

NAVIGATING THE FUTURE  
AND  
RETURNING THE PAST

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## NAVIGATING THE FUTURE AND RETURNING THE PAST

For centuries museums have been warehouses for millions of objects, human and animal remains, artworks, and so much more. However, this practice, a long-established museological tradition, no longer works and has created a rift between the museums, other collecting institutions, those who visit them, and those advocating for change. It has become increasingly more acknowledged, publicly, that museums are at least, in part, hegemonic forces, rather than purely spaces to learn, experience, and build community.

While inclusive, decolonizing, museological practices have been explored in the past few decades, this building of best practices is not something that some (or many) museum professionals seem to be interested in learning about or implementing. The Native Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) has been implemented by the American Government which asks museums to return human remains and sacred objects to indigenously recognized communities. Recently a final rule has been implemented in NAGPRA. The new (and possibly long-delayed) Final Rule in NAGPRA, has led many anthropological museums to return culturally significant artifacts and remains. However, are museums taking NAGPRA more seriously or are they lawyering in an attempt to keep these artifacts? While NAGPRA was enacted in 1990, its recent update has caused such a large change that museums are now trying to grapple with how they consider, display, categorize, and possibly return these objects. Looking at three different museums, all of which have taken different approaches to new museology practices and NAGPRA regulations, this paper will discuss what directions museums are moving toward and what it looks like for a museum to be active in new practices.

### Modern Museums and their Practices

Since the formation of the museum structure, museums have evolved from Cabinets of Curiosity to institutions like the Smithsonian. They have also developed new forms of practice, whether in displaying objects or collecting new items. Starting as spaces for reformation in the 1800s as discussed by Tony Bennett in *The Birth of the Museum*, museums have long been spaces for the people in authoritative roles to reform and educate the masses. However, this practice and many other museum systems need to be updated and the greater public is calling for change. Many discussions have been about breaking down the colonial structures that built museums and institutions, like universities, and reforming how they operate instead. The former practices of museum research are no longer the goal, but instead, those looking to study museums should be encouraged to practice New Museology.

New Museology is a new field of study, which was created in the 1980s and largely credited to Peter Vergos's "The New Museology". Vergo, a Professor of Art History and Theory at the University of Essex, was one of the first academics to use this term. Vergo defined New Museology by first questioning what a museum and museology generally are. Simply explained he defined museology as the study of museums, however, he expanded further by saying it is the study of their history, philosophies, policies, aims, and political or social roles (Vergo,1989). A key part that helps us move towards what new museology is, is when Vergo points out museology's role in connection to the public. Vergo states, "museology might appear at first sight a subject so specialised as to concern only museum professionals (...) in reality (...) it is a field of enquiry so broad as to be a matter of concern to almost everybody" (1989, p.1). As such, new museology is, "a state of widespread dissatisfaction with the 'old' museology, both within and

outside the museum profession” (Vergo, 1989, p.3). Therefore, new museology is where people are no longer satisfied with the parameters of old museology, which is about collecting, displaying, and educating visitors. All of these aspects are discussed in Vergo's book but it is also important to note why there is a need for “new” vs “old” museology and why a change in what museology is, is so controversial to those who study it. One reason for the disinterest in new practices is discussed by Duncan Cameron in an essay called *The Museum, a Temple or the Forum?*, which is about, in part, the museum having to figure out if it is a temple for muses and artifacts or a forum for people to discuss issues facing the world today. This is likely one of the largest reasons museum professionals criticize new practices. Instead of focusing on collecting, displaying, and educating the wider public, new museology essentially asks the museums and the people who work in them to act as the forum and even call to question the museum structure of museum professionals. Since then, the field of new museology has been transdisciplinary, in that it has expanded to and is rooted in numerous academic fields/subfields including anthropology, sociology, critical theory, institutional critique, curatorial studies, museum education, and museum interpretation, among others.

Recently, in the past ten years, there has been much more public interest in museums and the way they operate, some of which once again ask us if a museum is a temple or forum. Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell write in their book *Museum Activism*. “(...) museums are not, and never have been, neutral” (2019) This idea leads us to understand that while museums may see themselves as a temple, they act as a one-way forum telling people how to do this rather than engage in discussions. Janes and Sandell present the reader with many contemporary issues museums have encountered and how museums currently engage with activism. With the realization that museums are not neutral, these institutions have now been asked, or demands

have been made, to be more activist and reflective about the role of museums in society. Indeed, Janes and Sandell ask museum practitioners to be more inclusive, dismantle inequalities, support human rights, and practice non-hierarchical thinking. While some issues include current political conversations on both a national and global scale, this paper focuses on current issues relating to museum collecting, displaying, and “protecting” items that have been plundered, stolen, or purchased, sometimes in unethical ways.

Museums have collected hundreds of thousands of objects from Indigenous peoples all around the world with museums currently being faced with calls for these objects to be returned. While the paper focuses on more of a national scale the issue is global. It is also important to point out the level of opposition there is to this, some people publicly defy both museum changes and NAGPRA thinking they may tear down the museum structure people have come to know.

