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# The Art of Native Life: Exhibiting Culture and Identity at the National Museum of the American Indian

**RACHEL E. G. GRIFFIN**

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Within its short history as an institution and as a site of multilayered display and examination, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) has presented critical opportunities for the consideration of Native American art and material culture. Because NMAI is located at an important intersection between its audience of Native and non-Native individuals; its responsibility to Native communities and Native history; and its place within the Smithsonian Institution, it must strive toward complex, multifaceted goals and acknowledge Native and non-Native interests. To demonstrate these complexities, I examine one of NMAI's recent exhibit projects, *Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life along the North Pacific Coast*, in an effort to tease out the aesthetic and cultural composition of Native objects as perceived and promoted by Native and non-Native museum staff and Native community consultants. I review the operating philosophy and mission of NMAI and follow with a discussion of the object selection and presentation involved in *Listening to Our Ancestors*, an exhibit of which I was a museum-based cocurator and on which I have an intimate working perspective. I aim to add to our understanding of the different approaches to visualizing and displaying culture through this firsthand account of exhibit development and display at NMAI.

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Rachel Griffin is a museum specialist and collections information research assistant at the National Museum of the American Indian, where she has worked since receiving her PhD from the University of California, Berkeley in 2003. Although her recent research has focused on the Native tribes and nations of the North Pacific Coast, her doctoral research was focused on the American Indian art market and collecting community of the southwestern United States.

## CONSIDERING THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

W. Richard West Jr., the first director of NMAI, relates a story that was told to him by a good friend and colleague in Washington. The colleague was touring NMAI with a number of other friends, one of whom had been on the board of trustees of one of America's most renowned art museums. After the tour, and in apparent exasperation and frustration, she pulled the colleague aside and exclaimed, "I do not like this museum! It is not a collector's museum. Something else is going on here."<sup>1</sup> It's true—the NMAI is neither an art museum nor an anthropology museum. It does not attempt to comment on the objects' aesthetic value or use historic anthropological research to justify the cultural relationships evident within the collection in the majority of its exhibits and projects. If it is not art or anthropology, is it then a tribal museum writ large? Not really, but it certainly does serve the Native community; for example, NMAI recently sponsored its second national powwow, it regularly hosts tribal visitors to the collection, and it works toward the continued education of Native youth through resource center programs and outreach. NMAI is a place where something different is going on. And that something different is worth discussing when considering aesthetics, authenticity, and audience in Native American art and artifact.

One of NMAI's principal goals is to reassociate, even reacquaint its vast collections with the people who made them and "to interpret both in the communal contexts, past, present, and future, that give them continuing and holistic life."<sup>2</sup> Essentially, NMAI recognizes that there is a significance to objects—in their creation, use, and renewal—that far exceeds the tangible object's importance. Access to this dimension of meaning requires the direct involvement of those who live the heritage. For this reason, NMAI invites Native consultants to contribute to object selection, design, conservation, and display for exhibit projects.<sup>3</sup> This partnership of museum and nonmuseum professionals at the curatorial and exhibition table shifts the contexts of interpretation away from questions of aesthetics and authenticity and toward considerations of cultural exchange, complexity, and continuity.

A central component to NMAI's operating philosophy is the recognition that despite the remarkable beauty of much of Native American material culture, the original purpose in the making of those objects was not necessarily the creation of art. The Native people we now consider artists were not in the business of producing art objects per se. The importance of their creations did not reside in the object but in the fact that it reflected and embodied the processes—ceremonial and practical—that culturally defined the individual and the community.<sup>4</sup> As Bruce Bernstein suggests, "[NMAI's] collections are not mere objects or things, but rather ideas and words given form and substance. Making a piece increases its volume and tone by stretching the Native universe into other worlds, where it is accessible and knowable, whether for use at home or in the world of museums, curators, and collectors."<sup>5</sup> Just as there is no word for art in many Native languages, art for art's sake was not a predominant phenomenon. This history is constantly reinforced while working with Native individuals within NMAI's collection.

Native visitors, scholars, and consultants browse the collections, picking out pieces that are truly remarkable—whether for their workmanship, form, use, or story—yet I never had the sense that the objects are appreciated in isolation from their history, context of creation, or purpose.

