

REDEFINING CURATORSHIP AS SKILLED PRACTICE

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# **Anthropology & Art**

A new open-access publication series edited by the RAI Anthropology of Art Committee. The series stems from the international conference Art, Materiality and Representation organized by the RAI in collaboration with the British Museum and the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2018. Its aims are to make available to a wide audience works that engage with the connections between visual, material, aural and other expressive human practices and the lived worlds in which they take place from an anthropologically informed perspective.

We solicit new contributions from anthropologists and others – such as archaeologists, art historians and practitioners – that will enhance and expand our collective understanding and appreciation of this important area of social life.

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*Cover image: Totem poles standing in the MEG gardens c.1978. Image credit: MEG.*

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## **Museums without curators?**

In 2016, *Thema*, the journal of the Musée de la Civilisation in Québec, published a special issue entitled 'Museums without Curators'. In the introduction to the issue, Mathieu Viau-Courville, the editor, reminded us that the redefinition of the scholar-curator emerged as early as the 1960s and the 1970s within the 'new museology' movement.

New Museology emerged in the 1960s when a group of museum and heritage professionals began challenging the social and political roles of museums, namely those museums operating with an 'old museology'.  
(Viau-Courville 2016:8).

According to adherents of new museology, 'old museology' (Vergo 1989), had centred too heavily on the subject-specialist curator. Specialized exhibitions were created which drew exclusively on object-based research and a single voice: that of the curator.

From its opening in 1988, the Musée de la Civilisation embraced new museology. There, object-based research was challenged to give way to the practice of exhibition-making based on community-driven projects and participatory approaches.

As Viau-Courville recalls, the Musée de la Civilisation progressively shifted away from object-based research. Exhibitions, led by exhibition project managers, aimed to focus on ideas and topics of societal importance. Curators were in charge of 'recommending objects to project managers to *illustrate* exhibition narratives' (Viau-Courville 2016:9, my emphasis).

Viau-Courville goes on to say that new museology in general, and the Musée de la Civilisation in particular, denounced

*[M]useums as being too colonial, elitist and centred on collections and collected methods, their exhibitions and research being too symbolic, too focused on the past, and, overall, too expensive considering that they had no real purpose for contemporary society.*

(Viau-Courville 2016:8)

After more than forty years of attempts to reform museums in order to remain socially relevant, I argue that skilled practice can provide useful insights into how ethnographic museums might address the concerns of contemporary Indigenous Peoples. As discussed below, skilled practices can be used as research methods to focus on the processes through which things are made, rather than the more conventional approach of merely studying (and exhibiting) finished objects. For the museum professional, attaining skilled practices requires some degree of apprenticeship in the skills being analysed and studied. I argue here that indigenous artists can present, through their engagement with museums' collections, their own definition of cultural continuity, the recognition of the social value of their traditions and their control in the curatorship of their historic artefacts. Since the opening of the Musée de la Civilisation in the late 1980s, many museum professionals, around the world, have sought to adapt their policies and practices to provide Indigenous Peoples with greater access to and control over their cultural heritage (Jones 1993; McCarthy 2007). As a result, members of indigenous communities, not only in Canada but also elsewhere in the world, have increasingly been employed as trustees, curators and artists in residence (McCarthy 2007; McMaster 1992; Raymond and Salmond 2008). However, scholars seem to have paid more attention to exhibitions, as events that attract the core audience of the museum. Here, I argue that

less attention has been paid to the curatorial work on collections carried out behind the scenes, well before an exhibition opens. This paper thus argues that contemporary indigenous concerns are particularly well addressed by paying close attention to the way objects, to be exhibited at a later stage, are made in practice. I first adopted this research method within the context of ethnographic museums over ten years ago while conducting doctoral fieldwork at the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and at the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm (Durand 2008a, 2008b). In order to better understand my informants' views on cultural continuity, I had to move beyond studying the finished products that would end up in a display case. I had to literally conduct fieldwork inside a display case, which had been assembled by co-curator Rosanna Raymond, a New Zealand-born artist of Samoan descent, and study in practice the processes through which things were made (Durand 2010).

