

INDIGENOUS ART AT THE VISUAL ARTS COLLECTION

CREATING GUIDELINES FOR GUIDING THINKING

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ABSTRACT

The McGill Visual Arts Collection has recently acquired a number of Indigenous objects at a time when museums globally are reassessing the philosophies and ethics underlying their policies surrounding the ownership of Indigenous objects. My research was a timely investigation and compilation of issues and perspectives the VAC should be aware of as an institution holding a variety of works by Indigenous artists and artisans, both historical and contemporary. Additionally, this examination of issues was accompanied by research into specific histories of a number of objects within the recent donation, focusing on their creators and the communities they originate from.



RESEARCH METHODS

In order to compile relevant considerations surrounding contemporary art, I consulted scholarly publications on the issues, other institutions' protocols for culturally sensitive materials, and interviewed staff members at other institutions engaged in similar reflections. I spent time with each object featured in my research, creating a detailed condition assessment and catalogue record that required a close look at each object. I attempted to elucidate the specific history of each object, its significance to its creator and their community, and the particular difficulties that community has experienced. This portion of the research required reading as many texts as I could find on the objects, issues, and communities, with an effort to focus on the most recent writings, as well as those written by members of the specific community.



BACKGROUND

- Carved by Ainu people of Japan for tourism industry
- Bears have long been a sacred symbol in Ainu culture
- This "crawling bear" form was inspired by Swiss carvings, and was sold and produced by Ainu people as a way to sustain themselves in winter months



ISSUE

- These carved bears are sometimes deemed "inauthentic" Indigenous art because they are made for the tourism industry and were based off a Swiss design



GUIDE

- The notion of "authentic" Indigenous art assumes that these communities are "frozen in time"
- This object should be seen as a valid Indigenous object in the collection and discussed as such

BACKGROUND

A multitude of complex issues surround the ownership of Indigenous objects by Western institutions, and not all could be effectively addressed in my research. Therefore, I focused on issues that were the most relevant to the collection. With specific objects in mind, my research focused on issues of transculturation, the legacy of anthropology and Indigenous communities, the ownership of culturally sensitive materials, and the tradition of Indigenous art made exclusively for sale.



OUTCOME

Based on my research, I created a "guidebook," intended to open new avenues for thinking about Indigenous objects at the VAC. Featuring "case studies" of selected objects and a set of guiding questions, this document was created with the intention of keeping the issues Indigenous communities have faced at the forefront of the process of cataloguing, displaying and writing about this collection of Indigenous works, and any others the VAC may acquire in the future.