

Held in Glass: Indigenous North America and the Colonial Afterlife
of the Pitt Rivers Museum from 1901 to the Present

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Abstract

For over a hundred years the Oxford University Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) stood as a textbook example of colonialism. Now, the PRM claims that it is evolving from the colonial mindset of the 19th century towards a forward-thinking institution “where stories are shared by many voices” and that “want[s] to inspire empathy and deepen cross-cultural understanding.”¹ Does the way Indigenous North American objects are currently displayed in the PRM align with its mission statement? How has the presentation of Indigenous North American objects in the PRM changed over time to reflect this? What conscious and subconscious messages do object labels and display cases communicate to visitors today, in comparison to what they have communicated in the past? While answering these questions, this dissertation examines the evolution of the Indigenous North American cases in the Pitt Rivers and analyses how these objects have been curated and presented to the public over the museum's history.

1 “Home” Page of Pitt Rivers Museum, n.d.

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List of Abbreviations

PRM - Pitt Rivers Museum

INA- Indigenous North America

AR- Annual Reports (from the Pitt Rivers Museum)

NAC - 'North American Clothing' case (in the Pitt Rivers Museum)

ICOM - International Council of Museums

Chapter 1: Introduction

When a visitor first passes through the old wooden doors of the Pitt Rivers Museum of Anthropology and World Archaeology in Oxford (PRM), their first view is of a stately eleven-meter totem pole and several dozen freestanding glass cases. The three-story structure is open in the middle, and the cases are packed with tens of thousands of objects. The Star House totem pole, which has stood in the museum since 1901, lends an old-fashioned atmosphere, making a visitor feel as if they have stepped back in time to the days of Victorian archaeologists and cabinets of curiosities.²

The PRM's substantial collection of North American items, eleven percent of its half a million objects, have been popular among visitors for decades.³ The Indigenous North American (INA) collection alone consists of several prominent cases and numerous objects seen by several hundred thousand people each year.⁴ In fact, between 1985 and 1990, the most popular children's topic was the INA collection. Due to this popularity, the PRM Annual Reports (AR) documents that the INA was the first collection to be digitized.⁵ Considering the obvious importance of the INA collection, in-depth examination of the PRM's treatment of this collection over the years is warranted.

Ethnographic museums in Britain like the PRM claim to have evolved from the nineteenth-century colonial mindsets with which they were created into forward-thinking institutions that “want to inspire empathy and deepen cross-cultural understanding.”⁶ Does

² 1901.39.1

³ “Regional” n.d.; “Collections” n.d., 46,434 of 518,614 objects

⁴ 2022-2023 AR, 86

⁵ 1985-1991 AR's

⁶ “Home” n.d.

the PRM's display of INA cases align with this goal? What messages do object labels and display cases communicate today, in comparison to what they have communicated in the past? In investigating these questions, this dissertation examines the evolution of two INA cases and one temporary exhibit in the PRM. I analyse how these have been curated and presented to the public over the museum's history, how they are displayed now, and what could be altered to better align with the PRM's stated decolonial goals.

Significance

Many scholars, including current PRM Director Laura Van Broekhaven, observe the PRM is a “privileged location,” having received many of its objects through systems of colonial power, and thus risks further marginalizing former subjects by speaking for them.⁷ Many display labels only include privileged voices and perspectives, those of British curators.⁸ This can result in labels communicating objectifying and dehumanizing narratives regarding Indigenous groups. Perpetuating such narratives is often the first step to stripping minorities of their rights.⁹ Objectifying another culture presents the people associated with that culture as ‘sub-human’ and thus allows others to harm those people more easily. Teaching visitors to see less privileged groups as ‘savage,’ ‘extinct,’ or evolutionarily behind carries real political harm, reinforcing colonial power dynamics.¹⁰

Thus, curatorial decisions have tangible political and cultural consequences. Museum curatorial decisions shape objects in ways that acknowledge some identities and overlook others, in the process shaping “ways of seeing beyond” their walls.¹¹ Hooper-Greenhill notes “museums can impact powerfully on identity” through their influence on visitors.¹² Heritage

⁷ Broekhoven 2018; Alcoff 1991

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Phillips 2025

¹⁰ Aldrich 2009

¹¹ Macdonald 2006, 4; Aldrich 2009; Effros 2016; Akbarnia 2023

¹² Hooper-Greenhill 2007, I

practitioners like museum curators have control over how the heritage they work with is represented and understood by its visitors.¹³ Decolonial curation of Indigenous objects involves museums listening to and giving curatorial power to Indigenous communities so they can challenge problematic ideas about their cultures and “foster understanding of their culture, experiences and identities in non-Indigenous populations.”¹⁴

Whoever controls heritage associated with a living culture has control over the general public's perception of that culture and its people and “controls an important resource of political power.”¹⁵ For Indigenous groups, how Indigenous objects and histories are represented in museums has long-term implications for their political power and ultimately the rights afforded to Indigenous people. Museum's display choices matter because they can choose whether to perpetuate ideas of racial superiority and support neo-imperial ideas or use their displays to promote empathy and understanding of non-Western and Indigenous cultures.

U.K. museums hold “one of the greatest accumulations of Native [American] history anywhere in the world,” and the PRM holds one of the largest collections of INA material culture in Britain.¹⁶ Owning such a significant collection places on the PRM “an ethical responsibility to be responsive to the calls from Native visitors to represent their histories properly and accurately, to not assume knowledge, but to listen respectfully.”¹⁷

Definitions

Indigenous

The term ‘Indigenous,’ ‘Indigenous North American,’ or First Nations will be used instead of terms like ‘Native American’ or ‘American Indian,’ and whenever possible the

¹³ Smith 2006

¹⁴ Smith 2004, 289

¹⁵ Smith 2004, 75; Lonetree 2012

¹⁶ Davy 2021, 75; “*Regional*” n.d.

¹⁷ Davy 2021, 75

specific name of the Tribe or Nation will be used. The term Indigenous, with a capital I, will be used to honour the identity and history of the peoples this paper concerns. The term ‘Native American’ is criticized by some Tribes for its roots in European explorers’ attempts to name a supposedly ‘empty’ continent; however, as it is not generally perceived as an offensive word, it will not be omitted when it appears in source material.

Western World

The terms ‘Western world,’ ‘the West,’ or ‘Western scientific knowledge’ will be defined as the culture and knowledge-base centred around modern America and Western Europe.

Colonialism

Colonialism or colonisation refers to modern European colonialism since the seventeenth century. Modern colonialism is based on invented hierarchies that classifies colonized and European peoples into unequal categories to legitimize violence, genocide and racism.¹⁸ Ensuring the long-term continuation of these colonial empires “depended upon determining, codifying, controlling, and representing the past.”¹⁹ Acknowledging and making restitutions for colonialism, a process known as decolonisation, happens “through the sharing of knowledge and by encouraging mutual understanding...[and] rehumanization.”²⁰ The term postcolonial will not be used, as Western museums like the PRM were built to promote colonial empires and still own millions of objects wrenched from Indigenous communities and thus will never truly be able to move ‘past’ their colonial origins.²¹

Archaeology

¹⁸ Kristiansen 1998; McLeod 2007; Said 1978

¹⁹ Hannoum 2008, 94

²⁰ Soares 2022, 2; Gonzalez 2006

²¹ Hicks 2025

The discipline of archaeology emerged from colonial systems of anthropology.²² Historically, especially in Britain, the discipline of archaeology has supported colonialism.²³ Colonial empires used museums to create “classificatory hierarchies of the civilised/primitive kind justifying forms of racism, genocide and brutality previously unthought of,” which were given physical form in museums by displaying archaeological objects in evolutionary ways or ‘typologically’ to inculcate these beliefs in the general public.²⁴ Museums “helped to legitimate colonial domination...[and] cannot be divorced from the power relations inherent in the development of Empire and global colonisation.”²⁵ In the PRM, much of the collections and many of the older display cases are products of this colonial period of museum curation.

Salvage Archaeology

Colonial-era museum personnel, traders, and other opportunists frequently justified their seizure of archaeological objects from colonial subjects by calling it ‘salvage archaeology.’ Clifford defines it as “the idea that authentic tribal productions are doomed: their future can only be either local destruction or preservation in the hands of knowing collectors, conservators, and scientists.”²⁶ This white saviour narrative thus used the language of preservation to mask how museums and academics profited from the cultural genocide of so-called ‘primitive’ groups. Many of these cultures have survived the ravages of colonialism and have strong traditions and identities today, invalidating such justifications.²⁷ Many salvage-archaeologists collected objects while ignoring historical or cultural explanations of their purpose and importance, revealing why they were really collected: as curiosity objects for Europeans to stare at.²⁸ As will be discussed, the PRM’s Star House totem pole offers case-in-point.

²² Kohl 1996

²³ Trigger 1984; Shanks 1992; Vawda 2019

²⁴ Kristiansen 1998, 320; Dietler 1994

²⁵ Moro-Abadía 2006, 7; Lyons 2002; Ariese 2022

²⁶ Clifford 1997, 211

²⁷ Peers 2013

²⁸ Hicks 2020

Museum Studies

Museums are generally acknowledged as active institutions that contribute to political and cultural discourse, serving both as sites of contestation and of meaning-making.²⁹ They “mediate many of society’s basic values.”³⁰ They can also promote empathy and “a more egalitarian and just society” and diminish prejudice, under the understanding that culture represents identities and that comes with an ethical responsibility.³¹ Since the start of the twenty-first century, the concepts of “cultural and individual recognition, access, equity, and the assertion of political as well as human rights...have become central to museum discourse.”³² Some scholars like Thomas encourage museums to more critically reflect on the seemingly more mundane and less studied aspects of curatorial work like creating labels and arranging display cases.³³

The study of university museums has its own subfield in museum studies, and an International Council of Museums (ICOM) Committee called the International Committee for University Museums and Collections.³⁴ It is a young subdiscipline, only taking off in the late twentieth century, in which some scholars focus on visitor experiences and the purpose of these museums.³⁵

Ethnographic Museums

Ethnological museums or museums of ‘civilisation’ like the PRM were created by European colonial powers between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries to spread ideas of racial hierarchy.³⁶ They were designed to inculcate colonial and racist views in their respective populations in order to entrench support for the structures of empire.³⁷ Adam

²⁹ Fienup-Riordan 2000; Luke 2002; Message 2015; Mason 2005; Sandell 2007; Roppola 2012

³⁰ Hooper-Greenhill 2007, I

³¹ Hooper-Greenhill 2007, I; Warhurst 1986; Merriman 2002; Peers 2003; Silverman 2010

³² Message 2015, 254

³³ Thomas 2010; Heath 2004

³⁴ Plaza 2022

³⁵ Ibid; King 2025

³⁶ Young 2016; Ariese 2022; Bouttiaux 2010

³⁷ Aldrich 2009

Kuper has coined a phrase to describe these museums: “the Museum of Other People.”³⁸ This type of museum “put on display an exotic world of ‘primitive’ or ‘tribal’ peoples who lived far away or long ago” and compared them to European cultures to promote a view of history where societies progress linearly from ‘primitive’ beginnings to ‘civilised’ or ‘rational’ societies.³⁹

The PRM began as an ethnographic museum in 1887. Like many European museums in the twenty-first century, it has made notable progress in inviting Indigenous perspectives into the museum, mostly into their temporary exhibits.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, many cases in the PRM Main Court dating back to the early twentieth century remain virtually unchanged in composition and presentation. As Boast remarks, “the anatomy of the museum practice... seems to be persistently neocolonial.”⁴¹

History of the PRM

Beginnings

The PRM was founded by Lieutenant-General A. H. L. F. Pitt-Rivers, who believed “the masses are ignorant...[and] an educational museum” must be provided to properly educate them.⁴² He donated his substantial collection of ethnographic objects to Oxford in 1884, on the conditions the University create a new museum to house and display his collection and “appoint a lecturer to teach about it and maintain the general mode of display.”⁴³

Pitt-Rivers ordered his collections ‘typologically,’ arranged with types of objects grouped together and ranked evolutionarily, modelled after Darwin's theories of evolution.⁴⁴

38 Kuper 2023, 8

39 Kuper 2023, 8; Basu 2025; Coombes 1994

40 “History” n.d.; Lonetree 2012; Phillips 2025

41 Boast 2011, 56

42 Pitt-Rivers 1891, 2

43 “History” n.d.