Paying attention to artists' skills while learning them myself, enabled me to observe how artists provided their own definitions of cultural continuity through highly reflexive assemblages of both 'traditional' and 'contemporary' elements. This working of cultural continuity (involving the constant creation of new knowledge based on past traditions) would have remained hidden, if one had just looked at the finished artwork. Indeed, the contradictions and complexities of artworks that use simultaneously traditional and contemporary elements often remain invisible behind the glass of a museum display case. Looking at the final product, the visitor only sees 'affinities' between 'old' and 'new' objects (at best) or the inauthenticity of spurious traditions (at worst). Drawing on this previous experience, I have aimed to adopt skilled practice as a research method and an analytical tool since 2018, in the context of an exchange of practices

with four Ts'msyen artists: David A. Boxley and Gyibaawm Laxha (David R. Boxley), both master carvers; Mangyepsa Gyipaayg (Kandi McGilton), a weaver; and Huk Tgini'itsga Xsguook (Gavin Hudson), a poet from New Metlakatla, Alaska. Our collaboration was first initiated around the conservation work of two totem poles collected from Alaska in the 1950s, and held since then at the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva (MEG). In 2019, David R. Boxley, Kandi McGilton and Gavin Hudson were commissioned to create new artworks for a temporary exhibition on environmental injustice that opened at the MEG in 2021.<sup>1</sup> Engaging with their artistic practices in an effort to identify shared concerns about Indigenous Peoples' access to and control over their cultural heritage and the authenticity of Indigenous Peoples' traditions, I aimed to overcome the common assumption that collections-based research is not well equipped to address contemporary issues, and as such should be relegated to the past.

### **Skilled practice: a research method for curators**

The use of 'skilled practice' has been informed by an important shift away from studying finished products that has occurred in material culture studies and anthropology over the past thirty years. Scholars have increasingly investigated the processes through which things are made (Ingold 2000; Jensen 1992; Svensson 1985; Yaneva 2003). Many ethnographers have sought to adopt the same methodologies as their informants in order to gather ethnographic data. (Gunn 2007; Guss 1989; Wacquant 1995). Their attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> Environmental Injustice-Indigenous Peoples' Alternatives (24 September 2021 – 21 August 2022): [www.meg.ch/en/expositions/environmental-injustice-indigenous-peoples-alternatives](http://www.meg.ch/en/expositions/environmental-injustice-indigenous-peoples-alternatives) (accessed on 23 March 2023).



Figure 1 The making process for Rosanna Raymond's display case 'Eye Land Pt2: Welcome 2da K'Lub', 2006.

know ‘in the same way’ as those they work with (Strathern 1999:10) has enabled them to develop new abilities, beside their deployment of verbal and visual skills, while conducting fieldwork. In other words, they became skilled in the practice, as well as in the analysis, of their informants’ skills. Learning through skilled practice, I argue, is an indispensable technique that enables the scholar-curator to move in and out of his/her professional boundaries to assemble material for his/her research analysis on collaborative relationships with indigenous artists. Besides, it offers opportunities to observe that artists who express their concerns in museums have also acquired and developed research skills that enable them to cross borders between art and anthropology. However, I do not want to suggest that curators should be turned into artists in order to see the same things as the artists they are engaging with. Similarly, learning through skilled practice as a curatorial method does not imply that artists may become just another ‘object of study’ for the curator. There is clearly a distinction between curatorial and artistic skilled practice. Indeed, it is not my intention to learn the skills deployed by David R. Boxley and Kandi McGilton to become a wood-carver or a basket weaver myself. However, I aim to be able to perceive, in another way, how to engage in collaborative relationships with Indigenous artists by studying movements and engagement with materials. I also aim to emphasize how the processes through which contemporary artworks addressing Indigenous Peoples’ current concerns are made, are based on past traditions and historic objects. Documenting these processes, I argue, enables the scholar-curator to record the traces of movements that would become invisible once the artworks entered the display cases of the museum. In other words, such documentation provides the capacity ‘to reveal the unseen and

engender reflection’ (Laine 2009:21). I want to demonstrate that museums may gain greater social relevance if curators are willing to learn how to engage with materials through skilled practice. I concur with one of Tim Ingold’s central ideas in *The Perception of the Environment*, that ‘it is not through the transmission of formulae that skills are passed from generation to generation, but through practical, “hands-on” experience’ (2000:291).

In anthropology ‘hands-on’ participation prepares the ethnographer to observe in another way, as demonstrated by anthropologist David Guss, who conducted research among the Yekuana people in Venezuela in the 1970s and 1980s. Interested in recording the Yekuana’s creation epic known as *Watunna*, Guss was soon confronted by the difficulty of identifying framed ‘storytelling events’ (Guss 1989:1). He could, however, approach the myths through the geometric designs of Yekuana basketry. He notes: ‘to really communicate it often seemed one had to be making a basket. And so, it was not long before I too entered into the long process of becoming a basket maker.’ (Guss 1989:2). It was only while learning the skills of basket making that Guss was introduced to *Watunna*. As he explained: ‘to understand the *Watunna* ... demanded much more than just verbal skills. It required the use of all my senses.’ (Guss 1989:4).

