



Repatriation



The Repatriation Office is a program of the National Museum of the American Indian's Community and Constituent Services department and is located at the museum's Cultural Resources Center (CRC) in Suitland, Maryland.

What is Repatriation?

Repatriation is the process whereby specific kinds of American Indian cultural items in a museum collection are returned to lineal descendants and culturally affiliated Indian tribes, Alaska Native clans or villages, and/or Native Hawaiian organizations. Human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony are all materials that may be considered for repatriation.

The History of Repatriation at NMAI

Congress established the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in 1989 with the passage of the [National Museum of the American Indian Act \(NMAI Act\)](#), Public Law 101–185. The act transferred to the Smithsonian Institution stewardship of the more than 800,000 objects in the George Gustav Heye collection of the Museum of the American Indian in New York City. In addition, the act required the Smithsonian to create and carry out an institutionwide repatriation policy regarding Native American human remains and certain cultural materials. The NMAI Act requires Smithsonian museums to inventory, identify, and consider for return—if requested by a Native community or individual—American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian human remains and funerary objects. The [NMAI Act Amendment of 1996 \(Public Law 104–278\)](#) added provisions for the inventory and repatriation of unassociated funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. The NMAI Act and its amendment are most often applied to the Smithsonian museums that have large American Indian collections, most specifically, the NMAI and the [National Museum of Natural History \(NMNH\)](#). Both museums have Repatriation Offices that follow similar NMAI Act guidelines, yet each museum manages a separate and distinct repatriation program.

[National Museum of the American Indian Repatriation Policy, 2014 \(pdf\) »](#)

NMAI Collections

The NMAI maintains more than 800,000 catalogued cultural objects and 125,000 photographic images associated with hundreds of Native communities throughout the Western Hemisphere. The museum recognizes that its Native constituents have an absolute interest in the management, interpretation, and disposition of collections associated with their respective communities. Stewardship rather than ownership is the NMAI's approach to the care of its collections. One common misconception about the NMAI's repatriation program is that the majority of the NMAI's collections, at some point in the future, will be repatriated. In fact, less than three percent (about 25,000 items) of the NMAI's collections fall within the four primary categories of eligible items for repatriation: human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony.

Repatriation at the NMAI

Repatriation at the NMAI is a uniquely proactive and collaborative process. The Repatriation Office conducts its research independently from other Smithsonian repatriation programs and has a separate advisory committee. The office produces research reports in response to the repatriation claims it receives and bases its recommendations on the reports' findings. It sends the reports and recommendations to the [NMAI's Board of Trustees](#) for review. The Board has sole authority over the disposition of the NMAI collections, including decisions regarding the deaccessioning of items for repatriation.

The Repatriation Office works closely with Native peoples and communities as well as staff in other NMAI departments. These relationships are important in understanding the unique challenges in managing collections of a culturally sensitive nature. Through continuous dialogue with Native communities and representatives, the NMAI receives specific recommendations for the care and management for culturally sensitive collections in the NMAI's possession. A priority of the NMAI is to incorporate and sustain various forms of traditional knowledge related to the care and management of culturally sensitive material. This information is integrated into the NMAI collections management procedures and the museum's Collections Information System (CIS).

Human Remains

The NMAI believes that the respectful treatment and disposition of human remains is a basic human right. The highest priority of the Repatriation Office is the expeditious return of all human remains in the museum's collections to their lineal descendants, regardless of geography and sociopolitical borders. For the return and care of human remains, the NMAI has taken a proactive approach. The Repatriation Office places a high priority on determining the cultural origins and affiliations of the human remains in its possession and on returning them to their descendants and places of origin. At present, the NMAI retains fewer than 300 catalogued human remains, the majority of which originate from Latin America. These remains became part of the NMAI's collections when the Smithsonian acquired the George Gustav Heye collection of the Museum of the American Indian in 1989. Since then, NMAI has repatriated more than 2,000 items to more than 100 Native communities and individuals throughout the Western Hemisphere. As required by the NMAI Act, the Repatriation Office works with the NMAI Collections Management and Registration departments to inventory and identify the cultural origins of human remains and funerary objects that may be affiliated with contemporary American Indian peoples.

In 1993, the NMAI sent out inventories of its ethnographic objects to federally recognized Indian tribes, which included listings of human remains. Inventories of archaeological collections were sent out in 1995 and 1996.