Some professionals stand against this type of change in museums. One person is Pi Li the current Head of Art at Tai Kwun Centre for Heritage and Arts, and in his essay “Curation and forms of censorship” he blatantly dismisses the idea of changing practice calling the public call for change “cancel culture” and that museum professionals should be afraid of controversy. The idea that people see calls for change as “cancel culture” is shocking, to say the least, but Li isn’t the only person to believe this to be true. Another person who I’ve come across is Elizabeth Weiss, an anthropologist teaching at San José State University, who has been highly opposed to returning Indigenous remains throughout her career. Weiss has been likely one of the biggest opposers in the past few years, however, with this opposition also comes a level of disrespect for these objects. Weiss came into the spotlight with a famous picture of her holding the skeletal remains of a native person which eventually led to the downfall of her career with the university. Here Weiss made her views all the more public saying that returning these remains and objects

restricts learning and anthropologists from studying them. This idea is something shared by many people opposing NAGPRA and any policies calling for the return of objects. However, I believe this idea is likely ill-informed, in that why should we be allowed to keep items that aren't ours, take pictures with them (and post them), disregard the opinions and lives of those the objects or remains belong to, and still expect to keep and study these items. It all just seems very tone-deaf. Of course, it is understood what concerns that these collections of items can't be researched or presented but they're also human remains which museums and institutions have not been kind with, Weiss taking pictures with them as an example.

While museums and institutions alike may not be open to embracing new museology practices they must begin to, as the greater public will no longer stand by and watch as the institutions have success from stolen objects. Collectors and museums have collected objects from all around the world and shown little actual engagement with the people they present in their halls.

Looking at a section of Sandells and Janes' book that discusses how museums should begin implementing the framework for new museology. They say museums should develop commitments to the community, develop empathy, adopt civic-minded and professional attitudes, as well as philanthropy focusing on community well-being and participation (Sandell and Janes, 20). Museums have long enough been disengaged with the public and those they present. New Museology asks upcoming museum practitioners to change the way museums function and look at a more community-focused approach when working in these spaces. Of course, this is easier said than done, and in reaction to museums having collected hundreds of thousands of objects, the government implemented the Native Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) forcing

federally funded museums and institutions to look at their collections and return items and remains detailed in NAGPRA.

### What is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act was established on November 16, 1990, by the Bush Administration. The document proposed lays the groundwork for an act that would change the course of America, museums, and most importantly the indigenous nations that were colonized long before the act was signed. The act is one of the most influential pieces of law that aims to return stolen and plundered items from museums and other collecting institutions such as universities. Before this, there were essentially no laws asking museums to return objects. Even though the act has been impactful, on museums and institutions alike, it covered only a fraction of all the stolen items. The National Park Services website on NAGPRA provides a beneficial quote from a document that accurately describes the act saying:

The Native American Grave [sic] Protection and Repatriation Act achieves two main objectives. The first objective deals with Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony which are excavated or removed from Federal or tribal lands after the enactment of the Act(...)The second main objective addressed in this Act deals with collections of Native American human remains, associated and unassociated funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony currently held or controlled by Federal agencies and museums(...)This Act allows for the repatriation of culturally affiliated items and any other agreement for disposition or caretaking that may be mutually agreed upon by involved parties. (US House Report 101-877, 1990, pp.8-9).

The document clearly states two main objectives and goals of the act. The first objective is vital to the reasoning for developments within the act today. The objective states the objects that the act covers are human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. Human remains are generally understood to mean exactly that, the remains of those buried, but there is occasionally confusion about the other three types of objects. Before going forward, an understanding of each type of item is important. Funerary objects are objects that were part of a

burial ceremony and are typically buried with the individual or may even be the object a person was buried in, a coffin or urn being primary examples. Sacred objects are items needed by indigenous communities to perform traditional religious practices. Finally, objects of cultural patrimony are “object[s] having ongoing historical, traditional, or cultural importance central to the Native American group or culture itself, rather than property owned by an individual Native American” (US House Report 101-877, 1990, p.2). Meaning that items that are significant to the group can be returned, these items could not have been sold by an individual. However, the act has some huge loopholes and issues that prevent the return of many objects to their rightful owners.

While NAGPRA may appear as a saving grace allowing for the return of large amounts of cultural property, it does not cover all cultural objects. It even leaves loopholes that inadvertently allow institutions to keep objects in their collections. Three important pieces of NAGPRA allow for such things to happen. One is the institutions covered by NAGPRA. This is discussed in a blog post by Madeline Smith, a Tufts University student in the History & Museum Studies M.A. Program. She is currently an editor for the Tufts Museum Studies Blog and wrote an article titled *We Need to Talk About NAGPRA: Noncompliance & Cultural Affiliation* (2023). In this article, she discusses how institutions are getting away with not returning objects. One aspect many don't consider is what the act defines as “museums”. Smith discusses this loophole by first defining the term as “any institution or State or local government agency (including any institution of higher learning) that has possession of, or control over, human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, or objects of cultural patrimony and receives Federal funds.” She then goes on to point out that because the definition requires these “museums” to have a federal fund that museums would not apply for funding or turn down funding from the



