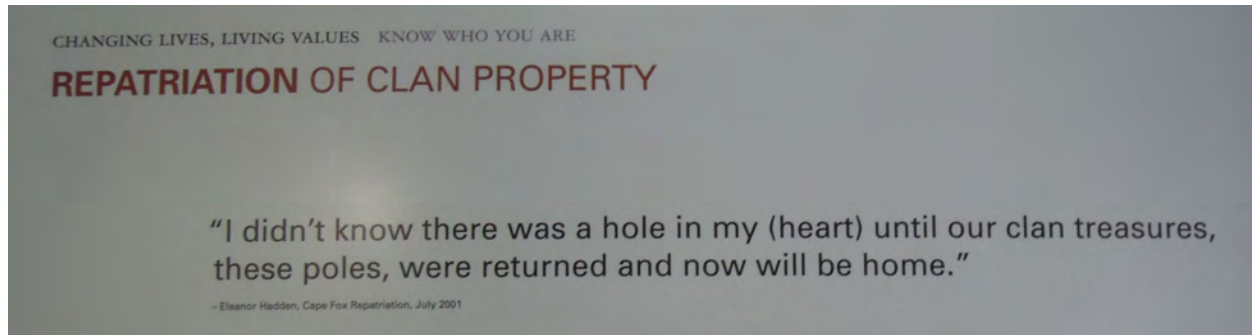


## THEN/Hier Report by Heather E. McGregor on Indigenous Curation and the Alaska Native Heritage Center

“The Things We Make: Alaska Native Art in the 21st century” Symposium on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013 at the Anchorage Museum (<http://www.anchoragemuseum.org/index.aspx>)

My impressions<sup>1</sup> from attending the presentation entitled:

### *Native Curators Interpreting Native Collections for a Public Audience*



*Panel from Alaska Native Heritage Centre*

Moderator: James Pepper Henry (Director of the Anchorage Museum)

Indigenous Curator Panelists: Darian LaTocha, Eleanor Hadden, Aaron Leggett

James Pepper Henry described the history of relations between Indigenous peoples and museums. Until the mid-1980s Native peoples were not recognized as having the authority to represent themselves or interpret collections in museums. In the US, this changed after the legislation National Museum of American Indian Act (1989) and other repatriation efforts in the 1990s. Henry explained that museums were historically about demonstrating the spoils of conquest. For American Indians, working in the museum is being reminded of what was taken away from their people and land. The pursuit of many Native curators is to give authority over exhibitions to the communities from which the artifacts originate. The Native curator is best placed to work on bringing *context* back to the artifacts that museums detached from culture.

Other complications have arisen with Aboriginal people in the museum:

- They are expected to be the expert on all Indigenous cultures represented in the museum. Pepper explained that he is not an expert or authority (due to his young age) in his own culture and yet expected to step up in the museum context.
- Native curators are asked to do things that are not consistent with their culture.
- Representing content to the public and answering their questions can be challenging.
- It can be difficult to present something that feels very “close to home” but has to be re-translated for public audiences.

---

<sup>1</sup> Please note that I am using language within this report that reflects common usage in Alaska (ie. “Alaska Native” or “Native curators”) and the usage of the participants in this context, but that may not be commonly used in Canada.

Panelist Aaron Leggett described how he became a Native curator by spending a summer hosting visitors at the Alaska Native Heritage Centre, as an interpreter at an outdoor village. At first he was uncomfortable and wondered what he could contribute. It drove him to become more familiar with his own culture, in order to interpret other Indigenous cultures. He took a degree in Anthropology with the goal to work in a museum setting. Leggett feels that even in a culture and heritage centre, it is important to apply certain museum standards to objects because cultural objects are important to preserve for the long term. As a Native curator there are more pressures from Indigenous communities to tell stories the way they want it told vs. pressures from others (the museum and sponsors) about how you're telling the story. It is a balance to engage the public without skirting around uncomfortable moments in history. Developing appropriate programming can be very challenging.

Darian LaTocha described that it is an exciting time to be an Indigenous artist and to work with artists in museums. It is a challenge when you encounter preconceived notions for things to look "authentically Indian" or to be Native art. Community curation is therefore very important, and during his time working at the National American Indian Museum, 30 cultural groups were invited to access every object from their culture group in the collection. This allowed communities to see the objects but also for the museum to collect information on objects and correct information in their database that was not appropriately indicated. Treating cultures like dying cultures isn't working anymore, LaTocha says, now we are providing opportunities for recognizing that cultures have been here and are still here and can be strengthened.








Panelist Eleanor Hadden, of the **Alaska Native Heritage Center** located in Anchorage (<http://www.alaskanative.net/>)

Eleanor explained a project to create exhibits within the Centre with each cultural group in Alaska. *(As I visited this project after her talk I will include pictures that I took.)*

The Alaska Native Heritage Centre called on each cultural group in Alaska to create a Cultural Advisory Committee that would determine how they want to represent themselves to the public. The Centre Curator (Eleanor) brings information to the committee on what kinds of exhibitions they are asking for support on. In this project, each group chose a *value* and then went about representing it from the cultural and historical perspective.

