

Conserving Indigeneity: Ethically and Digitally

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Exit Project

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I. Introduction

Indigenous peoples make up marginalized communities all over the world. In the United States, their presence in cultural and historical institutions is relegated to the topic of ancient history, and has been poorly addressed as modern cultures in America. As digitization has come to the forefront of historical record keeping in recent years, there have been efforts made to create inclusive subject headings and cataloging efforts. Despite the widespread nature of these efforts, collections far

outweigh the staff power available to change every object's metadata and subject headings.

During early research for this project, I came across literature indicating that the display and digitization of



Native American Collections Scope*

Field Museum of Chicago: **12,301**

Cahokia Mounds: **0**

Saint Louis Art Museum: **4,908**

State Historical Society of Missouri: **5,321**

*These numbers are not all perfect; they are based on what has been digitized and uploaded; not what is in the collection.

Indigenous materials suffer from unaddressed ethical problems.¹ David Arnold and Jaime

Kaminski assess three-dimensional scanning and representations of ethnographic collections as

well as the potentials and challenges of the process.² These ethical problems include (but are

not limited to) incorrect or non-inclusive metadata, appropriation, and copyright issues. It's my

¹ The bibliography includes some of these articles that were particularly influential in research of this topic.

² ARNOLD, DAVID, and JAIME KAMINSKI. "3D SCANNING AND PRESENTATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS—POTENTIALS AND CHALLENGES." *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 27 (2014): 78–97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43915864>.

hope that this survey report will offer opportunities for metadata improvement, workflow standardization, and further connections with tribal governments for the betterment of object care and Indigenous rights.

In a webinar on Wednesday, March 8, 2023 titled “Implementing Inclusive Metadata”, metadata professionals from the University of Michigan Library, Princeton University, ITHAKA, and the University of British Columbia offered their perspective on what it means for metadata to be “inclusive”, and how they themselves have been working toward more inclusive metadata. Primarily, the librarians agreed that the meaning of “inclusive” is, in nature, a complicated term. It does not invite marginalized groups into a white colonized space, but it is looking to engage with them individually. Inclusivity can exist without being welcoming, and one of the main tenets of metadata is to do no harm. To do that, standards that have biases must be changed, and fought to end the fascist hold on metadata. Essentially, we as library or museum professionals, must accept the responsibility of accuracy.

I was fortunate enough to speak with a representative from the Osage Nation, Sarah O’Donnell. O’Donnell, who works as the NAGPRA Coordinator for the Osage Historic Preservation Office, works with museums and other institutions for their digitization practices with images of the objects in question. She indicated that oftentimes, museums do not first consult Nations before undertaking their digitization projects which leads to mistrust between the institutions and the Indigenous Nations and in some cases harm and legal consequences. There is a specific process that museums holding Indigenous objects must complete, and O’Donnell explained that many have not completed this process and that they do not understand their Indigenous collections in their entirety. Without these processes, institutions

are required to communicate extensively with affiliated Nations before completing digitization projects. Furthermore, because of the lack of communication with Tribes, objects are not handled properly and are then digitized without consent. Because federal law recognizes Native American material, museums do not have the right to use these objects in any way they see fit.

Section 4 of Volume 87, Number 200 of the 2022 Federal Register discusses the proposed revisions and rules for the act and museum involvement. The changes suggested a reduction of redundancy, improvement of efficiency for the NAGPRA repatriation process, and would ensure that museums provide all necessary information to the federal agency regarding their collections as part of Subpart C of the register. This process involves funerary objects, human remains, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony under NAGPRA.³

O'Donnell went on to explain how cultural context is absolutely vital, and that museum professionals have a responsibility to ethically work with the materials and its metadata. She cited the Indigenous Collections Care Guide⁴ which walks through establishing trust, ensuring that the communities museums work with have the power over the items, prioritizing knowledge, and focus on cultural continuity rather than preservation. This is the care guide with which O'Donnell and her colleagues align their thinking for NAGPRA work with museums. As the NAGPRA coordinator, O'Donnell's work is aligned with ensuring that museums work appropriately with items that are related to Osage ancestry, and aid in repatriation, identification, and handling.