federal government so that NAGPRA wouldn't regulate them. This leaves many objects of cultural significance locked away and unable to be returned. Something else Smith points out which is also discussed in a Science Friday podcast titled "Why Won't Museums Return Native American Human Remains?" In this podcast episode, radio host John Dankosky interviews Mary Hudetz, a reporter who deals with tribal issues in the southwest (ProPublica). In this podcast, Dandkosky (2023) points out to Hudetz that "NAGPRA didn't have any real teeth behind it because there wasn't any enforcement mechanism at all". Hudetz agrees saying that this is partially due to the lack of overall funding provided to NAGPRA (2023). According to Hudetz (2023), the lack of returns is due to a lack of funding which Smith also points out in her blog post, adding that "There are no regular or random inspections for NAGPRA compliance by the Department of the Interior[and](...) the civil penalties that museums face are minimal in practice." The lack of enforcement and funding together equate to a large amount of return being allowed to happen. Funding and enforcement are of course of concern, but the biggest cause for a lack of returns is the "culturally unidentifiable" loophole within NAGPRA legislation. This loophole allows these museums to declare "that remains cannot be affiliated with a tribe or therefore culturally unidentifiable, which means that they cannot decide which tribe to repatriate to or that the human remains and the objects cannot be affiliated to any modern-day tribe."(Hudetz, 2023). This loophole is one of the most notable reasons for a lack of returns, one example of this is pointed out in a ProPublica report/database on the repatriation of indigenous objects in the US. (Jaffe et al., 2023) and other authors involved in the project, such as Mary Hudetz, in 1998 an Ohio historical society, the Ohio History Connection, labeled 7100 remains as "culturally identifiable" and only allowed for the return of 17 human remains. The lack of remains they allowed for return is only 0.2% of their collection. This is just one of many

examples of institutions taking advantage of this loophole, and the other way to escape from NAGPRA doesn't make it any easier for these community groups to get back things that belong to them. Despite this, in early December of 2023, the Department of the Interior increased NAGPRA regulations, bolstering the effectiveness of the act and its impact on institutions. However, I would like to include one more piece that's been present in many people's discussions of NAGPRA as it is still an issue regardless of the new regulations being implemented. It is how to even go about getting items repatriated.

What is the process where do you begin? The answer isn't as simple as the question museums alone have their policies on repatriation and in combination with the requirements of NAGPRA the repatriation process is a long and tedious one. Two museums discussed later, the American Museum of Natural History and the Field Museum both have their own, lengthy, policies that someone would have to go through. For example, The American Museum of Natural History 'generously' provides us with the policies on repatriation, however from the looks of it you'd have to go tons of loops just to get something back let alone even check to see if something is part of the federally recognized list of tribes to begin with. The list of bylaws and rules isn't just the only thing they have to deal with there is also whether or not the items have been inventoried or opened to being returned. This is something that will later be discussed, which is what notices are in the process of something being deaccessioned. NAGPRA defines four types of notices; Notice of Intended Disposition, which "recognizes the claimant(s) has ownership or control of the human remains or cultural items"(National Parks Service, 2024). Then there are Notices of Intended Repatriation and Notices of Inventory Completion, with the former being a notice that a request has been received and accepted and the latter being that the item has been identified as culturally affiliated with human remains or sacred objects. Finally,

there is also a Notice of Transfer/Reinterment which notifies NAGPRA of an item that will be returned (National Parks Service, 2024). This is just one layer of the entire process and the new regulations, while they have made it more effective, haven't made it entirely easier to get these items returned.

In the past ten years, museums have been called upon to change. One change due to NAGPRA allowing for more culturally significant objects to be returned. While NAGPRA already allowed for some items to be returned it's often looked at as a saving grace for objects that did not belong to institutions, while in reality many items weren't being returned, and these institutions put lots of effort into not returning these items.

On December 6, 2023, the Department of the Interior implemented the final rule for NAGPRA, due to an overall lack of returned objects, allowing for new regulations to be enforced through the act. Concerning these new changes a Ballard Spahr article by Marcel S. Pratt, a partner at a law firm, and Nina Kalandadze, a legal associate, the final rule eliminates one of the biggest loopholes in NAGPRA while also allowing for new rules to be enacted encouraging for more items to be returned. According to Ballard Spahr (2024), the Final Rule closes the "culturally unidentifiable" loophole. This of course comes as a shock after NAGPRA stayed the same for over 30 years. Now museums of course will have to grapple with returning many items that should not all belong to them. However, this development is just one of several new changes that help these communities get back their items. The list of new regulations is much more precise and leaves little room for institutions to not return objects.

