Guidelines for Ethical Practices of Display for Contemporary Art by Indigenous Artists

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Problem & Introduction

This summer, my ARIA project was to create guidelines for displaying Indigenous artwork and objects at McGill's Visual Arts Collection. As the VAC expands and the global art world becomes more inclusive, it is essential to consider the display of objects when designing exhibitions. For instance, it is essential to create dialogue with Indigenous individuals. Not consulting Indigenous individuals and communities in museum display can create misleading, inappropriate, and incomplete stories.

Methodology

My practice consisted of attending exhibitions showing Indigenous art across Montreal to study how they presented their works, the curatorial team, as well as the intended purpose of the exhibitions.

In total I attended seven exhibitions: McCord's *Indigenous Voices*, the World Cultures Gallery at the Redpath, La Guilde's *Looking Inside* and *Material Trilogy*, as well as the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' *Thought and Splendour of Indigenous Colombia*, *Wolves: The Art of Dempsey Bob*, and *Takuminartut*. I created a detailed report for each exhibition I attended. Finally, I compared these displays to the ones created by the Visual Arts Collection. The goal of my research is to foster a more inclusive environment at McGill University by creating guidelines for future curatorial projects.

Square Dance, Sharni Pootoogook, 2000, lithograph. 51 cm x 38.1 cm.

Discussion

Curatorial Team

To start, when putting together an exhibition of Indigenous content, speak with an Indigenous individual about respectful display. For example, when La Guilde put on ᐃᓗᒻᒧᑦ ᑕᑯᓂᐊᕐᓂᖅ or *Looking Inside*, they collaborated with Napatsi Folger, an Inuk writer and artist. Folger served as a guest curator for the exhibition.

McGill is lucky enough to have the Indigenous Studies and Community Engagement Initiative (ISCEI), so I strongly encourage collaboration with this department in the future. For instance, ISCEI features artists- and writers-in-residence, visiting elders, and knowledge holders. Encouraging this collaboration with Indigenous individuals on campus harbors a more welcoming and inclusive environment for not only McGill faculty, staff, and students, but Montrealers as a whole.

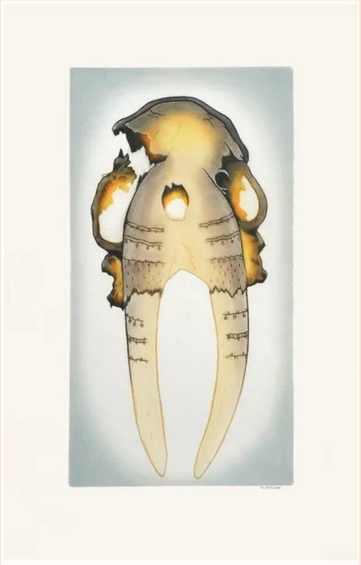
O'nenhakén:ra (White Corn) by Owisokon Lahache, 2022, Acrylic on Canvas. 17.5 cm x 22.5 cm.

Language & Translation

Next, there is the question of language. At the Gelber Law Library, McGill has translated the labels and wall texts into the language of the artist, in this case, Inuktitut. The VAC should stick with this policy in the future. When writing an exhibition's text, it is important to consider the audience and purpose.

For example, the McCord Stewart Museum's exhibition *Indigenous Voices of Today: Knowledge, Trauma, Resistance* was made for all Indigenous individuals. Because of this, they translated the section titles into different languages. They did not translate entire bodies of text into Indigenous languages, however.

In addition, at La Guilde, their permanent collection display *Material Trilogy: One Collection* has information written in English, French, Kanien'kéha, and Inuktitut. Because their collection is sourced from multiple nations, it makes sense that they would include the Indigenous language of the host territory (Kanien'kehá:ka) as well as the nation they collect much of their works from (Inuit).



Ancient Walrus Skull, Tim Pitsiulak, 2016, Etching & Aquatint. 74.9 cm x 47 cm.

The Glass Case Dilemma & Sustainable Audience Engagement

In addition, there is the dilemma of the glass case. In museums and galleries, curators will place objects in a display case for an exhibition. Critics of the glass case say that it cages the work and turns it into a specimen. But in a museum setting, the glass case around an object is meant not only to protect the object, but as a sign of respect. When I attended *Indigenous Voices,* I was concerned by the multiple objects with no labels nor cases.

Though museums are grateful to their visitors, they should not touch the objects. Leave the handling to the professionals. Though I encourage audience interaction, the matters get complicated when insurance and preservation are considered. We want to keep these objects for as long as possible so their beauty and history can be appreciated. For these reasons, I recommend that the VAC look elsewhere for audience engagement, like events, classes, and talks. Events like *Arjuinnata at McGill*, which was an event series highlighting Inuit excellence, achievement, and perseverance in 2022 should become more commonplace.

However, there are exceptions to this rule. In McGill's Department of Family Medicine, there is a dedicated room for activities surrounding Indigenous health and community outreach within the health sector. There is a Kwakwaka'wakw talking stick resting on the wall in this room. Because this is a room designated for Indigenous individuals, the VAC felt it was inappropriate to lock the object in a glass case.

Conclusion & Looking Forward

This research will lead to more thoughtful and sensitive displays of Indigenous art on McGill's campus. Who curates the works, the languages the text is in, as well as how the objects are displayed can completely change the meaning of an exhibition.

In the future, I hope for more collaboration between the McGill Visual Arts Collection and the McGill Indigenous Studies and Community Engagement Initiative. The Visual Arts Collection also looks to continue its Curatorial Internship for Indigenous Art.

Skull of Harps, Eldred Allen, 2018, Pigment print on archival paper flush mounted to Sintra. 42.6 cm x 76.2 cm.

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