44 Cousins 1993, 4

Bennett describes this display methodology as the arrangement of objects to show “a set of processual, developmental realities...as a means of teaching that evolution (in society as in nature) was inherently and unavoidably gradualist.”⁴⁵ Objects from colonies were presented as representing the beginning stages of human evolution, while European cultures were presented as the pinnacle of evolution, perpetuating the colonial myth European societies were evolutionarily superior.⁴⁶ Such museum displays showed objects from colonized cultures in an “explicitly racist and imperialist perspective” that Ariese calls “a monument of colonialism.”⁴⁷ This presentation legitimized colonial rule, both overseas and at ‘home’ in the metropole. This “tutelage over so-called inferior races” was utilized to convince working-class Britons to support the empire by minimizing “class differences, and their wide economic and cultural discrepancies...[and] emphasizing the shared racial unity of the nation against that of others.”⁴⁸

Colonialism in the PRM

The PRM has a history of directly supporting British colonialism. ARs from 1908–1938 note Henry Balfour, the PRM’s first curator, taught British Colonial Officers in-training, often in the museum itself, using objects to illustrate colonial ‘scientific’ ideals of Britain’s evolutionary superiority.⁴⁹ Balfour’s teachings perpetuated racist and dehumanizing theories about non-Western and Indigenous cultures. Many of these officers later donated objects obtained during their service abroad, further embedding the museum in systems of colonial violence as a recipient of the spoils of colonialism.⁵⁰ Cousins’ PRM *Souvenir Guide to the Collections* puts a now disturbing spin on this, stating Balfour “inspire[d] his students,

⁴⁵ Bennett 2018, 173

⁴⁶ Pitt-Rivers 1888

⁴⁷ Ariese 2022, 101

⁴⁸ Shelton 2006, 69

⁴⁹ 1908, 1939 AR; Cousins 1993

⁵⁰ Vawda 2019

many of whom were to join the Indian and Colonial Services, to collect for the museum in their turn.”⁵¹

Ethnographic museums purposefully detached objects from their cultures and prevented them from creating new connections by not recording information about the cultures they came from.⁵² Objects were put in dusty archives and glass display cases to separate and prevent the reintegration of these objects into their new contexts in Western societies.⁵³ Objects in the PRM from non-Western cultures were wrenched from their contexts and violently recategorized as museum objects. This separation allowed colonial museums to present objects from the colonies as “being ‘matter out of place,’” things which do not belong to the ‘modern age’ and are presented as anachronistic.⁵⁴ But even objects separated from their contexts still have agency and affect the people who view them.⁵⁵

This can be seen in the PRM’s display of many artifacts in its permanent collections without context or much information at all. This type of presentation implies to visitors that INA cultures are stuck in an ethnographic past, contrary to the fact that most of these cultures are alive and well in the present.⁵⁶ Some of the INA objects and display cases in the PRM have been displayed almost unchanged since the early twentieth century, which demeans and objectifies the non-Western cultures represented. There is a lack of historical contextualization that renders these objects voiceless and culture-less, an act of violence which denies them their histories and objectifies them.⁵⁷

Ensuring museum displays no longer communicate such understandings to visitors is essential for a decolonized museum. Changes to permanent cases, like decolonizing the wording of display labels, decluttering display cases, or entire overalls of a case to modernize

51 Cousins 1993, 15

52 Wingfield 2012, 74-5

53 Ibid; Gosden 2004

54 Wingfield 2012, 77; Douglas 1966

55 Gell 1998; Gosden 2005; Ingold 2010

56 Lightfoot 2009; Webster 1998

57 Kassim 2017

it are the sort of alterations that create visual decolonial change for visitors but are often pursued on an ad-hoc basis.

Present Day

The PRM acknowledges in the present day their “collections can be seen as a ‘footprint’ of colonialism.”⁵⁸ This follows what Ruth Phillips terms the “second museum age,” a decolonial trend since the 1980s that envisions “a more responsive museum practice” influenced by postmodernism and broader human rights issues.⁵⁹ In the PRM, this has led to multi-year research collaborations with Indigenous source communities on objects in their collections, often resulting in a temporary exhibition. The museum has spent many years and a considerable amount of resources “listening carefully to critical voices and uncomfortable stories and accepting them on equal terms...for deep epistemic and ethical transformation.”⁶⁰ Six temporary exhibitions have been put on by the PRM concerning INA peoples from 2015 to 2025.⁶¹ But these temporary ‘revolutionary’ Indigenous community-oriented displays have not created long-term change in the permanent galleries concerning Indigenous North Americans. This will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Clifford warns there is “a context of enduring power imbalance” in Western museums that should not be forgotten and which reveals “the racism, or at best the paternalistic condescension, of spectacles which offered up mute, exoticized specimens for curious and titillated crowds.”⁶² Many of the objects in the PRM lack labels, silencing objects and their histories. The subconscious prejudices and colonial systems of power that created the PRM, aided in acquiring most of the early objects in its collections, and displayed them evolutionarily are still very much present in the museum's permanent collections.

⁵⁸ “*British*” n.d.

⁵⁹ Phillips 2005; Lonetree 2012, 4; Peers 2003

⁶⁰ Ariese 2022, 99

⁶¹ “*Past*” n.d

⁶² Clifford 1997, 198

In 1998, the PRM made a decision to focus on online projects, research grants, and “innovative collaborative museum work with originating communities” in the coming twenty years, at the expense of leaving the permanent display cases basically untouched from a visitor’s perspective.⁶³ The PRM decided focusing on research and temporary exhibits would help to end the perpetuation of colonial stereotypes. The museum was also inhibited by an acute lack of funding that forced staff to prioritise either permanent or temporary exhibitions.⁶⁴ Many temporary exhibitions stemmed from the ‘collaborative museum work’ projects the PRM organized, but the permanent displays were not overtly affected by them. PRM curators Morton and Coote argued the PRM’s typological displays “are not ordered in evolutionary series but arranged to celebrate, and educate the visitor about...[how] people have solved the problems of, and attempted to deal with the mysteries of, existence,” so such displays were not inherently racist.⁶⁵

The PRM maintains its long-held intentions, dating back to 1983, to never change the ‘classic and beloved’ look of the museum.⁶⁶ But maintaining its ‘look’ and decolonizing the museum are diametrically opposed. A museum founded on colonial ideologies that preserves its nineteenth-century displays is still perpetuating said biases, which are ingrained in the displays themselves. Broekhoven stated in 2018 the museum knew its antiquated look and feel, in combination with the minimal labelling and stereotypical presentations of objects like the totem pole, was still perpetuating negative stereotypes about Indigenous and non-Western cultures to visitors.⁶⁷ She disclosed that visitors’ comments indicated all the internal work the PRM had done was not translating into the permanent displays to stop visitors from “finding confirmation of stereotypical images and concepts.”⁶⁸ In posts and comments “On social

⁶³ Broekhoven 2018, 75

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Coote 2000, 40

⁶⁶ Cranstone 1984; 2017-18 AR

⁶⁷ Broekhoven 2018

⁶⁸ Ibid, 73

media, visitors commonly use[d] words to praise the museum that are either stereotypical or racialized tropes.”⁶⁹

From 2017 to 2020 the museum did “a comprehensive internal review of displays... from an ethical, interpretation and conservation perspective.”⁷⁰ Director Broekhoven stated there was much internal change in the museum's policies and approaches to the collections, and that the museum has worked over the past few years to change internally and to “deeply engage with the museum’s colonial legacy.”⁷¹ But all of this research, the interventions, and temporary exhibitions have done little to visually change the permanent displays in the Main Court of the museum five years later and thus overall visitor experience remains the same.

Crowded and Confusing

The PRM has known for decades their permanent exhibitions have confused and overwhelmed visitors: “nearly half the Museum’s visitors are unable to make use during their visits of either the ideas or the language that underpin the displays.”⁷² Even Cousins wrote in the PRM’s souvenir guide: “The sheer volume of material competing for their [the visitor’s] attention is overwhelming. Treasures are displayed not only in cases, but hanging from the ceiling and cramming every inch of available space.”⁷³ She admits this organizational method makes “considerable demands on the visitor, who is challenged to find a way of responding to the museum’s visual and imaginative impact.”⁷⁴ Asking visitors to enter into philosophical contemplation is an unreasonable demand and such expectations likely lead to unfortunate and incorrect understandings of the minority cultures represented in the PRM.

⁶⁹ Broekhoven 2024, 135

⁷⁰ 2020-21 AR, 3

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² 1994-5 AR

⁷³ Cousins 1993, 1

⁷⁴ Ibid

Institutional Barriers

The PRM has several institutional barriers that make it very difficult to change the permanent exhibits. There is a severe lack of funding, going back to the museum's beginnings due to the lack of a founding endowment and the University of Oxford's refusal to fully fund the museum.⁷⁵ The University only provides thirty-eight percent of the PRM's funding, and the rest must come from outside sources, requiring PRM staff to spend much of their time securing public and private grants.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, government funding has fallen thirteen percent between 2008–2017.⁷⁷ More frustratingly, government funding is often restricted to short-term projects and temporary displays, and cannot be used for long-term projects or staffing costs.⁷⁸ As a result, museums in Britain are “shifting from permanent...to short-term, precarious work directed at peripheral rather than core operations.”⁷⁹

The PRM also has serious infrastructural problems; most notably a dysfunctional roof, broken elevator, and abysmal temperature controls.⁸⁰ Some of these design flaws originated at construction in 1885 due to insufficient capital.⁸¹ As a result, money that otherwise could have been spent on updating exhibits have instead gone to excessive maintenance expenses, restoring objects damaged by pests, water, and extreme temperatures, and raising funds for a new building that never materialized.⁸²

Additionally, creating or significantly altering a permanent display case takes an extraordinary amount of time and effort, with many long-term problems that must be solved.⁸³ Temporary exhibitions are much easier to fund and assemble, and provide new

⁷⁵ “Prehistory” n.d.

⁷⁶ 2022-2023 AR, 86; Conn 2016

⁷⁷ Davy 2021, 39

⁷⁸ Ibid, 39; Mendoza 2017

⁷⁹ Davy 2021, 39; Hooper-Greenhill 2007

⁸⁰ 1894-1895, 1903, 1933-4, 1994-5 AR's

⁸¹ Broekhoven 2018

⁸² 1906, 1928, 1980-1 AR

⁸³ Frey 2006, 408

opportunities to entice visitors to come to the museum.⁸⁴ However, the difficulty of changing permanent exhibitions does not excuse the PRM from neglecting to change permanent display cases and labels that continue to perpetuate colonial paradigms and objectify non-Western cultures. There are cases that have been recently updated in the PRM, like the newly redone Benin case in the less visible Lower Gallery.⁸⁵ However, many INA cases have not been updated recently and are especially disadvantaged because there is currently no Americas curator at the PRM.

The PRM's Purpose

According to ICOM, a museum's purpose is

in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits...heritage. Open to the public, accessible and *inclusive*, museums *foster diversity* and sustainability. They operate and *communicate ethically*, professionally and with the participation of communities.⁸⁶

Some scholars argue a university museum's main focus is pedagogical, an academic resource used to teach students.⁸⁷ The PRM was created as a teaching museum, and indeed the Anthropology department was first created as a part of the museum.⁸⁸ Teaching the next generation of academics and museum curators is vitally important in influencing how museum studies and museums themselves will evolve in the coming decades.⁸⁹ But the museum should not prioritize academics over improving the messages its non-academic audience receives (particularly impressionable young children), as there is a drastically larger number of yearly visitors to the PRM than the number of people who study at the museum.⁹⁰

84 Ibid

85 Case 26.A

86 "*Museum*" n.d., emphasis added

87 Merriman 2002; Were 2010; Kingsley 2016

88 "*Higher*" n.d.

89 Hooper-Greenhill 2007

90 "*Student*" 2024, 500,000 visitors versus 26,595 Oxford students per year

Archaeological Approach

This paper utilizes an archaeological methodology, focusing on material culture and how it is represented in museums. It will mirror PRM curator Hicks' call in 2013 for more “detailed archival, documentary, contextual and object-based research, that will reveal much more detail about the life-histories of these objects.”⁹¹ It will also take inspiration from a recently released paper authored by four PRM curators, which argues while archaeologists are more used to considering archaeological objects and assemblages in the context of how they were originally excavated, “taking this awareness and using it to examine the processes that deposit objects in museum collections” offers valuable new perspectives.⁹²

Archaeologists can see museums as a place for excavation and fieldwork, as a place to practice a new form of historical archaeology where the significance and influence of a museum's collections can be studied like an archaeological object.⁹³ Examining and re-documenting the on-display collections as “Archaeologists document in order to understand, and in doing so they transform, and thus re-create, their objects of enquiry,” will allow for a new perspective on the INA cases in the PRM.⁹⁴

Object Life History

The archaeological object ‘life history’ approach is defined by Gosden and Marshall as “seek[ing] to understand the way objects become invested with meaning through the social interactions they are caught up in.”⁹⁵ This paper will take a middle ground between the more archaeologically inclined object ‘life history’ and the anthropologically inclined object ‘biographical’ approach.⁹⁶ This approach affords the understanding of the full lifespan of the

⁹¹ Hicks 2013, 12

⁹² Hodgett 2025, 6

⁹³ Hicks 2013

⁹⁴ Ibid, 2-3

⁹⁵ Gosden 1999, 169-70; Thomas 1996

⁹⁶ Schiffer 2000; 2004

object archaeology offers, but with the focus on one object and its associated case (assemblage) anthropology offers.⁹⁷

The point is to highlight the emotions and significance an object gains through its interactions with people and events it has gone through, focusing on its materiality.⁹⁸ Objects are thus understood as “not simply residues of social interaction but are active agents in shaping identities and communities.”⁹⁹ A life history explanation includes how human and non-human relationships constitute an object and imparts vital information about the culture that created it. Ingold also points out the importance of including its ‘form-making,’ or how and what an object is made of, in an object's life history to understand it fully.¹⁰⁰

Employing an object life history approach in the curation of museum display cases presents the object's materiality to the visitor by emphasising how it was created, what material it is made of, why it is important and what it was used for, and the history of past users of the object, if known.¹⁰¹ This additional information allows the object to be a more true representation of its associated culture that lets the visitor better empathize with and understand that culture, humanizing the object. When creating interpretation and labels for things curators often think about every individual object and how they fit together, but without understanding the life histories of these objects individually they cannot be accurately understood together. The same goes for visitors trying to understand objects in a display case as an assemblage.

