

# CHILKAT BLANKET RESTORATION: A CASE STUDY IN ALASKA NATIVE AUTHORITY IN MUSEUM CONSERVATION

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the recent legacy of Indigenous object treatment authority in Alaska museums and examines in depth the case study of a Chilkat blanket restoration. Museum conservator Ellen Carrlee and master Chilkat weaver Anna Brown Ehlers collaborated on the treatment of a Chilkat blanket for exhibition in the new Alaska State Museum clan house gallery in 2016. Ehlers was given authority over treatment decisions, including interventions that would not be possible under standard museum conservation protocols. Museums have a long history of altering objects in their care, but there has been reluctance to afford source community experts the same privilege. In this article, we explore the benefits and challenges with an emphasis on creating space for Native authority.

## INTRODUCTION

The Chilkat blanket<sup>1</sup> is a traditional Northwest Coast Indigenous textile woven today by Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Kwagwath (*Kwak.wakawakw*) culture bearers. In 2016, the Alaska State Museum contracted with Anna Brown Ehlers to repair a damaged Chilkat blanket, museum object number II-B-861. The blanket was selected for exhibit in a clan house display for the new Alaska State Museum galleries because its design matched a wood pattern board painted in formline and other weaving-related objects intended for the display. However, the blanket had significant areas of damage and loss. Although the extensive intervention to stabilize and augment the blanket's structure challenged current ethics and guidelines for museum conservation treatment (American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works [AIC] 1994), the museum's presence in the Native homeland made collaboration imperative.

Juneau is built on Tlingit land, *Lingít Aaní*, and received its English name from gold miner Joe Juneau, who arrived in the area in 1880. The Tlingit are a Northwest

Coast Indigenous group whose regional tribal groupings are called *khwáan*. Downtown Juneau (*Dzantik'i Héeni*, literally translated "river at the base of Flounder") has been part of the land of the *Áak'w Kwáan* people for an estimated 10,000 years. Today, the *Áak'w Kwáan* people of downtown Juneau are organized into two main clans, the *Wooshketaan* (shark clan) and the *Leeneidí* (dog salmon clan), who are of the Eagle and Raven moieties, respectively. The Alaska State Museum has existed on the land of these people since its collecting activities began in 1900.

The new Andrew P. Kashevaroff State Library, Archives, and Museum (SLAM) opened to the public on June 6, 2016. A clan house exhibit within the long-term galleries depicts the history and culture of the three Northwest Coast Indigenous groups in Alaska: Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian. Exhibit design in consultation with source communities included a Chilkat blanket on a loom, a pattern board, a warping stick, balls of yarn, yellow cedar bark, and mountain goat wool (Fig. 1). Unfortunately, the most appropriate blanket in the museum's collection, the



*Figure 1. Display of a Chilkat blanket (Alaska State Museum object number II-B-861) in the clan house exhibit of the Alaska State Museum, designed to showcase weaving technology. Photo by Ellen Carrlee.*

one that matched an important pattern board, had disfiguring damage, including large losses to the fringe and unraveling areas of instability. Although the museum had in-house object conservation expertise in Ellen Carrlee, the degree of intervention required to make the blanket whole again was beyond the repairs she could complete without deceiving viewers about what was original and what was repair. Since the 1980s, North American museum preservation of collections has focused heavily on preventive care, as the intensely interventive treatments of past generations have often resulted in regret for museums. This is especially the case with Indigenous objects, whose meaning and value to source communities have not always been properly recognized by museums.

One example of evolving museum practice is the widespread replacement of toxic pesticides with a regime of monitoring and freezing objects to control insect infes-

tation. Another is the control of temperature and humidity to preserve leather, along with acceptance of an aged stiffness, instead of routine applications of oily dressings to artificially keep animal skins supple. Leather dressings over time were found to ooze, spew, darken, and rot leather fibers as the oils and greases themselves became rancid and deteriorated. Strong irreversible adhesives such as epoxies were replaced with weaker adhesives like Acryloid B-72, which could be readily reversed in the future if the orientation of break edge joins were incorrect or if an artifact endured new stress. While past generations of museum caretakers might have repainted a worn mask, later curators came to realize that uninformed but well-intended “improvements” to objects were not always in keeping with cultural principles. Today’s museum professionals are rightly reluctant to interfere with materials in a way that could obscure the original makers’ and users’ intentions.



Forward-thinking museums strive to make space for Indigenous voices that assert current cultural needs for museum objects (Bernstein 1992; Clavir 2002; Harrison et al. 2011; IARC SAR 2015). The SLAM budget for exhibit development afforded a rare opportunity to contract with a Chilkat weaver, whose interventions would meaningfully contribute to the blanket's biography.

