

The Presentation of Native American Culture in the British Museum.



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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of a B.A
(Hons.) in Archaeology and Heritage Studies

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

May 2018

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted for candidature for any degree

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This thesis is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references and a Reference List is appended.

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Abstract

For many Native Americans, aspects of their culture are often depicted in museums across the world. There are debates as to whether this rich and extensive culture should be showcased in museums at all, due to the cultural and religious features that encompasses the majority of Native American culture. The objective of this dissertation is to gain an understanding of the Native American exhibit at the British Museum and to discuss whether this display is acceptable. The issue with museums that portray aspects of Native American culture, is that this particular culture has many cultural values that Western museums may not take into consideration when displaying objects of Native American significance. The main question that has prompted thought-provoking discussions is 'who owns Native American culture'? This question related directly to the notions of colonialism and salvage ethnography, play a large part in this dissertation.

A first hand observation at the British Museum provides a substantial percentage of the information contained within this dissertation. Alongside examining the Native American exhibit presented at the British Museum, an extensive literature review is also an integral part of this research. This examines a range of different articles and academic books which contribute towards the argument present throughout this paper.

The findings of this dissertation were indecisive, as it is a matter of personal opinion to whether the British Museum should showcase a potentially offensive exhibit of Native American culture. This is due to the nature of the objects and the speculative nature of how these objects were obtained. My opinion as a British citizen is that the British Museum should review this exhibit and consider the cultural importance of some of the objects of display.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Quentin Drew, my dissertation supervisor, who has helped me greatly throughout my dissertation with his advice and support. I would also like to thank the British Museum for providing me with the materials and information I needed to complete this dissertation.

I would like to give big thanks to Eleanor Lockwood who has been a large pillar of support to me not only with this dissertation, but throughout my three years at university. A big thank you to Matthew Barham who has also been a huge help with my dissertation by supporting me emotionally. I would not have survived university life without both Eleanor and Matthew.

Lastly I would like to thank both of my parents, who have always supported me in everything I have done and who have played a big part in motivating me to complete this dissertation.

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Introduction

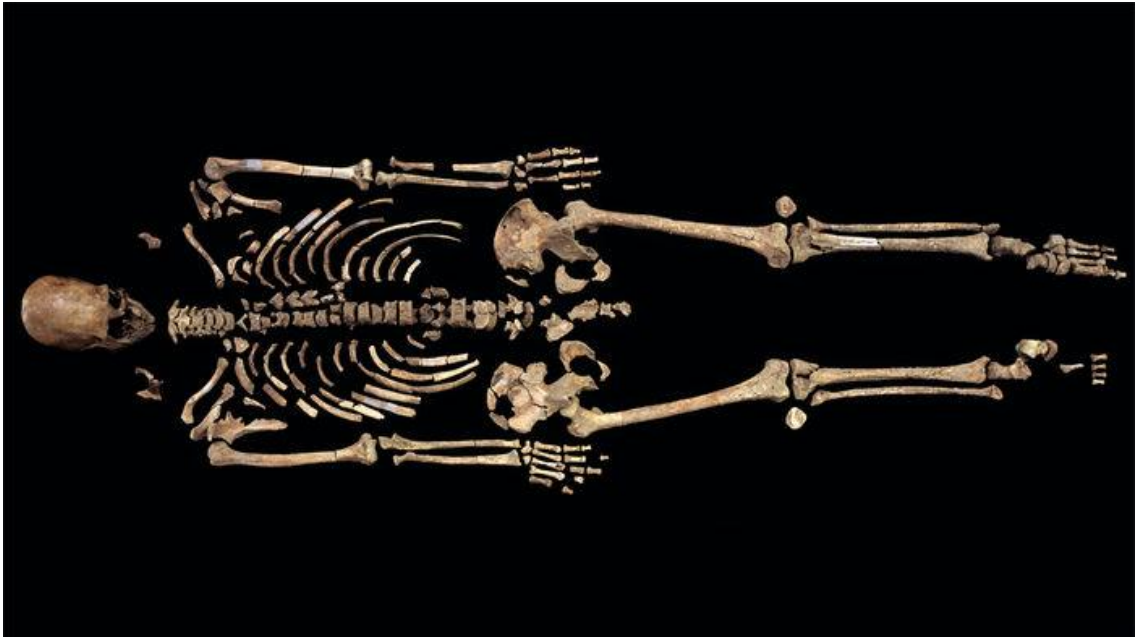


Figure 1 showing remains of Kennewick Man, after ScienceMag 2017

On 28th July 1996, remains of a 9,000 year old Native American male who was originally thought to have been of European descent, was discovered on the bank of the Columbia River (Coleman C.L and Dysart E.V 2005). These remains are more commonly known as being those of the Kennewick Man, which became the centre piece of a long and strenuous legal battle between three parties; scientists, the government, and a number of Native American tribes (Coleman C.L and Dysart E.V 2005). The Kennewick Man case became the main motivation for my research as it highlighted the lack of rights that Native American people had, and it also extended my interest into how museums present this culture.

The topic of this dissertation is focused primarily on the British Museum and how this museum represents Native American culture through the use of exhibitions. Both legal and ethical aspects will be explored in depth in order to gain a full understanding of how and why the British Museum displays Native American culture, and if the way they present this culture can be considered ethically and morally correct.

There will be four main chapters alongside a literature review in this dissertation. The first chapter will focus on the legal aspects surrounding

Native American rights and why they are integral in discussing not only the British Museum, but also other museums who portray Native American culture. The second chapter will include a discussion of museum ethics, which is a fundamental topic to analyse in this dissertation. The third chapter will be an in-depth discussion about my personal experience visiting the Native American exhibition in the British Museum, while the fourth chapter will be a comparison between the British Museum's representation and other museums located in America that display similar objects. By combining all the information that has been put into each chapter we will be able to gain an in-depth insight into how the British Museum presents Native American culture.

The main objective of this dissertation is to see whether the exhibit that the British Museum have put together is problematic or not, and if so to discuss possible solutions to address the issues that could arise. Possible issues and concerns could include objects being on show when they should not be and the idea of these displays being potentially offensive to those of Native American descent.

Literature review

It is my belief that this area of study has not been fully researched as although many authors discuss the idea that museums who hold culturally significant objects can cause issues. There seems to be a lack of written material directly related to specific museums and how they choose to exhibit the Native American culture. By reviewing existing literature related to my particular topic, I will be able to collect relevant knowledge on my area of study and review these works critically. The following pieces of literature have been selected due to common themes that run through them. These themes include legislation, post-colonial theories and the debate which is concerned with the idea of who's right it is to own the past.

