

*This month's Muse-ing comes from Anisha Gupta, a PhD Student in UD's Preservation Studies Program. Trained as an art conservator, she is studying the power of caring for cultural heritage, and how that power can be expanded beyond trained practitioners to include communities.*

Though art conservation has historically been conducted by the privileged of society, this has slowly been changing in recent years. For a field founded on a belief in the centrality of the object, it can be hard to make a shift towards prioritizing the people connected to that object. But community-based conservation is increasingly a discussion topic among practitioners, particularly how to bring more people into our work. So, what does community-based conservation look like? And how does the field continue to move in that direction?

In her seminal book *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native American in National and Tribal Museums*, Amy Lonetree puts collaborative museum projects in two categories: multivocal and community-based. Multivocal projects are when many voices, including curators, scholars, and Native people, contribute and offer their interpretations. Community-based projects are when the curator is the facilitator, and the community is given final authority in interpretation. The key difference is that in community-based projects, the community has the ultimate say and is not merely a collaborator. With these definitions in mind, it becomes clear that the majority of conservation work is not community-based. Though US conservators typically hold the ultimate power in determining treatment, storage, and housing decisions, one area where they have changed their practice is working with Indigenous communities.

Indigenous activists have been working hard for decades to push museums to open up their Native collections to descendant communities. This push has forced objects conservation, in particular, to be more responsive to community needs. Conservators of Indigenous collections engage in more culturally-sensitive training, and they readily bring in Indigenous groups for consultation and advice. In some cases, Indigenous community members are given authority over treatment processes or storage decisions, per Lonetree's definition of community-based projects. One example is from the Autry Museum of the American West, where conservators and members of the Gabrielino (Tongva) community worked together to determine the best way to repatriate ancestors that were found in the Autry collection. The Gabrielino (Tongva) community members had authority at every step, and the conservators acted more as facilitators, providing technical knowledge as needed (Gençay-Üstün et al 2017).

In order to help other museums build successful partnerships like the one between the Autry Museum and the Gabrielino (Tongva) community, a group of conservators and Indigenous museum workers and scholars published the [Guidelines for Collaboration](#) in 2019. This resource is for museums working with communities, outlining principles for building successful collaborations. They also created a similar resource for communities to guide them through the process of working with museums. These guidelines are a great resource for all museum workers to consider when building true collaborative projects.

The conservation literature is full of examples of community-based projects with Indigenous communities. This is likely due to the work of Indigenous activists, as well as the passage of the North American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, which forced museums to work with Indigenous communities on repatriation. However, when it comes to working with other communities, there are fewer examples. One notable exception is the George Floyd Global Memorial (GFGM).

GFGM is an example of a community preserving and conserving their own histories and stories. Though conservators have worked with caretakers of GFGM, the conservators provided technical knowledge while the caretakers and volunteers made the final decisions and carried out much of the work. And

unlike many examples in the conservation literature, GFGM is a completely community-led endeavor, operating independently of a pre-existing institution.

The museum field is increasingly pushing for more community-based work, and collaborations with Indigenous communities and GFGM are examples that set the stage for conservation to embrace work led by the communities themselves.