Understanding objects as more than inanimate things in museums has a well-documented history in archaeology.¹⁰² It began with the shift towards ‘New Museology’ in the 1980s, part of a broader shift in many academic disciplines to focus on “questions of

97 Joy 2009

98 Gosden 1999; Tilley 1996

99 Lyons 2002, 8

100 Ingold 2012

101 Geismar 2021

102 Appadurai 1986; Hodder 2012; Zuanni 2023

representation – that is, to how meanings come to be inscribed and by whom, and how some come to be regarded as “right” or taken as given.”¹⁰³ Archaeologists became more self-critical and attentive to which groups had been historically marginalised by museums, sparking a new focus on colonial histories which included the voices and histories of colonized peoples.¹⁰⁴

Relationships and situational context are important in archaeology for understanding objects. Thus it is necessary to understand the colonial relationships of power these objects were collected under, but not to let those relationships overshadow the entire object’s life history.¹⁰⁵ Academics like Thomas have looked at colonialism and ‘entanglements’ caused by colonial empires through an object focused lens.¹⁰⁶ Thomas points out when objects enter a museum, a new ‘entanglement’ occurs and archaeologists must be aware of “Creative recontextualization and indeed reauthorship may thus follow from taking, from purchase or theft” of objects for the museum and not cement them as a fixed and unchanging entity from the time of entrance.¹⁰⁷ Importantly, the colonial moment of encounter must not be allowed to consume the life history of the object.¹⁰⁸ The importance of this has been emphasized by Indigenous groups visiting the PRM before.¹⁰⁹

Many archaeologists have criticised the concept of life histories, seeing them as too focused on colonial histories or as just a fancy name for provenance history.¹¹⁰ It is easy to utilize object biography to focus agency on the colonizers side of history and deprive colonized peoples of representation. It is also easy for archaeologists to use this approach to focus on singular “star” objects, which are objects that are materially valuable, owned by

103 Macdonald 2006, 3; Edwards 2015

104 Macdonald 2006

105 Ibid; Pratt 2008, 6-7

106 Thomas 1991

107 Ibid, 4-5; Petch 2007

108 Clifford 1997

109 2018-19 AR, 8

110 Jones 2016

royalty, or beautiful from a Western perspective, which creates an unequal representation of the society the object comes from and ignores the experiences of everyday people.¹¹¹

Though the object life history approach has possible pitfalls, the concept still holds considerable value for museums in the curation of public displays and for visitor interpretation. This approach has proved useful in the PRM, where many object labels only tell the history of colonization, often containing only the date of collection, the usually white collector, and a summary of the object given by the donator, an extremely colonial centred viewpoint.¹¹² With such limited information the visitor is not invited to think about the whole life of the object, and thus misses much of its history and context.

The purpose of permanent museum display cases are to teach visitors about selected objects and their associated cultures, but the archives of the PRM often hold much more information on objects than is communicated to museum visitors. A study of the PRM states visitors cannot receive “a reductive or even imagined full version of a story from [the PRM’s] object-driven exhibitions...more narrative pieces of objects may help visitors enter a higher level of narrative exploration within the complex typological system.”¹¹³ The museum would be less confusing to visitors and perpetrate less colonial biases if the strategy of letting the thousands upon thousands of objects “speak for themselves” was lessened slightly to allow for more descriptions and explanations in the displays.¹¹⁴

Decolonizing museums includes reconnecting museum objects with their life histories and cultures. To do this, curatorial power—or at least veto power over what is put in permanent display cases—can be handed to source communities, letting them decide what they want communicated to museum visitors through the display of their cultural objects.¹¹⁵ The

¹¹¹ Example: Gosden 1999 focuses on a Indigenous Fiji neck-ornament from a King

¹¹² Peers 2020; Basu 2025; Antonites 2022

¹¹³ Chen 2024, 9

¹¹⁴ Coote 2012, 4

¹¹⁵ Young 2016

PRM has collaborated with many INA peoples in the past but has not handed over curatorial control of the permanent collections.

Studying the museum archaeologically by examining its layout, display styles, and arrangement of objects will reveal biases being imparted to visitors, while incorporating its objects' life-histories will give voices to the thousands of anonymous artefacts currently languishing in display cases.¹¹⁶ Many objects in the PRM lack provenance details, creating an obstacle to this goal. This paper is limited to what is available in the archives and on-display due to funding and time limitations, and furthering this proposed life history display approach in the PRM would require more prolonged and wide-reaching research on objects.¹¹⁷

Essay Roadmap

The PRM's Indigenous North American focused display cases in the Main Court are the primary source for this dissertation. The PRM archives, Annual Reports, and past pictures of the display cases from the archives will be heavily utilised. Under examination are the displays themselves, analysing curatorial choices from the beginning of the museum's history to the present by examining display labels, the layout and placement of artifacts and signage.

Chapter 2 takes up the first case study, the iconic Haida Star House totem pole, placed in the museum in 1901. Chapter 3 then offers an analysis of the seventy-five year evolution of the 'North American Clothing' display case. Finally, Chapter 4 examines the 2013 Blackfoot Shirt temporary exhibition, which is also pertinent to the 'North American Clothing' case. Objects from each example will be examined individually and their display cases examined as archaeological assemblages to analyse both the intentional and unintentional messages these displays have perpetuated in past and present iterations of the

¹¹⁶ Macdonald 2006

¹¹⁷ Hicks 2013, 4; Bennett 2010

displays. The aim is to determine if these display cases still communicate negative messages about INA cultures to visitors, consciously or not, and consider possible solutions.

It is important to examine these displays, how they have improved and how they are still lacking, as a way to encourage the PRM to continue decolonizing and improving their permanent displays.

Chapter 2: Haida Star House Pole

The Haida Star House totem pole, “an icon of the Museum,” was erected in the PRM in 1901.¹¹⁸ It is perhaps the most physically unchanged object in PRM, having been fastened in place with iron strips and placed upon a pedestal sunk into the foundation of the building, making it almost impossible to ever be moved again.”¹¹⁹ Today the totem pole is a “gathering point...where the swelling number of visitors...assemble to hear talks and introductions from Museum staff.”¹²⁰

118 2008-9 AR; 1901 AR; 1901.39.1

119 1901 AR

120 2014-2015 AR



Figure 2.1

Photograph from entrance of PRM, taken by author.



Figure 2.2

Photograph of PRM in 1910 from PRM archives, 1998.267.262.6.

Before June 1996 the Star House pole had no display label.¹²¹ An object imbued with history and culture was rendered mute for ninety-five years, its life history denied to it by colonial systems and museum curators. When an object is displayed in such a way it locks “objects, *and the people that made them*, in static representations...objectifying and manipulating them so that they can fit categories and outlooks that are alien to the individuals who forged and designed the objects.”¹²²

¹²¹ 1901.39.1

¹²² Broekhoven 2018, 72, emphasis added

Analysis

The current label for the Star House pole lacks important information concerning critical facts about its life history. The PRM certainly knows the entire object life history of Star House pole, including how it was made and why it is important in Haida culture. The PRM spent considerable time and effort on collaborative projects with Haida people from 2007 to 2018, including a repatriation claim, an official booklet on the totem pole, and a visit by twenty-one Haida delegates in 2009.¹²³

The totem pole booklet, titled ‘Star House Pole,’ was written in 2018 by curator Peers, in collaboration with Jisgang Nika Collison, who belongs to the Kaay’ahl Laanas of the Haida Nation and is Executive Director of the Haida Gwaii Museum.¹²⁴ The booklet includes Haida knowledge, customs, and perspectives as well as the colonial history of the totem pole, making it a superb example of a well-researched object life history. The booklet is not readily available in paper or digital form at the museum to visitors. There seems to be no plausible reason as to why the booklet is not available to visitors, as the museum clearly has the resources to print and display booklets, shown by the stack of booklets placed next to the Blackfoot ‘The Life of Many Shots’ robe display which go over the history and importance of the robe in a similar fashion to the ‘Star House’ booklet.¹²⁵

The current label for the Star House pole reads:

¹²³ Peers 2018; 2007-2008, 2008-2009 AR

¹²⁴ Peers 2018

¹²⁵ 1895.61.1; Brownstone 2005

HAIDA TOTEM POLE

**Canada, Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii)
Masset Village, Star House.
1901.39.1**

This totem pole is from the Haida community of Masset. It originally stood outside Star House, which belonged to chief Anetlas (c.1816 - 1893).

The pole was raised at a potlatch marking Anetlas' adoption of a young girl. A potlatch is a ceremony at which a person is given family rights; it involves reciting family lineages in front of witnesses. The guests are given gifts, and their acceptance of these marks their agreement to uphold the rights transferred to the person in that potlatch.

The pole is carved with figures that remind viewers of how ancestral beings bestowed certain rights and property on a family. The figures depicted on this pole are, from the top:

Three seated figures or watchmen
Bear eating a frog with a bear cub between its legs.
Bear holding a human with two bear cubs at its feet.
Raven with a human between its wings.

Today, these figures and their stories are still part of Haida culture.

The pole came to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1901, donated by Professor E.B. Tylor. It was purchased for \$36 and shipped by rail and steamer.

Figure 2.3

Photograph by author.
Label for Object 1901.39.1., transcribed in Appendix A.

Vital information is left out of the display label, including the name of the Haida artist thought to have carved the pole, Albert Edward Edenshaw.¹²⁶ To leave out the name of the First Nations maker is to continue to perpetuate the act of colonial violence that first ripped the totem pole from Haida people and attempted to erase much of the totem pole's previous history and meaning so that it could be presented as a stereotypical example of a culture wrongly designated as primitive.¹²⁷ Ninety-nine percent of PRM objects have a recorded donor but only 1.6% of the North American objects have a recorded creator.¹²⁸ This reveals the "historic and often deeply racist attitudes...embedded in fundamentally uneven levels of museum documentation."¹²⁹ Peers states colonial actions like maker name erasure on "Haida objects by museums in Britain had the effect of introducing intellectual and political distance between objects and their originating communities."¹³⁰

The label names Star House Pole "HAIDA TOTEM POLE," omitting its actual name used by Haida people and dehumanizing it. This insult is compounded by the fact that the name of the white donator is still included in the display label while much information on Star House pole itself has been left out. The label also minimizes the Haida name for their homelands, giving it in parentheses as if it was an afterthought to the Canadian colonial settler name.

The label mischaracterizes Star House pole by listing the figures "from the top." This is a complete disregard of Haida cultural knowledge. In the Star House booklet, the figures on the pole are explained "from bottom to top, as, contrary to popular belief, the bottom figure on a Haida pole is often most important."¹³¹ This mischaracterisation reveals that the

126 Peers 2018, 6

127 Hodgett 2025, 4

128 Ibid; "*Collections*" n.d., 15,714 North American objects, 235 have named creator

129 Hodgett 2025, 4

130 Peers 2013, 9-11

131 Peers 2018, 7

label was likely not redone after the writing of the ‘Star House Pole’ booklet or after the temporary exhibition on the pole in 2014.¹³²

Another omission of this object’s life history is the failure to mention the morally inexcusable methods by which E. B. Tylor acquired the totem pole for the museum.¹³³ A letter Tylor received regarding his inquiry to a colleague about buying a totem pole for the museum reads: “I think that I can secure two about next February when the people are generally without money & food.”¹³⁴ Tylor agreed and paid thirty-six dollars for the pole.¹³⁵ This excerpt is a horrifyingly blatant admission of how some museum collectors at the time took advantage of colonial systems of power to buy important Indigenous objects for cheap.¹³⁶ Balfour received the pole happily, and stated in his 1901 AR that “It may be regarded as a very typical and fine example of a class of symbolic insignia *which is rapidly dying out*.”¹³⁷ This is one of many instances in which the PRM directly profited from a colonial settler government perpetrating cultural genocide.

This came at a time when “coastal First Nations were experiencing some of the most damaging times in their histories...colonial regimes designed to eradicate these rich cultures.”¹³⁸ Their cultural practices were outlawed, potlatches were made illegal so that no more totem poles could be raised, and totem poles were highly discouraged by missionaries and coveted by museums.¹³⁹ The PRM preyed upon Haida people at their most vulnerable moment, then used the objects they gained to further support the systems of colonialism that were attempting to erase Haida people by exhibiting Star House pole as a mute stereotyped object for ninety-five years.

¹³² 2014-15 AR; “*Star*” n.d.

