

Museum in Progress: Indigeneity at CMA

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Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) courageously imagines and engages in a multi-year course of action towards a museum characterized by reparative, responsive, and respectful relationships with Indigenous artworks, cultures, and peoples. The following set of recommendations provides frameworks for reflective practice that should and will be undertaken with input from Indigenous communities and community members. The proposed steps are informed by the work of Indigenous scholars, examples set by leading institutions in the museum field, the advice of local constituents, collective inquiry with museum staff and members of the Board of Trustees, and input from a cross-departmental team.

CMA seeks to be a “Museum in Progress,” an institution that brings experimentation, public engagement, and transparent self-reflection to the historical and on-going harm committed by this Museum and museums more generally. Recognizing that museums have functioned as tools of cultural imperialism, CMA has a responsibility to respond to the systemic inequalities and injustices perpetuated by museum collecting, exhibition, and educational practices. Our region is an important site of Indigenous history and violent cultural erasure; the city’s name itself is a reminder of the enduring effects of colonialism. The Museum’s responsibilities involve investigating ways colonialism manifests in museums and (re)imagining our practices to be more respectful of and responsive to Indigenous people and cultures. With the understanding that decolonization supports the repatriation of Indigenous life and land, we will attempt to make substantive changes in our institutional practices and avoid complicity with settler narratives.¹ While conscious of the limitations of the Museum as an institution, we will actively consider how our position enables us to create opportunities for healing and liberation.² As a reflective learning institution, we embrace our community as a critical thought-partner, and we invite our public to (un)learn with us and hold us accountable for action.

This document presents some of CMA’s provisional understandings and priority areas along this evolving path. The information is organized by the core standards expected of museums by the American Alliance for Museums (AAM). Definitions of each core standard reflect the language used by AAM, while explanations of the standards are adapted from the AAM LGBTQ Welcoming Guidelines. We recognize that transparency is key to this endeavor, and we will maintain communication about our internal evaluations and shifts. A small team formed of representatives from multiple departments will help to coordinate, sustain, and assess collaborative efforts.

¹ Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

² Walsh, Catherine E. "4 On Decolonial Dangers, Decolonial Cracks, and Decolonial Pedagogies Rising." In *On Decoloniality*, pp. 81-98. Duke University Press, 2018.

Public Trust and Accountability

The effectiveness of a museum is directly related to the public's perception of its integrity. CMA will work toward Public Trust and Accountability characterized by:

- Reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities
- Co-created experiences and partnerships that center community interests
- Purposeful, public communication of plans and priorities
- Listening to and acting on compensated consultation with Indigenous partners

Recommended actions include:

- Provide compensated consultation with Native American partners
- Publish page on website with plan and resources
- Create a social media plan to inform content, including art, artists, events and holidays
- Provide cross-institutional support for other Native American cultural programming in Columbus
- Create a cross-departmental outreach and engagement team to attend, learn from, and support Indigenous programs and organizations
- Organize recurring, public events dedicated to sparking conversation on decolonization, contemporary Native arts and culture, and related topics
- Contracting with diversified vendors, including Native American-led businesses

In the near-term, CMA will:

- Create and communicate the first version of an evolving plan; roll this plan out with the entire staff and share it publicly on our website
- Consult with Native American partners in preparation for two exhibitions of contemporary Native American artists
- Build and strengthen relationships with area partners

Mission and Planning

A museum's mission guides museum activities and decisions by describing the purpose of the museum – its reason for existence. CMA will work towards mission and planning characterized by:

- Decolonial efforts
- Relationship building with, and incorporating input from, Indigenous community members
- Exploration of key organizational purposes, such as imagination, in relation to Indigenous thinking
- Consideration of Indigenous perspectives and worldviews at multiple levels of decision-making

Recommended actions include:

- Develop a written, approved, and published policy for examining and deconstructing colonial aspects of the Museum
- Develop a written, approved, and published policy on active inclusion in museum leadership, specifically of Indigenous lived experiences and cultural perspectives
- Develop admissions access program/partnerships for Native American audiences
- Invest financially in content from Indigenous creatives

In the near-term, CMA will:

- Seek to hire someone to sustain and implement identified strategic priorities

Leadership and Organizational Structure:

The effective operation of a museum is based on a well-functioning governing authority that has a strong working relationship with the museum staff. CMA will work toward Leadership and Organizational Structure characterized by:

- Continued relationship building, which evolves into ongoing consultation and participation of Indigenous people on committees, boards and events
- Transparent questioning of institutional values and messaging
- Pathways for access into leadership for Indigenous people
- Sustainable relations with people and other natural resources

Recommended actions include:

- Offer orientation, onboarding and on-going professional development related to decolonial action and Indigenous peoples, cultures and perspectives
- Actively recruit Indigenous candidates for staff and volunteer positions
- Support retention of Native and Indigenous staff, potentially through cluster/cohort hiring
- Create opportunities for Native American representatives on Board
- Train Board and leadership about NAGPRA compliance and global Indigenous standards for museums and cultural institutions
- Incorporate Native American cultural competencies and topics related to museums and colonization into orientation, onboarding and professional development

In the near-term, CMA will:

- Invite a Native American advisor to the (compensated) IDEA Committee
- Incorporate information about this plan into on-boarding and training for all staff
- Conduct all-staff and all-volunteer cultural competency trainings