The values that we focus on in this exhibit, as chosen by our Cultural Advisory Committees, are:


|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
|  | <b>ATHABASCAN</b>                              | Understanding & Adapting to What Life Brings – You Cannot Control Many Things |
|  | <b>YUP'IK &amp; CUP'IK</b>                     | See Connections – All Things Are Related                                      |
|  | <b>IÑUPIAQ &amp; ST. LAWRENCE ISLAND YUPIK</b> | Honor Your Elders – They Show You the Way in Life                             |
|  | <b>UNANGA &amp; ALUTIIQ (SUGPIAQ)</b>          | Share What You Have – Giving Makes You Richer                                 |
|  | <b>EYAK, TLINGIT, HAIDA &amp; TSIMSHIAN</b>    | Know Who You Are – You Are a Reflection on Your Family                        |

The curators do initial research on the value and the history. Then they draft the exhibition panels and they take it back to the Committee to make sure it is presented in a culturally appropriate way. This involves making tough decisions, balancing the story that the local people want told, even if it presents “difficult knowledge” to visitors. Most of the stories the Alaskan cultural groups chose stores about the painful colonial past. Below are two examples:

CHANGING LIVES, LIVING VALUES SEE CONNECTIONS

### WHEN THE AIPAIT\* BROKE OUR CONNECTION TO OUR CHILDREN


“When they all entered the school, I thought, ‘Ah, the school will take better care of my children than us.’ We made a mistake about the school. We never told our way of life. We trusted the school to properly lead them.”  
Paul Johns, Bethel, November 2007




One of the largest changes our people faced was losing the connection to the qasgiq when we were told to forget our “old” way of life with the introduction of schools and Western religion. Many Yup'ik and Cup'ik Elders today have mixed emotions when it comes to the idea of Western schooling and religion. Everyone agrees that getting a Western education is important; however, they feel that their children and grandchildren should also be getting an education to go against if they are to lead a healthy life. One issue that we feel was fundamentally wrong was the strict English-only policies that were carried out for most of the twentieth century. Efforts are currently underway to reintegrate the languages and traditions before the last generation of Elders who were raised in the qasgiq passed away.

“When the Yup'it of the past were truly living by the traditions before the priests and western educators arrived, they took care of their young people, and it was like they gave them a college education from the time they were small. Children were raised *Yuuciteng paqumaluku* (understanding their way of life).”  
Paul Johns, Tolsona Bay, April 2002

“I support the teaching of the *qanruyutet* that came from the Elders. Though our school principal told me repeatedly that they have no funding to pay me, I've told him I didn't talk to children for money.”  
Frank Andrews, Kaniqunglik, June 8, 1999





“We have two hindrances to our relationship with our children and grandchildren. They go away to schools and learn about ways to become successful in their careers. They also have priests or clergymen to instruct them, so we no longer speak to our children. We grandfathers no longer practice that tradition, because we have the school and the church opposing us.”  
Paul Johns, Tolsona Bay, April 2002

Yup'ik & Cup'ik 

CHANGING LIVES, LIVING VALUES HONOR YOUR ELDERS

## CHILDREN LEARNING THROUGH WORK AND PLAY

In the old days, our children were taught by the whole community – parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and big brothers and sisters. They learned by watching, listening to stories, and trying life skills on their own. By the time our children were teenagers, they had mastered the skills they needed to survive.

As soon as children started to walk, our community gave them toys, such as balls made of caribou skin, small bows and arrows, dolls of skin and fur, and spinning tops of wood. These toys were the tools for their earliest learning.

When boys were a little older, they began going on hunting trips with their fathers and male relatives. They turned games into real-life skills as they speared fish, harpooned seals, and trapped small land animals. When a boy killed his first big animal, he was taken to the *qargi*, or men's house, where the kill was announced to the whole community and the meat was shared with everyone. He was considered a man, old enough to work with the men in the *qargi* and eligible to marry.

Girls stayed at home, learning to cook, sew, take care of children, and become valued members of the community. The whole community watched them dance to celebrate their first bucket of berries, or basket, or pair of mittens.

University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska and Polar Regions Collections, David S. Rasmussen Library, Albert Johnson Photograph Collection, 1900-1917, 1947-1989, 100-402-0100  
Children learned subsistence techniques by helping their parents and Elders gather food.

Eleanor says that curators cannot possibly be experts on everything – including protocol – so they have to consult and in some cases wait for other specialists or experts to advise on how to proceed or what an artifact is.



In addition to the exhibitions on values and history, at the Centre there were large installations that give visitors a sense of the landscape in a community within the cultural region and also introduce them to a resident of that place.



There is also a children's engagement area.

The Centre has a theatre that shows a set of short films every day and a performance space. There are outdoor villages but due to the snow while we were there I didn't venture outside!

This picture shows the Anchorage Inupiaq dancers performing at the Centre for the conference banquet.