¹³³ Tylor 1902

¹³⁴ Peers 2018, 10

¹³⁵ Ibid, 12

¹³⁶ Thompson 2005; Harrison 1925

¹³⁷ 1901 AR, emphasis added

¹³⁸ Peers 2018, 9; quote from Jisgang Nika Collison

¹³⁹ Ibid

There is no information in the label or in the area around the totem pole that suggests to visitors that a well-done booklet containing extensively researched information and many historical photographs of the totem pole even exists. Visitors who do not perform their own research on the totem pole after departing are left in the dark about most of the pertinent information and Haida cultural knowledge concerning Star House pole – even its real name. Nor does the label mention that “Totem poles were, and still are, raised by Haida people.”¹⁴⁰ Star House pole is not a dusty relic of the past stuck in a timeless ethnographic museum haze, but a genuinely meaningful cultural object to Haida people today.

Much of the Star House pole’s life history is not directly communicated to visitors, which denies them a full decolonial understanding of Haida culture and history. Simply presenting a visitor with a stereotypical item of Northwest Coast First Nations heritage like a totem pole, with a simple summary that does not include Haida perspectives and is not rooted in modernity allows visitors to easily stereotype and objectify Haida culture.¹⁴¹ The museum has recognized this in the past. In 2010 the original entrance design of the museum was restored and the totem pole could again be viewed from the entrance of the museum, as seen in Figure 2.1. The AR notes:

Kate White carried out an in-depth analysis of the visitor comments book, which suggested that while the new entrance has undoubtedly enhanced visitors’ enjoyment of the Museum as a whole, it has perhaps also increased a tendency to regard the displays as comprising an extraordinary spectacle, rather than encouraging serious engagement with the more complex meanings of the displays and objects themselves. In addition, or perhaps as a consequence, many visitors take away different ‘messages’ from those expected by the Museum, or expressed by staff in public talks.¹⁴²

Apparently when PRM visitors observe the Star House pole and other iconic objects without the history and cultural information provided by a comprehensive display label or booklet, they are not encouraged to seriously engage with the collections. Objects like totem

¹⁴⁰ Peers 2018, 7

¹⁴¹ Nielssen 2016

¹⁴² 2010-11 AR

poles are not just ethnographic or archaeological objects, but important material culture for Indigenous peoples, a fact the PRM is not communicating effectively to visitors.¹⁴³ Broekhoven acknowledged in 2018 the PRM is aware that their permanent displays perpetuate “unsettling racialized stereotypes” through “iconic images” like the totem pole and fail to spark “critical reflection on how the collection or displays are interwoven with the legacies of empire” in visitors based on visitor comments.¹⁴⁴ Their main takeaways from the PRM are thoughts of “iconic images from popular culture that might seem innocent at first glance, but considered more carefully also bring to mind unsettling racialized stereotypes that could be considered to have their roots in Orientalism, colonialism or racism.”¹⁴⁵ She specifically mentions ‘totem poles’ as one of those iconic and stereotypical tropes frequently mentioned by visitors.¹⁴⁶

Peers asks and answers the question, after the many collaborations with Haida community members “has anything changed? We would argue, yes, *but not on the surface...* museum structures, processes, and professional expectations continued as usual...Information was added to catalogue records.”¹⁴⁷ Very little was visually altered in the pole’s display, and the general feel and presentation of the totem pole was left untouched. The immense amount of time and effort expended by the Haida people who visited and shared their cultural knowledge has not been utilized to its fullest potential if all it was used for was to create a temporary display and add information to the museum archives. Simply put, the opportunity to use information gained from Haida visits to encourage empathy and understanding to visitors about Haida culture was not taken advantage of long-term.

Small capitulations like giving Haida people access to their heritage and creating temporary exhibits, while progress, are not actions that create meaningful long-term change

143 Clifford 1997

144 Broekhoven 2018, 70-1

145 Ibid

146 Ibid

147 Peers 2013, 238, emphasis added

without further committed action.¹⁴⁸ Haida visitors did not get any say over possible changes to the permanent exhibits or subsequent publications about their visits, both of which would have levelled the uneven power dynamics in this situation. Without co-curation and veto power over how their heritage is presented to the public in museums, these visits could be seen as merely another way to obtain yet more knowledge from Indigenous groups in a neo-colonial paradigm.¹⁴⁹

The PRM has done many innovative Indigenous centred knowledge exchanges and visits to obtain information about objects in the museum. But when a museum does not take action to communicate that information to their visitors, the museum remains a space “of neocolonialism, of reinforcing relations of power rooted in colonial histories.”¹⁵⁰ Temporarily changing an exhibit is not an accomplishment. Instead, the collected data is filed away in the archives and the knowledge is lost to future visitors. Peers states through the Haida projects the PRM staff “changed, too: our ways of thinking about what museums are for, and whom they are for, and our roles as museum staff were altered.”¹⁵¹ But none of the changes she mentions were visible to the public. The PRM seems to lack the ability or the funding to sustain long-term communication of the new knowledge gained from visits by Indigenous groups. A similar set of events played out with the Blackfoot community, proving this is not a singular incident.¹⁵²

Solutions

For museums to truly decolonize there is a “need to make changes to what is visible in their exhibitions,” to how they display their objects.¹⁵³ As PRM curator Basu says, museums

148 Clifford 1997

149 Boast 2011

150 Peers 2013, 35; Boast 2011

151 Peers 2013, 185

152 Brown 2010

153 Ariese 2022, 22-3

“can transcend the colonial circumstances of their making and...become resources for the making of decolonial futures,” but there must be institutional commitment and follow through for permanent change.¹⁵⁴

If the PRM truly wants its collections to “share stories of hope, deepen cross-cultural understanding and inspire empathy” then this display needs to be addressed, and the museum needs to orient itself to share more decolonial information with its visitors.¹⁵⁵ A curator specializing in the Americas should be hired. The current lack of an Americas curator since Peers’ retirement in 2019 is unacceptable for an internationally renowned museum considering one fourth of its collections originate from the Americas.¹⁵⁶ Leaving two entire continents uncurated for six years allowed the carefully obtained knowledge and relationships with North American Indigenous groups like Haida and Blackfoot communities to wither away. Such relationships must be sustained to have a truly decolonial museum.¹⁵⁷

An immediate solution would be to reintroduce the ‘Star House’ pole booklet and have a copy available for visitors to read attached to the case. Shortly thereafter, a new label that includes more of the Star House pole’s life history and acknowledging the museum’s previous colonial actions could be created.

The Star House pole, along with many other objects, had further information available to guests through the audio guide of the PRM.¹⁵⁸ But the audio guide was discontinued in 2020 due to the pandemic and has not been resumed. A solution to this would be putting that information in a format like a QR code at the entrance to the museum that links to an online version of the audio tour.

¹⁵⁴ Basu 2024, 88

¹⁵⁵ 2021-22 AR

¹⁵⁶ “*Collections*” n.d., 90,760 from South America, 46,434 from North America, together 26.44% of PRM’s 518,800 items

¹⁵⁷ Peers 2013, 240

¹⁵⁸ 1901.39.1

A better solution would be to give Haida people an independent voice in the display case entirely uncontrolled by the museum. This could be done by including a QR code that connects to a website controlled only by Haida community leaders. All the museum would do is include the QR code in the case, with a label explaining that it provides a link to Haida perspectives on the Star House pole. Curators could include a picture of recently erected poles in Massett next to the QR to show Haida culture is thriving in the present. That way, visitors can understand that “Today, there are many new poles on Haida Gwaii, and their creation is part of a renewal of Haida culture.”¹⁵⁹ This would give Haida people a chance to control their own narratives without requiring much funding for changing the case, trips to the museum, or long consultations between the PRM and Haida leaders. Haida leaders could change and update the website whenever they wished without requiring permission from the museum. There is no justification for the PRM to entirely control the narratives around such an iconic item of the museum. This curatorial control could provide Haida people with knowledge their voices are being heard in colonial museums, and such QR codes would provide a direct link to the Haida community for visitors. This solution could be used for other on-display Indigenous items, cheaply decolonizing display cases by simply providing unbiased Indigenous viewpoints directly from source communities. A sign at the front of the museum could bring these QR codes to visitors’ attention and acknowledge the museum is no longer putting itself in a position of power over Indigenous peoples. A decolonial totem pole label could emphasise the pole is part of an extant Haida practice and culture and help combat the colonial misconception in ethnographic museums like the PRM that much of its collections pertain to long-dead cultures.

At least from an outside perspective, which is all most visitors see, the PRM has not decolonized the Star House pole display. It is the very first object visitors see when they walk into the museum, and it remains trapped in colonial narratives. Broekhoven

¹⁵⁹ Peers 2018, 15

acknowledged in 2018 the museum has been criticized “for unquestioningly repeating colonial paradigms (*or so it seems*) by embedding these in the very fabric of its collections and displays.”¹⁶⁰ Visitor surveys done by the PRM have shown that the collections appear and feel to visitors to continue perpetrating colonial ideas. If visitors believe these ideas are still being perpetuated, then the museum is failing on its promise of promoting cross-cultural understanding.¹⁶¹

Chapter 3: ‘North American Clothing’ Case

The presentation of the Star House pole has hardly changed since 1901. However, the ‘North American Clothing’ (NAC) case, located in the back right corner of the Main Court,

¹⁶⁰ Broekhoven 2018, 66, emphasis added

¹⁶¹ Hooper-Greenhill 2007

was completely redesigned in 2003 before which it had hardly changed since 1940.¹⁶² The museum was forced to change the Clothing case due to pest problems, and a dedicated curator took advantage of the opportunity to decolonize the case. Curator Peers, who worked at the PRM from 1998-2019, spent much of that time creating relationships with INA communities, oversaw the redisplay of the Clothing case in 2003.¹⁶³ The NAC case is presently one of the more updated and decolonial cases in the museum. Three objects in this case will be analysed, two from before the 2003 redesign and one from the current display case.

Pest Problem

The PRM has had pest problems since 1906.¹⁶⁴ Detailed records on the state of pest management in the PRM were not kept until 2008, but it is noted in the 2002-2003 AR a clothes moth infestation had grown so bad in the NAC case that it had to be entirely cleared to deal with it.¹⁶⁵ There had been repeated infestations of insects in this case stretching back at least thirteen years.¹⁶⁶ The pest problem in the Clothing case was considerably worse than other cases and persisted because the bottom of the NAC case was covered in pebbles, which provided the perfect habitat for bugs.¹⁶⁷ The pebbles were meant to emphasise INA people were close to nature, a curatorial choice intended to perpetuate a stereotype about Indigenous people that separates them from contemporary society.

The redesign of the NAC case was not done because of doubts about the ethics of how objects in the case were displayed or the colonial era labels. It was done out of necessity due to a horrible moth infestation that was destroying the clothing in the case. Peers was only given the opportunity to redesign the case because of the moth infestation, and the reason the

¹⁶² Case 10.A; 1939-1940, 2002-3 AR

¹⁶³ 2002-3 AR

¹⁶⁴ 1906 AR

¹⁶⁵ 2018-19 AR

¹⁶⁶ 1990-1 AR

¹⁶⁷ See Figures 3.1-3.3

NAC case is even slightly decolonial is entirely due to her seizing that opportunity to improve how the case represented INA peoples. The entire case perpetrates colonial narratives but would likely remain unchanged without the moth infestation forcing the PRM's hand. After all, there are still cases in PRM's Main Court that have not changed substantially in decades and convey unacceptable colonial sentiments, like the 'North American Pottery' case or the 'Magic and Witchcraft' case.¹⁶⁸ Museums that hold objects obtained through colonial practices or processes have a responsibility to represent their associated cultures accurately and empathetically.¹⁶⁹ The pre-2003 NAC case did not do this. Peers' redesign of the case, while not done in consultation with the many Tribes represented in the case, substantially improved the information visitors now receive about INA peoples.

Pre-2003 Case and Object Analysis



Figures 3.1 and 3.2

PRM archival pictures of pre-2003 NAC case.

¹⁶⁸ 'Magic and Witchcraft' case 8.A, 'North American Pottery' case 153.A

¹⁶⁹ Clifford 1997

The NAC case before its redesign in 2003 showed a complete lack of care or respect for INA cultures. It took several sacred items including a Dakota war bonnet and Blackfoot war shirt and displayed them carelessly, layering different cultures items atop one another as if they were simply interchangeable. Objects were disconnected from their source communities, jumbled together, and presented to visitors stereotypically. The lack of care for the objects in the case pre-2003 is apparent in the archival records: for three objects there is no known Tribe or even general geographical area recorded, and the ‘buffalo robe,’ acquired in 1887, was found during the redesign to be un-accessioned.¹⁷⁰

In the 1939-1940 AR, Curator T. K. Penniman notes Beatrice Blackwood bought the museum an “eagle’s feather war bonnet” while visiting America.¹⁷¹ It was promptly displayed in the PRM “on the bust of Plenty Coups, a famous Crow Indian Chief.”¹⁷² The two objects were displayed together until 2003, as seen in Figures 3.1 and 3.2. The entire case has been in the same spot since at least 1990.¹⁷³

170 1887.32.3

171 1939.8.32B

172 1939-40 AR; 1940.4.05

173 1939.8.32B, 1990 is when pebbles were added



Figure 3.3

Plaster bust of Plenty Coups, a Crow Chief, with eagle feather war bonnet (headdress) of Chief Holy Rock, a Dakota (Sioux) Chief atop it. Label transcribed in Appendix A, with archival information.

