

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# From museumization to decolonization: fostering critical dialogues in the history of science with a Haida eagle mask

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## Abstract

This paper explores the process from museumization to decolonization through an examination of a Haida eagle mask currently on display in the Exploring Medicine gallery at the Science Museum in London. While elements of this discussion are well developed in some disciplines, such as Indigenous studies, anthropology and museum and heritage studies, this paper approaches the topic through the history of science, where decolonization and global perspectives are still gaining momentum. The aim therefore is to offer some opening perspectives and methods on how historians of science can use the ideas and approaches relating to decolonization in other fields, and apply them constructively to the history of science, particularly in museum settings. Decolonization is a complicated process and the focus of this paper is squarely on the preliminary steps of its implementation. To understand this process fully, the paper will recontextualize the Indigenous history of the Haida eagle mask at the Science Museum through a careful reconstruction of its provenance record. Through this process it will expose the politics of erasure and hidden voices in museum collections.

## Introduction

There is a well-known presumption among museum professionals that when an object enters a museum collection it goes through an edifying process known as ‘museumization’, which is not so dissimilar to Emile Durkheim’s notion of ‘sacralization’.<sup>1</sup> On being accessioned into a museum’s registry, an object’s original and often ‘mundane’ meaning is purportedly removed, and replaced by a new ‘sacred’ meaning. Through this supposed process of museumization, an object becomes priceless and ascribed a special privileged position within society as an important symbol of human material culture and history. At least that is the unproblematic view, and for some ‘everyday objects’ it possesses a semblance of reality.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1912.

<sup>2</sup> For more on sacralization see R.L. Stirrat, ‘Sacred models’, *Man* (1984) 19(2), pp. 199–215; Hans Joas, ‘Punishment and respect: the sacralization of the person and its endangerment’, *Journal of Classical Sociology* (2008) 8(2), pp. 159–77; Douglas A. Marshall, ‘Temptation, tradition, and taboo: a theory of sacralization’, *Sociological Theory* (2010) 28(1), pp. 64–90. For more on museumization see Rosana Pavoni, ‘Towards a definition and typology of historic house museums’, *Museum International* (2003) 53(2), pp. 16–21; Sheila Collingwood-Whittick, ‘Skeletons in the cupboard: imperial science and the collection and museumization of indigenous remains’, in Catherine Delmas, Christine Vandamme and Donna Spalding Andreolle (eds.), *Science*

**Figure 1.** A nineteenth-century post-mortem hammer, manufactured by Charrière of Paris. It is part of the Henry Wellcome Medical Collection, housed at the Science Museum, London. Accession No. A106316 Pt3. Reproduced with the permission of the Science Museum Group under the term of Creative Commons, Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-a-like 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Take, for instance, this post-mortem hammer, produced by Charrière of Paris sometime between 1820 and 1860 (Figure 1). At a rudimentary level, it appears no different to any other nineteenth-century medical hammer used during autopsies. It has a steel head and a ribbed ebony handle, and its provenance, in terms of ownership and production, is unremarkable. Yet once it became part of the Science Museum's medical collection, it took on a new meaning, and came to represent a certain kind of medical instrument, which was used for particular purposes, and in specific spaces. In other words, the museumization of the hammer transformed the object into an important source for telling a story about the history of medicine. This new function as a storytelling resource was not part of its original design or purpose when it was manufactured.<sup>3</sup>

The process of museumization, however, is not the same for every object, and like any kind of source, each individual item has its own agency. How this agency is formed varies considerably depending on the circumstance surrounding the object, and it is negotiated by a network of actors.<sup>4</sup> For example, manufacturers, retailers, users, curators, conservators, interpreters and visitors all shape an object's meaning and significance. It is the job of those researchers investigating these objects to unpack and thresh out these subtleties, and create more sophisticated and complex narratives about their histories. Thus objects, as embodied sources of knowledge, are constantly in transition. Their meanings take on new significance when entering museums, but what those meanings entail does not remain static. It can even be the case that objects are deaccessioned from collections, depending on the priorities and preoccupations of the institution holding them.

With religious objects this process of museumization is even more complex. For the people from whose cultures these objects originate, religious artefacts hold important spiritual value, and their original meaning, which preceded the process of museumization, still matters. The problem, however, is that the original meaning is often erased when the objects take on new interpretations in museum collections, and this practice of erasure has significant and long-term impacts on how we envisage the sacred meaning of religious artefacts in museum spaces – especially when displaying extra-European and Indigenous

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*and Empire in the Nineteenth Century: A Journey of Imperial Science and Scientific Conquest*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010, pp. 65–82; and Andrea Meza Torres, 'The museumization of migration in Paris and Berlin and debates on representation', *Human Architecture: Journal of Sociology and Self-Knowledge* (2011) 9, pp. 5–22.

<sup>3</sup> W.V. Quine, 'Speaking of objects', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* (1957–8) 31, pp. 5–22; Barbara E. Frank, 'Field research and making objects speak', *African Arts* (2007) 40(1), pp. 13–17; Saskia Vermeylen and Jeremy Pilcher, 'Let the objects speak: online museums and indigenous cultural heritage', *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* (2009) 4, pp. 59–78; Joseph M. Murphy, 'Objects that speak Creole: juxtapositions of shrine devotions at Botánicas in Washington, DC', *Material Religion: Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief* (2010) 6(1), pp. 86–108; and Peter N. Miller, 'How objects speak', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11 August 2014, at [www.chronicle.com/article/how-objects-speak](http://www.chronicle.com/article/how-objects-speak) (accessed 24 October 2020).

<sup>4</sup> James Secord, 'Knowledge in transit', *Isis* (2004) 95(4), pp. 654–72; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; and Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.



**Figure 2.** Haida eagle mask from the 1890s, collected by the ethnographer and translator Gusgai'in between 1918 and 1924. It is part of the Henry Wellcome Medical Collection, housed at the Science Museum, London. Accession No. A645087. Reproduced with the permission of the Science Museum Group under the term of Creative Commons, Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-a-like 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

cultures. As the museum studies scholar Crispin Paine has argued, 'In the past, museums insisted on changing the meaning of icons or statues of the gods from sacred to aesthetic, or on using them to declare the superiority of Western society, or simply as cultural and historical evidence.'<sup>5</sup> With the advent of decolonization in the museum sector, however, there is a newfound recognition of the importance of reconnecting these original sacred meanings to religious objects – even if that means the removal of these materials from museum collections.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, I will explore the process from museumization to decolonization through an examination of a late nineteenth-century Haida eagle mask (Figure 2), currently on display in the Exploring Medicine gallery at the Science Museum in London. The mask was originally collected by an agent of the pharmaceutical entrepreneur Henry Wellcome (1853–1936) sometime between 1918 and 1924. It was acquired to serve as an example of the kinds of masks Haida used in traditional healing rituals. However, over the past century, the mask's original therapeutic function, history and cultural meaning have been stripped away, making it a useful example for tracing the process from museumization to decolonization. While aspects of this discussion are well developed in some disciplines, such as Indigenous studies, anthropology and museum and heritage studies, I am approaching this conversation through the history of science, where decolonization and global perspectives are still gaining momentum.

Historians of science have done some important work to facilitate the 'global turn' in the discipline, especially over the past decade.<sup>7</sup> However, there is still a significant amount of work to undertake. One area in need of further attention is science museums. This is

<sup>5</sup> Paine, *op. cit.* (4), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'Multiculturalism and museums: discourse about others in the age of globalization', in Gerard Corsane (ed.), *Heritage, Museum and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 163–83; Anthony Alan Shelton, 'Museums and anthropologies: practices and narratives', in Sharon Macdonald (ed.), *A Companion to Museum Studies*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 64–80; Majel Boxer, 'Indigenizing the museum: history, decolonization, and tribal museums', PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2008; Dominic Thomas (ed.), *Museums in Postcolonial Europe*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010; Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* (2012) 1(1), pp. 1–40; and Claire Wintle, 'Decolonizing the Smithsonian: museums as microcosms of political encounter', *American Historical Review* (2016) 121(5), pp. 1492–1520.

