

# Museum Anthropology

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## Abstract

Museum anthropology is a vigorous and growing perspective within anthropology. It applies insights from cultural anthropology to the assessment of how museums represent cultures, and increasingly looks to museum collections as the material record of cultures over time. It is a theoretical approach, distinct from technical aspects of museum operation, such as collections care and exhibit production, although in best practice, each informs the other. Degree programs in Museum Studies may include training in either theoretical museum anthropology or operational aspects, although more programs focus on the latter aspect and are not specific to the discipline of anthropology.

## INTRODUCTION

American anthropology first developed in museums, and collections were considered key sources of primary data as well as a core product of field explorations. During the twentieth century, anthropology became disconnected from museums as the discipline relocated its institutional center to universities and shifted its research interests to intensive local studies of particular cultures and societies with an emphasis on original fieldwork (Bouquet, 2001; Collier & Tschopik, 1954; Stocking, 1985; Thomas, 2010).

Anthropology has arrived now at a new conceptual and practical moment when museums and collections are again integral to the discipline, with the Council for Museum Anthropology that is an active section of the American Anthropological Association. There is a large and diverse body of relevant theory to be applied, there are numerous publication outlets, and there are clear opportunities for mutually productive collaboration with the source communities in which collections originated.

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

In the past 30 years, anthropology has developed a new understanding of museums, defining them as sites for the production of knowledge as well as its dissemination to a wide audience.

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## REFLEXIVE TURN

Renewed interest in museums was stimulated by the reflexive turn in anthropology. As places of public display of knowledge, they have provided an ideal site for anthropology to examine itself. The discipline has found museums “good to think with,” reflective of intellectual currents and tensions within the field. A series of key texts appearing in the 1980s and the early 1990s inspired researchers to conceptualize new ways to look at museums and their anthropological holdings, focusing particularly on exhibits (Ames, 1986, 1992; Clifford, 1988; Karp & Lavine, 1991; Karp, Kreamer, Lavine, & Lavine, 1992).

Museums and their role in public culture have become a frequent subject for ethnographic analysis. These studies have applied classic anthropological methods—observation, interviews, and archival research—to create a new genre of reflexive museum ethnography. The overarching theme is the cultural and social politics of representation. Some key texts are the papers published by Clifford (1988, 1997), Haraway (1989), Handler and Gable (1997), Macdonald and Fyfe (1996), Pearce (1992), and Stocking (1985) to name but a few. These studies have examined museum and related heritage institutions as sites for remembering (and forgetting), as evidence of social change, and as the colonial legacy of shifting asymmetrical power relations. Exhibits and displays in museums, expositions, and other venues have been a focal point for many scholars who concentrate on how people interact with objects in terms of intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic experience. Scholars have dealt critically with how visual representations have influenced views of cultures, races, and gender in the past and the present, offered challenges to canons of authenticity, and presented nuanced explorations of commodification.

A rich literature examines collecting histories and the complex ways artifacts have entered museums and left them (e.g., Barringer, Barringer, & Flynn 1998; Byrne, 2011; Cardinal & Elsner, 1994; O’Hanlon & Welsch, 2000; Wintle, 2013). A common theme is the impact of colonialism, while other topics are broader intellectual history, questions of how well collections represent the material culture of source communities, and the bias evident in different collecting strategies and resultant museum collections. For example, Gosden and Larson (2007) apply network analysis to the Pitt Rivers Museum to demonstrate that museums are as much about social relations as they are about objects.

Museums and the objects they contain have also been examined as part of broader cultural processes in the modern world, including globalization, nation building, identity, tourism, and appropriation (Handler, 1988; Kaplan, 1994; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Macdonald, 1998; Phillips, 1998; Rankin & Hamilton, 1999). The processes by which objects become defined as art

and the markets in which they then circulate have received substantial attention within anthropology (Gell, 1998; Marcus & Myers, 1995; Morphy, 2007; Myers, 2001; Phillips & Steiner, 1999; Plattner, 1996). Tracing the life histories, or “biographies,” of objects has proven a particularly productive strategy for understanding not only their place within the culture of origin but also the paths by which they arrived at museums (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986).

#### INDIGENOUS INTEREST

Indigenous people in many parts of the world have also rediscovered museums as sites of importance and locations where they are actively seeking to reclaim their tangible and intangible cultural heritage. They have used museums to assert rights to self-definition in interpretation and to exercise cultural sovereignty over objects. These processes have highlighted an often-troubled history of anthropological engagement, for which museums frequently stand as a visible symbol. Museums are acknowledged to have preserved a material heritage that in many cases would otherwise have been lost, but also signify histories of colonialism, repression, and appropriation (Edwards, Gosden, & Phillips, 2006; Karp, Kratz, & Szwaja, 2006; Lonetree, 2012; Peers & Brown, 2003; Ziff & Rao 1997). While much attention has focused on human remains since the passage in the United States of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, indigenous claims have been pursued worldwide for the return of a wide array of museum materials; internationally the UN is involved with museums as parts of human rights, intellectual property, and social justice initiatives (Biolsi & Zimmerman, 1997; Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1996; Fabian, 2010; Fforde, 2004; Mihesuah, 2000).