Even though all these new changes put lots of pressure on museums to return objects and reform their institutions, quite a few people and institutions are fighting to prevent this change by actively disregarding the updated act. Why do museums (and the people who work in them) not

find any benefits in NAGPRA and resist this change so much? When analyzing how museums and other institutions reacted to the new NAGPRA developments I noticed a range of reactions. Some museums closed the displays containing these objects while some increasingly pushed their displays and kept up shows that contained objects that may not rightfully belong to them. To discuss this I'll look at three institutions that take different approaches to these new regulations.

### The Field Museum: Strange Approaches to Repatriation

The Field Museum, founded in 1893, and opened in 1921, is known for its large size and diverse collection of objects. Named after Marshall Field, who was a major benefactor of the museum. He donated \$1 Million to the museum and helped solicit other investors to assist the museum in getting off its feet. In the early stages of the museum's history, it housed the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition collection of anthropological and biological objects. According to the museum's history, some of the earliest collections included "Ward's natural history collection, the entire Tiffany & Co. gem display, a collection of pre-Columbian gold ornaments, musical instruments from Samoa and Java, and a large collection of Native American objects." Due to the original museum location being unable to house so many objects and stay in good condition a new location was built in 1915 with workers moving the collection to the new site in 1920. Today the museum is home to nearly 40 million artifacts and specimens ranging from anthropology-based displays to botany and even zoology. Today some of the most notable parts of the museum are the most complete T.Rex skeleton in the world, Egyptian mummies, the man-eating lions of Tsavo, and hundreds of Native American objects and remains. As of November of 2023, the museum reported having the remains of at least 1,200 Native Americans

making it the 20th largest institution to hold Indigenous human remains or cultural objects according to a ProPublica Database. Only in 2020 did the museum make the return of objects “accessible”. Since the updated language for NAGPRA came out in 2023, the Field Museum has been a sight of study with eyes looking at how they collect and research their objects and how open they are to returning these significant objects.

The Field Museum collection which started with the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition collection was followed by expeditions starting in 1894 which aimed to gather objects from

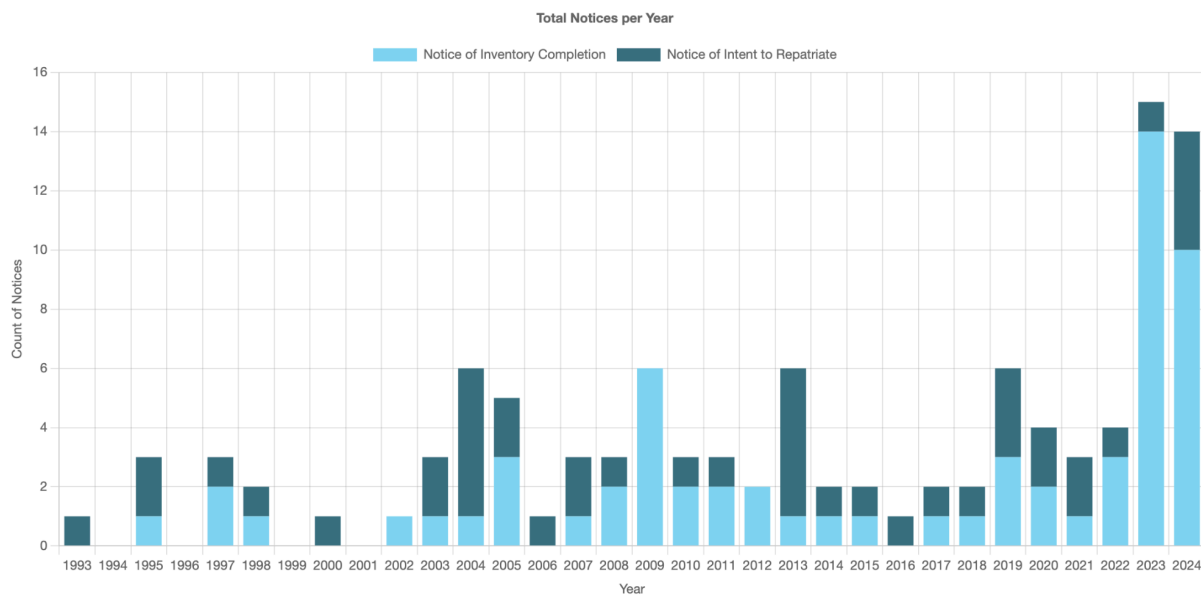


Fig. 1 The Field Museums Graph Displaying their Repatriation Statistics - Graph From Field Museums Repatriation Website (2024)

around the world to bring to the museum. The museum now has nearly 40 Million objects in its collections with only a minor fraction being on public display. When checking their database they reported having 2039 human remains from the United States with 111 hair clippings not being listed due to lack of provenance. Like many other museums, the museum presents the institution as open and willing to work with the communities to which the object originated; however their deaccessioning efforts only cover a small fraction of what should be returned.

With only 44 Notice of Intent, 63 Notices of Inventory, and 2 repatriations that were undocumented with NAGPRA between the years of 1993 and 2024 (Field Museum, NAGPRA Stats). There are few objects yet to be returned and while there was a dramatic increase in numbers in 2023/24 it's still barely scratching the surface of what could be returned (Fig 1).