All human remains and their associated funerary objects in the NMAI's collections are cared for at a separate

Smithsonian facility, where they are managed in a minimally invasive environment until they are returned to their affiliated Native community or place of origin. Access to human remains in the NMAI's possession is exclusive to the staff members who care for them and to official representatives of Native communities seeking their respectful disposition.

SIX STEPS TO REPATRIATION

There are six steps to getting an object repatriated to a Native community. These steps are also explained in the step-by-step diagram on page 60.

Step One: [Informational Request](#)

Step Two: [Formal Request for a Visit and Collections Review](#)

Step Three: [Consultation Visit and Collections Review](#)

Step Four: [Formal Repatriation Request](#)

Step Five: [Repatriation Research and Reporting](#)

Step Six: [Deaccession and Repatriation](#)

Step One: Informational Request

Any Native community or individual interested in pursuing repatriation at NMAI may write, call, or fax the Repatriation Office to request information about culturally affiliated objects in the museum's collection. ([View sample request for information.](#)) The initial request must be submitted by an official Native community representative, including Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPO), Historic Preservation Officers (HPO), NAGPRA (Native American Graves and Repatriation Act) representatives, or other authorized parties or individuals officially identified by their respective Native community. In return, official Native representatives will receive:

- A letter of acknowledgment
- A database inventory list of relevant collections
- A CD with digital images of relevant collections
- Definitions of repatriation object categories
- A copy of the NMAI Act
- A copy of the NMAI Repatriation Policy

Requests for information should be directed to:

Repatriation Office

Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of the American Indian

Cultural Resources Center

4220 Silver Hill Road

Suitland, MD 20746-2863

Phone: 301-238-1548

Fax: 301-238-3200

Email: nmai-repatriation@si.edu

Step Two: Formal Request for a Visit and Collections Review

Native communities wishing to visit the CRC in Suitland, Maryland, to review and document collections for repatriation must submit a formal request to the NMAI Repatriation Office on official tribal letterhead,

signed by the head of the Native community government. ([View sample letter for a consultation visit.](#)) The letter should name the officially appointed Repatriation Officer and those who will accompany him or her during the visit. It is helpful to include information about objects of interest from the inventory list, such as the museum catalog numbers and a brief description of the items.

Requests for a visit should be sent to the address referenced in Step One.

Step Three: Consultation Visit and Collections Review

The Repatriation Office strongly recommends that Native community representative(s) carefully review the NMAI collections and consult with Repatriation Office staff before submitting an official repatriation request. This ensures that items claimed for repatriation are consistent with inventory descriptions and museum catalog records. These visits also facilitate better communication as well as a fuller understanding of cultural perspectives and museum protocols. The museum will support one visit per Native community for collections review and consultation. This includes support for up to two community representatives to spend two days visiting the CRC. Please be advised that changes to the visiting delegation may only be made up to three weeks prior to the consultation date. Additional representatives or repeat visits to the museum are welcome at the travelers' expense.

It would be helpful to consider the following in preparation for a collections review and repatriation consultation visit:

- Review the museum's inventory list and identify objects that would be of significant interest and/or concern.
- Review the NMAI Act and NMAI repatriation object category definitions. Objects requested for repatriation must conform to these criteria.
- Review the museum's repatriation procedures, and make a list of questions or concerns.
- A delegation may include a traditional or religious leader who has the knowledge and skills to identify objects that may not be properly identified in the museum's records.
- Please inform us of any special needs that your delegation may have (wheelchair accessibility, specific object handling, or lighting requirements, etc.).
- Should you require a private place for traditional preparation, the CRC houses an indoor ceremonial space.

We suggest that you prioritize your review of the collections to ensure enough time to examine the objects that are significant to your community. Visiting community representatives may photograph or videotape objects in the collection. We encourage you to visit our archives to photocopy materials, but please bear in mind that this can be a time-consuming process. Representatives are also encouraged to share with NMAI staff any information that pertains to the storage, handling, or care of culturally sensitive objects.

Step Four: Formal Repatriation Request

Native communities wishing to request repatriation of certain objects must submit a letter on official tribal letterhead, signed by the head of the Native community government or acting official. ([View sample repatriation claim.](#)) A letter of support from the Native community government must accompany family or individual requests for the repatriation of objects associated with an ancestor. The letter must identify the requestor as an enrolled member of that community or provide other official documentation that the requestor is of Native descent.

