



Article: When you don't cry over spilt milk: Collections access at the UBC Museum of Anthropology during the renewal project

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WHEN YOU DON'T CRY OVER SPILT MILK: COLLECTIONS ACCESS AT THE UBC MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY DURING THE RENEWAL PROJECT

SHABNAM HONARBAKHSI, HEIDI SWIERENGA, AND MAURAY TOUTLOFF

ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2004, The UBC Museum of Anthropology embarked on a major Renewal Project to enhance the physical, visual and virtual access to its collections. Taking a total of six years to complete, the "Partnership of Peoples" project encompassed numerous activities including digitization, mount making, packing and moving of the collection, as well as the complete redesign of the visible storage galleries. Prior to the launch of the project, MOA's 30 year-old infrastructure was no longer able to successfully serve the increasing demands of its users. There was insufficient space to safely store and display material, and minimal room for community visits, research or new acquisitions processing. The museum's permanent installations were also in need of a significant change in order to accommodate both community and conservation concerns.

While the project would significantly impact the museum's operations, continued access to the collections for both researchers and originating communities throughout the process was critical. These consultations provide the intellectual, historical and spiritual context for many of the objects in MOA's collection. The museum's staff was able to accomplish this throughout the disruptive packing and move process by implementing a number of effective procedures and protocols.

MOA's philosophy of access, developed through the experience of hundreds of access requests from originating community members, allows for a heightened level of access to objects for the makers/artists, or the originating families of an object. Collections staff provide guidance on care and handling as well as details on the possible or confirmed presence of contaminants in order to enable the user to make informed decision about how they will handle a piece; however precisely how an object is handled is left largely to the individual. Any damage that may subsequently occur is arguably seen as part of the object's life as opposed to a detriment.

During the Renewal Project, collections staff were presented with the opportunity to further push the boundaries of what constitutes appropriate access thanks to some ceremonial requests that came about as part of the development of the museum's Multiversity galleries; One of the most noteworthy requests was the re-animation of a bronze representation of the Hindu God Vishnu which involved ceremonially dressing the figure and anointing it with milk, honey and a number of other wet substances. This ceremony contravened the standard protocols set for the care of collections but the benefits to both the community and the institution were found to outweigh the risks to the physical objects.

1. INTRODUCTION

The University of British Columbia (UBC) Museum of Anthropology (MOA) houses over 37,000 objects from at least 145 global cultures. The post-modern Arthur Erickson building has recently received National Landmark Status from The Royal Architecture Institute of Canada. The museum design is integral to the flow of the gallery and exhibition spaces as well as MOA's culturally reciprocal philosophy. MOA is committed to the collaborative process between the museum and community members. The museum's post-modern design and concept is not only important for generating a working relationship with the originators of the cultural objects in the collection, but is also integral to supporting community access as well as other cultural events such as ceremonies and performances.

The Museum building, as it was designed in the early 1970s, was not envisioned to have non-public rooms dedicated to object storage as the collections were meant to be entirely housed in the newly conceived visible storage gallery. The premise was that a visible storage system would showcase 100% of the museum's collections. Thus, researchers and community members could have visual access to material without having to go through museum administration. Over

time, the collections grew, and a few rooms in the non-public area of the Museum needed to be converted to object storage. In addition, the cases and drawer units in visible storage eventually filled up. Oversize objects were stored on top of cases, and objects were squeezed onto shelves, and stacked inside each other, until the available shelf space was full. Storage cupboards were added in the behind-the-scenes areas of the museum to hold further growth of the collections. Even with these conversions, the Museum's cupboards and cases were crowded. By the end of the 1980s, acquisitions were restricted due to lack of space.

