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Partnerships in Developing Cultural Resources: Lessons From the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples

Trudy Nicks

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Résumé de l'article

Dans son rapport publié en 1992, le Groupe de travail sur les musées et les Premières Nations, fruit de l'effort conjoint de l'Assemblée des Premières Nations et de l'Association des musées canadiens, se penche sur les questions non résolues qui opposent les musées canadiens et les peuples autochtones et formule des recommandations quant au règlement éventuel de ces questions au moyen d'efforts communs. Ce document retrace l'évolution du rapport du Groupe de travail et analyse les conséquences de celui-ci pour l'anthropologie muséale, et particulièrement pour les activités traditionnelles que sont la recherche, la collection, l'interprétation et la défense des intérêts.

NOTE ÉDITORIALE / EDITORIAL NOTE

Il devient évident que les muséologues jouent maintenant un rôle déterminant dans la négociation de nouveaux rapports avec les communautés culturelles. Nous présentons ici une discussion portant sur une négociation parmi les plus complètes, du point de vue d'une participante à celle-ci.

It is becoming apparent that museum anthropologists are now in the forefront of negotiating new relationships with cultural communities. The following is a discussion of one of the most comprehensive of these negotiations, written by a key participant. Dr. Stephen Inglis, Director, Research,Canadian Museum of Civilization

Partnerships in Developing Cultural Resources: Lessons From the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples [1]

Trudy Nicks

Department of Ethnology, Royal Ontario Museum Toronto

Dans son rapport publié en 1992, le Groupe de travail sur les musées et les Premières Nations, fruit de l'effort conjoint de l'Assemblée des Premières Nations et de l'Association des musées canadiens, se penche sur les questions non résolues qui opposent les musées canadiens et les peuples autochtones et formule des recommandations quant au règlement éventuel de ces questions au moyen d'efforts communs.

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In 1992 the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, which was co-sponsored by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association, published a report which examined outstanding issues between Canadian museums and native peoples and made recommendations for resolving these issues within collaborative partnerships.

This paper outlines the background to the Task Force report and discusses its implications for museum anthropology with specific reference to the traditional activities of research, collecting, interpretation and advocacy.

Introduction

The end of the twentieth century, like the end of the nineteenth, finds anthropology in North American museums in the midst of change. Today the change is as much driven by external events as by theoretical developments within the discipline of anthropology.

The current, self-examining mood in anthropology has caused a re-evaluation of the assumed objectivity of museum exhibits which interpret the cultures of "others" for the edification of the museum going public. But an equally compelling force for reappraisal comes from external communities which are increasingly challenging the authority of established institutions to determine how their cultures and histories will be represented.

In the last half of the twentieth century the Native peoples [2] of Canada have worked hard to regain control of their cultural heritage and to achieve social, economic and political independence (Erasmus, 1989: 1-42; Manuel in Tanner, 1983: v). Their efforts have often brought them to museums looking for the objects which are the tangible links to their history and traditional values. They have often found their access to

these important sources of learning and cultural continuity limited (Hill, 1988:32-36). They have, perhaps, had more mixed feelings about the way their history and culture has been presented in exhibitions. Elegant displays of highly aesthetic objects can be ennobling. But such exhibits can also reinforce images of vanished cultures and are therefore potentially detrimental to their interests in being recognized as distinct contemporary cultures.

The accumulating Native discontent with museums was given a national focus in the 1980's when the Lubicon Cree of northern Alberta initiated a boycott of *The Spirit Sings* exhibition.[3] This exhibit was planned by the Glenbow Museum as the major cultural event of the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics. Glenbow planned to bring together from around the world old and rare artifacts which represented Native cultures at the time of their first contacts with Europeans (Harrison, et al, 1987; Harrison, Trigger, Ames, 1988:12-25). Funding for the exhibit was provided primarily by the Shell Oil Company.

The Lubicon Cree who were, and still are, engaged in a land claim dispute with the federal and provincial governments, took exception to the exhibit concept and to the fact that the major sponsor was the same oil company drilling on land they claimed as rightfully theirs. The Lubicon campaigned for an international boycott of the exhibit which they felt slighted their interests and needs as contemporary Native people. Museums were asked not to lend artifacts to the Glenbow for the exhibit.