The first piece of literature which will be reviewed is *Native Americans and Archaeologists: Stepping Stones to Common Ground* edited by Swidler et al (1997) who collectively discuss aspects of repatriation, the discourse of science and tradition and delve into the laws that surround Native American peoples (Swidler et al 1997). This piece of literature plays a vital role in the contribution of my research as it touches on many of the issues that I wish to bring up in my dissertation. These include aspects of law, the importance of non-tangible heritage and the relations with not only museum professionals, but archaeologists themselves. A specific chapter, *Archaeologists-Native American relations* (Downer 1997), discusses in great detail NAGPRA and similar laws which have been created due to pressures from Native American peoples who wish to gain more rights. This aspect contributes to the discussion which provides an introduction into the relations between western museums and Native American peoples. Similarly, Christina F. Kreps in her book *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation* (Kreps 2003) notes the same importance of law, specifically NAGPRA. She also discusses the concept of "salvage ethnography", a notion which is an important one to critically analyse. Predominantly, Kreep's (2003) main focus in her book is the idea that non-western, 'euroamerican' people would be motivated to collect other people's culture in order to 'save it'. This concept is something that must be

discussed openly in this dissertation, due to the fact that the idea of 'collection' is something that goes hand in hand with museums.

Another book which is relevant to explore is *Indigenous Archaeologies: Decolonising Theory and Practice* (Smith et al 2004), which focuses mainly on the relationship between archaeologist and 'Indigenous' peoples. This contained thought provoking questions that helped me to expand my own research. One particular question that was noted in this book was 'who has the right to control the past?' (Smith et al 2004:1). This is perhaps one of the most fundamental questions to think about when discussing if the British Museum should hold and exhibit objects of Native American significance. This idea will be explored throughout this dissertation as it is vital to include in this discussion.

One final book that will be discussed in this literature review is *Exhibition Ethics: An Overview of Major Issues* (Gazi 2014). This particular article focuses on the ethical standards that all museums should undertake. Whilst discussing in detail issues of language, layout and what museums should do with sacred and culturally significant objects (Gazi 2014). This piece of literature has provided valuable information to contribute towards the analysis of ethical standards within museum exhibitions.

The books mentioned above are the main sources which have provided different insights into the legal and ethical issues behind the exhibition of Native American artefacts.

Chapter One: Aspects of Law

There is no doubt that 'Indigenous' communities have come face to face with issues such as 'colonialism, imperialism and cultural genocide' (Galla 2005: 142) over thousands of years, and this is no different for those of Native American descent. It can undoubtedly be stated that Native American's had little to no rights at all up until the late 1900's. This was shown in Ghost Dance of the Plains Indians in 1870, which was considered a starting point for the basic civil and human rights that Native American people sought-after (Simpson 2001). This idea however changed with the introduction of laws that are specifically designed to help protect Native American rights.

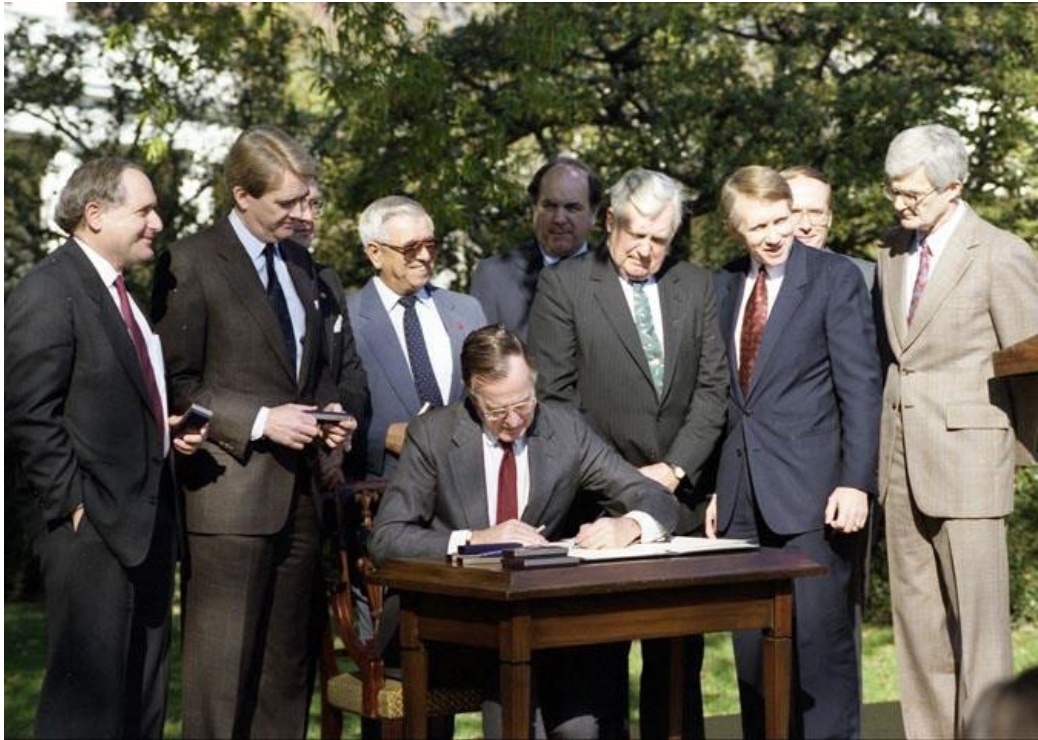


Figure 2 showing George H. Bush signing NAGPRA, after Indians of the Mid West 2011.

When discussing aspects of Native American rights and the effects this can have for museum establishments, it is wise to fully deconstruct the laws that effect the rights of Native American peoples. Arguably the most monumental act that was passed in the interest of Native American rights was that of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, or as it is more commonly known, NAGPRA. For the purpose of this essay NAGPRA will be

used when referring to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. This act, which was enacted in 1990, requires that human remains of Native American peoples be repatriated to Native American tribes, along with cultural objects that may be associated with these human remains (Smith 2004). These tribes must also be able to demonstrate they have cultural affiliation with any of the human remains or objects of cultural significance (Smith 2004). It should also be noted that this act prohibits the illegal trafficking of these human remains and/or cultural items, and decrees that museum institutions and other federally funded organisations must conduct inventories of Native American objects that they have in their possession (Kelsey and Carpenter 2011). These inventories must then be shared with the relevant Native American tribes (Kelsey and Carpenter 2011). Another thing to note is that these Native American tribes can gain restitution, based on the cultural affiliations that have been recognised in these inventories (Gestenblith 2011). However, even if these tribes do not have cultural affiliation, tribes might still be able to acquire restitution by proving a preponderance of evidence. The requesting tribe must then present a prima facie case against the museum or organization who might have associated culturally significant objects or funerary objects (Gestenblith 2011).