By arguing that anthropologists learn through skilled practice in order to ‘know in the same way’ as their research participants, I do not want to suggest, as already mentioned above, that their main goal is to master the skills being taught. Indeed, as the research project at the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva described below demonstrates, the museum curator who develops skilled practice differs from the apprentice who wants to acquire the skills for him/herself. Guss did not learn the skills involved



in basket making to be able to marry, as required among the Yekuana. Anthropologists who adopt such research methods seem more interested in analysing their research participants' point of view than in becoming experts in the skills they have come to engage with. My point is that using learning through skilled practice as a research method does not necessarily imply seeing the same things as one's research participants. Rather, their movements and practical knowledge prepare the ethnographer to observe in another way. Learning through skilled practice, for an anthropologist, consists in a 'guided rediscovery' of ethnographic methodologies (Ingold 2000:356). Indeed, it affords methodological insights that do not merely rely on linguistic abilities but on the 'active and sensuous engagement of practitioner and material' (ibid.:342). In addition, I argue that by paying attention to artists' skills within museums, curators are enabled to observe, in another way, how Indigenous Peoples think historically. In other words, skilled practice may help prompt the revisiting of assumptions about the past, present and future. Drawing on Hawaiian historian Lilikala Kame'eleihiwa's theory of the past and the future in Hawaii, James Clifford invites us to observe closely the 'future-oriented traditionalism of First nations'.

*It is interesting to note that in Hawaiian, the past is referred to as Ka wa mamua, or 'the time in front or before'. Whereas the future, when thought of at all, is Ka wa mahope, or 'the time which comes after or behind.' It is as if the Hawaiian stands firmly in the present, with his back to the future, and his eyes fixed upon the past, seeking historical answers for present-day dilemmas. Such an orientation is to the Hawaiian an eminently practical one, for the future is always unknown, whereas the past is rich in glory and knowledge.*

*(Kame'eleihiwa, quoted in Clifford 2013:24)*

According to Lilikala Kame'eleihiwa, 'the past thus materialised in land and ancestors, is always a source of the new.' (Clifford 2013:25). It is interesting to observe within the museum setting, as we will see in the case study described below, how artists are engaging with historic objects in order not only to revitalize their traditions for the future of their communities, but also to encourage museum professionals to address present-day issues faced by Indigenous Peoples. In doing so, curators are also invited to become caretakers of cultural objects along with Indigenous communities, shifting the whole museum's relationship to collections from ownership to shared stewardship. As a result, I will argue, Indigenous artists regain greater control over their cultural heritage.

In addition to skilled practice, the analytic term of 'assemblage' may inform scholar-curators willing to address contemporary issues through historic objects. Indeed, the below example of skilled practice carried out at MEG will show how Indigenous artists provide their own definitions of cultural continuity through reflexive assemblages of both 'traditional' and 'contemporary' elements. It demonstrates how skilled practice has the potential to become an essential curatorial strategy in examining the manifold ways in which elements of culture are produced and changed. In this case, skilled practice entailed discussion with Ts'msyen artists from Metlakatla, Alaska, of both past events (such as the migration of a whole community and the ban of cultural ceremonies such as potlatches) and contemporary concerns (such as the revitalization of a nearly extinct language and environmental loss due to global warming).

## Assemblage

Over the past two decades, social anthropologists and sociologists have increasingly thought through the concept of assemblage, a well-known ontological tool, for analysing the 'data' they collect in the field (Latour 2005; Marcus and Saka 2006). The 'writing culture' critique of the 1980s welcomed this term, which, as George Marcus and Erkan Saka argue, 'permits the researcher to speak of emergence, heterogeneity, the decentred and the ephemeral in nonetheless ordered life' (2006:101). At that time, many anthropologists were questioning assumptions about the static nature of Indigenous Peoples' traditions, and were instead embracing concepts that seemed 'unstable and infused with movement and change' (ibid. 2006:102). As Marcus and Saka note:

*Whoever employs [the concept of assemblage] does so with a certain tension, balancing, and tentativeness where the contradictions between the ephemeral and the structural, and between the structural and the unstably heterogeneous create almost a nervous condition for analytic reason.*

(ibid.)