Among the Lubicon supporters was the Assembly of First Nations, an organization which represents about one-half of the Native population of Canada. There was a good deal of debate among anthropologists about how museums should respond to the Lubicon call to boycott *The Spirit Sings* project.[4] The debate was highly publicized and very divisive. In spite of the call for a boycott the exhibit opened on schedule at the beginning of 1988, and later that same year moved to its only other planned venue, the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa.[5]

The boycott was officially ended in the fall of 1988 through the intervention of Georges Erasmus, then National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations. He invited the Canadian museum community to cosponsor a symposium which would deal with outstanding issues between museums and First Nations. The invitation was readily accepted. *The Spirit Sings* boycott was far from the first instance of tension between museums and Native peoples, although other cases were of more local scope. Some museums had already discussed among themselves how to respond to issues such as repatriation requests (Ames, Harrison and Nicks, 1988: 47-57). Erasmus' invitation provided an opportunity to participate in expanded discussions and to work directly with Native communities to try to resolve problems.

Preserving Our Heritage

The symposium "Preserving Our Heritage: A Working Conference Between Museums and First Peoples", was held at Carleton University in November, 1988 (Blundell and Grant, 1989: 12-16; Townsend-Gault and Thunder, 1989: 4-5). Some 150 Native and non-Native delegates from across the country attended and aired their concerns. By the end of the three-day conference the delegates had unanimously agreed that a Task Force should be established to further study the issues raised at the conference and to develop recommendations which would facilitate the development of working and equal partnerships between museums and First Peoples. The productive outcome of this conference was in no small measure due to the statesmanship of Georges Erasmus, who, in his opening remarks to the conference, stressed the need to get beyond confrontation and to recognize that museums and First Peoples are potentially strong allies.

The Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, which included Native and non-Native members, was formed in 1989 under the joint sponsorship of the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association. During 1990 and 1991 the Task Force conducted a nation-wide consultation with Native and non-Native individuals, cultural and educational institutions and organizations, and government programs and departments. A written report with recommendations was submitted to the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association at the end of 1991. [6]

In February, 1992, the Task Force presented the report to a second national conference, again held at Carleton University in Ottawa. Some 200 Native and non-Native people from across Canada attended this conference, optimistically titled "Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples."

The report and recommendations were generally well received by the participants. They recommended that the report receive the widest possible

distribution and that the Task Force, or a like-body, continue to exist to assist museums and First Peoples to develop working partnerships. The elders present ended the conference with a call for continued co-operation, sharing, and mutual respect between museums and First Peoples (Montour, 1992).

New Beginnings

The 1988 conference and the consultations carried out by the Task Force have provided a clear list of outstanding issues between museums and First Peoples. The major issues are: (l) the need for increased involvement of Native peoples in all activities concerning the interpretation of their cultures and histories in museums; (2) the need for Native people to have improved access to collections, and to all levels of employment and policy development in museums; and (3) the repatriation of some museum collections. Related to these are other issues concerning access to museological training and to sources of funding, especially funding to establish museums and cultural centres in Native communities (Task Force, 1992:1).

The Task Force report provides over thirty recommendations to serve as guidelines for policies that will address these issues. For present purposes, it is perhaps more instructive to outline the principles which served as the basis for the recommendations. These include: (l) museums and First Peoples share a mutual interest in the study and interpretation of the cultures and histories of the aboriginal peoples of Canada; (2) museums should recognize the desire and authority of First Peoples to speak for themselves, and First Peoples should recognize the value of the empirical knowledge and approaches of academically trained workers in museums; (3) museums and First Peoples should work as equal partners in all activities related to the histories and cultures of First Peoples which are undertaken in museums; and (4) the First Peoples of Canada have different histories and cultures and they cannot be expected to all have the same needs and interests with regard to museums (Task Force, 1992: 7 - 8). The emphasis of the recommendations flowing from these principles is, therefore, on establishing dialogues and working in partnerships to address the recognized needs and interests of both parties.

