The Alberta legislature began the new millennium by passing the First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act (FNSCORAJ). In doing so, the Province became the only jurisdiction in Canada that recognizes, through law, the right of First Nations people to retrieve sacred material from public collections in order to continue their traditional spiritual practices. The return of this material does occur elsewhere in the country, and most Canadian museums willingly repatriate sacred items and human remains. However, the process often relies on the development of a good relationship between a museum and a First Nation. Regardless of the good intentions and attitudes of museum personnel, this places the museum in the position of benefactor, a role that perpetuates the neocolonial relationship that exists between First Nations and the dominant Canadian society. The Alberta legislation ensures that repatriation is
not dependent upon the personalities of staff who work in museums and that requests for the return of sacred material cannot be declined simply because a curator or museum director thinks that the process is not a good idea or that the applicant is unworthy. Alberta’s repatriation act affirms the right of First Nations people to conduct ceremonies that are integral to their spiritual beliefs and well-being and to use items from their culture to do so.

The quest to repatriate sacred material has led the Blackfoot to museums in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The Blackfoot have had to learn the institutional processes that will gain them access to collections, the protocols necessary for the handling of artifacts, and the procedures for requesting the return of artifacts. To complicate matters, museums operate in accordance with principles and policies that can be very different from one another. Some have responded to Blackfoot requests promptly and positively, while others have been more suspicious and reluctant. These interactions reflect the culture and history of museums, the culture and history of the Blackfoot, and the personalities of the individuals who are engaged in the process of repatriation. In this chapter and the next, I consider the culture and history of museums and the Blackfoot, respectively. In the subsequent chapters, the individual stories of those who have been involved with repatriation provide personal reflections and insights about the process and outcomes.

The Idea of Museums

Museums are complex institutions that vary greatly in their structures, purposes, and philosophical foundations. No single description can do justice to this diversity, and any attempt will undoubtedly lead to some crucial omissions. The following outline of museums focuses on particular developments that will help us to understand the museum culture that the Blackfoot people encountered when they began to repatriate their sacred bundles, first in the 1970s and, later, in the 1990s. The examples of museum development found in the literature tend to highlight the larger museums where these evolutionary changes originated. While not all museums are grand, national temples of learning, they do share a common museum heritage and culture of collecting.
Museums are very much an invention of Western civilization. They have changed greatly over the centuries and continue to evolve and redefine themselves. While the name was first applied to temples that were dedicated by the ancient Greeks to the muses and their works of art (Alexander 1996, 6), the modern museum had its beginnings during the Age of Discovery, from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. It was during this period that sailors, explorers, missionaries, and the military who sailed from Europe to the far reaches of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas returned with stories of the wonders they had seen and with treasures of gold, silver, and other strange and remarkable things that verified the truth of their tales. At first, the European world must have been overwhelmed with the new sights and smells:

Obviously the mathematical and navigational sophistication necessary for Columbus to have been able to mount an expedition to America—and then make it back, and not once, but four times!—was of a considerable level, and was indicative of a steadily rising curve of such certain, positive knowledge. . . . But the stuff he found in America, and the stuff he brought back, was so strange and so new as to seem to sanction belief in all manner of wondrous prospects and phantasms for years thereafter. (Weschler 1995, 81)

These exotic objects from the far corners of the world became an important source of pride and prestige for the wealthy patrons of the voyages of discovery. In exchange for underwriting an expedition, patrons would expect a financial recompense through a share in any profits from trade of the imports. They also looked forward to gifts of exotica brought back from afar. These collections, along with anomalies collected closer to home, were often assembled in special rooms reserved for their display. Thomas Platter, a Swiss visitor to England, described the collection he observed in 1599 at the Kensington castle of Thomas Cope, a politician and member of the Elizabethan College of Antiquarians. The cabinets contained holy relics from a Spanish ship that Cope had helped to capture; earthen pitchers and porcelain from China; a Madonna made of feathers; a chair made of monkey teeth; stone shears, a back-scratcher, and a canoe with a paddle, all from India; a Javanese costume; Arabian coats; the horn and tail of a rhinoceros; the horn of a bull seal; a round horn that had grown on an
Englishwoman’s forehead; a unicorn’s tail; the baubles and bells of Henry VIII’s fool; and the Turkish emperor’s gold seal (Weschler 1995, 76–77). These “cabinets of curiosities” were the physical representations of the extent of Europe’s exploration, and the objects symbolized the advance of Western knowledge, for without this knowledge, the ability to travel and collect treasures would have been greatly curtailed.

