



Documentation of Cultural Objects at the National Museum of Natural History

The Repatriation Office of the National Museum of Natural History was established in 1991 with the purpose of responding to Native American requests for repatriation of human remains and cultural items. One of the primary functions of the office is to determine the extent to which cultural objects held by the Museum are culturally affiliated with contemporary Native American groups and to assess if the items fit the criteria of object categories that can be repatriated under the law. Under the NMAI Act these categories include associated funerary objects, unassociated funerary objects, sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony. In the case of associated funerary objects, the accurate identification and interpretation of the cultural affiliation of the object can also play a critical role in determining the cultural affiliation of the human remains with which they were found. Resolving the cultural affiliation of the cultural objects and evaluating their status as claimable items can be a time-consuming and challenging task but it is one that the Museum and the staff of the Repatriation Office take very seriously.

The documentation protocol for cultural objects was developed to facilitate the repatriation process by compiling all relevant information about the requested items so that the museum and the requesting tribe can make fully informed decisions regarding how the objects should be handled, housed and to determine the ultimate disposition of the object. To date, 87,565 archaeological cultural objects and 166 ethnological cultural objects in the collections of the National Museum of Natural History have undergone the documentation process and been repatriated to the appropriate culturally affiliated tribes.

Documentation, based on the physical examination of the cultural objects, is an integral part of the repatriation process. Information on the shape, size, material and manufacture of the cultural objects and information about the physical condition of the objects is evaluated, along with museum records, archaeological and anthropological information, and traditional knowledge to help identify the affiliation of cultural items to Native American groups. Documentation serves to verify existing museum records. It also forms part of the permanent record of the Museum's compliance with the repatriation mandate and affects the arrangements made for transfer of cultural objects to Native representatives. Information assembled and permanently archived at the Museum as a record of repatriation is subsequently available to Native groups for their own records and use.

The paragraphs below provide specific details on the kind of information recorded during documentation and the significance it has to the repatriation process. More information is available should the communities want to further understand this process. It should be noted that the Repatriation Office uses only techniques that are non-invasive and non-destructive. The cultural objects are not modified at any point during the examination.

A listing of the cultural items present

The first step in preparing cultural objects for repatriation is to retrieve the requested objects from collections storage. The Repatriation Office specialist documenting the cultural objects then creates a detailed list of the items in each catalog entry.

How this process works

- Creating a list of the cultural objects that are present verifies the information in the accession record about what objects should be present. If items or parts of objects are missing, they will be searched for and if not located, the Repatriation Office will determine why they are missing.
- Frequently, the objects in a single catalog number represent two or more distinct items. For example, many glass beads may have been accessioned into the museum as a single “lot” or set of beads under one catalog number. This process established the exact number of items being considered.

How this assists with repatriation

- The Repatriation Office establishes the number of objects in question.
- The Repatriation Office determines if all of the objects that are reported for a specific catalog number are presently in the collections.
- If objects are not located, the Repatriation Office can determine whether they were exchanged or misplaced.

Benefits for the community

- Knowing the number of objects may influence the disposition of the objects decided on by the community.
- The community can be assured that the museum has accounted for all of the items being returned as part of the repatriation.

Photographs and other Remote Sensing

Photography plays an important role in the repatriation process by creating a visual record of each cultural object and its condition in the museum. Other forms of non-invasive remote sensing such as x-rays, CT-scans, and x-ray fluorescence (XRF) analysis are sometimes used to document attributes of the items and their condition that are not detectable to the naked eye or standard photography.

Photography

Standard photographs are taken of all of the cultural objects. Other photographs and close-ups are taken when the condition of the item is unusual or when it is necessary to document particular details. Repatriation Office specialists use photographic and other facilities within the museum to take the images or readings.

Other Remote Sensing Techniques

Many non-invasive remote sensing technologies are available that can be applied to objects to address specific questions about their construction, the materials from which they were made, and the methods of manufacture which may have significant bearing on their age and cultural affiliation. Techniques like x-raying and CT-scanning can be used when an item cannot be unwrapped or opened because of cultural concerns or because the materials from which it was made are too fragile to manipulate. X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analysis can be used to identify some materials used in manufacture and can sometimes detect the presence of harmful substances or pesticides such as arsenic, lead, and mercury.

How this assists with repatriation

- Images can be sent to tribes to assist community members in identifying and understanding what objects are under consideration.
- Images can be sent to tribal members and other persons with expertise in cultural material to gather information about the objects that may affect the findings of affiliation.
- Photography or other techniques can help identify significant attributes or materials and manufacturing details that reveal the cultural affiliation of the item or the role it may have served as a sacred object or object of cultural patrimony.
- The permanent records are part of the National Museum of Natural History exit procedure.

Benefits for the community

- Photographs can be used by the tribe to educate tribal and non-tribal members about the items, their history and importance to the tribe, and to inform others about the repatriation process.
- Photographs may allow elders and traditional religious leaders unable to travel to the museum to make informed decisions about how an item should be handled or housed, and whether the item should be repatriated or left with the museum under special arrangements.

- If remote sensing techniques, such as XRF analysis, detect the presence of pesticides or other potentially harmful substances, the tribe can work with the museum to explore ways to minimize any potential hazards from handling the object after it is repatriated and put back into use in the community.

The Documentation of Physical Characteristics of the Object

By visually examining and measuring the cultural object, a Repatriation Office specialist can frequently determine significant facts about the object such as its origin, age, cultural affiliation, and function. Each item is measured, the materials from which it was made are recorded, details about how it was made are noted and formal stylistic characteristics are documented. Any of these attributes can be the source of key information that reveals the cultural affiliation and/or age of the item. Standard regional or cultural terminologies and typologies are used as references to aid in the identification of the item.

How this process works (examples)

- Projectile points or ceramics are often diagnostic of a specific regions and time periods and can correspond to a specific “earlier identifiable group” or known cultural affiliation.
- Some key types of objects differ only in their dimensions so the length or width of a tool can make the critical difference as to which group made or used it, or when it dates to. For instance, different types of projectile points may be identical in form, but longer points are defined as one type and shorter points are another.
- The materials from which an item was made can reveal when or by whom it was made. For example, European brass and other copper alloys can become weathered and look tarnished so that they look indistinguishable from the native copper that was used for thousands of years prior to European contact. A non-destructive analysis using x-ray fluorescence can reveal the age of the object and possibly its cultural affiliation.

How this assists with repatriation

- The objects themselves can reveal their cultural affiliation, and if associated with human remains, they enable the identification of the affiliation of the remains by association.

Benefits for the community

- The community may decide on appropriate burial treatment for individuals buried with certain objects that might differentiate their status or role in their society. For instance, some items might be recognized as having belonged to a shaman and therefore, may require special handling, or if associated with a burial, might indicate that those remains with which they were found should be handled in a special way.
- Objects may reveal knowledge and practices of ancestors and would be valuable to the present day tribe or native community.
- Object documentation may reveal techniques and stylistic details that would be useful or interesting to artisans interested in restoring into use in traditional crafts. The objects could therefore become a resource for cultural revitalization.

Conclusions

The National Museum of Natural History conducts non-invasive examination of cultural objects as part of our repatriation mission. We hope that our good faith effort to determine cultural affiliation and to return remains and cultural objects to culturally affiliated groups requesting repatriation will form the foundation of more open and collaborative relationships in the future. We will work closely with designated tribal representatives to determine cultural affiliation and to insure that their desires concerning the disposition of the cultural objects are met.