Museums are recognized as powerful sites of cultural representation, more persuasive, and with broader reach than anthropological texts. Indigenous people in many nations are asserting claims to self-representation and control over curation. The inclusion of “native voice” in exhibits and collections management is now routine, and co-curation is common (Lonetree & Cobb, 2008; McCarthy, 2011; Sleeper-Smith, 2009). Many source communities are developing their own museums, taking on the challenge of making meaning from objects in ways that promise new insights from indigenous scholars working in interdisciplinary endeavors (Isaac, 2007; Kreps, 2003; Stanley, 2007; Watt & Laurie-Beaumont, 2008).

#### CURRENT TRENDS

Anthropology has experienced an explosion of interest in objects in recent years. Objects have emerged as integral to sociality, an active agent in social, political, and economic relations. This material turn, shared with

a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, frames a number of theoretical stances under diverse terms, such as materiality, material culture, visual culture, and thing theory (Hicks, 2010). While much of the research in anthropology is rooted in ethnographic observation or archaeological fieldwork and analysis, the paradigm of materiality provides a framework for the examination of extant collections in museums. This is still a new research front for application in museum anthropology, with methods not yet fully defined to interrogate the host of objects awaiting study in the light of current interests. At present, the strongest engagement with collections-based research derives from programs in the United Kingdom, whereas in the United States, programs focus more strongly on engagement with source communities, primarily Native Americans. A recent British workshop assessed the future of ethnographic museums (Harris & O'Hanlon, 2013; Zetterstrom-Sharp, 2013), while one at the Smithsonian looked at the engagement of indigenous people with virtual access to collections (Bell, Christen, & Turin, 2013).

#### THE MATERIAL MOMENT

The reappearance of objects in anthropological research has broad roots but sources of particular influence in museum anthropology include Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (Appadurai, 1986), Glassie's anthropological folklore (Glassie, 1999), and Hodder's approaches to archaeology (Hodder, 1986). Artifacts once again are recognized both as the material representation of human actions, beliefs, and social institutions and as an active agent in creating them. The literature on objects has now reached sufficient density that a series of handbooks and readers on the nature of material culture have been published. Those oriented toward anthropological concerns include the volumes by Bennett and Joyce (2010); Candlin and Guins (2009); Hicks and Beaudry (2010); Miller (2005, 2009); and Tilley, Keane, and Küchler (2006). Much of the current work is densely theoretical, focused on defining principles of object agency, rather than exploring the history or form of any particular material culture.

Building upon Marcel Mauss's 1925 classic critical analysis translated into English as *The Gift*, scholars have revisited various dimensions of exchange, ranging from individual or interfamilial exchanges to commodities passing through world markets, and the ways in which gifts affirm social relationships. Comparative mapping of social and material worlds is now the subject of many scholars. The study of how materials are collected and transmitted also infuses work in cultural studies. Objects are central in studies of how value is created and transmitted and the aesthetics of actions and practices that inform the social worlds within which objects

emerge. With long-held sensitivities to the material world, anthropologists contribute to international and local discussions of heritage and connections between tangible and intangible forms of culture (Bell, 2008; Bouquet, 2012; Edwards, Gosden, & Phillips, 2006; Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2007).

The field of visual anthropology has similarly begun to engage museum collections. It has extended beyond early roots in filmmaking as an ethnographic method and the analysis of moving image records, to a broader interest in photographs as both image and object (Banks, 2001; Edwards, 2001) and from there to a consideration of the anthropology of art, including non-Western traditions and media (Banks & Morphy, 1997; Bouquet, 2012).

#### RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS AGENCY

Engagement with members of source communities, descendants of the people among whom many museum objects originated, has stimulated an interest in exploring the influence of indigenous people in the assembly of collections. The major issues in this research topic were defined by O'Hanlon and Welsch (2000), who made clear that overarching narratives of exploitation and appropriation have often obscured the active roles of indigenous individuals in processes of exchange. Recent edited volumes bring together new case studies on the topic (Byrne, 2011; Harrison, Byrne, & Clarke, 2013). Recognition of indigenous agency in the creation of older museum collections remains a challenging domain for ongoing scholarship, requiring peeling away constructed narratives of primitivism and disempowerment (Bell, Brown, & Gordon, 2013). Engagement with descendants has proven a productive strategy, providing both specific historical memories and more general knowledge about the processes through which object exchange is negotiated (Greene, 2001, 2013).

