

## **This Place Called Home** **Curating from an Insider's Perspective**

*Miles R. Miller*

**A**s a young boy, accompanied by my family, I joined the Washat religion at an area longhouse. I was nurtured with a traditional education, the elders taught me the Yakama legends and time-honored lessons, and encouraged me to understand everything around me. These early influences continue to inspire me as a beadwork artist. I learned patience, observation, design, and composition, skills that carried over to my collection management work. I learned to care for collections by thoroughly evaluating, completing, and updating accession and catalog records, thus facilitating the process of preservation and attending to exhibition concerns with care. The combined influences of my traditional Yakama upbringing, museology, and contemporary Native American art history studies motivate me as a curator to utilize exhibits as a new pedagogical method of pursuing Native American history, culture, and arts.

This essay will introduce the reader to *This Place Called Home*, an exhibit I curated in 2008 as part of my master's thesis project at the University of Washington's Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will reflect on my experiences as a Native curator from the Yakama Nation—specifically how, in my opinion, traditional cultural beliefs enhance current museological practices and the relative power of decision making in collaborative projects between museums and tribal communities. Related to this shared management process, I will address two additional issues: (1) the relationship between pan-tribal



Guest curator Miles R. Miller (Yakama) with a 1988 capote (cat. no. 1988-119/1) made by Maynard Lavadour White Owl (Nez Perce/Cayuse), on display in the 2008 Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture exhibit *This Place Called Home*. Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture. Photograph by Doug McTavish.

advisory committees and tribally specific values, and (2) possible tensions between culture and religion in museological practices.

In the course of the object-selection process for *This Place Called Home* (TPCH), an Umatilla cultural adviser brought his concern over ten historical objects that might possibly fall under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) to the attention of

the Plateau exhibit curators. These archaeological objects come from a particular accession in which the archaeologist and collector often acted without the guidance and advice of local Native American consultants. The intended use of these objects—a sinker/maul, sculpture/effigy, pestle, ground stone tools, and stone mortars—is often misunderstood. My course of action to resolve the issue was to research accession records in search of evidence supporting this claim of a burial connection. Finding no evidence, and acting as a curator familiar with traditional Yakama teachings, I chose to override the recommendation of the Umatilla cultural adviser. This internal decision making is indicative of new understandings of what we mean by indigenous museum curating and the implications of consultation.

### THIS PLACE CALLED HOME

In March 2007 I accepted the invitation by Dr. James Nason, curator emeritus at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Seattle, to cocurate a complementary, object-based exhibit to augment *Peoples of the Plateau: The Indian Photographs of Lee Moorhouse, 1898–1915*, a traveling photographic exhibition from the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.<sup>2</sup> Both *TPCH* and the Moorhouse exhibit were designed to focus on the arts and culture of middle Columbia Plateau tribes—Yakama, Umatilla, and Nez Perce—and as such, would be the first major exhibits about Plateau culture in the past twenty years at the Burke Museum.

The Moorhouse exhibit included fifty-one important historical images of known people, village sites, clothing, and other objects of material culture—all reproductions of Lee Moorhouse's glass plate negatives taken at the turn of the century. The Burke Museum was interested in enhancing the exhibit to highlight and present to western Washington audiences Plateau objects from the Native American permanent collection.

*TPCH* explored the indigenous aesthetic of the Columbia River Plateau region. Carefully selected objects looked at relevant historical and prehistorical objects characteristic of Plateau culture from the Burke Museum, and demonstrated how the Columbia River Plateau people visually represent a multidimensional and interdependent link to their homeland.

My role as cocurator was as a museology student, a collection manager, and a Yakama tribal member who happens to be a beadwork artist. *TPCH* was my master's thesis project. I entered the assignment wondering how best to signify eastern Washington's Plateau culture given the insufficient funding that limited me to objects from the Burke Museum's permanent collection. Borrowing objects from other institutions was out of the question, there were not enough resources to

purchase new objects, and requests for corporate or even tribal funding were denied. But these limitations, combined with concerns over culturally sensitive objects, became a motivating factor. I was determined to pull this exhibit together.

As a museology student, I began the University of Washington's museum studies program as an experienced collection manager with a burgeoning interest in curatorial work. Accepting the exhibit as my master's thesis project meant that I needed to impress on my thesis committee, the University of Washington, and the Yakama Nation that my experience and cultural knowledge combined to help me curate a successful exhibit on Plateau arts and culture. My previous work in collection management included many duties—one of which was to evaluate and write condition reports on objects selected for exhibitions use, noting whether the object was exhibit-worthy. The condition of each object was first and foremost in my mind. Each object displayed needed to be in stable condition, aesthetically agreeable, and culturally appropriate.

