

Appendix 6A: Excerpts from Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*

III. Results of Consultations

The regional consultations and responses to the call for submissions have provided a national perspective on the needs and aspirations of First Peoples with regard to museums and cultural collections. The range of needs and aspirations identified reflects the cultural diversity of Aboriginal people in Canada. The level of development of thinking and action on the issues identified by the Task Force varied substantially. In some locations consideration of these issues was being undertaken, for all intents and purposes, for the first time. In other localities, cooperative relationships between museum and Aboriginal communities were well established and flourishing. Similarly, it was readily apparent that solutions, both presently operational ones and ones that were required, varied from one region to another, often substantially. However, while it was recognized that a common solution was perhaps not possible it was generally agreed that improvements, often fundamental ones, were needed in the relationship between museums and Aboriginal communities and that the Task Force was an appropriate mechanism to achieve this objective.

The consultations also demonstrated that museums and cultural institutions are well aware of the necessity and the value of working as equal partners with First Peoples. There is a strong consensus that partnerships should be guided by moral, ethical and professional principles and not limited to areas of rights and interests specified by law. The many case studies of collaborative efforts indicate that partnerships have been underway for some time in many cultural institutions across the country....

The major findings of the national consultations by the task force are outlined below.

A. The Importance of Cultural Objects in Museum Collections

The importance of cultural objects is recognized. These objects represent cultural history and values and are therefore sources of learning, pride and

self-esteem. The primary concern of First Peoples is with the importance of cultural collections to their own particular communities. Nonetheless, there is also a general recognition that these collections, and the institutions that care for them, serve a wider function and can contribute to greater public education and awareness of the significant cultural contributions made by First Peoples. Also, scientific investigation and reporting on museum collections are valuable means of obtaining and interpreting information on matters of culture and heritage. In the broad sense, museums are identified as having the potential to engage with living cultures, not just objects.

B. Increased Involvement of First Peoples in Interpretation

“Interpretation” as discussed in the reports and submissions includes all facets of museum administration, research, public program, and exhibition planning, and the presentations that result from such planning. There is agreement that increased involvement of First Peoples in museum work is essential in order to improve the representation and interpretation of First Peoples’ histories and cultures in museums.

The major focus of discussions has been on the interpretation of First Peoples culture and history in public exhibitions. It was agreed that the role of First Peoples in Canadian history should be stressed. This approach should replace the stereotyped exhibitions that depict First Peoples as dying, primitive and inferior cultures, or as cultures isolated from Canada’s history, in “pre-history” galleries. The linkage between Aboriginal heritage and the present circumstances of First Peoples should also be represented; in fact, museums should become forums for discussions of relevant contemporary issues.

C. Improved Access to Museum Collections

“Collections” include not only human remains and artifacts, but also information associated with these materials: research results, photographs, works of art, and any other information related to First Peoples culture and history held in cultural institutions.

“Access” encompasses not only physical access to collections for purposes of viewing research, making reproductions and ceremonial use, but also access to funding sources, policy development and implementation

activities, as well as training and employment in museums and other cultural institutions.

There is wide agreement that enhanced access to collections related to First Peoples is appropriate and needed. Inventories of existing collections should be carried out as soon as possible and made available to the appropriate First Peoples communities. It was noted that different First Peoples have different customs and will therefore have different interests with regard to utilizing museum collections. Since narrow policies are unlikely to accommodate this diversity, cultural institutions must be flexible with regard to working out access arrangements with First Peoples. It was also recognized that some forms of access would need to be more regulated than others to take into account the selective needs of the material ranging from the religious or traditional manner of dealing with the object to its physically fragile nature.

In addition to First Peoples' access to existing ethnographic collections within museums, there was also discussion of the lack of representation of contemporary Aboriginal art in public art galleries. It was agreed that Canadian art museums should be encouraged to work with artists of First Nations ancestry to enhance their collections and exhibition programming in this area.

Access to museum jobs and training is a widely acknowledged need. Having First Peoples on staff would help to educate other museum personnel with regard to valuable Aboriginal perspectives and philosophies and would imbue a greater sensitivity to community needs and interests in non-Aboriginal museum personnel. At the same time First Peoples would gain greater access to museums and related institutions.

D. Repatriation

There was a consensus in favour of the return of human remains and illegally obtained objects along with certain non-skeletal burial materials and other sacred objects to appropriate First Peoples. In addition, there was some agreement on the return to originating communities of a selection of other objects considered to be of special significance to cultural patrimony.

It was also agreed that First Peoples communities should be able to demonstrate direct prior cultural connection and ownership with regard to collections in question. There should be Aboriginal involvement in determining who is the appropriate person or group to receive any repatriated material.