## BACKGROUND

Anna Brown Ehlers (*Saint' Teen*)<sup>2</sup> is a renowned Chilkat weaver of the Raven moiety. She is *Ghaanaxhteidi* (Woodworm clan) of the *Yaay Hit* (Whale House) (Fig. 2). She is descended from Klukwan, the main village of the *Jilkháat Khwáan*, approximately 100 miles north of Juneau. Anna's mother was Elsie Brown (*Yeix' Na What'*

*Kla* or *Daax' Aas Gidtk*), also a Raven of the Woodworm Whale House because Tlingit clan identity is matrilineal. Anna is also *Dakhl'aweidi yádi* ("a child of the Killer Whale clan") through the clan identity of her late father, Austin Brown (*Naahaan*). *Jilkháat Khwáan* was by far the most productive center of Chilkat weaving technology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and as a result blankets created here were labeled "Chilkat" despite their Tsimshian origins and pockets of production elsewhere (Jones 2018; Milburn 1997:375–380). Anna remembers seeing her first Chilkat blanket as a child when her uncle Roy Brown wore one in the Juneau Fourth of July parade during Alaska's celebration of statehood in 1959. During Anna's childhood, she was aware of just three living Chilkat weavers: Mary Willard (*Akhle*), Annie Klaney (*K'aanakéek Tlaá*), and Jennie Thlunaut (*Shax'saani Kéek'*).



Figure 2. Interior of the *Yaay Hit* (Whale House) of the *Gaanaxteidi* (Woodworm clan), Klukwan, Alaska, 1895. Photo by Lloyd Winter and Percy Pond. Alaska State Library Historical Collection ASL-P87-0010.

By 1980, when Anna began weaving, only Jennie Thlunaut remained in Klukwan. Jennie was an important conduit of both weaving and cultural knowledge. She is credited with instructing many of the master weavers active today, particularly through workshops and apprenticeships she undertook late in life (Hudson 2008; Worl and Smythe 1986). Jennie Thlunaut was close friends with Anna's paternal grandmother, Mary Betts Brown (*Kossanux'*), and stayed at her house whenever she traveled to Juneau. Anna studied with Jennie in 1982, and describes her as a mean, strict, traditional teacher who would pinch her arm or kick her under the table if she made an error. Jennie would only teach Anna in Tlingit. Anna would audiotape Jennie's instructions and take them to her father for translation. Jennie once wove a blanket for her uncle, who ordered the blanket as a commission but perished at sea before the work was completed. After Jennie finished the Chilkat blanket, she took it to the location in Lynn Canal where he drowned, cut it into pieces, and put it in the sea. This was a version of a long-standing Tlingit tradition of cutting up and distributing pieces of Chilkat blankets ceremonially (Emmons 1991:228). Jennie's action may have been the last ceremonial cutting of a Chilkat blanket until Anna wove a blanket expressly for the purpose for the *koo.eex* (memorial potlatch) for her father, Austin Brown, in Klukwan on September 7, 2007.

Anna studied with Jennie for over six months when Jennie was in her eighties (Fig. 3). Anna also studied weaving with Dorica Jackson, her brother Nathan's wife. In the 1980s, Betty Hulbert, Alaska State Museum curator

of collections, invited Anna to study the old blankets in museum storage. Anna spent many afternoons examining the construction techniques of past weavers. She credits this access with a five-year leap forward in her early weaving skills. Anna has since completed 13 full-size blankets (robes), three tunics, three aprons, several bibs, and hundreds of other Chilkat weavings. Anna's first full-size blanket was commissioned by the grandson of Franz Boas. She has also received numerous awards and grants. Although she has a house in Klukwan, Anna's main residence is in Juneau, where she grew up. In autumn 2016, during the project to repair this blanket in the Alaska State Museum conservation lab, Anna was also working at home processing dozens of sockeye salmon from the Chilkat River in Klukwan, demonstrating her ongoing connection to her ancestral village and subsistence values.

When the Alaska State Museum sought a weaver to repair the blanket, it searched for a local master weaver who could meet the deadline requirements for the exhibition and the object security requirements of the museum. It is estimated that a few dozen living Northwest Coast Native artists identify as Chilkat weavers, and only a handful are accomplished enough to teach apprentices the weaving tradition. Fewer still have completed a full-size blanket and understand the construction technology intimately enough to repair a historic blanket. Anna's authority, therefore, comes from several perspectives: heritage, training with other respected weavers, intensive study of old blankets, connection to her culture, connection to Chilkat country itself, her own prolific output creating Chilkat weavings, her revival of the tradition of cutting up a blanket at a memorial ceremony, and her status as a master weaver who has taught many apprentices. She has reached over 500,000 people since first demonstrating her craft to the public in 1984.

