



Museum Poems

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Truth and Healing for Museums

There's a natural impulse for institutions to try to look good, regardless of past mistakes and problems. A much stronger orientation is to embrace uncertainty and failure. The adoption of a "Truth and Healing" process for museums with Native art holdings can become a best practice standard nationally. Truth telling results in empathy and builds trust.

Documentation of the museum's previous work with tribes (both what it has done well and done badly) is critical if institutions are to effectively engage with Native representation. The era of institutions representing others without their free prior and informed consent (see [UNDRIP](#)) has ended. Art museums will benefit from engendering trust before asking for display permission. Trust building means transparency and community input from tribal nations, city, county, state and national bodies whose job it is to represent Indigenous concerns. Advisory boards and individual consultations are outdated and ineffective.

A full accounting of the past will require a coordinated institution-wide response. Ideally a process of discovery with archival documents and interviews with key personnel (including those Native representatives contracted in the past as consultants) is conducted with a public report issued at the end of the inquiry. This process will take 3-5 years and require proper funding. Museums with no Indigenous presence and practice should cease attempting to represent Native arts from the US if they are not adequately prepared to do the work credibly. Legal and ethical mandates for the collection and display of Native Arts have been present for 34 years - since the 1990 passage of NAGPRA. Scholarship should guide the acquisition, display and interpretation of Native objects instead of donor-driven collections efforts.

If a museum feels compelled to exhibit Native arts without adequate staff, work directly with tribal museums and federal collections for potential loans and partnerships. Commissioning works by artists (following Indian Arts and Crafts Act guidelines) can ensure that works are not in violation of laws. It is easy to do the right thing once you start the process of truth-telling.¹

¹ "Truth and Repair" at the University of Minnesota Weisman Art Museum's initiative funded by a IMLS grant and Terra Foundation support in 2023. <https://wam.umn.edu/weisman-art-museum-receives-grant-nearly-240000-federal-institute-museum-and-library-services>. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Lzjy0h5V3E>.



An Endless Request for Labor

As a public servant of several civic educational institutions including tribal colleges, tribal nations, federal and state museums, and state universities, I am generally in the position of helping. A child of the generations of achievers (following the generation of survivors and strivers), I come naturally to this work.² I inherited an orientation that “a lot of sh*t had gone down” and it was my job to fix that.

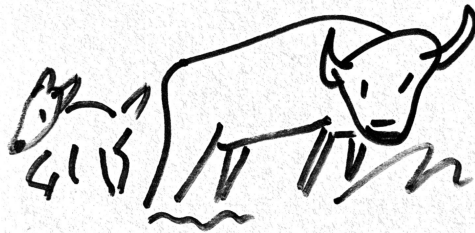
I was powerfully moved by the pro-labor, anti-discrimination agenda of *Change the Museum, We Here* and other equity organizations that sprung to life in the *Black Lives Matter* movement.³ In the pandemic era I started counting the number of public requests I received at UCLA. Every other day, I was asked to do something that had little relevance to my research. Requests often innocently began with a consultation and then grow exponentially. Many of these requests can be characterized as “product-endorsement,” and not scholarship. My concerns are of course overshadowed by the experience of artists, museum staff, graduate students, fellows and interns who are under-compensated and under-appreciated.

I hope I am never found guilty of exploiting others myself. It is easy to do. Often excessive demands of labor are fueled by a previous generation who have normalized exploitative practices and are scarred by our own experiences. And yet, and yet...Indigenous cultural norms dictate to “give hard” with a good Pendleton blanket, to host with plenty of food and to offer praise and gratitude. I recommend these gifting norms in the museum world. I hope to teach that when I choose to give, I give freely and am serving as a diplomat, a patron of the arts, a powerful colleague, similar to a Board of Directors member or a dignitary and not a “consultant” a “contractor” or an employee, but a human being sharing knowledge.

Asking in the right way means not trampling anyone’s mana or power. Asking in the right way demands humility, grace and understanding. None of this is transactional and it all take time.

² My forthcoming book *Red Skin Dreams* (University of Nebraska Press) documents this generational orientation.

³ See: *Change the Museum* (<https://www.instagram.com/changethemuseum/?hl=en>), “Pressuring US museums to move beyond lip service proclamations by amplifying tales of unchecked racism,” *We Here* (<https://www.wehere.space>), “We Here is on a mission to provide a safe and supportive community for people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color in library and information science professions.”