The lead curator, cultural advisers, and I were expected to make our recommendations in the object-selection process. The cultural advisers were given digital images and a report of each object. Being on-site at the museum, I had the advantage of examining and handling the actual objects in collection storage. Upon object review, several pieces were pulled immediately for failing to meet the previously mentioned prerequisites. For example, a particular cloth dress was removed due to the age, fragility, and unstable nature of the silk ribbon sewn onto it, and a pair of moccasins was pulled because they originated from the Northern Plains. A noteworthy discovery I made was that of a beaded vest, pictured in the *Peoples of the Plateau* catalogue, worn by One-Pie-High, a noted Indian war dancer.<sup>3</sup>

As a Yakama person, my fondest childhood memories are of when I would listen to and watch my Grandpa Joe and Aunt Rose tell our Yakama legends. They would animate each story by taking on the personality of various characters. These legends tell about the creation of landmarks or how animals received their markings. Grandpa Joe and Aunt Rose were fluent trilinguists who spoke the Yakama, Nez Perce, and English languages. Their lesson was twofold: to listen to and learn the Yakama language as well as to learn the moral of the legend. English may be my only language today, but I do remember the legends warmheartedly. Aunt Rose's favorite legend to tell was "The Origin of Basket Weaving." It is about a young girl who learned how to weave watertight, coiled cedar-root baskets, also known as Klickitat baskets. After completing her first basket, she is taught by nature how to decorate the baskets—the diamond comes from the rattlesnake, the stepped pyramid represents the mountain, and the stars, too, are symbolized in the basket designs. Alone these are simple geometric patterns, but put

together in certain configurations they signify fishnets and migrating geese, quail, and salmon. These visual representations are still woven into the baskets and twined bags of the traditional Plateau artists.

As a boy listening to the Yakama legends, unique ephemeral images were stored within my memory. I grew up surrounded by traditional Plateau clothing, coiled cedar-root baskets, and twined bags decorated with customary Plateau designs. For twenty-eight years, I have been a beadwork artist, and my childhood pictures have combined with the traditional Yakama patterns to motivate me to create time-honored, inspired designs in a contemporary fashion. My keen eye for detail and experience help me to understand the tangible and poignant moment in time involved in both the creation of traditional and contemporary art and the practice of museology.

#### **RELATIVE POWER OF DECISION MAKING**

For successful collaborative exhibit projects between museums and tribal communities to work, the lead curators should define the original concept of an exhibit (the thesis or main point to be interpreted), create a list of proposed objects, and establish the composition and role of a cultural advisory committee. The advisory committee is a relatively new development for museum practice, introduced in the last twenty years of advocacy for Native rights in museums. Some of these developments are related to the passage of legislative acts such as the NAGPRA.

Native American tribes have a deep and enduring relationship to the environment, which is expressed in their traditional material culture, religion, and storytelling practices. Traditional culture thrives today due to the nurturance of stories that are carried by individuals responsible for their continuance. These community experts serve as curators not only in an object-centered sense, but also in a broader philosophical sense within their tribal contexts. They thus curate not only objects, but also deep spiritual knowledge. This spiritual knowledge highlights notions of ownership and use. As culturally sanctioned experts, the advisory committee members are also arbiters of the objects' proper use and interpretation.

The Burke Museum has an active Native American Advisory Board (NAAB) that, on behalf of the Washington State tribes, oversees the implementation of care for its ethnographic collections. The museum staff and cultural advisers brought together for *TPCH* comprised Comanche, Yakama, Umatilla, and Nez Perce tribal members. Each possessed knowledge of, or practiced, the traditional arts and culture of the Plateau people. Although the cultural advisers for *TPCH* were a separate working group from the NAAB, as cocurator I worked with

the three cultural advisers representing the Yakama, Umatilla, and Nez Perce nations while Dr. Nason, the lead curator, worked with the Burke Museum's NAAB.

In preparation for the selection process, I reviewed and compared the images of *Peoples of the Plateau* to the initial TPCH list of ninety-nine objects selected by Dr. Nason. I developed a list that included the following criteria for selection of objects to be included: (1) Plateau—objects must be affiliated with the Yakama, Umatilla, or Nez Perce tribes; (2) condition—objects must be in stable condition, meaning they must be able to last the extent of exhibit, and withstand exhibit lighting and possibly cleaning; (3) exhibit history—objects must not have been previously exhibited or published; (4) aesthetic quality; (5) date; and (6) artist, if known. After meticulous research of the Plateau collection, I added twenty-four additional objects to broaden the list to 123 items.