<sup>7</sup> Sujit Sivasundaram, 'Sciences and the global: on methods, questions and theory', *Isis* (2010) 101(1), pp. 146–58; Fa-ti Fan, 'The global turn in the history of science', *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* (2012) 6(2), pp. 249–58; Manolis Patiniotis, 'Between the local and the global: history of science in the

crucial, because science museums are key sites of learning, where broader audiences consume knowledge about the history of science. The application of decolonization in these settings, therefore, can foster an important new critical awareness among museum goers, and afford opportunities for people to better understand and engage the impact and legacy of the colonial project on modern science and modern society more broadly. My aim, therefore, is to offer some opening perspectives and methods on how we as historians of science can bring together into dialogue the ideas and approaches relating to decolonization in other fields and apply them constructively to our own discipline. Decolonization is a complicated process and the focus of this paper is squarely on the preliminary steps of its implementation.

To understand this process fully, I will begin by first discussing spaces of encounters in museums, and how these encounters shape the construction of an object's meaning and significance. Second, I will consider the Haida eagle mask's current representation at the Science Museum, followed, in the third section, by an examination of its provenance and accession into the museum's collection. Finally, by reconnecting the mask to its original cultural meaning and significance among Haida people, I argue for the importance of 'shared authority' in museums, and why it is necessary for the 'Indigenous paradigm' to inform all ethnographic exhibitions of extra-European cultures. Throughout this analysis I will expose the many challenges researchers face as they decentre objects from European narratives, and bring to the fore Indigenous perspectives in museum spaces. Ultimately, it is my goal to foster a meaningful dialogue on critical issues within museums and the history of science, such as more sensitive representations of Indigenous cultures, cross-cultural collaboration and inclusion, and object repatriation.

### Spaces of encounter and visual epistemologies in museums

Museum exhibitions are important spaces of intercultural encounter that function much like the 'contact zone' famously conceptualized by Mary Louise Pratt in her much-celebrated book *Imperial Eyes*.<sup>8</sup> When visitors come into contact with the ethnographic collections on display in galleries, they create racial characteristics by juxtaposing their own languages, customs, habits, physical features and so forth against those of the Indigenous peoples' material culture that is represented in the exhibition.<sup>9</sup> This process is particularly problematic in museum spaces that use open interpretation models; that is, when there is limited contextual information surrounding objects on display, which is supposedly designed to allow more freedom for visitors to critically observe the exhibition. What can arise as a result of these open models is that deeply ingrained societal biases and prejudices shape visitor interpretations of the objects.<sup>10</sup> This is difficult to circumvent

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European periphery meets post-colonial studies', *Centaurus* (2013) 55(4), pp. 361–84; and James Delbourgo, 'The knowing world: a new global history of science', *History of Science* (2019) 57(3), pp. 373–99.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 5–8.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the contact zone see Joan-Pau Rubiés, 'Instructions for travelers: teaching the eye to see', *History and Anthropology* (1996) 9(2–3), pp. 139–90, 142, 147; Bronwen Douglas, 'Seaborne ethnography and the natural history of man', *The Journal of Pacific History* (2003) 38(1), pp. 3–27; Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee and Peter Kitson, *Literature, Science and Exploration in the Romantic Era: Bodies of Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 1–5; Robin Boast, 'Neocolonial collaborations: museums as contact zone revisited', *Museum Anthropology* (2011) 34(1), pp. 56–70; and Efram Sera-Shriar, 'Tales from Patagonia: Phillip Parker King and early ethnographic observation in British ethnology, 1826–1830', *Studies in Travel Writing* (2015) 19(3), pp. 204–23.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Whitehead, 'Toward some cartographic understanding of art', in Juliette Fritsch (ed.), *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2011, pp. 53–66, 60; and Volker Kirchberg, 'Museum sociology', in Laurie Hanquinet and Mike Savage (eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Art and Culture*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, pp. 232–46, 239. There is substantial discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of open interpretation models. For examples see Andreas Zingerle and Linda Kronman, *Opening Museums:*

given how much imperial legacies have impacted and shaped our cultural explanatory models in European and Euro-American museums. These colonial mindsets have unfortunately become forms of tacit knowledge in our modern world. To dismantle these paradigms, it is essential to unpack the visual epistemologies that shape exhibition work in museum spaces.<sup>11</sup>

I am borrowing the term ‘visual epistemology’ from the historian Daniela Bleichmar to define an embodied practice of ‘observation’ that moves beyond merely being the physical act of looking at things, to include a range of skilled activities. Observation, interpretation and representation are at the heart of all visual epistemic models that researchers regularly use in their studies.<sup>12</sup> When investigating the politics of display in museum spaces, we should follow the anthropologist Patricia Pierce Erikson’s lead in adapting fieldwork methods to the decolonizing strategies of our visual epistemologies. As Erikson argues, ‘One needs to know the history of the surrounding community, the collections, the staff, and the mission statement in order to understand how the museum sees itself and is seen by others.’<sup>13</sup> Like any object on display in a museum setting, the Haida eagle mask’s presentation in the Exploring Medicine gallery is the product of its institutional circumstances. The priorities, policies and practices of the Science Museum ultimately define how the Haida eagle mask is presented to visitors. Only through a process of critical reflection can researchers unpick the ‘politics and poetics’ of ethnographic constructions in museum spaces.<sup>14</sup> Through these transformative steps we can begin to develop new spaces of encounter in museums that are synergetic, bringing together

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*New Interaction Methods for Future Museum Experiences*, Morrisville: Lulu Press, 2012; Christopher Whitehead, *Interpreting Art in Museums and Galleries*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2012; Roeland Paardekooper, *The Value of an Archaeological Open-Air Museum is in Its Use*, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2012; Zvezdana Antos, Annette B. Fromm and Viv Golding (eds.), *Museums and Innovation*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017; Dina A. Bailey (ed.), *Interpreting Immigration at Museums and Historic Sites*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018; and Steven Miller, *Museum Collection Ethics: Acquisition, Stewardship, and Interpretation*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012, pp. 2–3.

<sup>12</sup> Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012, pp. 6–10. For more on ‘visual epistemologies’ and observational study in Victorian anthropology see Efram Sera-Shriar, *The Making of British Anthropology, 1813–1871*, London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013, pp. 1–20. For more secondary literature on the history of scientific observation within the natural and social sciences see Deborah Coon, ‘Testing the limits of sense and science: American experimental psychologists combat spiritualism, 1800–1920’, *American Psychologist* (1992) 47(2), pp. 143–51; Anne Secord, ‘Artisan naturalists: science as popular culture in nineteenth-century England’, PhD dissertation, University of London, 2002, pp. 135–206; Anna Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer’s Eye: Ways of Seeing in Modern Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Cristina Grasseni (ed.), *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards*, Oxford: Berghahn 2007; Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, New York: Zone Books, 2007; and Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck (eds.), *Histories of Scientific Observation*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. For observation in sociocultural anthropology see Barbara Tedlock, ‘From participant observation to observation of participation: the emergence of narrative ethnography’, *Journal of Anthropological Research* (1991) 47(1), pp. 69–94; George W. Stocking Jr, *The Ethnographer’s Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992; Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, ‘Discipline and practice: “the Field” as site, method, and location in anthropology’, in Gupta and Ferguson (eds.), *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, pp. 1–46; and Henrika Kuklick, ‘After Ishmael: the fieldwork tradition and its future’, in Gupta and Ferguson, op. cit., pp. 47–65.

<sup>13</sup> Patricia Pierce Erikson, *Voices of a Thousand People: The Makah Cultural and Research Centre*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002, p. 189.