There is wide recognition that concepts of ownership vary, therefore, a case-by-case collaborative approach to resolving repatriation based on moral and ethical criteria is favoured rather than a strictly legalistic approach. The “Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act”, recently passed in the United States, was studied by Task Force members. While not ruling out the possibility of the creation of legislation in the future, it was agreed that it was preferable to encourage museums and Aboriginal peoples to work collaboratively to resolve issues concerning the management, care and custody of cultural objects. Proposed guidelines for such a collaborative process follow in the recommendations section.

E. Training

The need for training for both First Peoples and non-Aboriginal museum personnel is critical. To work in established museums, or to develop museums in their own communities, First Peoples need training in all phases of museology. Conversely, museum personnel need training in the cultures and values of First Peoples in order to better care for and interpret collections and to work more effectively as partners with First Peoples communities.

An inventory of active training programs in museological practice was compiled as part of the Eastern Committee report to the Task Force. Copies will be made available by late January, 1992, through the Canadian Museums Association.

F. Support for Cultural Institutions

The importance of supporting the efforts of First Peoples to manage and conserve their own cultural facilities in their own communities cannot be stressed enough. Community-based cultural centres and programs can reinforce a positive identity, help to heal cultural dislocation and improve educational opportunities for children. These improvements in turn support

the realization of socio-economic goals of First Peoples communities.

G. Funding

The Task Force consultations revealed an urgent need for additional funding for projects involving First Peoples in existing Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal museums. Funding is also required to assist First Peoples in establishing their own museums.

H. International Collections

It was agreed that First Peoples need governmental assistance in gaining access to and/or repatriating cultural objects held in collections outside of Canada.

IV. Creating Partnerships: Principles and Recommendations

If museums are to achieve their goal of “interpreting the past, explaining the present and thereby illuminating choices for the future”,¹ they must express accurately and in context the cultural heritage and spirit of the civilizations that they portray. In this regard, “The Spirit Sings” exhibition was a watershed in Canadian museology. It has served as a forum for identifying historical problems in the representation of Aboriginal peoples in museums and it has led to the present efforts toward establishing open and lasting partnerships between museums and Aboriginal communities.

Over the years museum exhibitions have usually been based on the assumption that Aboriginal peoples were extinct or on the verge of vanishing. A great portion of existing collections were gathered at the turn of the century when museums and private collectors rushed to collect cultural materials from Aboriginal communities which, according to the social, scientific and political philosophy of the time, were believed to be well on the way to extinction. Some museum exhibitions reinforced a public perception that Aboriginal cultures existed only in the past and that they were incapable of change. Such perceptions continue to support the mistaken notion that Aboriginal cultures are inferior.

Museums have recognized the failings in such presentations and changes

are being made. As well, a number of community-based Aboriginal cultural centres have been established instigating changes of far-reaching impact. Along with some museums the latter have begun to develop new initiatives in cultural representation. However, a great deal remains to be done to set the record straight for a museum-going public accustomed to the old-style presentations.

In order to accurately reflect within museums the fundamental and unique contribution of First Peoples to Canada, as well as the spiritual and social values of their diverse contemporary cultures, it is necessary to develop new relationships with museums based on progressive principles and policy. To quote former AFN National Chief Georges Erasmus again, “We (the Aboriginal peoples) are well aware that many people have dedicated their time, careers and their lives showing what they believe is the accurate picture of indigenous peoples. We thank you for that, but we want to turn the page...”²

In order to turn that page, and in the spirit of forging new partnerships, we offer the following principles and recommendations based on regional consultations, the many submissions received from organizations and concerned individuals combined with extensive and productive discussions at three national task force meetings.

A. Principles to Establish Partnerships between First Peoples and Canadian Museums

1. Museums and First Peoples will work together to correct inequities that have characterized their relationships in the past. In particular the desire and authority of First Peoples to speak for themselves should be recognized and affirmed by museums.
2. An equal partnership involves mutual appreciation of the conceptual knowledge and approaches characteristic of First Peoples, and empirical knowledge and approaches of academically-trained workers.
3. First Peoples and museums recognize mutual interests in the cultural materials and knowledge of the past, along with the contemporary existence of First Peoples.

4. First Peoples and museums must accept the philosophy of co-management and co-responsibility as the ethical basis for principles and procedures pertaining to collections related to Aboriginal cultures contained in museums.

5. Appropriate representatives of First Peoples will be involved as equal partners in any museum exhibition, program or project dealing with Aboriginal heritage, history or culture.

6. First Peoples and museums must recognize a commonality of interest in the research, documentation, presentation, promotion and education of various publics, including museum professionals and academics, in the richness, variety and validity of Aboriginal heritage, history and culture.

7. First Peoples must be fully involved in the development of policies and funding programs related to Aboriginal heritage, history and culture.

