SHARED AUTHORITY

Art in America asks five specialists to discuss practices and policies for decolonizing museums.

Opposite,
Kent Monkman:
Watercolor Study for The Subjugation of Truth, 2015, watercolor and gouache on paper, 22 by 15 inches.

PARTICIPANTS:
Wanda Nanibush
Karen Kramer
Ben Garcia
Tricia Laughlin Bloom
Lara M. Evans

Drawings by
Kent Monkman
IN HER BOOK Decolonizing Museums, Ho-Chunk art historian Amy Lonetree identifies an ideological shift that has taken place in recent years, whereby institutions have partially relinquished curatorial control and solicited input from Native communities regarding the representation of their own histories. These practices are carried out with an awareness of the role that museums—as repositories of stolen objects and purveyors of narratives that relegate Native life to the past—have played in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples. As Lonetree writes, “What a great irony that places inextricably linked to the colonization process are also the sites where the difficult aspects of our history can and must be most clearly and forcefully told.”

We asked a number of curators and experts to discuss the steps that have been taken at their institutions and others to implement decolonization, and to offer suggestions for the future. We also invited Kent Monkman, a Toronto-based artist of Cree and Irish ancestry, to contribute a visual commentary on the topic. He had conceived his exhibition “Shame & Prejudice,” on view this summer at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, as a rejoinder to sesquicentennial celebrations of Canada’s confederation. Some studies for the show are presented here. In his paintings, Monkman imitates the style of European artists, some of whom came to North America in the nineteenth century and created the works that represent the continent’s history in museums. Yet he subverts their efforts by depicting moments in Canada’s past that are omitted from official accounts. Monkman made these works in his characteristically ironic spirit, suggesting that laughter can accompany—and even aid—a sober confrontation of hard truths on the path toward healing.


WANDA NANIBUSH
Anishinaabe, assistant curator of Canadian and Indigenous Art, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

“For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.”

—Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth

“The time has come. Water is something we cannot negotiate, something we cannot compromise. It is seemingly abundant, but in reality, it is in grave danger and my duty as a woman is to defend our water and to protect life . . . water is life.”

—Nina Waise, Lakeota/Dakota/Cree, founder of Idle No More, #Oct7 Proclaim Quotes and Connect

The prefix "de" in "decolonization" means to remove, reduce, or produce the opposite of colonization. It seems the first step would be to understand colonization as the theft of land and liberty from Indigenous peoples. This connects any process of decolonization to the prefix "re" and the idea of returning land and liberty to Indigenous peoples. For this reason, decolonization means letting Indigenous people lead.

"Decolonization" is a word used to describe a large number of processes of restoration, repatriation, and restitution of Indigenous lands, bodies, cultures, and communities. It encompasses healing one’s self by unlearning toxic stereotypes and historical lies, as well as changing social, economic, political, and legal structures. My goal is to inhabit this world as a free human who, without oppression or hindrance, can live as an Anishinaabe on my own lands, with a language, a community, and a culture I can pass
on to my children and grandchildren: a future where my culture is not ossified in the binary of precontact and colonized, where transformation, freedom of movement, and chance—rather than colonial concepts of authenticity, unchanging tradition, stasis, and predictability—are the basis of my worldview.

Decolonization involves unlearning and changing the base of colonialism in the concepts of private property, Manifest Destiny, "discovery," enlightenment, Eurocentrism, Cartesian dualism, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, positivism, sexism, racism, individualism, extraction, classism, violence, and control. Decolonization should challenge all that is thought to be proper and normal in current settler colonial states. Decolonization involves a centering of Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and loving. As an Anishinaabe-kwe, 1 it is my responsibility to take care that the earth and her lifeblood, the water, are here to nourish many generations to come. Without the return of land bases, we will not be able to get out of poverty. Our poverty is a direct policy of colonialism and led to the wealth of today's "West." We are asserting our sovereignty over our bodies, communities, and lands today, even though to do so is precarious and illegal. Every drum, song, painting, installation, and performance is an act of freedom aimed at an Indigenous future. Indigenous art is an experience of a future contained in the present. It goes beyond decolonization when colonialism is no longer the main reference point. Our collective, traumatic past still contains the seeds for times we have not lived yet—futures that are dreams, instead of the terrible hauntings of colonialism.

---

1. The suffix "-kwe" means woman.

KAREN KRAMER
Curator of Native American and Oceanic Art and Culture, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

Institutions with Native American and other Indigenous collections have an opportunity—and an obligation—to work with tribal communities to bring their perspectives to bear on the museum holdings and on visitors' experiences. Decolonization in a museum setting entails, at minimum, sharing authority with Native Americans for the documentation and interpretation of Indigenous art and culture. It is an honorable but never-ending pursuit. What I find to be a useful framework is the idea of "presencing Indigeneity," an approach that influences museum programs, exhibitions, staffing, administrative policies, and more. It means infusing the institution with Indigenous perspectives in many ways, from revealing historical truths and trauma wrought by colonization to celebrating the incredible depth, breadth, diversity, and dynamism of Indigenous creative expression.

Working on innovative exhibitions and publications with Native collaborators is part and parcel of stewarding the Peabody Essex Museum's collection of Native American art. But we feel an additional responsibility to foster and advance the next generation of Native American leaders in the cultural sector. To that end, the museum runs a Native American fellowship program, currently in its eighth year, that provides practical experience in day-to-day museum operations as well as leadership training in strategic planning, fund-raising, communications, and organizational politics.