³ "The Federal Register," Federal Register: A Proposed Rule, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2022-22376>.

⁴ "Indigenous Collections Care Guide," School for Advanced Research, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://sarweb.org/iarc/icc/>.

II. Project Scope

The following report is based on a survey conducted of Missouri and Illinois cultural institutions, conducted to determine the status of Indigenous digitization's progress in two midwestern states. The study was by no means comprehensive, and only looked at a small group of institutions that are historical sites or societies and museums. The institutions evaluated in this study were The Saint Louis Art Museum, The Missouri Historical Society, The Cahokia Mounds Historical Site, and The Field Museum of Natural History. However, even with such a small grouping of professionals to speak to, the results were diverse and helpful to understand where differing institutions are in their digitization projects. In addition to establishing a status of digitization and metadata practices, this survey is intended to look to the future and offer some ideas as to where the digitization of Native American Indigenous objects can go.

Over the course of this study, I gathered information from sources including scholarly text, public digital repositories from Missouri and Illinois cultural institutions, and discussions with representatives from each institution. These representatives ranged from archivists, curators, collections managers, and Indigenous Nation representatives; all of whom are involved with the collection and its processes in some way. I asked a series of questions to each person I spoke to that discussed workflows or general processes, metadata, equipment, culturally significant or culturally sensitive information and how it's handled, and general current, past, or future projects. I have compiled the data gathered into data visualizations and an analysis of

each institution's process, which will culminate in recommendations for the future as well as conclusions of the study.

III. Saint Louis Art Museum in Saint Louis, Missouri

The first person I spoke to was Cathryn Gowen from the Saint Louis Art Museum (SLAM) where she is the Head of Digital Assets. She explained that the art museum digitizes when objects are coming off of exhibit, or after conservation. Indigenous objects are fragile in nature, and Gowen indicated that because of this, a preparator has to be available for the day of digitization. Unfortunately, the Digital Assets department does not have a dedicated preparator and therefore has to wait for an opening on their schedule. Many Indigenous objects need special mounts in order to be able to sit on a flat surface safely, and it is not always possible to have these individualized mounts on hand for photography. It takes a different amount of time to build the mounts for each object depending on the size and shape, however, it was unclear how long creating the custom mounts takes.

All digitization is based on the budgets, exhibit schedules or object rotation, and staff availability. There is a digitization studio at the museum, and up until relatively recently, all of their photographic work was completed by contracted photographers with their own equipment. This can be difficult because not all cameras produced the same quality of image; very few setups replicated the same photographic angles, and depending on said setup, there could be vibration and shake in the photographs. Despite the fact that the same person processed the photographs and can give the same lab values or white balance, the cameras would be inconsistent. Recently, the team acquired a new camera that they are able to use to achieve consistency and it will be able to establish an internal workflow.

Due to the constraints placed on digitization because of scheduling, there is little time available for objects to be digitized. This year, the digitization team has twenty-two days of object capture scheduled. In 2021, there were eighty days of capture. There is likely a plan to digitize Native American objects, depending on the rotation of objects or whether or not there is conservation being completed. Conservation and digitization is based upon the schedule for exhibitions, display rotation, and staff availability.

The Saint Louis Art Museum has roughly 5,000 objects that are of Native American origin, and less than 10% of those are digitized to the SLAM website. In my conversation with Gowen, she indicated that it is difficult to upload everything to the digital space because there is a large amount of approval that must happen from different departments and the cultural representatives that they

work with. There have been many objects that have been photographed over time, but because metadata and information is changing so quickly, there's little time to upload objects before something changes. The time it



takes for approval on all necessary fronts can be a hindrance. When new information comes to light and the metadata has to be changed, the approval process has to start again.

Sarah Biggs, the Collections Cataloguer for SLAM, was able to offer me a different perspective involving the metadata of the collections they hold, and how that is represented online. One of the main things we discussed was representation and identification in library sciences, especially as it pertains to North American native nations.