<sup>14</sup> James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986; and David W. Penney, ‘The poetics of museum representations: tropes of recent American Indian art exhibition’, in W. Richard West Jr (ed.), *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures*, Seattle: University of Washington Press 2004, pp. 47–66.



cultural paradigms that generate collaborations between diverse groups of people, foster cross-cultural dialogues and support the empowerment of hidden and erased voices.

Exhibitions at the Science Museum in London are designed and maintained by using a set of guidelines that promote inclusive displays and interpretation.<sup>15</sup> The creation of these guiding principles was in response to the critical re-evaluations that are ongoing across the sector, and seek to assess the impact of colonialism on museum collections. Much of the attention in the Science Museum's guidelines focuses on what the organization has termed 'inclusive storytelling', which connect to larger institutional priorities relating to science capital. The concept of science capital is a theoretical tool developed in part by the sociologists Louise Archer and Pierre Bourdieu to analyse, but also summarize, an individual's knowledge of, and engagement with, the sciences. A core aspect of developing science capital relates to the democratization of science.<sup>16</sup> One way to achieve this ambition is by making science more accessible and relatable to different socio-economic and ethnic groups. This is where inclusive storytelling becomes important, because it offers a way to add new perspectives to the narratives we tell about science. No longer will people learn about the history of science solely through the experiences of Europeans and settler communities. Instead, a more diverse picture of the past is presented.

However, nowhere in the Science Museum's policy on inclusive displays and interpretation is there a discussion about decolonization. Instead, the document states that the museum's priority will focus on 'additions, not subtractions'.<sup>17</sup> This distinction is significant and ultimately affects the presentation of objects such as the Haida eagle mask. There is an acknowledgement in the Science Museum's policies that 'the history of science, technology, and industry is intertwined with Britain's history of empire and colonialism', but it stops short of providing any definitive action plan in terms of critically reassessing the legacies of the imperial project in the museum's collections.<sup>18</sup> Older problematic narratives are not necessarily removed from galleries, but other perspectives are added to complicate the historical picture. This means that the entire impact of colonialism on the collection cannot be fully realized or challenged, and that historical-systemic biases and inequalities can persist.

This cautious and resistant approach to confronting the legacies of colonialism in the Science Museum's collections can be accounted for, at least to a certain degree, by situating the official guidelines in relation to the conservative political climate that continues to be dominant in the United Kingdom. Government agendas significantly influence how the Science Museum, as a nationally funded organization, operates. All of these factors are important to recognize in order to understand the institutional 'politics and poetics' that shape the display of the Haida eagle mask, and the way visitors encounter the object in the gallery's 'contact zone'.<sup>19</sup> A review of these policy guidelines helps to raise awareness

<sup>15</sup> This is an internal document for Science Museum workers and not openly available to the public without request. See anon., *Inclusive Displays and Interpretation: Exploring Our Colonial History*, London: Science Museum, 2021, pp. 1–12. The Science Museum also has an *Open for All Strategy*, which is the public-facing policy document that outlines the organization's approach to inclusive displays and interpretation. It can be found on the museum's website: anon., *Open for All Strategy, 2022–2025*, Science Museum Group (website), at [www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/blog/open-for-all-strategy](http://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/blog/open-for-all-strategy) (accessed 21 September 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Louise Archer, Emily Dawson, Jennifer DeWitt, Amy Seakins and Billy Wong, "'Science capital': a conceptual, methodological, and empirical argument for extending Bourdieusian notions of capital beyond the arts", *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* (2015) 52(7), pp. 922–48.

<sup>17</sup> Anon., *Inclusive Displays and Interpretation*, op. cit. (15), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Anon., *Inclusive Displays and Interpretation*, op. cit. (15), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Clifford and Marcus, op. cit. (14) 1986, Penney, op. cit. (14), pp. 47–66; Erikson, op. cit. (13), pp. 186; and Boast, op. cit. (9), pp. 56–70.

of the kinds of decision-making processes that inform the presentation of Indigenous and extra-European materials at the Science Museum. Shedding light on these issues underlines where further institutional consideration is still needed.

While the Science Museum has struggled to fully embrace the decolonization movement in its curatorial and interpretation practice, as a result of its distinct cultural and political circumstances, other museums around the world have been more proactive and successful in embracing these critical re-evaluations. Take, for example, the Haida Gwaii Museum in British Columbia, Canada. In its 'vision statement' the museum embraces a more progressive approach to museum practice. Much can be learned by adopting similar approaches in other museum spaces:

The Haida Gwaii Museum is committed to using art as a means of facilitating creative dialogue that encourages a holistic and critical exploration of the multiple, diverse ways to understand Haida Gwaii. As the only cultural facility on Haida Gwaii designated as a category 'A' museum (and only one of 12 museums in BC with this designation) we are enabled to bring the work of regional, national and international artists to this isolated community. In this way, the museum serves the population of Haida Gwaii and is both a regional and community museum where the rich and diverse stories of Haida Gwaii are kept and told for people of today, as well as for future generations.<sup>20</sup>

What is clear from this vision statement is that the Haida Gwaii Museum employs the core elements of decolonization practice, with its emphasis on critical reflection, and cross-cultural dialogues, while also maintaining the importance of decentering European narratives and bringing to the fore hidden and erased Indigenous voices. With this process in place, a new kind of 'contact zone' is formed in the Haida Gwaii Museum. The statement therefore provides a framework in 'best practice' for other heritage organizations to appropriate in their own institutional reforms. Museums should ultimately act as translators and makers of social change, and of cultural awareness, sensitivity and inclusion. To succeed in this endeavour, however, museum professionals and researchers must recognize their roles in shaping ethnographic knowledge through their application of visual epistemologies and museumization practices.

### **The museumization of the Haida eagle mask**

Under its current exhibition framework, the Haida eagle mask is located in the Exploring Medicine display, which is part of the Wellcome Medical Galleries at the Science Museum in London. This exhibition contains around a thousand medical objects from around the world, and is designed to introduce visitors to the scale and breadth of the Science Museum's medicine collections. Elements of the galleries mirror the sort of classic exhibition model that Crispin Paine has criticized as a process of transforming the meaning and symbolism of spiritual objects from sacred to artistic, thereby silencing and erasing its original cultural significance.<sup>21</sup> As a way of navigating this highly problematic exhibition practice, the Science Museum has envisaged the space as a kind of open canvas that provides opportunities for live interpretation through activities such as tours, object-handling sessions and research talks, to broaden its interpretive perspectives.

Thus far the Haida eagle mask has not been included in any live interpretation activities. However, there are a multitude of ways in which the Science Museum can enhance the mask's interpretation in the gallery space. One approach is to follow the Haida Gwaii

<sup>20</sup> For more information see anon., *Our Vision*, Haida Gwaii Museum (website), at <http://haidagwaiimuseum.ca/museum/#> (accessed 3 November 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Paine, op. cit. (4), p. 1.



**Figure 3.** Cabinet entitled 'The many faces of medicine 1550–1910', located in the Exploring Medicine gallery at the Science Museum, London. Reproduced with the permission of the Science Museum Group under the term of Creative Commons, Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-a-like 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Museum's own practice by facilitating creative dialogue through presentations and performances co-organized with members of the Haida community. In doing so, the museum, in collaboration with these Indigenous stakeholders, can engage visitors in important critical discussions and introduce audiences to Haida culture and traditions. This approach is not without its own set of challenges, and it raises some ethical questions. Not least, why should members of the Haida community serve the needs of the Science Museum?

Live interpretation is not always possible, and therefore there should be textual information available for visitors to consult when activities are not being held. However, in the case of the Haida eagle mask's display, the textual information is extremely limited. For practical reasons, a decision was made to only provide a minimal amount of individual object interpretation for about fifteen of the objects on display in Exploring Medicine, with the remaining objects being interpreted at a group level, based on their cabinet distribution and typology. The Haida eagle mask is positioned in a cabinet entitled 'The many faces of medicine 1550–1910', which includes an assortment of masks from different historical periods and cultural contexts (Figure 3).