Yet so much of Native American material culture is beautiful, and our consideration of these objects as art remains a dominant theme in conversations inside and outside of this country's museums. We are reminded that the relationships between objects, aesthetics, cultural contexts, and values are not straightforward, and multiple ways to consider this exist. Through its unique position as a national museum that works in direct collaboration with Native peoples, the NMAI provides an important opportunity to examine these relationships and consider the intersections between culture, objects, aesthetics, and visuality.

#### THE ART OF NATIVE LIFE ALONG THE NORTH PACIFIC COAST

Exhibited from February 2006 to January 2007 in Washington, DC, *Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life along the North Pacific Coast* is the culmination of five years of work between the NMAI and eleven Native nations of the Pacific Northwest. In its conception and execution, the project has sought to highlight NMAI's noteworthy collections of Northwest Coast material while also reassociating Native communities with collections at NMAI and advancing the working relationship between a national museum and its constituents. With a collection that could have easily been highlighted for aesthetic strength, what developed instead was a complex interplay of cultural vitality, notable art history, and multilayered material culture. With Native curators focused on ideas of ceremony, privilege, protocol, and reciprocity, intersections between lives and objects have played out on the exhibit floor in ways that are refreshing and insightful.

At the heart of *Listening to Our Ancestors* and most of NMAI's exhibit projects is the museum's steadfast belief that there is a continued relevance and authority to Native people's own understandings of who they are and how they present themselves to the world.<sup>6</sup> In general, NMAI considers itself a steward of the collection that it holds by federal mandate. NMAI works with an ever-increasing number of Native communities and seeks their advice in the handling, moving, and housing of the collection at its Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland, and in the display of the objects within its Washington, DC and New York City museums. One principle of NMAI's stewardship philosophy is that of participant-driven levels of access and preservation. As the museum's collections policy states, "Proper access is to undo the century of exclusionary practices of museums and academics in particular toward Native people and their cultural patrimony. But it is also about the intellectual access that creates a dialogue in regards to the collections and their meanings."<sup>7</sup> This principle leads directly to the reason why the NMAI works in deliberate partnership with indigenous people to represent Native culture and history.

Nearly seven years ago, in preparation for the collaborative project that has become the *Listening to Our Ancestors* exhibit, NMAI consulted with

guest scholars to determine the specific communities with which to work. The strength of the NMAI's collection of North Pacific Coast objects and the need to represent the diversity of the region's Native peoples were among the criteria used to select the specific communities. To determine individual representatives from within selected communities, endorsements were sought from tribal museums, tribal councils, designated repatriation persons, cultural committees, and other authorities. Fundamental to the process was NMAI's collection: the selected communities each had a significant number of objects within the collection, and the inclusion of each community created a balanced perspective of the coast's Native inhabitants. Accordingly, the communities involved in the exhibit include the Makah and Coast Salish of Washington; the Nuuchah-nulth, Kwakwaka'wakw, Heiltsuk, Nuxalk, Tsimshian, Gitksan, Nisga'a, and Haida of British Columbia; and the Kaigani Haida and Tlingit of Alaska.

In the spring of 2003, individuals from the eleven collaborating Native nations were given photographs of the objects in the museum's collection. They were asked to review the photos and begin to select the pieces that best represented their communities. These men and women became what NMAI calls community curators, and they approached the object selection and curation task from a spectrum of experience and with a variety of interests and goals. Because the exhibit project includes plans for the selected objects to return to their respective communities as temporary exhibits or loans, several community curators selected objects primarily because they were interested in bringing the items home for other community members to see. Other individuals selected objects based on sheer beauty and quality; and some set out to convey a very specific message with the objects and thus made their selections based on a cohesive story arc.

The community curators met together with NMAI staff and guest scholars to discuss object selections and exhibit content several times throughout the exhibit's development. The Makah Cultural and Research Center in Neah Bay, Washington, hosted the first comprehensive exhibit team meeting in September 2003, which brought together most of the Native communities, NMAI staff, and guest colleagues. The project's next meeting, in January 2004, was held in Prince Rupert, British Columbia and was hosted by the Tsimshian Nation and the Museum of Northern British Columbia. By this time, community curators had developed their object selections and exhibit themes and were able to discuss each section and how it joined with the whole. In April 2004, the eleven curatorial groups met among the museum's collection at NMAI's Cultural Resources Center outside of Washington, DC. This meeting was positive and productive: community curators were able to confer with each other regarding the collections, and they were able to work with teams of NMAI conservators, designers, and editors to provide a very real sense of how the exhibit was to take shape.

