

# ***LIVING OUR CULTURES, SHARING OUR HERITAGE:*** **AN ALASKA NATIVE EXHIBITION AS INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE NEXUS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska* opened in 2010 at the Smithsonian Institution's Arctic Studies Center in the Anchorage Museum. Based on extensive Alaska Native consultation and collaborative research, the exhibition of 600 masterworks of art and design from Smithsonian collections was envisioned as a coming home of these heritage objects to support Indigenous cultural renaissance. The *Living Our Cultures* exhibition serves as a statewide center for Indigenous knowledge studies and community-based programming, suggesting new directions in the evolving relationship between museums and First Peoples.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Smithsonian Institution's Alaska Native ethnological collections—including some 30,000 nineteenth- and twentieth-century objects<sup>1</sup> as well as photographs, sound recordings, and film—are tangible expressions of Arctic and subarctic Indigenous knowledge that have been archived outside the stream of living culture, often for many generations (Crowell 2020; Fitzhugh 1988, 2002; Hinsley 1994).

As defined by the Inuit Circumpolar Council, Indigenous (traditional) knowledge is “a systematic way of thinking applied to phenomena across biological, physical, cultural and spiritual systems” and is acquired through “direct and long-term experiences and extensive and multigenerational observations, lessons and skills” (Council 2013:1). It includes deep experiential understanding of Arctic biomes (traditional ecological knowledge); designs and technologies for northern living; oral history and traditions; social systems based on reciprocity and the sharing of resources; diverse languages and arts; mythologies; and sacred cosmologies (Fienup-Riordan 2007; Kawagley 2006). In contemporary communities, Indigenous knowledge is an essential foundation for cul-

tural identity and expression, health and well-being, sustainable ecosystem use, resilient responses to social and environmental stresses, and ultimately cultural survival (Barnhardt and Kawagley 2005; Chapin et al. 2006; Freeman 2000; Nuttall 1998; Pearce et al. 2015; Robards and Alessa 2004; Simpson 2004).

Heritage items in museum collections embody the rich multidimensionality of Indigenous knowledge, and these meanings may be explicated through object study and discussion by members of source communities (Crowell 2004, 2009a, 2009b; Fienup-Riordan 1996, 2005). Such interactions are an “opportunity to engage in a dialogic translation of knowledge” (Silverman 2015:5). Museum-facilitated sharing of Indigenous knowledge, especially between elder and younger generations, may be of direct and substantial benefit to the cultural vitality of Indigenous communities while supporting complementary museum objectives of public education and appreciation for others' cultures.

In response to these potentials, *Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska*, an exhibition organized by the Smithsonian's Arctic Studies

Center at the Anchorage Museum, seeks to synergistically connect heritage objects housed in museums with community knowledge through collaboration, dialogue, discovery, and education (Crowell et al. 2010). *Living Our Cultures* advances the collaborative paradigm that emerged in recent decades as museums shifted “from ‘colonial’ to ‘cooperative’ museology” (Clifford 1991:224) and recentered their Native American exhibitions on the ideals of community participation and self-representation (Ames 1992; Clifford 2004; Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2004; Crowell 2004, 2020; Cruikshank 1992; Fienup-Riordan 1996, 1999; Golding and Modest 2013; Karp et al. 1992; Krmpotich and Peers 2014; Peers and Brown 2003; Phillips 2003; Sleeper-Smith 2009).

Collaboration during *Living Our Cultures* has been multifaceted and sustained, extending over nearly two decades through collections research, exhibition planning and design, media production, publication, and outreach programming. The latter includes work with Alaska Native artists to document the Indigenous knowledge represented by Arctic skin clothing, basketry, walrus ivory carving, and other traditional manufactures, and with fluent speakers of Alaska Native languages to document object-related lexicons. Ancestral objects in the *Living Our Cultures* collection serve as exemplars for artists, teachers, and students, and knowledge is passed on through workshops in rural communities, Smithsonian websites, and online videos. Through-collaboration of this kind contrasts with the relatively limited and short-term advisory roles that have often characterized Indigenous–museum relations (Ames 2003; Phillips 2003; Swan and Jordan 2015).

For Alaska Native contributors, *Living Our Cultures* has been an opportunity to activate ancestral objects and Indigenous knowledge as resources to build cultural resiliency in their home regions, supporting recovery from colonial legacies of suppression and loss. Gwich’in elder Trimble Gilbert, who participated with other Athabascan community scholars in documenting Smithsonian objects in Washington, DC, for the Alaska exhibition, and who later co-taught young apprentices from his region during a *Living Our Cultures* snowshoe-building residency, said: “We can shoot this arrow in the air. I wonder, how far will it go? That’s the future. That’s what we are here for: future generations need to know our cultures” (Crowell et al. 2010:26).

## ***LIVING OUR CULTURES, SHARING OUR HERITAGE: THE FIRST PEOPLES OF ALASKA***

Through engaged research, exhibitions, publications, and public programs, the Smithsonian’s Arctic Studies Center (Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History) seeks to make the Smithsonian’s circumpolar ethnological collections both widely known to the public and accessible to northern Indigenous communities (Crowell et al. 2001; Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988; Fitzhugh and Kaplan 1982; Krupnik and Kaneshiro 2011; Shutt and Biddison 2014a, 2014b). The Alaska office of the Arctic Studies Center (ASC-Alaska), hosted at the Anchorage Museum since 1994 through a federal-private partnership, takes the lead in making Smithsonian resources and programs available to Alaska Native constituencies, supported by grants and gifts from nonprofit foundations, corporations, philanthropic individuals, and state and federal governments.