In my curatorial practice, and with the fellowship program (of which I am the director), I constantly assess the lines of accountability and authority between the museum and Native communities of artists, scholars, curators, educators, and representatives. My role is often to act as a conduit. I'm always striving to consider new models that build on past successes and to improve areas where we've fallen short in order to construct a more inclusive present and future.

For the 2012 exhibition "Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art," we had several advisers—Native and non-Native scholars, educators, and artists—who helped us refine the core concepts for and list of artworks in the exhibition. We asked dozens of contemporary artists for input and artist statements, and also reached out to dozens of tribal communities for their assistance in interpreting historical artworks. This method worked well for this particular exhibition, which had an equal amount of historical and contemporary art.

For PEM's long-term display "Raven's Many Gifts: Native Art of the Northwest Coast," which opened in 2014, the museum had a very tight timeline and budget. While we did speak with several contemporary artists whose work is in the show, we didn't involve community members in the overall installation or interpretation, an approach we will not likely repeat.
At this museum, we have begun the decolonization process within our collections. The museum stewards more than 150,000 ethnographic items and more than 300,000 archaeological items from around the world, including the remains of more than 5,000 human beings. Many of the human remains were separated from their communities of origin through colonizing practices that were legal, but not mutually empowered, and that we do not view as ethical by current standards. We recently passed a new policy modeled on a measure implemented a decade ago at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science that establishes informed consent by descendants as the minimum standard for conducting research on or holding the remains of a deceased person. Passage of the human-remains policy ended a century-long practice of researching and displaying human remains. It also requires the museum to comply with the wishes of the descendant community for all the individuals housed in its collections' facilities—whether that means returning them for reburying, continuing to steward them at the museum, or some other outcome.

Over the next year, SDMoM will consider applying a similar standard to all its Indigenous collections. Consulting with descendants about the return of artifacts that left during colonization would ensure that SDMoM ultimately stewards only artifacts that are there with consent. The process of consulting on all of the hundreds of thousands of items in the museum raises many practical difficulties and would certainly take years, likely decades. The benefits, however, would be measured in the opportunities for cultural reconstruction within the communities to which the collections were returned, and the opportunities for educating our visitors who largely remain unaware of the legacies of colonialism inherent in museums.

TRICIA LAUGHLIN BLOOM
Curator of American Art, Newark Museum, New Jersey

Museums tell stories. The older and more diverse a museum’s collection, the fuller the stories it can tell—but only if the collection is used wisely. As purveyors of culture, museums always risk falling into patterns—telling familiar stories, one-sided stories. It is not enough to collect with a broad and democratic mission, as the Newark Museum has done for more than one hundred years. Rich holdings of Native American art—or the art of any non-dominant group—do not benefit anyone if the works remain in storage. It is critical to find ways to put objects into thoughtful contexts. The vitality of the objects, which come to life when placed within a larger visual exchange, and the attention of the visitors, who weary of the same old scripts, depend on it.

In 2016, the Newark Museum relocated its Native American collection from a tucked-away space to a central gallery on the ground floor; at the intersection of the decorative arts, Asian art, and American art galleries, steering our visitors toward the new conversations we want to have about the museum’s global collections. Titled “Native Artists of North America,” this long-term installation presents a selection of
rarely exhibited historical objects, which have been taken from storage, studied, treated, and reinterpreted. They are arranged with ample space and light, allowing people to get up close to the materials, and reflect the experiences of six different curators, including five leading Indigenous artists and scholars from around the country. "Native Artists" becomes, in effect, the way into "Seeing America," Newark's recently reconfigured display of American art, featuring Indigenous art—historical, modern, and contemporary—installed throughout the chronological narrative.

While the basic story of "Seeing America" may look familiar, the museum has intentionally made the aesthetic equivalent of large demographic shifts in these galleries over the past two years. The reconfigured long-term exhibition integrates works of Latin American, African American, and Indigenous art—largely pulled from storage—into the overall history of American art. The ongoing challenge is to continue to build the collection in underrepresented areas and to make the acquired works part of the public stories we tell.

LARA M. EVANS
Cherokee, associate professor, Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Decolonization means transitioning to a broader mission, one that focuses on creation in addition to preservation. I see a need for museums to move beyond acting as repositories for the past. I teach in the museum studies department at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Most of our students are Indigenous and want to learn skills to help them serve their communities. Envisioning the institutional structures needed to grow and fully support Native communities is part of the purpose of the college.

Many museums have collections spanning hundreds and even thousands of years, but support for artists and culture-bearers working in the here and now is lacking. Being an artist in any case is difficult, and being Native and an artist is a special challenge. Colonialist restrictions dominate various types of markets available for Native artists. IAIA successfully sought funding for an artist-in-residence program. Between September 2015 and December 2017, we will have hosted thirty-seven people, all of whom we maintain relationships with. Our goal is to meet the needs of Native and First Nations artists, give them a whole month with our community, and expose our students to different kinds of artists, including those who make fine art, those who make specialized work in their own communities, and those who participate in multiple markets. Making things brings people together. When people learn about techniques using plant and animal materials, they also learn about the life cycles of those plants and animals. They get beyond the mechanics of technique, materials, and artistic concept. Our artist-in-residence program allows our students and the artists to share Indigenous systems of knowledge, reinforcing the sense of community.

Selling artwork to private collectors is not enough for artists. They need wide-ranging institutional sustenance to support the processes of learning and sharing. The most valuable assets aren’t the "things" artists make, but the ways they share the knowledge that comes from the making.