2. THE RENEWAL PROJECT

This lack of space was one of the reasons that MOA embarked on a major renewal initiative in the spring of 2004. The Renewal Project was devised to enhance the physical, visual and virtual access to the collections. One of the other driving motivators for the Renewal Project was the desire to preserve and further develop our current partnerships with the communities that created the objects in our care. It is imperative to the post-modern museum that these relationships be mutual and dynamic. These partnerships ensure that post-modern museums can be an integral part of contemporary societies. Providing the essential access to cultural objects for the originating communities not only provides the museum with valuable information about their collection, but it may also provide a platform for the cultural revitalization of certain objects. This dynamic re-integration of objects into ceremonial or cultural use is beneficial for the long-term cultural preservation of the objects and to the museum as a whole. As the scope of the entire Renewal Project is too broad to cover in detail here, this paper will focus on some key points of the project that illustrate MOA's commitment to collections access.



Fig. 1. The UBC Museum of Anthropology (Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 2. Old display case in the visible storage gallery (Courtesy of UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 3. Bill Reid's *The Raven and the First Men* being un-crated after completion of construction (Courtesy of David Campion)

3. COLLECTIONS ACCESS

If you were to ask any member of the collections or conservation staff at MOA to identify the most critical aspect of their job, the answer would be ‘to provide access to the collections’ for researchers, artists, originating community members, students or the general public.

The access itself may be to the physical object and the information that the museum has about that object, but it can also be in the form of visual access in the Public Galleries or virtual access through the museum’s website or the Reciprocal Research Network to be discussed later in this paper.

4. PHILOSOPHY OF ACCESS

Throughout the past few decades, MOA has developed a philosophy of access to the belongings of originating communities that differs somewhat from our standard protocol for collections care. It differs in the understanding that the preservation of the cultural significance of an object is heavily weighted towards community use of the collections—even at the possible risk to the physical object itself. This practice has developed alongside the shift that conservators have been increasingly experiencing regarding the care of cultural material. Museum practice has moved from that of institutional privilege to a collaborative model. Now methods of care are the result of discussions between conservators and the artist or the originating community.

Miriam Clavir, former Senior Conservator at MOA furthered this practice during her tenure by stressing the important of considering the intangible aspects of an object alongside the tangible ones. In the case of a recent access request, the critical intangible element of value to the community were the lessons on style and technique that the works offered, and that could be taken back to the community. On May 5 2009, a group of Nuu-chah-nulth weavers came to MOA to work with a collection of baskets that had been woven in their community. MOA curator, Karen Duffek, was interested in gaining more knowledge about the weaving techniques and materials that had been used to make the pieces in the museum’s collections—information that was important both for inclusion in MOA object database and to assist with the interpretation of the material in the newly designed visible storage gallery.

As with all other access requests, the group was given a brief tutorial on care and handling by a collections staff person and they were informed of the possibility of pesticide residue contamination. With this information, the members of the group were then able to make an informed decision about how they would handle the material—the use of gloves, for example, was left to the individual.

With this group, the materials and the ability to handle them freely created a jovial atmosphere. This permitted a greater connection with the objects and more rewarding experience for the participants than rigid handling protocols would have allowed. The level of risk to the objects was higher given the relaxed atmosphere but this risk was viewed as acceptable.

And in fact—damage did occur. The handle of one of the pieces was broken after a classic handling error—lifting by the handle. So, is this acceptable? Should it be considered allowable damage that may in fact serve to enrich the object as evidence of use? Conservators at MOA believe this to be the case. The breakage is repairable and the damage is not an impediment to further use or study. There may be a fine line here between allowable damage and loss but staff at MOA have not yet experienced an event that has crossed that line due, in large part, to the high level of respect from all parties towards the objects being handled.



Fig. 4. Collections staff reviewing objects with community members
(Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 5. New display cases in the Multiversity Gallery (Courtesy of David Campion)



Fig. 6. MOA consultation session with group of Nuu-chah-nulth basket weavers
(Courtesy of UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Figs. 7, 8. Community members handling their cultural objects (Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Figs. 9, 10. Nuu-chah-nulth weaver, Alice Sam, wearing a hat for MOA's collection (Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 11. Basket handle damaged during research session (Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)

5. ACCESS DURING THE PROJECT

It was imperative that collections access be maintained throughout the Renewal Project. Community members, curators, designers, conservators and mount makers met on several occasions to decide on the exhibit parameters for the new visible storage spaces, re-named the Multiversity Galleries. Throughout the several streams of the Renewal Project, meetings were held centered on a selection of objects that either the guests or a curator selected beforehand.

