsonian NMNH Arctic Studies Center exhibit entitled, “Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Knowledge,” which opened in their new facility at the Anchorage Museum in May 2010. Mr. McIntyre was one of many consultants who were flown to Washington DC to participate in extensive

consultations regarding all aspects of the exhibition process. Conservators and curators were interested in learning more about the technologies, traditional uses, and meanings of Alaska Native objects for documentation purposes, but also intended to engage consultants in the decision-making process for exhibit content, design and conservation treatment (Gleeson 2009; Smith 2009; Anchorage Loan website 2011).

### 2.1.1 Treatment Decisions

The collaborative environment and open discussion established in the Anchorage Loan Project resulted in creative treatment solutions that were aimed at preserving not just the physical objects, but the technologies and ideas behind them. During examination of a Yup'ik mask in the NMNH collection (E033114), for example, the conservators asked Mr. McIntyre and Vernon Chimalegrea, a Central Yup'ik cultural expert, about the correct placement of several detached pieces (fig. 2). Research revealed a history of exhibiting the mask in various configurations over the years. In addition, it was found that the extant caribou ruff had been added to the mask by the museum for an exhibit in the 1980s. Based on museum records and reports by early Smithsonian scientists, and comparisons with similar masks in the NMNH Anthropology collections, it was determined that masks such as this often had ruffs. However, according to Mr. McIntyre and Mr. Chimalegrea, the restored ruff was not the correct type and further, it had been attached incorrectly; this was confirmed in other such masks as well as in late 19<sup>th</sup> century drawings made by the museum scientists. Lastly, the ruff made it impossible to see areas where the detached parts might have been joined with the mask. Based on a synthesis of information from background research, museum records, examination, Yup'ik and curatorial consultation, the decision was made to remove the ruff (fig. 3). Although the ruff had not been the initial focus of the consultation, an open dialogue allowed for what was important to the consultants to come to the fore. In this case, the meaning of the mask was partially restored through the removal of the misleading, previously made additions. The detached parts travelled with the mask to Anchorage where further consultations with Yup'ik community members are planned as part of a continuing partnership between the museum and Alaska Native advisors.



Fig. 2. Conservator Landis Smith discusses the treatment of a Yup'ik mask (NMNH E033114) with Chuna McIntyre and Vernon Chimallegrea (Photograph by the Anchorage Project conservation team)



Fig. 3. Chuna McIntyre explores possible placement of a detached piece on the mask (NMNH E033114) after the caribou ruff was removed (Photograph by the Anchorage Project conservation team)

### 2.1.2 Simulated Restoration

Each object presents a unique set of issues; consequently, restoration may not always be an ideal solution. For example, the decision-making process took a different turn during the examination and documentation of a pair of NMNH Yup'ik dance fans, or finger masks, currently on display in Anchorage (Smith et al. 2010) (fig. 4). These fans, carved of wood and painted, were originally constructed with feather plumes inserted in holes along their edges. During one of his visits to the NMNH Anthropology Conservation Laboratory (ACL), Mr. McIntyre demonstrated the use of these fans in Yup'ik dance and expressed his opinion that the feather plumes should be restored (fig. 5). It was immediately apparent that the purpose of the plumed dance fans—to accentuate flowing arm movements—was lost in their current condition. However, the decision was complicated by the presence of original quill remnants in the holes, making it impossible to restore the plumes without their removal. This idea was problematic for the project conservators and for the curator, so a solution was found that would restore the meaning of these objects as dance fans while preserving all original materials.

Plexiglas mounts were designed that would back each dance fan, with holes drilled into the edges of the Plexiglas that exactly lined up with the original holes in the dance fans (fig. 6). Mr. McIntyre has made new feather plumes for the dance fans and will travel to Anchorage to ensure that they are placed correctly into the Plexiglas mounts. As a result, the exhibit visitor will see the fans as they were meant to be seen and understood, while the original materials are preserved intact.

