# Cultural Considerations in the Care of American Indian Objects

As a conservator and consultant, I occasionally have been asked to provide assistance in the care of American Indian items. The methods and techniques I suggested were always based on standard museum practice. But often, it seemed, my suggestions did not meet the cultural needs of the items and were impractical given the situation in which they existed. I was glad that tribal methods of care were still practiced.

Yet there appeared to be a need for additional practical information, especially as tribal museums and cultural centers grew in number. So, one thing led to another, and in collaboration with many people, I edited a book intended to fill this need. The title is *Caring For American Indian Objects: A Practical and Cultural Guide* (edited by Sherelyn Ogden, St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2004.) The book is based on standard museum practice and includes a section on cultural considerations, which is written by American Indian people. It was during this project that I became aware of how important cultural considerations are.

This article explores cultural considerations as they relate to why items are preserved and how they are used, handled, and displayed. Because I am discussing cultures different from mine, I use the words of American Indian people as much as possible, quoting extensively from American Indian contributions to the book. The numbers that follow quotations refer to pages in *Caring for American Indian Objects: A Practical and Cultural Guide*.

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I would like to acknowledge at the outset the American Indian people who provided gracious and patient guidance to me in the preparation of the book, and whose wisdom is reflected in the words I quote. I would also like to point out that I am new to this topic, and I recognize this. There are conservation professionals who have worked closely for years with American Indian people and who have a much deeper understanding of cultural issues than I do. Also, some of these individuals are American Indians and deal with cultural issues in all aspects of their lives, not just professional ones.

I begin the consideration of cultural issues with the concept of preservation. It seems to me as a conservator trained according to standard museum practice, that many conservation professionals tend to see all types of cultural items as objects or artifacts, that are often created as works of art, beauty, or craftsmanship, and that have some special value in and of themselves. Each item is experienced as an individual object of study or of visual beauty, separate and even isolated from human society. Proper care of an item often means finding a way to preserve it forever so that it can be seen and studied, but not used or handled, and the conservator's primary responsibility is to preserve the item's artifactual or physical integrity. In short, preservation is all about the object.

American Indian people, on the other hand, tend to see a cultural item not as an object but as a functional item that is part of a human society and useful to it. In fact, the choice of words here is revealing. When collaborating on the book, Joe Horse Capture (A'Aninin/Gros Ventre) indicated that he was uncomfortable with the use of the word object. He explained that the more that word is used, the more an item becomes "an object" and the less it is seen as what it is – a part of everyday life. For American Indian people, the item is seen as part of the culture from which it comes and is inseparable from it. Proper care is seen as a way of preserving the lifeways of a people, not of preserving objects. Preservation is all about people and human societies.

So, whereas the goal of non-American Indians primarily is to preserve the item, the goal of American Indian people is to preserve the culture of which the item is just one part. And this culture is an oral one rather than one with written records. This basic difference is especially apparent when considering why items should be preserved. Kathryn "Jody" Beaulieu (Anishinabe/Ojibwe) explains that "American Indians have been viewed as a vanishing people. What if our cultural objects had not been preserved? Memories are sparked by them, and we learn through the oral history of our elders. Objects assist in having memories flourish. Elders see objects, and then stories flow from them, and younger Indians learn." (p.3)

Faith Bad Bear (Crow/Sioux) points out the importance of these items in teaching the culture to Indian children: "Our cultural items from the past are important. They tell us why things were done back then. It's important that the children of the Tribes understand this. It is important for the children to learn from us…. Some items are meant to deteriorate and should be left to deteriorate naturally. Some are not. Those that are not should be used to educate our children." (p.82) Dr. Sven Haakanson, Jr. (Alutiiq-Sugpiaq) describes items as "clues to our cultural past" and sums up their importance in preserving the culture. He says:

> American Indian cultural items are more than objects of art or representations of primitive peoples. They are cultural links between the past, present, and future for specific groups of people. Additionally they may be the only history we have for these Native peoples. The items contain implicit information about how traditional materials were made into objects that were used everyday to fulfill both practical and ceremonial needs. What we can learn from these items is how our ancestors viewed their world, how they treated animals, and how they respected their ancestors. Most important, we can use these items to preserve our culture and to bring this knowledge into a living context that continues to be passed on from generation to generation, rather than tucked away in a book, archived, or hidden in a museum collection.(pp.5-6)

Understanding some of the reasons why American Indian people believe objects should be preserved clarifies cultural differences related to the use of them. Whereas non-American Indian conservators try to restrict use, which is usually limited to research or display purposes, American Indian people may wear, eat from, smoke, or make music with cultural items.