Intentional disrespect of Dakota and Crow cultures is communicated by this display case. This sixty-three year placement showed how little the PRM cared about sacred objects tied to living cultures and peoples and showed a distinct lack of consideration and research into these cultures. The plaster bust spells Chief Plenty Coups name wrong, as ‘Plenty Coup,’ and Chief Holy Rock’s headdress has no label at all. War bonnets, traditionally made by Plains Tribes, are sacred for religious and cultural reasons.¹⁷⁴ This headdress reflected “the owner’s tribal identity and accomplishments. Each feather and its arrangement carried deep

174 “War” 2023

meaning.”¹⁷⁵ To place one chief’s war bonnet on the bust of another, without even labelling the war bonnet to acknowledge it was not Plenty Coups’ but belonged to another chief, erases Chief Holy Rock’s name and identity and reveals the callous colonial disregard and belief in Western cultural superiority that superseded the beliefs and sacred objects of all non-Western cultures in the twentieth century in museums. This display dislocated these objects from the communities they belong to and objectified them. This is a perfect example of severing objects from their life histories to promote colonialism.¹⁷⁶

The black and white photo under the bust is another object that perpetuates subconscious racist stereotypes to visitors.¹⁷⁷ Clifford reveals “One of the indices of a historical approach...is the systematic use of photographs, particularly in black-and-white or sepia.”¹⁷⁸ Colour photographs signal to visitors contemporaneity and a present existence, while black and white photographs signal the past and a historic existence. Consider the impact on a visitor who sees a massive totem pole with no display label at all and then encounters several more stereotypical INA objects all jumbled together in a mismatch of cultures and lacking almost any information about their associated cultures, making it easy to objectify these objects and their source communities.

Admittedly, museums are limited and influenced in what they put on display by the composition of their collections. Displaying a feathered headdress, a stereotypical object “in the Western imagination...for the North American prairie peoples” can be done sensitively and appropriately if the museum reaches out to source communities and gives them some curatorial control.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Ibid

¹⁷⁶ Peers 2012, 158-159

¹⁷⁷ Nielssen 2016 58; Clifford 1997

¹⁷⁸ Clifford 1997, 118

¹⁷⁹ Nielssen 2016 58; Peers 2003

Post-2003 Case and Object Analysis



Figure 3.4

Current NAC case. Photograph by author, as there are no official pictures of many of the permanent cases in PRM.

Examining the Clothing case before and after 2003 reveals the “‘found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private’ nature of all archival framing...all practices of collecting entail selection, storytelling practices of interpretation.”¹⁸⁰ No INA communities were consulted on the redesign despite the presence of at least fifteen different cultural groups in the case, likely due to lack of funding and the unexpected nature of the project requiring a quick turnaround.¹⁸¹

The main label for the display case reads:

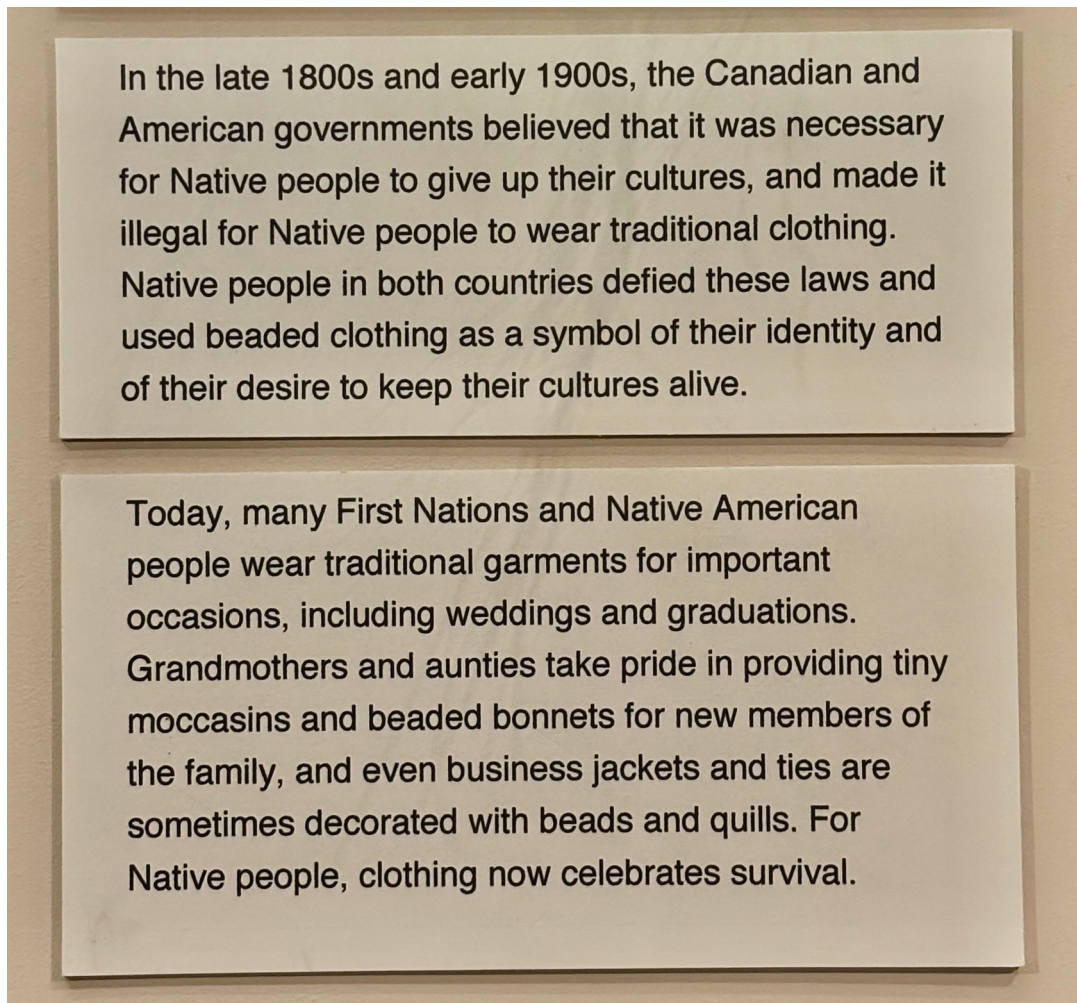
¹⁸⁰ Penrose 2020, 90; Foster 2004

¹⁸¹ Case 10.A

Native American Clothing

Native American and First Nations people needed clothing which protected them from the cold. They also used clothing to express important values: industry, generosity, respect for animal beings, and especially kinship. Men brought home animals to their wives, mothers, or sisters; women tanned hides and produced clothing for their families.

It takes about 40 hours to tan a hide. A shirt or dress requires two hides, and one moosehide provides moccasins for two adults for a year. Beadwork and porcupine quillwork are very skilled and time-consuming tasks. Still, women took great pride in producing evenly tanned, soft hides and in making garments which were finely sewn and beautifully decorated. Such clothes served as a travelling art gallery for a woman's skill and told of her love for her family.



Figures 3.5 and 3.6

Photographs taken by author, shows how the main case label looks in-situ.
Labels transcribed in Appendix A.

This label humanizes the objects in the case as well as emphasizes that Indigenous North Americans exist in the modern day by mentioning how traditional clothing has been incorporated into modern-day practices. It also mentions the colonial pressure INA peoples have faced to abandon their cultural practices and beliefs, though it does not acknowledge the colonial circumstances under which many of the older items in the case were collected. The mention of modern-day practices helps visitors connect Indigenous clothing with Western practices to de-exoticize them, and to lessen the sense of a timeless ethnographic past many cases in the PRM convey. This is also aided by modern items in the case like the ‘Crow

Country' t-shirt, which provides a visual cue to visitors that this case concerns living cultures and peoples. The display label for the t-shirt reads:

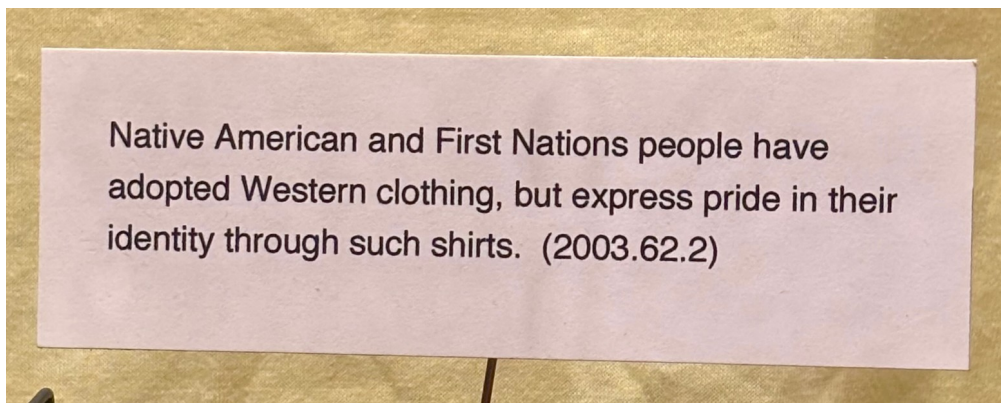


Figure 3.7

Photograph by author. Label transcribed in Appendix A.



Figure 3.8

PRM photograph of Object 2003.62.2.
Archival information in Appendix A.



Figure 3.9
Blackfoot and Crow County shirts in Clothing case. Photograph by author.

The display label for the shirt does not mention the year the shirt was made, but it is obviously a modern t-shirt with bright colours that emphasize its modernity, contrasting the visibly older Blackfoot shirt. The modern t-shirt subverts the stereotypical expectations of what a museum like the PRM would have on-display and possibly causes visitors to reconsider their own biases. The PRM has struggled for years to fix that “visitors and volunteers alike indicate they feel one of the most difficult elements to grasp in the museum is the concept of time: how do things relate to each other?”¹⁸² The Clothing case addresses

¹⁸² Sauvage 2010, 110

this. These labels and the t-shirt, while better displayed than objects in the pre-2003 case, still centre some colonial narratives and do not decolonially centre INA people's agency.

Solutions

The simple display label is lacking given the possible impact this t-shirt could have. The author has observed many PRM visitors freeze upon first seeing the 'Crow County' t-shirt, its eye-searing yellow colour and conspicuous modernity utterly baffling in a museum filled with more 'traditional' and older museum items. That attention-grabbing quality could be capitalized on to promote Indigenous people's rights and display their cultures empathetically. Currently the label states INA people "adopted Western clothing," which focuses on how they have conformed to colonial pressures and not on Indigenous autonomy. The case could promote a more decolonial narrative if the t-shirt label was used to say something about how Crow Tribe members have incorporated modern styles with their traditional symbols and commercialised them while also promoting their identities.

The label fails to give any object life history such as what the design on the shirt represents or how it was collected by the museum. Adding that the t-shirt was bought from The Indian Uprising Gallery in Montana, which showcases art from INA artists, could emphasize how the PRM has changed its collecting practices since the colonial era.¹⁸³ This information is already in the archival description and thus easy to add to the label.¹⁸⁴

Another issue with the case is the title, which is misleading and echoes old colonial ethnographic biases. The case is titled 'North American Clothing,' even though the only clothing represented comes from Indigenous North American people. If the title was accurate, clothing from many different North America cultures would be present, such as typical white American and Canadian clothing. But there is an assumption rooted in colonial practices that

¹⁸³ "Indian" n.d.

¹⁸⁴ 2003.62.2

cultures studied in museums are Indigenous and non-Western minorities, not white cultures which are considered ‘normal.’ Retaining this title perpetuates the idea that museums like the PRM are museums for “Other People.”¹⁸⁵ To reflect its contents the title of the case could be renamed ‘Indigenous North American Clothing.’

Some at the museum wish to “limit the amount of additional, contextualizing information to what can be provided without interfering with the number of objects to be displayed or getting in their way” in order to preserve the museum’s ‘special atmosphere’ and let the objects “speak for themselves.”¹⁸⁶ But the usual excuse of it being necessary to minimize the number of words in each case to retain the original ‘typological’ organization of the museum as homage to its namesake and to preserve its “unique Victorian atmosphere” rings false here, as this case is not typologically organized.¹⁸⁷

The idea that in the PRM “a post-colonial intellectual refurbishment has in fact... already been conducted, *even if it may not be fully apparent to the public*” is obtuse.¹⁸⁸ There has been no corresponding change in the public-facing INA permanent collections within a reasonable timeframe to reflect this ‘refurbishment,’ and so INA cases appear visually the same to PRM visitors. As of 2018, visitors’ comments about the permanent displays and galleries still found “confirmation of stereotypical images and concepts” instead of “develop[ing] a deeper understanding of humanity’s many ways of knowing, being and coping through time.”¹⁸⁹ If there is no visible difference in a case that encourages visitors to discard the outdated colonial sentiments these ethnographic museums were created to promote, then the museum has not realized its stated mission.

