Community-centric Collections: Reassessing John Fleckner’s Perspectives on the Commonalities Between Museums and Archives


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In the 1990 article, “Archives and Museums,” John A. Fleckner, archives scholar, past Society of American Archivists (SAA) president, and former senior archivist at the National Museum of American History, shared his thoughts on the commonalities between museums (especially history museums) and archives, as well as his vision for how archivists and museum professionals could collectively respond to opportunities and challenges confronting the cultural heritage sector. Fleckner encouraged archivists to broaden the way they approached their work by seeking out “greater involvement with colleagues in the museum community” (p. 67). In considering the article today, I see many parallels between Fleckner’s recommendations and practices often applied in what we now consider to be community-centric collections where decisions are driven by community voices, for community voices. Community archives stem from a commitment to promote community stories and experiences that are often disparaged or misrepresented in history.¹ Because of this, community archives are driven by communities and in some sense, according to Andrew Flinn, are the embodiment of activism.² This suggests that Fleckner’s dialogue was not that removed from today’s practices. Although Fleckner based his discussion on his experience working in history museums, a more holistic way to consider the commonalities between archives and

museums is to view them from a community-centric perspective. For me, that would be from an Indigenous perspective.

Fleckner begins his article by describing professional activities that demonstrated an awareness of sector overlaps between museums and archives, such as the archival-related programming and conference sessions hosted by the New England Museum Association and the American Association of Museums, now the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). Although we have seen an increase in this type of intersectional programming at both AAM and SAA annual conferences, there is no better example of complete, ongoing integrated programming than at the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (ATALM) annual conference. Each year, ATALM hosts an array of conference sessions related to projects, programs, and innovative research occurring in Tribal archives, libraries, and museums (TALMs), often through institutional and sector collaborations. Sessions are structured to provide attendees with the opportunity to fully engage in areas such as archives, historic preservation, language, libraries, and museums. These focus areas are further divided into secondary topics such as archives development and management, organizational capacity, collections care, historic preservation and repatriation, marketing and community outreach, oral history, partnerships and collaborations, and technology that allow attendees to concentrate on building specific skills or gaining strategic knowledge. The conference programming indicates a national organization that understands the needs of its audience and is aware that cultural heritage management in TALMs involves cross-sector collaboration and support.

Fleckner continues his discussion by proposing that archivists should spend the next decade scrutinizing institutional accreditation, specifically in the museum field, to determine whether it is an appropriate means to improve professional practice. Fleckner felt that accreditation stimulated “the articulation of new standards for the field” (p. 68). A fresh perspective at the time, Fleckner was beginning to identify overlaps in archivists and museum professionals’ work and the critical need, particularly in history museums, to rethink their fundamental purposes. Fleckner proposed that we could “strengthen our status and our ability to achieve our larger professional goals by acknowledging and building upon interests shared with other keepers of our cultural heritage” (p. 69).

Basing many of his conclusions on the national framework for professional standards that existed at that time, mainly those from AAM, SAA, and the Association for State and Local History (AASLH), it was still too early for Fleckner to see, let alone fully understand, just how close the lines between archives and museums are and how those lines can sometimes blur. The founding of the Institute

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of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in 1996 further demonstrated the awareness, at the national level, that museums, libraries, and archives are institutions of learning and inspiration-keepers of the nation’s natural and cultural heritage whose ability to connect community members promotes the enhancement of a collective sense of place. IMLS has since contributed millions of dollars each year toward pioneering projects that have driven significant changes within the museum, library, and archival sectors. An example is the specific funding that IMLS has provided over the last decade to institutions within African American, Native American, and Native Hawaiian communities, which has led the emerging discussion of community-centric approaches to collections management. For instance, this year, Sealaska Heritage Institute, the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository (Koniag, Inc.), and Hui Mauli Ola will begin collections management projects funded through IMLS’s Native American/Native Hawaiian Museum Services Grant. The projects will be guided by community consultations, and community cultural practices will be implemented into management plans and workflows. For many Indigenous communities, archives often fall under the umbrella of a Tribe’s library and/or museum, which explains why Tribal archival projects are often funded through both library and museum services grants.