B. Specific Recommendations to Establish Partnerships between First Peoples and Canadian Museums

The range of needs and aspirations that have been identified reflect the cultural diversity of the First Peoples of Canada. Clearly, no single set of recommendations and policies will adequately address this diversity; rather, a premium has been placed on flexible approaches in the development of partnerships between First Peoples and museums.

It is also recognized that significant funding, human resources and time will be required to make the changes and implement the recommendations outlined here. Accordingly, we offer specific recommendations relating to the issues of funding and human resources in the implementation section [section 5].

1. Interpretation

a. Museums should ensure that First Peoples are involved in the processes of planning, research implementation, presentation and maintenance of all exhibitions, programs and/or projects that include Aboriginal cultures.

b. Interpretation or representation of information related to First Peoples should conform to an ethic of responsibility to the community represented, as well as to the scholarly or professional ethics of the academic and museum communities.

c. In partnership with First Peoples, museums should refine the nature of information relating to their collections, activities and practices. Identification of items in their collections and in exhibitions using Aboriginal languages is recommended.

2. Access

a. To ensure the proper interpretation and representation of Aboriginal heritage, histories and cultures, museums should provide for the participation of Aboriginal people as members of governing structures and on boards of directors.

b. All museums and art galleries with ethnographic or Aboriginal art collections should develop programs which encompass legitimate opportunities and [encourage] the employment of Aboriginal peoples at all levels of their operations.

c. Museums should recognize the legitimate right of access by Aboriginal peoples to sacred materials, cultural objects and relevant documentation. Aboriginal peoples must also recognize the legitimate concerns of museums with respect to the care, maintenance and preservation of their holdings.

d. In concert with First Peoples museums should develop a workable process to provide full disclosure of existing information relating to Aboriginal collections. Such information will include the scope of the collection, the kinds of objects included, and the geographical location, cultural affiliation, means and period of acquisition.

e. Canadian art museums should work with artists of First Nations ancestry to enhance their collections of contemporary art.

3. Repatriation

This report considers the disposition of Aboriginal cultural patrimony, including human remains, burial objects, sacred and ceremonial objects and other cultural objects that have ongoing historical, traditional or cultural import to an Aboriginal community or culture. The Canadian Museums Association and the Assembly of First Nations should endorse and encourage the adoption of the following guidelines relating to the repatriation of Aboriginal cultural patrimony:

a. Human Remains

(i) Remains of individuals whom evidence indicates are remembered by name must be offered for disposition at the request of the families, their descendants or clan, upon notification of the appropriate First Nations, community, tribes, clan or family members.

(ii) Human remains which evidence indicates may be affiliated with a named First People must be reported to that Nation, community, clan, tribe or family.

(iii) Upon agreement and in cooperation with the museum the appropriate First Nations group may work with scientific interests for a mutually agreed upon period, and may have the remains re-interred according to the appropriate traditional or other religious practices of the First Nation or Aboriginal community.

(iv) The treatment and disposition of remains and associated burial objects that are ancient or that cannot be affiliated with a named First People shall be decided through discussion and negotiation with an advisory committee of First Peoples. The First People may work with scientific interests for a mutually agreed upon time period and may have the remains re-interred in manner consistent with local traditional practices.

(v) Museums that acquire human remains through any means must involve the appropriate First Nation in the treatment and disposition of the remains.

(vi) The retention of Aboriginal human remains for prolonged periods against the expressed wishes of First Peoples is not acceptable.

b. Objects of Cultural Patrimony

The treatment, use, presentation and disposition of sacred and ceremonial objects and any other objects of cultural patrimony should be decided on moral and ethical grounds with the full involvement of the appropriate First Nations as equal partners. In the event of disputes between individuals, between an individual and the community or between communities, the onus should be on the First Peoples to resolve the dispute according to customary practice.

Recommended options for this process include the following:

(i) Restitution or Reversion. This includes the return to an originating culture or individuals of any objects that are judged by current legal standards to have been acquired illegally. This process involves the transfer or return of legal title to an originating culture or individual from the museum, based upon existing legal mechanisms for de-accessioning.

(ii) Transfer of Title. Even in cases where materials have been obtained legally, museums should consider supporting the requests by Aboriginal communities and community-based Aboriginal museums for the transfer of title of sacred and ceremonial objects and of other objects that have ongoing historical, traditional or cultural importance to an Aboriginal community or culture. This involves a case-by-case negotiation with the appropriate communities based on moral and ethical factors above and beyond legal considerations.

(iii) Loan of Materials. Museums should loan sacred and ceremonial objects for use by Aboriginal communities in traditional ceremonies and community festivities, based on mutual agreement on the use and time period in question as well as the risk to the physical object. Again, these decisions should be based on moral and ethical considerations both from the perspective of First Peoples and from that of museum conservation ethics (i.e., respect for the physical and historical integrity of the object).