Repatriation requests should include the objects' museum catalog numbers; a brief description of the objects; and the category under which the Native community is requesting repatriation (i.e., a funerary

object, an object of cultural patrimony, or a sacred and/or ceremonial object). The letter should provide a specific reason for categorizing each object and should include as much evidence as possible of cultural affiliation and identification.

Repatriation requests should be sent to:

Museum Director

c/o Associate Director for Community and Constituent Services

Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of the American Indian

Fourth Street and Independence Avenue, S.W.

P.O. Box 37012

Washington, DC 20013-7012

The NMAI Repatriation Office will acknowledge in writing receipt of each repatriation request and establish a file for organizational and tracking purposes. Repatriation Office staff then assess the request to ensure that the object is eligible for repatriation consideration, and confirm that the Native community has substantiated its claim of cultural affiliation to the object. If the request is not complete, the representative will contact the Native community representative for additional information.

Depending upon the nature of the request, the Repatriation Office representative reserves the right to notify other interested parties of the repatriation claim via telephone, email, fax, publication in tribal newspapers, or mailings to the governments of other potentially interested Native communities. Instructions will be provided and a reasonable period of time allowed from the date of publication for others to express interest in the items under consideration. The Repatriation Office will field inquiries and assemble documentation, if necessary, to resolve any competing claims that might arise during the research process. This will be accomplished through consultation with all potential claimants and with all parties receiving copies of the documentation. Native communities with competing claims for items in NMAI's possession are encouraged to resolve their differences at the community level.

Step Five: Repatriation Research and Reporting

Repatriation claims approved for research are assigned to a research specialist. The research specialist is responsible for gathering information about the repatriation claim and for organizing this information in a repatriation research report. Research includes gathering all pertinent information from museum record groups, archival and historical sources, specialized publications, and other materials that help determine the identity and history of the objects. Repatriation documentation may also involve consultation with Native and non-Native experts or authorities versed in tribal history, oral traditions, geography, anthropology, or archaeology.

The repatriation research report includes a recommendation as to whether the requested objects should be deaccessioned for repatriation. The process by which the report and its recommendations are examined, critiqued, and ultimately accepted or denied involves review by the museum director and staff, the Smithsonian's Office of General Counsel, and NMAI's Board of Trustees. After review by the NMAI Director, the recommendation is forwarded to the Board of Trustees for final consideration. The Board has the authority and formal responsibility for making decisions regarding repatriation of material in the museum's collections.

Step Six: Deaccession and Repatriation

The NMAI Director will notify the requesting party of the Board of Trustees' decision. Once repatriation is approved, the museum will make arrangements for returning the objects. The NMAI will support up to two community representatives for up to two days so that they may travel to the CRC to affect the transfer of objects from the museum to the community. The museum will not be responsible for any costs for special activities, religious observances, or materials or services that the requesting party may deem necessary upon completion of the transfer to the community of the deaccessioned objects.

In consultation with Native community representatives, the museum may provide the following services:

- Secure, prepare, and pack the objects for shipment by air cargo or other approved carrier to the location designated by the Native community representatives. All packing materials and containers will be supplied by the museum.
- Affect the transfer of property at the museum facility.
- Assign museum staff to hand carry or escort the objects to the point of disposition or other predetermined destination.
- Provide assistance in securing a disposition site in consultation with another federal, state, or local agency.

Annual Report of the Repatriation Activities of the Smithsonian Institution

[2017 Annual Report \(pdf\)](#)

[2016 Annual Report \(pdf\)](#)

[2015 Annual Report \(pdf\)](#)

[2014 Annual Report \(pdf\)](#)

[2013 Annual Report \(pdf\)](#)

[2012 Annual Report \(pdf\)](#)

[2011 Annual Report \(pdf\)](#)



Smithsonian
National Museum of the American Indian

National Museum of the American Indian

National Mall

Fourth Street & Independence Ave., S.W.

Washington, DC 20560

10 AM–5:30 PM daily

National Museum of the American Indian

New York

Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House

One Bowling Green

New York, NY 10004

10 AM–5 PM daily, Thursdays to 8 PM

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