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Textualizing Intangible Cultural Heritage: Querying the Methods of Art History

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In February of 2018, I participated in the AHAA panel at the College Art Association. The AHAA session theme was “America Is (Still) Hard to See: New Directions in American Art History.” The title was based on the Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition, *America Is Hard to See*, which was lauded for “fresh perspectives” and the representation of African American artists, but which included only one Native American artist.¹ There continues to be a lacuna around Native American art in art history textbooks and in the worlds of “American art” writ large. But even within my sub-discipline of Native American art history, there are other issues that are “hard to see.” I want to look at the issue of *intangible* cultural heritage, which has become invisible due to the incessant art-historical focus on that which is tangible and *visible*.

To start, some history: in December 1921, a Kwakwaka'wakw chief, Dan Cranmer, held a potlatch on remote Village Island, on the central British Columbia coast. Some say it was the biggest potlatch on record, with witnesses receiving unprecedented amounts of payments as many inherited privileges were passed to the next generation. But the Canadian Indian Act prohibited potlatching in Canada from 1885 to 1951. Consequently, forty participants were arrested and twenty-two were sentenced in the Provincial Courthouse in Vancouver. Faced with the untenable choice of going to jail or surrendering their potlatch regalia—masks, blankets, and coppers—some of the accused gave up their wealth, and the confiscated goods were sold to private collectors and museums.

Although the potlatch ban was lifted in 1951, the repercussions echo to this day. Museums that hold collections often unethically acquired during those dark years must now work to re-earn the trust of affected communities. In 2008, Kwakwaka'wakw artist Marianne Nicholson's *House of Ghosts* illuminated the façade of the Vancouver Art Gallery, which is housed in what was the Provincial Court House. Nicholson's thirty-foot wide projection imposed the lintel and house posts of a Kwakwaka'wakw Big House, transforming the colonial site of the potlatch prosecutions into a virtual place of convening for the spirit and human world. *House of Ghosts* was intended to make people see the histories that are still hard to see, even if they are etched into the land under our feet and the buildings through which we walk. Her work asserts the ongoing presence of First Nations communities and

their powerful resistance to colonial abuses. The work asks us to consider if art can reclaim space. But as powerful as it was, Nicolson’s work was only a temporary intervention. The digital projection effected no tangible change to the building.

Nicolson claims that her work transformed the Vancouver Art Gallery into a Big House, but concomitantly it highlights the fact that the museum cannot be an actual Big House, and points to the failings of museums and institutions. The visual nature of most museum exhibitions of Northwest Coast work turns familial property into art and hides the critical histories and intangible connections that should inhere to cultural creations. As Nicolson notes, it is the performative act of singing and dancing in ceremony that animates much First Nations art through the interaction of object, actor, and audience. In that moment, meaning is co-constituted by the knowledge of all those involved—carver, singer, dancer, and witnesses. Museums excel at spotlighting the visual aspects of art but struggle to engage the fundamental sensorial and performative aspects of art tied to movement, song, and language. When objects are removed from their performative contexts, as is often the case in museum displays and text-based art-historical inquiries, their cultural meanings are deactivated, and they become artifacts of the dynamic moment of meaning.



Fig. 1. Yaxwiwe', Kwakwaka'wakw frontlet, originally Tsimshian made, late nineteenth century. Maple wood, abalone shell, paint, 9 3/8 x 9 x 3 in. Seattle Art Museum 91.1.47. Photography by Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse

By way of example, when this frontlet, a carved piece attached to a headdress with a long ermine-skin trailer (fig. 1), was sold to a collector in 1965, it was ripped away from the genealogical connections and inherited privileges that had catalyzed its public presentation during ceremonial gatherings in community. Research has brought to the surface the latent connections of the physical object to the intangible wealth of the community from which it originated. In this instance, the frontlet appears in an 1898 photo of Charles Nowell’s wedding, an event during which it and other family regalia and tangible wealth were used to transfer names, songs, dances and other intangible property, rights, and privileges, many of which are still held by Nowell’s descendants.

This same headdress also appears in a unique archival document from 1930—films made in the village of Tsax̱is (Fort Rupert) by Franz Boas and George Hunt with members of the Hunt, Martin, Wilson, and Williams families (fig. 2). The film shows this headdress being worn by dancer Lucy Martin Nelson. It is a rare document of the frontlet actually in use, in a dance during the Canadian government’s potlatch ban and only eight years after the potlatch prosecutions in 1921. In 1955, Kwagu’l chief Mungo Martin watched the film, recognized his daughter’s dancing, and recorded the song that was meant to accompany it. Together the film and audio provide a rare glimpse of this frontlet in a dance, its rhythm and movement as well as the performative kinship connections and inherited privileges that were validated when it was danced.



Fig. 2. Lucy Martin Nelson dances a Tlasula Dance (film still), filmed by Franz Boas and George Hunt, Tsax̱is (Fort Rupert), British Columbia, 1930. Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture

This frontlet is just one example that demonstrates the complicated relationships between object, dance, song, and—perhaps most importantly—genealogical connections. It also illustrates the fraught nature of archival materials and the methodological challenges to art history in uncovering the connections that material objects have with intangible cultural property. The archival material on this frontlet comes from five different museums and archives, but most importantly, that material has been reconnected with knowledge from the Hunt, Martin, and Wilson families and other community members who were consulted over time by Franz Boas, Erna Gunther, Bill Holm, and myself. This collaboration has clarified the record of the frontlet.