The Smithsonian with a much larger collection than the Field Museum has offered the return of over 7000 objects to which over 5000 have been repatriated according to their website on human remains in the Smithsonian. So it calls to question where the delay is and why more objects haven't been returned. A large part of the critiques the Field Museum faces isn't just the way they collect and return objects and how they display them.

When the new NAGPRA language was implemented, museums displaying and collecting sacred objects scrambled to "abide" by the regulations. The Field Museum, being one of those to scramble, slightly increased the number of objects they could repatriate and also covered the displays with paper to take the objects away from view (A tactic many institutions took once the new language was implemented). While it's agreeable that these objects should no longer be on display until permitted to by those they belong to, we are still presented with a narrative by the museum. They present these closed cases simply by vowing to work with communities to display these objects accurately. They do not address previous colonialistic perspectives in the museums and how they are displayed but just say they will change it because we have to. Rather than just taking the objects out of the display and keeping it open with an explanation for these missing objects they give visitors an empty room with nothing (Fig 2) presenting multiple narratives many museums may not even intend to communicate.



Fig 2. The Field Museum Spiritual World section is covered up with paper hiding objects from view - Photograph from museum visitor (2024)

Furthermore, a book by Susanne Belovari, an assistant professor at the University of Illinois, discusses how the museum has displayed objects, called *Invisible in the White Field*, which covers The Field Museum and native histories in the museum. A key part of her discussion on the texts associated with native objects gives us accurate insight into the museum's “dedication” to presenting these objects. Belovari describes the museum's descriptions of these objects as:

repetitive, staccato, boring notes providing little specific information that would make the stroll through these halls the rewarding, intellectual enterprise it was advertised to be. In these texts, there are no or few descriptive adjectives, no positive appraisals of Native American objects which are listed with infinitely less care and enthusiasm than the zoological or herbarium specimens whose name lists fill pages in many annual reports.”(Belovari, 1997 p 156).

So clearly the Field Museum's interest in Native American objects is not nearly as great as other objects in their collection, what does this mean for the way they care for these objects and what their displays look like today?

The Field Museum may seem to be making adequate steps toward a decolonized museum but its facade is easily disregarded when looking at each of the articles discussed in this section. This is not to say the museum hasn't made efforts to address the issues but it's also important for the museum to consider these aspects of museum practice further and practice "appropriate museology" as discussed in a text by Christina F. Kreps the Director of Museum of Anthropology and Museum & Heritage Studies at the University of Denver. The article *Appropriate Museology in Theory and Practice* addresses many aspects of museum practice specifically how museum practices have changed. In short, appropriate museology is to suggest, "that indigenous museological traditions should be explored and integrated into museum operations where suitable" (Kreps, 2008). This in short poses the idea that maybe one of how museums could address the issues around museum practice in relation to sacred objects is to integrate indigenous practices of display into their own. This idea may seem strange for museums but it is not as outlandish as it may seem. However, there are still many museums like the American Museum of Natural History that have also yet to address these issues and continue the same practices of display, collection, and repatriation that got us here.

#### The American Museum of Natural History: Continuing Old Practices

The American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) is a historic museum that is known for its massive collection of objects and calls itself "one of the world's preeminent scientific and cultural institutions" (AMNH, 2024). The museum was founded in 1869 by Albert Smith Bickmore, a Harvard zoologist. Gaining support from major influential figures at the time such as Theodore Roosevelt, the museum would outgrow their first home, Central Park Arsenal, in just three years making them need to find a new home. The new building would then open in



1877 at its current location. They would begin expeditions not long after in 1881 with museum representatives going to almost every aspect of the globe in the name of the museum to collect new objects with their first hall, Northwest Coast Hall formerly Hall of Northwest Coast Indians, opening a few years later in 1896. The museum has been home to many protests and calls for action in the past few years prompted by a statue of Theodore Roosevelt being removed for its clear display of colonialism in the United States (Fig 3). From there the museum would later be called to close two halls in their museum, Halls of Eastern Woodlands and Hall of the Great Plains, due to them containing countless objects that now preside under NAGPRA regulations. Today the museum has begun its evaluation internally by looking to return objects to those they rightfully belong to and publicly calling for more objects to be repatriated with better museum practices going forward.

