Great North Museum: Hancock

**Policy for the Repatriation of Cultural Property**

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**1. Introduction**

Over the last 300 years or so, many communities worldwide have been physically separated from their material heritage, objects having flooded western museums as a result of colonial, conflict or trading activities. This heritage now exists in museums far from those communities. For indigenous peoples aspects of history, heritage, identity, and elements of culture, can be embodied within artefacts. Traditionally, both ethnographic research and displays have employed a clearly western approach to looking at indigenous artefacts as inanimate material beings and overlooked the object’s significance to its source communities. Increasingly, however, museums are recognising and showing sensitivity to indigenous views. While it is a complex issue involving a range of emotional, ethical, legal and political factors, the repatriation of cultural heritage is now being discussed at national and international levels. The Great North Museum: Hancock (GNM) is committed to having clear and transparent policies to help mitigate against some of the complexities surrounding museum repatriation.

**2. Governance background**

The GNM is part of Newcastle University. However, the museum is managed on behalf of the university by Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums (TWAM), a local authority museum service encompassing 10 museums, galleries and archives. The building and majority of the collections within the museum belong to the Natural History Society of Northumbria (NHSN), with other collections belonging to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne (SANT. These assets are on long term lease to the university.

Newcastle University has a legal agreement with both societies stating that it is responsible for the care of the collections and the museum building. However, both societies remain the legal owners of their assets and retain decision making rights regarding acquisition and disposal.

The World Cultures collection at the GNM belongs to the NHSN, with some items on loan to the NHSN from SANT and is under the remit of the GNM’s Archaeology team, and it is the specific responsibility of the Keeper of Archaeology. Therefore, due to management and responsibility structures, it will be the GNM who directly responds to any repatriation requests rather than the societies.

The collections are internationally significant. The earliest major acquisitions in 1822, contained significant collections of ethnography, especially from the Pacific region. Sixty-five of these specimens survive, including items that can be traced with certainty to the voyages of Captain Cook. All areas of the world and a great number of indigenous communities are represented through the World Cultures collection.

**3. Purpose**

**3.1** The GNM has developed this policy in recognition that certain objects in the ethnographic collection may be subject to repatriation requests from indigenous communities from countries around the world, including (but not limited to) Canada, the United States of America, Australia and New Zealand.

**3.2** This policy will set out guidelines to ensure that any community requesting repatriation of objects will have a clear set of procedures to follow, and in turn, what is to be expected from the GNM.

**3.3** For the purposes of this document, “repatriation” will mean specifically the return of cultural arts, heritage or human remains to the community of origin. This also includes any relevant photographs, drawings and documentation.

**4. Guiding principles**

**4.1** GNM is committed to working respectfully with source communities from whom the Museum’s collections have originated.

**4.2** GNM will consider all requests for repatriation seriously and on a case-by-case basis.

**4.3** GNM will be open and transparent during repatriation discussions with the claimant community and any other interested party.

**4.4** GNM will respond as quickly as possible to all requests.

**5. GNM General Guidelines for Repatriation**

Before submitting a repatriation request, claimants should consider the following guiding principles.

**5.1** GNM will normally only consider a claim for repatriation from an indigenous community if it has been made officially through a body or individual generally recognised as responsible for the governance or interests of the claimant community

**5.2** GNM will normally consider a claim from a national government only if it is made on behalf of an identified source community and formal communication is received from both parties confirming their relationship.

**5.3** Claimants should do everything that they can to ensure that they are the only possible claimants, and if they are not, attempt to ensure that there is agreement over who has the right to make the claim.

**6. Procedure for Repatriation applications**

In the initial stages of a request, an informal letter or email to the Keeper of Archaeology to begin discussions about the potential repatriation of an object/objects would be welcomed. When both the claimant community and the GNM feel that a formal request is ready to go ahead, the following procedure will begin.

**6.1** Requests for the repatriation of cultural materials should be made in writing and addressed to the Director of Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums. The request should clearly:

* Identify the indigenous community making the claim, or governing body representing the community
* Identify the object/objects being claimed
* State the reasons for the request
* Provide any evidence to substantiate the claim

**6.2** Requests for repatriation will be acknowledged by the Director in writing. The GNM will then begin examining the validity of the claim. Both the NHSN and SANT and Newcastle University will be informed of the request. GNM will then issue an announcement via relevant media that a repatriation request has been made.

**6.3** Complex issues may arise during this process. For example, there may be no clear evidence of the pathway that led to the object/objects becoming a part of the museum’s collection. Expert advice may be sought from the claimants. External advice may also be sought from other museums and professional bodies (eg, Museums Association), and further consultation with other interested parties (eg, diplomatic representatives of the claimant’s national government) may also be sought at this stage.

**6.4** The Natural History Society of Northumbria and the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne will make the formal decision on whether or not to repatriate items from its collection, but decision-making would be on the presumption that repatriation would be supported where a claim is shown to be valid, following collaborative discussions between the claimant community and the GNM.

**6.5** The decision for or against the claim will be communicated to the Director. A written report will be prepared by the GNM to explain how the decision was reached. Claimants will be informed of this decision in writing, along with a copy of the report.

**6.6** If the decision has been taken to return an object/objects, GNM will begin discussions with the claimant as to how and when the repatriation will take place. Unless the claimant community has acquired specific funding to assist with repatriation, the GNM will cover the costs of packing and shipping the object/objects plus any conservation treatment that may be required.

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| **Date approved** | **10 August 2020** |
| **Approved by** | **University Museums and Gallery Board** |
| **Master file location** |  |
| **Related policies** | GNM Acquisition and Disposals Policy  GNM Policy for the Care of Human Remains  GNM Policy for the Care of Culturally Restricted Objects |
| **Key contacts** | Executive Museum Manager: Caroline McDonald  Keeper of Archaeology: Andrew Parkin |
| **Policy review date** | August 2024 |