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Author(s): Gwénaële Guigon and Aurélie Maire

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Introduction to Arctic Collections and Museology: Presentations, Disseminations, and Interpretations

Gwénaële Guigonⁱ and Aurélie Maireⁱⁱ

This issue of *Études Inuit Studies* is dedicated to Arctic collections and museology in European museums. It follows a panel called Arctic Collections: Presentations, Disseminations, and Interpretations, which took place during the 19th Inuit Studies Conference in Quebec in 2014. The panel focused on artifacts¹ from Arctic regions held in museum collections around the world and explored their trajectories. Why were these Arctic artifacts in Europe and elsewhere? Why and by whom were they deposited? Was it possible to determine the contexts in which these objects had been acquired by the museums that house them today? In this issue, we wished to further the discussion by uniting panel participants with authors who engage in multidisciplinary reflection on the topic. Until now, little research has focused on the study of Arctic artifact collections in museums and their staging, and it is difficult to form an idea of museology, or rather of the *museologies*, applied to these objects, without being on location. This volume showcases the work of Arctic collection specialists in museums and cultural institutions.

One Museum, Several Museums

Quickly, an initial observation stands out: meanings of the term *museum* vary within the field. Its definition has evolved through time, according to the history of institutions themselves, private or public, in close relation to the national or international policy of the countries where they are located and in relation to the academic prism in which the collections were selected, triaged, organized,

i. Arts of Americas, École du Louvre, Paris, France. gwen.guigon@gmail.com

ii. Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA), Université Laval, Québec, Québec, Canada. Aurelie.Maire@ciera.ulaval.ca

1. In this article, we use without distinction the terms *object* and *artifact* to refer to Inuit creations. We use the definition of artefact as proposed by the museologist and curator André Desvallées: "Artefact n.m. - Similar to the old Latin term *Artificialia*, the term 'artefact,' first used mainly by anglophones, is nowadays used to designate any 'object' manufactured by man, and in particular those for which it uses technical processes" (Desvallées 1998, 206).

analyzed, and presented to the public. The International Council of Museums (ICOM)² proposes the following definition:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, studies, communicates and exhibits the tangible and the intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (ICOM 2017, Art. 3)

In resonance with this universal definition, adopted during ICOM's 22nd general assembly in Vienna (Austria) in 2007, the Arctic Collections: Presentations, Disseminations, and Interpretations panel at the Inuit Studies Conference proposed to initiate a collaborative reflection specifically on Arctic collections held mainly outside their country of origin. The goal was to question current museographical models and the impact a collection can have on visitors as well as the populations from which the artifacts originate.

This issue reflects the first phase³ of a selection of projects that started in 2009. Others are underway or under preparation. This volume is not an inventory of the numerous past or planned projects. Rather, the articles collected here highlight the great variety of collaborations that have been realized in very different contexts. The work of the authors, whether they are emerging or accomplished researchers in their respective fields, attests not only to the dynamism of the topics related to museum collections, but also to the relevance of engaging in a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary reflection on socio-cultural issues relating to these collections, on local, regional, national, and international levels.

The thread in this volume, of each paper, could be perceived as so many attempts to reconnect, each in their own way, with a singular history, and to reconstitute step by step an unwritten history and enriched with important documentation surrounding items from collections, tangible or intangible, kept in museum and cultural institutions. These sites appear as receptacles for these objects conceived by peoples, nations, communities, families and individuals who transmit, through them, their history, their stories, and their experiences.

2. ICOM, an international organization founded in 1946, brings together professionals from museums across 140 countries on all continents. This organization provides an ethical framework and facilitates exchanges between professionals, all while showcasing the collections gathered in museums and cultural institutions.

3. This first phase deals almost exclusively with Arctic collections in Europe. A second phase will focus on Arctic collections in North America and Greenland.