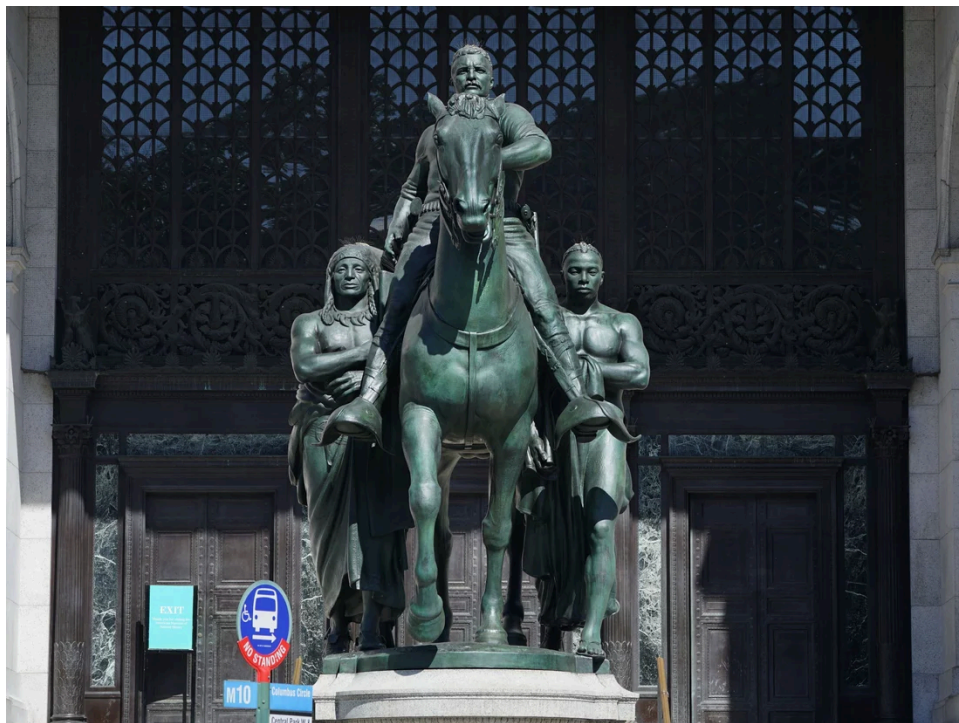


Fig 3. The Theodore Roosevelt Equestrian Statue is shown in front of the American Museum of Natural History's Central Park West entrance in New York City in 2020. Timothy A. Clary

The museum collection currently has 32 million specimens and cultural artifacts according to their website. A ProPublica report titled, "The American Museum of Natural History to Close Exhibits Displaying Native American Belongings" by Logan Jaffe and Mary Hudetz, two ProPublica reporters, says, "Federal data shows the American Museum of Natural History has made available for return 47% of more than 3,500 Native American remains that it reported to the federal government. It still maintains control of at least 1,800 ancestors and more than 4,060 funerary items buried with those individuals" (Jaffe and Hudetz, 2024). While the museum has reported 3,500 remains to the government with nearly half being returned there is still a large portion of remains and objects that have yet to be put up for repatriation. This brings us back to my previous discussion of the Field Museum and both its collections and processes of repatriating objects. While the museum has returned a dramatically larger amount of remains and objects, a large issue with the museum's processes is its lack of transparency. While the museum may be going through a busier than normal time due to the updated language I noticed the museum anthropological collection database was inaccessible (AMNH, 2024). This is a major issue Indigenous communities face when attempting to get objects returned to them. What is one to do when the database is "under maintenance" and I can't find any information objects? This is what I encountered trying to find out how accessible it was to just find objects up for repatriation which is a key section of NAGPRA. Anthropologist Chip Colwell writes in his article, *Curating Secrets: Repatriation, Knowledge Flows, and Museum Power Structures* that, "Multiple mechanisms are built into the law to ensure that museums make their records accessible to tribes and that the legal process is transparent." (Colwell, C. 2015, 267). However, Colwell points out a loophole that has since been removed from NAGPRA regulations that assisted the museum in keeping this information private. The section of the former NAGPRA document states, "The

museum official or Federal agency official, at the request of the Indian tribe official, may take such steps as are considered necessary pursuant to otherwise applicable law, to ensure that information of a particularly sensitive nature is not made available to the general public ”((43 CFR 10.10(f)(2), 1995). So if a museum declared something sensitive information they were able to withhold it, this is no longer the case yet we still clearly have a deficit of information that we should have from the museums. The museums should have inventories of objects up for return; however, both museums discussed so far made it fairly difficult to find that information with AMNH not having it published anywhere due to maintenance. AMNH is clearly resistant to being transparent about the process of returning objects but they must be stellar in the way they display them.

Just like the Field Museum, AMNH has also covered its displays (Fig 4). This isn't surprising however as this is a tactic taken upon by many museums since the new NAGPRA language was implemented.



Fig 4. People are seen walking past covered-up exhibits in the American Museum of Natural History. Photo by J. Messerschmidt for NY Post 2024

Before this however their displays were something of discussion. Specifically, their two previously mentioned halls containing objects of the Indigenous peoples are what I refer to. Leonie Treier, a Faculty Fellow at the Program of Museum Studies at New York University, discusses AMNH and these exhibitions in her article, *Annotating Colonialism*. She discusses the AMNH while still addressing many museums in how they deal with new museology and change in museum practice by reviewing things the museum has done to "decolonize", however, I consider it to be almost performative which she hints at. When finishing her discussion she concludes by saying, "museum carefully controls the discourse around appropriate institutional steps towards transformation, representing itself as embracing external voices while preserving past displays and its futurity as a settler institution" (Lonetree, 2021, p.101). This essentially points out that museums may appear as though to be moving in a decolonial direction but in the same breath continue old practices staying settled into their old ways.