Fleckner noted that archivists in his time should have taken a special interest in the critical rethinking that history museums were taking regarding their fundamental purpose. He felt that history museums and archives were both engaged in issues regarding information exchange as they collected materials from specific periods and considered how collections in their care document history. Fleckner explained how the conference on A Common Agenda for History Museums was a catalyst for more organized discussions about rethinking American history museums’ purposes and history and acting on critical issues affecting these museums. According to the “Common Agenda,” the first priority for history museums was to reach people about history (p. 69). Although this remains true in today’s history museums, the COVID-19 pandemic and the sociopolitical movements of a post-COVID world, have shined a light on museums, specifically on how they tell their stories, what stories they are sharing, and how museum and archival collections are managed.

Westernized collections management methodologies place the librarian, the archivist, the collections manager, and the curator as administrators responsible for the management of the material culture found in permanent collections and archives. In this context, cultural heritage professionals must abide by a professional code and follow industry standards that are rooted in colonial theories and practices that evolved out of European conquest and expansion. However, according to friend and colleague, White Earth Chippewa (Anishinaabe) professor Dr. Jessie Ryker-

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Crawford, director of the Cultural Administration program at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico,

We are much more than simply stewards of inanimate objects that are held within our collections. We are also servants of the cultures and communities from which we gather knowledge, insight, and both personal and professional enlightenment. For we are here to help share the stories that have been for so many years silenced, miscommunicated, disfigured, and misapprehended.6

Collecting objects is not enough; recording the stories of the communities that give them meaning—their context—is just as significant. Fleckner quotes Nicholas Westbrook, formerly of the Minnesota Historical Society, who wrote that “we need to be collecting not only fine objects . . . but also the stories of the lives that gave meaning to those objects” (p. 70). Fleckner sought to learn from his museum contemporaries how archivists could improve their own techniques and methodologies for preserving these stories. However, he also should have looked to the source communities from which the materials in his care originated. Those of us in Indigenous communities know that archival and museum collections (cultural expressions) are living, by nature, and to bring real value to them, it is important to document their connection to their source communities.

The Ahtna Dene communities of Alaska, like many other Native American communities across the United States, First Nations communities across Canada, and other Indigenous communities around the globe, understand that the Westernized approach to collections management not only does not align with our community cultural values and traditions, but also contradicts our understanding of our intimate responsibilities to our communities and the landscapes that we have called home since time immemorial. The emergence of cultural resources projects led by Ahtna Dene communities of Alaska demonstrates the increasing desire for Alaska Native communities to steward their own cultural expressions in a manner that is culturally relevant and respectful. This means that Ahtna Dene communities are developing their own unique methodologies for collections management. Due to the immediate need to establish these practices, Tribes have chosen to adapt current established Westernized institutional practices using an “Indigenized” manner that implements Indigenous ways of knowing. In doing this, they are choosing to integrate aspects of collections management from Westernized libraries, archives, and museums that will inevitably lead to an amalgam of institutional convergence with Indigenous worldviews.

The cultural resources projects discussed at the first Ahtna Language and Culture Gathering in February 2023, hosted by the Cheesh’na Tribal Council, the governing

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body of the Ahtna Dene village of Chistochina, are examples of this approach. During the gathering, Chistochina Elder, Agnes Denny, and Denny’s daughter, Jessica Denny, shared the Cheesh’na Tribal Council’s current work, which is focused on addressing the need and desire to formalize the Tribe’s cultural expressions in a manner that aligns with the Tribe’s cultural values and lifeways. As part of their infrastructure development, the Tribe has visited external repositories to learn how and where cultural materials from their community are managed and housed. Their goal is to integrate some of these institutional practices with Tribal traditional stewardship practices. The Tribe is focused on caring for their materials according to the Ahtna seasonal wheel. This will be achieved through the assignment of cultural protocols to help determine levels of access while dictating what time of year materials will be accessible. This approach to collections management and access honors the Tribe’s legacy and respects their history and culture. However, this methodology is not widely accepted among Western museums, libraries, and archives.