Since the late 1990s, in parallel with the development of the new museology critique mentioned above, the concept of assemblage has been used in anthropology to describe broad processes of globalization. Stephen Collier has suggested, for example, that 'an assemblage is structured through critical reflection, debate, and contest' (2006:400). In pointing to 'instabilities and conflicts', the global assemblage thus serves, he further argues, 'as a tool for a critical global knowledge' (ibid.).

I am concerned here with the exchange of practices encouraged by methods of assemblage in both art and anthropology. According to

Marcus and Saka, the term of assemblage, as used in anthropology, can be traced 'genealogically to ... a desired association with or inspirational connection to the art, architecture and literary spheres of its creation' (2006:102). At the same time, for Ruth Phillips:

*The developments of assemblage, installation, and performance art are hard to imagine without the models imported by field anthropologists. All three contemporary art genres are essentially contextualizing projects; they reintroduce magic, ritual, movement, and associative meanings to the gallery spaces from which such distractions had been removed by the decontextualizing impulses of formalism.*

(1994:43)

In the context of contemporary art, 'assemblage' is an artistic process in which a three-dimensional artistic composition is made, often by putting together found objects. The word was first used in art practice in the early 1950s, when Jean Dubuffet created a series of collages of butterfly wings, which he titled *assemblages d'empreintes*. In both French and English assemblage denotes 'the fitting together of parts and pieces' and can apply to both 'flat and three-dimensional forms' (Seitz 1968:105n). The unity that results from an assemblage of parts and pieces, however, 'can never be entirely preordained, for an assembled work grows by testing, rejection and acceptance' (ibid.:39). The artist, he continued, must 'cede a measure of his control, and hence of his ego, to the materials and what transpires between them, placing himself particularly in the role of discover or spectator as well as that of originator' (ibid.).

As I will show, the observation of, and participation in, the ways in which Ts'msyen artists become involved in broader assemblages

such as the reinterpretation of historic objects from their cultures, may yield important insights for anthropological analysis within the museum setting. Whereas an artistic assemblage, as noted above, is a three-dimensional composition made from putting together found objects, the collaborative initiative described below is made of several elements, including storytelling, carving, weaving, Indigenous Peoples' rights to control their land and territories, language skills and curatorial management.

Drawing on the study of historic Ts'msyen objects held in the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva's collections and the creation of newly commissioned artworks, the invited artists engaged in an interrogation of open-ended questions about the past, as well as controversies and debates about the future of Indigenous languages and traditions, Indigenous Peoples' rights to their lands and territories, and the overall shift from ownership to stewardship in the museum setting over the past years.

### **Case study: assembling Ts'msyen heritage from Alaska**

In 2016, curators at MEG conducted a collections review of over 74,000 artefacts. The objective was to assess which artefacts would require special attention in terms of research, conservation care and deaccessioning procedures, before the move of the entire collection to a new storage facility in 2019. It soon became apparent that we needed to commission a specialist wood conservator<sup>2</sup> to further assess the condition of two totem poles. These had once stood in the gardens of the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva, but had been

de-installed in 1990 and placed in off-site storage due to conservation concerns. The totem poles were collected in Ketchikan,<sup>3</sup> Alaska, in 1955 by Georges Barbey, a retired banker, who acted as the *Président de la Société Auxiliaire du Musée d'Ethnographie* (The Ethnographic Museum Society). The objects had been carved by Sidney Campbell, also known as Chief Neesh Loot. Campbell was a Ts'msyen boatbuilder, carpenter and wood-carver born c.1847 in British Columbia. While assessing the poles, our primary concern, was to evaluate whether they could be moved to the new storage facility without damage. It was expected that a heavy-handling operation would be necessary to transport the poles to their new storage area.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, my colleagues and I<sup>5</sup> started to express concerns over accessibility for artists, scholars and Ts'msyen people once the poles entered storage.<sup>6</sup> It could be another decade, or more, before plans were made to encourage research on the poles, due to the lack of space for viewing in the new storage facility.

Stephanie Barbey, the great-granddaughter of Georges Barbey, suggested that the history of the totem poles could be further investigated before they were moved. Barbey is a film-maker, and she informed us that she was willing to make a film about her great-grandfather's journey to Alaska. This film would tell the story of the

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2 The MEG is fortunate enough to count among its staff two conservators, one of whom is the lead conservator in our project team. She suggested that we should commission Claude Veuillet, a conservator and a wood-carver who has much experience in restoring large buildings and materials made out of wood.

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3 The two poles stood in front of a store in the city of Ketchikan when G. Barbey resolved to purchase them for the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva.