*Living Our Cultures* opened in 2010 at the Arctic Studies Center in Anchorage and includes more than 600 works of Indigenous art and design from the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) and National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) (Fig. 1). It presents the traditions and cultural knowledge of Alaska Native peoples through diverse testimonies and first-person perspectives (Chan 2013; Jonaitis 2011; Steffian 2010; Williams 2011). The exhibition was envisioned as the “coming home” of Smithsonian collections to their place of origin and was organized in partnership with the Anchorage Museum and Alaska Native cultural organizations statewide. Nearly 200 Alaska Native community scholars, artists, advisors, translators, and educators contributed to the exhibition, the catalog published by Smithsonian Books (Crowell et al. 2010), the exhibition website (*Alaska Native Collections: Sharing Knowledge*, <https://alaska.si.edu>), and outreach programming.

Design and construction of the 8000-square-foot *Living Our Cultures* exhibition was funded by private, corporate, foundation, federal, and state funding through a capital campaign by the Anchorage Museum and direct grants to the Arctic Studies Center, at a total cost of \$14 million. This included exhibition research, design, fabrication, media production, and contracts for loans, conservation, mounting, and shipping of the NMNH and NMAI objects. All 12 Alaska Native regional corporations were cosponsors. Research and content development



*Figure 1. The Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: First Peoples of Alaska exhibition gallery at the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center, Anchorage Museum. The Yup'ik region case and Yup'ik introductory film with narrator Alice Aluskak Rearden are at center, flanked by the Sugpiaq (left) and St. Lawrence Island (right) displays. Photo: Chuck Choi, with permission from the Anchorage Museum.*

were led by the Alaska office of the Arctic Studies Center (Aron Crowell, exhibition curator; Dawn Biddison, assistant exhibition curator) with guidance from a 25-member advisory panel. The exhibition was designed by Ralph Appelbaum Associates (New York), whose staff participated in advisory meetings and responded creatively to panelists' recommendations. The Alaska Native Language Center (University of Alaska Fairbanks) assisted in translation and transcription of Alaska Native languages, reinforcing their presence throughout the exhibition as texts and spoken voices.

In the gallery, heritage items of all kinds—clothing, hunting equipment, tools, ceremonial regalia, carvings, basketry—appear to float inside floor-to-ceiling glass cases, cantilevered on horizontal supports from vertical steel poles (Fig. 2). Three cases along the west wall of the gallery display objects related to the cross-cultural themes of community, ceremony, and connections to the sea and land, flanked by graphic panels portraying Alaska Native history and contemporary lifeways. Seven double-sided cases

arrayed down the length of the gallery present collections from the major cultural regions of Alaska and adjacent parts of Russia and Canada: (1) Tsimshian and Haida; (2) Tlingit; (3) Athabascan and Eyak; (4) Sugpiaq and Unanga; (5) Yup'ik; (6) St. Lawrence Island Yupik and Eastern Siberia; and (7) Iñupiaq. Objects are placed at contextual elevations and orientations; thus boots, clothing, armor, and masks are at heights corresponding to how they are worn on the body; drums face toward or away from the viewer according to how they are played in their home regions; harpoons point down as if toward the ocean or sea ice; and darts and arrows arc though the air high up in the cases.

Innovative features of the case and mounting system (described below) allow objects to be temporarily removed for study and discussion in a Cultural Consultation Room adjoining the gallery. This aspect of the exhibit design supports a major goal of the project for both Alaska Native advisors and the Arctic Studies Center—that *Living Our Cultures* serve as an active center for Indigenous





*Figure 2. Detail of the Iñupiaq exhibition case in Living Our Cultures showing the contextual height and orientation of sealskin boots, a winter parka made of Dall sheep fur, mittens ornamented with puffin beaks and polar bear fur for the Wolf Dance, a mask for whaling ceremonies, a bentwood feast bowl ornamented with walrus ivory carvings, small boxes and carving tools, a sealing harpoon and stool (far left), and other heritage objects. The pole-and-bracket mounting system is barely visible yet secure and permits easy removal of objects from the case for community study. A text and graphic panel depicting Alaska Native history and contemporary lifeways is seen to the right. Photo: Chuck Choi, with permission from the Anchorage Museum.*

knowledge studies as well as an engaging public exhibition for general audiences.

On the gallery walls are greetings to visitors in all 20 Alaska Native languages; a 12-foot-high touchable map showing Alaska's cultural areas and communities; and a Dena'ina welcome wall acknowledging that the exhibition stands on Dena'ina land with the permission of tribal authorities. Large-format introductory videos narrated by residents of each region, placed at the end of each case, introduce contemporary life, history, and cultural values (Fig. 1). Touch-screen computer kiosks offer close-ups of the pieces on display (including 3-D rotatable views) accompanied by transcripts of elders' commentaries, ethno-historical data, Indigenous language names, and other learning resources. Kiosk information is periodically updated through a back-of-house curatorial interface to include new information provided by elders, artists, and

others during community programs, and corresponding updates are made to the exhibition website. The digital design is flexible, interactive, and responsive to community input, allowing the Indigenous knowledge content of the exhibition to grow.

With assistance from Anchorage Museum staff, and through partnerships with Alaska Native cultural and funding organizations, the Arctic Studies Center co-organizes and presents exhibit-based programs in the gallery, including artists' residencies, language documentation seminars, youth events, lectures, docent tours, and community study visits. The center's archaeology lab, adjacent to the gallery, doubles as a publicly accessible studio for arts programs, and a dedicated "Listening Space" offers an immersive audio program of Alaska Native oral traditions. *Living Our Cultures* receives over 200,000 Alaskan, national, and international visitors



each year, including 5000 to 7000 public school students and teachers on class visits.

*Living Our Cultures* is scheduled at the Anchorage Museum through 2022, when current NMNH and NMAI collection loans expire, but it is anticipated that new agreements will extend the project for five years or more, with new selections from the Smithsonian collections replacing some of the display items. *Living Our Cultures* was intended to be a long-term exhibition with a slowly shifting population of objects, allowing new items of community interest to be brought from Washington and others to be returned, so plans for a 2022 changeover are consistent with the original concept. This arrangement also accommodates conservation concerns about fragile items that may need to be taken off display after a certain time, such as a Dena'ina beaded caribou hide tunic (catalog number NMAI 151841) that was returned to the National Museum of the American Indian in 2017 to avoid potential fading and stretching on its exhibit mount.