Kurprecht (2012) in her book *'The Concept of "cultural affiliation" in NAGPRA: it's potential and limits in the global protection of Indigenous cultural property rights* (2012), notes NAGPRA's potential. She discusses that this act not only recognises that ideas of oral traditions are satisfactory evidence for cultural affiliation, but notes that it abandons the "language of property" (Kurprecht 2012) and instead works with an altered language that allows for personal relations and contact in relation to a cultural object (Kurprecht 2012). Archaeologists are no longer in the superior position that they once were, and many say that Native Americans are now more than ever in a position where they are treated as equals alongside archaeologists (Swidler et al 1997). This belief is arguably true; no longer are Native American peoples in a situation where their protests and rights are ignored, and it is set in stone by law that their culturally significant objects must be returned to their tribes.

Before the introduction of this law, it was indubitably true that there was no real reason for the majority of western scholars and archaeologists to treat Native Americans as equals (Swidler et al 1997). Is it unquestionably accurate that many Western archaeologists and scholars were motivated to collect objects that belonged to those of an 'Indigenous' background. There are perhaps two reasons for this; One being that they felt the need to 'rescue' and 'protect' these culturally significant objects from, as Kreps (2003:79) notes, '*an inevitable extinction*'. The second reason is perhaps seen from an anthropological point of view, which is known to have a more scientific value and notes that collecting these objects is important for looking at progressions in science (Kreps 2003). The concept of salvage ethnography is an important one to discuss here, this model of 19th century American anthropology is a critical concept in the world of archaeologists and anthropologists who are studying Native American culture (Kreps 2003). There was an immediate sense of urgency in the 19th century to preserve the existence of certain cultures that were feared to become extinct (Gruber 1970). This concept was predominantly driven by a scientific need for the protection of the Native American cultures. Gruber (1970) explains that Prichard, who over 70 years ago became aware of these issues, was the figure who was predominantly seen in the salvage ethnography movement. The whole idea of ethnographic salvage was wrought, as noted by Gruber, by the 'advance of civilization and the spread of the hegemony of western culture' (Gruber 1970:1295). Although the ideas of ethnographic salvage have good intentions for the interest of certain cultures such as Native Americans, the suggestion that these cultures need 'saving' in the first place perhaps shows fundamental issues.

Although it would seem that many academics support NAGPRA and the ideals that comes with it, it can be said that this act has its limitations and does not fully support those Native American peoples who wish to claim their ancestor's human remains or cultural objects. NAGPRA was drafted due to the petitioning of Native Americans and others who believed these people deserved more rights (Smith 2014). Although the intention is seemingly useful for Native American peoples, difficulties have been raised by some

tribes including lack of funding and excluding certain cultural items which are not deemed 'indispensable for completion of a scientific study' (Kelsey and Carpenter 2011).

Although it is clear that many individuals have positive thoughts about this act, there are also many who do not. These thoughts often originate from individuals with both a scientific background and an archaeological background. These academics note the importance of their scientific work and suggest that if they were able to convince Native American peoples how important their work was, they will eventually 'stop bothering us' (Swidler et al 1997:75). For some archaeologists to say this, it suggests that this 'solution' heavily depends on having a superior position (Swidler et al 1997). This potentially shows that even through the introduction of NAGPRA, some believe that the words of Native Americans is not as important due to the fact that archaeologists have '*training in academia*'. Kelsey and Carpenter (2011) analyse archaeologist Meighan's take on NAGPRA, who believes that there should be a 'historical cut-off date' to which human remains should not be under the law of NAGPRA and subsequently seen as common property of everyone, including those in the scientific community (Kelsey and Carpenter 2011). This conception however can be seen as an imperfect argument, it is said that it is impossible to decide on one solid date in which the 'present' Native American could be disconnected from their past relatives and ancestors (Kelsey and Carpenter 2011). This idea is further continued by Kelsey and Carpenter (2011), who both point out that the traditional Native American beliefs of time is considered vastly different from a western understanding. It should be noted that the past for Native Americans is "constitutive and concurrent with the present" (Kelsey and Carpenter 2011: 69).

Another person who gives their opinion of whether NAGPRA is useful or not is Grossman, who notes that all culturally sensitive objects should be made accessible to all who wish to look at them, and states that not having access to them 'prevents exploration of object knowledge' (Swidler et al 1997). Although some may say that the scientific aspects outweigh the moral aspects, this idea projects a Westernised way of thinking on a culture that

does not work in the same way. This aspect of post-colonialism comes directly into the discussion; the functions of colonial museums such as those in Britain and Paris were to demonstrate how these governments had secured control of the colonial world (MacLoed 1998). The theory of post-colonialism is a vital topic to discuss when thinking about Native American rights. The term post-colonialism comes directly from the ideas of colonialism, which is a theoretical concept that revolves around the conquering of other civilizations land and belongings (Loomba 1998). Although this theory mainly focuses on the growth of European groups into Africa, Asia and America, this approach has been present throughout all of human history. It should be noted that post-colonialism ideals are often debated amongst academics, as the term and what it encompasses can be difficult to narrow down into one category; it cannot be used in a singular sense (Loomba 1998).

MacLoed (1998) goes on further to note that many of the artefacts in museums were often collected by expedition and simply given to these establishments, fundamentally disregarding any relationship between Native peoples and the west (Mac Loed 1998). Simpson (2001:134) in her book *Making Representations: Museums in the post-colonial era* notes that in this colonised world, American Indians have “lost lives, lands and much of their material culture which is now held in museums around the world” (Simpson 2001:134). Indeed, the peoples of Native American descent have faced many issues in their lives, and for some archaeologists and museums to practically ‘ignore’ this and put most likely illegally obtained culturally significant objects in their exhibitions is a problematic one.

