

Museums are catching on to the importance of terminology in these increasingly sensitive times

Finding the right words

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What's in a name? When it comes to Native American art and craft, a great deal. In the long, tragic history of the European settlement of the Americas – a process that deserves to be called a genocide – terminology might seem a relatively minor issue. But language matters. Racial slurs like 'redskin' are markers of longstanding prejudice, violence and displacement.

This is part of a bigger story, for there is increased sensitivity in the USA these days about who gets called what. Terms like Latinx and trans-, and the gender-neutral pronoun 'they', are all entering general (if still debated) use. It's not surprising that the same conversations are happening around Native people. And museums are no exception.

A case in point is *Art of Native America: The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection*, a show currently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It celebrates a major private gift of works to the museum, and is, shockingly, the first time that its American Wing has shown Native works. (They have long been sequestered in a separate department.) It is a feast of craftsmanship, with masterworks of weaving, woodcarving, pottery, basketry and quiltwork on display.

One of the most striking features of the Met's show is its careful use of naming. The head of the American Wing, Sylvia Yount, told me that 'language was paramount from the start – beginning with the use of "Native American" and "Indigenous American" vs. "American Indian".' The Met has also given the preferred Native term for each tribal designation, preceding more common Euro-American names: 'Haudenosaunee/Iroquois', 'Diné/Navajo'.

There are also informative wall texts written by scholars of Native American heritage. This feature is consistent with another recent introduction to the Met's galleries – a labelling campaign entitled 'Native Perspectives'. For this project, the Met has commissioned commentary on some of its own historic artworks. For example, the Tlingit artist Jackson Polys uncompromisingly describes a marble sculpture of Henry David Longfellow's fictional character Hiawatha as 'a self-fulfilling prophecy in service

of a new national tribe, which relies on the neutering of the Indian problem'.

Yet even at the Met, the problems of historic language lie heavy over the artefacts. The museum has consulted widely with Native experts – among them Ned Blackhawk (who is of Western Shoshone heritage), a respected professor at Yale University. Even so, an advocacy group called the Association on American Indian Affairs has contested the very idea that the works in the exhibition should be presented as 'art', instead describing them as 'ceremonial or funerary objects that belong with their original communities and could only have ended up in a private collection through trafficking and looting'.

It's also worth noting that items in the show are described using English terms: pot, basket, belt pouch, 'soul catcher'. The only Native term used is *atlatl*, a Nahuatl word for a spear-thrower, for which there is no English equivalent; yet there are object terms of both French and Spanish derivation (*parfleche* and *serape*). At this level of interpretation – what things actually are – the language of the coloniser is still employed.

A research project at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, is exploring another possibility. For its exhibition *Intersections: Indigenous Textiles of the Americas*, curators Dakota Mace (who is of Diné heritage) and Kendra Greendeer (who is from the Ho-Chunk nation, on whose unceded ground the university stands) gathered terminology through an extensive informal network of indigenous expertise. A Hopi wedding



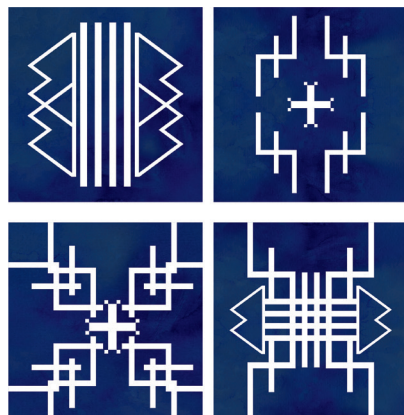
It seems many Americans don't want to deal with cultural difference

belt is described as such, but also given its proper name: *wukokwewa*. So is a Potawatomi healing blanket: *ashokmagé waboyan*.

The introduction of such terms, authorised by the community, signal to the visitor that each of these items is imbued with meaning beyond what can be contained in a gallery. As Dakota Mace puts it: 'In our cultures we believe that these objects are living. They deserve to have the knowledge that is represented within them passed on.'

Mace is a practising artist, too, and pursues similar goals in her work. One series of cyanotypes, entitled *Na'ashch'qq' I-IV* (which could be translated as 'design'), represents ancestral knowledge through four symbols commonly used in Diné weaving: *Na'ashjé'íi Asdzáá* (the Spider Woman goddess), *Dził* (the Mountain), *Tsil nó'olí* (the Whirling Log) and *Díí* (the number Four). In traditional belief, she says, these principles together make up the shifting energies of the land (*keyáh*).

When faced with unfamiliar ideas and terminology, there are two possible reactions. The first is to pull back and shut down. The second is to lean forward and learn. Many Americans these days, it seems, don't want to deal with cultural difference; it's just too difficult. But more and more, the invitation is there. In a subtle way, Mace and Greendeer offer a chance to reckon with the past of all the nations who have occupied this land.



Top: dance mask by Yup'ik artist, Alaska, c.1916, wood, pigment and vegetal fibre, at the Met, New York. Left: *Na'ashch'qq' I-IV*, 2018, a series of cyanotypes by Dakota Mace depicting four symbols used in Diné weaving, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison

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