4 The access gate of the room designed to store the totem poles in the new facility is located several meters above the ground. The use of a self-propelled lifting equipment would have been required to lift the totem poles.

5 In addition to me, the core team for the totem-poles project was comprised of a conservator, curatorial assistant and museum photographer.

6 Access to and research on the poles was challenging due to the fact that other large artefacts were also to be stored in this area.



Figure 2 Museum staff repositioning the totem poles side by side to allow conservation study. Image credit: MEG/Carine A. Durand, November 2017.

totem poles he collected for the museum and subsequently brought to Geneva. We became interested in assembling a broad variety of skills, including curatorship, conservation care, photography and film-making for the project. In November 2017 we invited Barbey to record the handling operation that arranged the totem poles side by side, in order to allow the commissioned conservator to perform the conservation study.

As the first handling operation progressed, Johnathan Watts, MEG's photographer, took photographs of Barbey and her cameraman filming and recording museum staff and commissioned workers while they handled the poles. The assemblage of photographic and filming skills around the poles enabled me to gain

a better understanding of the life of the totem poles since their arrival in Geneva in 1956. While editing the pictures retrieved by Watts and interpreted by Lucie Monot, the lead conservator of the totem pole project, my attention was drawn to the remnants of colour that could still be seen on the poles. We started to understand how the citizens of Geneva, and more specifically, the school children facing the museum, appropriated the totem poles as 'their own', whilst analysing archival images gathered by Watts. Between 1956 and 1990, the period of time they stood in the museum's gardens, the totem poles became not only the symbol of the museum, but also a true landmark in the neighbourhood, still



Figure 3 Schoolchildren around the crate of the newly arrived totem poles, May 1956. G. Barbey, with a white beard, can be seen in the background. Image credit: MEG.

remembered today by Genevan citizens (Watts, pers. comm.)<sup>7</sup>

We had managed to re-assemble several elements of the totem poles' biography since their arrival in Geneva in 1956. However, an important part of their history was still missing. I was interested in interviewing a Ts'msyen carver who could better inform us about the skills

mobilized in the late nineteenth century, to carve such poles. I was hoping that by reinterpreting the poles with a contemporary master carver, we could gather information about the unique way that Sidney Campbell had assembled traditional carving techniques learnt in his youth in British Columbia. It might also reveal new skills developed after Campbell together with about 830 Ts'msyen left their homeland in British Columbia, led by William Duncan (1832–1918) an English-born Anglican missionary, to found the city of New Metlakatla in Alaska in 1887. Under the rules of William Duncan the carving of full-sized totem poles for ceremonial purposes were banned. Surprisingly, however, the full-size totem poles now held at the Ethnographic

<sup>7</sup> In 2000, ten years after the original totem poles were de-installed, replicas in glass fibre were made and placed where the original poles once stood, in the gardens. In 2010 the replicas were also de-installed to allow the construction work for the museum's extension. On 14 May 2015, upon the request of several organizations, the replicas were mounted in a city park close by the museum and where they still stand today.



Figure 4 Installation of the totem poles in the Museum's gardens. May 1956. Image credit: MEG.



Figure 5 David A. and David R. Boxley (on the right) observing the techniques mobilized to carve Sidney Campbell's poles, 26 November 2018. Image credit: MEG/Johnathan Watts.

Museum of Geneva were carved by Sidney Campbell after the migration of his people to Alaska, despite the fact that at that time Duncan only encouraged small-scale native crafts for commercial purpose. Small-scale totem carving originated in this context (David A. Boxley, pers. comm. November 2018; Kiffer 2006). Following the advice of Stephanie Barbey in 2017 I contacted David Albert Boxley, a prominent Seattle-based Ts'msyen master carver, in order to research the history of the poles and the Ts'msyen community of Metlakatla. Born in Metlakatla in 1952, Boxley was raised by his grandparents. In the late 1970s, he began researching traditional Ts'msyen carvings from museum collections. Boxley is a self-taught carver and made the decision, in 1986, to devote his time and energies towards carving. Through this he could transmit Northwest Coast

art-carving skills to younger generations. Boxley is active in cultural preservation and the founder of the *Git-Hoan* (people of the Salmon) dancing group. With his son, David Robert, Boxley has been instrumental in the revitalization of Ts'msyen culture, through organizing and hosting potlatches in his home town and beyond. Boxley, who remembered the totem poles standing in Ketchikan in his childhood, agreed to travel to Geneva with his wife, Michelle Boxley, also a performer. His son, David Robert Boxley, a renowned artist himself, and his son's partner, Kandi McGilton, a master weaver and recipient of the 2018 First Peoples Fund Cultural Capital fellowship, also joined them.