¹⁸⁵ Kuper 2023

¹⁸⁶ Coote 2012, 5

¹⁸⁷ Cranstone 1984, 4-5; 2017-18 AR

¹⁸⁸ Harris 2013, 10, emphasis added

¹⁸⁹ Broekhoven 2018, 73

Chapter 4: The Blackfoot Shirts

In 1998 Director Michael O'Hanlon decided the PRM's focus in the twenty-first century would be temporary exhibitions, internal change, and online resources through source community outreach, research visits, and publications.¹⁹⁰ The permanent collections were to be mostly left alone unless there was an urgent need to change them. The upside of this decision is that the museum proceeded with a series of innovative temporary exhibitions in collaboration with source communities that accurately presented many object life histories. The downside is that many of the museum's permanent displays, as seen with the totem pole and Clothing case, are now in dire need of updating to be truly decolonial.

Temporary versus Permanent Displays

For a museum, putting on a temporary exhibition is usually much easier and cheaper than making substantial changes to the permanent displays.¹⁹¹ A museum usually has a dedicated space for temporary exhibitions, designed to be versatile and multi-functional and relatively easy to change for every exhibition. Changes to a permanent display involves much more work.¹⁹² There are many long-term problems that must be solved with making permanent displays or significantly altering them. The display must be designed to last decades, the objects must be presented in a way that does not cause them to deteriorate from being continuously on display, part of the museum must be closed to the public while the display is being altered, etc.¹⁹³ Even just changing the labels and not the whole design of the case takes a considerable amount of work, as creating each label is a long process of decisions and edits done after copious amounts of research.

¹⁹⁰ Broekhoven 2018

¹⁹¹ Frey 2006, 408

¹⁹² Ibid; Shelton 2006, 75

¹⁹³ Frey 2006

Due to these inherent difficulties, permanent exhibits in museums are infrequently updated. Temporary exhibitions tend to be more progressive as they are created in line with evolving museum discourses.¹⁹⁴ Temporary exhibits in museums in the last few decades have shifted from displays of the museum's collections from the archives to highlight a specific artist or location or historical event, to "identify their works and themselves less with ethnographic and more with aesthetic and universal genres of display."¹⁹⁵ This can be seen in the shift in types of temporary exhibitions the PRM had done on Indigenous North American topics over the past twenty years: the 'Native American Photographs: Nineteenth-Century Images from the Collections' in 1996 versus 'Collaborating with the past: Native American portraiture by Shane Balkowitsch' in 2024.¹⁹⁶ The more recent exhibition is a collaboration with Indigenous people, includes modern objects showing Indigenous people as part of the modern world, and does not just display objectifying images of people.

Temporary displays "By their nature...[are] ephemeral."¹⁹⁷ They last weeks or months and are visited by a comparatively smaller number of people than the permanent collections receive over decades, though they are often a draw for new visitors.¹⁹⁸ As a result, temporary exhibits have less of a long-term impact on visitors than permanent collections. Half a million people visit the PRM every year, but only a fraction see the temporary exhibitions. For example, the online "Radical Hope, Critical Change" programme the PRM held in 2020 had a live audience of 3,757 people, and the recording had been viewed 4,317 times by the middle of 2021.¹⁹⁹ Those numbers are inconsequential when compared to the annual number of visitors to the PRM.

¹⁹⁴ Shelton 2006, 75-6; Ariese 2022

¹⁹⁵ Shelton 2006, 75

¹⁹⁶ "Collaborating" n.d.; "Regional" n.d.

¹⁹⁷ Hartig 2016, 212

¹⁹⁸ Frey 2006

¹⁹⁹ 2020-21 AR

The PRM has a room off the Main Court, past the bathrooms and elevator, specifically designated for “special exhibitions though it is a bit hidden and hard for visitors to find.”²⁰⁰ In 1995 a survey was done on 15,000 visitors after they had walked through the museum and “over half interviewed said they were unaware that there is a special exhibition gallery.”²⁰¹ The museum’s layout has not changed in the intervening years. The temporary exhibit room is hard to find, removed from the main museum to preserve its ‘unique atmosphere,’ which further limits the amount of visitors PRM temporary exhibitions receive.²⁰²

It is vital for the PRM to create temporary exhibitions in its efforts to “transcend the colonial circumstances of their making and also become resources for the making of decolonial futures.”²⁰³ Temporary exhibitions alone, however, do not change the essence of the museum, no matter how transformative.²⁰⁴ After temporary Indigenous community-oriented exhibitions are over, the PRM must build on the change started by these temporary exhibitions by making permanent changes in the relevant permanent galleries to further promote empathy and understanding of these cultures. Otherwise, the PRM is left with examples such as the ‘Visiting with the Ancestors: The Blackfoot Shirts Project.’ This innovative project collaborated with Blackfoot people and ended with a temporary exhibition at the PRM in 2013 but lacked follow through to translate that innovation into the permanent display cases of the museum.²⁰⁵

200 1994-5 AR

201 Ibid

202 Ibid

203 Basu 2024, 10

204 Prior 2006, 515; Vawda 2019

205 2012-13 AR

*Life History of ‘Shirt with Painted War Honors’ (war shirt 1893.67.1)*²⁰⁶

It is important to note war shirts, or hairlock shirts, are sacred to Blackfoot people.²⁰⁷ Three of the five Blackfoot shirts in the PRM are war shirts with hair locks containing human hair.²⁰⁸ These shirts are “considered to be living beings, and there are cultural protocols for handling and talking about such powerful persons.”²⁰⁹ Since war shirts are considered alive by Blackfoot people, utilising the concept of an object life history is extremely apt.



Figure 4.1

‘Shirt with Painted War Honors’ (war shirt 1893.67.1)
from the PRM Blackfoot website.

The early life history of these shirts is pertinent to the understanding of their positioning within the museum today. ‘Shirt with Painted War Honors’ was created approximately ten to twenty years before 1841 and used in battle at least once as it has red

206 Peers n.d.

207 2009-10 AR

208 Peers 2015, 98

209 Ibid

ochre paint on the inside indicating it was donned by a man wearing war paint.²¹⁰ It is made of elk hide, porcupine quills, plant fibres, and dyes from plants and minerals.²¹¹ The entire creation of this shirt was done with care, and collecting the materials and mixing paint required ceremony and prayer. The panels of white are quillwork, and the now faded paint on the lower half of the shirt “bears a record of its owner’s deeds in battle. The painted images show a tally of enemies killed, weapons and horses captured, and scalps taken.”²¹² There is no inscription documenting who wore or made these shirts.

In 1841, George Simpson, the Governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, obtained the shirt (presumably as a diplomatic gift), which was then donated to the PRM in 1893.²¹³ The rights to wear the sacred shirt would not have been transferred. As a result, the sleeves were sewn closed, transforming the shirt from clothing into an object.²¹⁴

In the late nineteenth century, the Canadian settler colonial government enacted colonial laws outlawing INA religious and cultural practices.²¹⁵ As a result, Blackfoot communities lost all their war shirts and the knowledge of how to make them. The tradition was almost extinct by the early 2000s, as for a Blackfoot man to have the right to own and wear a hairlock shirt there must be a ceremonial transfer from a man who already has that right. In 2010 there were “less than a handful of individuals who had these rights. There had been no ceremonial transfers of these rights.”²¹⁶ When Blackfoot community leader Frank Weasel Head visited the PRM in 2004 to see the hairlock shirts, he said no one in his community had ever seen a hairlock shirt.²¹⁷ Those that still exist are in museums in Britain and continental Europe, far out of the reach of most Blackfoot people.²¹⁸

210 Ibid

211 Peers n.d.

212 Peers n.d.

213 2009-10 AR; Peers 2015

214 Peers 2015, 160

215 2009-10 AR

216 Peers 2015, 83-4

217 Ibid

218 Ibid, 159

To alleviate the suffering caused by the deprevation of these shirts, all five of the Blackfoot shirts owned by the PRM were sent to Canada on loan in 2013. Transfer ceremonies were performed by Blackfoot community members using hairlock shirts made with knowledge gleaned from the PRM shirts, reviving the tradition and keeping it alive for future generations. Laura Peers reports PRM museum staff during this project saw the shirts move “from being museological specimens to being catalysts for the strengthening and renewal of Blackfoot culture.”²¹⁹ In other words, they came alive. Such powerful and culturally important objects in museums “are travelers, crossers—some strongly “diasporic” with powerful, still very meaningful, ties elsewhere.”²²⁰ Andy Blackwater explained the Blackfoot community still feels incredibly close to their shirts: “You are holding part of us there.”²²¹ Recognizing and acknowledging these ties is important for understanding “these animated objects from within the cultural epistemologies of those who created them.”²²²

Blackfoot Shirts Temporary Exhibition

There have been six temporary exhibitions specifically concerning INA artifacts in the past fifteen years at the PRM.²²³ All of these were created in collaboration with the relevant source communities. However, it seems only one of them changed the label of an object on permanent display in the Court, and even then the museum has failed to take further action to maintain these relationships or to fully decolonize the labels for this object.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 102

²²⁰ Clifford 1997, 213

²²¹ Peers 2015, 81-2

²²² Lyons 2002, 8

²²³ “Past” n.d.



Figure 4.2

Photo of temporary Blackfoot shirt exhibition in the PRM.
There are no photographs of the exhibit in PRM archives. Personal photograph taken by Dr. Laura Peers and shared with permission to use.

In 2013 the PRM did a temporary exhibition on the Blackfoot shirts in its collections: ‘Kaahsinnooniksi Ao’toksisawooyawa (Our ancestors have come to visit): Reconnections with historic Blackfoot shirts.’²²⁴ This exhibition followed six years of consultations, exchange visits at the PRM and museum staff visiting Canada, and all five shirts being transported to Canada for handling sessions with Blackfoot communities and temporary exhibitions at two Canadian museums.²²⁵ The project began in 2007 as a digitization project to provide First Nations communities with access to their heritage.²²⁶ Laura Peers won a grant to pay for the digitization project and for First Nations scholars to visit the PRM and provide knowledge on Blackfoot objects. This led to many more visits from both sides and eventually a temporary exhibition.²²⁷

²²⁴ 2012-13 AR, March-September 2013

²²⁵ 2007-2008, 2012-13 AR; Krmpotich 2011

²²⁶ Brown 2010

²²⁷ 2009-10 AR



Figure 4.3

Photo of Blackfoot shirt exhibition label in the Galt Museum in Alberta, Canada. The exhibits in the Galt and PRM were apparently very similar so the label from the Galt Museum's temporary exhibition of the shirts is used here as there is no record of the PRM's label.

The 2013 Blackfoot shirt temporary exhibit in the PRM displayed three of the shirts, a video of Narcisse Blood, a Blackfoot elder, and artwork and quotes from Blackfoot community members.²²⁸ Peers recalls in her book this temporary exhibition was intended “to encourage public consideration of the responsibilities of museums toward originating communities.”²²⁹ The exhibition was focused on amplifying Blackfoot voices and perspectives. Many visitors to the exhibition said the shirts should be repatriated and some “criticized the museum for portraying itself as “ethical” for undertaking such participatory projects when in fact it was unable to repatriate the shirts because of the university’s policy.”²³⁰

²²⁸ Peers 2015, 204-206

²²⁹ Ibid, 205

²³⁰ Ibid, 204-206

PRM staff seems to have truly listened to Blackfoot elders and worked with Blackfoot people—until the project ended.²³¹ The knowledge collected was typed into the archives, “absorbed into the collections of the centre...An asymmetric space where the periphery [Blackfoot people] comes to gain some small, momentary and strategic advantage, but where the centre [PRM] ultimately gains,” and the relationships with the Blackfoot community were allowed to fade.²³²

Peers acknowledges “museum policies and procedures may reinforce or destabilize colonial relations of power,” and museums must build and maintain long-term relationships in order to challenge these relations of power.²³³ The PRM had expressed its intentions to maintain and grow its relationships with Blackfoot people and agreed to a long-term loan “in principle” in 2011.²³⁴ The 2012-2013 AR emphasised “the Museum's continuing relationship with the Blackfoot people in caring for their sacred objects.”²³⁵ Members of the Blackfoot community expressed concern before 2015 that although the collaborative project had started good things “these might come to an end now that the shirts were back in the UK.”²³⁶

In 2015 Peers ended her book on a hopeful note that the museum would keep working with the Blackfoot community so that “this set of relationships might continue into the future to ensure that new generations of Blackfoot people continue to have access to the shirts.”²³⁷ Sadly, these relationships have not been built on since. Peers retired in 2019 and moved to Canada, taking all the relationships she created with her.²³⁸

The Blackfoot shirts remain in the PRM, with one shirt on display and no direct Blackfoot influence or quotes included in the permanent display case. The sentiments

²³¹ Ibid, 109

²³² Boast 2011, 68

²³³ Peers 2013, 240

²³⁴ Peers 2015, 162, 206

²³⁵ 2012-13 AR

²³⁶ Peers 2015, 206

²³⁷ Ibid

²³⁸ “Prof” n.d.

espoused in the temporary exhibit on the importance of amplifying Blackfoot voices were not added to the permanent display labels. Despite the progress the PRM made in acknowledging its colonial past, the colonial power differential between heritage practitioners and Indigenous peoples persists.²³⁹