Within the cabinet, the Haida eagle mask is positioned in the bottom right-hand corner between an ophthalmic phantom mask made in Vienna, Austria, during the opening decade of the twentieth century, used for practising eye surgery (Figure 4), and a painted wooden mask with polychrome detail, representing Deva Sanniya, a demonic figure associated with epidemic diseases among Sinhalese people of Sri Lanka (Figure 5). The group label reads 'Henry Wellcome's collection contains depictions of faces from all over the world, including death masks, surgical training tools and spirit masks. The familiar features of faces on display here are all connected to ideas of health and medicine.' There is no obvious connection between these objects beyond their all containing faces, and their individual and culturally specific meanings and histories are erased from the exhibition's narrative. Thus their display in the medical gallery generates important questions about the kinds of narratives museum exhibitions tell.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Information about the Exploring Medicine exhibition, which forms part of the Wellcome Medical Galleries at the Science Museum in London can be found on the Science Museum's official webpage: anon., *Medicine: The*





**Figure 4.** An early twentieth-century ophthalmic phantom mask made of Bakelite and manufactured by Leiter in Vienna, Austria. It is part of the Henry Wellcome Medical Collection, housed at the Science Museum, London. Accession No. A606412. Reproduced with the permission of the Science Museum Group under the term of Creative Commons, Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-a-like 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



**Figure 5.** A painted wooden mask with polychrome detail, representing Deva Sanniya, a demonic figure associated with epidemic diseases among Sinhalese people of Sri Lanka. It was produced sometime between 1771 and 1860. It is part of the Henry Wellcome Medical Collection, housed at the Science Museum, London. Accession No. A62942. Reproduced with the permission of the Science Museum Group under the term of Creative Commons, Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-a-like 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

To a certain degree, the cabinet containing ‘The many faces of medicine 1550–1910’ is the product and legacy of an old Victorian practice within ethnographic collections of displaying objects based on type to demonstrate what nineteenth-century anthropologists,

Wellcome Galleries, Science Museum Group (website), at [www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/see-and-do/medicine-wellcome-galleries](http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/see-and-do/medicine-wellcome-galleries) (accessed 24 October 2020).

such as Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), conceptualized as the ‘psychic unity of man’.<sup>23</sup> This mode of representing material cultural emerged from the universalizing rhetoric of Victorian cultural evolutionism, which sought to position all cultures onto an evolutionary scale with Western Europeans situated at the top and Indigenous peoples at the bottom.<sup>24</sup> It will likely appear striking to many readers that these kinds of museum practices, with clear links to European imperial pasts, are still employed and present in museum spaces. However, we should not underestimate the power and legacy of the colonial project, and how deeply ingrained it is in heritage organizations, allowing it to continue to perpetuate racial biases.

At a broad level, museums should be more mindful of their displaying practices. The decision to uncritically employ outmoded museological approaches is unconscious, and part of a larger body of tacit knowledge that curators regularly use in their work practices. As a way of fostering significant and sensitive reforms to the museum sector, there needs to be a complete overhaul and reflexive reconsideration of curation that requires decolonization to be central to all aspects of museum practice and culture. This is a major task and will take generations to fully realize, given how deeply embedded and widespread these systemic prejudices are within the museum sector. To effect change, museum professionals must recognize the presence of these damaging practices in museum and heritage environments, and work from the bottom up to effect long-term sustainable change.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, there are some within the museum and heritage sector, as well as in academia, who have defended these antiquated and problematic practices of hiding Indigenous narratives and erasing links to imperial legacies. As the scholar of Indigenous studies Amy Lonetree has outlined succinctly in her book *Decolonizing Museums* (2012), these arguments tend to centre on the following critiques: first, that museums should avoid offending people; second, that museums should remain neutral and avoid discussing controversial topics that unearth painful histories or contemporary social problems; third, that museums should not ascribe a language of victimization to extra-European cultures; fourth, that these stories are already well known and do not

<sup>23</sup> Edward Burnett Tylor, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization*, London: John Murray, 1865, pp. 377–8; George W. Stocking Jr, *Victorian Anthropology*, New York: The Free Press 1987, p. 160; Bradd Shore, *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 15–41; Bradley W. Patterson, *Redefining Reason: The Story of the Twentieth Century ‘Primitive’ Mentality Debate and the Politics of Hyper-rationality*, Bloomington: Xlibris Corporation, 2011, pp. 84–6; and Sera-Shriar, op. cit. (12), pp. 166–7. See also Jacques Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods, and Theories of Research*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999, pp. 209–19; Neil Roughly (ed.), *Being Humans: Anthropological Universality and Particularity in Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Efram Sera-Shriar, ‘Historicizing belief: E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* and the evolution of religion’, in Efram Sera-Shriar (ed.), *Historicizing Humans: Deep Time, Evolution and Race in Nineteenth-Century British Sciences*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018, 68–90. Tylor outlines his developmental model in the opening pages of his book *Primitive Culture: Edward Burnett Tylor, Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*, 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1871, vol. 1, pp. 5–6. For more on cultural evolutionism see also John W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966; George W. Stocking Jr, “‘Cultural Darwinism’ and ‘Philosophical Idealism’ in E.B. Tylor”, in Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968, pp. 91–109; Joan Leopold, *Culture in Comparative and Evolutionary Perspective: E.B. Tylor and the Making of Primitive Culture*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1980; and Peter Bowler, *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989. For a good example of historicization and deep time in an extra-European context see Pratik Chakrabarti, *Inscriptions of Nature: Geology and the Naturalization of Antiquity*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Pieterse, op. cit. (6), pp. 163–83; Shelton, op. cit. (6), pp. 64–80; Lonetree, op. cit. (11); and Claire Wintle, *Colonial Collecting and Display: Encounters with Material Culture from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013, pp. 1–17.

require repetition in museum spaces; and fifth, that museums are not service agencies for social empowerment. All of these critiques remain powerful discourses within museums, and pose significant challenges to decolonization efforts.<sup>26</sup>

What this cultural misappropriation demonstrates is the continued need for critical reflection and transparency when displaying objects. As noted already, one of the reasons why problematic ethnographic displays of these kinds continue to exist has much to do with the erasure of objects' original, and often sacred, meanings.<sup>27</sup> Without contextual information about these materials on display, they become exoticized examples of 'other' cultures, and the application of cultural erasure can be as damaging as outright prejudice.<sup>28</sup> Thus the first step in transforming how we represent cultural objects more sensitively is by rediscovering their provenance. The second step is by reconnecting objects to their original cultural meanings and significance. In both instances, researchers are met with sets of challenges. This process of recontextualizing collections should eventually be done at a wider organizational level. However, for many museums this presents a significant task, because of how deeply ingrained imperial legacies have become within institutions. A more effective strategy, therefore, is to begin at a smaller scale with specific objects, and work outwardly from sections of the collection toward a full-scale reinterpretation of the museum's entire store.