Each of these three meetings provided the space and time for the group to work as a whole, share the ideas that were being developed for each section, and discuss ways to connect the eleven sections into one unified exhibit. In the months between each whole-group meeting, community curators worked

in a variety of ways to develop their ideas and mold their object selections into a cohesive story and message. Community curators met with other community members, friends, and family, to learn more about the material culture and make links between the objects in the museum and their tribal history. NMAI staff along with two guest scholars also made several trips to each community to work with the curators in person and in small-group, section-specific work. The summation of this work is an exhibition of more than four hundred objects organized in eleven sections, each of which focuses on one participating community. Themes explored in these sections include ceremony, family, hereditary obligation and right, fishing and whaling, cultural and individual identity, and song and dance.

Exhibit accomplishments are not measured only within the museum gallery. Listening to Our Ancestors has provided the opportunity and momentum for many important developments among participating Native communities and institutions. In many instances, the project provided initiative for community members, tribal councils, and elders to meet and discuss aspects of their cultural heritage that had not been talked about in many years. Members of the participating Native nations speak about the project and the renewed efforts in cultural matters with great interest.

The project has also resulted in important museum-to-museum collaboration. NMAI has worked closely with the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology to reconstruct a Heiltsuk chief's settee, a significant collaborative effort and a highlight piece for the exhibition. In a somewhat unique situation, the settee was divided into parts upon its collection in the early twentieth century, and, in 1918, George Gustav Heye gave four of its decorative components to the University Museum in Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup> George Gustav Heye is the man who amassed the extremely large group of objects that now makes up the bulk of the NMAI collection. The exhibit has created the occasion for the components to be reunited and the settee to be reconstructed. Needless to say, this is a very exciting endeavor for the institutions and Heiltsuk community involved.

With a collection that easily could have been highlighted for aesthetic strength, what developed, instead, was a complex interplay of cultural vitality, notable history, and nuanced multilayered meanings. Also, throughout exhibit development there existed important intersections among the collection, the community curators involved in object interpretation, and the exhibit presentation, which was filtered through Native and non-Native museum staff and Smithsonian Institution standards. As the following examples will reveal, there can be disconnect between the visual-culture values expressed by the collaborating community curators and what is achieved and presented by the museum in the exhibit. What happens at this type of intersection to produce these results? And how might the dynamic be improved to reflect collaborators' values and perceptions more accurately? What follows is an analysis of a few exhibit selections to demonstrate this dynamic intersection.

## ACKNOWLEDGING LIFE THROUGH CEREMONY AND SURVIVAL

The Kwakwaka'wakw exhibit section focuses on the cycle of life as it is marked by Kwakwaka'wakw ceremony. Central to Kwakwaka'wakw life is the potlatch, and one of the potlatch's most important elements is the T'seka, or Red Cedar Bark Ceremonies. Barb Cranmer, the Kwakwaka'wakw community curator, chose this focus for her object selections because, as she explains, the ceremonial regalia and masks connect the Kwakwaka'wakw to their ancestral roots and make them a distinct people.<sup>9</sup> Most objects within the Kwakwaka'wakw exhibit are remarkable and stunning, so it is due to personal preference and general significance that I single out one object for discussion: a carefully carved, ornately painted Sun transformation mask (fig. 1).

During Kwakwaka'wakw Peace Dances, which form the second major part of the Kwakwaka'wakw Red Cedar Bark Ceremonies, the chief's relatives and extended family members wear headdresses of carved wood, sea lion whiskers, and ermine fur. When danced, eagle down inside of the headdresses floats up and over the sea lion whiskers, symbolizing peace. After each group of relatives has danced, a treasure is brought in representing a mythical creature or



**FIGURE 1.** *Representing the sun and several spirits, this carved and painted wooden mask has a painted muslin backing. When the wearer pulls the strings, the headdress expands, and the mask opens to reveal the inner spirit of the sun. This mask was created during the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (1870–1910) and is 46 by 52 inches. Courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (NMAI 11/5235). Photo by Ernest Amoroso.*



animal from the land, sky, or sea. The Sun transformation mask is part of the latter, and it represents the mythical being who descended to the earth in the shape of a bird, then changed into a man.

