



3.2 Introduction to Pacific Collections: Cultural Considerations



Cultural considerations

Working with material from the Pacific involves artefacts from a range of cultures, spread over a vast geographical area. This of course means that different communities think about their material in different ways and may have wide ranging views on the role of a museum. It is important to approach collections in a manner that is culturally sensitive and to seek advice from appropriate networks and individuals where possible. The following suggestions are useful when working with Pacific collections but are not exhaustive.

Wash your hands

Although you should always be wearing gloves, it is a good habit to wash your hands after you have been handling objects. Not only is this best practice for health and safety reasons, but it also has cultural importance. It is possible that the items you have been handling are powerful and so touching them could be potentially harmful to an uninitiated person.

Keep like material together

On a practical level it is helpful to keep like with like in the museum stores. The cultural beliefs of some communities make it even more important to follow this rule whenever possible. For example, Māori carvings that are imbued with ancestral spirits should be kept together so that the ancestors can communicate with one another.

Secret and sacred

If you know an item to be secret/sacred then it should be treated sensitively at all times. One of the most effective ways to approach this type of artefact is to make it a box using conservation grade material that will keep it covered, ensuring the exterior is clearly labelled. If it is not possible to make a separate box then a screen could be erected (e.g. a curtain of Tyvek sheeting). Again, clearly mark the shelf area. It may be that an artefact is men's business and therefore should not be viewed or handled by any females (or vice versa). If such an item requires to be moved in a manner that involves looking at or touching it, then a male should do this whenever possible.

If you are unsure if an artefact is secret/sacred then it can be challenging to confirm this. Consult original documentation and look out for anything that could imply sacred significance. Carry out research on other collections and consult knowledgeable curators. If you wish to seek advice from an individual or group in a particular community then take care if showing images of an artefact you are unsure about as you are at risk of showing something they are not permitted to view.

Human remains

It is good practice where possible to keep human remains in a separate and secure store. This restricts the number of people with access to sensitive items and reduces the possibility of some individuals viewing this material by mistake. Certain communities would not wish to be near human remains no matter where the remains originate from. Get into the habit of announcing yourself to the ancestors present within this store and explaining any visitors you have accompanying you. If you have only a small amount of human remains then a locked cupboard would be sufficient for secure storage.

There are laws relating to the curation of human remains and so it is important to keep up to date with legislation if you work with this material. Seek expert advice if you are unsure. See below for a further list of resources.

Museum staff have a duty of care to all material in their collection and it is important to respect cultural attitudes. If visitors see you acting with cultural sensitivity to all material then they will feel more comfortable about you looking after their ancestral pieces.

Further resources:

Working with source communities

<http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/sitecollectiondocuments/tepapa/nationalservices/pdfs/resourceguides/governance/iwi.pdf>

Curating human remains

Scotland Human Tissue Act: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2006/4/contents>

Guidelines for the care of human remains in Scottish museum collections:

<http://www.museumsgalleryscotland.org.uk/research-and-resources/resources/publications/publication/378/guidelines-for-the-care-of-human-remains-in-scottish-museum-collections>

Repatriation

<http://www.nma.gov.au/history/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-cultures-histories/repatriation>