
INTERPRETING HISTORY

Case Study: Portland Art Museum: *Object Stories*: Connecting Collections with Communities

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In 1989, the Portland Art Museum brought together a group of about twenty people to discuss the museum's Rasmussen Collection of Northwest Coast Native American Art. Gathering in the museum's basement, the group included museum staff, art experts, anthropologist and historian James Clifford, and a group of Tlingit elders accompanied by translators. Objects from the collection were brought out one by one, presented to the elders for comment with the expectation that they would tell museum staff about how each object was used or by whom they were made. Instead, as Clifford recounts, "the objects in the Rasmussen Collection, focus for the consultation, were left—or so it seemed to me—at the margin. For long periods no one paid any attention to them. Stories and songs took center stage"¹⁷

Rather than providing historical details and context that could be easily converted into research files or didactic labels, the session brought forth voices, songs, dances, ongoing stories, and lived experiences that challenged the museum with alternative perspectives on these objects, as well as a potential way of decentering the museum's authorial voice. Instead of envisioning ways to bring these voices and stories into dialogue with the collection, the museum bid the group goodbye and archived the audio and video footage of the consultation. Little, if any, of the content acquired was used to inform catalogue entries or interpretive labels, primarily because no one on staff quite understood what they had witnessed.

Twenty-five years after these "conversations in the basement," the Portland Art Museum is actively working to re-address many of the issues around interpreting its Native American collection, including the hire of a Native curator whose research focus is the substantive integration of diverse voices and community perspectives into curatorial and educational practice.¹⁸ This case study will focus on two recent projects piloted within the museum's *Object Stories* initiative, which is a partnership with the Native American Youth Association (NAYA) Family Center to connect Native youth voices with the collection, and an artist-led project that has gathered stories from Yup'ik tribe members in Bethel, Alaska.

The Collection

The Portland Art Museum stewards more than fifty-two thousand works of art, nearly five thousand of which comprise the Native American collection. With objects dating from pre-European contact to the present, the collection features important works from nearly every tribal group in North America, with especially strong representation from tribes in the Northwest coastal region and the Columbia Plateau. Anchored by the world-renowned Axel Rasmussen Collection of Northwest Coast Native American Art and the encyclopedic Elizabeth Cole Butler Collection, the Museum's Native American art collection is the single-most visited aspect of the museum's permanent collection—and the

most popular destination for K–12 students visiting the museum from schools in Oregon and Washington.

Established in 1948, the Native American collection has been on continuous view since 1949, when the Portland Art Museum was the first museum to dedicate permanent gallery space to the exhibition of Native American objects as works of art rather than as anthropological artifacts. In addition to these major collections of historic Native American art, the museum has acquired works by contemporary Native American artists including Rick Bartow, Lillian Pitt, James Lavadour, Marvin Oliver, Gail Tremblay, Marcus Amerman, and Marie Watt. These works reveal the vitality and continuance of Native culture and suggest new bridges for research between scholars and contemporary Native artists.

Object Stories

Framed by larger challenges facing museums in the twenty-first century, the Portland Art Museum has been involved in a broader process of rethinking how it relates to its public audience and exploring strategies to be more relevant to its community. In doing so, museum staff have uncovered that both the museum and the public need catalysts for active participation, personal reflection, and meaningful ways to discover and rediscover works of art in the collection. It was out of this ongoing thinking that the *Object Stories* project was born.

Since its inception, the *Object Stories* concept has evolved into a comprehensive educational platform for engaging audiences, forging collaborations, and bringing community voices into the process of interpreting the collection. By capturing, honoring, and sharing participants' stories, the *Object Stories* project aims to demystify the museum, making it more accessible, welcoming, and meaningful to a greater diversity of communities while continuing to highlight the inherent relationship between people and things. This initiative also allows the museum to explore how new media and other technological innovations can contribute to more genuinely inclusive engagement with audiences and communities.