Decolonization is not easy, and it is a long process. However, it is fundamentally about decentring the European narratives that surround objects on display in exhibitions.<sup>29</sup> Sometimes this process leads to the removal of objects altogether from museum collections, but in all cases it is about bringing to the fore different perspectives, and introducing audiences to the ideas, values, practices and so forth of extra-European cultures, thereby showing the diversity of human existence on equal ground. The removal of an object's original cultural meaning from exhibition narratives, under the guise of a more open interpretation model, is just another form of cultural erasure. What is really needed is spaces in museums that honour Indigenous world views and ways of knowing, that challenge stereotypical representations of extra-Europeans, and address the legacies and impact of imperial projects around the world. Museums should be transformed into what Amy Lonetree has described as 'places that matter for Indigenous peoples'. Through this process of cultural empowerment, everyone benefits regardless of their cultural background.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Lonetree, op. cit. (11), p. 6. Lonetree identifies Paul Chaat Smith as one of the more vocal critics of decolonization efforts in museums. See Paul Chaat Smith, *Everything you Know about Indians Is Wrong*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Raymond Orr, Katelyn Sharratt and Muhammad Iqbal, 'American Indian erasure and the logic of elimination: an experimental study of depiction and support for resources and rights for tribes', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2019) 45(11), pp. 2078–99. For more on cultural erasure, especially in museums and heritage, see Helaine Silverman (ed.), *Contested Cultural Heritage: Religion, Nationalism, and Exclusion*, New York: Springer, 2011; Asja Mandić and Patrick Roberts, 'Museum education in times of radical social change: international perspectives and problems', *Journal of Museum Education* (2012) 37(3), pp. 9–14; Carolyne R. Larson, *Our Indigenous Ancestors: A Cultural History of Museums, Science, and Identity in Argentina, 1877–1943*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015; and Brad Buckley and John Conomos, *Erasure: The Specter of Cultural Memory*, Farringdon: Libri Publishing, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> George W. Stocking Jr (ed.), *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983; and Henrika Kuklick, 'Personal equations: reflections on the history of fieldwork, with special reference to sociocultural anthropology', *Isis* (2011) 102(1), pp. 1–33.

<sup>29</sup> Ruth B. Phillips, 'Disrupting past paradigms: the National Museum of the American Indian and the First Peoples Hall at the Canadian Museum of Civilization', *Public Historian* (2006) 28(2), pp. 75–80.

<sup>30</sup> Lonetree, op. cit. (11), pp. 168–75; Tuck and Yang, op. cit. (6), pp. 1–40.

## Rediscovering the hidden provenance and cultural meaning

The Haida eagle mask is part of the Henry Wellcome collection of medical objects, which is on long-term loan with the Science Museum Group. This arrangement was necessary, as the Wellcome Collection in London lacked sufficient storage space to house the materials on their own site. As a result of this unique organizational structure, the Science Museum Group's catalogue contains very little information on the origin and original function of the mask. An executive decision was made early on not to replicate the provenance records at the Wellcome Collection for the Science Museum, nor to store them within the museum's library and archive. Thus the objects and records were actively separated from one another. This puts curators and researchers at a disadvantage when trying to recontextualize the Haida eagle mask, because from the onset of the object's accession into the Science Museum Group's collection the record had already undergone a process of erasure. The current file identifies the object as a 'wooden spirit mask', originally belonging to the Haida community, in what is now part of northern British Columbia in Canada. There is also a suggestion that it was used for spiritual purposes, although the nature of those purposes is not recorded.<sup>31</sup>

It is frustrating that the catalogue entry is so basic, but we are fortunate that more information about the history of the Haida eagle mask can be gleaned through the surviving records located at the Wellcome Library in London. Nevertheless, these documents are not easily located, and are spread among several different archives. The dispersal of the object's records is indicative, in some respects, of the lack of value curators placed on the mask during its transition from the Wellcome Collection's facility to that of the Science Museum in 1976. Evidently, the mask's Indigenous cultural meaning and significance did not matter enough to the person registering the object to include this information in the new catalogue entry.

The challenge, then, is to reconnect the Haida mask to its provenance record. However, this raises important questions about issues of access and knowledge, because finding this information is a difficult task, and not everyone has the means and ability to do so. It therefore exposes a further layer of museumization that the object has undergone, and highlights yet another way in which museums control knowledge about their collections. A key component of decolonization works to democratize this information, making it open to all.<sup>32</sup> Tracking the process of recovery and providing the full reference details allow other investigators, whether amateur or professional, to find a pathway to accessing these hidden materials. In some sense, it is a kind of 'thick description', to borrow the term from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. As he famously wrote in his seminal book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), 'if you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings ... [but] at what the practitioners of it do'.<sup>33</sup> To fully comprehend how curators reconstructed the meaning of the Haida eagle mask on display at the Science Museum, it is necessary to explore its museological past, through the surviving records.

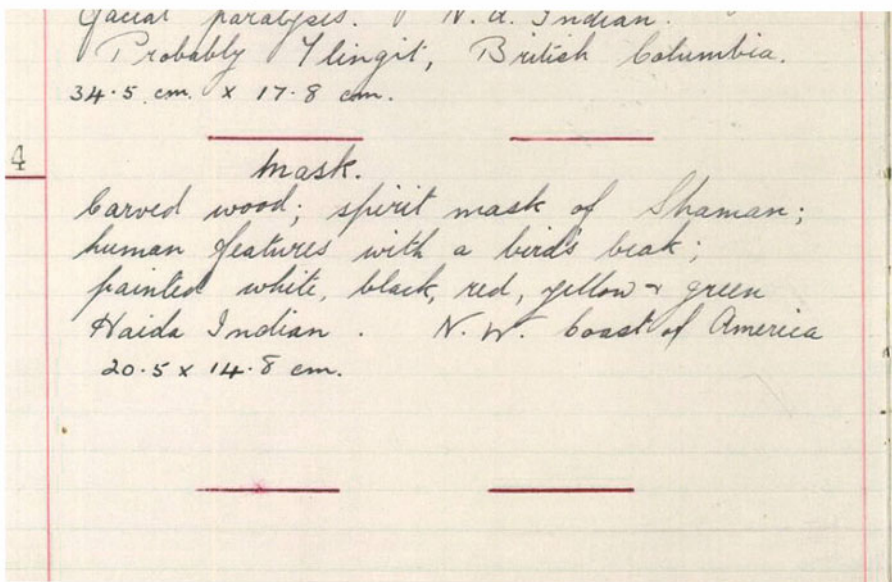
Buried in volume 30 of the Wellcome Collection's Museums Accessions Register, there is an entry for the Haida eagle mask on 13 May 1952 (Figure 6). The entry provides the following description of the mask: 'Carved wood; spirit mask of Shaman; human features with a bird beak; painted white, black, red, yellow & green. Haida Indian. N.W. Coast of America 20.5 x 14.8cm.'<sup>34</sup> As with the Science Museum Group's catalogue entry, the

<sup>31</sup> Anon., 'Wooden spirit mask', object no. A645087, *Science Museum Group Collection* (catalogue), at <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co105836/wooden-spirit-mask-mask> (accessed 24 October 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Pavoni, op. cit. (2), pp. 16–21; Collingwood-Whittick, op. cit. (2), pp. 65–82; and Torres, op. cit. (2), pp. 5–22.

<sup>33</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Anon., 'Mask - 14/1952', Museums Accession Register (hereafter MAR), 36 vols., Wellcome Library, London, WAHMM/CM/Acc/50, 30: 162, at <https://wellcomelibrary.org/item/b18773229?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=165&z=0.1594%2C1.2291%2C0.125%2C0.0785> (accessed 24 October 2020).