In the closed position, the central face, although basically humanoid, might also be interpreted as the face of a sea creature, given the crescent-shaped, gill-like design elements. When the outer face splits and opens, the inner face clearly reveals a male ancestor, given the black moustache and the humanoid characteristics. The human figure atop the mask is a representation of the sun in human form with its characteristic surround of rays. The cloth fan-like surround behind the standing figure folds shut in the initial presentation and fans out as the outer face opens. The human head, torso, and arms painted on the cloth surround are another representation of the sun in human form. And a sea creature is probably intended by the two profile images painted on the screen, given the spine- or fin-like projections atop the back.<sup>10</sup>

Part of this mask's significance lies in the history with which it is associated, a history colored by the Canadian potlatch prohibition from 1884 to 1951. Despite the government's potlatch ban, sociopolitical gathering, feasting, and dancing continued covertly in modified form throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1921, Dan Cranmer held a large potlatch that was raided by government agents. Regalia and masks much like the Sun transformation mask were confiscated, and many Kwakwaka'wakw men and women were arrested and jailed. The objects that were confiscated were sold by the Canadian government to collectors such as George Gustav Heye and made their way to national museums far from their proper place of creation and belonging. Subsequent investigation and repatriation has resulted in the return of many of these confiscated pieces, and because of these efforts, the objects embody a survival and persistence of Kwakwaka'wakw culture that is definitive and potent. The Sun transformation mask has strength because of this history and because of the potlatch's role in Kwakwaka'wakw culture. It is this strength of context and this objectification and celebration of survival that informs Barb Cranmer's selection of the mask and that makes this mask an important part of the exhibit as a whole.

Enter into the realm of exhibit display, however, and this important cultural and visual context meets with design and installation limitations. One wish in exhibiting this piece was to demonstrate its movement in order to indicate how it is seen in its ceremonial context. Somewhat ironically, these interests collided with the very real factors of budget and schedule, and, unfortunately, this wish has not been realized. In response, the exhibit has effectively utilized a lenticular lens photo in association with this piece, so that with the move of one's head side-to-side, one might see the mask as it is when open and when closed. However, the mask's movements and transformations are not physically demonstrated, and the piece remains static and still—similar to the masks-as-art that hang on collectors' walls. We're faced with objectified culture with little additional explanation or demonstration. This juxtaposition of the mask's static display with its empowering history of creativity, beauty, and survival, reveal the chasm between an object's signifi-



cance to Native cultural and visual frameworks and the current state of an object's perception as manipulated by non-Native collection and Native and non-Native display. Although the NMAI has tried to do what it can to learn from and convey the piece's original cultural and visual frameworks, it is extremely difficult to translate those ideas to the display case.

### TO SEE THINGS NOT ORDINARILY VISIBLE

Another object worth considering is one that Shirley Muldon and Laurel Mould, the Gitksan community curators, included in their selections for the exhibit. It is a small otter-shaped bowl—called a spirit canoe—which is carried by shaman when practicing about the sick (fig. 2). The use of the spirit canoe is associated with the Gitksan shaman's belief in a great lake in the spirit world that he sees when in his trance. When practicing, the shaman took the spirit canoe in his hands and sprinkled it with bird down; it is a favorable sign if he can see the spirit of the sick in the canoe at that time. The spirit appears as the patient in miniature and is visible only to the shaman. To think of it another way: when a person is ill it is thought that his or her soul is lost; the shaman has to bring that soul back to the patient to restore his or her health. The shaman used this object—this spirit canoe, or soul catcher—as an aid.

The practice of the *haalayt-dim-swannasxw*, or shaman, no longer occurs among the Gitksan, and Muldon and Mould speak of it in the past tense. "*Haalayt-dim-swannasxw* were healers . . . who were endowed with strong spiritual powers. By communicating with the spirit world, they sought the cause of illness, drew it out of the patient, and blew it from the house."<sup>11</sup> Although Muldon and Mould are not personally familiar with the *haalayt-dim-swannasxw*'s work, they sought assistance with the exhibit project from people



**FIGURE 2.** Carved and painted wooden Gitksan spirit canoe was created in the late nineteenth century (1870–1900) by a Gitksan shaman and is 2.95 by 2.56 by 8.9 inches. Courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (NMAI 3/5017). Photo by Ernest Amoroso.

who could recall occurrences of healing ceremonies in Gitksan villages. One informant told Muldon and Mould about receiving a healing as recently as the mid-1960s.