In the end, AMNH, similar to the Field Museum, was built on the sacred objects and human remains of Indigenous people. Their practices, are for sure, considered old museology whether that is through the way they collect objects or display them. Their efforts to follow NAGPRA regulations also appear to be, like many, the bare minimum in addressing historical injustices faced by Indigenous peoples. Moving forward I hope to see the museum follow better practices of new museology but if that chooses to do so is something we might not see for some time.

### The National Museum of the American Indian: One Step Closer to Returning Objects

The National Museum of the American Indian is one of many Smithsonian museums with three locations, one in New York City, a main location in Washington D.C., and a collection center in Maryland. The museum was founded in 1916 by founder George Gustav Heye, a

mining engineer and late collector, who opened the Museum of the American Indian to the public in 1922 in New York. He began his collection with a Navajo hide shirt from Arizona in 1897 and quickly grew his collection of objects to more than 10,000 in 1906 with objects from around the U.S. Heye began cataloging his collection in 1904 by documenting objects on 3-by-5 inch cards. The museum would later come upon hard times and began to look for ways to keep the museum going, this included the consideration of a transfer of the museum to a new owner. However, on November 18, 1989, the US president at the time, George H.W. Bush signed the National Museum of the American Indian Act. This legislation not only integrated the museum into the Smithsonian institution but also allowed for the museum to return objects to federally recognized tribes just like NAGPRA. The museum is well known for being a progressive institution in that while they still hold many objects that would fall under NAGPRA or NMAIA purview they do their best to focus more on collecting modern and contemporary works while returning or preserving their older collections. However, NMAIA is much less robust than NAGPRA and hasn't been updated to the extent NAGPRA has. This raises some concerns especially when it comes to repatriation. So has the museum taken a page out of NAGPRA during their collecting, repatriating, and display processes?

The museum's collection was built purely by Heyes until about 1908 when he had his first exhibition using some of the objects at the Pennsylvania University Museum. Going from one Navajo shirt to 800,000 objects and photographs with an additional 500,000 digitized images the collection is now highly robust and currently still collects but with the goal of collection of modern and contemporary arts. It considers its collections as significant to Native peoples as they are to the museum," both as a steward of much of their material heritage and a responsible partner in the ongoing work of making it accessible to their community members and the public

to the greatest extent possible” (NMAI, 2024). The museum has been excellent in making the collection accessible (Fig. 5) with an easy-to-navigate website and public information that will help those trying to get objects returned.

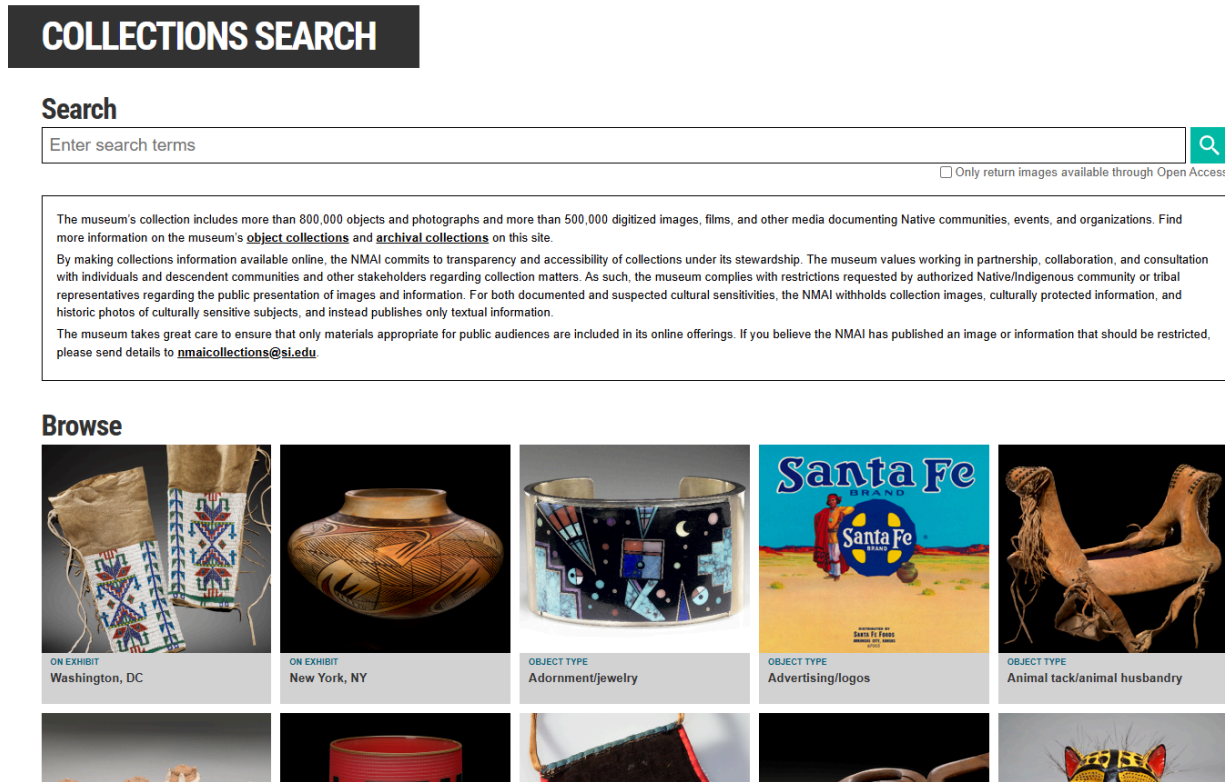


Fig 5. The National Museum of the American Indians publicly accessible collection search on their website. Screenshot (2024)