Alaska State Museum conservator Ellen Carrlee holds a master's degree in art history and object conservation from New York University and is a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her efforts to pursue collaborative object treatments are part of a trend in museums to make space for cultural experts to influence the care and treatment of museum collections (Kaminitz et al. 2008; Kaminitz and Poiss 1999; Odegaard 2005; Stable 2012). On a national level, tribal consultation expanded dramatically in the 1980s as museums struggled to comply with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) legislation. The development process for the Smithsonian's National Museum



*Figure 3. Jennie Thlunaut (left) and Anna Brown Ehlers (right) demonstrate Chilkat weaving at the 1984 Smithsonian Festival of American Folk Life in Washington, DC. Photo by Dane Penland, Smithsonian Institute.*



of the American Indian's 2004 inaugural exhibits on the national mall established a new standard of expectation for community consultation in museum exhibition of Indigenous materials in the United States (Drumheller and Kaminitz 1994; Johnson et al. 2005; Kaminitz et al. 2005). A generation of museum conservators was trained in this approach through internships, fellowships, conference presentations, and publications, but the profession still struggles to incorporate collaboration into its praxis (Malkogeorgou 2013; McHugh 2012; Saunders 2014; Wharton 2005).

In Alaska, community collaboration in museum artifact treatment has a legacy extending back at least to 1971. That year, the bare frame of an Iñupiat *umiaq* (open skin boat, ASM object number II-A-4935) was re-covered with walrus skins. The boat had been built by Jonathan Onalik in Wales, Alaska, in the 1920s. An Alaska State Council on the Arts grant funded the project, called "A Live Introduction to Traditional and Contemporary Eskimo Culture," and brought four Siberian Yupik couples (John and Lillie Apangalook, Vivian and Lewis Igakitan, Thelma and Homer Apatiki, and Fred Angi and Flora Imergan) from Gambell to Juneau with fresh walrus skins to re-cover the boat. A similar project took place in 2003, when the Museum of the North at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks re-covered a kayak frame (UAMN object number UA72-078-0001) commissioned from Simon Paneak in collaboration with the Iñupiaq community of Anaktuvuk Pass (Linn 2004). Other examples of hands-on Indigenous interventions in treatment collaboration include the 2002 repair of a birchbark canoe (object number SJ-IV-X-20) at the Sheldon Jackson Museum with the collaboration of Athabascan canoe maker Howard Luke (Carrlee 2003), and Siberian Yupik skin sewer Elaine Kingeekuk's collaborations to repair a gut parka (NMAI 12/3434) for the National Museum of the American Indian/Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center in Anchorage (McHugh 2008) and another gut parka (object number 93-56-1) for the Cordova Museum (Gibbins 2015). Totem pole treatment has been an especially active focus of Indigenous collaboration in Tlingit country. Examples include Nathan and Dorica Jackson's preservation work on Nathan's totem poles; the 2003 treatment of the Auke Pole (object number 81.01.033) for the Juneau-Douglas City Museum; Haida carver Lee Wallace's 2008 restoration of his grandfather's Four Story Pole (object number 84.19.001) for the Juneau-Douglas City Museum; Tlingit carvers Wayne Price and Fred Fulmer's 2015 res-

toration of the *Yax Te' Hit* pole for the U.S. Forest Service in Juneau (Granger 2017; Jenkins 2015; McCarthy 2017); and Tlingit carver Tommy Joseph's 2017 restoration of the Chief Johnson pole for the City of Ketchikan (Dudzak 2017a, 2017b; Kauffman 2017).

## THE BLANKET AND ITS TREATMENT

The Chilkat blanket in this project was collected in Sitka around 1900 and purchased by the Alaska State Museum in 1946 from Dr. Bertrand K. Wilbur. The maker and clan are not known at this time, but Zachary Jones and Harold Jacobs's research suggests the unusual green areas of the fringe and the extensive checkered border indicate the work of *Kháaxh'eidei.át*, a late-nineteenth-century weaver of the *Ghaanaxhteidi* clan in Klukwan (Jones 2018:57–59). The motif seems to be a diving whale. Some Chilkat blankets are woven with clan designs of either the Raven or the Eagle moiety (examples might include blankets that feature clan crests such as a frog, a wolf, or a killer whale). In 1985, Tlingit culture bearer Anna Katzeek told Anna Brown Ehlers that the diving whale blanket was made for trade within the culture, as it could be used by either Raven or Eagle moiety. Diving whale blankets were sometimes made for the art and tourist market, though most older blankets tend to have clan significance and are considered *at.óow* (sacred clan property not belonging exclusively to a single individual). If the blanket depicted a clan crest, the museum would have considered protocols to balance the moiety of the blanket and the moiety of the weaver chosen to make the repairs.

