Curators, Collections, and Inuit Communities

Case Studies from the Arctic

Bernadette Driscoll Engelstad [1]

The past thirty years have witnessed a dramatic transformation in the museum world as Indigenous communities and museum curators have begun to work in a more collaborative manner on the ethnographic collections brought together by explorers, traders, missionaries, and ethnographers during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This transformative period is the product of a confluence of factors, including improved means of transportation and communication; cultural, educational and political developments in northern and southern communities; initiatives undertaken by curators, researchers, and cultural institutions, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous; and current technological innovations which have enabled a more closely integrated approach to collection research, allowing museum collections to be shared with a much wider audience, particularly in northern communities. This paper highlights several exhibitions and collaborative efforts which serve as markers in this transformative period.

The late 1970s: A Personal Reflection

As a graduate student researching Inuit caribou fur clothing, I studied ethnographic reports, catalogue documentation, and Inuit fur clothing in four North American museum collections (Driscoll 1983). Despite several months spent in the cold storage rooms of the National Museum of Man in Ottawa (now the Canadian Museum of Civilisation) and the attic of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, I knew I had much more to learn; so with the support of my advisor, George Swinton, I traveled to two Inuit communities, Igloolik and Arviat (Eskimo Point), in the Canadian Arctic. Only then, while in conversation with Inuit seamstresses or participating in a workshop preparing caribou furs, or photographing a young girl "dancing on sealskins" to soften the hides for her grandmother to sew, did I come to appreciate the breadth of community knowledge - and the depth of individual knowledge - invested in Inuit clothing production.

As I joined seamstresses on the cold linoleum floor of the elementary school in Arviat, the women softened dried caribou furs by hydrating, scraping, and chewing the hide. By scraping and drying the thick back muscle of the caribou, women transformed the animal muscle into strong, water-resistant sinew used

1 Bernadette Driscoll Engelstad is an independent curator (bengelstad@aol.com)

Elders (left to right) Margaret Tangik Egotak, Mary Okheena, Ruth Nigionak, and Elsie Nilgak study archival photographs for research project, Ulukhaktok. (Photo: BDEngelstad.)

for thread (*ivalu*). During interviews in their homes, seamstresses cut out clothing patterns, describing the tailoring of men's, women's, and children's clothing, as well as variations in regional design features, such as the shape of the hood, the design of the front flap (*kiniq*) and back tail (*akuq*) of women's parkas. By working directly with seamstresses, and taking part in the social life of the community, I began to appreciate the *living art* of Inuit clothing design. I came to recognize, too, the intimate connection that links Inuit women and their skill as seamstresses with a profound sense of responsibility in creating warm clothing for loved ones, and their pride in creating not only functional, but aesthetically beautiful, articles of clothing.

Looking back, I now understand how this experience bridged the divide between my knowledge of Inuit clothing, acquired indirectly through studying ethnographic reports and museum collections, and the direct knowledge and cultural practice of Inuit women producing clothing in their home communities. Although this gap between institutional and community knowledge existed as an accepted practice within the museum world, initiatives from individual curators, museums, and Inuit cultural leaders began to close that gap, reframing museum practice and restoring to ethnographic collections a more holistic sense of social history and cultural identity. These initiatives have laid the groundwork for restoring to Inuit communities a fuller knowledge of the ancestral legacy held in distant museum collections.

With improved access to transportation and communication across the North as well as technological advances in digital imaging and increased use of the Internet in schools and communities, museum curators today are continuing to reach out to northern communities, actively embracing the spirit of cultural repatriation. By organizing exhibits to travel to northern communities and hosting community researchers to study ethnographic collections, historical museum collections are becoming more readily accessible to their communities of origin; and by developing local museums, cultural heritage programs, and training youth in oral history techniques and video production, Inuit communities are laying a stronger claim to recording and preserving their own cultural history.

The heightened collaboration between Canadian museums and First Nations in the wake of *The Spirit Sings* exhibition (1988, see Cooper 2008:20-28), as well as the philosophical foundation and *modus operandi* of the Smithsonian Institution's Arctic Studies Center (established in 1988) and the National Museum of the American Indian (opened in 2004), provide compelling models of institutional change, redefining the educational role of museums by directly linking communities and museum collections. In effect, a series of key initiatives involving arctic collections over the past thirty years serves to demonstrate the rich potential for developing closer relationships between museum collections and Indigenous communities.