While the museum's legislation hasn't been updated in many years they still implement their own internal policies to keep up with new museum practices. The Shared Stewardship and Ethical Returns Policy is one of these, shared across the entire Smithsonian, the policy aims to reimagine what collecting items means, understanding that if the museum doesn't recognize the issues with historical museum collecting then they may cause more harm to Native communities. The policy's goal is to not only help these objects either stay safe or find their homes but to also make the process more transparent and collaborative. The museum itself has also adopted its repatriation policy which is fairly straightforward with the intent to make objects of Native

peoples easier to repatriate. Shared Stewardship is also key in NMAI processes in that it's something few museums take upon themselves. The museum stewardship policy essentially says the museum will work closely with communities to present objects in their collections allowing the people, to whom the objects belong, to have physical access to the collection. The museum's statement on the policy says, "will work with communities or individuals to determine the most appropriate path forward, be it forging shared stewardship agreements, establishing a basis for ethical return, or following the legal path of repatriation"(NMAI, 2022). When discussing the actual process of repatriation the museum not only has easy-to-access collections pages but also provides those looking to get an object returned a step-by-step guide on how to get an object back. This shows how transparent the museum tries to be in making repatriation attempts easier instead of making them jump through hoops to get back what's theirs. While people still have to go through a long process of returning to NMAI, it's much easier than museums like the Field Museum or American Museum of Natural History make it. However, while not every item is being returned at once the museum still has displays up within the museum containing objects from these Native communities.

The exhibits of NMAI are much different in comparison to the displays of AMNH and the Field Museum with the museum actively engaging with new museology practices and working with communities to put together their exhibits. However, while their shows may be wildly more engaged with decolonial practices in comparison to many other museums they're still an institution built off of colonialism and inherently contain colonial forces. An article by Amy Lonetree, a Professor of History at the University of California, titled Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI discusses how the museum makes attempts to stand against museum colonial upbringings. Lonetree points out the new objective of those working in

spaces like the NMAI stating, “[...]one of the primary objectives of those working with museums is to have the exhibition not only serve as important sites of “knowledge making and remembering” for their communities but also to challenge the commonly held stereotypes about American Indian history and culture that are predominant in our society”(Longtree, 2006, p.633). So while the museum is grounded in colonialism these museum practitioners have actively attempted to change some of their practices to address and challenge these issues. While the museums themselves are not dismantling colonialism, their exhibits call into question decades of history in which Indigenous people have been deceived as lost to the past bringing them into the future as something still here in the world today. So these exhibits and museums aren’t where they’re dismantling colonialism but instead are where the starting points for these discussions begin and exhibits presented at NMAI are key in the start of the talks.

All in all, the National Museum of the American Indian is much different than the former two museums discussed. The museum's long history starts with Heye collecting hundreds of Indigenous objects and has led to one of the largest museums focused on Indigenous history. While the whole idea of museums is a colonialist structure itself NMAI has made larger steps than most institutions to act as a starting point for discussions of both decolonization and indigenous histories hidden by colonization. Out of all the museums discussed, NMAI has been one of the few museums to practice some new museological tactics.

### Conclusion

After going through this paper it could be found that while museums have long been spaces for education, in which the professionals educate the wider public, we (as the public) have started to regard museums as spaces for protest and conversation (if the museum is open to it).



Museums have a long history originating with cabinets of curiosity and wealthy people displaying their things for others. Since the establishment of museums and similar institutions, there has been little change in their processes and structure. This has paved the way for their success. For many years there has been an increased public awareness about how these places operate especially in interactions with the public. Even though we are in a time where museum practices are evolving and there is a larger public interest, museums, and institutions alike are a long way from adopting new museology practices. Not all practices are consistent across the nation; many of them find the idea of returning objects to be a bad thing. While NAGPRA, which forces the institutions to return items, has been updated to focus on a larger scale it hasn't made the process as quick or simple as it once was. Then even beyond that, we get into institution practices as a whole from the ways they collect, return objects, and display objects they've yet to or don't plan on returning. Across all three museums discussed, however, we see how they've each begun to abide by the regulations whether it is on a small scale or by being proactive. Regardless, it's apparent museums and institutions both have so much more to change and it isn't just returning things they should have in the first place. They should be more community-engaged and focus more on those who are coming to learn rather than present things they have like trophies representative of decades of colonialism.

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