6. PROJECTS STREAMS

The project streams included survey, digitization, pesticide residue testing, mount making, packing, moving and installation. In order to ensure that the objects were retrievable at any time during the years of the Renewal Project, the first step in the process was the survey and subsequent barcode assignment to every object in the collection.

This initial step was important for several reasons. First, it ensured that the most up to date information was entered into the collections management database. Secondly it meant that objects could be tracked through the multiple activity streams of the project. However, neither could function without the creation of a separate database.

Ideally an object would be digitized after the survey was complete. Community consultation also proved to be instrumental for image capture during digitization. Since the images were intended for both research and documentation, having community input about what types of images they would want to see of an object being viewed from their home community was critical. An average of four views were taken of each object. The images are currently available online using the MOA Collections Access Terminal (CAT) and the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN).



Fig. 12. Barcode scanner and laptop computer station (Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 13. Four views of Northwest Coast Basket (Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)

The MOACAT is a collections access system that was created to give people unprecedented virtual access to MOA objects. Catalogue information and high-resolution digital images are fed to both the in-house CAT stations and an online version available on website. With either the mouse click or the touch of a screen, visitors on-site, or on-line can search or browse all the objects in the catalogue.

The RRN was one of the key components in the Museum's Renewal Project. The RRN was co-developed by the Musqueam Indian Band, the Stó:lō Nation/Tribal Council, the U'mista Cultural Society and MOA. The RRN is an online tool to facilitate collaborative research about cultural heritage from the Northwest Coast. There are currently 17 institutions sharing information and providing on-line access to their databases on the RRN.

The second key component of the Renewal Project was the mount-making project. The mounts built during the Renewal Project were designed to serve several purposes. First and foremost, the mounts needed to provide increased earthquake mitigation for objects, both while on display and in storage. The individually fitted mounts would also provide protection against vibration for those objects going into display drawers. The mounts also need to act as service supports in order to facilitate object movement between storages, galleries and research areas. To complicate things further, these research facilitation mounts also had to be aesthetically pleasing enough to be used as display mounts in MOA's Multiversity Gallery—the redesigned visible storage galleries that would showcase one third of the collections. Each object type presented its own set of challenges in achieving these multiple goals.

Crucial decisions about mount design and construction were made after several consultations with originating communities and MOA staff. Some community members found the clinical nature of the mounting materials or the positioning of the mounts negated the cultural

values of the originating community. In the end there were two main types of object mounts that were built during the Renewal Project with each type having several different variations.

The first type is a very sturdy brass, or brass and plexi-glass mount. These mounts were designed for objects, such as masks, which required a rigid mounting system due to the size or weight or counterbalance. It was also important to create a virtually invisible mounting system that was sturdy enough to support the objects.



Fig. 14. Tray mounted objects inset into a display drawer units in the Multiversity Gallery (Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 15. Old display mount (Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 16. New custom made brass mount designed to fit the interior of a mask
(Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 17. A black foam and mat board Northwest Coast rattle mount prototype
(Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)

The second type of mount conceived during the Renewal Project after much community consultation and several rounds of Oddy Testing was the black tray model. These custom built supports made of black plastizote foam and black acid free matboard were chosen for objects which had the proper weight and dimensions to fit in a drawer unit or sit on a shelf in the new cases.

In some instances, storage solutions for large or difficult object had to be devised. One such example was the handling “sleds” that were built for long, heavy headdresses. These aluminum storage mounts were designed to hold the mask’s interior mount and to allow the mask to be safely moved without touching the object.

It was also important to keep collections access in mind during the extensive packing process. Packing the collections in geo-culturally homogeneous boxes and rolling racks greatly facilitated retrieval. Throughout the packing program, priority was given to object safety, but the consideration of object density and economy of supplies due to a finite amount of storage space and a set budget was unavoidable. The objects did not have to travel far, but they still needed to be secure enough to tolerate being moved quickly through a construction zone. Soon the focus shifted to the actual move. There was intense pressure to move the collections as quickly as possible so that construction could proceed. This was also the only time during the project where the collections were not accessible. The use of rolling racks greatly facilitated a quick and efficient move and the process of moving the collection of 35,000 objects took slightly more than two weeks.