The Growing Interest of European Museum and Cultural Institutions for Their Heritage Outside Europe

We can observe with the status of museums a true international willingness to grasp the history of collections despite different methods and procedures. The 2014 panel discussed the importance of collaborations between Inuit, communities, and museum and cultural institutions that had developed in the 2000s. These collaborations coincided with the rise of digital technologies and the deep impact they had, on each side of the Atlantic Ocean, in the rediscovery of collections that had until then not been brought to light. This interest in the collections, described as “ethnographic,” is part of a new approach to objects that results from the dynamic of valorization of all preserved heritage, tangible or intangible.

In “Shared Inuit Culture: European Museums and Arctic Communities,” Cunera Buijs, curator at the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (National Museum of World Cultures and Research Center for Material Culture), Leiden, Holland, introduces us to several collaborative projects that highlight the complexity of relations between museum institutions and Indigenous communities. These exchanges can take different forms: temporary exhibits, short- or long-term loans, and especially virtual projects that were developed with the digital rollout, as well as physical repatriations to communities, as was the case, for instance, for collections of the National Museet de Copenhague to the Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allagaateqarfialu in Nuuk, Greenland. Buijs insists that the “collection sharing between European museums and Arctic communities are very different in character, scope, aim, organization, funding, impact on the local community, and results.”

In her work in this volume, Bernadette Driscoll Engelstad, of the Arctic Studies Center of the Smithsonian Institution, is concerned with the relationships between Indigenous people and researchers or explorers who were connected to museums. She focuses on the role of Captain George Comer, who was employed by anthropologist Franz Boas. Comer was a prolific purveyor of Indigenous objects at the origin of collections held at the Museum of Natural History in New York, as well as at the Penn Museum in Philadelphia, the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec, and the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. The paper examines archaeological and ethnographic artifacts collected, associated with detailed documentation and accompanied with photographs, as well as sound recordings. Driscoll Engelstad focuses on the realization of over two hundred plaster casts, representing men, women, and children of Qatiktalik (Cape Fullerton), in Nunavut. Comer’s trajectory, as a whaler from New England, merges with the history of whale hunting on the West Coast of Hudson Bay, and immerses us beyond the life of a man, in bringing to light a network implicating Inuit and non-Inuit personalities who have contributed to various collections.

The history of Arctic artifacts does not stop at the museum door; it continues and is renewed by the different discourses that are applied to it and by the interest of scientists in it. Gwénaële Guigon, an independent historiographer and museographer, presents the context in which items from Arctic regions were brought to and kept in France in the nineteenth century. This century saw the birth of a state culture in museums in the French territory. Any medium or large city had to have had to have a museum open to the public under certain conditions. The stories of the multitude of micro-collections, revisited in a national context, raise the filigree of a regional history that was lost during the twentieth century.

Accessing the Objects: Hidden Objects, Lost Objects?

The journey of an object held in a museum collection starts in its place of creation. It continues through the means employed to bring it to a museum and the way in which it is proposed and presented to the public. It seems obvious today that collections should be, as far as possible, accessible, whether by virtual means or on site, through a simple justified request. However, such access is not always possible, and digitizing collections and virtual repatriation, for example, require time, money, and skills that are often in short supply.

Arctic collections have only been studied in a fragmented way, mainly because in most cases, their volume is limited within so-called encyclopedic museums, except in great European museums that house ethnographic and anthropological collections.

The methods and the difficulties encountered when attempting to inventory Arctic collections are numerous. Objects are not always exposed, and it is not always easy to access them. At times, reserves offer little access or are even on other geographical sites. Adapting to the constraints of each establishment can quickly become time-consuming and onerous. During renovations of buildings or exhibit halls, or during moves as was the case in France in the 2000s, parts of collections and documents are no longer available for consultation.⁴

The first available source of information is found in inventory registries, in which the date of the object's arrival at the museum, as well as its first denomination, appear.⁵ Old commentary, from the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, remains limited. One can find, however, information on the conditions of acquisition, the address of the donor, and, occasionally, information on the

4. Renovations can sometimes require several years of work.

5. Inventory registries are not always original, especially if collections have been moved to a new establishment. It is then paramount to note the old numbers appearing on the artefact to verify if the tag attached to the piece is close in the reserves. Otherwise, it can be difficult to know if the numbers are correct without verifying all existing records. In the case of multiple inventory registries, and in the absence of files, it is necessary to conscientiously look at available documentation as the same object can sometimes have several inventory numbers.