Linking Communities and Collections: A Recent History

The acquisition of Inuit artifacts by *qallunaat* (Western) collectors may be viewed in three major historical periods: exploration; ethnographic fieldwork; and museum collections. In the search for the Northwest Passage, explorers acquired Inuit objects for personal use or as souvenirs of their encounters with local populations. As European and American whalers, traders, and missionaries worked more closely among Inuit, they tended to collect more extensively. These artifacts, often donated to museums by the collector or family descendants, comprise significant collections from areas influenced by, or in some cases isolated from, sustained Western contact. From the late 1880s through the 1920s, scientifically trained ethnographers, including Edward Nelson, Franz Boas, Vilhaljmur Stefansson, Diamond Jenness, Knud Rasmussen, and Kaj Birket-Smith, carried out extensive fieldwork among regional groups of Inuit across the Canadian Arctic and Alaska. The ethnographic collections they acquired, initially described and illustrated in scientific publications, comprise the arctic holdings of several prominent museums from Washington to New York, Ottawa, Toronto, London, and Copenhagen. Throughout the 20th century, artifacts from these collections have been exhibited in these museums for the almost exclusive benefit of metropolitan audiences.

Despite the exhibition of selected artifacts, the bulk of arctic collections lay dormant in museum storerooms throughout much of the 20th century. For example, the remarkable collection of Inupiat tools, hunting equipment, clothing, and dance regalia brought together by Edward Nelson in the 1880s at the request of the Smithsonian Institution was presented as a comprehensive exhibit only in 1982. Entitled *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*, the exhibit, organized by Curators William Fitzhugh and Susan Kaplan, opened in Washington, D.C. and was shown in major museums in Alaska as well as across North America. The *Inua* catalogue remains a significant record of the Nelson collection and its exhibition (Fitzhugh and Kaplan 1982). In addition, a smaller mini-*Inua* exhibit traveled to Native communities throughout Alaska (as well as in Canada and Greenland), providing northern viewers the first opportunity to see these artifacts made by Inupiat ancestors a century before (Fitzhugh and Kaplan, 1983).

In the wake of *Inua*'s public success, the Smithsonian Institution opened negotiations with several museums in North America and the then-Soviet Union to organize a boldly ambitious project, *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska* (Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988). Bringing together artifacts from American, Canadian, and Soviet institutions, the exhibit highlighted the cultural production of Indigenous societies across Alaska and northeastern Siberia, discussing regional and pan-Arctic crosscurrents of social, cultural, economic and linguistic influences. Again, a smaller exhibition of these artifacts traveled to northern communities throughout Alaska (Chaussonnet 1995). In 2004, *Crossroads of Continents* was also developed as a web-based exhibit, preserving its legacy for yet another generation of viewers (www.mnh.si.edu/arctic/features/croads).

In 1988, the Smithsonian Institution created the Arctic Studies Center (ASC), supporting one of the most active programs of archaeological and ethnographic research in the circumpolar regions. In an effort to make Smithsonian resources more accessible to Native communities in Alaska, and to facilitate closer working relationships with Native researchers, the ASC established a regional office in Alaska at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art in 1993. In addition to developing exhibits, supporting collection research, directing field studies, and maintaining an active web presence (www.mnh.si.edu/arctic/html/alaska), the ASC in Anchorage sponsors a community outreach program working with Native Elders in developing an oral history archive. The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian has also begun to highlight its arctic collection through exhibition, publication, web-based programming, and by promoting academic and community research of the collection (Ganteaume 2010).

Maintaining a close working relationship with Inuit communities across the Canadian Arctic, museum curators in southern Canada have long sought opportunities to link museum collections with northern communities. With the

hiring of Jean Blodgett, the first Curator of Inuit Art in Canada, the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG) began to work more closely with Inuit artists and community art cooperatives in in presenting exhibitions and building its collection of Inuit art; assuming the curator's position in late 1979, I continued to work closely with Inuit artists and communities. In conjunction with the 1980 exhibit, *The Inuit Amautik: I like my hood to be full*, exploring the theme of maternity in the design of the *amautik* (woman's parka) and in contemporary Inuit art, seamstresses Annie Napayok and Charlotte St. John led two sewing workshops in which participants constructed traditional and contemporary styles of the amautik (Driscoll 1980). In 1987 the seamstresses reviewed historical collections of Inuit fur clothing, travelling to museums in Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal. At a meeting of Pauktutiit: the Inuit Women's Association at Taloyoak (formerly Spence Bay), Annie Napayok shared photographs of fur clothing from the museum collections with fellow delegates who at the time were unaware that such extensive holdings of Inuit caribou fur clothing existed in Canadian museums (personal communication, 1988).