Damage to the blanket that occurred pre-collection (i.e., prior to 1946) included missing sections of fringe, a damaged area on one side, and losses to a horizontal woven element in the bottom fringe. These gaps and losses made the blanket look incomplete, disfigured, and poorly cared for. A standard museum conservation repair would have gently stabilized those areas by reinforcing the damaged edges with fine stitching of cotton thread or hairsilk, and with cultural consultation might have considered loss compensation to fill the missing areas with new material. These actions would have been aimed at maximum preservation of original material and making the blanket look visually whole for the exhibition. Anna came to the museum in the summer of 2015 to consult on the condition of this blanket and two others. While conservator Ellen Carrlee could have stabilized the blanket adequately for exhibition, the chance to add to the blanket's biography

and integrity while creating an opportunity for a living weaver to interact intimately with an old blanket seemed to address a higher museum mission. Creating access and inviting in cultural experts to further their own priorities is a role museums need to embrace, even though doing so means giving up some control and authority.

Anna made the treatment decisions to address the damages. Regarding fringe replacement and the border stabilization, Anna's approach had much in common with Ellen's conservation training. In her approach to caring for the bark within the warp fringe and the damaged twining across this fringe, Anna's actions would have been inappropriate for a conservator to undertake. In those areas, the damage was not to the blanket's appearance but to its capacity to perform its cultural function. For museum objects such as firearms, clothing, machinery, and musical instruments, inclusion in a museum collection almost always marks the cessation of active cultural use and the termination of activities to prolong their physical functionality. Continued cultural activity of a museum object is referred to as "consumptive use" and is considered contrary to the museum goal of preserving the object for future generations. Many museums maintain a separate collection of "lesser" objects for consumptive use, often labeled "educational," "hands-on," or "reference" collections. The disadvantageous historical circumstances of artifact collection for Native people, coupled with the need for material culture access supported by the North American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) legislation, has led museums to reevaluate the notion of consumptive use for Indigenous objects. "Ceremonial use" is increasingly used to identify this kind of purpose for museum collections.

Treatment of the blanket by an expert like Anna does not begin when hands touch the damaged blanket any more than weaving a new blanket begins at the loom. The work begins in the woods, gathering bark from a yellow cedar tree in the spring. Bark is spun into the warp of a Chilkat blanket along with mountain goat wool. The oldest blankets are made with cedar bark, mountain goat wool, and natural dyes, but a great many existing blankets include commercially dyed sheep wool as the weft (horizontal weaving element). Cedar bark and mountain goat wool continue to be the standard expected for the warp (vertical weaving element), even though both are difficult, expensive, and time-consuming to gather. Inclusion of bark in the warp is a unique feature of Chilkat weaving, creating the stiffness needed to execute the surface

braids that permit curvilinear design forms. Anna gathers and processes her own cedar bark with local permission from property owners in Kake, Sitka, and Ketchikan. These property owners, consulted each time, are typically the ANCSA corporation of that area or the U.S. Forest Service. Her mountain goat hides are usually gifted or bartered with hunters. The processed bark and wool warp are thigh-spun together by hand. When Anna started the hands-on intervention phase, she brought several boxes of bark in various phases of processing and wool both roved and spun into warp. Roved wool has been pulled and lightly twisted into fluffy lengths in preparation to spin it into yarn. The presence of these materials in the lab emphasized the extensive resources, labor, and knowledge required to weave Chilkat. Rarely is one person an equally skilled spinner, dyer, and weaver. Many people cannot handle processing the raw materials. Some do not want to do spinning. Anna herself does not do much dyeing, preferring the colorfastness and brilliance of the commercial wool, silk, or blends of 50 percent wool and 50 percent silk as her wefts. When Anna travels, she brings wool and bark with her to spin. Other weavers often want to buy warp from her.