eventual use of the object. While the use of “object-files” is a current practice in French museums, it is not systematic among Arctic micro-collections, although it is becoming more common. Thanks to inventory numbers or other information,⁶ the object-files allow us to link an object to its history without having to manipulate it or to travel to a museum or a reserve.⁷

Despite digitalization policies that began in France in the 1990s, little information is associated with inventoried Arctic objects. Quite often, specific micro-collections, which had been studied little or not at all and with no apparent relation to the rest of the collections, were digitalized. If museums and different institutions are partly computerized, it is sometimes necessary to re-examine older paper files⁸ to access information. Of course, mistakes can appear on original documents. Triangulating information from different sources is essential to obtain satisfactory results.

We can also say that current museography for Arctic pieces remains frozen in time; change and evolution are made possible only in temporary exhibits. Most often, the presentation reflects a relatively outdated outlook⁹ in the way it depicts objects and informs the visitor. It is a vision that provides little information on the vivacity and current state of circumpolar Inuit culture.

Another important factor in France has encouraged bringing forgotten collections to light. Since 2002,¹⁰ the French State has required the inventory of collections, even though this was unofficially the case before. In other words, French law requires the verification of the location of pieces registered in the inventory register of public museums depending on the state and territorial authorities. The law specifies that “museum collections in France are subject to registration in an inventory. Inventory must be done every ten years” (Gouvernement français 2004, Art. L451-2).

Nonetheless, a great French particularity resides in the very status of objects in public collections: “The goods constituting collections in the museums of France belonging to a public person are part of the public domain and are, as such, inalienable” (Gouvernement français 2004, Art. L451-5).¹¹ This inalienability, which has existed since the Ancient Regime, implies that an item cannot be taken out of the public domain. It cannot, then, be exchanged, given, or sold. Furthermore, “collections of French museums are imprescriptible” (Gouvernement

6. It could be photographs used in publications, in an exhibit or taken in museum spaces.

7. The reserves are no longer systematically kept within the museum when it possesses large collections.

8. It is extremely important to take note, if possible, of non-classified archives (unlisted and unsorted).

9. Descriptions seldom mention the object’s date of arrival in the collections or its precise origin for items dating before the twentieth century.

10. See law n° 2002-2005 of January, 4 2002, regarding museums in France.

11. See ICOM, *Code du patrimoine*, <https://www.icom-musees.fr/ressources/code-du-patrimoine>.

français 2004, Art. L451-3). No matter what happens to an object, it remains property of the museum without a time limit.¹² As these objects were often unrepresentative of the museums they were associated with, their mandatory retention ensured they were neither destroyed nor sold by politicians or collection managers, which permits their study over many generations.

Documentation Available Outside Museums

As information regarding Arctic collections is often limited, answers must be found outside museum walls, in places such as departmental or municipal archives, archives of chambers of commerce, local presses, with individuals, and so on. The lack of the available information is the main obstacle to surmount in such research.

The article by France Rivet, director of the Polar Horizons in Gatineau, Quebec, is eloquent on this fragmentation of data. For over four years, she meticulously retraced the trajectory of two families from Labrador who travelled to Europe in 1880 to be exhibited before the European public. Neither family came home as they died after contracting a contagious disease. Her skilled historical research pieces together a portrait of their daily life during their last trip to Europe and uncovers what happened to their bodies. The history of these families is sadly not unique; similar cases, notably in the United States, are perhaps more well known.¹³

Nevertheless, it is impossible to neglect the financial cost of conducting time-consuming research where sparse documentation is a challenge. Focusing on museum collections demands knowledge of both history of the country of origin and of the country where pieces are now held. The value of such research on collections cannot be disassociated from the work of researchers who preceded us and who focused on this topic.