In addition to hosting artists for exhibit openings and workshops, the WAG began an active program of curatorial travel to interview artists in their home communities (Driscoll 1980, 1981, 1982a, 1982b,1985; Blodgett and Bouchard 1986). In conjunction with the exhibit, *Inuit Myths, Legends, and Songs,* the Gallery collaborated with the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) in Baker Lake (Qamanittuaq) to create a series of five programs of artists' interviews for northern broadcast. When the WAG hosted the Smithsonian exhibit, *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*, Elder Joe Curley guided the IBC camera crew through the exhibit, describing the tools, hunting equipment, and domestic artifacts from Alaska, and relating them to objects used by Inuit in the Canadian Arctic. The filming was conducted entirely in *inuktitut.* When asked how it was going, IBC Director William Noah quietly replied, "I think this is the best program we've ever done" (personal communication, 1984). The Winnipeg Art Gallery continues to collaborate with Inuit artists and northern art cooperatives with an active exhibit and publication program devoted to contemporary Inuit art under the direction of Curator Darlene Wight.

In 1994 the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) organized a major exhibition, *Threads of the Land,* drawing from the Museum's extensive collections of Inuit, Dene, and Nlaka'pamux clothing. In preparing the exhibition of Inuit clothing, Curator Judy Hall invited two teams of seamstresses to study the Museum's Inuit clothing collection. Elder Elsie Nilgak, Alice Omingmak, and Julia Ogina from the community of Ulukhaktok (Holman), spent a week reviewing the clothing collection from the Copper Inuit region acquired by the Canadian Arctic Expedition (CAE) more than 75 years earlier. Videotapes of their research sessions, prepared by the CMC staff, were forwarded to the Copper Inuit communities of Uluhaktok, Kugluktuk, and Cambridge Bay, extending the benefit of the visit to local seamstresses, students, and commu-

Elsie Nilgak, Alice Omingmak of Ulukhaktok examine Inuit clothing collection with Judy Hall, curator, and Julia Ogina at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, November 1994. (Photo: BDEngelstad.)

nity residents (Hall et al. 1994; Speak and McCarthy 2000; Driscoll-Engelstad 2005). A selection of museum artifacts acquired by the CAE in the early 20th century was placed on exhibit in Cambridge Bay (Judy Hall, personal communication, October 2008).

Despite the increase in museum exhibitions and catalogues dedicated to Inuit ethnographic material, a comprehensive inventory of Inuit ethnographic collections in museums does not yet exist. Few institutions have published inventories of their arctic holdings, leaving researchers and community scholars to depend on personal communication and research visits to ascertain the extent of a museum's collection. For example, while reviewing the arctic collection of the Berlin Ethnological Museum in 1994, anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan was surprised to find the museum staff unpacking the extraordinary Yup'ik artifact collection acquired by the Norwegian adventurer Johan Adrian Jacobsen in 1882-83. Returned to the museum after its removal from Berlin in the Second World War, the collection was virtually unknown to Yup'ik communities. In collaboration with Yup'ik educator and cultural historian, Marie Meade, Fienup-Riordan organized a delegation of Elders to visit the collection in 1997. The results of the Yup'ik Elders' study are documented in two comprehensive publications (Fienup-Riordan 2005; Meade and Fienup-Riordan 2005).

After contacting several museums, Bernadette Miqqusaaq Dean[2] and Rhoda Karetak eventually located the exquisite beaded parka belonging to their ancestor Nivisanaaq at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Known by the whalers' nickname Shoofly, Nivisanaaq was a prominent figure in the Inuit community gathered at the American whaling station at Cape Fullerton on the west coast of Hudson Bay and appears in numerous photographs of the period taken by Captain George Comer, A.P. Low, and the independent photographer, Geraldine Moodie (Burant 1998:76-87; Calabretta 1984, 2008a, b; Dean 2010:259; Driscoll 1984:40-47; Eber 1989:114-123; Ross 1984; White 1998a, 1998b:88-97; www.mysticseaport.org). In the summer of 1999 Dean and Karetak traveled to New York to examine Nivisanaaq's parka first-hand; in the course of their study, they also discovered related clothing articles belonging to Nivisanaaq in the museum storage. Following their visit to New York, Bernadette Dean organized an exploratory tour for a group of Inuit Elders from Nunavut to study Inuit museum collections in Toronto, Ottawa, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Their journey was recorded by Isuma Productions of Igloolik, under the direction of noted filmmaker, Zacharias Kunuk. The film production, entitled *Piqutingit: What Belongs to Inuit* (2006), concludes with the group meeting with Inuit youth in Ottawa. Through powerful personal statements, the Elders describe the emotional impact of their journey and their renewed respect for the strength, fortitude, and skill of their ancestors. At the 15th Inuit Studies Conference at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, Ashley Paniyuk Dean, a student (now teacher) who accompanied the Elders group, shared photographs of artifacts uncovered during their tour, again recounting the powerful impact of the project on the participants.