The implementation of this exhibit was a shared experience between the curators and the cultural advisers, but discrete steps needed to be taken as well. Among the curatorial team there appeared to be an understood level of trust in my knowledge of traditional Plateau culture and my authorship of the exhibit's main theme. Using the criteria I established, I was asked to select the final objects and develop the exhibit story line in more detail. My curatorial statement read as follows:

This exhibition expresses the rich traditional cultural continuity of my people—the Yakama, Nez Perce, and Umatilla. It also demonstrates how we see, understand, and represent our families, our homes, and world around us. Each of us perceives home differently. It can be represented by the gathering of natural foods, the ability to speak and understand our native language, or the way we see our land—from the sagebrush covered hills to the high alpine forests to the river banks of the Columbia River.

For thousands of years Plateau artists incorporated geometric designs into stone carvings and rock wall paintings recording how they experienced and understood nature—especially the relationship between humans and the natural world. Today these distinct recognized patterns are symbols of place that connect us to our culture, history, environment, knowledge, and values.

Present-day Plateau artists are inspired by and continue to use these symbols to identify tribal and familial backgrounds. Floral and pictorial images have also been incorporated. Drawing on oral histories, tribal celebrations, and landscapes, Plateau artists are creating remarkable new visual memories of this place called home.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, the exhibit encompassed clothing, archaeology, horse gear, and a DVD of modern-day artists and cultural specialists that explains to the viewer how the Plateau people visually expressed their relationship to their homeland.<sup>5</sup> I selected the objects, created the curatorial statement, authored the exhibit text and individual object label copy, and acted as liaison between the museum and the tribes in the selection of the community experts. The design elements were created with input from the curators and an exhibit designer. Consultation with the cultural advisers was necessary throughout the entire process for their input on object selection and label copy content, and their recommendations of artists for public programming events.

### IDENTIFYING AND DEALING WITH DIVISIVE ISSUES

The combined influences of a traditional Yakama upbringing with studies in contemporary Native American art history and museology continue to inspire me as a practicing artist specializing in beadwork. I learned to pay attention to detail, a skill that carried over to my collection management work. This awareness of my people's practices is complemented by education and training received by studying and working at various mainstream educational institutions, including the Institute of American Indian Arts, the Smithsonian Institution, and Harvard's Peabody Museum. A combination of lived experience and formal training enhanced the work I pursued as a curator. For example, my familiarity with Columbia Plateau arts helped me to identify previously unidentified or unaffiliated objects as Plateau.

As a member of the Yakama Nation, taught to appreciate and respect traditional Yakama beliefs, I understand the importance of NAGPRA and Native American ethnographic museum collections. The issue of NAGPRA arose when it was discovered that several objects on the initial list were identified as culturally sensitive or burial related. I had prior knowledge of the objects' culturally sensitive identification, but since Dr. Nason previously selected these, I left them on the list. In the process of object selection, a member of the consultation team recommended that several archaeological objects be pulled. These objects included a sinker and maul, mortar, and other stone tools.

The cultural advisers for *TPCH* comprised Comanche, Yakama, Umatilla, and Nez Perce tribal members—a pan-tribal advisory committee focused on tribally specific values. The Plateau people, Yakama, Umatilla, and Nez Perce have overlapping or shared cultural beliefs: each speak related dialects of the Penutian language family, practice the Washat religion, and abide by similar unwritten laws of the Creator. Their ceremonies and material culture constitute the “heart knowledge”<sup>6</sup> that pays honor to a time long ago before there were people on

this planet, when the animals were preparing the world for our coming. But there are distinct tribes and bands that make up these modern-day nations. The Yakama Nation alone includes fourteen tribes and bands whose semipermanent villages were scattered throughout eastern Washington. Although each tribe and band followed similar cultural beliefs, they had their own legends that told about the creation of landmarks or how animals received their markings.

The recommendation from one of the advisory team members to flag these archaeological objects in the database system as culturally sensitive sparked an internal discussion about power, legitimacy, and our mutual curatorial roles. I immediately researched accession records and other related documentation once this concern was brought to my attention. Could the two separate opinions—one that followed the original archaeological record, and my own, based on my cultural and professional training—be seen as a tension between religion and culture? I believe it was not necessarily the cultural or religious aspects of the objects in question, but more a doubting of my experience or cultural knowledge. It has been my experience at home to be told by an elder, "You are young, you don't know anything yet." I believe Dr. Nason recognized something in me that impressed him enough to ask me to cocurate. I also trust he felt I could settle the debate about the objects; if he sensed I could not settle this, he would have stepped in. He listened to me and reviewed my findings. Careful reviews of the object records found no evidence indicating a relationship of the archaeological material to burials.

