



North East Museums

Policy for the Repatriation of Cultural Property

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1. Introduction

Over the last 300 years, many communities worldwide have been physically separated from their material heritage, objects having flooded western museums as a result of colonial, conflict, or trading activities. This heritage now exists in museums far from those communities. For indigenous peoples, aspects of history, heritage, identity, and elements of culture, can be embodied within artefacts. Traditionally, both ethnographic research and displays have employed a clearly western approach to looking at indigenous artefacts as inanimate material beings and have overlooked the object's significance to its source communities. Increasingly, however, museums are recognising and showing sensitivity to the views of indigenous people. While it is a complex issue involving a range of emotional, ethical, legal and political factors, the repatriation of cultural heritage is now being discussed at national and international levels. North East Museums is committed to having clear and transparent policies to help mitigate against some of the complexities surrounding museum repatriation. This policy was developed by staff at Great North Museum: Hancock (GNM: Hancock) in 2020 and adopted by North East Museums in 2025.

2. Governance background

North East Museums manage 12 venues which include museums, galleries and Roman forts as well as Tyne and Wear Archives. One of these managed venues is GNM: Hancock which is part of Newcastle University and holds the largest number of objects relating to world cultures from across the service. The building and majority of the collections within the museum belong to the Natural History Society of Northumbria (NHSN), with other collections belonging to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne (SANT). These assets are on long term lease to Newcastle University who have a legal agreement with both societies stating that they are responsible for the care of the collections and the museum building. However, both societies remain the legal owners of their assets and retain decision making rights regarding acquisition and disposal. The World Cultures collection at the GNM: Hancock belongs to the NHSN, with some items on loan to the NHSN from SANT and is under the remit of the GNM: Hancock's Archaeology team. The collections at GNM: Hancock are internationally significant. The earliest major acquisitions in 1822, contained significant collections of ethnography, especially from the Pacific region. Sixty-five of these specimens survive, including items that can be traced with certainty to the voyages of Captain Cook. All areas of the world and a great number of indigenous communities are represented through the World Cultures collection.

There are also small World Cultures collections at the Laing Art Gallery, South Shields Museum and Art Gallery and within the Northumberland collection.

Therefore, due to management and responsibility structures, it will be North East Museums who directly responds to any repatriation requests.

3. Purpose

3.1 This policy was developed in recognition that certain objects in the world culture collections may be subject to repatriation proposals from indigenous communities from countries around the world, including (but not limited to) Canada, the United States of America, Australia and New Zealand.

3.2 This policy will set out guidelines to ensure that any community proposing repatriation of objects will have a clear set of procedures to follow, and in turn, highlights what is to be expected from North East Museums.

3.3 For the purposes of this document, “repatriation” will mean specifically the return of cultural arts, heritage or human remains to the community of origin. This also includes any relevant photographs, drawings and documentation.

4. Guiding principles

4.1 North East Museums is committed to working respectfully with source communities from whom the Museum’s collections have originated.

4.2 North East Museums will consider all proposals for repatriation seriously and on a case-by-case basis.

4.3 North East Museums will be open and transparent during discussions about repatriation proposals.

4.4 North East Museums will respond as quickly as possible to all requests.

5. North East Museums General Guidelines for Repatriation

Before submitting a repatriation proposal, the community proposing repatriation should consider the following guiding principles.

5.1 North East Museums will normally only consider a repatriation proposal from an indigenous community if it has been made officially through a body or individual generally recognised as responsible for the governance or interests of the community proposing repatriation.

5.2 North East Museums will normally consider a repatriation proposal from a national government only if it is made on behalf of an identified source community and formal communication is received from both parties confirming their relationship.

5.3 The community proposing repatriation should do everything that they can to ensure that there is agreement with other potentially interested parties over who has the right to receive the repatriated items.

6. Procedure for Repatriation applications

In the initial stages of a request, an informal letter or email to the relevant Keeper to begin discussions about the potential repatriation of an object/objects would be welcomed. When both the community proposing repatriation and North East Museums feel that a formal request is ready to go ahead, the following procedure will begin.

6.1 Requests for the repatriation of cultural materials should be made in writing and addressed to the Director of North East Museums. The request should clearly:

- Identify the indigenous community making the proposal, or governing body representing the community
- Identify the object/objects involved in the proposal
- State the reasons for the request
- Provide any evidence to substantiate the repatriation proposal.

6.2 Requests for repatriation will be acknowledged by the Director in writing. Curatorial staff will then begin examining the proposal. Both the NHSN and SANT as well as Newcastle University will be informed of the request if the request relates to GNM: Hancock collections. North East Museums will then issue an announcement via relevant media that a repatriation proposal has been made.

6.3 Complex issues may arise during this process. For example, there may be no clear evidence of the pathway that led to the object/objects becoming a part of the museum's collection. Expert advice may be sought from the community proposing repatriation. External advice may also be sought from other museums and professional bodies (eg. Museums Association), and further consultation with other interested parties (eg. diplomatic representatives of the proposer's national government) may also be sought at this stage.

6.4 For GNM: Hancock objects, The Natural History Society of Northumbria and the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne accept that, following collaborative discussions between the community proposing repatriation and North East Museums, where a proposal for repatriation results in the decision (by the GNM:Hancock Board) to return an object or objects, these will be considered to be automatically deaccessioned from the respective collection and noted as such at the next formal meeting of the respective society's governing body.

6.5 For council owned objects, the North East Museums Strategic Board accept that, following collaborative discussions between the community proposing repatriation and North East Museums, where a proposal for repatriation results in the decision (by the Strategic Board) to return an object or objects, these will be considered to be automatically deaccessioned from the respective collection and noted as such at the next formal meeting.

6.6 The decision for or against the proposal will be communicated to the Director. A written report will be prepared by North East Museums' staff to explain how the decision was reached. The community proposing repatriation will be informed of this decision in writing, along with a copy of the report.

6.7 If the decision has been taken to return an object/objects, North East Museums will begin discussions with the community proposing repatriation as to how and when the repatriation will take place. Unless the community has acquired specific funding to assist with repatriation, North East Museums will cover the costs of packing and shipping the object/objects plus any conservation treatment that may be required.