As Weschler (1995, 81) remarks, the wonders that came from afar challenged Europeans’ conceptions of the order of the universe. As these collections became more numerous and grew in size, they became the focus of study by both their owners and a growing body of scientists—philosophers and naturalists who concerned themselves with understanding how the world worked. Yet within the prevailing theistic paradigm, which credited divine intervention for all of Creation, it was difficult to arrive at a meaningful, cohesive ordering of these fantastic objects. By the late eighteenth century, the scientists and philosophers of the Enlightenment had rejected deistic explanations of the natural order in favour of a science that was based on rational and intellectual analysis of observable phenomena. A set of criteria and principles emerged that gave scientists of the time a frame of reference within which they could arrange the objects of their study. These arrangements generated theories that explained similarities and differences between individual objects and among groups of objects and laid the foundation for the field of biology (Mayr 1982, 107–111). Eventually, these studies of life forms led to a recognition that evolution provides the most robust and parsimonious explanation for the diversity of life on earth.

These scientists primarily studied the natural world and were not overly concerned with materials made by humans. Nevertheless, the allure of the scientific method, with its reliance on observed facts and verifiable theories, drew some researchers to apply this process to the study of human cultures. After Charles Darwin published On the Origin of Species in 1859, his ideas were adapted by Herbert Spencer, who is often credited as the author of the theory of cultural evolution, according to which societies, like living organisms, progress from simple to complex. “Primitive” societies were assumed to be homogenous, and evolutionary change (adaptation) was the basis by which cultures gradually grew more complex and became differentiated from one another (see Harris 1968, 126–131). Scholars gathered reports about Indigenous cultures,
usually second-hand from missionaries, colonial administrators, and military officers. Key cultural traits were selected and compared across cultures, and these comparisons became the foundation for determining which cultures were “more advanced” and which were more “primitive.” Of course, these traits were taken out of context: researchers were unconcerned with how a culture functioned, changed, or interacted with other cultures. Moreover, the traits they chose reflected the culture and interests of the non-Native researcher more often than they did those of the Indigenous peoples (Hernandez 2007). This was, and remains, particularly problematic with regard to the concept of the sacred, since Western epistemology had gone to great lengths to ensure that the spiritual aspect was removed from any analysis of what was considered to be a purely mechanistic world (Herman 2008, 74).

It was within this intellectual milieu of the late 1800s that A. H. L. Pitt Rivers began to amass his encyclopaedic collection of tools and weapons (Chapman 1985). As a young military officer, he was assigned to test newly developed rifles for the British army and was impressed with what he imagined to be a slow, but systematic, progress in the development of weaponry. At the same time, he had an abiding interest in the archaeological relics that he uncovered at various sites in the United Kingdom. As his military career took him abroad, he was able to collect examples of material culture from outposts of the British Empire, and his friendships with fellow officers and government staff ensured that his collection represented places that Pitt Rivers could not visit himself. This assemblage was organized so as to support a Spencerian evolutionary model of cultural progression, one that applied both across cultures and through time. In this scenario, vibrant, modern cultures in Africa could—on the basis of their perceived degree of technological sophistication—be equated with cultures found, for example, in Stone Age England. And if the technological sophistication of living people was equivalent to that of the Stone Age, this implied that the rest of their culture was similarly undeveloped. Pitt Rivers bequeathed his collection to the University of Oxford with the stipulation that the arrangement of the material in displays be retained during his lifetime “and beyond—except for such changes in detail that might be ‘necessitated by the advance of knowledge’” (Chapman 1985, 15–16). At the university’s Pitt Rivers Museum, items were grouped together by type—watercraft, cooking containers, smoking equipment, and so on—and arranged from the simplest (least
advanced) to the more complex (most advanced), irrespective of the culture that had produced the objects or their context within that culture.

Pitt Rivers’s and Spencer’s interpretations of social Darwinism were not the only frameworks for museum collections and exhibits. When the German anthropologist Franz Boas became the assistant curator of anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in 1896, he brought with him a very different perspective (Jacknis 1985). Boas was not convinced that a linear, evolutionary model offered an accurate explanation of the variety of cultural expressions. Rather, he believed that, in order to understand a culture, we needed to understand how all of the parts contribute to the complex whole—a perspective that came to dominate anthropology early in the twentieth century. Within the museum context, this meant that objects should be interpreted only within their cultural milieu. The approach that Boas developed accordingly “focused on how objects are used and included cultural context (for example, through dioramas) to access the meaning of the objects according to the people from whom they originated” (Shannon 2009, 224). It was important, then, to record the details of how people behaved and to collect a wide variety of material culture that helped to describe and explain the behaviour.