In a September 11, 2007, letter, I wrote to the advisory committee that I felt comfortable keeping the selected objects in the exhibit:

Though these objects [identified above] are from accessions that included funerary objects there is nothing in the records that would lead us to believe these objects are culturally sensitive objects. We greatly appreciate [your] diligent research in this matter. Dr. Bergen, collector of [the archaeological objects in question], often made assumptions in his notes about the use of objects; unfortunately, he did this without any tribal consultations or intimate knowledge of the culture. . . . I have carefully reviewed these object records and there is no evidence indicating a relationship to burials. . . . The other two cultural advisors involved with this project . . . have not expressed any concern over these objects. Following a discussion this morning with Laura Phillips, Archaeology Collections Manager, I feel comfortable with keeping these in the selection at least until I hear otherwise. . . . If you have any other specific information that you would



like us to consider about these objects, please do not hesitate to contact the Burke.

I made the decision to override the cultural adviser based on my belief that archaeologists and collectors of the time rarely consulted with tribes. The possible burial connection with the objects was made in response to the accession record, which noted the collector's impression about the use of the objects in question. The assumption in his notes about the use of objects was made without any tribal consultations or intimate knowledge of the culture.

Due to the age of the objects, their provenience is undetermined even by tribal standards. I therefore allowed the ten archaeological objects that date between one hundred and nine thousand years old to remain part of the selection process as evidence of the Plateau peoples continued existence in this region. It was my understanding that similar objects are on exhibit at tribal museums, which supported my decision to have them displayed.

### CONCLUSION

Throughout my life, my family encouraged me to balance an education in long-established Yakama philosophy with Western learning. As a beadwork artist, I am continually inspired by and create traditional Plateau designs in a contemporary fashion reminiscent of the historic twined bags, coiled cedar-root baskets, and clothing whose designs impart stories. The dramatic visual explanations I incorporated into beaded bags, moccasins, medallions, and belt buckle patterns are fragments of a longer story known only to me or to whomever received the finished product. This ancestry of experience of my people's customs—heart knowledge, blood memory, and voice of the land<sup>7</sup>—is complemented by education and training received by studying and working at various institutions. I believe the combined influences of my traditional Yakama upbringing, museology, and contemporary Native American art history studies helps me to understand and respect the material culture of America's indigenous peoples.

Curating a collaborative project such as *This Place Called Home* was not only a testament of my knowledge, skills, and abilities as a curator, but also evidence that the knowledge my elders taught me qualified as cultural preservation standards. As a Native American in the museum field, I believe in joint projects between the museum, tribal communities, and Native American art historians in identifying object and tribal affiliation, developing exhibitions, and creating new pedagogical approaches to Native American history, culture, and arts. As a curator, I believe in developing collaborative exhibition projects between museums and tribal communities, encouraging active participation of the

artists to articulate their tribal histories through visual dialogue, and inviting audiences to meet cultural specialists who can express their perspectives and experiences. As a collection manager, my interests are in evaluating and completing accession records, gathering, compiling, and updating provenances, dates, artists, and materials. I believe this type of partnership between varied constituents and practices is needed to strengthen relations between museums, tribal communities, and Native American art historians.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Miles R. Miller** was born and raised in the Yakima Valley. As a beadwork artist, he creates traditional-inspired designs in a contemporary fashion. His beadwork has been exhibited at the Columbia Center for the Arts, Hood River, Oregon, and at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico. He earned a master's degree in museology from the University of Washington, a bachelor's degree from Evergreen State College, and an associate's degree at the Institute of American Indian Arts in museum studies. He curated *Lasting Heritage* for the Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture and cocurated *This Place Called Home* at the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture. In 2007 Miller participated as curator's assistant with *The Requickening Project* during the Fifty-Second International Venice Biennale. His publications have appeared in various journals.

NOTES

- 1 Miles R. Miller, "This Place Called Home: A Columbia Plateau Arts and Culture Exhibit and Study Guide" (master's thesis, University of Washington, 2008).
- 2 For more information on these two exhibits, please visit the University of Washington's Burke Museum Web site at [http://www.burkemuseum.org/static/plateau\\_arts/tpch/index.php](http://www.burkemuseum.org/static/plateau_arts/tpch/index.php) and [http://www.burkemuseum.org/static/plateau\\_arts/moorhouse/index.php](http://www.burkemuseum.org/static/plateau_arts/moorhouse/index.php).
- 3 Miller, "This Place Called Home," 194.
- 4 See the full statement at [http://www.burkemuseum.org/static/plateau\\_arts/tpch/about.php](http://www.burkemuseum.org/static/plateau_arts/tpch/about.php).
- 5 Miller, "This Place Called Home."
- 6 Leilani Holmes, "Heart Knowledge, Blood Memory, and the Voice of the Land: Implications of Research Among Hawaiian Elders," in *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World*, ed. George J. Sefa Dei, Budd L. Hall, and Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 40.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 46.