#### CO-PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

As noted, one of the most powerful forces drawing anthropologists into museums has been indigenous interest. Communities around the world that have been the source of collections are interested in engaging with this material heritage; they seek to revitalize their connections with it in broader and more complicated ways that go beyond claims for physical possession. Initially conceived as an ethical obligation, often in response to repatriation claims, anthropologists are beginning to develop a broader body of theory as well as practice in relation to the co-production of knowledge about museum collections, as the dialogue around objects offers a new type of field site to consider how culture is questioned, researched, and constructed (Isaac, 2007, 2011; Kreps, 2003; Lonetree & Cobb, 2008; Sleeper-Smith, 2009).

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While the topics laid out above will continue to engage the anthropology productively for many years, others are likely to emerge.

### COLLECTIONS AS RESEARCH DATA

Museums are databanks filled with objects available for study. However, will anthropology be concerned with questions to which this data is relevant? Two broad trends within anthropology suggest that museum collections will again be viewed as research data. One trend is an increased commitment to empiricism, emerging in the wake of dissatisfaction with postmodernism. Objects constitute observable data points, and those preserved in public repositories are accessible for reexamination and verification. Foundational work in museum ethnography and collaborative work with source communities have provided a basis for placing these objects within various frames of knowledge, ensuring that the new empiricism will be anthropologically informed. The other trend is an increased interest in the temporal range typically covered by ethnographic collections, some 100–200 years. This middle range is a compliment to the focus on the present inherent in ethnographic observation and to the deeper time frames most commonly investigated in archaeology. Ethnographic museum collections offer a unique source of information reaching back some 200 years, covering a period during which societies around the globe changed dramatically. Collections often represent the only possibility of recovering past native voices and recognizing indigenous agency, too often silenced by the written record.

### THE VIRTUAL MUSEUM

Museums are committing major resources to providing online access to collections in the form of digital images of objects, creating a new form of engagement. Scholars are just beginning to examine the conceptual implications of online access to images, as virtual objects circulate in cyberspace. This promises to be a field of lively debate engaging theory drawn from media studies, visual anthropology, and materiality as well as wider learning theory.

### THE NATURAL HISTORY CONNECTION

Anthropology has long been uncomfortable with its historic and current ties to museums of natural history. Late twentieth-century anthropological critiques of museums revealed the racist foundations for placing the study of

non-Western people within a natural history paradigm, and museum-based anthropologists have struggled to overcome this unhappy legacy. However, museum anthropology is now beginning to reassess its relationship to natural science, acknowledging that the schism between nature and culture is a Western epistemological construct not shared by all societies. Some anthropologists are exploring the positive aspects of positioning cultural materials within natural history museums, such as serving source community interests in exploring a fully emplaced heritage, facilitating interdisciplinary investigation of environmental change, and encouraging serious consideration of traditional environmental knowledge.

#### THEORIZED PRACTICE

Ethnographic studies of museums have provided a foundation for theorized museum practice, a specialized domain of applied anthropology. This perspective is now most often applied in the field of public engagement (i.e., exhibits and programs), as museums are major sites where anthropological understanding is presented to the public. An important question for the future is the extent to which theorized practice can productively infuse and inform wider museum practices, ranging from preservation to registration and cataloging, or whether “best practices” developed in Western museums should be widely applied as nations around the world expand their museum capacity (Kreps, 2003; Lorente, 2012; Shelton, 2013).

#### NEW CHALLENGES

The full development of museum anthropology to meet its promise will require overcoming challenges in both human resources and the appropriate application of technology.

#### THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

Describing anthropology’s twentieth-century disinterest in museums, one scholar noted “the social and the material parted company so radically (in some places) as to produce a kind of knowledge gap between historical collections and the intellectuals who might have been expected to work on them” (Bouquet, 2001, p. 2). While universities now offer many courses in museum and material theory, only a few have faculty able to provide training in how to use museum collections as data collection sites within broader anthropological inquiry. They lack either personal expertise or hands-on access to museum resources. Yet before collections can be a useful source of information for the questions of today, emerging scholars will

have to envision new methodologies to interrogate data assembled in other times for different purposes. Anthropology needs to develop systematic training in collections use, more widely extending the type of training now offered by the Smithsonian's Summer Institute in Museum Anthropology under a series of grants from the National Science Foundation (see [anthropology.si.edu/summerinstitute](http://anthropology.si.edu/summerinstitute)).

A related knowledge gap is expertise in material culture—the ability to recognize and assess artifacts on the basis of materials, techniques, and styles, and a familiarity with their temporal and cultural associations. Long devalued in anthropology as a form of antiquarianism, a strong knowledge of the material record is an essential skill to make meaningful observations and to assess incomplete documentation in museum records.