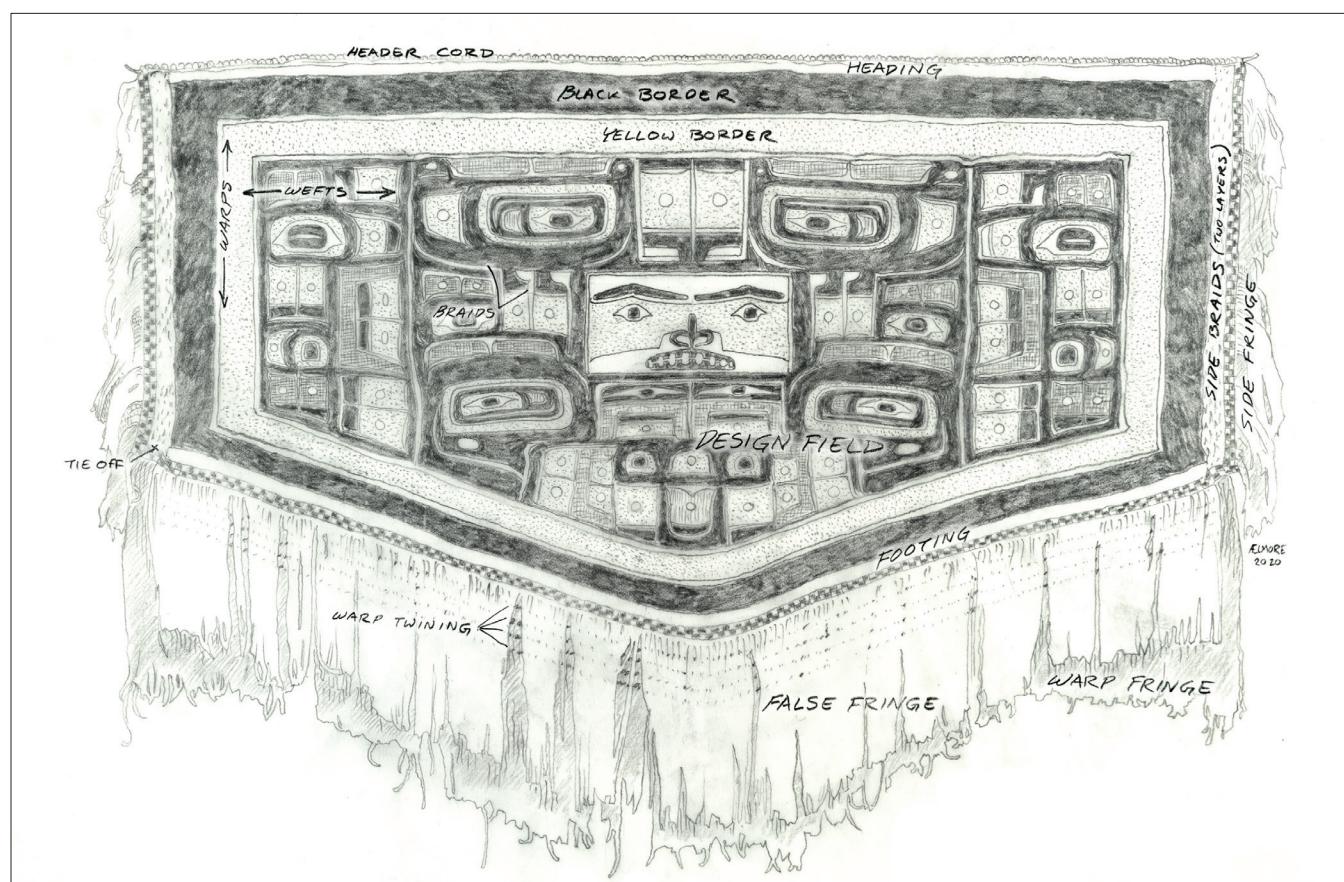
Long ago, the Tlingits of the Chilkat valley (*Jilkháat Khwáan*) would send mountain goat hides and bark to the interior Athabascans in the fall, along with coastal products like ooligan (*Thaleichthys pacificus*) and seal oil. In the spring, the spun warp would be sent back in return. This trade relationship allowed the elite weavers of the Chilkat valley to specialize in weaving. Their renowned skill and productivity led the name "Chilkat blanket" to be associated with the textile. *Naaxéin* was the Native word used, meaning "fringe about the body." The movement of the fringe is considered essential to the purpose and meaning of the blanket; thus, the attention paid to the treatment of the fringe is an important part of the conservation treatment. Fringe is not simply a decorative embellishment. The woven design visually establishes the wearer's identity and lineage, and the purpose of the blanket is to be danced in ceremony with the fringe in motion and for the wearer to be transported spiritually and emotionally by the spirits of clan ancestors (Brown 1998; Emmons 1907, 1991; Holm 1982; Samuel 1982; Williams 2000). Tlingit oratory makes clear that the presence of a Chilkat blanket is a conduit for the spiritual participation of the blanket's ancestral owner or caretaker, who is present at a memorial *khu.éex'* to comfort the bereaved (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1990:243–259).