**Figure 6.** This is the Haida eagle mask entry on page 162 of volume 30 of the Wellcome Collection's Museums Accessions Register for the years 1950–5. The entry for the Haida eagle mask is at the bottom of the page. The document is housed at the Wellcome Library, London. Reference number WAHMM/CM/Acc/50. Reproduced with the permission of the Wellcome Collection under the terms of Creative Commons, Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-a-like 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

description in the Wellcome Collection's register is rather bare, with no recognition of the mask's original meaning or purpose, beyond a vague mention that it was a 'spirit mask of [a] Shaman'. The sort of language used to describe the object is similar to the kinds of descriptive narration, which lacked critical analysis, that were common in nineteenth-century racial discourse in the human sciences.<sup>35</sup> It is also indicative of a nineteenth-century museological approach to curation that was concerned with the objectification of Indigenous peoples, and used artifacts to 'prove' the existence of extra-European communities. In other words, these culturally significant materials underwent a process of museumization that removed their original meaning from museum documentation. These are clear acts of European imperialism and cultural subjugation.<sup>36</sup>

The entry in the Museums Accessions Register also states that the Haida eagle mask was part of a collection of ethnographic materials that were acquired as part of the 'Seattle consignment' by agents of Henry Wellcome during the opening decades of the twentieth century. These materials, which comprised ten cases, travelled to England

<sup>35</sup> Efram Sera-Shriar, 'Civilizing the natives: Richard King and his ethnographic writings on indigenous north-erners', in Edward Jones-Imhotep and Tina Adcock (eds.), *Made Modern: Science and Technology in Canadian History*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2018, pp. 43–5. For more on descriptive ethnographic writing see also Michael Bravo, *The Accuracy of Ethnoscience: A Study of Inuit Cartography and Cross-cultural Commensurability*, Manchester: Manchester Papers in Social Anthropology, 1996; and Bravo, 'Ethnological encounters', in N. Jardine, J.A. Secord and E.C. Spary (eds.), *Cultures of Natural History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, pp. 341–9.

<sup>36</sup> Arlene Dávila, *Culture Works: Value and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas*, New York: New York University Press, 2012, p. 96.



via an overland route from the west coast of North America to Montreal, where more materials were added, before setting sail and arriving in London in 1924. The main collector of the materials for this consignment was the Tsimshian ethnographer and translator Gusgai'in, also known as William Beynon (1888–1958), who worked for Wellcome between 1918 and 1924, while he was residing at Port Simpson, or Lax-Kw'alaams as it is known today, in northern British Columbia.<sup>37</sup>

Gusgai'in was a respected ethnographic collector, who collaborated with other important anthropological figures in Canada, including Marius Barbeau (1883–1969), while he was undertaking work for the Geological Survey of Canada in 1914, and the missionary William Duncan (1832–1918), who also worked as an agent for Wellcome.<sup>38</sup> Gusgai'in's role as a collector for Wellcome is significant, as it highlights the important role Indigenous peoples occupied historically as cultural brokers of ethnographic objects. After all, Gusgai'in chose this particular mask as an elucidating representation of Haida spiritual and medical culture.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, his reasons for its selection are lost, and thus his voice was undermined and seemingly erased in the surviving records. In the document detailing the content of the Seattle consignment, the Haida eagle mask was part of a collection of materials described as 'Old Curiosity Shop' objects.

Almost certainly, the Seattle consignment record is referring to Ye Olde Curiosity Shop, which is a souvenir store that was founded in Seattle, Washington in 1899, and remains in operation today. The original owner, J.E. Standley (1854–1940), had previously operated a grocery store in Denver, Colorado, where he regularly traded goods with local Indigenous groups. Recognizing that there was a valuable business opportunity to exploit trade in Indigenous art and objects, Standley set up a new store that specialized in the sale of what he termed cultural 'curios'. The decision to establish the shop in Seattle was strategic. In addition to being an important timber town for the growing settler community in the newly formed Washington state area, Seattle was also a key resting point for weary travellers, and various kinds of researchers, on their way to the north-western region of the Yukon Territory, where there was a major gold rush during the 1890s. Many of these travellers were keen to collect Indigenous objects as mementos of their journeys.<sup>40</sup>

Standley's shop regularly contained a significant number of Indigenous artefacts for sale. Some of these materials were genuine, but others were replicas. A key clientele for Standley was museums, who regularly sent agents there to acquire Indigenous materials for their collections. Therefore Gusgai'in's purchase of the Haida eagle mask from Ye Olde Curiosity Shop is not distinct.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, Ye Olde Curiosity Shop is a relic and product of the colonial project, which sought to commodify Indigenous people through the exoticization and objectification of their culture. Retracing this aspect of the Haida

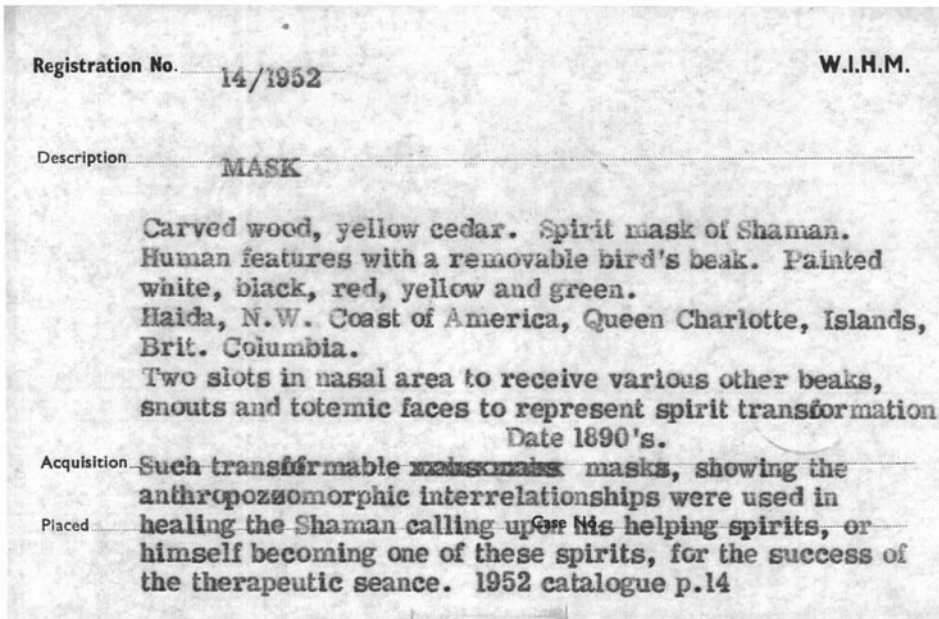
<sup>37</sup> Anon., 'Seattle consignment', Collection Dossiers, Wellcome Library, London (hereafter WL), WAHMM/CM/Col/90, at <https://wellcomelibrary.org/item/b18345931#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=1&z=0.5227%2C0.6107%2C0.125%2C0.0785> (accessed 24 October 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Marjorie M. Halpin, 'William Beynon, ethnographer, Tsimshian, 1888–1958', in Margot Liberty (ed.), *American Indian Intellectuals: 1976 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society*, St Paul: West Publishing Company, 1978, pp. 140–56.

<sup>39</sup> Simon Schaffer, Lissa Roberts, Kapil Raj and James Delbourgo (eds.), *The Brokered World: Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770–1820*, Cambridge: Science History Publications, 2009. For more on cultural brokers and knowledge formation see Yiheyis T. Maru and Jocelyn Davies, 'Supporting cross-cultural brokers is essential for employment among Aboriginal people in remote Australia', *Rangeland Journal* (2011) 33(4), pp. 327–38; and Sara de Jong, 'Cultural brokers in post-colonial migration regimes', in Nikita Dhawan, Elisabeth Fink, Johanna Leinius and Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel (ed.), *Negotiating Normativity: Postcolonial Appropriations, Contestations, and Transformations*, New York: Springer, 2018, pp. 45–59.

<sup>40</sup> For more about the history of Ye Olde Curiosity Shop see Kate Duncan, *1001 Curious Things: Ye Olde Curiosity Shop and Native American Art*, Seattle: Washington University Press, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> See Duncan, op. cit. (40), p. 119.



**Figure 7.** Catalogue card, produced in May 1952, which provides further information about the Haida eagle mask on display in the Exploring Medicine gallery at the Science Museum in London. The document is housed at the Wellcome Library, London. Reference no. WAHMM/CM/Inv/A/265. Reproduced with the permission of the Wellcome Collection under the term of Creative Commons, Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-a-like 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

eagle mask's provenance sheds important light on the early collecting practices that arose during the nineteenth century, which Guscgai'in was a part of, and the imperial legacies that continue to inform museum curation and interpretation even to this day.<sup>42</sup>

There was also a catalogue card that was produced by the Wellcome Collection in May of 1952, and this document provides further contextual information about the provenance of the mask (Figure 7). In addition to the standard descriptive information that was provided in the other records that document the mask's physical appearance, it also states that the object was acquired in Queen Charlotte Island in British Columbia, which is known today as Haida Gwaii, and is a national park reserve and Haida heritage site. Moreover, the catalogue card states that the mask was likely made in the 1890s, and used during ceremonies to represent spiritual transformations. It therefore provides the first indication of the original significance and function of the eagle mask among the Haida community. More importantly, it allows us to begin the process of reconnecting the object to its original meaning.