### 2.1.3 Two-Way Flow of Information

The participation of consultants provided a wealth of information to conservators and curators and resulted in a richer and more complete exhibit in Anchorage; however, these partnerships are not just a one way flow of information but have been of benefit to all involved. For instance, during one of Mr. McIntyre's initial visits to the NMNH ACL, he expressed the desire to copy the pattern of an elaborate Yup'ik fur parka in order to make his own (fig. 7). The commitment to an ongoing and long-term relationship with Mr. McIntyre on the part of the Anchorage Loan Project conservators allowed him to refine his method of taking patterns from garments in the collections from a first attempt using Mylar to a more successful method using glassine. Mr. McIntyre had the opportunity to work with NMNH collections, to get to know them and to use them as inspiration for his own art and the preservation of cultural traditions.



Fig. 4. Annotated photographs of Yup'ik dance fans (NMNH E217808)  
(Photograph by the Anchorage Project conservation team)



Fig. 5. Mr. McIntyre demonstrating the use of the dance fans (NMNH E217808)  
(Photograph by the Anchorage Project conservation team)

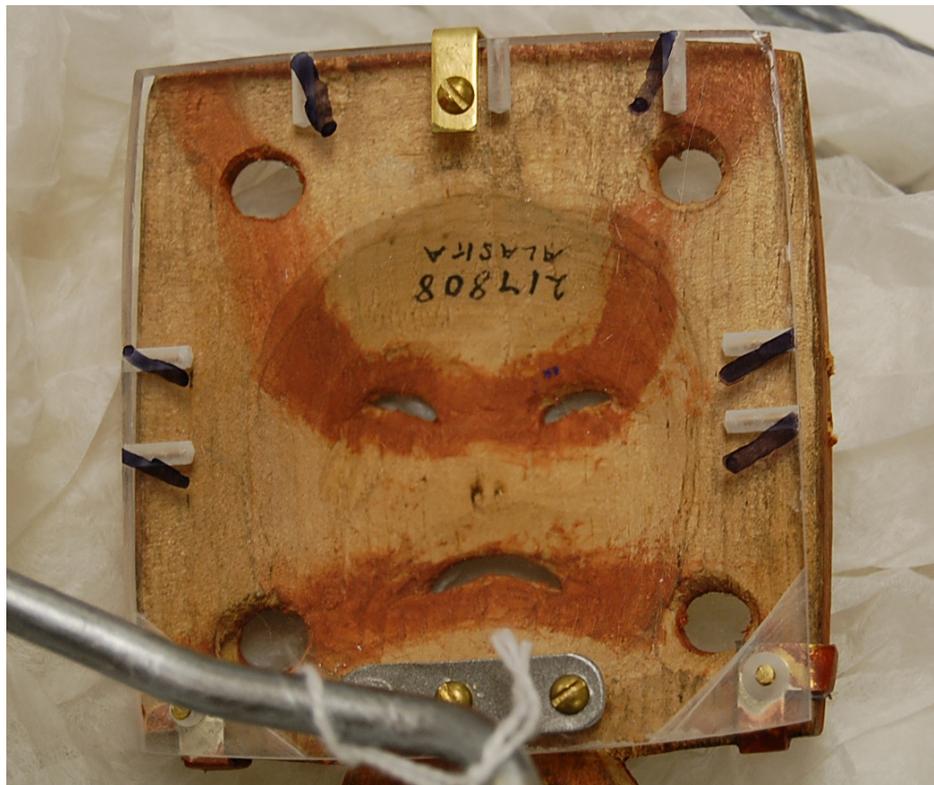


Fig. 6. Plexiglas mount with holes drilled for feathers to be inserted  
(Photograph by the Anchorage Project conservation team)



Fig. 7. Chuna McIntyre tracing the pattern of a Yup'ik fur parka in the NMNH collection  
(Photograph by the Anchorage Project conservation team)

## 2.2 THE “RECOVERING VOICES” INITIATIVE: THE PRESERVATION OF LANGUAGE AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

