



# PANORAMA

Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art

ISSN: 2471-6839

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**Cite this article:** heather ahtone, Bully Pulpit, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2018), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1662>.

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The study of art and material culture will advance by inquiring how museums can make connections between the tangible and the intangible, particularly in relation to those collections that have been gathered from non-Western communities. This is especially true when one interrogates the multiplicity of colonial constructs that led to the creation of these collections, a topic that merits remembering because it fundamentally relates to connections ruptured in the collecting process. Considering the ways that emerging digital technologies offer to reconnect an object with its cultural life and people merits investigation and offers opportunities that have been heretofore prohibited by a focus on the tangible materials of an object's life. The question leads also to a related question: how can an institution reconnect objects with their culture and, then, present these relationships to its audiences? This very question sits at the forefront of my work as we establish the American Indian Cultural Center and Museum as an Indigenized institution serving the diversity of Oklahoma's thirty-nine tribal communities. It is particularly relevant to the significant loan of more than one hundred objects from the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian that we are incorporating into our inaugural exhibitions.

As a curator who has worked primarily with contemporary art, it has been my experience that art, encompassing aesthetically created cultural objects, is a conduit through which connections are made between artists and audiences, a reflexive process that requires a vital pulse. This experience is materialized through the art and experienced as part of cultural exchange. Art is a powerful force within this exchange. Because of this potential, one desires to give advantage to the best of that potential. Expecting that an object disconnected from its community can stand alone, or as a synecdoche, is folly. And yet most museums function in this way.

Resulting from the perception that an object's material is its primary attribute, audiences have been fed a diet of Indigenous arts presented in comparison to and drawing upon aesthetics proffered through museological approaches grounded in a Euro-American tradition. Consequently, museums have relied on an anemic presentation of Indigenous arts for too long, isolating the object from its community, its songs, its prayers. The result is that these objects languish in vaults longing to be reunited. The personhood of the objects has been dismissed, ignored, and denied by the nature of being made of materials that are perceived within a Western construct as inanimate. The disconnect of Western culture (Euro-American culture broadly), placing humans in a hierarchy above all other life forms and denying personhood to forms that are categorized as "inanimate," informs this museum

practice. Within Indigenous cultures, in contrast, everything has a life force that animates it within our world. Even the objects that fill museum collections.

Museums are institutions that remain grounded in the colonial project, and their concepts of ownership and representation are guided by Western cultural practices and beliefs. Stating this provides a background for the inquiry at hand: how can museums make connections between the tangible and the intangible? If museums continue to perceive their role as being to present material objects, relying on their visual assets even while making the connections that can be materialized through digital resources, there is still a component of this work that remains missing. The object remains in isolation, and while the audience may be able to intellectually make the connections needed for their own edification, the object's personhood remains denied.

The question that rests in my hands—and in the hands of other Indigenous curators and allies—is can an institution not only virtually reconnect the objects with their communities, but also create reciprocal relationships that will benefit the objects and the communities (both Indigenous and museum audiences alike) and thereby begin to heal the bonds that have been violated through the practice of collecting? This question is posed recognizing both the concern institutional leaders may feel for the materials they steward and the fear of the racially biased assumption that the only beneficiaries of this reciprocal relationship would be the Indigenous community. I would argue that the relationships between objects and Indigenous community genuinely benefit the institution and its non-Indigenous constituents, as much if not more than the Indigenous community, and that the benefit of seeking reconciliation through the fostering of relationships and reciprocity serves all those willing to humbly submit to the process.

Acknowledging that relationships can be mediated through an object and allowing for its cultural tenacity to yield results that cannot be imagined within the current discourse, institutions are situated in a distinctly privileged position to engage in this exploration and discourse. I would suggest that the digital terrain can best serve as the visualization of this reconnection between object and community, but that the object must also be allowed to regain its subjectivity and be reconceived as having personhood. Through this process, categorical definitions will likely be reshuffled, and collections may need to be met anew by curators, audiences and communities. Beginning with those objects for which this may seem most easily accessible will open portals that will allow us to imagine the museum of the future, one where the museum will facilitate the relationships by assuming the responsibility for caring for and about the objects in concert with their community, creating the potential to achieve the respect needed to become the home where we all gather and feast. In this process, we will draw upon the wisdom of our ancestors and create the path toward a future, one where museums are more than an archive of objects and where new stories emerge and are created. That is the future I am working toward and praying for daily.