In tandem with Cheesh’na Tribal Council’s efforts, representatives from Chistochina Village, Native Village of Cantwell, and Chickaloon Native Village, in partnership with the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center at the Anchorage Museum, are working on a cultural belongings sovereignty project. The project involves the Tribal representatives visiting several Smithsonian institutions that have Ahtna Dene and Ahtna Dene–related materials in their holdings to determine how the materials were acquired and how they are being managed. One of the main goals of the project is to restore control over these cultural expressions to their source communities, thus enforcing the sovereignty the Tribes innately possess. Throughout the project, the Tribal representatives are regularly consulting with other members of their communities to broaden their understanding of the materials and to provide guidance in how to improve their care and management.

Fleckner too recognized the importance and value of collaboration, even if he approached it more from an institutional standpoint than a community-centered one. In a demonstration of how archivists and museum professionals could begin to collaborate, Fleckner proposed that both sectors maintain a dialogue on standards and ethics within the industry, explore their common interest in history education, and consider the AASLH Common Agenda Documentation Project as a structure in which collaboration could be fostered. He also encouraged archivists to investigate the applicability of museum registration principles and practices in archival settings. These suggestions encouraged archivists and museum professionals to work together, not against one another, and collaborate to redefine their work so that they could bring stronger meaning and greater use to the collections in their

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7 Agnes and Jessica Denny, “Cheesh’na Tribal Council” (Virtual Presentation, Cheesh’na Tribal Council’s Ahtna Language and Culture Gathering, Anchorage Sheraton Hotel, February 17, 2023).

8 Melissa Shaginoff, “Creating Sovereignty of Cultural Belongings” (Virtual Presentation, Cheesh’na Tribal Council’s Ahtna Language and Culture Gathering, Anchorage Sheraton Hotel, February 17, 2023).
care. As previously noted through the professional development offerings of TALMs and the cultural resources projects currently being conducted in Ahtna Dene communities, many of Fleckner’s recommendations have already been put into practice within Indigenous communities. In fact, there are now numerous institutions throughout the country, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, like the Chickasaw Cultural Center’s Holisso: Center for Study of Chickasaw History and Culture and Chikasha Poya Exhibit Center, that house both archives and materials collections and have some structural or organizational overlap in their operations.

Fleckner concludes his article by acknowledging how information technologies and communications contribute to greater museum and archives interaction. Three decades later, this statement could not be more true. Virtual and social platforms, most notably, have become essential, due in part to how organizational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic pivoted how they operate. Post-pandemic, these platforms have been adopted into regular organizational operations within the cultural heritage sector for the purposes of holding organization meetings, professional training opportunities, organizational programming, collections documentation, and improved access. According to past IMLS Director Robert S. Martin, “In the digital environment, the distinctions among libraries, museums and archives that we take for granted are artificial,” and as the boundaries between libraries, archives, and museums begin to blur and they begin to work more closely to “realize their common missions [our] communities will be strengthened and [our] heritage ensured.”

Fleckner’s position on the commonalities between museums and archives is still valid and, in fact, more evident than ever. However, where he proposed the use of history museums as the focus of his analysis of industry similarities and the potential of development through cross-sector collaboration, he also should have been looking into community-centric collections like those found in Indigenous communities. Indigenous cultures and languages are not remnants of the past but rather exist in the now, and the materials that have and continue to be created through Indigenous lifeways are living extensions of the people who created them. As such, they are to be respected, acknowledged, and shared appropriately so that those cultural expressions can continue to help the community to thrive. An Indigenous community’s need to preserve and share community histories and culture (through stories) empowers their community to be active partners and participants. This intimate relationship creates more authentic and meaningful collections management practices, which leads to stronger and more effective repositories. This approach is not synonymous with only Indigenous communities but applies to other communities as well. Amidst a post-COVID world immersed in a variety of sociopolitical movements, communities across the nation want and need something more. In listening to these community voices, cultural heritage

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professionals must begin to understand that the path forward will most likely not look like the one of the past. Indeed, it will consist of what Fleckner earlier proposed as a “critical rethinking,” though this is far more extensive than he originally considered (p. 69).