The “Recovering Voices” program is an ongoing initiative at the Smithsonian Institution that promotes collaborative research with indigenous communities worldwide in the documentation and preservation of endangered languages and traditional knowledge, especially as they relate to the Smithsonian’s collections. Mr. McIntyre participated in the initial Recovering Voices workshop by co-presenting a talk on the Anchorage Project with Landis Smith. A subsequent Recovering Voices project brought Mr. McIntyre back to the SI along with Yup’ik elder, Mark John (Calista Elder’s Council, Bethel, AK) to participate in collections consultations as part of the programming surrounding the NMNH opening of the exhibit *Yuungnaqpiallerput (The Way We Genuinely Live): Masterworks of Yup’ik Science and Survival*.<sup>3</sup> Together with NMNH curators, scientists and a conservator, Mr. McIntyre, and Mr. John recorded Yup’ik terminology and traditional knowledge of cultural objects, birds and mammals (from which the Yup’ik objects were made) collected in Yup’ik lands by early NMNH scientist, Edward Nelson (Smith 2011). The expertise and perspectives of all participants were brought together in the documentation of these collections. Many of the sessions were carried out in a public forum, further increasing and expanding access to collections by allowing museum visitors the opportunity to engage in the process of consultation and to understand the function and impact of museums beyond exhibitions. Furthermore, the public was able to hear directly from Mr. McIntyre and Mr. John about the value, meaning and current relevance of Smithsonian collections and their preservation to source communities.

### 2.3 THE *INFINITY OF NATIONS* EXHIBIT: RESTORATION OF A YUP'IK MASK

In 2010, working with the conservation department at the NMAI, Mr. McIntyre participated in the treatment decisions and ultimately in the restoration of a Yup'ik mask from the NMAI collection that is currently on display in the *Infinity of Nations* exhibit in New York City. Archival photographs from the 1950s revealed that several appendages had been lost since the mask was acquired by the museum, including a wooden hand and two flippers (fig. 8). The photos also made clear that the feathers had been switched between their locations and that the cylindrical appendage at the top of the mask had at some point been replaced. In its 2008 condition prior to treatment, the mask was missing the hand, two flippers, and possibly a feather. The baleen connecting the mask to the lower crescent shaped attachment was also splitting and the feathers were slightly dirty and brittle.

Mr. McIntyre explained that the mask is meant to represent a diving seal, which is signified by the central figure of a seal with its tail facing upwards. Often these masks communicate a relationship with the animal world, but also crucial is the connection with the spirit world. This is implicit in the presence of the hand on the proper right side of the mask shown in the 1950s photograph. This is not just any hand, but a spirit hand with four fingers. As Mr. McIntyre relates, “The story goes that with only four fingers and no thumb, the spirit cannot grab on to you.” Mr. McIntyre went on to convey that without its proper appendages, especially the spirit hand, the mask would be telling an incomplete story. The conservators, Mr. McIntyre, and curator Cecile Ganteaume therefore made the decision to replace the lost attachments after an exhaustive search through the miscellaneous and missing parts shelves in storage.



Fig. 8. (Left) Archival Image of the mask (NMAI 120910.000) in the 1950s with the spirit hand present. (Right) The mask before treatment in 2008 with the spirit hand missing. (Courtesy of NMAI)

Mr. McIntyre re-created these pieces from the early museum photos, drawing on his extensive knowledge of Yup'ik traditional arts and his skills as an artist and carver. The dimensions of the lost spirit hand were calculated using the relative size of features in the early photograph and a template was produced from these measurements. Mr. McIntyre used this template as a guide to cut a new spirit hand out of poplar, which he sanded down to match the appearance of the original hand (fig. 9). The new hand was painted in the traditional Yup'ik method using a white clay slip tinted with iron oxide for the base color and charcoal for the gray. The missing flippers for the seal figure on the mask were re-created and painted following the same steps. Holes were drilled into the re-created attachments that lined up with those already present in the mask and bamboo skewers were cut and sanded down to fit into the drilled holes. Using the traditional Yup'ik methods of attachment—mechanical peg joining—the restoration satisfied the conservation requirement of “full reversibility” as the bamboo dowels can be easily removed at any point in the future (fig. 10).