### **COLLABORATIVE EXHIBITION RESEARCH AT THE SMITHSONIAN (2001–2005)**

We will discuss the Indigenous–museum collaborations that were mobilized to create *Living Our Cultures* in three parts, focusing on the themes of collections research (2001–2005), planning/design/production (2006–2010), and postproduction programming (2010–present). In 2001, ASC-Alaska launched the Alaska Native Collections Project to bring community scholars to Washington, DC, to document heritage collections at NMNH and NMAI, supported by grants from the Rasmuson Foundation, National Park Service (Shared Beringian Heritage Program), Anchorage Museum Foundation, Smithsonian Institution, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Museum Loan Network. Over four years, 40 Alaska Native scholars traveled in seven contingents to Washington with ASC-Alaska staff on “reverse expeditions” to rediscover—and temporarily reclaim for exhibition—cultural objects that had been acquired from their communities many decades earlier by traders, museum collectors, and Smithsonian scientists.<sup>2</sup> The delegates were recommended by regional cultural organizations and comprised a truly distinguished group. Rosita Worl of the Sealaska Heritage Institute introduced Tlingit and Haida representatives Clarence Jackson, George Ramos, Peter Jack, Dolores Churchill, Donald Gregory, and Anna Katzeek with words that could apply to all who

participated: “I would like to say for the record that these are our scholars. These are the people that we selected to represent us and who carry the wisdom of our people and our ancestors” (Crowell et al. 2010:293).

Consulting with Indigenous experts about cultural knowledge—as opposed to collecting and analyzing quantifiable or personal data about them as individuals—does not constitute “research involving human subjects” under federal law or Smithsonian guidelines (Smithsonian Institution 2009; Smithsonian Human Subjects Institutional Review Board 2011). Nonetheless, the methodology employed for the Washington research followed ethical standards set by these guidelines, including informed consent and the right to review. Prior to each trip, participants were briefed in detail about the project and signed consent forms acknowledging their understanding that the discussions at NMNH and NMAI would be videotaped and transcribed; that information they provided would be presented in a public exhibition, printed catalog, and website; that their comments would be attributed to them as named individuals; and that they would be compensated fairly for their participation. Importantly, the consent agreement included the right to review transcripts, make corrections, and retract material they did not wish to share publicly. ASC-Alaska provided honoraria and travel expenses at standard federal rates to the visiting scholars, from grant funds.

During the weeklong sessions in Washington, the Alaska Native delegates engaged in self-directed group dialogues about potential exhibit items, addressing a wide range of topics, including how the objects were made and used, their probable places of origin based on design and iconography, social contexts of use, and related oral traditions and spiritual concepts (Fig. 3). Each group followed its own social protocols during these discussions, including opening prayers, personal introductions, order of speaking, and observance of proprietary rights to speak about objects of clan patrimony. Curatorial interjections were limited to providing the discussants with available museum documentation (e.g., date of acquisition, reported provenance, collector's notes) and asking occasional follow-up questions. Many of the visiting scholars were fluent speakers of Alaska Native languages and preferred to converse in those languages about ancestral objects, providing summaries in English for the benefit of staff.

The visiting scholars embraced their role as educators for the benefit of both their own communities and the world at large and were generous in sharing their expertise.



*Figure 3. Unangǎ (Aleut) Alaska Native community scholars Daria Dirks, Vlaas Shabolin, Maria Turnpaugh, and Mary Bourdukovsky (left to right) examine a pair of woven grass socks from the Aleutian Islands at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH E316670, Sheldon Jackson collection, 1921) during a research visit in preparation for Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage. Mary Bourdukovsky recalled her father wearing socks like these inside his waterproof sealskin boots. Photo: Aron Crowell, Arctic Studies Center.*

When examining a *qantaq* bentwood eating bowl, John Phillip Sr. spoke in Yup'ik about the traditional men's house as the communal center of learning where he saw such bowls being made. The exhibition could be a new way of teaching, he suggested: "We want your help with these things.... We want you to understand our way of living" (Crowell et al. 2010:112).

Because of the enormity of the Smithsonian Alaska collections, costs of travel, and limited time available with NMNH and NMAI collections staff, it was possible to present the visiting scholars with only a sample of the Smithsonian objects from their respective regions, generally about 125 to 150 items that were curatorially preselected for exhibitable condition and typological variety. Items were presented one at a time for discussion rather than in multiples, to avoid confusion of reference in the transcripts.

The Alaska Native scholars suggested objects that should be included in the exhibition to represent their cultures and declined others as of lesser importance or inauthentic. For example, Tlingit elders rejected a ceremonial copper shield (*tinaa*) collected in Klawock in 1926, saying that it was made of sheathing from a ship's hull rather than native copper and that the crest designs inscribed on it did not appear to be authentic; it was "not a real *tinaa*" and could even be a non-Native forgery. Community scholars avoided speaking about items outside of their direct knowledge, as when Yup'ik elders from the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta declined to discuss objects from "upriver" or from Nunivak Island because they were unfamiliar with their construction and design.

Altogether, the Washington trips generated discussions of nearly 1000 heritage items in the NMNH and



NMAI collections, documented by over 4000 pages of annotated transcripts with passages in Yup'ik, St. Lawrence Island Yupik, Inupiaq, Tlingit, Haida, Koyukon, and Gwich'in as well as English. This large corpus of Indigenous knowledge documentation was published online by the Arctic Studies Center in 2006 as Alaska Native Collections: Sharing Knowledge (<https://alaska.si.edu>), produced by Second Story Interactive (Portland, OR) and hosted on Smithsonian servers (Fig. 4). Object-

level pages on the website include high-resolution studio photography, edited transcripts, curatorial summaries referenced to anthropological and historical sources, names of objects in the language/dialect of their region of origin, historical photographs, related objects, and location maps. Objects from the Bering Strait region are also presented in Russian translation for the benefit of Indigenous audiences in eastern Siberia. Advanced search and browse features, cultural overviews, and biographies of contributors are provided.