My inquiry at this current moment is to ask how museums and art historians can work harder to record and address these important connections. How might technology restore the connections between the tangible and the intangible that text-based art-historical practices and their often singular focus on the visual have damaged or elided? What would that look like, and how could it shape current museum and publication practices?

Traditional art-historical texts and even museum exhibits have rarely been able to evoke the full range of connections between the tangible and intangible. Moreover, it is clear that indigenous communities are actively engaged in the “archive,” using publications and collections to meet current needs.² Past events and people, as well as renewed customary activities, are often discussed in community as to how they are “inscribed in published works.”³ So, the risk of *not* striving for the fullest record has long-lasting impacts. Projects that work to reweave information fragmented among various institutions due to Western collecting practices can have concrete results.⁴

As caretakers of this knowledge (such as records of songs, dances, and names) and as caretakers of the collections of physical objects, museums must work with communities to determine how their cultural property (both tangible and intangible) will be cared for.⁵ How should issues of access and authority, consent and rights management, be handled with the Indigenous communities to which this heritage belongs?⁶ How can institutions that hold these fragments of knowledge work collaboratively with community necessary to reunite them?

It should be a core mission, function, and value for scholarly writing and museum information systems to support Indigenous communities’ urgent needs for access to, and use of, their own cultural heritage. We need to care for both tangible and intangible material and facilitate community connection to that material. Museums must learn how to support the desire to recreate objects and how to reactivate songs or dances associated with those objects and how to expand beyond storage shelves into new ways of documenting, understanding, and presenting context that challenge current cataloging and retrieval systems. Ultimately, we must rethink the academic categorization of objects and practices in ways that allow for multiple knowledge systems and priorities, including treatment of culturally sensitive and protected information.⁷

Digital publications have a unique capability to implement an art-historical approach to the visual object while integrating film, oral history, and song to activate the performative contexts and intangible rights and privileges that are key to robust analyses of these artworks.⁸ We can attempt to acknowledge, understand, and preserve the intangible materials that crucially inform the physical objects in museum collections, and—most importantly—we can engage in robust inquiries led by community priorities. These steps are critical for publications as well as museum practices.

We have the technology. It is time to get to work.

Notes

¹ Nancy Elizabeth Prophet (1890–1960), African American and Native American (Narragansett) sculptor, was the one native artist in the Whitney Museum exhibition. Recent programming at the Whitney Museum of American Art reveals a new initiative to support Native American and acknowledge traditional land and ongoing colonial legacies. See <https://hyperallergic.com/447207/the-new-red-order-the-savage-philosophy-of-endless-acknowledgement>.

² Many museums work with communities to bring historical knowledge from collections into conversation with living memory. Sven Haakanson’s [Angvaag Project](#) is one example at the Burke Museum. Kwakwaka’wakw historian Gloria Cranmer Webster discusses how the Franz Boas and George Hunt papers were used for many revitalization efforts including canoe carving, kerfed box making, and language revitalization in “Consumers, Then and Now,” in Laurel Kendall, Igor Krupnik, eds.,

Constructing Cultures Then and Now: Celebrating Franz Boas and the Jesup North Pacific Expedition. Contributions to Circumpolar Anthropology, Volume 4 (Washington, DC: Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, 2003), 362.

- ³ Daisy Sewid-Smith, “Interpreting Cultural Symbols of the People from the Shore,” in Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Jennifer Kramer, and Ki-ke, eds., in *Native Art of the Northwest Coast: A History of Changing Ideas* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 24; Marianne Nicolson, “In Order to Survive We Create,” in Sonny Assu, ed., *Sonny Assu: A Selective History* (Victoria: Heritage House, 2017).
- ⁴ Kimberley L. Lawson, “Precious Fragments: First Nations Materials in Archives, Libraries and Museums.” MLIS thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2004.
- ⁵ The passage of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act mandated that museums work with American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities on the repatriation and care of their material heritage. My call here is to think about extending these protocols and processes into the realm of intangible cultural heritage.
- ⁶ More museums are thinking about culturally-sensitive databases. One example is Mukurtu which was designed with Aboriginal communities “to empower communities to manage, share, and exchange their digital heritage in culturally relevant and ethically-minded ways.” See <http://mukurtu.org>. See also multiple publications by Kimberly Christian, one Mukurtu’s founders.
- ⁷ Karen Duffek, “Bridging Knowledge Communities at the UBC Museum of Anthropology,” a paper presented at the International Council of Museums International Committee of University Museums and Collections Conference, Mexico City, 2006.
- ⁸ Aaron Glass, Judith Berman, and Rainer Hatoum are working with a team of Kwakwaka’wakw advisors and contributors, including Andy Everson and Corinne Hunt, to bring greater cultural specificity and contemporary Indigenous knowledge into a new digital edition of Franz Boas and George Hunt’s 1897 book, *The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians*. See Aaron Glass, Judith Berman, Rainer Hatoum, “Reassembling the Social Organization: Collaboration and Digital Media in (Re)Making Boas’s 1897 Book,” *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 5 (July 2017): 108–32. For an expansive discussion of some of the issues raised in this Bully Pulpit essay, see also Aaron Glass, “Indigenous Ontologies, Digital Futures: Plural Provenances and the Kwakwaka’wakw Collection in Berlin and Beyond,” in Raymond Aaron Silverman, ed., *Museum as Process: Translating Local and Global Knowledges* (London: Routledge, 2015): 19-44.