We are unable to fully discuss NAGPRA without also discussing in detail the case study of the Kennewick Man, which was previously mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation. As stated previously, the remains of Kennewick Man, or the Ancient One as it is sometimes referred to were discovered by accident on federal land that was owned by the U.S Army Corps of Engineers or COE (Anon 2005). The COE proposed the return of these remains to relevant Native American groups, but was subsequently opposed by a group of scientists, who in the events surrounding this dispute

were successful in arguing that the act of NAGPRA was not relevant or appropriate in this case (Anon 2005). During this time the remains were given to a group of anthropologists for scientific study, but were severely opposed by groups of Indian tribes who demanded that the remains of the Kennewick Man be returned so that he could be re-buried. Although they were allowed to have the remains returned to them, scientists challenged them and the case was taken to court. The scientist's argued that the remains were a critical source of information about 'new world populations' whereas the Native American peoples' were retaliating stating that the Kennewick Man is an ancestor of their culture and should be buried according to their religious, cultural and social beliefs (Anon 2015). At the time that this article was written, the remains of Kennewick Man were still in the possession of the group of scientists that were persistent in arguing to keep the remains for scientific study, but it should be noted that as of 2017 the remains, which were kept at the Burke Museum, were officially repatriated under the law of NAGPRA (Burkemuseum 2017). The museum, although were holding the remains in storage, note that they were not involved in any scientific experimentation that occurred and also state that the remains were buried in an undisclosed location by relevant Native American tribe members. By analysing and discussing this case study, we are able to see that NAGPRA, although is seen as beneficial, does not come without its problems.

When discussing law's that revolve around the repatriation of Native American's cultural objects and human remains, it is also important to discuss the UK equivalent. The British Museum would not follow the same steps taken that museums in America would when thinking about Native American rights. The British Museum has a policy which was developed by themselves that is related to the human remains. This policy follows the recommendations of the Code of Practice which was governed under the Human Tissue Act that was created in 2004. Although the British Museum is employed to follow the law of the Human Tissue Act, they place a very large emphasis on the importance of keeping human remains and notes that they can help to advance research focusing on the history of disease and genetics (BritishMuseum 2017a). One major thing to note that is directly

related to Native American rights and museums is section B, appendix 1 of their human remains policy, which discusses the cultural and spiritual significance of human remains. The British Museum states that cultural groups who are trying to reclaim human remains need to prove that they have particular cultural and/or spiritual worth to their culture and community. Although at first glance this could be seen as an ethical and moral step to take, they further go on to say that even if the group can prove that the remains have spiritual importance, it 'will be *duly* considered' (BritishMuseum 2017a). From this, we might be able to suggest that this museum does not think of spiritual and cultural significance as a reasonable reason to return human remains, which can be seen as problematic to those of 'Indigenous' descent.

The importance of law in relation to Native American culture and how this is presented in museums, as discussed above, is undoubtedly one of the most important things to discuss and heavily analyse when thinking about how the British Museum portrays the culture and lifestyle of Native Americans. It is perhaps true that although NAGRPRA and laws similar were created with the intention of helping and supporting those of Native American lineage, there is clearly more that has to be done in order for the act to perform at its full potential. As well as the law aspect, the notions of museum ethics are equally as important to discuss in order to gain a full understanding of the implications that the British Museum may face when exhibiting aspects of Native American culture.

Chapter 2: Ethics in a Museum Context

Museum ethics is an extremely integral topic to think about when discussing how specific museums present certain culture's objects, in this case how the British Museum showcases aspects of Native American culture. Besterman (2011:430) discusses what museum ethics consists of, he notes that it aims to provide a "purposeful, philosophical framework" (Besterman 2011:430) for everything that museums do. He goes on further and states that ethics is an expression of social responsibility that revolves around the association between people (Besterman 2011). Museums are often advised to follow set 'guidelines' and principles of good practice in order to maintain fair and ethically sound exhibitions (Gazi 2014). However, these principles are only guidelines. Ethics have no enforcement power over museum institutions in the same way that law does (Gazi 2014) which can only advise on issues including what and how they display objects, the language that is used and how to tackle displays that contain sensitive objects or references. There is often confusion of the relationship between law and ethics when discussing museum morals. Aspects of law looks at and controls engagements of human action, whereas ethics seeks to outline certain standards that museums should take and is in no way enforced by law (Gazi 2014). It is very important to gain an understanding of the difference between ethics and law, certainly in relation to the British Museum and how they present not only aspects of Native American culture, but also other 'Indigenous' cultures. It brings in to question the ideas of ethics and morality, if no such law surrounding repatriation were implemented in the British Museum, would these remains been returned at all? For example, the surviving parts of the Parthenon marbles, or the Elgin Marbles were removed between 1801 and 1812 by Thomas Bruce who sold them to the British Museum in 1816 (Meryman 2009). By looking at the controversy that the British Museum has had with the Elgin marbles, it is clear to see that this museum has had issues with returning objects on display. As of 2018, the Greek marbles are still on display and in possession of the British Museum, bringing into question their moral and ethical standards that they possess.

Moral and ethical philosophy can be said to have been developed over 2000 years ago by human impulses that attributed to these notions (Besterman 2011). The importance of museum ethics has become clearer in the past 25 years due to the growth of professionalization in the museum industry (Besterman 2011). Whilst it is true that museum ethics is a moderately new concept, it can be said that the “roots of museums and philosophy are entwined” (Besterman 2011) in the history of humankind.

Exhibition spaces are the main places in which ethical battles take place (Gazi 2014) and in order for a museum to present an exhibition that is not only ethically sound but also historically accurate, certain questions should be asked in order to gain a clear understanding. Firstly, it is important to ask how we should approach the subject which is being presented and to think about what sort of objects should be included (Gazi 2014). Museum exhibitions have a heavy focus on the objects they display, and these objects are saturated with a range of different values. When these objects are on display to the public some of these values, which are sometimes intended for certain cultures, may lead to disputes amongst museum officials and the public (Gazi 2014). This can also lead to disagreements when thinking about displays of ‘Indigenous’ cultures, specifically the Native American culture. Many of the Native American artefacts that are displayed in museums across the world are seen as ‘culturally significant’ or sacred objects. Some scholars connote that there is a supposition that Native American peoples are not concerned with the preservation and well-being of their cultural objects. This can lead Western museums to validate their reasoning for retaining these objects in their possession (Kreps 2006). For some academics to justify ‘looking after’ these objects due to their Western way of thinking is a problematic one. But before discussing the main issues displaying these objects can cause, it is important to define what exactly sacred objects are. Gazi (2014) notes that this is not an easy task to accomplish, and states that sacred objects are removed from their original context when put on display in museums (Gazi 2014). This idea put forward by Gazi is an important idea to discuss, especially in relation to Native American exhibitions. Kreps (2006) develops this idea further by suggesting that the confiscation of particular

cultural objects from their original resting place or original community has led up to events such as the decrease of some cultural beliefs and traditions. (Kreps 2006). It is clear that removing sacred and cultural objects from their source community comes with considerable implications. This idea is often seen in relation to Native American communities and future generations. A recent example is the controversial procurement of Native American cultural objects that were being kept by the Andover Newton Theological School. In 2017, it was stated that the Peabody Essex museum, located in Massachusetts received over 150 Native American cultural items from the Andover Newton Theological School after having them transferred over. This school has been known for its problematic attitude over past years. Not only did they not comply with the rules of NAGPRA by not repatriating these Native American cultural items, but they also attempted to sell them in order to fix their financial issues. The Peabody Essex museum has stated that they plan to repatriate items slowly under the regulations of NAGPRA (Gorel 2017).