As an object, the spirit canoe is small; it can be held in the hand. It is charming and beautiful, its form is balanced, and its tone is warm and rich. And the manner in which it is exhibited—in a conservatively lit, visually clean gallery and in a pedestalled case with few companion pieces—certainly contributes to a construction of aesthetic value reflecting art rather than artifact. Form and display aside, NMAI and this exhibit hope to suggest that knowing what this piece means to the people whose ancestors made and used it enhances our appreciation and increases its beauty.

When considering the cultural and visual significance of Native American art and artifact, this spirit canoe presents an interesting example. As an aid to a specially equipped healer, it inhabits a realm that is private and powerful. Its form is not available for open admiration, but rather it is obscured and seen by only those involved in healing the sick. Perhaps this is the reason why, during the exhibit's development, Shirley Muldon savored the opportunity to hold the spirit canoe in her cupped hands, gazing at it with an awe-like tranquility and commenting on its purity and warmth. Muldon sat with the spirit canoe for nearly an hour—holding it, caressing it, and contemplating it—while we filmed a short video interview about the Gitksan exhibit selections and about the spirit canoe in particular. She had chosen the spirit canoe as her focal object for the interview, and she enjoyed the chance to discuss its beauty and its role in the Gitksan's healing ceremonies. I find this reaction to the object particularly interesting because the spirit canoe and its realm of healing are things that are personally unfamiliar to Muldon yet hold a significance to her tribe's history and culture that warrants attention and respect. Many are not aware of the visual aspect to the *haalayt-dim-swannasxu's* practice. Muldon admires and delights in this visuality in the same way that those who are less familiar with Gitksan shamanism may.

It is also interesting to consider the spirit canoe in comparison to the Kwakwaka'wakw Sun transformation mask. In the mask's case, Cranmer chose to focus on the potlatch, an element of history that represents continuation and persistence. In the spirit canoe's case, Muldon and Mould attempt to summarize and present an arcane subject that is mired by sensitivities, intellectual permissions, and cultural change. Yet a sense of power and beauty arise from both objects and from the ways in which the community curators highlight their individual histories and the cultural contexts within which they have been created.

#### ART, ARTIFACT, AND IDENTITY

Finally, let's consider one of NMAI's most famous pieces and a focal point of the Listening to Our Ancestors exhibit: a Tsimshian portrait mask (fig. 3). Unfortunately, little information regarding the original owner and specific use of this mask is available. George Gustav Heye purchased it from W. O. Oldman, a collector and dealer of ethnographic material in London,



**FIGURE 3.** *A classic Tsimshian wooden mask that is painted and decorated with human hair. Such realism is seen more frequently among Tsimshian sculpture than in that of most of the other Northwest Coast tribes. The mask is 7 by 9.5 inches and was created circa 1800. Courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (NMAI 3/4678). Photo by Ernest Amoroso.*

England. Lindsey Martin, the Tsimshian community curator, chose this piece because it is foundational to the section’s identity theme. As she explains, “For the Tsimshian, identity is much larger than just the individual. It also identifies who your nation is; your tribe; your clan, as well. Through masks and through everyday items, we display that identity.”<sup>12</sup> Martin was also interested in this piece for its superb artistry—its detail and workmanship. Not only does it convey an understanding of the Tsimshian relationship to the world of protocol and community organization, but also it reflects the way that material and aesthetic demonstration is valued. As Martin and her colleagues explain, “This mask looks beyond the material world and sees the spirits within it. Through it, we also see. Seeing and hearing properly leads to understanding and wisdom.”<sup>13</sup>

The way in which the Tsimshian community curators discuss the importance of the visible, artistic object and its connection to the invisible is absolutely fundamental to the exhibit as a whole. The exhibit and its object selections are rooted in the idea that an inseparable bond between one’s identity and the objects that one creates and/or uses exists. As the Tsimshian community curators comment, “Tsimshian art expresses the essence of

life, its spiritual dimension, in abstract and often complex visual forms. Our objects may be painted, carved, or woven, but each one manifests the unseen. Each reminds people of the interrelationship of all living things. The iconic images shown . . . reflect the Tsimshian *way of being* in the world.”<sup>14</sup> This Native value for transmitting knowledge of cultural identity through objects surfaced throughout our work on *Listening to Our Ancestors* and served as the connective tissue between exhibit sections, collaborating community curators, and selected objects. In listening to the community curators’ discussions throughout the exhibit’s development, one could hear repeated mention of the importance of the visual elements of identity and the resulting beauty of the material culture. However, in exhibit design and presentation, aspects of that visuality became blurred with the concepts of art and aesthetics and diluted through the practicalities of exhibit structure and design requirements. Ultimately, at this intersection of object selections, Native curation, and museum-based design, one is left with the complexities of Native American material culture and visuality in which beauty is one thing, and art—although spoken about in terms of beauty and aesthetic value—is a completely different thing.