Launched in March 2011, *Object Stories* invites visitors to share stories about an object, whether personally owned or part of the museum's collection. Comprised of a recording booth, website, and interactive gallery space, *Object Stories* collects oral and written testimonies and provides arts education opportunities to diverse communities through targeted outreach and partnerships. Current visitors to the museum's *Object Stories* gallery encounter a central table with two large interactive touch screens that enable them to browse, search, and listen to more than one thousand collected stories about personal objects and artworks from the collection. On the surrounding walls, guests find a rotating selection of museum objects that have been the subject of recent stories, often related to a larger theme or special exhibition. Elizabeth Wood and Kiersten Latham describe *Object Stories* in their recent book *The Objects of Experience: Transforming Visitor-Object Encounters in Museums*:

The recorded stories reinforce the personal experience that people have with objects. In the same way that personal objects evoke powerful feelings and experiences—clearly demonstrated through the stories the museum's visitor have shared—the stories about museum objects hold a high level of personal connection.¹⁹

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Figure 6.1. Object Stories gallery on the Lower Level of the Portland Art Museum. Photo by Cody Maxwell

By the end of 2011, the Portland Art Museum had extended *Object Stories* into an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)-funded three-year partnership with area middle schools that involved in-depth teacher professional development, artist residencies, and multiple visits to the museum that culminated in students' recording their own personal "object stories." More recently, the museum has focused on recording personal stories related to objects from the museum's collection, creating an alternative to the museum's institutional voice by adding the voices of community members to in-gallery interpretation. During 2013, *Object Stories* projects brought the Portland Art Museum into an international partnership with the Museo Nacional de San Carlos in Mexico City; a more locally focused partnership with the NAYA Family Center; and an artist-led project that has gathered stories from Yup'ik tribe members in Bethel, Alaska. These latter two projects will be described in detail.

The internal process of developing and implementing *Object Stories* has encouraged meaningful and sustained collaboration between education and curatorial departments, the growth of new partnerships with community organizations, and the confidence to experiment with a formative approach to programming that aims to be inclusive of the voices, stories, memories, and experiences of the museum's audience and community. Scholars have questioned how a museum's voice might be changed from monovocal (single voice, often an institutional "voice from nowhere") to a more polyvocal (many voices, without much sense of hierarchy).²⁰

In this scenario, museums are encouraged to give up some of their control and their authorial voice to allow the public or specific communities to speak for themselves and be heard in a public space (Mason et al., 2013, 164).

The *Object Stories* projects discussed in this case study have begun to bring museum staff and community members into new forms of collaboration as we work together to explore ways to bring polyvocality and shared authority into museum practice.

The Community

Portland has the ninth largest Native American population in the United States, with nearly sixty thousand single-race or multiracial Native Americans living in the Portland Metro area. Portland's Multnomah County rests on traditional village sites of the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, bands of Chinook, Tualatin Kalapuya, Molalla, and many other tribes who made their homes along the Columbia River, and the current Native American population includes descendents from approximately four hundred tribes. This diverse and growing community, however, is largely underserved and faces deep economic and educational challenges. Native people in the Portland metropolitan area count disproportionately among the urban poor, experiencing the highest rates of homelessness, poverty, and unemployment of all ethnic groups. Native Americans constitute 24 percent of all children in foster care in Multnomah County, Oregon; only 37 percent of Native American high school students living in Portland graduate on time; and among those graduating, only 54 percent enter higher education.²¹

Native American service organizations address these inequalities and create a space for Native Americans to reconnect with each other, their ceremonies, and their cultures, yet the Native American community remains largely disconnected from the museums that house many of their cultural artifacts. Research has shown that engagement with cultural objects affirms Native American youth's sense of identity, which has been linked to better performance in school and a broad range of other personal positive effects. Framed by these larger concerns, the Portland Art Museum has begun to rethink how it can actively emphasize a multiplicity of perspectives and forge connections with the contemporary experiences, contexts, and practices of Native artists and their communities.