Artists and creators that the museum collaborates with each are able to indicate their preferences for how they're identified in museum documentation and whether or not this information is to be displayed online. Providing self-identified information eliminates assumptions that could be made by museum staff, and allows the constituent to have only the desired details displayed. Constituents are also able to identify the labels with which they prefer to be associated. Naming authorities used by databases such as the Library of Congress are often considered to be outdated or "misaligned" as Biggs identified them. In some circumstances, the more "modern" or correct terms are front-facing while outdated or incorrect terms appear on the research side. There are names that Nations use to identify themselves, and there are names that outside sources utilize. Because there are so many names for the same groups, creating succinct and accurate terms is difficult, and there is often discrepancy - therefore, by asking individuals which they prefer, it's not left up to interpretation. When modern artists or representatives identify themselves as part of a certain group to the staff at the museum, they are able to indicate their preferred tribal affiliation, name, or pronouns in their file. That way the staff who display the individual's artwork are able to honor their

preferences as to what information they are comfortable sharing with the public. Achieving information about individual objects, however, does not appear to be quite as easy.

Their ethics statement recognizes the fact that museum cataloging has been “...characterized by racism, white supremacy, colonialism, othering, and oppression.”⁵ It also acknowledges SLAM’s effort to provide inclusive metadata while still making objects accessible to the public.

IV. Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, Illinois

When speaking to the Native North American Collections Manager at the Field Museum, Michelle Brownlee, they indicated that inclusive metadata and proper object care according to its Nation of origin is something that is taken very seriously. While the department does not currently have a curator, they are still taking every possible step to continue digitizing, preserving, and communicating with Indigenous communities. Materials are digitized when they come off of displays or when they are going through conservation work. Currently the department is taking a look at historic beadwork with glass beads, and it is taking reference or conservation photographs of those objects as they’re handled. Objects on display have photographs as well, although not all have been photographed in the cases. Those that are too fragile to

⁵ SLAM Ethics Statement



be moved are photographed where they are for safety.

There is no on-staff photographer for the museum, but there is a specific workflow for incorporating the photograph metadata into their collection management system, EMu.

Everything that is public-facing on the website has been approved by representatives of the corresponding nation, and any that have been taken down were done so at the request of tribal governments. There are 70,000 total objects in the North American Native collections that have varying tribal connections and every one of these objects has been cataloged. Repatriation is an ongoing process with the objects at the Field Museum, as is communication with different governmental representatives to approve information that is front-facing. This is a similar process to SLAM which attempts to clarify preferred information that is displayed online or in-person.

Brownlee explained that conversations with Indigenous representatives and governments are ongoing and frequent. The level of engagement with representatives varies depending on the frequency with which they converse regarding an object's digitization and research requests. In a situation where a party outside of the institution may be viewing or interacting with an Indigenous object, whether physical or digital, members of the affiliated Nation are often contacted to gain permission. Additionally, when there are questions on maintenance for culturally significant objects, they contact the correct nation to receive instructions for cultural care, if any.

V. Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site in Cahokia, Illinois

Besides the two large museums that I surveyed, I was able to gather helpful information from the Missouri Historical Society and the Cahokia Mounds site in Cahokia, Illinois. The Cahokia Mounds site itself does not currently have an on-site collections facility, but instead exhibits materials on loan from the Illinois State Museum or the Missouri History Museum. Currently, their efforts lie in updates to the Visitor's Center and its surrounding space, as well as improving their relationships with descendent communities in the region.

Their digitization is handled by their Interpretive Coordinator, who is in the process of transferring their data from a card file system into DonorPerfect to make the switch to an online inventory system. Even though they do not have a collection themselves, they are still able to digitize materials for their website, which has extensive details of each of the Mounds. Each mound is photographed, and the information available ranges from size, its location as it relates to other mounds, how it may have been used in the past, and if it's been excavated for artifacts or not. Lori Belknap, the staff member I spoke with from the Cahokia Mounds, indicated that objects are not their main focus for the online presence. They prefer to focus on the behaviors of the people who used to inhabit the land, and the materials that come are only one cultural aspect.