Fig. 18. An example of a “sled” or handling mount for a long, heavy headdress
(Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 19. A fully loaded saddle mount rolling rack
(Courtesy of UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 20. Ceramics packed with corrugated rings
(Courtesy of UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 21. Small figures packed in divided tray using tissue donuts (Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)



Fig. 22. Collections staff moving packed rolling racks through construction zone
(Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)

7. NEW DIRECTIONS

The museum Renewal Project brought forth one interesting and unexpected development that pushed the boundaries of collections access. As the Multiversity Gallery began to evolve, ceremonies that were considered to be important to the health and vitality of the objects being exhibited were conducted at the request of communities. All these ceremonies involved an aligning of cultural processes and conservation practice.

An example of this was the reanimation of a bronze representation of the Hindu god Vishnu that was done in conjunction with the opening exhibit for the renewed MOA. “Border Zones: New Art across Cultures” was an exhibit in which twelve artists explored how cultural interactions shift as the boundaries between them are lessened or removed. For his contribution to the exhibit, Hindu priest, Prabakar Visvanath, focused on a bronze image of the Hindu God Vishnu from the museum’s collection. His project was to reactivate or re-sanctify for worship this figure that had been held in museum storage for 24 years by conducting an *abishekam*, or ritual renewal. The challenge for MOA conservators was that the *abishekam* would involve a number of elements that are contrary to the standard care of bronze material.

The most significant conservation concern was the use of wet and sticky substances to ritually anoint the statue; the piece was bathed in a succession of auspicious liquids including water mixed with turmeric, milk, oil, honey, and finally fruit salad. After a quick rinse, the figure was ritually dressed in miniature regalia and floral garlands before being offered a feast of fruits and sweets. The image was later taken out through the museum on a procession that was attended by members of the Vancouver Hindu community as well as the general public.

The decision to conduct the ritual bathing of the bronze was made after careful consideration of the value of the ceremony to the community and the potential risk to the

physical object. While it was very possible that the applied liquids would have had a detrimental effect on the metal, it was decided that the spiritual revitalization was an important part of the life of the figure and that it served to further the preservation of the spiritual and cultural integrity of the piece. In order to mitigate any possible damage due to the elevated moisture level, the image was thoroughly cleaned and dried by conservation staff immediately following the ceremony and then placed in a desiccation chamber prior to its eventual reinstallation in visible storage. To date, no deterioration has been observed.

A surprising aspect of the process was the anticipation on the part of those bringing the request forward that conservation would not support the ritual. Even now that the event is over, a description of the proceedings on MOA's own website refers to the need for 'much negotiation between conservation and curatorial departments' before the ceremony could proceed. It seems that the impression of the conservator as the rigid and unyielding protector of the physical object is a hard one to shake.



Fig. 23. Application of fruit salad as part of an *Abishekam* ceremony performed on bronze representation of Vishnu from MOA's collection. (Courtesy of the UBC Museum of Anthropology)

8. CONCLUSION

The Renewal Project brought beneficial infrastructure changes to MOA that significantly improved the visual and virtual access to the collections and increased MOA's ability to care for, manage, and provide access to its collections. Through the project, it was recognized that collections access at MOA is an evolving philosophy that will continue to grow with community input. MOA has an established history of working with local First Nations Communities to provide access to their belongings in the collection and, in the past, many of these items would travel to the communities to be danced or displayed at special events. The evolving philosophy of access enforces this practice, but also encourages a collaboration between museum staff and community members to engage in ceremony which, while challenging to historical conservation

methods, are increasingly understood as being vital in maintaining the spiritual life of the objects. There has also been welcomed broadening of groups that come to access their cultural material to include globally transplanted communities.

The following quote from William White, a North West Coast weaver, illustrates why collections access for originating communities is a critical part of MOA's mandate:

"One of the things that is very important to me is accessibility for my people - to come into the museum and be treated with respect and honour;" William White

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