New Buffalo

The contemporary American Indian art market in 2024 is expanding in ways that many veteran artists of the last generation had hoped, given current sales numbers and prices. But, like any arts movement, sustained interest and inclusion depends on more than collectors and markets. Museum professionals, scholars, dealers, collectors, the artists themselves and their communities all make up an entire arts ecosystem. Without each of these forces working together, the rising up of Native voices is not effective or lasting.

The separation of arts commerce, critique and training in American Indian fine arts from Indigenous knowledge systems has resulted in only sporadic gains for Native representation. Even more concerning, raw market forces have led to the disfiguration of Indigenous values and resulted in cheap imitations of the masterworks our communities are capable of creating and are known for. Inclusion alone is not the goal. Visibility is not representation.

Unlike other marginalized communities, Indigenous values call for more than outside recognition. Indigenous values are defined by deep land-based knowledge systems, reciprocal relations and generational understandings of power. These values are not related to Western economic systems of capital and accumulation.

New Buffalo is a Native-led consortium of highly visible foundations whose main purpose is to facilitate the development of “arts hubs.” Each hub serves as an incubator that merges practice (studios), training (workshops), research (retreats) and outreach (exhibitions) with Indigenous values of relationality (gatherings) and reciprocity (land-based recognition). *New Buffalo* creates opportunities for artistic self-determination in American Indian visual arts, literature, music, fashion, and performance through the recognition and understanding of First Nations peoples as central contributors to the legacy of American art, culture and history.

The challenge of “understanding” American Indians is largely a failure of the imagination, but it is also a failure of expansive organizing.⁴ Like our ancestors who depended on the buffalo for their total sustenance, the projects *New Buffalo* produces will sustain our unique knowledge systems in the arts for future generations.

⁴ “Hatred is easier to organize than understanding.” United States Information Agency. 1965. *Nine from Little Rock*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPVOO5sugMY>



The “Encyclopedic Museum” as a Colonial Tool

The will to collect and display artifacts from every world culture is a manifestation of imperialism, the act of a nation extending power into other territories for economic or political gain. Museum visitors who reenact this impulse to symbolically “own” cultural artifacts from across the globe may appear to be “appreciating” these cultures, but often, active learning is sacrificed.⁵ Exhibitions built on encyclopedic knowledge reinforce preexisting “entrance narratives,” rather than spark curiosity.

Problematically, museum visitors reassert their own biases ... Although research suggests that viewers rate “enriching my understanding” as a high entrance value, few visitors actually select this as an experience they find especially satisfying in exit interviews. Rather, viewers tend to enjoy “being moved by beauty” more. Because visitors tend to respond more positively to exhibits they already relate to, research shows they gain little new knowledge.⁶

In my 2020 essay “[The Encyclopedic Gaze,](#)” I advocate for a grounded theory approach to learning, from specific to general knowledge as a decolonial approach. An Indigenous framing asks “Who are you?” “Where are you from?” “With what intentions?” “Who gave you permission to do this?” and “Why?” Can the encyclopedic museum be redeemed? Perhaps, but new messaging will need to be authored for a diverse audience base.

⁵ For a counter narrative see: [Donatien Grau](#), editor of *[Under Discussion: The Encyclopedic Museum](#)*, Getty Research Institute, 2021, “[T]he Louvre offers you two things, amongst many others. One is the possibility to get lost, which is so rare today and which is wonderful. Second it offers you an encounter with so many different forms of human creativity gathered under one roof, and that’s something you *can’t have anywhere else*. We have a *duty* to open up that way of being lost.” In the same volume, Kwame Anthony Appiah asserts: “The argument we make about encyclopedic museums can be made about any form of cultural project: it is certain that the collections of the encyclopedic museums were brought together in the context of an ethically impermissible process...It is part of their mandate to make objects available, because *it is the common property of mankind*.” “[S]omething you can’t have anywhere else” echoes a consumerist bent, while “duty” resonates with a nationalistic calling, as in, “reporting for duty.” “Common property of mankind” is disputed in national and international legislation.