Collections Stewardship

Collections are held in trust for the public and made accessible for the public's benefit and are an important means of advancing the museum's mission. CMA will work toward Collections Stewardship characterized by:

- An explicit collecting mission that addresses Indigenous artists and guidance on the respectful and compassionate stewardship and display of these works
- Quality research on all objects and artists and transparency about provenance
- Dialog about the reasons why some objects lack readily available information
- Representation of various global Indigenous communities and artists, historical to contemporary
- Critique of the exclusionary and harmful aspects of so-called "scholarly standards," and proactive inclusion of multiple modes of knowledge, including lived experience
- Diverse perspectives on the collection

Recommended actions include:

- Maintain compliance with NAGPRA regulations and seek continuing education on relevant policies
- Create a NAGPRA summary describing Native American objects of cultural patrimony or sacred significance
- Audit collection using NAGPRA and global Indigenous guidance
 - Assess all Indigenous objects in collection
 - Identify works for repatriation
 - Identify and act on areas to improve information (e.g. clarification of Nationality; identify possibly incorrect information)
 - Identify descendant groups connected to (global and US) Indigenous collections
- Create and fill a registrar/collections position to specifically manage this work and a scholarly position to keep the museum current on recommended practices from Native communities
- Create a collections policy for Indigenous artworks, including parameters for repatriation, storage, categorization, and interpretation
 - Create a management and stewardship plan that incorporates preferences of descendant communities in terminology and storage
 - Improve the quality and accessibility of information (images and text) on works by Indigenous artists
 - Create an acquisitions policy for works by contemporary Indigenous artists
 - Create a protocol for thoughtful and respectful assessment of proposed donations of works by Indigenous artists
- Create and enact a collections plan that aligns with articulated goals
 - Assemble advisors, scholars, and research
 - Establish community advisory resources
 - Evaluate collecting processes to identify opportunities for input from Indigenous partners
 - Articulate collecting narrative that advances contemporary Indigenous art and expands awareness of contemporary Native artists
 - Inform the intentional integration of works from Native artists and cultures into galleries
- Review of all label copy with critical consideration of coloniality and respect for Indigenous cultures

In the near-term, CMA will:

- Begin the process of a 2-4 year assessment of current collections, with advice from consultants
- Begin to evaluate online collections to set priorities

Education and Interpretation

Museum education enhances each visitor's ability to understand and appreciate museum collections, exhibitions, and public programs. CMA will work toward Education and Interpretation characterized by:

- Compatibility between the Museum's learning philosophies and approaches and those of Indigenous scholars and partners
- Increased understanding of and sensitivity to extractive histories of research, problematic histories of image making and display and legacies of institutional exclusions
- Approaches that avoid assumptions and challenge stereotypes and harmful narratives

- Respectful and inclusive content grounded in listening
- Respectful language, un/relearning, and humility
- Varied perspectives, including values, voices, and credited and compensated knowledge of Indigenous people and cultures
- Active invitation, listening, compensation, patience, and adjustment based on input
- Time, space, money, energy, and labor for Indigenous people and cultures
- Communication of the plurality, contemporaneity, and intersectionality of Native people

Recommended actions include:

- Use interpretation strategies that:
 - Are developed with Native artists
 - Center Indigenous voices
 - Address and challenge harmful stereotypes
 - Raise up Native creativity
 - Apply to permanent collection objects, including works by non-Native artists
 - Are built into workflow with staff and guest curators, with accountability
- Develop interpretation plans for works by non-Native artists relevant to Native people and cultures
 - Full interpretation packet created for Amelia Elizabeth White Collection and other collections of art by Indigenous creators
- Conduct object research to develop docent education resources to encourage responsible gallery engagement
- Host ongoing, participatory trainings on decolonizing museum learning practices for docent and staff educators
- Develop interpretation processes/checklists that screen for language preferred by descendant communities/contemporary members of Indigenous communities
- Build relationship with Indigenous artists and organizations, supporting potential partnerships
- Research and create a decolonial framework for education practices
- Hire Indigenous educators
- Facilitate artist interventions and collaborations
- Conduct evaluations, including through feedback from Indigenous community members

In the near-term, CMA will...

- Launch a compensated artist interpretation project
- Create a draft, evolving document to help build CMA educators' awareness of ways that colonialist thinking shows up in gallery learning, museums, and scholarship

Financial Stability

Nonprofits like museums look to their communities for support in establishing and maintaining financial sustainability. CMA will work toward financial stability characterized by:

- Ethical and transparent donor relations and cultivation
- Financial investments in decolonial efforts

Recommended actions include:

- Budget allocation for actions outlined in this document
- Avoid tokenization in donor outreach and fundraising campaigns
- Specify and define gift acceptance policies

In the near-term, CMA will:

- Research respectful and inclusive fiscal and fundraising practices

Facilities and Risk Management

Museums care for their buildings, grounds, and other assets in trust for the public. CMA will work toward Facilities and Risk Management characterized by:

- Community input, including input from Indigenous community members
- Environmental stewardship grounded in reciprocity with communities and the non-human world

Recommended actions include:

- Create environmental stewardship policies incorporating Indigenous perspectives
- Assess environmental impact of buildings and grounds to better understand ecological footprints and opportunities
- Seek and respond to community input on currently under-used exterior grounds (e.g. Broad Street lawn)

In the near-term, CMA will:

- Create a cross-departmental environmental sustainability team