(iv) Replication of Materials. Museums and First Peoples communities should consider the replication of materials slated either for repatriation or retention by the museum for the use of the other party. Negotiations should

be guided by moral and ethical considerations and the traditional knowledge and authority of the First Peoples involved, as well as the scientific knowledge of academically-trained museum personnel.

(v) Shared Authority to Manage Cultural Property. In all cases museums are urged to share management of their collections by involving the appropriate First Peoples in assisting to define access to collections, to determine storage conditions and use of collections, and to recognize traditional authority or individual ownership systems of the originating culture.

c. Repatriation of Foreign Holdings

The CMA and the AFN are urged to promote repatriation of human remains and objects of cultural patrimony held outside the country, subject to the same criteria outlined above under 1 & 2, through lobbying efforts in association with national governments, UNESCO, the International Council of Museums and other professional organizations.

4. Training

a. The CMA and the AFN, with funding provided by the Federal government, should promote the development of professional and technical training initiatives for First Peoples according to community needs and in a culturally appropriate manner.

b. Priority should be given to funding for training programs run by educational institutions and cultural centres controlled by First Peoples.

c. Non-Aboriginal museum professionals should be trained in the Aboriginal cultural knowledge and approaches relevant to museum research, conservation and interpretation.

d. Museums and other cultural institutions should recognize the legitimate credentials of certain individuals and groups within Aboriginal communities who possess knowledge of the particular culture.

5. Implementation

a. The Task Force urges the appropriate federal departments and funding programs, in consultation with the AFN and the CMA, to immediately allocate special funding over a 5 year period beginning in 1992. This funding will assist museums and Aboriginal communities to implement the principles and recommendations advocated by the Task Force. In addition to the items listed below, the initial funding will be used to study ongoing financial needs beyond the five year period. Provincial and territorial governments should also allocate increased funding for training, the development of Aboriginal run museums and cultural centres, as well as collaborative research, training, exhibitions and other special projects between existing museums and First Peoples communities.

The special funding should be allocated to a number of areas including, but not limited to the following:

- to support the proposed 1992 National Conference to discuss the findings, recommendations and implementation of this report;
- to assist in the establishment of Aboriginal-run cultural centres and museums from facility development to training of personnel;
- to assist existing museums to properly inventory their collections of ethnographic materials and to publicize same to the appropriate First Peoples;
- to assist in repatriation negotiations; - to assist in the establishment of internship and affirmative action programs at existing museums with cultural patrimony or art collections;
- to support collaborative research, training, exhibitions and other projects between museums and First Peoples communities;
- to assist the CMA and the AFN in developing a set of national guidelines based on the principles and recommendations contained in this report;
- to assist the CMA in establishing a documentation centre, with a full-time staff position to assist museums and Aboriginal communities in

implementing the recommendations of the Task Force; and

- to fund a joint committee to monitor and report developments over a five year period.

b. The CMA and the AFN are urged to lobby the appropriate federal departments to ensure that the above-mentioned funding initiative is implemented.

c. All federal and provincial funding programs for museums and related cultural institutions should establish criteria to ensure that the institutions receiving financial support adhere to the principles and recommendations contained in this report.

d. The CMA should develop a set of national guidelines with respect to interpretation, access, repatriation, training, and implementation based upon the principles and recommendations contained in this report.

e. The CMA and the AFN should recommend that principles and recommendations similar to those outlined in this report be adopted by cultural institutions other than museums, such as universities and other professional associations.

f. Museums with ethnographic or art collections should identify and publicize to the appropriate Aboriginal communities the specific personnel responsible for facilitating implementation of the principles and recommendations contained in this report.

g. The CMA and the AFN should report annually on the implementation of these principles and recommendations. In particular, the CMA is urged to ensure that a session devoted to the long-term partnerships of First Peoples and museums be an integral part of its annual conferences. These sessions will enable people to report on progress and to devise innovative and creative approaches to collaborations.

h. The CMA should establish a resource-documentation centre, with a full-time staff position to assist museums and Aboriginal communities in implementing the recommendations of the Task Force.

i. A joint committee made up of members of the Aboriginal and museum communities should be established to monitor developments over the next decade. The committee should be directly linked to the council of the CMA and to the executive of the AFN or its designate organization.

j. A public review of progress made over the ten year period should be conducted in the final year to make recommendations on future needs.

Notes:

* Report of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples (Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations and Canadian Museums Association, 1992).

1 Communications Canada, 1988. Challenges and Choices: Federal Policy and Program Proposals for Canadian Museums, p. 25.

2 Georges Erasmus, past National Chief, Assembly of First Nations, Opening Address to “Preserving Our Heritage: A Working Conference for Museums and First Peoples”, Ottawa, November, 1988.