As the catalogue card explains, 'Such transformable masks, showing anthropomorphic interrelationships were used in healing the Shaman[,] calling upon his helping spirits, or himself becoming one of these spirits, for the success of the therapeutic séance.'<sup>43</sup> Thus

<sup>42</sup> See anon., op. cit. (37); and Dávila, op. cit. (36), p. 96.

<sup>43</sup> Anon., 'Mask- 14/1952', flimsy inventory cards, WL, WAHMM/CM/Inv/A/265, 377, at <https://wellcomecollection.org/item/b18826416#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0> (accessed 24 October 2020).

the mask is representative of a kind of important tool in traditional Haida medicine. The catalogue card also makes reference to an exhibition guide for the Medicine of the Aboriginal Peoples in the British Commonwealth show that was hosted at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in 1952. Therefore there is a strong indication that the Haida eagle mask was part of this show, and that its role within Haida culture was represented more fully in the exhibition's textual interpretation.<sup>44</sup>

The ceremonial performances associated with the eagle mask are central to Haida spiritual belief and practice. Objects such as these recount a time when magical ancestors could change themselves from supernatural beings into human forms.<sup>45</sup> The symbolic meaning of the eagle is also important for understanding the significance of the mask and its role in ceremonial performances. In Haida culture, eagles represent courage and strength, and are associated with healing powers. Eagles are also seen as spiritual guides, and symbolize a connection to a higher realm. Haida culture is also divided into two ancestral lineages or 'moieties', with the eagle adopted as the primary symbol of one group, and the raven as the primary symbol for the other.<sup>46</sup>

As the historian Sujit Sivasundaram has argued, objects such as the Haida eagle mask represent important historical sources for broadening our narratives of the history of science, technology and medicine, allowing for a more global perspective to emerge. The mask embodies another form of natural knowledge, and provides a starting point for exploring other cultural viewpoints on health and medicine that decentre mainstream European and Euro-American narratives and complicate the historiography, thereby making historical scholarship more diverse and inclusive.<sup>47</sup> In the case of the Haida eagle mask, it also offers a pathway to discussing Indigenous understandings of human origins and deep time that push beyond European narratives and chronologies.<sup>48</sup>

The Haida eagle mask is also a useful object for expanding our perspectives on the relationship between science and extraordinary belief. While there has been a growth of material in recent years to explore the history of 'alternative sciences', much of the focus has typically been on European and Euro-American contexts.<sup>49</sup> In particular, topics such as the rise of alchemy and magic in the early modern period and psychical research in the late Victorian era have tended to grab the spotlight. These new works have done much to argue convincingly for the importance of studying science and its relation to

<sup>44</sup> E. Ashworth Underwood (ed.), *Catalogue of an Exhibition Illustrating the Medicine of the Aboriginal Peoples in the British Commonwealth*, London: G. Cumberlege, 1952.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Macnair, Robert Joseph and Bruce Grenville, *Down from the Shimmering Sky: Masks of the Northwest Coast*, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1998, p. 36. For more on Indigenous conceptions of spiritual transformation see also Lisa Seip, 'Transformations of meaning: the life history of a Nuxalk mask', *World Archaeology* (1999) 31(2), pp. 272–87; and Sujit Sivasundaram, 'Imperial transgressions: the animal and human in the idea of race', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (2015) 35(1), pp. 156–72.

<sup>46</sup> Mary Lee Stearns, *Haida Culture in Custody: The Masset Band*, Seattle: Washington University Press, 1981, pp. 246–82; George F. MacDonald, *Haida Monument Art: Villages of the Queen Charlotte Islands*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983, pp. 8–14; Marianne Boelscher, *The Curtain Within: Haida Social and Mythical Discourse*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989, pp. 31–4, 148, 175; and Pansy Collison, *Haida Eagle Treasure: Traditional Stories and Memories of a Teacher of the Tsath Lanas Clan*, Edmonton: Brush Education, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Sivasundaram, op. cit. (7), pp. 146–58. See also Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*, Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 2000; Fan, op. cit. (7), pp. 49–258; Patiniotis, op. cit. (7), pp. 361–84; and Delbourgo, op. cit. (7), pp. 373–99.

<sup>48</sup> David Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion, and the Politics of Human Origins*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008, pp. 8–25; and Efram Sera-Shriar, 'From the beginning: human history theories in nineteenth-century British sciences', in Sera-Shriar, *Historicizing Humans*, op. cit. (24), pp. 1–13.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas F. Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999; and Shiv Visvanathan, 'Alternative science', *Theory, Culture, and Society* (2006) 23(2–3), pp. 164–9.

occultic practices, including magic, supernaturalism, folklore and psychical research.<sup>50</sup> However, Indigenous understandings of this interrelation are nearly always absent from these studies.

What the Haida eagle mask shows is that nineteenth-century conceptions of spiritualism among north-western Indigenous peoples in Canada differed considerably from beliefs of the kind held by Victorians in cities such as London during the same period. Even the term ‘supernaturalism’, which is an occidental concept, does not translate neatly into Indigenous cultures. Not least, the relationship between spirits and nature among Indigenous groups is part of much broader cosmological orders, which do not denigrate extraordinary beliefs in the same way that Western rationalist thought has done in European and Euro-American cultures for the past few centuries. By expanding beyond the standard historiographical narrative to include Indigenous perspectives, a vastly different story about science and extraordinary belief can be told. This new narrative can be one that encourages us to significantly rethink major themes in the secondary literature such as the relationship between science and religion at a global level. Traditionally, this scholarship has focused on Abrahamic religions, with almost no attention paid to extra-European cultures beyond the Islamic world. With the addition of new Indigenous perspectives, such as those of the Haida community in British Columbia, the history of science and belief can be reframed to be more globally inclusive.<sup>51</sup>

Global historical approaches, however, do present other interpretive challenges. For example, it is important to be somewhat cautious in confirming whether this particular mask was ever used by Haida in ceremonial performances. From the 1820s, First

<sup>50</sup> For examples of works on alchemy and magic see Cathy Cobb and Harold Goldwhite, *Creations of Fire: Chemistry's Lively History from Alchemy to the Atomic Age*, New York: Springer, 1995; Lawrence Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013; Chris Gosden, *Magic: A History. From Alchemy to Witchcraft, from the Ice Age to the Present*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020; Jennifer M. Rampling, *The Experimental Fire: Inventing English Alchemy, 1300–1700*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020. For examples of works on psychical research see Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Shane McCorristine, *Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750–1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; Christine Ferguson, *Determined Spirits: Eugenics, Heredity and Racial Regeneration in Anglo-American Spiritualist Writing, 1848–1930*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012; Peter Lamont, *Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017; Courtney Raia, *The New Prometheans: Faith, Science, and the Supernatural Mind in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019; Richard Noakes, *Physics and Psychics: The Occult and the Sciences in Modern Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019; and Efram Sera-Shriar, *Psychic Investigators, Anthropology, Modern Spiritualism, & Credible Witnessing in the Late Victorian Age*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> For classic examples of the scholarship on science and religion see Frank Turner, ‘The Victorian conflict between science and religion: a professional dimension’, *Isis* (1978) 69(3), pp. 356–76; Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987; John Headley Brooke and Geoffrey Cantor, ‘Whose science? Whose religion?’, in Brooke and Cantor (eds.), *Reconstructing Nature: The Engagement of Science and Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 43–72; Peter Bowler, *Reconciling Science and Religion: The Debate in Early-Twentieth-Century Britain*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001; Peter Harrison, ‘“Science” and “religion”: constructing the boundaries’, *Journal of Religion* (2006) 86(1), pp. 81–106; Bernard Lightman, ‘Victorian sciences and religion: discordant harmonies’, *Osiris* (2001) 16, pp. 343–66; Lightman, ‘Does the history of science and religion change depending on the narrator? Some atheist and agnostic perspectives’, *Science and Christian Beliefs* (2012) 24, pp. 149–68; John Headley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014; Matthew Stanley, *Huxley's Church and Maxwell's Demon: From Theistic Science to Naturalistic Science*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014; and Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Nations artists began creating masks specifically for selling and trading to Europeans. Masks of these kinds are usually referred to as ‘trade masks’, and can typically be distinguished by more simplistic designs, lack of distinguishing wear marks and missing attachments, which would be employed during ceremonial dances to represent the transformation of the wearer from a supernatural being to a human.<sup>52</sup>