Lack of Indigenous Control

Peers explains the Blackfoot community leaders who worked with the PRM on the exhibit received criticism from some in their community for not pushing harder for the repatriation or long-term loan of the shirts, which the PRM initially refused.²⁴⁰ Frank Weasel Head told Peers there was opposition to working with the PRM at all: “Our people wanted to keep them...but we convinced them...the project is going to keep going, they’ll come for a visit but it’s not going to end there.”²⁴¹ But another Blackfoot community leader, Allan Pard, disclosed they were out of options and needed a fast solution: “We are in a dilemma now, because if we continue the way we are, we’ll lose our culture.”²⁴² The few people who had hairlock shirt rights were old and might die before the shirts were returned, resulting in the loss of that tradition altogether. There were still colonial power dynamics in this relationship, the museum in the position of power over Blackfoot people.²⁴³ Blackfoot people were also required to see their shirts in museum spaces where museum staff retained ultimate authority. The shirts were loaned to Canadian museums and Blackfoot people had to drive up to six hours to see the shirts, and pay the cost of entrance to the special exhibition.²⁴⁴ Wendy Aitkens, a curator at the Galt Museum in Canada, said the cost could have “deterred others from coming to see the exhibition.”²⁴⁵ Peers says the PRM allowed visiting Indigenous groups to “disrupt established museum procedures” by touching or moving objects because

²³⁹ McNiven 2005; Chakrabarty 1992

²⁴⁰ Peers 2015, 99

²⁴¹ Ibid

²⁴² Peers 2015, 161-2

²⁴³ Clifford 1997; Ariese 2022

²⁴⁴ Aitkens 2015, 92-94

²⁴⁵ Ibid

“Indigenous people have the greater power when they insist that museums recognize their moral and cultural ownership of objects.”²⁴⁶ But officially loaning the shirts on a museum-to-museum basis kept them in the hands of a museum controlled by a former colonial power the entire time.²⁴⁷ A decolonial process would give source communities more control, of both information and objects, or at least give them veto power over how colonial museums present their cultural heritage, instead of museums just ‘allowing’ them access to their objects in a neocolonial paradigm.²⁴⁸

However, the PRM did not fully embrace decoloniality just by giving Indigenous people access to their own cultural heritage and consulting them for temporary exhibits of their material culture. Sumaya Kassim notes:

Too often people of colour are rolled in to provide natural resources – our bodies and our “decolonial” thoughts – which are exploited, and then discarded. The human cost, the emotional labour, are seen as worthy sacrifices in the name of an exhibition which can be celebrated as a successful attempt by the museum at “inclusion” and “decolonising”, as a marker that it – and, indeed, Britain – is dealing with its past.²⁴⁹

Using Indigenous knowledge but not allowing Indigenous control is still centring attention on the museum and its needs in the long-term. Blackfoot knowledge holders did not have power over the temporary or permanent displays of their objects nor over the subsequent publications on this project. They were only “advisors” and knowledge holders for the projects, which demonstrated the unequal power dynamics and emphasised that the inequalities of power created by colonial powers persist in the museum.²⁵⁰

246 Peers 2013, 239

247 Aldrich 2009

248 Boast 2011; Ariese 2022

249 Kassim 2017

250 Aitkens 2015; McLeod 2007

Colonial Power Structures in Museums

True decolonial archaeology and museum practice occurs when Indigenous peoples “have the inalienable right to control and represent their own heritage.”²⁵¹ Clifford recognized in 1997 that until museums fundamentally alter the ‘normal’ power structures they operate under, until they include Indigenous people in “the control of museum collections, they will be perceived as merely paternalistic by people whose contact history with museums has been one of exclusion and condescension.”²⁵² The idea of the ‘curatorial authority’ of European museums over all other voices is a condescending idea created in the twentieth century to infantilize non-Western communities that object to how European museums represent them.²⁵³

If Indigenous communities do not have curatorial control over displays that include their cultural heritage, then the modern museum has not been fully decolonized.²⁵⁴ Having control of their heritage in museums gives Indigenous peoples the ability to define themselves to non-Indigenous audiences.²⁵⁵ Museums have the legal right, through colonial systems of power, but not the ethical right to control the material culture and narratives of other people's histories.²⁵⁶ There is a significant but necessary mindset shift that must occur “From the standpoint of museum professionals...to call on ones “native informant”...[versus] to work with a co-curator.”²⁵⁷

251 McNiven 2005, viii

252 Clifford 1997, 207-8

253 Soares 2022; Clifford 1997; Macdonald 2022

254 Clavir 2002

255 Smith 2006, 291

256 Smith 2006, 287

257 Clifford 1997, 210-11

Current Permanent Blackfoot Shirt Display



Figure 4.4

Object 1893.67.1, 'Shirt with Painted War Honors' in Clothing case.
Photograph by author.

The Blackfoot shirts project changed one object and label in the NAC case. 'Shirt with Painted War Honors' was installed in the Clothing case in 2013 with new labels after the temporary exhibit ended.²⁵⁸ The Blackfoot shirt 'A Shirt that Tells its History' had stood in the case before, but had been damaged by moths. As a result, curators decided to replace it with a less fragile shirt.²⁵⁹ This was the only object and label recorded as changed in the Clothing case since 2003, despite the extensive institutional decolonization and several INA collaborative projects done by the PRM since then. Once again the museum changed only

²⁵⁸ 1893.67.1

²⁵⁹ 1893.67.4; Peers n.d.

what it must due to an object's poor condition. The current labels for the Blackfoot shirt in the Clothing case reads:

Blackfoot shirt, made 1830–40, collected in 1841 at Fort Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, by Sir George Simpson and Edward Hopkins of the Hudson's Bay Company. Made of animal hide (elk, mountain sheep, or deer), porcupine quill, sinew, human and horse hair, paint. (1893.67.1)

The war honours painted on this shirt record one Blackfoot man's war deeds: the war parties he went on, the weapons he captured, and the enemies he killed. The locks of hair are from scalps and captured horses. The porcupine quillwork refers to relationships with powerful sacred beings.

From the late nineteenth century Blackfoot communities were under severe pressure to give up their culture. Today, contact with heritage items such as this shirt is important to Blackfoot people as a means of strengthening identity. In 2011, the Museum loaned the shirt to two museums in Alberta and invited 500 Blackfoot people to learn from the shirts through guided handling and sharing knowledge. Following this, Blackfoot people decided to revive a ceremony connected with hairlock shirts in order to honour men who had helped their people.

For more information and photographs, visit the project website at:
<http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/blackfootshirts/>



Figure 4.5

‘Shirt with Painted War Honors’ in Case 10.A. Photograph by author. Label transcribed in Appendix A.

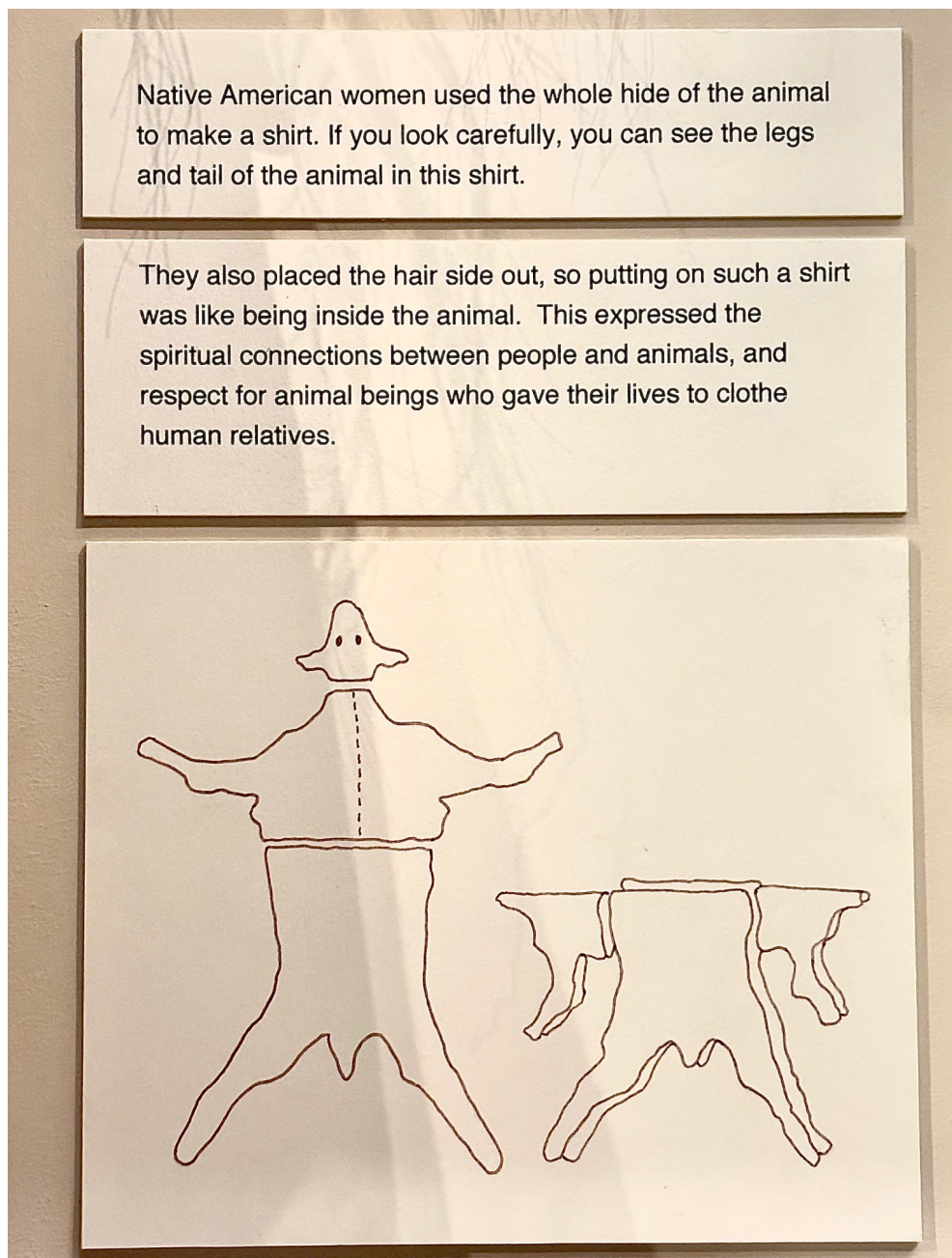


Figure 4.6

The second label and accompanying diagram explains how the Blackfoot Shirt was made. Photograph by author. Label transcribed in Appendix A.

The Blackfoot shirt is displayed with more care and detail than most of the other objects in the case. However, the labels leave out many details from the temporary exhibition, including that the shirt is sacred to Blackfoot people and considered a living being and the museum obtained this shirt through colonial processes. It also leaves out the name of the

shirt, given to it by the PRM, denying that humanizing aspect to this display label.²⁶⁰ There are no first person quotes from any Blackfoot people. Clearly, these permanent labels were likely not created with Blackfoot input. Compared to the Blackfoot temporary exhibition, which was created in dialogue with its associated living culture and included direct quotes from Blackfoot people, these labels are lacking. As Ariese affirms, if Indigenous people are ‘allowed’ to “participate in the workings of the museum, but their work is not valued, not used...they lacked any real power.”²⁶¹ If communities are asked to participate in the creation of a temporary exhibit, but their views are not included in the relevant permanent displays afterwards then that change was temporary, not long-term.

There is a website link, which has more information on the Blackfoot project.²⁶² The website has not been updated since at least 2019, as it directs any questions to Dr. Laura Peers who retired in 2019. The website is not geared towards non-academic visitors, stating “The site is intended to support researchers, teachers and students who wish to learn from the shirts.”²⁶³ Information is a bit scattered around the site with no singular cohesive document containing a more in-depth explanation for a visitor who does not want to spend several hours reading different documents.

The shirt received a relabelling and a link to a website with lots of information, but there are no first person quotes in the label nor is there any indication of the real importance of these shirts to Blackfoot people in the physical case. There is little in the Clothing case which reflects a decolonial understanding that Indigenous communities should be consulted and have power over the display of their objects. Additionally, the Blackfoot shirt is made with human remains and is a sacred ceremonial item. It should then be treated and displayed with much more care.

²⁶⁰ Soares 2022, 2

²⁶¹ Ariese 2022, 40

²⁶² “*Kaahsinnooni*” n.d.

²⁶³ Ibid

Solutions

The Blackfoot website has a short booklet about ‘Shirt with Painted War Honors’ under the ‘About the Shirts’ tab.²⁶⁴ This booklet details much of the life history of this shirt, including what it is made of and how it was made, the sacred aspect of the shirt, details of its decorations, and up close pictures of the shirt.²⁶⁵ With this booklet and information from the rest of the website it would be relatively easy for a curator to assemble a full life history of ‘Shirt with Painted War Honors.’ Including direct quotes from Blackfoot people and a photograph of a modern Blackfoot shirt would emphasise to visitors this is a living tradition practiced by a living culture. These could be acquired by reaching out to Blackfoot community members who consulted on the temporary exhibit and potentially help to reignite those relationships. It would be relatively simple to add a few pages to this already existing booklet and then put a copy with the Clothing case, perhaps attached to a string and resting in a small open box attached to the front of the case if continually printing out copies proves financially strenuous.