On the subject of use, Laine Thom (Shoshone / Goshiute / Paiute) explains that "…because Native American culture is dynamic and always changing, Native ways of thinking in the past, present, and future are connected. Items used in ceremonies from the past are still utilized by contemporary Native American people today. Whatever the item is, it is 'alive' and full of spirit. These items connect past, present and future," and he notes "when most non-Native American persons view … items behind glass [in a display], they think that what they are looking at is from the past and frozen in time. However, they aren't, because much of the time many of the items are still used by contemporary Native people. People who own heirloom pieces often bring out the pieces and use them for social gatherings and for religious purposes…." (p.16)

Another important cultural difference is the value placed upon respect and the interpretation of this concept. As Bad Bear explains, "everything about us --- how we were raised, how we were talked to, how we were taught--- everything revolves around respect,"(p.82) and Char Tullie (Diné / Navajo) points out that "when working with cultural objects, the number one thing is to have respect."(p.57) This value, which is deeply held by American Indian people, is central to their culture and needs to be brought to bear in all aspects of museum work, including preservation. It affects the way items are used, handled, and displayed. It is not enough to employ the best museum practices; museum professionals need to seek information on how to handle items in a manner that is compatible with the appropriate tribal practice.

Joan Thomas (Kiowa) suggests "with regard to storing objects and handling them, always try to find out as much as you can about their origins. Even if you know only the general area or cultural group from which a particular object originates, this will give you a better idea of how to interact with it."(p.8) It is important, however, for non-American Indians to recognize that cultural practices differ from tribe to tribe. If possible, "always contact the tribe of an item's origin to determine the appropriate way to handle it. By going to the source in a respectful way, you will usually get the accurate information you need."(pp.9-10) She advises further that "the museum and collector should always be aware when adding to their collections that the items they are handling are from a living and vibrant culture. No object exists within a cultural vacuum. There are people who care deeply about how you are handling, displaying, and storing the cultural material in your care." (p.10)

The concept of respect in the care of cultural items may be most challenging for non-American Indian conservators when it involves sacred items. As Alyce Sadongei ( Kiowa / Tohono O'Odham ) asks, "how should these objects be cared for while in museums, and who prescribes the care?"(p.17) In her chapter (*which follows this article. Ed.*) Sadongei points out that "Sacred objects…often require special care that cannot be reduced to a list of "do's and don'ts." The very notion of sacred is not static and, in fact, is subject to change. While having such a list or guidelines is appealing, it simplifies the profound nature and purpose of these objects."(p.19)

Perhaps the concept of respect is violated most often in the display of cultural items. For example, it is not unusual for items that have special meaning for American Indian people, such as sacred ones, to be placed on display. Polly Nordstrand ( Hopi) points to "the conflict between culturally sensitive information protected by Indian communities and a museum's role as a public institution. In many Indian communities, some knowledge is seen as a privilege for the few, not a right for all. Objects as well as images are integral to this knowledge, especially in ceremonial use. Too often museums have not respected this tradition and have recklessly displayed sensitive items that were never created for public view."(p.12) In other words, quoting Bad Bear, "museums should know that there are aspects of our lives that we want to keep to ourselves and not put on display. They should respect that."(p.82)

Another issue related to display and the concept of respect is displaying items out of the context of how they were used originally or without appropriate supporting information. Laine Thom believes that "American Indian cultural items should be combined with historical and contemporary photographs and graphic text of Native peoples, narrative and commentarial, relevant to the themes of the exhibit. The result of such an exhibit would be an important method of …[demonstrating] the ways of life of native peoples, historically and now. It is important to display items in such a way that their past history and current use are understood in the context of the lifeways of Native peoples."(p.15) Nordstrand suggests that "when beginning an exhibit project, you may want to approach the selection of objects by first analyzing your own point of view. Do you see this object as a work of art? As a historic artifact? As a living being? What was the maker's intention in creating this object? Did he or she intend for it to be displayed? Or even preserved beyond its original use? You may also want to consider how your point of view influences the story you are telling the audience. If a ceremonial item is displayed for its aesthetic qualities, are you providing accurate information to the audience?"(p.12)

Respectful display of items probably cannot be accomplished by non-American Indians without the guidance of members of the appropriate Tribe. Felton Bricker, Sr. (Mohave) suggests that "museums should invite Native people to visit their institution when they are installing a show that represents their Tribal group. This would be the best way to get the 'Native voice' and to be sure you have accurate representation of their people. NAGPRA has taken us to new places, but museums still have a long way to go."(p.97)

To summarize, the care of American Indian items presents special challenges. It raises questions about the spiritual and cultural nature of the items and how to ensure that this aspect of them is protected. Issues of use, respect, and display need to be considered within the context of American Indian concepts of preservation. A general understanding of various cultural practices and points of view, and a respect for these on the part of everyone involved is key to the appropriate care of these items.