This issue can also be viewed as an homage to anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1904; Mauss and Beuchat 1904–1905), his students Henri Beuchat (1912; Mauss and Beuchat 1979) and Paul-Émile Victor (Victor and Robert-Lamblin 1989; 1993); to anthropologists Franz Boas (1888, 1896, 1897, 1899, 1901, 1904, 1907, 1927, 1932), Ann Fienup-Riordan (1986, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2005), Lydia T. Black

12. While both these particularities may cause debate on the international level, we must, however, admit that in the specific case of the study of Canadian and Greenlandic pieces, they allowed research to continue for over two centuries.

13. For instance, we may recall the story of the young Minik (Harper [1986] 1997) who accompanied his father and four Inuit from Greenland to New York, upon the invitation of explorer Peary. Minik and the group were exhibited at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. They quickly died of staggering tuberculosis, with the exception of Minik who was 8 years old at the time. He was adopted by one of the museum's administrator and raised as a Qallunaaq. Many years later, he discovered with horror, in a museum window, his father's labelled skeleton despite having believed he had attended his funeral.

(1983, 1984a, 1984b, 2003), and Bernard Saladin d'Anglure (1962, 1984, 2001, 2006; Saladin d'Anglure and Alasuaq 1978); to professors and art historians Ruth Phillips (1998, 2011; Phillips and Phillips 2005; Phillips and Steinr 1999) and Janet Catherine Berlo (1986, 1990a, 1990b; Berlo and Phillips 2006); to researchers Bernadette Driscoll Engelstad (1982, 1985, 2010, 2018) and Molly Lee (2005); to curators Éveline Lot-Falck (1957; Lot-Falck and Falck 1963), Jean-Loup Rousselot (1994; Graburn, Rousselot, and Lee 1996, Louis Gagnon (1990, 1996), and Cunera Buijs (2010, 2016; Van Broekhoven, Cunera, and Hovens 2010; Cunera and Jakobsen 2011), who have, during the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, emphasized the value of studying the Arctic pieces kept in private and public collections. Their work is a great source of inspiration for emerging Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers.

The Museum: A Space for Meetings, Crossings, and Exchanges

Who takes the past as root, has the future as foliage.

—Victor Hugo, *Beams and Shadows*, 1840

A decontextualized object can be the carrier of many messages. Thus, when focusing on collections, one cannot neglect the collective dimension of a study that must necessarily bring together various professions. Objects have a life inside the museum, which must be, more than ever, thought of as a moving and changing space. An artifact does not have a simple utilitarian value; it is part of a larger perspective of the discovery of the Other.

The article by curator Anne Lisbeth Schmidt looks back on a multidisciplinary program developed in the context of an initiative of the National Museet de Copenhagen between 2009 and 2014. This program included the realization of twenty-five international scientific projects. One of them, *Skin Clothing from the North*,¹⁴ aimed to study a collection of over two thousand pieces of clothing from all circumpolar regions. The results of Schmidt's research are available on the *Skin Clothing Online* website, which has expanded since the launch of the program (Schmidt 2016). The author proposes a contextualized analysis of the collections of Finnish scientist Henrik Johan Holmberg (1818–1864), who gathered over four hundred artifacts, a great number of which were clothes from the Koniags peoples (of Kodiak Island on the south coast of Alaska) and the Tlingit (along the northwest coast of the Pacific).

It seems obvious today to call on specialists of the Arctic associated with Indigenous Peoples, but this was not always the case (Fienup-Riordan 2010). The authors in this issue of *Études Inuit Studies* have all been associated with or are at the source of a project or an international program that has allowed for the discovery of a plural history.

14. See <http://skinddragter.natmus.dk/?Language=0>.

We emphasize that the involvement and the collaboration of Indigenous associations are at the very source of the success of such projects. The elaboration of projects to identify artifacts encompasses all disciplines of human and social sciences and goes beyond borders. For example, in Alaska, Yup'ik Elders have been invited to document objects of the Ethnologisches Museum de Berlin (Fienup-Riordan 2005). Likewise, the Avataq Cultural Institute in Montreal, Quebec, regularly calls on Inuit from Nunavik to consult and document objects from the collections (George 2009). Moreover, Avataq has collaborated closely with the Nunavimmiut to restore items in their collections to the Nunavik communities from which they originate.