At the AMNH, with the financial support of key benefactors, Boas began a period of intense fieldwork and collecting on the Northwest Coast and in the Arctic. As tensions developed between Boas’s insistence on the importance of research and publications and the museum administration’s need for documentation of the collections and label writing for the exhibits, Boas resigned and joined Columbia University, where he developed a program that was instrumental in shaping anthropology in North America for many generations. His students went on to populate universities and museums, where they developed research programs that followed Boas’s prescriptions. Clark Wissler’s publications on Blackfoot culture exemplify the process in which a series of cultural traits, such as ceremony, material culture, and mythology, are described in detail and artifacts are collected that exemplify these traits—ceremonial bundles, clothing, tools and utensils, and so on (see Wissler 1911, 1913, 1918, 1975a, 1975b).

Boas and his students were less interested in contemporary Aboriginal life than they were in these cultures as they had existed before the arrival of Europeans in the hemisphere. They were largely concerned with recording lists
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of cultural traits and understanding the cultural context that articulated human interaction with the physical environment. Relatively scant attention was given to the connections between cultures that created nuanced contexts. However, because many Aboriginal people had already been greatly influenced by interactions with Europeans, Boas and his students were faced with the monumental task of retrieving and preserving as much as they could of these “traditional” cultures, prior to their presumed contamination as a result of contact. If a practice or object had already fallen into disuse, people would be asked to recreate a “remembered culture” that could be captured for the anthropological record.

As a result, collections in many museums came to represent cultures that were “frozen in time” in a fictionalized “ethnographic present.” In essence, this process involved recording the accounts of Aboriginal people as they recalled how life had been in the past. Within museums, this was translated into the arrangement of artifacts in “life studies,” or dioramas, that portrayed Aboriginal people in abstracted, fictionalized settings that were oddly nostalgic, summoning up a way of life and a time that, in many cases, had long since disappeared. It was often implied that, just as the lifeways had disappeared, so too had the people. While this inference may or may not have been intentional, the impact was far reaching: if Aboriginal people had disappeared, there was no need to develop social, economic, or political programs that would address their ongoing concerns. Moreover, if traditional cultures were lost (or were about to be), it was only right that the material expressions of those cultures be collected and preserved in the artifact collections of museums. Museum curators were challenged with “salvaging” the objects and any knowledge about them.

In spite of the influence of Boas and others, museums remained eclectic in their approach to collecting and exhibiting cultures. George Heye’s Museum of the American Indian in New York is an important counterpoint to the contextual approach that was emerging in North American museums in the early years of the twentieth century. The scion of a wealthy New York family, Heye abandoned the world of finance to devote his time, energy, and resources to collecting Indigenous material culture from throughout the Americas. Various portrayal as a “buccaneer,” a “rapacious” collector, and a “crazy white man” (see McMullen 2009, 65–66), he amassed a private collection of some 800,000 items by buying individual pieces and large assemblages from museums and collectors. With the support of influential businessmen, he also funded

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990172.01
archaeological and anthropological expeditions and a great many publications reporting the results of these undertakings. Heye’s underlying quest was to uncover and understand the origins of Aboriginal people in the New World.

While many portray Heye only as a collector, McMullen (2009) probes the motives that led him to found the Museum of the American Indian in 1916. This was a time when many large American museums were turning away from archaeological studies of North America in favour of investigating ancient civilizations in other parts of the world. In addition, public education was becoming a greater focus of museums, with collecting increasingly oriented toward “exhibits rather than pure science” (McMullen 2009, 76). Heye was dedicated to providing a site in New York City where adults could find serious, research-based information about the Aboriginal people of the western hemisphere. He was particularly interested in early material and often refused to purchase more recently made material. Furthermore, while dressed mannequins and dioramas were gaining popularity, Heye chose to exhibit his material in closely packed display cases with minimal commentary. When Heye lost financial support for his museum in 1928, he dismissed most of his professional staff but continued to collect material and compile catalogue documentation himself. Eventually, the Heye Foundation collection became the core of the National Museum of the American Indian.

The repatriation initiatives of the Blackfoot have, so far, been largely directed toward the Royal Alberta Museum (formerly the Provincial Museum of Alberta) and the Glenbow Museum. Both have extensive collections of Blackfoot material and, as Alberta institutions, are readily accessible to the Blackfoot people. Although the histories and philosophies of these institutions generally reflect the history of museum development outlined above, these museums are also unusual in some very important aspects. The interactions that Blackfoot people have had with the Alberta museums have influenced how the Blackfoot approach other institutions; in turn, the responses of the provincial museum and the Glenbow have influenced how other museums react to Blackfoot repatriation requests. It is therefore worth considering the contexts within which these two museums developed.