The Alaska Native Collections website continues to serve the research and educational objectives of the *Living Our Cultures* program and was adapted in 2010 to support the information kiosks in the exhibition gallery. However, the website is now technologically outdated and nearing the end of its viability. As a remedy, the Arctic Studies Center has proposed a new Smithsonian-hosted site, programmed in Drupal and drawing on updated EMu (electronic museum) collections databases at both NMNH and NMAI, to provide access to all information developed during the Alaska Native Collections Project. Support for development of the website will be primarily in-kind from the National Museum of Natural History and National Museum of the American Indian, including contributions by information technology and collections staff.

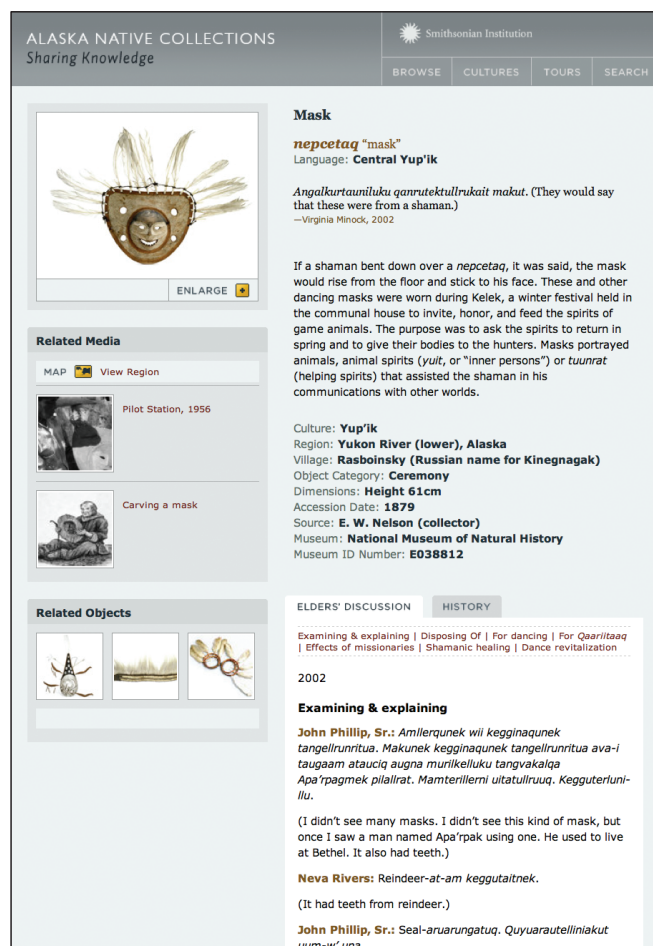


Figure 4. Screen shot from the Alaska Native Collections: Sharing Knowledge website (<https://alaska.si.edu>) showing a Yup'ik shaman's mask purchased by Smithsonian naturalist Edward W. Nelson in 1879 (catalog number NMNH E038812). The page includes the Central Yup'ik (nepcetaq) word for this type of mask, a 23-page edited transcript of community scholars John Phillip Sr. and Neva Rivers discussing the mask in Yup'ik (Elders' Discussion), ethnohistorical data (History), museum cataloging information, a high-resolution image of the mask that can be enlarged, historical images, and related objects in the online collection.

## COLLABORATIVE PLANNING, DESIGN, AND CONTENT DEVELOPMENT (2005–2010)

As an exhibition concept, *Living Our Cultures* presented the considerable challenge of representing all cultural regions of a state that is home to 229 federally recognized Alaska Native tribes (generally corresponding to individual villages) and 20 different Indigenous languages. This was an enormous increase in scope from *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*, an earlier Arctic Studies Center exhibition focusing on the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq region of Prince William Sound, the Kenai Peninsula, Kodiak Island, and the Alaska Peninsula (Crowell et al. 2001). The collaborative approach adopted for *Looking Both Ways* included Smithsonian partnership with the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak; formation of a regional advisory committee of Indigenous and humanities scholars; and elders' planning conferences at the Alutiiq Museum in 1997 and 1998, attended by representatives from all 17 villages in the region (Crowell 2004). Themes and content from discussions during these gatherings, combined with Smithsonian and Alutiiq Museum col-

lections, oral traditions, archaeology, and ethnohistory, provided the foundation for the exhibition and catalog (Clifford 2004, 2013).

While appropriate and successful for collaborative exhibition development within a single cultural region, the *Looking Both Ways* model of engaging local representatives from all constituent communities was impractical for planning *Living Our Cultures*. As a solution, ASC-Alaska scaled up the process by enlisting advisors from Indigenous, academic, and cultural institutions around the state to serve as representatives of their home regions in shaping the voice, content, and style of the exhibition. Their effort would build on the foundational research in Washington and help to bring the knowledge and perspectives of community scholars into the public sphere. Seventeen Alaska Native advisors with backgrounds in education, museums, and cultural leadership joined eight non-Native museum and educational professionals on the advisory panel in 2005, representing the Alaska State Museum, Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, Anchorage Museum, Alutiiq Museum, Alaska Native Heritage Center, Calista Elders Council, Chugach Heritage Foundation, Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Ilanka Cultural Center, Kawerak Inc., North Slope Borough, Sealaska Heritage Institute, University of Alaska (Anchorage and Fairbanks), and Yupiit Piciryarait Cultural Center and Museum.