For museums to show objects that have significant cultural links to the public can come with complications. This notion is also expressed by Parker in Kreps' *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation* (Kreps 2003) who notes that some objects related to Native American tribes were never intended to be used or touched by their own tribal members, let alone museum personnel (Kreps 2003). For museum curators to dictate the life cycle of objects that were not meant to be tampered with shows substantial issues that would need to be scrutinized in detail. This idea can be related directly to Gell's (1998) theory of object agency, where he proposes that agency is related to people who are seen as starting sequences of a particular type. He further states that agency is as a result of human action from the intentional to the unintentional (Harris and Cipolla 2017). Not only do objects have agency, they also represent the object's biography which was introduced by Kopytoff (1997), suggesting that every object has a beginning in life, a middle and a final ending place (Kopytoff 1997). The main issue that can arise when relating Gell's (1998) theory of object agency to certain Native American objects, is that of the designed purpose being obstructed.

Parker goes on further and notes that there is an outstanding contrast with western science and museology and how they see objects compared to how those of Native American descent see them (Kreps 2003). For museums to have a Western ethos (Gazi 2014) when dealing with sacred and cultural 'Indigenous' objects, they are undoubtedly overlooking the significance of them.

Modern day museums who are in the Post-Colonialism era face an array of challenges. One of the most prominent of these involves museums reconsidering their validations for their collections including 'Indigenous' people's cultural objects (Kreps 2003). Indeed, it is vitally imperative that museums who possess culturally significant objects, specifically Native American cultural objects, have a great understanding of the significance of these objects that they hold in their collections. In terms of the British Museum, the objects that they choose to exhibit will be discussed in great detail further on in this dissertation in order to gain and present a full and educated understanding of the implications that arise.

In relation to museum ethics, many would say that the educational purposes of museum exhibitions are also important to discuss. Museum's by nature are 'educational institutions' (Hein 2006:340), and education can be said to have always been important when thinking about the functions of the museum (Hein 2006). Indeed, it can be said that museums are an essential institute not only for school children, but everyone in society. We are able to learn not only about our own heritage and ancestors, but also about how other societies would have lived. The idea of museums being educational centres can be traced back to 1683 with the opening of the Ashmolean Museum which was noted as being the first museum to showcase its exhibitions to the public (Abt 2011). In modern times education is the riding factor of museums, but alongside education comes social accountability (Hein 2006). Museums and other heritage organisations need to take caution in what and how they choose to exhibit in order to not present a false reality to the general public.

Another aspect of ethics that is important to discuss is how a museum utilizes the space that they have for exhibitions. When members of the public

walk into an exhibition space, they are undoubtedly influenced by its layout and design. This notion is often referred to as Space Syntax, which is a theory that focuses on analytical and descriptive tools for looking at the layout of the space in a building, such as museums. One question that is often asked is does the spatial layout of an exhibition have an influence on shaping the experience of the visitor? (Hillier and Tzortzi 2009). This is evident by Choi's article *The Morphology of Exploration and Encounter in Museum Layouts* (1997) who notes that whilst any museum space can provide a 'physical realization of classificatory principles' (Choi 1997:3), the spatial arrangement may make some objects more available than others in the exhibition (Choi 1997). In relation to the Native American exhibition in room 26 at the British Museum, the room itself is on the smaller size compared to almost all the other exhibition rooms. This could perhaps mean that they had to think even more carefully when deciding how to exhibit aspects of Native American culture. Although more detail will be discussed in the next chapter about how certain objects are displayed, it should be first noted here that almost all of the objects are placed in large display cases that cover both sides of the room. Although there are a few display cases in the centre, it is more often than not that most visitors will not spend too much time observing the middle cases, and will head directly to either side of the room. This is noted to being a single sequence, in which visitors of the museum will enter, circulation once and leave again (Hillier and Tzortzi 2009).

On a final note, it is vital to state that the concepts of museum ethics that have been discussed in this chapter are 'not carved in stone' (Gazi 2014), and to suggest that all museums must follow a certain code of ethics is a misinformed one. Gazi notes that ethical ideas are culturally specific, and that no single system of ethics is neither right nor wrong (Gazi 2014). Certainly, different museums will have different understandings of ethical issues that they can face, and will almost always deal with these issues in a sufficient manner. When thinking about the British Museum's code of ethics, it could be suggested that they are perhaps lacking in aspects which other museums have covered. Not only relating to Native American culture, but perhaps all 'Indigenous' cultures that they choose to represent in their

museum. Chapter 3 will discuss the notion of the British Museum and will heavily focus on and discuss if the Native American exhibition in this museum follows procedures of museum ethics and law.

Chapter Three: A Methodology: A Look into the British Museum



Figure 2 showing British Museum building, after Blog. British Museum 2017.

The majority of my data and research came from independent visits to the British Museum, specifically to see the Native American exhibit which is located in room 26. The British Museum themselves note that this room, labelled as the North America room, showcases the objects, artefacts and art entities that represent Native inhabitants of both the United States and Canada. At the same time room 26 showcases what effect colonialism and colonializing European countries had on Native American peoples, past and present (BritishMuseum 2017b). Although this may seem to have a positive effect on the representation of Native American culture, it is important to look at, in great detail, the specific objects that are a part of this exhibition. By doing this, we will then be able to discuss how these objects are related to what has been previously been discussed in this dissertation, specifically law and museum ethics. We should then be able to decide whether the Native American exhibition at the British Museum is appropriate to be on display to the public. If they are not appropriate then it is imperative to connote the

reason why it can cause issues not only for the British Museum, but for those of Native American descent.

When first walking into room 26, it is clear that this museum has utilized the small amount of space that they have been given to put on and display objects that are related to Native American culture. On each side of the room, there are two display cases that span the entire sides of the wall. These exhibition cases contain objects from different areas and periods relating to the culture, and lifestyle of both past and modern-day Native American peoples. The museum is noted to having over 1,000 objects that relate to North America and Native American peoples in their collection, but it is clear that only about 30-40 objects are physically on display, and it can be assumed that the rest of these objects are in the British Museum's storage. Many of the items can be seen as culturally significant items, for example there are two large totem poles which are placed on either side of the entrance to the exhibitions, which can also be seen in figure 2.