The vertical element of the so-called “warp fringe” comes into existence as soon as the warp is put on the loom. It is looped over a header cord that is itself lashed to a wooden crossbar pierced with holes. Chilkat warp is usually made of mountain goat wool spun with cedar bark and is relatively stiff in comparison to the other kinds of fringe on the blanket. The warp fringe extends through and beyond the woven design area. Along the bottom of the blanket, there is a top layer of softer wool fringe over the warp fringe that does not contain bark and is lighter and more flexible. Sometimes called “false fringe,” it is attached separately at the bottom of the woven area after completion of the woven design. The two kinds of fringe move differently when the blanket is danced. If they tangle, they cannot move properly. To prevent tangling and promote proper movement, the upper section of the warp

fringe in back has several widely spaced rows of twining. This twining is minimally visible when covered by the top fringe (see Fig. 4 for a diagram of this Chilkat blanket).

One of the treatment activities Anna and her daughter Alexis did was to remove small bits of broken cedar bark from the warp fringe. Approximately half a teaspoon of bark was groomed from the fringe. This intervention would be in direct opposition to traditional museum conservation ethics, which preclude conservators from removing original material whenever possible. Museums also tend to prioritize the static visuals of an object over the actions it was meant to do, and removal of tiny bits of bark did not add to the visual impact of the blanket. Watching Alexis trim the bark bits from the fringe with tiny scissors made Ellen exceedingly uncomfortable, as it was in opposition to her museum training. At the same



*Figure 4. Warps made of spun cedar bark and wool are looped over the header cord. The white heading at the top and white footing at the bottom set off a black border and a yellow border. Twined wefts with forms outlined in braids make up the design field, here showing a central panel and two side panels. The upper part of the warp fringe (spun with bark) is held in a flat plane by warp twining, while the false fringe (spun only with wool) is attached to the footing. Side fringe is attached between two layers of side braids. The tie-offs are unusual on this robe, extending as a checkerboard pattern around three sides instead of just the lower corners. Ties to secure the garment when worn are missing from this Chilkat blanket.*



time, Anna was replacing the damaged warp fringe and its twining (Fig. 5).

On this blanket, almost 70 percent of the fringe twining was lost and the remaining twining was loose, fragile, and tangled. In a standard museum conservation treatment, such damaged fringe twining would be stabilized, perhaps even held at its broken ends with tiny knotted supplementary cotton threads or hair silk, carefully hidden. Anna's treatment involved the complete removal of the broken and fragmentary twining, repair of missing warp fringes, and replacement of fringe twining. While the conservation approach would have maintained a *visual* continuity that integrated repair material with maximum original material from the past, the weaver's approach maintained a *cultural* continuity that restored the potential for cultural use in the future. Any original material removed from the blanket was carefully labeled and retained, in keeping with museum practice. Anna, too, felt this was valuable and did not perceive the fragments as trash. She carefully saved them in an ice cube tray as she



*Figure 5. Alexis Ehlers (center) trims tiny pieces of broken cedar bark from the warp fringe while Anna Brown Ehlers (foreground) replaces missing warp fringe. Photo by Ellen Carrlee.*

worked or taped them to the inside of her notebook. The new twining afforded robust and even tension across the weft fringe, holding both old and replacement weft fringe securely in place (Fig. 6). If the blanket is requested for ceremonial use in the future, the repairs made by Anna and her daughter will permit the fringe to move correctly.

As an object of cultural patrimony actively used in ceremony, Chilkat weavings are sometimes the subject of NAGPRA claims. One Chilkat blanket in the Alaska State Museum collection is checked out by the clan caretaker for ceremonial use at least once a year. In 1992, the blanket in this article was taken to Celebration, a biennial



*Figure 6. Paler-colored new warp fringe can be distinguished from the darker old fringe. The yellow and black widely spaced twining that secures the upper region has been restored with an even tension to allow the movements required by ceremony should the blanket be used in the future. The middle row of twining has a small curved area where it diverts from a straight line to catch the cut ends of the damaged old warps and hold them securely. If the blanket were danced in the future, the new warp fringe would loosen slightly with use and take on a diameter closer to the old fringe. Photo by Ellen Carrlee.*



Northwest Coast cultural festival, with a group of approximately 30 other artifacts for review by clan leaders for potential NAGPRA repatriation (Steve Henrikson, pers. comm., 4 January 2019). Trends in current and future research (Carrlee 2018; Jones 2018) suggest it might be possible to affiliate this blanket with a clan and coordinate its reintegration into active ceremonial life. Anna's treatment extends its biography and cultural identity in that direction.