#### THE RESOURCE GAP

A second major challenge is the general shortage of resources within museums, and the direction of scarce resources toward public engagement and technical aspects of museum professionalism rather than toward anthropological concerns. Curatorial positions are being reduced in number and influence. This resource shift limits access to collections for research purposes and reduces the incorporation of anthropological thinking into public engagement. Ironically as anthropology embraces the material turn, museums are increasingly shifting resources toward digital surrogates and online access, assuming that virtual access will serve audiences more efficiently than physical access. Alarmingly, pressed by the high cost of professionalism, some universities are divesting themselves of anthropological holdings or consolidating them within art museums. Unless anthropological collections are viewed as essential to teaching and research, only a few universities will be able to justify maintaining them.

#### TECHNOLOGICAL AGENDAS

Museum anthropology has yet to organize around any major agenda that would articulate pan-institutional needs and define resource requirements. At present, it is a largely theoretical, discursive field, defining issues and implementing actions largely at the local level. Wider action will require a broad vision of museum collections as a distributed record of the material past, leading to greater collaboration among scholars and museums to make that resource useful. Better information access and development of technological resources will surely be a part of whatever wider vision emerges.

Significant research on broad topics requires the use of larger sets of cultural material than any single museum can provide, but discovery of relevant



material is now a tedious process impeding research. Overcoming this limitation will require linking repository databases without flattening the complexity of cultural histories through imposition of overly standardized nomenclature. Numerous current regional efforts such as the Reciprocal Research Network based at University of British Columbia ([rrncommunity.org](http://rrncommunity.org)), all largely developed to serve source communities, can provide case studies of various models and difficulties in practice. Of related concern is the fact that most museum documentation remains in analog form with digital catalogs containing only a few fields of information.

New forms of technical analyses also have the potential to yield transformative new information about museum collections. The possibility to source and date constituent materials offers enormous potential to increase the types of research that could be undertaken with objects, with studies ranging from dating of commercial dye stuffs to preferential use of avian species in religious regalia to the biological relationships revealed by strands of human hair accidentally woven into baskets by their makers.

#### OBJECTS, KNOWLEDGE, AND POWER

The debates that are likely to occur within museum anthropology relate to the many publics that museums serve, underlying ethics of anthropological practice and the circulation of knowledge. Access enabled by digitization has generated both conflict and creative collaborations, generating new thinking about intellectual property (Bell, Christen, & Turin, 2013; Jackson, 2010).

Objects embody knowledge, and knowledge is powerful. The politics of knowledge control will be increasingly debated within museum anthropology as two trends of the “information age” converge. One is the increasing expectation for online open access to publicly held resources such as museum collections. The other is the increased recognition of the entanglement of intangible cultural heritage and material heritage, and acknowledgement of the rights of source communities. Some community members celebrate new forms of access while others express concerns about public access to the knowledge that objects embody. Cultural traditions may stress the importance of controlling knowledge, often along lines of age, gender, descent, or social position.

#### INTERDISCIPLINARY ENGAGEMENT

Museum anthropology is beginning a profitable engagement with three other disciplines: visitor studies, information science, and material science. At present, museum ethnography and visitor studies stand as largely separate ways of examining public interpretation in museums. An emergent

cross-fertilization of method and theory should enrich both fields. An even more promising engagement is now forming between museum computerization, thus far heavily focused on technical capacity, and theoretical aspects of information science, which are beginning to include anthropological insights on systems of knowledge. Material science has long had an impact on archaeology, ranging from materials analysis to dating, and it offers the capacity for similar application to a wider array of more recent materials in museums as research questions emerge. Related biological analyses ranging from DNA sequencing to isotope studies as well as more conventional identification processes will also support more rigorous questioning of received wisdom about past human-environmental interactions.

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#### CANDACE S. GREENE SHORT BIOGRAPHY

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She is the author of many publications, including *One Hundred Summers: A Kiowa Calendar Record* (University of Nebraska Press, 2009) and *Silver Horn: Master Illustrator of the Kiowa* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2001) and senior editor of *The Year the Stars Fell: Lakota Winter Counts at the Smithsonian* (University of Nebraska Press, 2007). She curated a companion online exhibit *Lakota Winter Counts*, which was honored by the United Nations with a World Summit Award and received a Webby Award in 2005.

#### RELATED ESSAYS

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Culture and Cognition (*Sociology*), Karen A. Cerulo

Misinformation and How to Correct It (*Psychology*), John Cook *et al.*

Micro-Cultures (*Sociology*), Gary Alan Fine

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Cultural Heritage, Patrimony, and Repatriation (*Anthropology*), Richard Handler

Ethnography in the Digital Age (*Methods*), Alan Howard and Alexander Mawyer

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Exploring Opportunities in Cultural Diversity (*Political Science*), David D. Laitin and Sangick Jeon  
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Alternative Polities (*Archaeology*), Roderick J. McIntosh  
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