Figure 3 showing North American exhibit at British Museum, after Billington 2017.

These totem poles, whose respective museum catalogue numbers are Am1987,Q.5 and Am1944,02.39, are both noted by the British Museum as being part of a pair, and were found in British Columbia in the 1860's (BritishMuseum 2017c). Huang in her article *Totem Poles* (2009) notes the socio-cultural worth of totem poles, and suggests that these wooden poles do not always show a story. However, they would have served as a way to

document historical events and stories that would have been significant to certain families, clans or communities (Huang 2009). It is indeed clear that these objects hold great cultural and spiritual significance, as with many of the objects of display in this exhibition, which could potentially cause issues for the museum.

The British Museum, alongside many other museums, decontextualize many objects by removing them from their original purpose which inevitably changes the objects interpretive space (MacLoed 1998). The ideals of postcolonial thinking again come into play, for Western museums take objects that have a direct link with Native American culture and decide to showcase them to the public has undoubtable issues that are vital to address. Huang continues her ideas further, and goes on to suggest that the presence of totem poles, specifically in British Columbia, have come under threat by 'non-aboriginal settlers' (Huang: 2009:2) who saw these totem poles as paganistic. She notes that thousands of culturally significant objects were deliberately taken from Native American peoples only to be displayed in museums all across Western Europe (Huang 2009).

Figure 5 showing ceremonial masks, after Billington 2017 and figure 6 showing ceremonial masks, after Billington 2017.



Another significant object that is on display at the British Museum in the North American exhibition is a ceremonial mask, or as it's officially known; the Pookmis mask which can be seen in figure 4. This mask, object number AM1984, 04.11, is noted to be a red cedar wood mask which was found in 1982 in British Columbia (BritishMuseum. 2017d). It is said that highly decorated masks, such as AM1984 04.11, were an integral component of ceremonies that those of Native American lineage would have performed. The University of Oregon note that these ceremonial dances were executed to showcase and re-enact the history of their hero-ancestors and also to display '*spirit beings*' in their mythological past (University of Oregon, n.d.). It is important to also state that the right to dance in these ceremonies and rituals were passed down in the families who participated (University of Oregon, n.d.). It is possible to then suggest that it was an honour and a source of pride to be able to partake in these sacred rituals. There are many ceremonial masks in the North American exhibition as seen in figure 5, which could perhaps be seen as a positive thing or a much more negative one.



Figure 6 showing warrior shirt, after Billington 2017.

As mentioned in previous chapters many Native American objects, especially sacred and cultural ones, were subject to the colonial ways of Western 'collectors' who collected anything that they deemed needed protection or was worth looking at.

Figures 7 and 8 showing range of ceremonial objects, after Billington 2017



It could be said that the reason there is a high number of these ceremonial masks in this museum is due to the fact that they would have been seen as 'exotic' items. Alongside ceremonial masks and large totem poles, warrior shirts are also clearly on display. Perhaps one of the most eye catching objects on display due to the eagle-like position which the museum has presented it in. AM1983, Q288, shown in figure 6, is a painted skin shirt which is embellished with beaded rosettes and has unique patterns which the British Museum notes as being representative of thunderbirds (British Museum 2017d). It is unknown who originally owned this impressive shirt, but it is speculated to have been in the possession of Chief Red Crow in 1886 (BritishMuseum 2017d).

As well as the objects that have been discussed in this chapter, this museum has also taken the liberty of displaying a small group of shamanistic and cultural items, as can be seen in figure 7 (Billington 2017). One thing to note is that many Native American peoples consider certain objects as having spiritual power deeply imbedded into them (Swidler et al 1997). For these specific objects to be displayed to the general public could perhaps cause

issues within the Native American community, who could potentially be offended by the display of these culturally significant objects.

As well as looking at the physical items the British Museum displays in relation to the Native American culture, it is important to discuss the language that is used. In almost every caption, they give information on what the specific object(s) is, what they would have been used for and potentially who owned them. Accompanying the text is a black and white image which can be seen on almost every caption in this exhibition, which typically tend to showcase Native American peoples interacting with the object that the text is accompanied with.

Although the impeccable condition which the items on display are kept in, to house objects that are of cultural, religious and ceremonial value can perhaps cause issues. One thing that is vital to note is that not once has the British Museum stated if the items on display have been loaned from the Native American peoples. If they have not been loaned or the museum has not been given permission to showcase them to the public due to their cultural value, then problems are undoubtedly evident.



Figures 9 showing another warrior shirt, after Billington 2017

Another issues to develop on is the portrayal of culturally significant objects. It is known in Native American culture that many of the objects that are produced for ceremonial or cultural events are seen as 'instruments that ensure the continuation of good in the world' (Swidler et al 1997:37). For experts to disrupt their original resting place in order to take these objects for themselves would indisputably have a negative effect of those of Native American descent. This is due to the fact that this would cause unbalances in their communities (Swidler et al 1997). Another thing to note here is that originally, Native American peoples did not have a need for any type of museum since their culture is seen as being self-perpetrating (Simpson 2001). If this is the case, then it could be said that Western museums, including the British Museum, have no need to display Native American objects, unless it is happening in conjunction with Native American communities who either give their permission or would like to display their culture. Cuno (2009) also discusses this notion, and states that it is important for Native communities to be in charge of their own museums and/or cultural centres as they have a better chance of displaying their culture under certain conditions that they have control over (Cuno 2009). Although the ideas of Native community led museums or cultural centres will be discussed in further detail in chapter 4, it is important to analyse what Cuno has written. It is indeed true that Native American peoples would have more freedom to decide what they want to display to the public. He further explains that there should be consideration for how these community centres can offer a positive and authentic representation of their culture whilst at the same time showing the struggles and hardships that Native American peoples and their ancestors went through (Cuno 2009). Although there is an importance to showcase the true struggles that faced past Native American communities, this should perhaps not be compromised for museums to try and add elements of entertainment into it purely to try and attract visitors.

Although physical objects play a large part in telling the story of Native American peoples, oral tradition is an ideology that is so vitally imperative for museums to take on board when they are thinking about what to display in

their exhibitions. Anyon and Ferguson (1997) discuss in their chapter of *Native American Oral Tradition and Archaeology* in *Native Americans and Archaeologists: Stepping Stones to Common Ground* (Anyon and Ferguson 1997) note that the importance of oral tradition is virtually ignored and not seen as a source of accurate and factual information about Native American peoples past and culture (Anyon and Ferguson 1997). It is said that the main history of Native American peoples is passed down from generation to generation through the use of oral histories and communication. This can be seen as a large and vital part of Native American life, but is hardly ever referenced in museums (Anyon and Ferguson 1997). This is evident in relation to the British Museum. There is no trace of the British Museum exploring aspects of oral tradition, their focus is predominantly on physical objects that they have acquired over the years.