Other treatments undertaken by Anna had much in common with museum approaches. Anna spent many hours traveling to specialty yarn stores in the Seattle area in search of green and yellow commercial wool yarns that would be similar enough in color and size to integrate with the old materials but remain visually distinct for researchers to easily distinguish original from repair. On exhibition, at a distance of a few feet, her work blends with the original and is not distracting. But upon closer examination the distinction can be readily seen. In the loss compensation of the checkerboard pattern border, frayed original ends were not trimmed and the unraveling region was secured with weaving that loosely imitated the original

(Figs. 7 and 8). These loss-compensation principles guide the conservation profession as well (Alarcón et al. 2012; Heald 1997; Levinson and Nieuwenhuizen 1994; Russell 2003; Smith 1994; Sutcliffe and Jenkins 2003).

Anna did not remove original material that did not interfere with the cultural functionality of the blanket. Even an unsightly old intervention of coarse commercial cordage used on the back of the blanket to create a sleeve for wall-hanging display was left in place. Anna decided it was not necessary to remove this addition, and it remained intact as part of the object's biography from its mid-twentieth-century use by a collector or museum (Fig. 9). The blanket was attached to the replica loom using artificial sinew threaded through drilled holes at the tapered edge of the loom's top bar, catching the original header cord of the blanket with a blanket stitch loop at intervals just as the blanket would have been attached to a loom as it was made (Fig. 10). A supplementary header cord of artificial sinew was added side-by-side to the original to reduce the stress of the header cord from gravity over time, as finished blankets were not stored tied to their looms.



*Figures 7 and 8. Loss to the side fringe and damage to the border is seen before repair (left) and after repair (right). These repairs stabilize without confusing new restorations with original work. Photo by Ellen Carrlee.*





*Figure 9. Weaver Anna Brown Ehlers attaches the Chilkat blanket to a replica loom in the collections storage room of the Alaska State Museum. Visible near the top edge on the back of the blanket is the old commercial cordage element from a previous display technique. Photo by Ellen Carrlee.*



*Figure 10. Attachment of the blanket to the replica loom by catching the header cord with artificial sinew. Warps are doubled over the header cord, creating the loops seen along the top of a Chilkat blanket. Photo by Ellen Carrlee.*

## AUTHORITY

Increasingly, museum authority to “collect, preserve and interpret” (Munley and Roberts 2006:31; Skramstad and Skramstad 2012:66) is seen as enhanced by the collaboration and participation of source communities. The museum field has not developed far enough in this regard, and there are still plenty of exhibitions and projects that interpret and analyze Indigenous objects without any participation from relevant culture bearers, not to mention the important question of whether certain objects belong in a museum at all.

By contracting with Anna to make repairs on the blanket and having components of the treatment occur in sight of the public, the Alaska State Museum aimed to demonstrate its current-day authority to care for this blanket by doing so in a collaborative way involving a living Chilkat Tlingit weaver. The museum is showing that it is caring for collections according to the most up-to-date museum ethics and standards, and this includes Native collaboration. A large glass window into the conservation lab is a visual public statement that the museum takes preservation seriously. The space has large, clean layout tables, cabinets full of specialty adhesives and cleaning devices, snorkels for fume exhaust of chemical vapors, microscopes and an XRF spectrometer for analysis, and other physical manifestations of the conservation profession. Anna brought physical elements of her studio, her professional identity, and her heritage into the conservation lab to both inspire her and to establish her authority. While the museum considered sending the blanket to Anna’s studio so she could work in the comfort and convenience of her own space with her own supplies and equipment, everyone agreed that security and insurance concerns precluded that option. The work needed to take place at the museum, in what anthropologist James Clifford has called the “contact zone” (Clifford 1997:192).

The museum is implicitly a place of power imbalance. To balance the disadvantages of the museum space (both as a “contact zone” but also from limited building hours, constricted movement due to keycard access through doors, and limits on where food and beverages could be consumed), Ellen tried not to ask too many questions or give unsolicited opinions about treatment decisions. She did not ask for an explanation when Anna brought a wide variety of items to the lab that were not directly used on the blanket. Anna’s intent in bringing the materials and objects into the space was partly to make the space