Over a week, between 25 November and 2 December 2018, we gathered around the poles and the historic photographs taken in Alaska and



Figure 6 From left to right, David R. Boxley, Kandi Mc Gilton and David A. Boxley observing the carving techniques of a model pole (ETHAM K001671) in MEG's exhibition gallery. Michelle Boxley can be seen in the background. 26 November 2018. Image credit: MEG/Johnathan Watts.

Geneva. We started to re-assemble the past, the present and the future of the poles by analysing the techniques Campbell had used to carve them and by studying ancient Ts'msyen objects from the museum's collections. It soon became evident for both David Albert and David Robert Boxley that Sidney Campbell's totem poles were the missing link between two traditions of full-sized pole carving. One tradition originated in the past, in British Columbia, and was left behind in 1887 by the Ts'msyen who followed William Duncan. The other was rooted in the present, and initiated by David Albert Boxley himself in the 1980s.

What makes the totem poles carved by Sidney Campbell in Metlakatla special is that they assemble specific details characteristic of Ts'msyen carving skills, such as pronounced

high cheekbones<sup>8</sup> (David A. Boxley and David R. Boxley pers. comms). David Albert Boxley pointed us towards another detail that would have remained invisible to our eyes, as non-carvers. He suggested, 'It is as if Campbell had replicated model poles turning them into full-size totem poles.'

The re-connection with Campbell's totem poles raises a number of questions still to be answered, such as why he was allowed to carve these full-size totem poles in Metlakatla. Further research involving the descendants of Sidney Campbell might provide insights into such questions.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Also referred to as 'pyramidal cheeks'.

<sup>9</sup> Museum staff aim to address this question and many others in collaboration with the Guthrie family, descendants of Sidney Campbell.



While researching the past of the poles, we soon addressed the future of the Ts'msyen youth. As Lilikala Kame'eleihiwa suggested, above, it seems that the past, for the Boxleys and for Mc Gilton, is also a source for the new. Indeed, David Albert Boxley, David Robert Boxley and Kandi McGilton have become experts in looking to the past to find a way towards a future. Most of their artistic endeavour has been aimed at creating new work based on ancient pieces for 'their community to study and be proud of' (Kandi McGilton, quoted in Sawyer 2018). In this context, I am interested in analysing the vision of the Center for the Future of Museums, which states that by 2040 curators will be responsible for helping people access museum resources in order to fulfil their own needs (Merritt 2018:20). An increasing number of scholars and museum professionals are also encouraging museums to understand Indigenous Peoples' epistemological practices and protocols, and the communities' ontologies concerning the traditional knowledge inherent in objects. In doing so, some argue, museums might be far more effective in exercising their stewardship responsibilities and as such increase their social relevance. The process of acquiring this capability has been termed 'epistemological stretching'.<sup>10</sup>

This vision challenges the view supported by new museologists that there is a divide between specialized curators, focusing only on their own voice; and exhibition project managers, focused on community-driven projects and participative approaches (Viau-Courville 2016). While the

history of Sidney Campbell's totem pole is being reassessed, we aim to challenge this assumption further. One way of tackling this issue, we argue, is by encouraging Ts'msyen artists to access the historic collections held at MEG and create new artworks for their own agendas. An initiative in this vein was launched by MEG in 2020 and invited David R. Boxley, Kandi McGilton and Gavin Hudson – as co-founders of the Haayk Foundation, a Metlakatla-based non-profit organization – to participate, as commissioned artists, in the development of the temporary exhibition *Environmental Injustice-Indigenous Peoples' Alternatives* (24 September 2021 – 22 August 2022). Kandi McGilton contributed to the exhibition through the creation of a cedar offering mat for the salmon (*Hoon Umgooksit a Sgan*, ETHAM 068768), five picking and gathering baskets, and a devilfish bag (*Gwe'etm hats'ald*).<sup>11</sup> Gavin Hudson and David R. Boxley reminded us of our responsibility towards natural resources through the reinterpretation of a traditional tale: 'The Prince Kidnapped by the Salmon'. This Ts'msyen short story was reinterpreted by Gavin Hudson, who evoked the Ts'msyens' relationship with the Salmon people through the perspective of four different entities: The Salmon Chief, The Prince, the River and the Cedar.<sup>12</sup> Master carver David R. Boxley contributed to this reinterpretation through the creation of four masks for each one of these entities and a prominent Salmon Transformation Mask (*Lutootgm Amiilgm Hoon*).<sup>13</sup> Gavin Hudson

10 M.J. Barrett, M. Harmin, K.B. Maracle and C. Thomson, 'Expanding the toolbox: 'epistemological stretching and ethical engagement': toolbox of research principles in an Aboriginal Context': [https://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/300/cssspnql/toolbox/toolbox\\_research\\_principles\\_aboriginal\\_context\\_eng.pdf](https://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/300/cssspnql/toolbox/toolbox_research_principles_aboriginal_context_eng.pdf) (accessed 23 March 2023).