In their article on objects acquired in Alaska by Alphonse Pinart and William Dall, researchers Marie-Amélie Salabelle, Claire Alix, and Allison McLain examine the historical context surrounding the acquisition of the objects in Pinart's and Dall's collections, which are now located in the Château-musée de Boulogne-sur-Mer, in France, and the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Their paper initiates a reflection on the historical and socio-cultural contexts when the objects were acquired.

It also addresses the matter of self-determination for Indigenous peoples and their demand for restitution of objects within their community, in the world (Buijs 2016; Driscoll Engelstad 2018). The authors emphasize that a collaborative process with Indigenous communities, as well as an interdisciplinary study, is necessary to provide tangible visibility and allow physical or virtual restitution, according to ethical values of the time, both in Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous institutions.

The rediscovery of these collections is also noteworthy because they allow Indigenous people, mindful of the reappropriation of their history(ies), to discover familiar objects used by their ancestors around the world. Eva Aariak, premier of Nunavut between 2008 to 2013, presented her political vision by emphasizing the value of Inuit heritage, tangible or intangible, past and present; the essential role of appropriation by the Inuit of their cultural identity; and the importance of partnerships with Inuit communities:

Nunavut is known for its unique language, culture, heritage, and rich artistic presence. By taking active ownership of our cultural identity, we will provide more opportunities for all aspects of the arts to flourish. We will work together with communities, artists, and businesses to build a more cohesive culture and arts sector. It will include traditional and contemporary visual arts, language, performing arts, and all other forms of artistic expression. (Aariak 2009, 11)

The dissemination and understanding of knowledge are relayed, in Europe, by the mission of curators of collections outside of Europe. Analyzing each object in its reality opens a field of shared knowledge. Thus, collaborative projects

between Indigenous Peoples and museums are multiplying in Europe as well as in Canada and the United States.¹⁵ It is likely that in the near future, numerous museums will be approached to bring together a material heritage with universal reach.

There are many ways to have genuine dialogue between cultures. Thus, latent issues arise. Can we define a museography that is applicable by all and in all places? Must we sustain a single museographical model to the detriment of another to the extent where the status of private and public museums and the constitution of collections have been affected by history and cultural policies in each country?

In her article, Tone Wang, a researcher at UiO Kulturhistorisk Museum in Oslo, describes a collaborative process that allowed for the return of artifacts to the Natilik Heritage Centre in Uqsuqtuuq (Gjoa Haven) in Nunavut in 2013. These artifacts were acquired by Roald Amundsen during his stay in the community from 1903 to 1905. The descriptions of this group of everyday objects were realized in partnership with Elders from Uqsuqtuuq. Strong involvement on both sides contributed to the success of this project. Moreover, Wang emphasizes the processes and importance of pedagogical trajectories in order to interrogate the designation and the utilization, for instance, of a cup: “as a museum object restored to its original community, the artifact in question had to contribute to work on local memory, in the context of traditional knowledge and Gjoa Haven’s heritage.”

In the same way, the municipality of Panniqtuuq (Pangnirtung, Baffin Island, Nunavut), created a local cultural centre, Angmarlik Visitor Center,¹⁶ which presents objects in relation to the nomadic way of life of the Inuit and whalers, who had established themselves in the fjord in the nineteenth century. The centre, which bears witness to the historic past of the area, includes a room where the Elders meet each day to play cards or sew. Another room serves as a library. The centre, called serves all generations in the community and acts as a space of transmission of knowledge and know-how through the intermediary of objects presented, stories shared by Elders, or books available in the library.

In Nunavik in 1986, Eugène Arima solicited interest in the reconstitution of the *qajait* (plural of *kayak*) to expose their history and transmit knowledge of their conception: “During the last thirty years, traditional boats were built from time to time for exhibit or conservation purposes in order to keep the

15. See, among others, Buijs (2010, 2016); Buijs and Jacobsen (2011); Van Broekhoven, Buijs, and Hovens (2010); Driscoll Englestad (2010), and Fienup-Riordan (1999, 2005, 2010, 2018).