It is significant that the Haida eagle mask at the Science Museum fits with these general criteria. Moreover, the mask’s likely purchase from Ye Olde Curiosity Shop, where trade masks were regularly sold, adds further strength to the argument that it is probably a replica. The catalogue card does mention that there are two slots in the mask where various kinds of animal ‘beaks, snouts and totemic faces’ can be inserted, but no additional attachments are found in the museum’s collection. This further suggests that the mask was potentially designed for sale to Europeans, and therefore was not necessarily a sacred object. However, there is a gap in the mask’s museum record between its arrival in 1924 and its accession in 1952. It is conceivable that there were attachments for the eagle mask originally, but they were lost during these years. The possibility that the Haida eagle mask is actually a ‘trade mask’ raises important issues about the challenges researchers encounter as they aim to decolonize museum objects. It is important to understand and recognize the limits of ‘sacralizing’ materials, and when it is appropriate to do so. The decision to confirm whether or not objects such as the Haida eagle mask should be ascribed spiritual meaning are best made through consultation with representatives of the Haida community. Currently these discussions are at a very early stage with regard to the Haida eagle mask at the Science Museum. However, the effort to foster these conversations is an important step in the decolonization process. As Peter Macnair, Robert Joseph and Bruce Grenville remind us, ‘We can only begin to understand and appreciate masks when they are contextualised by the authority of the native voice.’<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion: toward shared authority and an Indigenous paradigm

How can we ensure that Indigenous voices become core to museum narratives? The next step in tracing the process from museumization to decolonization is to push toward a ‘shared authority’ in museum settings.<sup>54</sup> It is only through this kind of collaboration – which not only recognizes, but also incorporates, extra-European viewpoints and experiences into museum programming – that an Indigenous paradigm can take root, and generate long-term sustainable change.<sup>55</sup> Shared authority can be developed through various means, such as the inclusion of oral and written testimonies by representatives of Indigenous groups, by using crowdsourcing and other digital platforms that are user-

<sup>52</sup> Gary Wyatt, *Spirit Faces: Contemporary Masks of the Northwest Coast*, Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1994; and Aaron Glass, *Objects of Exchange: Social and Material Transformation on the Late Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Macnair, Joseph and Grenville, op. cit. (45), p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1990; Claire Bishop, ‘The social turn: collaboration and its discontents’, *Artforum International* (2006) 44, pp. 178–83; Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene and Laura Koloski (eds.), *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, Philadelphia: Pew Centre for Arts and Heritage, 2011; and Mirjam B.E. Held, ‘Decolonizing research paradigms in the context of settler colonialism: an unsettling, mutual, and collaborative effort’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (2019) 18, pp. 1–16.

<sup>55</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture*, New York: Bantam Books, 1982; Polly O. Walker, ‘Journeys around the medicine wheel: a story of indigenous research in a Western university’, *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* (2001) 29(2), pp. 18–21; Grave A. Getty, ‘The journey between Western and indigenous paradigms’, *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* (2010) 21(1), pp. 5–14; and Polly O. Walker, ‘Indigenous paradigm research’, in Diane Bretherton and Siew Fang Law (eds.), *Methodologies in Peace Psychology*, New York: Springer, 2015, pp. 159–75.



based to provide more voices that are not from museum professionals or academics but from broader publics, through creative initiatives such as art installations or designs which are led by Indigenous artists, through community-led educational workshops, and by organizing alternative tours of exhibitions that decentre European and Euro-American narratives and focus on Indigenous agency.

Much has been written about the immersion of Indigenous paradigms into the museum sector, but at a broad level it is about pressing for organizations to address the legacies of colonialism, and the impact that these histories have had on Indigenous communities, especially the historical unresolved grief that has arisen as a result of the exploitations produced by European imperial projects.<sup>56</sup> As the historian Susan Miller has explained in her groundbreaking article 'Native America writes back', when museums begin the process of decolonization in their organizations, the Indigenous paradigms that they advance should include four main concepts: Indigenousness, sovereignty, colonization and decolonization.<sup>57</sup> The major change to occur in recent decades is that academics and museum professionals have increasingly engaged far more directly and critically with the consequences of imperialism in European and Euro-American cultures. They have actively sought collaboration with Indigenous communities, who are becoming increasingly important stakeholders in museum settings and scholarly literature. There has also been a genuine push to openly foster critically constructive dialogues about the legacies of colonialism, and how all kinds of researchers can work together to decolonize museums and the historical scholarship that informs exhibition work. Thus museums are slowly becoming spaces of intercultural encounter that actively encourage visitors to think about and discuss these major historical and contemporary issues as participants in knowledge production.<sup>58</sup>

How does this critical examination of decolonization using the Haida eagle mask as a case study help to transform our understanding of the history of science, technology and medicine more broadly? My aim in this paper was to offer some rudimentary perspectives on how historians of science working in museum spaces can apply the theories and methods of other disciplines, such as Indigenous studies and anthropology, to historiography and museum practice in an effort to begin the process of decolonizing the research field. By tracing the process from museumization to decolonization using the Haida eagle mask, I have sought to expose some of the ways object meanings are constructed in museum settings. To fully understand this process from museumization to decolonization, however, I began by discussing spaces of encounter in museums, and how these encounters shape the construction of an object's cultural meaning and significance. I also considered how the Haida eagle mask is currently exhibited at the Science Museum in London, and examined its provenance record and accession into the museum's collection.

By reconnecting the mask to its original cultural meaning and significance among Haida people, I argued for the importance of 'shared authority' in museums, and why it is necessary for the 'Indigenous paradigm' to inform all ethnographic exhibitions of extra-European cultures. Throughout this analysis, I exposed the many challenges researchers face as they decentre objects from European narratives, and bring to the fore Indigenous perspectives in museum spaces. As I have emphasized throughout my analysis, decolonization is a complicated process, and my focus has squarely been on the preliminary steps of its implementation. Museums should ultimately act as translators and makers of social change and cross-cultural understanding. Museum professionals and

<sup>56</sup> Lonetree, *op. cit.* (11), pp. 6–7.

<sup>57</sup> Susan A. Miller, 'Native America writes back: the origin of the indigenous paradigm in historiography', *Wicazo Sa Review* (2008) 23(2), pp. 9–28.

<sup>58</sup> Miller, *op. cit.* (57), pp. 14–18.

researchers in turn must recognize their chief role in shaping ethnographic knowledge through their application of visual epistemologies, historiographical approaches and museumization practices, with a view to fostering essential dialogue on critical issues within museums, within the history of science, and beyond. Only through this full-scale approach can we embrace a research programme that is genuinely global and inclusive in perspective, and which can generate long-term sustainable change for years to come. Through this process of cultural empowerment for those voices which have been most displaced and subjugated, everyone benefits.

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