

# FOREWORD

## From Consultation to Collaboration

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The chapters that follow are testament to the growing commitment and passion of museum professionals in the twenty first century to share the collections in their care with the descendants of the people and communities from whom these collections originally came. This has not always been the case, as the histories of particular collections and relations with particular Indigenous communities make clear. Museum doors were largely shut to Indigenous people as recently as the 1970s, with a handful of notable exceptions (Driscoll, this volume). In 1989, I was allowed access to the Museum of the American Indian (now the National Museum of the American Indian) in New York. That same year two Yup'ik friends sought to visit the same collection and were denied because they lacked academic credentials.

Consultation with Native informants and community representatives by anthropologists and museologists has been taking place since the days of Franz Boas in the early 1900s. Native men and women were brought into collections to answer specific questions in preparation for museum exhibitions, and sometimes put on exhibit themselves. Consultation is still considered a valuable tool in many museum contexts, where Native co-workers share information but final decisions remain in museum hands.

The essential question explored by contributors to this volume is when does cooperation move beyond one group providing ideas and understandings to another to the co-conceptualization and co-commitments of true collaboration. In different ways each chapter confronts the range of practical, ethical, and political constraints that shape museum work today. True collaboration, as many note, is the joint shaping of representations. These deep collaborations offer powerful alternatives to more conventional research approaches (Oosten, Driscoll, and Buijs, this volume).

I am a cultural anthropologist who came to museum work late in life, and the changes I have seen since my first museum visit in 1989 are profound. Curiosity inspired that first trip. I had seen photographs of Yup'ik masks housed at the Museum of the American Indian, and I wanted to learn more. Back in Alaska, I shared these photographs with Yup'ik friends. Their response was transformative: they wanted these masks brought home for their young people to see. Repatriation was not the issue, as ownership of masks was not the goal. Rather,

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“visual repatriation” was what they sought - the opportunity to show and explain traditional objects to contemporary young people. Thus began work on the Yup’ik mask exhibition, *Agayuliyararput/Our Way of Making Prayer*, which opened in the Bering Sea community of Toksook Bay in January 1996.

I have described our exhibit-making process in detail elsewhere (Fienup-Riordan 2000:209-245). The important point here is that throughout the process we were fortunate to have a team of Yup’ik men and women who guided every aspect, from giving the exhibition its name to choosing which masks to display and how to organize them. Our exhibition grew from the Yup’ik desire to see these old things brought home. We found willing partners in the museum community - both in the United States and abroad - and together we mounted an exhibition that none of us could have created alone.

Prior to the opening of the mask exhibit, Yup’ik Elders worked with photographs of objects, but few entered museums to see the real thing. Since then, Yup’ik men and women have had unprecedented opportunities to visit museums and view collections. Like the mask exhibit itself, these visits were initiated by Yup’ik community members with the generous cooperation of the museums involved. Perhaps our most rewarding museum expedition was work at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin in September 1997. I had learned of their rich Yup’ik collection, including more than two thousand pieces gathered by Johan Adrian Jacobsen in 1882-83, on a research visit prior to the mask exhibit. Peter Bolz, the museum’s curator of North American collections, visited Alaska for the opening of the mask exhibit, and when we asked if a Yup’ik delegation could come to Berlin, he agreed. On arrival he warned us that some of his colleagues were concerned for the safety of the objects in their care as no group our size (six Yup’ik Elders and myself) had ever asked to work through an entire collection. Peter welcomed us nonetheless, and staff opened their doors to make our work possible. The Elders stayed three weeks and looked at all 2,000 pieces. During that stay the concerns of museum staff turned to appreciation as they witnessed the Elders’ excitement at seeing the remarkable things their ancestors had made and that, without the museum’s care, would be dust. Just before our departure, Elders expressed their profound gratitude for the opportunity the museum had given them. Our eldest group member, Wassilie Berlin, thanked Jacobsen for undergoing harsh surroundings to collect these objects as well as the museum for keeping them safe, so that they would be there for his children and all those who came after them.

Our trip to Berlin was expensive, costing over \$20,000, and the logistics not for the faint of heart - especially getting U.S. passports for Elders with multiple names and dates of birth. The results, however, were worth all our time and effort. Working closely with Yup’ik language expert Marie Meade, we later published two books combining photographs of what Jacobsen had collected and the knowledge Elders shared: *Yup’ik Elders at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: Fieldwork Turned on Its Head* (Fienup-Riordan 2005) and *Ciuliamta Akluit/*

*Things of Our Ancestors* (Meade and Fienup-Riordan 2005). We dubbed the first, lavishly illustrated, “visual repatriation,” as it brought home to Alaskans images, stories, and information surrounding Jacobsen’s remarkable legacy.