⁶ <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Research-Art-Works-Occidental.pdf>



How to be a Buddha in the Museum (Learning from the Dog)

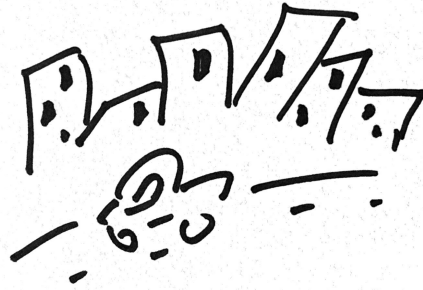
My dog likes a lot of attention. So do museum visitors. While it may seem to make sense to entertain viewers, the curator's job is more demanding. Visitors want to be seen and recognized. They want to feel smart and understood. These emotions are tall orders for a curator to satisfy, but the task does not need to be impossible. Less is often more.

Objectness can sometimes void the presentness required to make human connections. When human connections are the goal, the objects become secondary. The primary aim in a museum then is recognizing a person's self-worth and not trampling their mana or power.⁷ One way to do this is to trust the visitor's inherent intelligence, whether that visitor is six years old or sixty. Let the viewer figure things out, trust their intelligence.

Like animals, museum visitors can sense when they are just being distracted and when they are being truly engaged. Engagement requires the storyteller (and all curators are at heart storytellers) to let go of controlling the narrative and to allow the listener to respond and interact freely. Detachment grants the museum visitor a certain dignity. No one wants to be lectured to. They want to be loved.

Each museum encounter is an opportunity for human connection. Art museums are unique in that this connection need not be didactic but evocative. There is always a question in a work of art. Resist the urge to answer that question and instead let the viewer try to solve it. Play catch with them. Throw the stick. They don't have to catch it, but if they do, then let them run off with it in another direction and never come back.

⁷ Do not trample someone's mana. Chris Winitana, *New Zealand Geographic*, 1990: <https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/the-meaning-of-mana/>



The Urban Indian Experience

Los Angeles is one of the U.S. cities selected by the United States government as an “Indian Relocation” center. The Indian Relocation Act of 1956 was an outgrowth of the Termination Policy, an assimilationist agenda to whitewash and eventually exterminate Native cultures.⁸ Today in Los Angeles, a 4th generation urban relocation population of American Indians coexists with the local Tongva, Tataviam, Serrano, Kizh, and Chumash Peoples of Southern California, the original inhabitants of this land who have sovereign rights.⁹

Nationally, the American Indian population nearly doubled in 2010-2020,¹⁰ with the majority of American Indians living in cities.¹¹ The urban Indian experience is characterized by language loss, lack of housing, (with particular poignancy considering that the land base originates with First Nations peoples), and often health disparities, including violence and substance abuse. Native American and Alaska Native peoples experience murder, rape, and violent crime at rates much higher than national averages.¹² These stark social issues are deeply rooted in historic and systemic policies with the goal of eradication.

Civic bodies, including the Los Angeles City County Native American Indian Commission are tasked with safeguarding the rights of Native North American Indigenous peoples, but their resources are limited.¹³ City partners, including museums, are alert to the rich history of minoritized communities, but often overlook American Indian populations. This willful ignorance is not innocent but stems from on-going colonialism. We can do better.

⁸ <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/11/01/uprooted-the-1950s-plan-to-erase-indian-country>

⁹ https://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/lac/1137966_AREPORTONHARMSCountyofLosAngeles.pdf

¹⁰ From 2010-2020 the American Indian alone population grew 11.6% to 2,159,802, while the alone or in any combination population nearly doubled, increasing to 6,363,796. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/10/2020-census-dhc-a-aian-population.html>

¹¹ Based on 2020 U.S. Census data, the Indian Health Service estimates that approximately [87% of the AI/AN population](https://www.ihs.gov/Urban/aboutus/about-urban-indian-organizations/#:~:text=*.Please%20note%3A,-The%20above%20data) live in urban areas. https://www.ihs.gov/Urban/aboutus/about-urban-indian-organizations/#:~:text=*.Please%20note%3A,-The%20above%20data

¹² <https://www.bia.gov/service/mmu/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-people-crisis>

¹³ A REPORT ON PAST, PRESENT, AND ONGOING HARMS AGAINST LOCAL TRIBES Report prepared for the County of Los Angeles – January 2023 Los Angeles City/County Native American Indian Commission Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture.

https://file.lacounty.gov/SDSInter/lac/1137966_AREPORTONHARMSCountyofLosAngeles.pdf