The panel worked closely with the ASC-Alaska curatorial team, exhibition designers (Ralph Appelbaum Associates), film producer (Donna Lawrence Productions), web designers (Second Story Interactive), and Listening Space producer (Charlie Morrow Productions). Five two-day, full-panel sessions were held in Anchorage to share ideas and review successive versions of exhibit scripts, graphics, object selections, case designs, gallery layouts, and digital presentations. Group discussions and reviews continued apace between panel meetings via phone and email. Paul Ongtooguk, an Iñupiaq advisor and faculty member of the School of Education at the University of Alaska Anchorage, likened the intensive advisory experience to serving on the “Alaska Native United Nations” because of the unique opportunity it afforded to collaborate with colleagues from all parts of the state.

Among the issues that the panel considered was how to present culturally sensitive ceremonial and spiritual objects, with concern for misunderstandings that might arise among non-Native audiences. The specific question of whether to display masks, amulets, rattles,

and other instruments associated with Southeast Alaska shamanism was referred externally to the Sealaska Heritage Institute’s Council of Traditional Scholars (CTS) and the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (CCTHITA). Meeting jointly in Juneau in 2008, the CTS and CCTHITA adopted a resolution supporting inclusion of these pieces in *Living Our Cultures* with guidance that the role of shamans as healers and spiritual guardians of their communities should be emphasized, and that cultural protocols in the handling of these objects must be observed (Council of Traditional Scholars 2008).<sup>3</sup>

Many aspects of the exhibition design reflect ideas and recommendations provided by the advisory panel, including its overall layout. *Living Our Cultures* occupies a large, open gallery with the seven regional cases arranged in geographical sequence from north to south along its length, offering visitors a sweeping entry view of Indigenous art and design from the Arctic coast to central Alaska to the southeastern panhandle of the state. There is no fixed path through the floor plan, inviting visitors to explore the gallery as an analog cultural landscape where contrasts and similarities between the different regions may be discovered. In this way, Alaska Native cultures are experienced as adjacent and related, reflecting their shared histories and connections through trade, migration, and cultural exchange.

A principal outcome of design collaboration was to envision a new kind of exhibition that would serve Alaska Native communities as an active nexus for Indigenous knowledge studies and education. The integrated solution included: (1) cases with sliding glass panels that can be opened to provide access to the objects; (2) a mounting system on which objects are secure but easily released, allowing them to be temporarily removed by museum staff and transported by mobile carts to the Cultural Consultation Room for study (Fig. 5); (3) Smithsonian–Anchorage Museum loan agreements that permit hands-on examination and discussion of objects by community participants; (4) ASC-Alaska commitments to securing funds and organizing programs that utilize the objects as knowledge resources; and (5) making Indigenous knowledge documentation and updates available online and in the exhibition gallery.

In Washington, the massive task of preparing one of the largest loans ever made by the Smithsonian was undertaken over a nearly three-year period by project conservators, registrars, fellows, and interns. Their work with





*Figure 5. Unanga̋ student Delores Gregory studies the construction of a bentwood hunting hat in the Living Our Cultures Community Consultation Room during the Art of Aleutian Islands Bentwood Hunting Hats residency in 2012. The hat has been removed from display and attached, still on its exhibit mount, to a mobile consultation cart. Photo: Wayne Carroll for the Arctic Studies Center.*

the loan objects, which included documentation, archival research, and Alaska Native consultations, set a new standard for collaborative ethnographic conservation. Artists Chuna McIntyre, Sylvester Ayek, David Boxley, and others met in Washington with NMAI and NMNH conservators to advise and assist with object treatments; and Elaine Kingeekuk made expert repairs to a torn St. Lawrence Island *sanighaq* (ceremonial seal intestine parka) using traditional materials and methods (Smith et al. 2010) (Fig. 6). Smithsonian staff and contractors fabricated object supports and test-mounted the pieces in a mock-up exhibition case to plan their final placements. The Smithsonian's Conservation Analytical Lab assisted

Ralph Appelbaum Associates in designing the cases, support system, and mounts to withstand Alaska earthquakes, preparations that have enabled the exhibition to survive multiple temblors since 2010 with only minor damage to the cases (cracked glass during a severe 7.1 Mw event in November 2018) and none at all to the objects (Crowell 2019a; Pressler 2012).

The implementation phase included collaborative writing and editing of the exhibition catalog, *Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska* (Crowell et al. 2010). The volume, coedited by Aron Crowell, Rosita Worl, Paul Ongtooguk, and Dawn Biddison, includes cultural and historical overviews by the three senior editors followed by 18 chapters and short essays by Alaska Native authors highlighting culture and heritage in their home regions. The chapters are illustrated with contemporary images, historical photographs, and color plates of exhibition objects captioned with oral and ethnographic information. The result, as one reviewer put it, is a multivocal assemblage in which “Western, linear notions of past and present are suspended in favor of a more fluid sense of time where ancestors’ objects contribute to the broad, complicated landscape of contemporary life” (Steffian 2010). Tlingit clan leader and educator Elaine Chewshaa Abraham wrote: “*Haa Shaagoon ayah aa eet x’eivatán*—it is as if our Ancestors have spoken to us. When community experts viewed these objects for the first time, the sacred objects awakened in them the ancestors’ spirits” (Crowell et al. 2010:back cover). Both comments speak to a fundamental concept: that heritage objects are material expressions of Indigenous knowledge that are meaningful and relevant to contemporary lifeways and challenges.

## EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING (2010–PRESENT)

The May 2010 grand opening of the exhibition in Anchorage honored the many Alaska Native individuals and organizations who contributed to its creation and marked the beginning of a new chapter in which *Living Our Cultures* would actively give back to Indigenous communities.