In the case of *Listening to Our Ancestors*, the community curators wanted the exhibit to stay as far away from a suggestion of “art” as possible. They did not want the objects to be portrayed under a stereotypical umbrella, at least not to the detriment of showing museum visitors the cultural richness—the ceremony, privilege, and protocol—embedded in each piece. They wanted movement, sound, and graphics to accompany the objects in order to convey the way that the pieces are seen, danced, and celebrated at home. Unfortunately, the exhibit’s limited budget and schedule made many of these wishes unattainable. Ironically, the gallery and case design—and even the title: *Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life along the North Pacific Coast*—presents a construction that does not accurately reflect the show’s substance or the community curators’ intent.

What happened? What caused this disconnect? Multiple factors are involved—including budget, schedule, and audience, which hold equal weight and consideration in these matters. Although time and budget dictated the gallery design, audience had an influence on exhibit title and the objects’ public presentation. The title for the exhibit grew out of group conversations with all the community curators, and the idea of “listening to our ancestors” reflects an underlying theme present throughout the project’s work. However, NMAI publications staff in partnership with *National Geographic* ultimately established this title and its subtitle. The determining factor in publication decisions is how the purchasing public will receive the product. Recognition of this public audience—taking into consideration the museum’s location in Washington, DC and the museum’s association with the Smithsonian Institution—can also explain some budget and scheduling decisions. The museum’s director, curators, and design staff are continually balancing requests from collaborating community curators with regulations and demands set in place by the Smithsonian Institution and the visiting public. Thus lies the fundamental juncture that exists at the heart of NMAI exhibit projects which broadly affects the

representation of Native American art and artifact within this national venue. Native American frameworks of visibility and identity must be conveyed to a large Native and non-Native audience, and these efforts result in a distillation of meaning during which some of the essence, and some of the nuance, is lost. Returning to the elements of this juncture—Native American art and artifact coupled with exhibit manipulation and public perception—may allow for a bit more clarity on the matter.

### CONSIDERING THE CULTURE-OBJECT-AUDIENCE DYNAMIC

By considering the multivariable criteria of value that frame the perception of American Indian culture and art, one is better prepared to analyze the culture-object-audience dynamic at work within an exhibit such as *Listening to Our Ancestors*. For example, as James Clifford explains, “It is important to analyze how powerful discriminations made at particular moments constitute the general system of objects within which valued artifacts circulate and make sense.”<sup>15</sup> To extend this idea further, museum exhibits play a crucial role in the manipulation of objects and the formation of public perceptions surrounding cultural and aesthetic considerations. It follows that museum exhibits and institutional practices influence individual perception of Native American art and artifact. Patterns observed in museum-based curation and display of Native American art often resemble patterns observed in the private perception, purchase, and collection of the work by non-Native individuals. Furthermore, museums foster a close relationship with their patrons and with the local community. These relationships result in a passing along of ideas and in establishing an approved way of seeing and talking about Native American material culture. Museum exhibits provide direct encouragement to their visitors through the museum’s authoritative legitimization and evaluation of work. Museum displays present a window into and stimulate patterns within current trends in Native American art; and museum visitors and collectors, in turn, are assured of the worth and importance of these trends and the associated work. This consideration of museums, their visitors, and collectors matters in my discussion of American Indian art for the same reason that W. Richard West Jr. notes the art museum board member’s reaction upon her first visit to the NMAI. That is, it recognizes the spectrum of perception involved in museum display, and it acknowledges the feedback loop that exists between museums and their supporting publics.