The massive amount of incredible work the PRM staff has done researching these items has not translated to the museum’s influence on the public, wasting an incredible amount of effort, time, and money. More importantly, these failures continue to perpetuate subconscious negative stereotypes about Indigenous cultures belonging to the past.

The QR code solution, mentioned in Chapter 2, which would link visitors to an Indigenous controlled website by including a QR code in the display case or even with each object label, would be an inexpensive quick fix. It would be powerful for Blackfoot people to have direct control of the narrative of such an important object to their culture and would return the voices and agency of these objects and Blackfoot peoples to the display case.

²⁶⁴ “*Kaahsinnooni*” n.d.

²⁶⁵ Peers n.d.

Comparison to Star House Pole and Haida Collaborations

‘Shirt with Painted War Honors’ has a parallel history in the PRM to the Star House Pole. Both are currently displayed without their names, but have immaculately researched booklets written by Peers that contain the life histories not included in their display cases that are not easily accessible to visitors. These booklets provide a simple solution for displaying the life histories of their objects in the museum without the need for expensive and time-consuming changes to the permanent cases.

The Haida and Blackfoot research collaboration projects are eerily similar in their outcomes. Both Indigenous communities spent an incredible amount of time and energy giving information to the museum, information that was recorded in the archives, displayed temporarily, and then forgotten about. These relationships were then left to rot as the museum moved on in search of new communities to work with. Certainly, Star House pole and ‘Shirt with Painted War Honors’ are displayed with more detail than most of the rest of the Clothing case and have more information than many label-less objects in the museum. But the PRM loses the opportunity to make considerably more progress in their decolonial agenda when it stops these collaborations after a few years when they have only made a little bit of progress.

The PRM’s continued prioritization of temporary exhibitions over changing the permanent collections, at least the INA cases, is clear. The Blackfoot shirts were a one-time temporary loan and temporary exhibition, instead of a permanent loan of the shirts or long-term relationship, because the PRM seems to only be able to act when absolutely necessary. This is similar to how the Clothing case was only updated in 2003 because of pest problems. In order to live up to its mission statement, more must be done. As PRM curator Paul Basu says, “there can be no return to a pristine, pre-colonial world, but perhaps there are ways of taking care and attending to the consequences of these traumatic histories—ways of “staying

with the trouble.””²⁶⁶ Since Oxford policies do not allow the PRM to return these shirts to Blackfoot people, the museum can at least “stay with the trouble” by displaying this material culture in a more decolonial and empathetic manner to visitors.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ Basu 2025, 82; Haraway 2016

²⁶⁷ “*Human*” n.d.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

As holders of one of the largest accumulations of INA material culture in the world, museums in Britain like the PRM have the responsibility to permanently decolonize their INA collections and displays, both temporary and permanent.²⁶⁸ Museums are seen as “impenetrable centers of self-validating authority;” the general public sees museums as the arbiters of truth.²⁶⁹ The general visitor walks into a museum and assumes that what is on display and written on the labels are factual and correct representations of history. PRM visitors have indicated they “see the museum as a trusted source of information.”²⁷⁰ The museum, while taking on the role of a “learning community” for source communities, activists, and Indigenous groups, must also embrace its role as controller of truth by taking extreme care with what and how the PRM presents its collections. The knowledge the PRM deploys to its half a million visitors every year through how its displays are curated must be unbiased, well researched, and acknowledge past failings.²⁷¹

Understandably, decolonization of an entire collection takes time, dedication and funding. The time for impactful, long term change at the PRM is now. The dedication is clearly present considering the PRM staff have been working for decades to decolonise the museum. The only question remaining is whether sufficient funding can be obtained to carry out the stated mission of creating cross-cultural understanding. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that with very limited funding, combined with the will to change, an opportunity currently exists to bring meaningful change to the INA collection.

First, the practice of prioritizing temporary exhibits over permanent collections must end. There is a dearth of long-term benefits for the public at-large. Second, a full time curator specializing in the Americas must be hired. Third, there must be material changes to the

²⁶⁸ Davy 2021; “ICOM” n.d.

²⁶⁹ Ariese 2022, 98-9

²⁷⁰ Broekhoven 2018, 70

²⁷¹ Vawda 2019

permanent INA display cases. The addition of QR codes linked to websites controlled by INA groups and giving visitors access to already well-researched booklets that include the life histories of INA objects are quick and simple fixes.

Ultimately, the PRM has a responsibility to stop the words and display techniques used in its collections from contributing to subconscious perpetuations of colonialist values.²⁷² If the funds cannot be found to carry out the PRM's decision to communicate ethically, then now is the time to return these objects to their original owners.

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Appendix A: Full Display Labels and Archival Information for Examined Objects

Everything in this appendix is sourced from the PRM's archives.

Chapter 2

- Figure 2.2

- Object 1998.267.262.6, 1910 photograph of PRM:

Stereocard views of display cases and totem-pole in the Court, taken from the west side of the Museum looking east, slightly raised from Court level.

These images might have been taken by Alfred Robinson who took several early photographs of the museum interior, *Circa* 1910 (undated: early 1900s, after 1901).

- Figure 2.3

- Object 1901.39.1, Haida Totem Pole label:

Label reads: 'HAIDA TOTEM POLE / Canada, Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii) / Massett Village, Star House. / 1901.39.1 / This totem pole is from the Haida community of

Masset. It originally stood outside Star House, which belonged to chief Anetlas (c. 1816 - 1893). The pole was raised at a potlatch marking Anetlas' adoption of a young girl. A potlatch is a ceremony at which a person is given family rights; it involves reciting family lineages in front of witnesses. The guests are given gifts, and their acceptance of these marks their agreement to uphold the rights transferred to the person in that potlatch. The pole is carved with figures that remind viewers of how ancestral beings bestowed certain rights and property on a family. The figures depicted on this pole are, from the top: Three seated figures or watchmen / Bear eating a frog with a bear cub between its legs. / Bear holding a human with two bear cubs at its feet. / Raven with a human between its wings. Today, these figures and their stories are still part of Haida culture. The pole came to the Pitt Rivers Museum in 1901, donated by Professor E.B. Tylor. It was purchased for \$36 and shipped by rail and steamer.'

Chapter 3

- Figure 3.3:
 - Object 1940.4.05, bust of Plenty Coup:

Pre-2003 display label from archival picture: "WAR BONNET OF EAGLE PLUMES OF TYPE WIDELY DISTRIBUTED IN LATE 19TH CENTURY/SIOUX INDIANS, DAKOTA, c.1930." Under the black and white photograph of Plenty Coups it continues "PLENTY COUPS (1848-1932) WAS A CHIEF OF THE CROW INDIANS. A TRIBE NOW SETTLED IN MONTANA."

The black and white photograph of Plenty Coups included in the label cannot be located in the PRM archives. War bonnets are also colloquially known as headdresses.

Archival information: Plaster cast bust of Plenty Coups, Plains Crow Chief / 1940.4.05 / USA / Plains -> Crow / The cast is white all over. Realistically sculpted, with hair styled in two plaits and eyes finely portrayed. The bust sits on a square plinth inscribed 'A-RAH-DZEE-

AH-USH' and 'PLENTY COUP CROW'. The back of the bust is inscribed 'H.W.Hendley
Sculpt. Aug. 27 1909.' and 'U.S. NAT. MUSEUM' / Field collector: Unknown Collector /
PRM source: Department of Human Anatomy, Oxford University Museum of Natural History
/ Acquisition date Loaned: 1940.

- Object 1939.8.32B, Dakota war bonnet:

Archival information: War bonnet made of tail quills of the Golden Eagle, with beadwork
head band with geometric pattern. / 1939.8.32B / USA South Dakota / Plains -> Oceti
Sakowin - Sioux -> Dakota / Field collector: Albert Green Heath / Purchased: 1939 / Chicago
Ill. - War bonnet, made of tail quills of the Golden Eagle. Belonged to Chief Holy Rock Sioux
(Dakota) Indians South Dakota \$25.00.

- Figure 3.5:

- First half of main case label of Case 10.a, Main Court, PRM

Label reads: 'Native American Clothing: Native American and First Nations people needed
clothing which protected them from the cold. They also used clothing to express important
values: industry, generosity, respect for animal beings, and especially kinship. Men brought
home animals to their wives, mothers, or sisters; women tanned hides and produced clothing
for their families. It takes about 40 hours to tan a hide. A shirt or dress requires two hides, and
one moosehide provides moccasins for two adults for a year. Beadwork and porcupine
quillwork are very skilled and time-consuming tasks. Still, women took great pride in
producing evenly tanned, soft hides and in making garments which were finely sewn and
beautifully decorated. Such clothes served as a travelling art gallery for a woman's skill and
told of her love for her family.'

- Figure 3.6:

- Second half of main case label of Case 10.a, Main Court, PRM

Label reads: 'In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Canadian and American governments believed that it was necessary for Native people to give up their cultures, and made it illegal for Native people to wear traditional clothing. Native people in both countries defied these laws and used beaded clothing as a symbol of their identity and of their desire to keep their cultures alive. Today, many First Nations and Native American people wear traditional garments for important occasions, including weddings and graduations. Grandmothers and aunties take pride in providing tiny moccasins and beaded bonnets for new members of the family, and even business jackets and ties are sometimes decorated with beads and quills. For Native people, clothing now celebrates survival.'

- Figure 3.7:

- Label of object 2003.62.2, a yellow t-shirt, from Case 10.A, Main Court, PRM

Photograph reads: 'Native American and First Nations people have adopted Western clothing, but express pride in their identity through such shirts.'

- Figure 3.8:

- PRM archival photograph of object 2003.62.2, Crow County T-shirt

Archival Information: Yellow T-shirt with a motif in the centre of the chest consisting of a circle in which is depicted a red and yellow sunrise over green hills, a white tee-pee flanked on either side by a war bonnet, at the foot of the teepee is a club and the words 'Crow Tribe' in black. Written under the circle are the words 'Crow Country'. / 2003.62.2 / Canada Montana Bozeman / Plains -> Crow / Field collector: Laura Peers / Date collected August 2002 / Date made: Circa 2000 / Accession entry: Part of a collection made by Laura Peers when on field

work in Canada in 2002. Some items from this collection were given to the Museum's handling collection. This item was purchased from the Indian Uprising Gallery in Bozeman, Montana for US \$5.00.

Chapter 4:

- Figure 4.2
- Photo of the temporary 'Kaahsinnooniksi Ao'toksisawooyawa (Our ancestors have come to visit): Reconnections with historic Blackfoot shirts' temporary exhibition in the Galt Museum in Alberta, Canada. Taken from the Galt Museum website on their temporary Blackfoot shirt exhibition:

<https://www.galtmuseum.com/exhibit/kaahsinnooniksi-aotoksisawooyawa-our-ancestors-have-come-to-visit-blackfoot-shirts>

Label reads: "These five Blackfoot war shirts are visiting Blackfoot territory for the first time in 160 years. They were given to the University of Oxford in England in 1889 by Edward Hopkins, a senior Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) officer. Hopkins visited Fort Edmonton with Sir George Simpson, the Governor of the HBC, in 1841. Many Blackfoot people met with Simpson at this fur trade post; and the shirts may have been part of a diplomatic exchange. Blackfoot visitors to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford have said how important it is that people from their communities should see the shirts. They asked if the shirts could be brought home for a visit so that Blackfoot people could learn from them. This exhibition explores how these shirts came to be in England and what they mean to Blackfoot people today." From the Galt Museum website on their temporary display on the Blackfoot Shirts.

[The label is incorrect, as only three of the five shirts are war shirts, designated by their hair locks.]

- Figure 4.4

- Photograph of the first object label for object 1893.67.1 in Case 10.A, Main Court, PRM

Label reads: 'Blackfoot shirt, made 1830-40, collected in 1841 at Fort Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, by Sir George Simpson and Edward Hopkins of the Hudson's Bay Company. Made of animal hide (elk, mountain sheep, or deer), porcupine quill, sinew, human and horse hair, paint. (1893.67.1) The war honours painted on this shirt record one Blackfoot man's war deeds: the war parties he went on, the weapons he captured, and the enemies he killed. The locks of hair are from scalps and captured horses. The porcupine quillwork refers to relationships with powerful sacred beings. From the late nineteenth century Blackfoot communities were under severe pressure to give up their culture. Today, contact with heritage items like this shirt is important to Blackfoot people as a means of strengthening identity. In 2011, the Museum loaned the shirt to two museums in Alberta and invited 500 Blackfoot people to learn from the shirts through guided handling and sharing knowledge. Following this, Blackfoot people decided to revive a ceremony connected with hairlock shirts in order to honour men who had helped their people. For more information and photographs, visit the project website at: <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/blackfootshirts/>'

- Figure 4.5

- Photograph of the second object label with diagram for object 1893.67.1 in Case 10.A, Main Court, PRM

Label reads: 'Native American women used the whole hide of the animal to make a shirt. If you look carefully, you can see the legs and tail of the animal in this shirt. They also placed the hair side out, so putting on such a shirt was like being inside the animal. This expressed the spiritual connections between people and animals, and respect for animal beings who gave their lives to clothe human relatives.'