Connecting Collections with Communities

Listening to the Ancestors

Beginning in the fall of 2013, the Portland Art Museum launched a partnership with the NAYA Family Center's Early College Academy and worked with the museum's existing community-based interpretive platform of *Object Stories* to bring these Native voices into the galleries. Each participating student was asked to choose an object from the museum's Native American collection that resonated with them in some meaningful way, conduct research on the work, and then record their personal narratives about that artwork. NAYA students visited the museum on multiple occasions during the project, not only spending time in the galleries but also getting to know curatorial and education staff and learning



Figure 6.2. NAYA Early College Academy students studying objects from the Portland Art Museum’s Native American collection. Photo by Deana Dartt

more about the inner working of a public art museum. During one visit, the students were able to closely study their selected objects, many of which had not been on view in the museum’s galleries.

After more than two months of work between the museum and the NAYA students, the stories created for this project were exhibited along with the students’ selected artworks in the *Object Stories* gallery located in a prominent location in the museum’s lower level. Each of the student’s stories can also be accessed through the project’s website at www.objectstories.org (by entering “NAYA” in the Search field), allowing these stories to reach wider audiences through a digital format. Each story shares information about the object from the collection and makes meaningful personal connections to the storyteller’s life. The story excerpt here, relating to a Beaded Bag (ca. 1900) created by an unknown

Pitt River artist, shows the types of connections that participating students were able to make through this process of shared learning with the museum:

Cherokee, my tribe, also has similar bags. They are used for the same things. This relation warms my heart because it makes me feel closer to my ancestors. The bag also reminds me of my hairpiece through the color patterns and designs. My mom got this for me at a pow-wow. She is also the main reason I know about my heritage. I now know more about myself and where I come from. My mom is my hero. Working on this project just makes me so proud to be native, and I appreciate how passionate natives are about their culture and what they believe in.

In addition to the student stories, three Oregon native mentors—including NAYA Cultural Arts Instructors and an elder from the Native community—recorded stories connected to objects in the collection as part of this project. The museum installed these stories directly into the Native American collection galleries, allowing visitors to use a new iPad listening station to access these stories adjacent to where the objects were on view. This represented the first instance when the museum brought the *Object Stories* project into its permanent collection galleries as a way to actively work with the Native community to co-create knowledge and understanding about these objects, connect contemporary voices and lived experiences with these objects, and present these stories in a public way for visitors to engage with them as part of their museum experience. The experiences and stories that are part of this project work toward offering alternative perspectives on works of Native American art in the collection, provide an avenue for understanding historic Native art in the context of the modern urban, Indian experience, and begin to incorporate stronger native voice in interpretive efforts.²²

Yup'ik Stories

Early in 2013, education and curatorial staff from the Portland Art Museum met with Alaskan artist and photographer Katie Basile to explore the possibility of recording “object stories” with Yup'ik community members during one of her trips to Bethel, Alaska. Originally from Southwest Alaska, Basile was involved in several media arts and storytelling projects with the rural community in and around Bethel. At the same time, the museum was prototyping a new iPad app that would allow *Object Stories* content to be recorded outside of the museum, using the iPad device to capture audio and photographs through a new mobile platform. For her first trip to Alaska as part of this project, Basile used one of the museum's iPads to record a series of personal object stories from Yup'ik tribal elders, artists, and youth. During a return visit to Bethel, Basile brought images of Yup'ik masks and dance wands from the Portland Art Museum's collection to gather connected stories from Yup'ik elders and artists. The story excerpt is from Alaska Native mask artist Drew Michael, telling a story connecting his own artistic process to the Yup'ik masks in the museum's collection:

[W]hen I look at masks, I try to understand somebody else's perspective. When I have masks that I'm creating, I typically am telling a story from my place and my environment and my time. . . . To me, the most beautiful thing is looking at a mask and seeing how the story is portrayed and expressed using the materials that are from your environment. With my work, I'm using materials that are around me, and that sometimes includes

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Figure 6.3. Screen shot from Object Story told by Alaska Native artist Drew Michael. Photo by Katie Basile.

going to the store [laughs]—it doesn't mean that I have to go to the beach or the woods to find the material.