In order to bring maximum transparency and better the institution, the staff engage with members of Indigenous communities whenever the opportunity arises. If Nations visit for tours or otherwise, they try to have frank and open conversations about site interpretation to see what can be improved or what is going well. Resources are limited in the Cahokia area, and

therefore it can be difficult for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (which the Cahokia site is a part of) to develop Indigenous relations.

VI. The State Historical Society of Missouri

The Missouri Historical Society has an incredible wealth of materials related to Indigenous peoples, but Europeans are the primary creators of the collections. I spoke with two different specialists from the Missouri Historical Society; Heather Richmond and Joan Stack. Richmond acts as a Senior Archivist, and Stack is the Curator of Art Collections. As a Senior Archivist, Richmond was able to offer me insights on the digitization workflow for the Art Department. Their selection process for digitization is determined by a committee who strategizes about materials to be digitized but grants can also determine what ends up being digitized. Their capture equipment consists of flatbed scanners and an older overhead scanner with the operators consisting of primarily volunteers and student employees. Art is captured at a higher resolution than standard documents, and there is a staff of volunteers who handle transcription of materials as the scanning process takes place. Metadata is another matter handled in part by the committee, and appropriate Library of Congress subject headings are added where need be.

When I spoke to Joan Stacks, we discussed the amount of Indigenous related materials that are in the collections. Most of the objects are representative of Indigenous people and culture but are not of Indigenous origin. In a year-long IMLS Grant project, over 3,000 nineteenth and early twentieth century objects from the art and library collections depicting Indigenous peoples were digitized. Their descriptions were written with contextual information

derived from analysis. In structure, the descriptions followed an advisory plan from the National Humanities council. A member of the Cherokee Nation from the Missouri Humanities Council Native Heritage reviewed the discussions of cultural issues and acknowledgement of the biases in the depictions of Indigenous peoples.

VII. Workflow Analysis

The workflows of my chosen institutions all attempt to meet best practices when it comes to the respect and understanding of Indigenous customs and culture, but they are all vastly different. No two institutions have equal capacity, and work processes will differ depending on the departmental budget, staff, and resources. However, the lack of consistency regarding the care of Indigenous objects and communication with those who represent them is likely to create more distrust between institutions and the Indigenous nations.

The Field Museum's communication practices were described as being regular, everyday work in the Anthropology department. Involvement of the tribal governments to ensure culturally accurate care is a major priority for the collection staff, who had the most significant amount of interaction with outside professionals and representatives in my study. The Saint Louis Art Museum's collection is not quite as large as the Field Museum, but their digitization practices are quite similar in that they occur on the basis of necessity. Since moving objects can be detrimental to their physical condition, digitization for purposes other than a display picture is not always an option. Obviously the physical condition of the actual artifacts are more important than digitization, and therefore, capturing them digitally is not necessarily a priority. Both institutions described the lengthy, detailed process of uploading photographs or scans of

Indigenous objects, and recognizing inclusive metadata and terminology comes with this territory.

The Historical Society does not have any three-dimensional objects that are of Indigenous origin. All of the materials that they have related to the Nations of North America are from an outside source; primarily from a European point of view that “others” the Indigenous people of North America. They did utilize the expertise and opinions of Native Nation representatives to ensure that their materials were presented in the most respectful way possible, but they are the only institution that I spoke to that does not have any materials from Native peoples. While it’s important that they discuss their materials with a cultural expert, words such as “indian” are still a relevant subject heading used for research. As metadata standards update, these words that are considered to be offensive are being phased out and replaced with culturally accurate and appropriate terms. Despite the fact that these words are in the European materials, the search terms should be updated to reflect metadata standards.

