

Great North Museum: Hancock

Policy for the Care of Culturally Restricted Objects



1. Introduction

The Great North Museum: Hancock (GNM) has developed this policy for certain kinds of sacred or culturally restricted objects in its ethnographic collections to recognise that these objects may need an enhanced set of ethical guidelines when considering their display, storage and conservation. This policy will ensure that any problematic issues concerning such collections may be dealt with in a culturally, sensitive, practical and appropriate manner. When forming this policy, the MA Code of Ethics 2015 and the MEG Guidance Notes on ethical approaches in museum ethnography (2003) were used as guidance.

Over the last 300 years or so, 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. Museum collections of ethnography thus represent a tremendous accumulation of knowledge and a highly significant and often unique resource. Traditionally, both ethnographic research and ethnographic displays have employed a clearly western ethos of looking at indigenous artefacts as inanimate material beings and overlooked the objects' significance to its source communities. Increasingly, however, museums are recognising and showing sensitivity to indigenous views.

Defining culturally restricted or sacred objects is not an easy task. The very notion of sacred is subject to change. Many indigenous communities around the world will consider all things sacred. Within communities, there may be different restrictions on objects, either by age, knowledge or gender. Furthermore, sacred objects in museum collections are removed from their original context and it may be difficult to associate them with sacred meanings when they are far removed from their communities of origin. However, for the purpose of this policy, ethnographic sacred and/or culturally sensitive objects will mean any object that:

- Has been used in a culturally restricted ceremony by the relevant indigenous peoples
- Reflects the spiritual power of an indigenous person or community
- Was left as an offering in an indigenous community's ceremony or practice
- Has contemporary cultural importance in the ceremonial life of a community with cultural restrictions or requirements.

The GNM: Hancock's World Cultures collections are internationally significant. The earliest major acquisition to the Museum of the Literary and Philosophical Society, in

1822, contained significant collections of ethnography, especially from the Pacific region. Sixty five of these specimens survive, including an item that can be traced with certainty to the voyages of Captain Cook. All areas of the world are represented, and often include rare items, such as sealskin parkas, a complete Inuit kayak and aboriginal religious items. The collections are particularly strong in items from the Oceanic Islands and unique treasures include a burial effigy from Malekula, an 18th Century rei puta, a drum from the Austral Islands, examples of bark cloth and a Hawaiian feather cape and helmet. Consequently, many indigenous nations are represented; examples of these include but are not limited to the Maori of New Zealand, Zulu of South Africa and several First Nations from the North American continent such as the Inuit, Tlingit, Cree and Haida. This collection belongs to the Natural History Society of Northumbria, is under the care of the GNM: Hancock's Archaeology team, and is the specific responsibility of the Keeper of Archaeology.

2. Guiding principles

2.1 GNM: Hancock recognises that objects within the ethnographic collection can be classified as sacred, secret-sacred or ceremonial, and that these objects may have an elevated status within the indigenous community they object originated from. Therefore, the following guiding principles underpin this policy:

- Views of communities will be taken into consideration in how objects are managed
- Secret-Sacred objects will always be treated with the utmost respect
- All matters relating to culturally restricted objects will be overseen by appropriate staff
- Secret-sacred objects will only be handled by appropriate personnel
- Those secret-sacred objects which should not be seen in public will not be used or displayed in any way that could upset or cause offense to the relevant indigenous communities

2.2 We are committed to further research into the collections to:

- a) gain a better understanding of the objects we know are classed as secret-sacred
- b) ascertain whether other objects may be classed as secret-sacred

2.3 We are committed to working cooperatively with representatives of source communities, other museum professionals and all interested groups, to ensure that all culturally-sensitive items are cared for appropriately.

2.4 We are committed to working cooperatively with source communities, other museum professionals and all interested groups to designate objects as culturally restricted or secret-sacred, if previously these had been thought of as secular.

2.5 This policy will be reviewed and updated regularly. Date for next review: January 2028

3. Acquisition

3.1 Active collecting will be restricted to acquiring objects for display, or to support exhibitions or learning and community programmes. Consideration will be given to material from all geographical areas. There will be a presumption against building the collection further, except where historic collections of value to local communities may be acquired as part of cultural diversity work.

3.2 The GNM: Hancock will acquire sacred objects that can be viewed publically. Where objects have certain cultural restrictions that apply to them, eg. can be viewed by men only or women only, the museum will decide on the acquisition of such objects on a case by case basis.