Initiatives to collaborate with Alaska Native artists arise from their “creative activist” role in reenergizing Indigenous arts, skills, and knowledge. Artists seek out elders to learn the complex knowledge required to harvest and process natural materials (wood, grass, spruce roots,



*Figure 6. St. Lawrence Island Yupik artist Elaine Kingeekuk making traditional repairs with sinew thread to tears on a ceremonial seal intestine parka in the conservation lab of the National Museum of the American Indian, in 2009. Elaine also replaced some auklet feather ornaments that were missing from the parka, using materials brought from home. Photo: Kelly McHugh for the Arctic Studies Center.*

cedar bark, berries, ivory, skins, furs, quills) and to transform them into fine handcrafted pieces, often combining local knowledge of these arts with studies of museum collections (Crowell 2016c). Artists imbue their work with the social and spiritual meanings that are a profound part of cultural inheritance. Alaska Native corporations, foundations, and tribal organizations support participatory heritage work and teaching by artists, including culture camps and community workshops where art-making is viewed as a life-affirming pathway for young people and adults to engage with culture and identity.

To support these grassroots efforts, ASC-Alaska organizes teaching residencies at the Arctic Studies Center in Anchorage during which pairs or trios of artists work together, instruct young adult learners, interact with the museum public and school groups, and study objects in

the *Living Our Cultures* and Anchorage Museum collections for insight into ancestral design and techniques (Fig. 7). Smithsonian and Anchorage Museum conservators take part in these events to learn methods of working with natural materials that can inform the care and preservation of ethnological collections. Recent residency programs have been paired with art-making and material-harvesting workshops in rural towns and villages, including Ketchikan, Bethel, Nome, Metlakatla, Kenai, Soldotna, and Quinhagak. Program sponsors include The CIRI Foundation, Surdna Foundation, Alaska State Council on the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, First National Bank of Alaska, Anchorage Museum, and the Smithsonian Council for Arctic Studies (Biddison 2014; Crowell 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2018, 2019b).





*Figure 7. Yup'ik artist Mary Tunuchuk demonstrates how to stitch together strips of prepared seal intestine to make waterproof parkas and bags during the Sewing Gut arts residency at the Arctic Studies Center in Anchorage in 2014. With Tunuchuk are Inupiaq-Athabascan artist Sonya Kelliher-Combs (far left) and students Danielle Larsen and Eve Mendenhall, both undergraduates in the Alaska Native Arts Program at the University of Alaska Anchorage. In back are museum conservators Kelly McHugh (NMAI, left) and Monica Shah (Anchorage Museum, right). Photo: Wayde Carroll for the Arctic Studies Center.*

ASC-Alaska's Dawn Biddison produces video documentaries of the residencies and workshops featuring interviews with the artists and step-by-step demonstrations of their work. The videos are published to the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center Alaska YouTube channel (<https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCNpC1tX-kqJaSU7ZSxUWAfA>, accessed 20 December 2019) and comprise a uniquely in-depth Indigenous knowledge resource. The documentaries are also distributed on DVD to assist artists and learners in rural areas with poor internet service. The 17 heritage arts programs completed to date (Table 1) have had statewide scope and impact. Together they have involved 35 artists and elders, more than 250 adult students, thousands of visitors in person and online, and hundreds of thousands who have learned about them through extensive print, television, and radio coverage.

Another framework for creative interaction with the *Living Our Cultures* collection is Urban Interventions, a program benefiting Indigenous youth undertaken in partnership with the Anchorage Museum, Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Kennecott Youth Center, and Covenant House, an Anchorage shelter for at-risk teens. For *Skate Art* (2015), New York-based skateboarder and graphic artist Jim Murphy (Lenni Lenape) and Inupiaq artist Holly Nordlum led a youth workshop on designing and painting skateboard decks, inspired by artistic motifs in the *Living Our Cultures* exhibition (Biddison 2016). For *Street Art* (2016), Arizona artists Dwayne Manuel (Onk Akimel O'odham) and Rene Garcia (Tohono O'odham) were joined by Alaska artist Arielo Taylor (African American/Unangaᖃ) to lead an Anchorage youth team in

*Table 1. Heritage arts programs conducted by the Arctic Studies Center (2011–2019) in connection with the Living Our Cultures exhibition, including museum residences and community workshops.*

Date	Location	Event	Artist and Elder Faculty
2011	Anchorage	Athabascan Snowshoe Making (museum residency)	George Albert (Koyukon), George Yaska (Koyukon), Trimble Gilbert (Gwich'in)
2012	Anchorage	Aleutian Islands Bentwood Hunting Hats (museum residency)	Okalena Patricia Lekanoff-Gregory (Unanga̋), Michael Livingston (Unanga̋)
2012	Anchorage	Sewing Salmon—fish skin bags (museum residency)	Audrey Armstrong (Koyukon), Coral Chernoff (Sugpiaq), Marlene Nielsen (Yup'ik)
2013	Anchorage	Dene Quill Art—porcupine quillwork (museum residency)	Emma Hildebrand (Koyukon), Shirley Homberg (Tanana), Nancy Fonnicello
2014	Anchorage	Sewing Gut—seal intestine bags (museum residency)	Mary Tunuchuk (Yup'ik), Elaine Kingeekuk (St. Lawrence Island Yupik), Sonya Kelliher-Combs (Inupiaq-Athabascan)
2015	Bethel	Sewing Gut (community sewing workshop)	Mary Tunuchuk (Yup'ik)
2015	Anchorage	Sculpting Ivory—walrus ivory carving (museum residency)	Jerome Saclamana (Inupiaq), Levi Tetpon (Inupiaq), Clifford Apatiki (St. Lawrence Island Yupik)
2015	Nome	Sculpting Ivory (community carving workshop)	Jerome Saclamana
2015	Anchorage	Voices from Cedar—cedar wood whistles and rattles (museum residency)	John Hudson (Tsimshian), Norman Jackson (Tlingit), Donald Varnell (Haida)
2015	Ketchikan	Voices from Cedar (community carving workshop)	John Hudson
2016	Anchorage	Twining Cedar—cedar bark basketry (museum residency)	Delores Churchill (Haida), Holly Churchill (Haida), Kandi McGilton (Tsimshian)
2016	Metlakatla	Twining Cedar (community bark harvesting and preparation workshop)	Delores Churchill, Kandi McGilton
2016	Metlakatla	Twining Cedar (community basket weaving workshop)	Delores Churchill, Holly Churchill, Kandi McGilton, Annette Topham (Tsimshian), Karla Booth (Tsimshian)
2017	Anchorage	Tanning and Sewing Moosehide in the Dene Way (museum residency)	Joel Isaac (Dena'ina), Melissa Shaginoff (Ahtna)
2017–2018	Kenai, Soldotna, Chickaloon, Gulkana	Tanning and Sewing Moosehide (community workshop, documentation of tanning and smoking hides, consultation with elders)	Joel Isaac, Melissa Shaginoff, Helen Dick (Dena'ina), Sondra Shaginoff-Stuart (Ahtna), Jeanie Maxim (Ahtna), Charlie Hubbard (Ahtna)
2019	Quinhagak	Yup'ik Twined Grass Baskets: Renewing an Ancestral Art (community weaving workshop)	Grace Anaver (Yup'ik), Pauline Beebe (Yup'ik), Sarah Brown (Yup'ik)
2019	Quinhagak	Yup'ik Twined Grass Baskets (documentation of grass harvesting and preparation)	Grace Anaver