The work of the Task Force represents a new beginning for Canadian museums and First Peoples. It provides a clear perspective on the interests of Native people with reference to museums—interests that are far less adversarial and polemical than the initial response to *The Spirit Sings* might have suggested. The Task Force recommends, and the co-sponsors have endorsed, a co-operative model of equal partnerships guided by moral, ethical and professional responsibilities rather than by legal obligations. A legal analysis of issues surrounding repatriation supports the co-operative, negotiation approach over recourse to legal remedies (Bell, 1992 and forthcoming). It is cheaper, faster, and much more likely to result in solutions satisfactory to both parties. Legislation which provides guidelines to aid the cooperative approach may ultimately be useful. But, if the United States experience with the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act is an indication, starting with legislation may create more problems than it resolves (Bell, 1992: 69 fn).

The ultimate value of the Task Force report will be determined by how widely its insights and intents are translated into action. Adversarial attitudes can still be found on both sides, and it is all too often these, rather than examples of co-operative efforts, that become the subject of media reporting. Both Native people and museums have work to do, and perhaps also to make a leap of faith, if the powerful alliances foreseen by Georges Erasmus in 1988 are to become the norm.

Museum anthropology and the Task Force

The remainder of this paper considers some implications of the Task Force initiatives for museum anthropology. Native peoples are not interested in wholesale dismantling of existing institutions. They want involvement, and they want to establish parallel institutions in their own communities. To some extent these goals are already being realized. Among the Native members of the Task Force were directors of Native-run museums and a curator at a major non-Native museum. The Task Force report provides a context in which to assess what museum anthropology can offer and to think about how roles may change in the future. What follows represents some initial ideas concerning the activities of research, collecting, interpretation and advocacy.

Research

The Task Force found Native people well aware of the value that scientific research on museum collections may have for understanding and explaining their cultural heritage. An example of the potential value is provided by Adrian Tanner in his introduc-

tion to the book *To Please the Caribou* by Dorothy Burnham (1992). Her book represents research over a twenty-five year period on the beautiful painted skin coats, originally worn by Cree-Montagnais-Naskapi hunters of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula, which are now scattered in museums around the world.

Tanner relates his experience as a witness at the trial of a member of the Naskapi Band of Schefferville, Quebec, who was charged with hunting geese across the nearby border in Labrador. His defense, based on a claim of unextinguished aboriginal rights in Labrador, ran into the problem of having to prove to the court that an "organized society" had occupied the territory since before the establishment of colonial sovereignty. The prosecution had difficulty reconciling the notion of "organized society" with the nomadic form of land tenure of the Naskapi.

Tanner reflects that the collection of hunting coats studied by Burnham would constitute good evidence for proving that an organized society existed. In his words (Burnham, 1992: viii):

> Any organized society is based on a shared set of ideas, beliefs, rules, standards, and values, whether or not these are written down. The social organization of Northern Algonquians is based on an extensive kinship system and includes people who do not always live together, but are nevertheless all part of a vast social network, one which in Quebec-Labrador spans the peninsula. The system had to be flexible, as people continually moved between residential groupings. The coats in this book show clear evidence of collective artistry and skill, even if they are not the product of a group of artisans in constant contact with one another. ...The coats show that, however scattered were the Naskapi, they had, collectively, a shared artistic, religious, and moral tradition. The coats in museum collections are material evidence of this organized tradition, one that spanned at least hundreds of years without decline. They are the expression of the art and the religion of a society, even if it was one whose members traveled constantly and moved residence every few weeks.

More research of this caliber would clearly be useful. Anthropologists, even those working in museums, have tended to ignore ethnographic collections as research material. As custodians of collections, however, it is a task we might well be expected to attend to with a greater sense of responsibility.

One productive approach to existing collections is to look at them as historical documents in their own right. The Task Force heard complaints that museums presented Native cultures in the past and in isolation from mainstream history. These biases, in fact, are based more in Boasian models of how to exhibit Native cultures than they are inherent in museum collections. Museum collections reveal much about culture contact and interaction as long as we are willing to learn the contexts in which objects were created, used, exchanged, ended up in cultural institutions, and still have meaning to Native peoples today.

