

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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Centering Indigenous Voices in Museums

By Zane Cuthbertson, Coordinator, Heritage Support Grants

Museums have long displayed Native American artifacts and presented Native American history in ways that lacked context or meaningful consultation. Displaying Native American cultural heritage is more than just glass cases and wall labels. It requires consultation with those whose culture and history is being depicted so that the story can be told in a way that centers the voices of those represented. Moving beyond a perpetuation of colonialism in the museum space requires confronting these practices.



John Herron Art Institute, exhibit gallery, 1912 (Indiana Historical Society)

Meaningful representation begins by centering Indigenous perspectives in curation, artifact handling, and interpretation. It requires that we acknowledge potential harm caused, reject stereotypes, and amplify Native American voices. This is not just an effort to make museums more inclusive, but also justice and reconciliation.

Tips for working with Native American history & artifacts

- Work with tribal representatives to co-create exhibits and displays. Let representatives of the culture being displayed decide which items are displayed, how they are interpreted, and what the story is.
- Prioritize returning culturally sensitive items with tribes when necessary/possible. Acknowledge that some objects may belong with tribes, not in museums.
- Avoid exoticizing artifacts. Label them from an indigenous perspective that acknowledges the living cultural tradition it is related to.
- Feature contemporary Indigenous artists, leaders, and issues. Show that Indigenous cultures are living and continuously evolving.
- Decolonize interpretation by training staff and volunteers to reject stereotypes and use an active voice when speaking about Indigenous peoples.
- Build relationships with Indigenous communities so that collaboration persists rather than treating it as a checklist item.
- Acknowledge that not all tribes have available personnel for collaborative efforts, but that they may be able to push you in the right direction.
- Listen and commit to being open-minded in collaborative efforts with Indigenous peoples.

Consider these questions before working with Native American history & artifacts

- How can you better involve Indigenous communities in shaping our exhibits?
- Who from local tribes may partner with your organization to advise?
- Do you have potentially culturally sensitive objects in your collection?
- Are you using the names and terms that Indigenous communities prefer?
- How can you describe objects in ways that acknowledge their cultural significance?
- What stories about items in your collections would help your visitors understand their context?
- How can you build relationships with local tribes? And how can you make them ongoing partnerships?
- What training do your staff/volunteers need to engage with these topics?
- How can you help visitors understand historical and contemporary indigenous cultures?
- How can you address concerns about changes while staying committed to progress?
- What would a process for repatriating an item look like and when is it necessary?
- How can you incorporate Indigenous languages into your exhibits?
- How can you accept and welcome community feedback?
- How can you acknowledge complex histories in a way that is truthful and healing?

Resources

- [Standards for Museums with Native American Collections](#) (School for Advanced Research)
- [Essential Understandings](#) (National Museum of the American Indian)
- [Frequently Asked Questions](#) (NAGPRA) (National Park Service)
- [Caring for sacred and culturally sensitive objects](#) (Government of Canada)

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Teaching & Learning About Native Americans](#) (National Museum of the American Indian)
- [Resource Library - Decolonization](#) (American Alliance of Museums)

Collection Trainings

- **June 10** [Environmental Monitoring](#) (Northeast Document Conservation Center)
- **June 12** [Connecting Art Curators Globally: North American West Coast](#) (The Association of Art Museum Curators)
- **June 12** [Creating an Integrated Pest Management System](#) (Northeast Document Conservation Center)
- **June 20** [NAGPRA Steps to Repatriation-Summaries](#) (National Park Service)
- **June 24** [Handling Book and Paper-Based Collections: A Primer for Staff, Interns, & Volunteers](#) (Northeast Document Conservation Center)
- **June 26** [Digitization: Planning for Success](#) (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

Recorded Webinars

- [Indiana Historical Society Webinars](#)
- [National NAGPRA Program Webinars](#) (National Park Service)
- [Museums Today: NAGPRA Compliance, Meaningful Collaboration, and Transparency in Exhibitions](#) (Association of Academic Museums & Galleries)
- [Success Stories: Improving DEAI Programs](#) (MuseumExpert)
- [Caring for Native American Collections](#) (Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy)

[Local History Services](#)

(317) 232-1882 | localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org