more her own by including inspirational items to give her strength, made through the labor of herself and her family. But it was also to assert her authority visually through the physical evidence of her identity, relationships, and accomplishments. Anna brought two large boxes of roved wool, a large ball of roved wool, hundreds of yards of spun warp containing mountain goat wool and yellow cedar bark, examples of split cedar bark, and two large boxes of finely split cedar bark. These materials were a testament to the amount of skill, time, and effort needed to produce weaving supplies. They were also proof of Anna's expertise. Anna brought her own posters and a painting of Martha Benson. One poster was didactic, showing the elements of Chilkat weaving with samples of each material attached to the surface, and another featured Anna's photo and name from a school workshop she had done. Both of these demonstrated Anna's history of teaching and demonstrating Chilkat technique. Anna also brought several Native-made garments: a beaded leather jacket made by her paternal grandmother Mary Betts (*Kossanux'*) in 1921 for Anna's uncle Judson Brown, a button vest with a formline Raven motif made by a Tsimshian artist, a floral beaded headband made by Kathy Polk, and leather boots made of sea otter and harbor seal made by Mary Jane Valentine of Klukwan. These items demonstrated Anna's authority through her relationships: kinship connections, connections to ceremonies and events where cultural items are used, and connections to places where both seal and sea otter are privileged materials, reserved for use by Alaska Natives through the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. Anna brought in a contemporary acrylic painting by Juneau artist Arnie Weimer, taken from a historic photo of Martha Benson. Martha was the paternal aunt and teacher of Anna's teacher, Jennie Thlunaut. She was also Anna's matrilineal ancestral relative of the Whale House. In addition to the heritage connection depicted, the fact that the painter (a middle-aged white male) gave the painting to Anna as a gift indicates that Anna is recognized for her authority in many circles.

Ellen did not fully grasp the implications of all these items when they first arrived in the lab, but in keeping with the theme of visual messaging she brought out two of Anna's weavings from the museum collection and included them with the display of items visible from the lab window (Fig. 11). One of the items was a section of the blanket cut apart during Anna's father's *khu.éek'* (object number 2008-13-1). The other was an early weaving made

when Anna was an apprentice (object number II-B-1851). During the month that Anna was actively repairing the blanket, she brought in an apprentice, Darrell Harmon; her daughter Alexis; and three of her grandchildren, Serena Harrell, Kyrie Harrell, and Carter Ehlers. She had been teaching her grandchildren to process bark and wool. When her own children were young at home, she would not let them play outside until they had split a bowl of bark. Her three children helped spin the wool for Austin Brown's *koo.eex* blanket. Anna has given approximately 325 people hands-on instruction about Chilkat weaving in classrooms, heritage centers, culture camps, universities, and her own home. She has had a handful of apprentices. If the objects she brought to the lab were witnesses to her connection to her cultural past, the presence of these people in the lab is testament to her commitment to the future of her culture.

## RELATIONSHIPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The treatment and display activities for this Chilkat blanket lasted approximately six months from the time supplies first arrived in the lab until the blanket went on display in the clan house exhibit. However, the supplies and objects Anna brought stayed in the lab for over two years. Practically speaking, Anna's house was undergoing renovations and Ellen was in no rush to hustle the materials away. The presence of the material in the lab kept the door open between Anna and Ellen. In those two years, Ellen's husband passed away, and Anna's daughter Alexis died. Ellen's son decorated Christmas cookies with Anna's grandchildren. Anna shared smoked ooligan fish from her backyard smokehouse. Ellen proposed to coauthor this paper with Anna. Anna has suggested future collaborative projects, including bringing her grandchildren to the museum to process mountain goat hides. The treatment project and the presence of Anna's material in the lab helped spark a new research project on Chilkat dyes. The Chilkat Dye Project is a collaborative endeavor between a working group of more than a dozen Chilkat weavers who meet monthly at the Alaska State Museum to study and lead research and the Pacific Northwest Conservation Science Consortium, an analysis group of five institutions funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. These activities demonstrate the importance of Indigenous authority in museum conservation. Objects are important because objects are important



Figure 11. Some of the items visible through the conservation lab window that helped to visually establish Anna's authority in the treatment of a Chilkat blanket in the museum collection. Photo by Ellen Carrlee.

to people. The future of ethical museum work includes making space for living people to engage meaningfully with their own material culture and share decision-making authority about the future of those objects.

## ENDNOTES

1. Also called a Chilkat robe, or a Chilkat dancing robe, but Anna grew up with the term "blanket" so we use it here.
2. Anna's Chilkat name is *Saint' Teen* after Mildred Sparks, the eldest woman in the Whale House when she was born. Her Auke name is *Kotch'gun* after Bessie Visaya. Her Klukwan name is *Sa' What Ka Tlein* from her twin sister's 1994 *khu.éex'*. Her Hoonah name from 1976 is *Sus' Keen*.

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