11 Duutkgm gaboog shellfish gathering basket (ETHAM 068764); Gok small berry picking basket (ETHAM 068766); Ts'ila large family berry picking basket (ETHAM 068765); Duutkgm ta'axsk seaweed-gathering basket (ETHAM 068763), Yuusl rattle-top basket (ETHAM 068767), devilfish bag (ETHAM 068769).

12 The stories are available to listen to at [www.ville-ge.ch/meg/ieaa/en/60.php](http://www.ville-ge.ch/meg/ieaa/en/60.php) (accessed 21 April 2023).

13 Amiilgm Sm'ooygidm Hoon Salmon Chief Mask

further contributed to the exhibition through a poem *Wiileeksm Sganm Sngan* ('The Great Cedar Tapestry') and a song *Sagayt K'uulm Good* ('All of One Heart'), which reads as follows:

*Sagayt K'uulm Good (All of One Heart)*

*Sgiuu wilgoosk a txa'nii goo.*

*Sgiuu gatgyet a txa'nii goo.*

*Awil sagayt k'uulm gagoodm.*

*ah hii ya oh ha*

\*

*Sagayt hoy txa'nii goo gatgyet a txa'nii ndeh.*

*Awil sagayt k'uulm sisgan a 'wiileeksm sganm sngan.*

\*

*Everything has wisdom.*

*Everything has power.*

*Because we are all of one heart.*

*Power is shared everywhere and with everything.*

*For we are woven together in a great cedar*

*tapestry.*

Gavin Hudson states:

The Ts'msyen philosophy of *Sagayt K'uulm Good* (All of One Heart) expresses unity through love and universal consciousness. It could not be more clear that the global climate emergency, wars, poverty, famine, species extinctions, and the impending water shortages are all symptoms of a break from *Sagayt K'uulm Good*.

(Excerpt from the Artist's statement, *Environmental Injustice – Indigenous Peoples' Alternatives* exhibition, 2021)

The primary goal of the Haayk Foundation is to safeguard Sm'algyax, the declining language

(ETHAM 068762); Amiiilm K'ala Aks River Mask (ETHAM 068761); Amiiilm Lguwaalksik Prince Mask (ETHAM 068760); Amiiilm Sngan Cedar Mask (ETHAM 068759).

of the Ts'msyen people. One way of achieving this goal is to build stronger communities, while replicating ancient basketry techniques and visiting collections held in museums. Such practices require specific knowledge of the environment and of plants, as well as harvesting and weaving skills that are being challenged by the increasing loss of fluent elders and by the environmental transformations being observed, such as severe drought due to global warming. As Kandi McGilton recalls:

*We are a coastal people, we rely on the ocean for our food. These pieces [baskets] represent our ability and our responsibility to take care of one another and to take care of our families, which is also tied into our berry picking. The smaller basket can be worn around the neck [...] you pick the berries and you put them in the basket and [when it is full] then you dump [the berries] into a larger basket and the whole family will gather, return home. It is one more way to express respect for each other and taking care of each other.*

(interview with Chiara Cosenza, 24 September 2021).

Drawing on previous work carried out by McGilton with the collections of the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center,<sup>14</sup> we commissioned the weaver to document through photography and audio recordings of words in Sm'algyax the making of her series of baskets now displayed at MEG. This series of baskets and the accompanying audio documentation is intended

<sup>14</sup> In her work at the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center, McGilton developed a series of instructional videos that taught the community's unique form of basket weaving. The series comes with an accompanying bilingual guide in English and Sm'algyax, the Ts'msyen language: [www.haaykfoundation.org/learning-materials.html](http://www.haaykfoundation.org/learning-materials.html) (accessed 21 March 2023).