VIII. User Interface Analysis

In addition to the interviews I conducted with the archival and cultural professionals, I dove deeply into the websites and digital collections of each chosen institution. They are all housed on different platforms and have vastly different formats and search filters available. The SLAM website allows you to distinguish between on and off display objects, all of them of Indigenous origin.⁶ All of the objects displayed on their site collection have photographs as well, and have short descriptions. They are searchable through 44 different filters for the material or object descriptions.

⁶ All of the searches were completed either through filters to reflect Native American origin, or terms such as “Indian” were utilized in cases where the materials are coming from a European point of view.

This website differs from the Field Museum website quite wildly, where the digital collections of the natural history museum has over 340 subject headings. Some of these subject headings repeated, or were pieces of other more detailed terms. The object entries for the Field Museum's digital collections did not include photographs for every entry, and many included the original cataloging cards that indicate the collector, year of collection, and location of collection. With the age of many of these objects, there are culturally defunct or insensitive terms related to them on the cataloging cards. These are in contrast to the entries which include the names and terms currently acknowledged for individual groups and Nations. Additionally, when you enter the Field Museum's digital collections, there is a disclaimer regarding these culturally incorrect terms and the fact that this does not align with the mission and view of the institution.

The Missouri Historical Society's website is broken down by collections as well as the material type and department they're housed in. While it was unclear exactly how many materials related to Indigenous people are digitized on the website, I was told in my discussion with Joan Stack that the majority of objects related to Indigenous people and Indigenous life have been digitized and uploaded. The collections that have Indigenous representations of European origin have disclaimers regarding the viewpoint from which they were made due to the biases stemming from colonization. The Cahokia Mounds Historic Site web presence focuses on the historical aspects of the site rather than artifact history. They have a timeline that outlines the history of the area; it links to a collection of detailed descriptions of each mound at Cahokia. Additionally, they have a unique section of the site that includes Indigenous art and

artifacts for sale. These objects are from local peoples looking to sell historic pieces or from Indigenous artists who produce original work.

Whether or not there are permissions given to researchers to save images, it is still possible on the websites of all four institutions. Two have specific “download” buttons to download the images and their information, one has the option after you open the image, and the final site has a standard “Save image as...” button. These uploaded objects would presumably be approved to be put onto the repository with the understanding that they may be downloaded and used by researchers. While this might appear to be a foregone conclusion, it is unclear whether or not there is permission for downloading on the part of the Indigenous Nations.

IX. Conclusion and Recommendations

The most significant takeaway of this survey is the consensus regarding the difficulty of uploading objects and their information to digital repositories in a timely manner while following NAGPRA ethics and guidelines. But, this is just the fact of the process as it stands. It became clear that there is not one specific workflow or strategy followed over a small sample of the institutions in Missouri and Illinois. When going into the future with digitization, there could be adjustments made to the metadata and pre-flight workflows to attempt to streamline the necessary procedures for the NAGPRA processes as they relate to the proposed changes by the federal government. Due to the fact that going through the NAGPRA processes is necessary, and it has not been widely accomplished for many museums, there needs to be a specific and strict process, which is what the new proposal would enforce, should it be adopted.

While NAGPRA is an important facet of Indigenous digitization, the act alone is not the entire solution to issues in digitization. What I've learned from this study is that metadata practices are still problematic for some institutions. Using inclusive and correct subject headings is a step toward subverting centuries of structured racism in history and collecting. Out of all of the interfaces and workflows, it was clear that improvement is necessary even as a slow-going process. Digital repositories such as Mukurtu, a community-based repository for Indigenous communities, allows Nations or tribes to upload materials of their choice onto a sharing platform. By using this method, the information and photographs are coming from the community members who will display what is appropriate for their culture along with the correct metadata. If a format such as this was adopted eventually, it could offer more opportunities for collaboration between institutions and Indigenous Nations that fully respect the needs and wishes of the Nation. While we as a society are on the right track for developing proper practices, there are many areas such as subject headings, communication, and cultural care that could be improved upon by everyone. Studies could be conducted nationwide to bridge the gap between Indigenous governments and the museums holding their objects and create a more harmonious, comprehensive, ethical digital collection.

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