Collecting

As with material culture research, collecting is an area in which current practice could be improved. Acquisitions of contemporary materials are generally made opportunistically rather than according to systematic plans. Given present practices, the curator of the future, Native or non-Native, may find that the cultures of First Peoples at the end of the twentieth century are largely represented by emblazoned T-shirts, baseball caps and lapel buttons, and by ceremonial regalia and some fine and no-so-fine art and crafts. It seems that we are still fascinated as anthropologists by objects of warfare and politics, art and ritual, almost to the exclusion of other materials. Future generations may well ask "is that all there is (or was)?".

They might also ask what contemporary Native people thought about what was selected for preservation. The Task Force was told that museums and art galleries should place more emphasis on collecting the works of contemporary Native artists. Certainly this would be a rich source for both a record of aesthetic achievement and a record of social and political commentary by Native people.

New approaches to collection to complement traditional practices need to be explored. Videotaping equipment, in the hands of Native or non-Native researchers, could preserve a far more comprehensive record, in terms of range of items and contextual information, than traditional collecting methods.

Interpretation

The Task Force findings and recommendations challenge the authority of non-Native museum workers to decide unilaterally how the cultures and histories of "others" will be presented. This, of course,

is very much in line with the recent writings on the question of ethnographic authority by Clifford (1988) and others. Canadian Native peoples want to be involved in all phases of planning exhibitions and other types of public presentations concerning them. If such projects are not overtly multivocal they should at least be informed by a Native voice.

It needs to be stated that this is not necessarily the same thing as consciously exposing within an exhibition the values and assumptions on which it is based. Presenting reflexive exhibits in the multicultural environment which characterizes much of Canada today can be quite problematical. A speaker at the Montreal CASCA meetings remarked that Canada is a land of immigrants and, therefore, anthropologists never really leave the field (Siecie–chowicz, 1992).

This may be merely an interesting observation from the vantage point of a university department. Anthropologists in museums are far more visible publicly, and they can find themselves embroiled in controversy when they debate issues of representation in public exhibitions. The subject matter of any exhibition is open to multiple responses. As Kenneth Hudson has observed (1991: 459):

> What one gets out of a museum depends largely on what one brings to it. The best market research can be nothing more than an approximation for this reason.

Hudson goes on to point out that many—perhaps most—museum visitors do not come with questioning minds. They feel comfortable with received ideas and they are not grateful to have these ideas disturbed or demolished (1991: 459).

It may be the desire of museum curators and special interest groups to use the museum as a forum for experimentation, debate, and even confrontation. But the image of the museum as a temple, a source of timeless, universal truths, more closely fits the expectations of many visitors (Dunce Cameron cited in Lavine and Karp, 1991: 3-4). No better example exists, perhaps, than the public expectation that the Native peoples of Canada will be portrayed according to a set of idealized categories, in an idealized time, and outside of mainstream Canadian culture and history. (The role museums have played in teaching the public to see Native peoples in terms of culture areas and cultural inventories is beyond the scope of the current discussion.)

These are, of course, the types of.portrayals to which the Lubicon Cree and others have objected. It does not suit their own sense of their history, nor does it further their goal of having their contemporary, separate and vital cultures recognized by the rest of Canadians.

The Task Force report calls for museum exhibits that will both accommodate the desire and authority of Native peoples to speak for themselves and, as well, respect academic research. It is a challenge, but not one which has thus far proven impossible. Many collaborative exhibits have been developed and a sampling of such projects is cited in the Task Force report (1992: 17-18). These projects have included the Native voice without being unduly misinterpreted by the general public. For example, *Living Arctic*, an exhibition organized jointly by the British Museum and the Canadian-based organization Indigenous Survival International, followed a very traditional ethnographic exhibition format (Cruikshank, 1988: 74-77; British Museum and Indigenous Survival International, 1989). It differed mainly in including a large section on contemporary Indian and Inuit peoples of northern Canada. Indigenous Survival International wanted to let the British and European public know that northern Native cultures are still alive and are dependent on income from fur trapping. The British Museum had the collections and the infrastructure necessary to create the exhibit. More importantly, they provided access to a large public which the Native organization hoped to influence. In Canada Native people participated extensively in the development of *Trapline Lifeline*, an exhibit mounted by the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife, which also stressed the importance of hunting and trapping to contemporary northern Native communities (Irving and Harper, 1988: 38-42).