Although the British Museum has many well preserved objects in relation to Native American culture, the way in which this museum gained these objects can certainly cause confusion. It is important for any museum to clearly disclose if the objects were obtained in ethical circumstances, or simply removed unnecessarily by Western archaeologists or academics for their own personal preferences. It is therefore important to compare the British Museum to other museums in order to gain a fuller understanding of if the British Museums North American exhibit is ethically and morally sound. Chapter 4 will focus heavily on this notion.

Chapter Four: Comparative Considerations

In order to gain a greater understanding of how ethically and morally correct the British Museum's Native American exhibition is, it is important to analyse and compare other museums and cultural institutions in America. By conducting this comparison, we will be able to gain an insight into how American museums portray aspects of Native American culture, and if the way they have done this is considered ethical in relation to Native peoples whose sacred culture is being shown. There will be two museums that shall be discussed in this chapter, firstly the National Museum of the American Indian Museum, and the Chickasaw Cultural Centre. Although both can be considered vastly different from each other, it is important to showcase both a national yet federally funded museum's perspective and a cultural centre which is run by predominantly peoples of Native American descent.

Simpson (2001) notes that Native American museums and cultural centres provide peoples of Native American descent with the ability to showcase and support their cultural distinctiveness. She further states that these culturally specific museums allow Native American peoples to '*take control*' of how their culture is represented (Simpson 2001). This notion would hopefully mean that they would be able to decide what to showcase, and how these objects or similar objects would be seen to the public. However, one important aspect to note is that originally, Native American peoples did not have a need or perhaps a willingness to showcase their culture in museums. For those of Native American descent to sometimes have their culture showcased in museums without their consent shows a post-colonial attitude towards Native Americans. Cobb (2005) quotes that 'Museums have, in many ways, trapped Native Americans behind their glassed in-case' (Cobb 2005:488). Indeed, this quote is an informative opinion, one in which could perhaps perfectly sum up why including Native American culturally significant objects within museum displays can be so disruptive and disrespected to their culture. It could perhaps be said that because their culture is self-perpetuating, there is perhaps no need for their culturally significant objects to be displayed in any museum, unless given consent prior. It is said that Cobb (2005) in her article *The National Museum of*

the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty (Cobb 2005) that the concept of museums are unheard of and perhaps alien in nature to the Native American people, but the idea of religiously caring for and protecting sacred cultural items is not (Cobb 2005). It is however important to discuss the significance of Native American museums. In 1978 the Native American Indian Museums Association Act was passed in order to provide support to Native American museums in America (Simpson 2001), which indisputably would have been a large factor in the creation and running of these specific museums. Native American museums are important for a multitude of reasons, one of these being that they are pinnacle places for the preservation and enrichment of Native American culture and history (Simpson 2001). Indeed, compared to museums who do have an immediate focus of Native American culture or those who have a small exhibition dedicated to it, for example the British Museum, the amount of effort and understanding can surely be seen as different. This idea showcases the importance of these Native American museums; in that who else is there to present their large and extensive culture than themselves? Another reason which is noted by Simpson (2001) for the need for these museums is to promote their culture to members of the public who may not possess accurate knowledge about Native American past and present (Simpson 2001).

The first museum that is vital to discuss is the National Museum of the American Indian, which is noted on their official website as being the holders of one of the world's largest collection of Native American objects, with approximately 850,000 artefacts and art pieces in their possession (NMAI n.d.a). The museum itself, seen in figure 10, is said to have the majority of the collection received from the Heye Foundation which was put together by George Gustave Heye (NMAI, n.d.b). Heye, as described by the museum, had a great wish to not only collect objects of Native American relevance, but he also wanted to study and preserve them so that he could exhibit things connected with the anthropology of Native American peoples (NMAI, n.d.b). This theory does however hold problematic issues, due to the fact that Heye proceeded to simply take these objects, which are more than likely to have

cultural significance, simply for his own interest. For Heye, a western academic, to seize objects without permission clearly showcases the issues of the colonization of Native American peoples and their culture. The museum also connotes that the Heye's collection still stands as a 'remarkable testament' to his passions towards the Native American people (NAMI, n.d.c).



Figure 10 showing National Museum of the American, after NMAI, n.d

As discussed previously, the amount of objects on display that are directly related to ideals of Native American culture is an unfathomable amount. Specifically, the North American Ethnology collection has just over 88,000 objects, which relate mostly to earlier examples of the Native American Plains and note that every single Plains group is represented equally (NAMI, n.d.d). Objects in this collection include a ceremonial, wooden rattle, seen in figure 11, and a Native American mask which most likely would have been used in ceremonial dances or festivals, seen in figure 12. Although it can be said the two objects have somewhat similar qualities to other objects found in the British Museum's Native American exhibition, the fact that the National Museum of the American Indian is known for giving permission for those of Native American descent, to have access to certain objects whenever they please is something that makes all the difference.



Figure 11 showing Native American ceremonial rattle, after Smithsonian Institution, n.d.



Figure 12 showing Native American mask, after Smithsonian Institution, n.d.

Many scholars and academics praise the NMAI for its impeccable focus on the history of the Native American peoples and also for its inclusion of Native American peoples input. Cobb (2005) in their article *The National Museum of the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty* (Cobb 2005) highlights that over 25,000 Native American peoples attended a celebration of the opening of this cultural museum in Washington mall. This perhaps indicates that this museum is one that many Native Americans will have an unusually good relationship with, as it is known by many that people of Native American descent have a distressing relationship with museums (Cobb 2005). Alongside this museum having an amazing focus and dedication to the culture of Native Americans, they also introduced a large and meticulous repatriation policy. This extensive report notes the importance of repatriation and what it exactly entails, as well as a detailed '6 steps to repatriation', which includes:

1. Information request by Native American peoples
2. A formal request for those who have requested an item to be repatriated
3. A consultation review

4. A formal request for the repatriation of the specific object
5. Research conducted into the repatriation process and finally
6. The repatriation of spoken items

(NMAI, n.d.e).

It is indeed clear that this specific museum holds great respect and has a courteous approach to the care of Native American cultural objects. This perhaps cannot be said of other museums who decide to show objects, both culturally significant and general, everyday objects, to the willing public. In terms of the British Museum, this level of respect is not as high. Although the British Museum does have certain policies and laws, as spoken about in chapter 1, they do not equate to the amount of time, effort and consideration that other museum institutions such as the National Museum of the American Indian has. Although this may be partly because of the nature of this national museum *being* a museum for the portrayal of Native American culture.