As something to consider jointly, visual-culture studies, tucked among the folds of the disciplines of art history, aesthetics, anthropology, and media studies, foregrounds a consideration of “visibility,” or the practices of seeing the world and other people. W. J. T. Mitchell explains that “visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of the visual.”<sup>16</sup> By embracing the full range of visual representations, visual-culture studies helps to deconstruct previously accepted ways of seeing to create space for a greater consideration of visual forms.<sup>17</sup> The visual-culture model—as advocated by 1970s and 1980s art history and taken up by anthropologists and art historians such as Janet Catherine Berlo, James Clifford, George Marcus,

Fred Myers, Ruth Phillips, and others—has attempted to mend what had been a severe fragmentation of non-Western expressive systems associated with the movement of Native arts and material culture into the Western aesthetic framework and art-historical system. The translation of non-Western material objects to Western systems of perception privileged a Western-based visual image experience and resulted in the disconnection between non-Western objects and their sociocultural contexts of production. In an attempt at improvement, the visual-culture framework provides for a more comprehensive and just narrative of the history of Native American material culture and creative form. It also allows the creative work of Native American contemporary artists to be seen in a continuum with that of earlier generations working in different formats and media.<sup>18</sup>

The consideration of how museums contribute to the culture-object-audience dynamic helps one to understand how objects and visual forms are perceived and evaluated by certain groups. The recognition of a visual-culture model enables one to consider the source and production of objects and visual forms. Although these realms address different subjects, each circumscribes the matter at hand: the perception of Native American material culture by Native and non-Native individuals. Accordingly, I suggest that a more complete consideration of this material requires simultaneous consideration of visual-culture models with recognition of the museum as a controlling site. This synthesis creates a framework for understanding the complete trajectory of a cultural object over its entire life span. Models of visual culture reveal the elements involved in the production of a piece of art or material culture while models surrounding museum design and exhibition describe, in part, its consumption.

In closing, let us remember the story—and more specifically the audience reaction—shared by W. Richard West Jr. at the start of this article. It is hoped that the objects' lure, and the notable collection as a whole, has drawn visitors to *Listening to Our Ancestors*. We know that museum exhibits in general, including those of NMAI, attract the collectors and those interested in art. It is in this realm that multiple audiences are present, with each appreciating the display as art or artifact in a variety of ways and along a continuum of judgment. The challenge for the museum is to guard against the disappointment that may result when some people do not see the exact presentation that they may have expected. This is where a consideration of visual culture is important. Namely, one must recognize the contexts from which objects come and of which they are a part, and the museum must strive to convey these contexts through innovative methods of display and explanation.

Ultimately, through the continued advance of the collaborative process between the NMAI and Native communities and the success of exhibitions that present Native American material culture in a way that reflects a deeper context for the objects and an engaged, substantive dialogue and partnership with the people who hold the heritage,<sup>19</sup> we can advance our understanding of Native American objects beyond that of simply art, anthropology, aesthetics, and authenticity, and toward a more informed and accurate—although complex—consideration of the material.

## NOTES

1. W. Richard West Jr., *The National Museum of the American Indian: Journeys in a Post-Colonial World* (Canberra, Australia: World Archaeological Conference, 2005), 2.

2. *Ibid.*, 3.

3. The Native consultants visit the collection and select objects for exhibit and discuss how these objects should be cleaned, conserved, and exhibited. Occasionally, the Native consultants will suggest a newly commissioned object to be added to the collection as a supplement, but usually exhibit selections are drawn from NMAI's original collection.

4. W. Richard West Jr., *The National Museum of the American Indian: Whence the "Art Object"?* (2004).

5. Bruce Bernstein, wall text for *Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life along the North Pacific Coast* (Washington, DC: National Museum of the American Indian, 2006).

6. Bruce Bernstein, personal communication, September 2005.

7. NMAI Collections Policy, 2006.

8. In 1918 it was called the University Museum. Its current name is the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

9. Barb Cranmer, wall text for *Listening to Our Ancestors*.

10. Peter Macnair, personal communication, March 2005.

11. Laurel Mould and Shirley Muldon, wall text for *Listening to Our Ancestors*.

12. Lindsey Martin, personal communication, April 2004.

13. Susan Marsden, William White, and Lindsey Martin, wall text for *Listening to Our Ancestors*.

14. *Ibid.*

15. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 221. See also Molly Lee, "Tourism and Taste Cultures: Collecting Native Art in Alaska at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, eds. Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 267–81.

16. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2002), 91.

17. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972).

18. Ruth Phillips, "Art History and the Native-made Object: New Discourses, Old Differences?" in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Rushing W. Jackson (London: Routledge, 1999), 103–4.

19. Reference to statement made by Richard Kurin, director of Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.