Linking Communities and Collections: Future Prospects

Certainly no modern technological development offers a greater potential for linking Inuit communities and museum collections than the Internet. By joining institutional and community knowledge with the technical resources of web-designers, the Internet can provide comprehensive access to museum exhibitions, collections, photographic archives, and catalogue documentation. As institutions increase their use of the web to publicize collections and extend the reach of exhibitions, Inuit communities are becoming more fully aware of

2 Bernadette Miqqusaaq Dean contributed to both the discussions and the conference. Two of her pieces were particularly relevant to the meetings (1) "Somebody's Daughter": This presentation provided a visual overview of a collaborative workshop for young Inuit women and elders held at a camp outside the community of Rankin Inlet, Nunavut. The annual workshop focuses on sealskin sewing techniques and clothing production; and (2) "Inuit Piqutingit: What Belongs to Inuit": A documentary film (2006, 49min 24sec) directed by Zacharias Kunuk and Bernadette Dean; produced by Isuma Productions, Igloolik, Nunavut. The film features Inuit elders on a research visit through five major museums in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Toronto, and Ottawa to study historic Inuit ethnographic collections.

the rich cultural heritage preserved within these institutions. In addition to providing digital images and archival documentation of museum collections, web-based programs can extend the audience, scope and time-frame of exhibitions by preserving the exhibit in cyberspace beyond its physical presence in a museum gallery, as well as by providing supplemental exhibit programs for use in schools and communities.

In recent years, an increasing number of museums with arctic collections have enabled viewers to access their collections and exhibitions via the Internet. Marking the centennial anniversary of Robert Peary's 1908-09 expedition to the North Pole, viewers on the website of the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum at Bowdoin College were able to follow the expedition's daily progress, reading the online journal with excerpts from diaries kept by expedition members (www.bowdoin.edu/arctic-museum). The Mystic Seaport Museum in Mystic, Connecticut, has organized a comprehensive online exhibit of historical photographs taken by Captain George Comer during whaling expeditions to the west coast of Hudson Bay (www.mysticseaport.org). The program complemented the Museum's in-house exhibit of Inuit artifacts and whaling history, entitled *Frozen In: Captain Comer and the Hudson Bay Inuit*, which was on view until October 2009. The New Bedford Whaling Museum also offers access to its photographic archives of Alaskan images through its website (www.whalingmuseum.org/newbedphoto).

In addition to web-based exhibits, digital imaging of ethnographic collections, and archival documentation, several prospective areas of collaboration between institutions, curators and communities remain to be more fully developed in the coming years. First, ethnographic artifacts provide a significant resource for community-based interviews with Elders; recording these interviews will ensure the preservation of knowledge within the community. Second, many museum collections contain exceptional and even unique or atypical artifacts long removed from their community of origin. A comprehensive review of museum collections in conjunction with community cultural leaders would identify these artifacts and make known their existence within the larger community. Third, many museum collections contain artifacts that have been damaged over the years. A challenging, if somewhat controversial, area of collaboration between museum conservators and communities would be a program to repair, restore, and/or replicate these objects within the communities with the knowledge and skill of Inuit artisans and seamstresses. Such a program for the repair and replication of ethnographic material would provide skilled seamstresses and artisans with the opportunity to work directly with historical patterns, ensuring that traditional knowledge and production skills are maintained in the community and shared across generational lines. As illustrated in several instances, the presence of historical artifacts in their communities of origin has served to stimulate the production of lost or neglected patterns of clothing, tools, and

ceremonial objects by restoring the design templates removed from the community with the collection of the original artifact (Driscoll-Engelstad 2005; Fienup-Riordan 1996, 2005; Steffian 2006:39).

Conclusion

The history of geographical exploration and scientific fieldwork in the Arctic throughout the 19th and 20th centuries prompted many museums to acquire extensive collections of Inuit ethnographic material. With modern advances in transportation and communication technology, these museums now face an unparalleled opportunity to reconnect these artifact collections with their communities of origin. Through traveling exhibitions to northern communities, and research visits to museum collections, Inuit Elders and cultural leaders are beginning to restore the cultural knowledge of the community to museum collections. Likewise, the institutional knowledge contained in ethnographic reports and present in the museum's catalogue documentation is able to fill additional data. Linking community and institutional knowledge replenishes gaps of knowledge on both sides, restoring to the object a fuller sense of its cultural and historical context. Digital imaging, catalogue documentation, and web-based programming now enable museums to provide Inuit students, Elders, and community residents with greater access to the artifacts and archival records held in the museum's care. With the vision and will to dedicate sufficient resources to this effort, museums are embarking on a new era of collaboration with Inuit communities and cultural leaders, bridging the geographical divide that has long separated Inuit from the ancestral legacy held in museum storerooms. It is an era which will fulfill the promise of transformational change in museum practice and ensure community access to museum collections.

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