Alongside looking at a national museum that has an immense focus on Native American culture, another education institute that would be beneficial to compare to the British Museum is the Chickasaw Cultural Centre. The importance of community run cultural centres is examined by Navasaitend and Pekumiene (2010), who discuss that the term 'culture' includes aspects of religion, language and dress. Ethnic culture is also something which is discussed quite specifically in this article. Ethnic culture refers to the beliefs that would have been passed down from previous generations (Navasaitend and Pekumiene 2010). The authors of this article states that in order to preserve the heritage of a certain nation or culture, cultural centres are beneficial (Navasaitend and Pekumiene 2010). This notion is indeed a convincing one, although museums or similar education institutions on a national or international scale may showcase certain aspects of any culture, to have a cultural centre that is specifically created and used to educate, protect, preserve and showcase elements from their culture is an important one to do.

The history of the Chickasaw peoples is imperative to understand, and begins approximately in 1504 when the people of Chickasaw first came into contact with Europeans (The Chickasaw Nation 2015). The people of

Chickasaw are perhaps most commonly known as being part of the 'five civilised tribes' who were forced to move from their homeland and reposition. The specific tribes include the peoples of the Chickasaw, Cheokee, Choctaw, Creek and finally the Seminde. These five tribes were noted as being highly skilled in agricultural terms and led many successful trading routes (The Chickasaw Nation 2015).

This historical and culturally significant centre, seen in figure 13, is located in Oklahoma and not only incorporates the history, heritage and ways of life, but also wishes to tell the public the stories and histories of the Chickasaw peoples (Chickasaw Cultural Centre, 2018a).



Figure 13 showing Chickasaw centre, after Chickasaw cultural centre. n.d.

The goals that this cultural centre intend to accomplish are to harness and showcase the spirit of the Chickasaw culture, to protect their rich culture and to showcase through the use of demonstration the culturally traditions that would have and undoubtedly are still used to this day (Chickasaw Cultural Centre, 2018a). It is vital to note that this centre is predominantly self-run by those of Native American descent, more specially those of Chickasaw descent, and is only focused on portraying the correct information of the history of the Chickasaw peoples.

In terms of how this cultural centre decides to portray their history, there is a vast range of different and intuitive ways in which this is conducted. These are immensely different from both the British Museum's exhibition of North America and the National Museum of the American Indian's interpretations and portrayals of Native American culture. To begin with, the grounds in which the Chickasaw village is located on is noted as being a recreated version of a traditional, authentic portrayal of a historically accurate Native American village setting (Chickasaw Cultural Centre, 2018b). This recreated village showcases a variety of different educational aspects, including taking part in classes that enable the public to learn parts of the Chickasaw language, lessons in the history of their culture and demonstrations of the stomp dance, native to the Chickasaw culture (Chickasaw Cultural Centre, 2018b). Another aspect of this cultural centre can be seen in their fine art galleries; the Aaitafama room, which holds collections of art works that present the people and the history of the Chickasaw and the Aapisa' art gallery (Chickasaw Cultural Centre, 2018c). It is clear to see that this Native American run centre has many positive ideals and opportunities not only for the Chickasaw people, but also members of the public who wish to gain insightful knowledge into the history of the Native American community of Chickasaw.

It is indeed clear that the Chickasaw cultural centre based in Oklahoma is a crucial centre not only for the people of Chickasaw, but for all Native American peoples. It is not only the fact that this centre is almost entirely run by Native American peoples, who in turn would have possibly unlimited knowledge of how to present their culture in ways that is appropriate. Also effectively showcasing their culture to the public in order to spread awareness of the cultural attributes that comes hand in hand with Native American culture.

Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation is to showcase the issues that can face museums when presenting certain cultures that perhaps require a different approach to the normal, museology attitude. The British Museum which has been critically evaluated in relation to how the Native American culture has been represented in a Western perspective. A detailed discussion of legislation and how this has impacted the rights of Native American peoples has first been discussed in relation to museums ethics and their connection to the British Museum. Using methodological approaches, the North American exhibit in the British Museum has been examined by observational techniques to analyse the objects and how they could have a negative impact for Native Americans. Finally, a comparative study of two American museums against that of the British Museum was conducted to understand the differences in the presentational aspect of educational centres.

The question of if the British Museum presents a problematic Native American exhibit is a difficult one to fully answer. From a British perspective analysing the Native American Culture, it is in my opinion that many of the items in this exhibit are culturally sacred, and should perhaps not be displayed in a typical museum exhibition. The fact that there is no direct evidence of the objects on display being donated by Native American communities or even having these communities involved, perhaps tell us that there are unresolved issues here. However, it can be said that if the British Museum, or any museum, did not showcase a range of extensive cultures through the use of exhibits, then these cultures would perhaps not be able to showcase what their culture is all about. But another point of view can come from the fact that if many of the Native American objects should not be shown to the public, then what does this mean for all of the other culturally significant objects that the this museum had from other culture such as Egyptian or Greek.

There have certainly been some limitations of this work, the most predominant issue being the lack of material that has been written on how Native American cultures have been presented in museums. There is much material on the relationship between archaeologists and Native American

peoples, but very little on the relationships between Native American's and museums. Alongside this issue, the fact that the British Museums is not always clear on how they procured these objects is another problematic conception that needs to be solved. This notion can go one of two ways; if it is the case that this museum has permission from Native American peoples to display and protect the objects in their collection, then it would be wise for them to fully showcase this. However, if the museum does not have any permissions from any Native American tribe to show their culture then the museum needs to either return the objects or work with Native American peoples, as was seen in the National Museum of the American Indian which was discussed in chapter 4.

The concept of the British Museum being an individual entity is important when considering the actions that the British Museum follows, has a potential to filter down into other, perhaps smaller museums that are influenced by the way the British Museum conducts itself. In other words, if the British Museum holds Native American culturally significant objects, then it is plausible to suggest that other museums in the heritage network will also adopt this.

The research that has been conducted by myself for this dissertation, would hopefully be part of a movement for having more research put into how aspects of Native American culture is presented in museums all over the world. The importance of this research would not only be vital in terms of looking at museums who are showcasing ethically sound Native American exhibits, but also to look at those who are perhaps not educated on the cultural significance that almost all hand-crafted Native American objects contain.

Although the future of Native American rights is an undoubtedly positive one, there is still far to go in terms of how museums and other educational centres present Native American culture, and if they should do so at all.

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