Fig. 9. Chuna McIntyre checking the shape of the new wooden attachments (Photograph by Ainslie Harrison)



Fig. 10. The mask (NMAI 120910.000) after treatment and restoration (Photograph by Ainslie Harrison)

Through his past experiences working hands-on with collections, Mr. McIntyre came to understand the concerns and skills that conservators bring with them and was therefore willing to compromise on several points. While Mr. McIntyre originally asked to replace all of the feathers due to their dull appearance, the conservators expressed the importance of preserving the original materials as stated in the AIC code of ethics (AIC 1994). After seeing the conservation techniques for cleaning feathers, which the conservators demonstrated for him, Mr. McIntyre agreed that the feathers could be cleaned and maintained in place.

The broken baleen join at the lower crescent shaped attachment presented a similar situation. While Mr. McIntyre was concerned that the attachment be more firmly joined to the mask, ideally using a similar mechanical peg join as used for the other attachments, he understood that it was important to the conservators to retain the original baleen in place. The team therefore worked together to carve down a supportive bamboo splint, insert it into the holes in the mask and attachment, adhere it to the splitting baleen, and tone it to match the surrounding color. The result is a secure and unobtrusive join that maintains the original baleen *in situ*. Finding a middle ground in these cases was essential and required good communication, respect, and mutual understanding.

Interpreting and understanding Yup'ik masks is complex and their meanings are not always apparent to museum professionals. Through consultation and refurbishment by Mr.

McIntyre, however, the design elements of this mask were interpreted and the missing appendages replaced, thereby restoring its context and allowing the viewer a more accurate portrayal of its purpose.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The conservation of ethnographic collections has long been viewed in a holistic manner where the care of the artifact includes not just material considerations but context and meaning. In this way, conservation is also intimately related to the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge. Restoration and refurbishment are therefore not only valid, but often essential components of conservation; further, those with traditional knowledge of the objects, their manufacture, and care are often the best prepared to carry out such treatments. The decision to restore an object, however, is singular, taking into consideration the individual object and its cultural and museum contexts. In the situations presented here, the well-established partnership between the conservators and Mr. McIntyre facilitated the decision-making process by allowing for an open dialog and confidence that all perspectives would be valued.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### NOTES

1. A discussion has recently arisen within the ICOM-CC Ethnographic Collections Working Group evaluating the appropriateness of the term "Ethnographic." For more information see the discussion paper posted on the ICOM-CC website under the Ethnographic Collections Working Group: <http://www.icom-cc.org/54/document/discussion-paper-on-the-name-change-of-the-working-group-ethnographic-collections/?id=969>

2. An abbreviated list of policy documents and associated websites on the rights of Native people worldwide to access and active involvement in the use of their material culture:

-*NMAI Act* (1989), United States federal law (<http://www.legalanthropology.com/101-185.html>)

-*NAGPRA* (1990), United States federal law (<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nagpra/>)

-*Joint Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples* (1992), sponsored by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association, Canada

-*Previous Possessions, New Obligations, Policies for Museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (1993), Museums Australia (<http://desgriffin.com/indigenous-intro/ppnoprinciples-2/>)

- AIC Code of Ethics (1994), American Institute for Conservation (<http://www.conservation-us.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageId=858&nodeID=1>)
- AICCM Code of Ethics (2000), Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (<http://www.aiccm.org.au/docs/AICCMBusinessDocs/CodePracticeEthics.pdf>)
- UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), United Nations, ([www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?ph=00002](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?ph=00002))
- ICOM Revised Code of Ethics for Museums (2004), International Council of Museums (<http://icom.museum/ethics.html>)
- Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities (2005), Museums Australia ([http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au/userfiles/file/Policies/ccor\\_final\\_feb\\_05.pdf](http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au/userfiles/file/Policies/ccor_final_feb_05.pdf))
- NMAI Mission Statement (2006), United States (<http://www.nmai.si.edu/subpage.cfm?subpage=about>)
- UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (2004), United Nations (<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html>)
- NMAI updated collection policy (2008), United States

3. The exhibit *Yuungnaqpiallerput (The Way We Genuinely Live): Masterworks of Yup'ik Science and Survival* was curated by cultural anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan and supported by the Anchorage Museum.

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