As part of the larger initiative to generate knowledge and interpretive resources with the Native community in the public spaces of the museum, these Yup'ik stories have been exhibited in the Arctic Native American Art gallery through an additional iPad listening station adjacent to their related objects. Bringing together personal object stories and collection-based stories, the museum is offering visitors a layered and nuanced learning experience as the Yup'ik tribe members share their personal and cultural perspectives. Furthermore, through this prototype *Object Stories* project with Basile, the museum has begun to build a new model for interpretation that brings Native artists into the core of planning, collaborating, creating, and editing content within our Native American Art collection, an interpretive model the Portland Art Museum will be building and extending in the upcoming years with its collection and exhibitions.

Taking the notion of collaboration and consultation a step further than past efforts, Basile as a community-based researcher, and the use of the iPad app within the community allowed for organic, first-person narratives to emerge about objects currently held in the museum without the need to involve the museum—its staff and perceived authority—in the conversation. The community in Bethel was made aware of the Portland Art Museum holdings, shown the collection online, and alerted young artists such as Drew Michael (Yup'ik) of the accessibility of the museum's Alaska Native collection for research.

The content developed during the pilot Yup'ik storytelling project has proven so meaningful that the Museum plans to expand the model to targeted communities, beginning locally—with Oregon tribal groups—using the connections and expertise of the

Native artists to record community members' stories as part of the *Object Stories* initiative. First-person narratives by origin community members will then be available to museum visitors through iPads, online collections, and other digital strategies in addition to the more conventional interpretation in the galleries.

In addition to the decentralization of authority, the *Object Stories* platform allows for an emphasis on individual Native voices, unsettling notions of “community voice,” which stereotypes Native people and assumes a “Native” way of being, thinking, and art-making process and philosophy. In this model, individual artists—rural, urban, young, and old—are able to express what is important to him or her from within—but not necessarily defined by—their tribal history and culture.

Steps Forward

As we move forward, we have identified some limits to our work at the Portland Art Museum and where we need to ground ourselves before we continue. We realize the need to talk to visitors and Native community members to explore responses to these stories and notions of “alternative” voices in the galleries. We learned that in an effort to collect and share meaningful Native community stories, we will need to have Native participants serve as editors for the stories themselves. During editing of both the NAYA and Yup'ik stories, we used internal education staff and realize the shortcoming of this approach. We also realized that confining the NAYA youth to an object search that only included Native American art was also limiting. It was only after they had chosen their objects that it occurred to us how interesting it would have been to offer up the entire collection for their perusal.

In 1989—pre-Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act—the Portland Art Museum was bold and progressive, if only somewhat ethnocentric, to secure National Endowment for the Humanities funding to bring Tlingit tribal members to the museum to help the institution tell a more meaningful story of the ancestral objects as it redesigned the Native American galleries. Although motives were pure and collaboration was intended, the museum stood between the objects and the stories. The museum attempted to serve as the bridge for the visitors between the ancestral object and the descendent storyteller. However, the stories and objects out of context required much more interpretation than time allowed, so the tapes sat idle with museum staff clueless about any connection to the collection the stories were intended to enliven. Museums have continued to mediate the connection between story and object. We hope to step out of the way.

Object Stories allows people to bring story back to objects disembodied from their cultures and their people. We hope that through this work we can reunite the ancestors with (while introducing museum visitors to) the energy, language, and living traditions of Native people. Best practices, such as the ones highlighted in this case study and volume, have the power to transform museums from “sites where knowledge is transmitted to passive audiences to potential forums or contact zones where new voices and visibilities are raised and new knowledge(s) actively constructed.”²³ In many ways, the *Object Stories* platform challenges the museum, its audiences, and its communities to consider the complex types of exchange and dialogue that might occur with its collections beyond the traditional experience of passive, didactic looking. This platform is enabling us to facilitate, and then share, the dialogue between the maker and the viewer and through a process of

shared authority and unmediated connection may transform the way museums see, use, and present Native American art.</casestudy>

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Notes

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