4. Loans

4.1 The GNM: Hancock may loan sacred objects from its collections for exhibition and display purposes. In such cases, the museum would expect the lending institution to adhere to guidance laid out in this document and to any specific instruction from the GNM: Hancock Archaeology team.

4.2 The GNM: Hancock will refuse loan requests of culturally-restricted material for display purposes.

Such items include, but are not restricted to, secret-sacred Australian Aboriginal objects that were intended to be viewed by men only.

4.3 Any requests for loans from the museum collections will be decided upon by the Keeper and the NHSN Council.

5. Claims for return

While secret-sacred and some kinds of ceremonial objects can form a valuable part of a museum collection, it is clear that some objects may have been obtained in ways that would now be deemed unacceptable, and that some individuals and communities may wish to see the return of those objects or to gain some control over their future or management.

Requests may be initiated abroad by indigenous communities in former colonised nations including USA, Canada and Australia.

The Museum and Repatriation survey in 1997 showed that 97% of Museums Association individual members thought that items should be repatriated under certain circumstances, and almost 50% agreed with the statement “Circumstances have changed and in many cases there are grounds for repatriation, even if the items may not be preserved in a museum”

5.1 The Great North Museum Board, acting on the advice of GNM: Hancock's professional staff, and in consultation with its partner organisations, may take a decision to return sacred objects or specimens to a country or people of origin. The GNM: Hancock will take such decisions on a case by case basis; within its legal position and taking into account all ethical implications and available guidance.

Please see Great North Museum: Hancock's Policy for the Repatriation of Cultural Property for more thorough guidance.

6. Storage, conservation and collections management

6.1 GNM: Hancock aims to store and display secret-sacred or culturally sensitive objects in an environment which minimises their rate of deterioration. Storage is actively managed and monitored and meets good standards of security, access management and environmental control.

6.2 Culturally restricted objects are stored in a respectful and culturally appropriate way wherever possible. This may, for example, mean restricting access to certain items, where unrestricted access may cause offence to indigenous peoples. All storage boxes are clearly labelled if they contain restricted objects.

6.3 Secret-sacred objects will be handled only by museum staff, students supervised by museum staff, and researchers supervised by museum staff

6.4 Clean examination gloves must be worn when handling and a clean area prepared if the remains are removed from their storage units.

6.5 Any conservation treatment deemed necessary will aim to maintain the integrity of the sacred objects. No original component will be permanently removed and every effort will be made to ensure that any material added to improve stability will be reversible in the long term and will not alter inherent characteristics. Where possible, conservation techniques should take into account practices or values associated with the indigenous people who created the objects.

7. Access and research

7.1 GNM: Hancock currently provides limited access to its collections of sacred objects through public display. Culturally restricted sacred objects will not be used for object handling sessions within learning workshops or public events.

7.2 Access to secret-sacred objects in store is allowed only to authorised staff and to visitors under agreed supervisory arrangements. The museum will always discuss the issues surrounding culturally sensitive objects with potential visitors /researchers. For example, if objects were originally made to be viewed only by a certain group of people such as the indigenous community or males only, this will be discussed with the visitor before both the visitor and the Keeper decide on whether the objects should be viewed.

7.3 GNM: Hancock will work cooperatively with source communities, other museum professionals and researchers to designate objects as sacred, if previously these had been thought of as secular.

8. Display

8.1 GNM: Hancock will only display sacred objects in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner.

8.2 GNM: Hancock will work cooperatively with source communities, other museum professionals and researchers to designate objects on display as sacred, if previously these had been thought of as secular.

References and Links

MA Code of Ethics (2015)

<http://www.museumsassociation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics>

MEG Guidance Notes on ethical approaches in museum ethnography (2003)

<http://www.museumethnographersgroup.org.uk/en/resources/343-meg-publications.html>

MA Policy Statement on Repatriation of Cultural Property (2006)

<http://www.museumsassociation.org/policy/01092006-policy-statement-on-repatriation-of-cultural-property>

Stewards of the Sacred, Sullivan & Edwards (2004)

Date approved	April 2024
Approved by	UMGB
Master file location	
Related policies	GNM Acquisition and Disposals Policy GNM Policy for the Care of Human Remains
Key contacts	Keeper of Archaeology: Andrew Parkin
Policy review date	November 2028