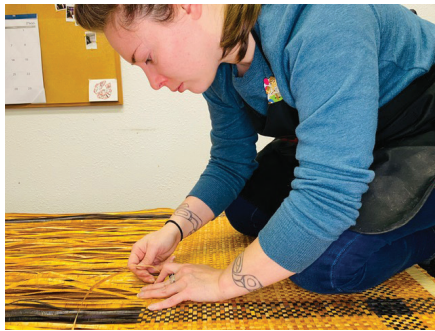
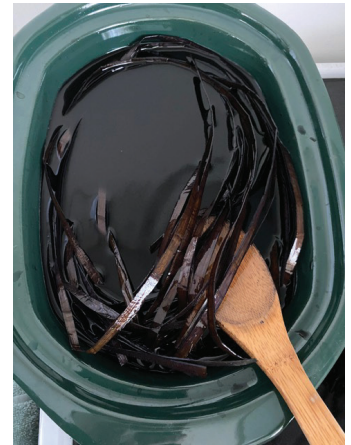


Figure 7 Making process for the cedar offering mat for the salmon (Hoon Umgooksit a Sga'n, ETHAM068768), 2020. Image credit: David Robert Boxley and Kandi McGilton.

to address the way in which the Ts'msyen community of Metlakatla encourages the creation of a larger pool of fluent speakers as well as adopts a creative approach to engage with and respond to climate change.

As stated earlier, by engaging with the artists' assemblages of materials, my intention was to document the traces of movements that would become invisible once the artworks entered the display cases of the museum. Revealing the unseen enables the curator to identify shared concerns about the outcome of collaborative initiatives between museums and Indigenous

Peoples, as well as about persistent biases in attitudes toward cultural continuity among Indigenous Peoples and other cultural minorities. David R. Boxley recalls, through his practice, that Indigenous cultures and art production are at once 'traditional and contemporary'.

*We use modern [tools] now. Any chance we get to use technology to make our job easier as indigenous artists we will use them [...] My dad was carving a totem pole and he was using a chain saw to make just the initial cuts and a tourist walked by and said: 'Oh! A chain saw,*



Figure 7 Making process for the Salmon Transformation Mask (Lułootgm Amiiłgm Hoon, ETHAM 068758).  
Image credit: David Robert Boxley.

*your grandfather would be ashamed of you!' and my dad replied with 'my grandfather bought me that chain saw'. Like anyone else we want to be efficient with our time but at the same time use these modern tools to continue to tell our stories through our perspective.*

*(interview with Chiara Cosenza, 24 September 2021)*

As museum professionals committed to developing skilled practice as a research method, two members<sup>15</sup> of MEG staff travelled to Metlakatla in 2022, to deepen our knowledge on the history of the totem poles carved by Sidney Campbell and to learn basket weaving in practice, in order to investigate through hands-on experience the current and future issues of climate change mitigation in Alaska. The museum's aim is thus to continue to develop object-based research initiatives such as the ones described above, and to explore the insights that can be gained from collaborative work around collections.

## Conclusion

This paper has considered how and why collection-based research led by scholar-curators may be relevant for addressing contemporary issues. The case study shows how skilled practice has the potential for challenging ongoing assumptions about collection-based research as 'too focused on the past' (Viau-Courville 2016). I hope to have demonstrated that scholar-curators can learn how objects are made in practice with Indigenous artists. They are in a unique position to lead community-based and participatory projects, which assemble together museum professionals, artists, scholars and the public at large, with and around historic

objects. Furthermore, challenging the common assumption that ancient collections (and with them scholar-curators) cannot adequately address topics of societal importance (Viau-Courville 2016), this paper aimed to show that Indigenous artists mobilize their knowledge of ancestral objects in order to create new artworks addressing current challenges. In doing so, they demonstrate cultural continuity and control over their cultural heritage through the assemblage of both traditional and contemporary elements. Contrary to the idea that 'traditional' is necessarily opposed to 'contemporary', the reinterpretation of the totem poles by Ts'msyen artists showed how the 'past' and the 'new' are assembled together. Similarly, Kandi McGilton, David Robert Boxley and Gavin Hudson relied on traditional techniques and stories to convey current concerns regarding the effects of climate change on their land and territories. This results in the re-interpretation of historic collections within the museum setting. Drawing on the combination of the analytic tools of assemblage and skilled practice, I questioned the idea that collection-based research is ill equipped to contribute to community-driven projects and participating approaches.

Following our collaboration with Ts'msyen artists and artisans, which resulted in the reassessment of the history of the two totem poles on the one hand, and in an ongoing discussion over current and future global challenges on the other, we hope that public events will more generally engage audiences with and around historic collections in the years to come.

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<sup>15</sup> Lucie Monot (conservator) and Johnathan Watts (photographer).

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