Age Matters. How to Avoid Golden Boys and Girls

I have learned that there are several mechanisms for misdirecting the path of an artistic movement. Many of these strategies are not overt, but subtle and unnamed. One of these approaches to Native arts curation in mainstream institutions is what I call the golden girl and the golden boy syndrome. Basically, a new rising star is discovered, taken from living in obscurity (typically in a rural area) and magically transplanted into the big city, where they are instantly “freed” of their past cultural trappings and can manifest their best selves in the company of new friends. This is a trope as old as the Renaissance painter Giotto who was noted for being discovered as a simple shepherd drawing on the ground with a pointed stone.

The problem with the myth of discovery and individual greatness is that these tropes are counter to Indigenous premises of collectivity, relationality and care. Even more disconcerting is the lack of recognition of cultural continuity and the status of elders. Individualism in the arts is a handy way to hijack deep relational knowledge to the desires of a commercial market, intent on sales alone. Our beautiful children are made into temporary celebrities who grace the covers of magazines, often partially unclothed and with their skin tone darkened. This type of manipulation is an embarrassment to artists in their later years. Old golden girls and boys can find themselves depressed, alone and in poverty. I am aware that this kidnapping scenario applies equally to many in the arts world and Native artists are not singular in their entrapment.

How to address this tragedy of youth adulation and manipulation of artists who have already made their way into major museum collections? Apply the same research diligence that other minoritized artists enjoy and do the research. Native art history has existed since Angel DeCora’s time (1871–1919).¹⁴ The “discovery” of Native artists only belies the ignorance and pride of newly infatuated writers and curators. Treat our children as you would your own. Grant them dignity, protect them, and allow them to be mentored with credible teachers.

¹⁴ DeCora was kidnapped as a child and sent to the Hampton Agricultural and Industrial School. She later wrote and illustrated essays with *Harper’s Monthly* and studied at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Emery, Jacqueline, ed. “Angel De Cora (Winnebago).” In *Recovering Native American Writings in the Boarding School Press*, 243–51. University of Nebraska Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1w76tq5.36>.

These essays grew out of my forty years of experiences as a curator and a tribal citizen (Fort Sill Chiricahua Apache) during a time of exponential growth of Native sovereignty claims and actions. Intense changes in the American psyche about American Indian peoples' place and political rights emerged during this period (1985-2025) in response to Indigenous activism and leadership. Not a manifesto or even a request, these "poems" are meant as gifts drawn from my observations as a Native arts cultural worker, moving across space and time. From the place now known as the United States of America to global locations, and throughout my own generational journey from a young student learner to an elder knowledge keeper, my central orientation is as a community member living through precarious times.

Twenty-five years ago, Santa Clara elder Dr. Dave Warren concluded, "As we enter a new century, the ability to shape our own image and exert an influence of immense significance on others is unprecedented. To a great extent it is in the areas of arts and cultural development that our greatest challenge may be centered." Warren championed, "the appreciation that culture is a process, not a collection of results or products for distribution. Cultural activities and artistic activities are shared procedural experiences; they involve the most complex and yet richest aspects of human imagination and behavior." I believe we are still in this process of addressing "the greatest challenge." Indigenous scholars have collectively learned that "sharing" is not enough to achieve equity; we must then "center" our efforts with partners.

I am frequently a guest on other peoples' territories and am thankful for the opportunity to continue to grow and to learn from Indigenous communities across planet Earth. I am grateful to Lorene Sisquoc and Cindi Alvitre, Great Oak Press and the amazing women responsible for Yáamay (Rebecca Macarro, Camaray Davalos, Avelaka Macarro, and Desiree Wetz), the editor of Great Oak Lauren Niezgodzki, the filmmaker Casse Kihuut Alaniz, wisdom keepers Jessa Calderon and Tina Calderon. Thanks to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, especially Diana Magoloni, Michael Govin and Nancy Thomas for welcoming me as a Curator-in-Residence fall 2024, and to Abel Valenzuela, Dean of UCLA Social Sciences who enabled my sabbatical with LACMA. With gratitude also to my ancestors, my children and my relatives. May we continue to learn together

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¹⁵ Dave Warren. 1991. "American Indian Challenge and Opportunity of a New Century," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal Special Issue, Sharing a Heritage*.