creating spray-painted murals on temporary walls set up on the Anchorage Museum lawn, also inspired by exhibition themes (Biddison 2017).

Many individual artists have accessed the Smithsonian and Anchorage Museum collections through Local Inspirations and Polar Lab, programs co-organized with the Anchorage Museum. Inupiaq performance artist Allison Warden, Deg Hit'an/Inupiaq mask carver Brian Walker, Unanga painter Julia Orloff-Duffy, Yup'ik painter and skin sewer Peter Williams, Tlingit weaver Ricky Tagaban, Haida weaver Jacinthe LeCornu, and dozens of others have studied Smithsonian and Anchorage Museum pieces to inform their contemporary work.

The Arctic Studies Center also builds on *Living Our Cultures* as a resource for Indigenous language education, responding to the crisis of language endangerment in Alaska (Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council 2016; Krauss 2007). In 2010, Dena'ina speakers Helen Dick and Gladys Evanoff discussed objects in the Smithsonian collection, using them to teach lessons in their language (Crowell 2011). Instructional dialogues from the sessions are available on the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center Alaska YouTube channel (<https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCNpC1tX-kqJaSU7ZSxUWAfA>).

In 2011, with funding from the Shared Beringian Heritage Program (National Park Service), Jana Harcharek (North Slope Borough School District) and Bernadette Alvanna-Stimpfle (Eskimo Heritage Program, Kawerak) worked with elder participants Willie Goodwin, Herbert Foster Sr., Alvira Downey, Faye Ongtowsruk, Sylvester Ayek, and Rachel Riley to document Inupiaq language dialects through discussion of exhibition objects. In 2012, Chris Koonooka of the Bering Strait School District joined a delegation from St. Lawrence Island including Ralph Apatiki Sr., John Apassingok, Lydia Apatiki, Elaine Kingeekuk, Angela Larson, Merlin Koonooka, Vera Metcalf, and Jonella Larson White to discuss pieces from St. Lawrence Island. The Inupiaq and St. Lawrence Island Yupik sessions, each four days in length, were transformed into *Listen and Learn*, a video-based bilingual education curriculum (Shutt and Biddison 2014a, 2014b; <https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCNpC1tX-kqJaSU7ZSxUWAfA>, accessed 20 December 2019). In 2018, in conjunction with the *Twining Cedar* basketry project, the Haayk Foundation in Metlakatla worked with ASC-Alaska to produce a basketry-related Tsimshian language curriculum (McGilton 2018).

Through these programs, as well as scores of other individual and group visits, gallery lectures by Alaska Native scholars and artists (see the Living Our Cultures YouTube playlist <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL33278BF298794573>, accessed 20 December 2019), Indigenous film screenings, internships, and research fellowships, *Living Our Cultures* is serving its larger purpose as a vehicle for Indigenous knowledge activation and renewal.

## A WORK IN PROGRESS

*Living Our Cultures* was made possible by an extended partnership between the Smithsonian Institution and the Anchorage Museum, with a special focus on enhancing source community access to the historic Alaska Native collections held by the National Museum of Natural History and National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC. Seeding a small but active program in Alaska in 1994 and giving it time to grow has produced roots and branches of alliance across the state, the only way that it was possible to form the large, generous circle of Alaska Native contributors who made the exhibition on behalf of their communities and who contributed the knowledge and voices of their people to its realization.

Exhibition content, design, and programming for *Living Our Cultures* have been shaped by Alaska Native intellectual contributions and leadership, complementing the anthropological curatorship, research, project management, technical and design expertise, and fundraising capacity of museums. The keys to the strength of this relationship have been balance, dialogue, mutual respect, and shared commitment. *Living Our Cultures* started with collections-based research by community scholars, laying a foundation of Indigenous knowledge that informed the total project. During planning and design, Alaska Native advisors recognized the potential of the exhibition not only to portray their cultures but to serve communities, and they helped to envision it as a nexus of Indigenous knowledge learning and exchange—a living, growing program rather than a static museum representation. Exhibition-based programming since 2010 has demonstrated this concept, tapping a wave of cultural activism and revitalization led from within communities, to which museums may contribute.

The “terms of engagement” between museums and Indigenous communities are complex, contingent, and evolving, and in this sense *Living Our Cultures* has been an experiment in methodology (Crowell 2004; Silverman

2015). Its expansive geographic scope is not unprecedented for the circumpolar region—*Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska* was even broader (Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988)—but strong collaboration with so many different cultural groups appears to be. At this scale it was not possible to achieve the level of individual community involvement and intensive focus achieved by other Alaska exhibitions that were based on collaborative work within single cultural areas, such as *The Living Tradition of Yup'ik Masks: Agayuliyararput (Our Way of Making Prayer)* (Fienup-Riordan 1996); *Yuungnaqpiallerput: The Way We Genuinely Live* (Fienup-Riordan 2007); *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People* (Crowell et al. 2001); and *Dena'inaq' Huch'ulyeshi: The Dena'ina Way of Living* (Jones et al. 2013). Yet the broader scope of *Living Our Cultures* explores the possibility of presenting and comprehending all of Alaska in a holistic way, as a diverse and interconnected panoply of Indigenous knowledge and cultures.