Exhibits curated solely by Native people are appearing in museums both in Native communities and in large urban institutions. The Canadian Museum of Civilization exhibit *Indigena*, which presents Native artists' perceptions of the last 500 years, is one example (McMaster and Martin, 1992).

In the fall of 1992, *Fluffs and Feathers: An Exhibit on the Symbols of Indianness* (Doxtator, 1988 a, b) which, as its subtitle suggests explores stereotypes of Indians in history and popular culture, will open at the Royal Ontario Museum. The exhibit is curated by Iroquoian museum professionals. It has a hard-edged message delivered with considerable wit and hu-

mour. It was well received when first presented at the Woodland Cultural Centre on the Six Nations Reserve in 1988. When the Cultural Centre could not find funds to travel the exhibit the Royal Ontario Museum offered to help. How will museum publics across the country respond to this exhibit which challenges many of their ideas about Indians? Will the humour mitigate the shock of realization? Will it be mistaken for approval of the stereotypes depicted? Will visitors realize that the exhibit represents the Native voice even though it appears in non-Native institutions? The national tour of this exhibition promises to be interesting.

Advocacy

Advocacy is not a new role for anthropologists, in or outside of museums. But there are calls for changes in the way in which the advocacy role is practiced. Regna Darnell (1992) has spoken of the responsibility of anthropologists to facilitate discourse between Natives and "white" people. Specifically, she argues that anthropologists must teach non-Native people how to hear Native people when they speak.

Wayne Warry (1990: 61-73) reminds us that anthropologists are among those who need to improve their listening skills. He argues for a shift from independent to collaborative research in applied anthropology. In his words, "it is time for anthropologists to move from writing **about** Native people or speaking **for** Native people to working **with** Native people" (1990:62).

The Task Force facilitated discourse between Native and non-Native peoples. The non-Native members of the Task Force, many of whom were anthropologists, heard the desire and the ability of Native peoples to speak for themselves directly to museum publics. They want to be included in museums to do this. The advocacy role of anthropologists in museums must surely change from that of assuming the authority to speak on behalf of Native interests to that of opening doors and providing opportunities for Native people to speak for themselves.

An important recommendation of the Task Force report is that funding agencies give a high priority to assisting the development of Native museums and training. Funding is not easily come by for any museum project in the current economic climate, but the objective of increasing Native participation in museums must remain a high priority. The collaborative partnerships called for by the Task Force will not only be of benefit to Native people who will gain access to information and resources from which they have long felt excluded. As Warry (1990: 70) has observed, collaboration leads to self-reflection and critical reassessment of our own discipline. A major benefit of the partnerships advocated by the Task Force will be an expanded perspective, and a renewal, for museum anthropology.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented in a session on "Rights and Management of Common Resources" at the Society of Applied Anthropology in Canada meetings in Montreal, May 9-12, 1992. I would like to thank Michael Ames, Jeanne Cannizzo and Stephen Inglis for their comments which were helpful in clarifying and revising the original paper.
2. Many names are currently used to refer to the indigenous inhabitants of Canada. The Canadian Constitution recognizes Indians, Inuit and Metis. But several other terms are also in use including First Nations, First Peoples, aboriginal peoples, native peoples, Native Peoples. Which term is deemed acceptable varies according to time, place and individual. For an appraisal of the situation by a Native writer see Taylor (1992).
3. The issues raised are summarized in Ames (1991).
4. For a sense of the debate among anthropologists see Harrison (1988) and Trigger (1988).
5. The actual location of the exhibition in Ottawa was the Lorne Building as the Canadian Museum of Civilization was at the time between its new and old facilities.
6. Copies of the report entitled *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples* are available from the Canadian Museums Association in Ottawa.

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