The present volume describes equally inspiring collaborations, some dubbed “virtual repatriation” and “digital repatriation”. Driscoll (this volume) is certainly correct that the Internet offers unparalleled potential for linking communities with museum collections, allowing quick and easy access worldwide. This process is not uncomplicated, as such easy access can work against Indigenous models of circulation. To date the focus has been on the act of giving back, with less attention paid to what happens once these digital objects are returned (Bruchac 2010). How communities put these new cultural objects to use remains to be seen.

*Agayuliyararput* opened doors, and those who entered found an unimagined array of artifacts, which most had viewed only briefly when they were young. All were deeply moved by what they saw. Elders also recognized the potential power of museum collections to communicate renewed pride and self-respect to a generation of young people woefully ignorant of the skills their ancestors used to survive. In 2003 the Calista Elders Council (the major heritage organization in southwest Alaska) began working with the Anchorage Museum on another major Yup’ik exhibition, *Yuungnaqpiallerput/The Way We Genuinely Live: Masterworks of Yup’ik Science and Survival*. Like *Agayuliyararput*, our exhibit-making process was highly collaborative, involving a 12-member Yup’ik steering committee, museum professionals, and anthropologists. We also worked with the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry to create a dozen interactives designed to give visitors an opportunity to experience firsthand the natural materials and techniques Elders described. Although team members’ backgrounds and viewpoints varied widely, all came to the table with a common purpose - to enable Yup’ik community members to share their heritage in new and exciting ways.

I am proud to have been part of this diverse team, and in the exhibition catalogue I again described our exhibit-making process (Fienup-Riordan 2007:3-6). Yet I hesitate to admonish museum professionals, “This is the way it should be done.” We were able to accomplish what we did because of the decades of experience Yup’ik community members and I had working together in museums. It is no exaggeration to say that *Yuungnaqpiallerput* was twenty years in the making, beginning with that first trip to the Museum of the American Indian in 1989. How, then, should younger curators move forward to create the bonds of friendship and trust on which successful collaborations depend? The answer, I think, is captured in many of the working relationships described in the following pages, where best efforts are made to both reach out and keep listening.

As many also note, power relations still favor museums. While Yup’ik community members requested objects to include in *Yuungnaqpiallerput*, the conservators working in many lending institutions were the ones who ultimately

determined what the public could see. Over half the objects we originally requested were denied, as the dominant view in most museums continues to place primary value on the material well-being of objects and their preservation for future generations.

Over the last two decades, as the desire of Native people to view museum collections has grown, conservation standards have shrunk what some museums are willing to loan, especially as we learn more about how climate and travel adversely affect these collections. Museums today differ widely in their response to this paradox. Among the most thoughtful I have encountered was that of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. The steering committee for *Yuungnaqpiallerput* requested a drum in the museum's collection to open their exhibit. The drum had been collected on Nelson Island in the early 1900s, and at our first steering committee meeting, Elder Paul John told a long story about the drum's maker. Frank Andrew concluded, "The reverberation of the drum kept everyone together."

We requested the loan of the drum, and the Peabody Essex Museum at first agreed. On consideration, their conservators deemed it too fragile to travel. I spoke at length to their curator about how much that particular drum meant to Yup'ik community members. After long thought the museum sent us a letter, which they wanted our Elders and steering committee members to read and sign. The museum said that they viewed themselves not as the drum's owners but as its caretakers. They told us that the drum might be damaged if it made such a long trip but that they were willing to loan it for the Anchorage venue if we wanted it sent home. Steering committee members read and signed the letter, and in 2008 the drum safely traveled to Anchorage for all to see.

Our experience with the Peabody Essex Museum highlights an important theme running throughout this volume. **From the Yup'ik point of view (and many Indigenous peoples worldwide) objects are not primarily seen as material remnants of ancestral lives, but as persons themselves, possessing awareness and capable of responding to human action, with whom contemporary Native people feel kinship. For Yup'ik people these objects are like Elders, and their role is to teach. How can they carry out this mentoring role if they remain hidden from view?**

There is a flip side of the positive ownership of our exhibit by Yup'ik community members. Our exhibit originated in the Yup'ik desire to bring old things home for their younger generation to see. Had we not done the exhibit the way we did, had the Yup'ik community not been involved from the beginning, the results of all our planning might not have been simply neutral, they could have been hurtful. If, as non-Native researchers, we work without community involvement, we take away authorship, undercut ownership. Collaboration is much more than a matter of respect. An outsider's exhibition, however accurate, runs the risk of putting Native people at arm's length from the objects of their past.

Finally, Laura Peers (this volume) speaks of the need for museums to secure funding before going to source communities. I would turn this on its head and encourage source communities to seek the funding or, better yet, work in partnership with museums to secure support. Peers is correct that museums must wait for as well as respond to community requests. I have no doubt these requests will be made. If the period between 1990 and 2010 has been a turning point in relations between museums and source communities, then I would predict that the best is yet to come. The transformation of museum practice into research with rather than research about Native peoples - as embodied in this volume - holds the potential to reform museum landscapes in unprecedented ways.

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