The idea of reaching out to all, sharing Indigenous knowledge, and telling the stories from each place and people seems to have inspired everyone involved in the creation of *Living Our Cultures*, whether they were discussing heritage pieces in Washington, meeting as a planning committee in Anchorage, teaching from objects in language seminars, or interacting with students and artists during Arctic Studies Center residencies and community programs. Ultimately, perhaps the most important part of the *Living Our Cultures* experiment in collaboration has been to make it open-ended; and we, in the collective sense of all who have been involved, hope that it will always be a work in progress.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From my perspective as curator and project director, the scale, time investment, complexity, and expense of *Living Our Cultures* at times felt like huge risks with uncertain prospects of achieving the collaborative outcomes to which we all aspired. Dawn Biddison's extremely capable, creative, and tireless contributions as ASC-Alaska assistant curator helped make it possible, yet for both of us the sheer volume of research, multitrack detail, deadlines, budgets, and logistics was unrelenting. Thankfully, many others shared this burden with incredible energy and dedication, far too many to individually acknowledge. A complete list of Alaska Native advisors, scholars, translators, and authors is included in the exhibition catalog (Crowell et

al. 2010:5), and to all of them we owe the first and deepest gratitude. We extend special thanks to members of the exhibition advisory panel: Larue Barnes, Scott Carrlee, Craig Coray, Angela Demma, Barbara Donatelli, Ann Fienup-Riordan, Sven Haakanson Jr., Eleanor Hadden, Joan Hamilton, Beverly Faye Hugo, John Johnson, Eliza Jones, Suzi Jones, Merlin Koonooka, Aaron Leggett, Allison Young McLain, Paul C. Ongtooguk, Patricia Partnow, Patricia Petrivelli, Gordon L. Pullar, Jonathan Ross, Monica Shah, Clare Swan, Jonella Larson White, and Rosita Worl.

On the museum side of the complex equation that produced *Living Our Cultures*, we recognize the deep and abiding support of the Anchorage Museum, led by directors Patricia Wolf and later James Pepper Henry, and of the Anchorage Museum Foundation. Julie Decker, the current Anchorage Museum director, has provided essential support and staff assistance to ASC-Alaska's arts, language, and heritage programming. Lead professionals in design and production of the exhibition included Sarah Barton (RISE Consulting Group), Jennifer Whitburn and Tim Ventimiglia (Ralph Appelbaum Associates), Julie Beeler (Second Story Interactive), Donna Lawrence (Donna Lawrence Productions), Charlie Morrow (Charlie Morrow Productions), and Carolyn Gleason (Smithsonian Books).

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## ENDNOTES

1. St. Lawrence Island Yupik elder Roger Silook gave the title *Sakwat* (Objects) to a temporary exhibition of ancestral Old Bering Sea walrus ivory carvings that he co-curated at an Arctic Studies Center tribal museums workshop (Crowell 2000). It would



be ideal if *sakwat* (or another Alaska Native word) could be used as a general designation for all items of Alaska Native heritage held by museums, but each Indigenous language has its own appropriate synonym and “objects” serves here by default. However, its inadequacy of connotation, especially in relation to intangible meanings and values, is recognized. In New Zealand the Māori word *taonga* (“property, goods, possession, effects, object” but also “cultural treasure”) has displaced English terms in Indigenous museum discourse (Moorefield 2011).

2. The Alaska project was not intended to take the place of repatriation, a legal process that at the Smithsonian is governed by the National Museum of the American Indian Act (NMAIA) of 1989 (Public Law 104-278) as amended in 1996 (20 USC 80q et seq.). Through the NMAIA, federally recognized tribes, including those in Alaska, may request the permanent return to their communities of human remains, funerary or sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. In order to avoid interference or overlap with this independent effort, no items requested by tribes as of 2010 were selected for *Living Our Cultures*. In 2012, however, the Hoonah Indian Association (HIA) requested repatriation of a Tlingit wooden model of a slave-killer club (NMNH E73831), designated as a funerary object, that had been included in the exhibition (Hollinger 2012). The club was formally repatriated to HIA, but the tribe agreed that it could remain temporarily on display in Anchorage, where it remains as of this writing.
3. Council of Traditional Scholars Resolution 02-08, jointly adopted with the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (CCTHITA), specifies that only members of a shaman’s clan can safely and appropriately handle his or her instruments or clothing; however, if clan affiliation is unknown, as is the case for all shamans’ objects included in *Living Our Cultures*, then museum personnel should handle them, with full respect for their sanctity (Council of Traditional Scholars 2008). If such objects are displayed, their cultural significance must be made clear to viewers. At the council’s recommendation, the following text is included in exhibition labeling for Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian shamans’ items: “The traditional *ixt’* (Tlingit) or *nang sgáagaa* (Haida), or ‘one who has spirits and supernatural powers’ (in English, a shaman) had responsibilities to

care for the physical, economic, and social welfare of his or her clan. While a shaman’s work benefitted the community, a witch (in Tlingit, *nooks’aatí*; in Haida, *st’áw*) brought only misfortune. The two must not be confused. The *ixt’* or *nang sgáagaa* (shaman) used masks and instruments to beckon the helping spirits. These items may be sensitive to some viewers and to members of specific clans.” CCTHITA clan leaders Harold Jacobs, Edwell John, Bob Sam, John Eugene Bartels Sr., and Raymond Wilson took part in ceremonial blessings of the shamans’ objects in Washington prior to their shipment to Alaska and/or in Anchorage before they were installed in the *Living Our Cultures* gallery.

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