16. See <https://www.pangnirtung.ca/angmarlik>.

construction technique for kayaks alive” (Arima 1986, 29).¹⁷ Today, the Avataq Cultural Institute is involved in similar processes of restitution and reconstitution of objects to communities; other projects exist throughout Canada.

During the World Science Day for Peace and Development on November 10, 2016, Irina Bokova, UNESCO’s director-general, remarked, “Museums and scientific centers are places of dialogue, understanding and resilience. The immense pleasure and the wonderment they evoke in visitors, independently of their sex, age or origin, unify them around common values” (UNESCO 2016).

Today, many knowledge-sharing efforts aim to have Indigenous Peoples (re)learn a heritage that has, in some cases, been forgotten. The realization of partnerships, mutual agreements, skills sharing, and even restitutions continue in the same direction as that initiated during ICOM meetings. The 2013 edition of the ethical code of the ICOM proposes, as one of its principles, that

Museums utilize a wide variety of specialisms, skills and physical resources that have a far broader application than in the museum. This may lead to shared resources or the provision of services as an extension of the museum’s activities. These should be organized in such a way that they do not compromise the museum’s stated mission. (ICOM 2017)

Are we able to answer this demand positively? Sharing our knowledge requires planning large-scale programs that implicate a great number of people and resources.

Inuit collections must be integrated in way that, more than ever, reflects the current museum world. The next meeting of the ICOM board of directors will take place in Kyoto in September 2019; one of the goals will be to work to formulate a current definition of museums. Among the elements to keep in mind, we find that “the definition of museum must recognize and treat with respect and consideration the different visions, conditions and traditions which regulate museums in the world.” ICOM specifies that “the definition of ‘museum’ must express the unity of the role of museum experts on the topic of collaboration, engagement towards responsibility and authority towards their community.”¹⁸

Inuit and First Nations people are increasingly occupying positions of power in museums and cultural institutions, and bringing new perspectives to

17. This request was initially made for a temporary exhibition. Then, *qajait* building was added to school curriculum in Puvirnituk and Inukjuak to address school dropout. This interest in *qajait* was not new and was also shared with numerous researchers, including Robert Gessain (1968), Paul-Émile Victor (Gessain and Victor 1969a, 1969b), Gerti Nooter (1971), Guy Mary-Rousselière (1991), and Hans Petersen (1986, 2001; Petersen and Ebbesen 1987).

18. ICOM, Permanent committee for the definition of a museum, perspectives, and potentials (MDPP), Dec. 2018. See <https://www.icom-musees.fr/actualites/participez-la-creation-de-la-nouvelle-definition-du-musee-colonne-vertebrale-de-licom>.

the public as well as to the collections and museography more broadly. Such is the case, notably, in Iqaluit where Jessica Kotierk was the first Inuk in Nunavut to be named as a curator at the Nunatta Sunakkutaangit Museum, in April 2019.¹⁹ As she remarked, “The more variety of positions Inuit have, the younger Inuit can see that they can do anything and be in the administration of organizations like this” (cited in Edgar 2019).

One of the issues for twenty-first-century museums will be to find a just middle ground between reaching a broader public and developing international scientific partnerships that take into account the communities of origin and certain objects. For European and North American museums, tomorrow’s museum could be one of the main true intermediaries between cultures. For this to be possible, the necessary means must be found. Is it possible to dream that in the twenty-first century, we might reach a better understanding of these scattered Arctic collections? Future generations will, we hope, answer this question. Are we not also transmitters, purveyors in communion with the past, responsible for a discourse that will inevitably be judged by them?

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19. There are many other examples in Canada of museums where collections of Indigenous objects are managed by local First Nations. Notably, hotel-museum Premières-Nations in Wendake, near Quebec City, is entirely managed by the Hurons-Wendat (see <http://tourismewendake.ca/hotel-musee-premieres-nations/>); and the Musée amérindien of Mashteuiatsh, in Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean, Quebec, is managed by the Pekuakamiulnuatsh (Innu Nation) of the community (see <http://www.cultureilnu.ca/musee-amerindien-de-mashteuiatsh/presentation>).

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