The project to create the Provincial Museum of Alberta (PMA) was initiated in 1962 as a celebration to commemorate Canada’s 1967 centennial. Matching federal and provincial funds provided the resources to hire staff,
develop collections, construct the building, and create exhibits. Raymond O. Harrison was hired as the inaugural director in 1964, with a mandate to complete the project within three years. As Alberta’s economy boomed throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the museum continued to expand, adding staff, artifacts, and exhibits. It was during this time that much of the sacred material in its collection was acquired. The early exhibits reflected a Boasian perspective, with artifacts grouped together by culture in ways that illustrated various aspects of those cultures. Occasionally, there were also exhibits that compared some items among Aboriginal cultures: for example, groupings of snowshoes or canoes. Staff members seem to have understood and appreciated the significance of the items that were being gathered. On at least one occasion, a sacred bundle, upon its addition to the collection, was ceremonially transferred to a museum employee, although it is not clear whether the staff fully understood the responsibilities that this implied. The provincial museum was clearly meant to be an institution that celebrated the history and achievement of the people of Alberta. Although not as grand as the Louvre or the British Museum, it was intended to serve much the same purpose by highlighting the unique features and the importance of Alberta’s cultural heritage. Significantly, the collections are not owned by the Province of Alberta (which implies a bureaucratic prerogative) but by the people of Alberta, signifying a collective attachment.

The Glenbow Museum originated in much the same way as the Museum of the American Indian (Dempsey 1991). Eric L. Harvie, a Calgary lawyer, had invested in property near Leduc and Redwater, Alberta, during the 1930s. In the late 1940s, when oil was discovered at both locales, he became one of the wealthiest people in Canada. He used some of his new wealth to pursue his passion for collecting, and although his interests were eclectic, there were three overarching themes. First, he acquired art and artifacts about the West, especially as they pertained to the pre- and early settlement period of southern Alberta. Second, he was interested in the military, collecting arms and armour from around the world. Third, he acquired materials that were exotic in the eyes of southern Albertans. Harvie travelled extensively at a time when few people had the opportunity to do so, and he felt that it was important that other parts of the world be brought to Calgary. For many years, he displayed portions of his collection of art, artifacts, books, and archival material in a network of spaces throughout the city, where they were available to both school groups
and the general public. In honour of Canada’s centennial, Harvie donated his collection to the Province in 1966 and, with a matching grant from the Province, created an endowment fund for the museum. During the 1970s, he negotiated an agreement with the City of Calgary and the Province of Alberta that led to the construction of the current building, which the Province owns and the City maintains (fig. 3). The Glenbow Museum, however, is a not-for-profit organization that manages the collection for the Province, in exchange for an annual fee-for-service. It is a unique museum model in Canada.

The Glenbow’s approach to the interpretation of its ethnographic collection has, in general, tended to be closer to that of Pitt Rivers and Heye than that of Boas. When the present museum opened in 1976, collections were grouped according to geographic area and, within that, according to culture of origin. The display techniques emphasized the pieces as objets d’art, with text that provided little context (fig. 4). While the main exhibits featured material from the Great Plains and other parts of Canada, the collections from Oceania, Africa, and Latin America were held in reserve for special occasions. There was a sense that the museum and its artifacts reflected both the brashness of Calgarians (and Albertans) and their growing sophistication. The brashness derived from bringing “world class” material to Calgary and exhibiting it in a “state of the art” facility. The sophistication stemmed from the scope of material presented. At the time, the city was often disparaged as a “cowtown” lacking the knowledge to produce such a facility, let alone an audience to appreciate it.

The provincial museum and the Glenbow began their collecting programs relatively late. If the museum anthropologists of the early twentieth century felt that Aboriginal cultures were beginning to disappear, the continuation of traditional practices seemed even more tenuous by the 1960s. Collecting expeditions from both institutions travelled throughout southern Alberta in search of items that had historic importance or that were associated with important individuals. Often, museum representatives developed close personal relationships with First Nations people. The museums came to be regarded by some as suitable repositories for items that seemed no longer to have either purpose or meaning.

The collection records at the Glenbow suggest that the items were collected as commodities, as representations of disappearing cultures, and as a source of celebration and pride in the province. The commodification is
Figure 3. Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, 2010. Photograph by Owen Melenka, courtesy of the Glenbow Museum.
Figure 4. Glenbow ethnographic exhibits, ca. 1976. Photograph by Ron Marsh, courtesy of the Glenbow Museum.
reflected in the focus on the prices paid for items and, in some cases, the protracted negotiations over the appropriate price. In one rare instance, a bundle was sold to the Glenbow with the stipulation that it could be bought back within a year if the seller changed his mind. By the time the seller requested the bundle’s return, the year had passed and the request was denied. In many cases, the sacred material that came to the Glenbow was accompanied by extensive notes about its role in sacred societies and ceremonies. A series of ceremonial songs were recorded, and some ceremonies were even photographed. One film, Okan, Sun Dance of the Blackfoot, followed the events of the annual Aako’ka’tssin, or summer gathering, held by the Siksika in the mid-1960s. These were all undertaken with the full cooperation of the Aboriginal people involved. These individuals were highly respected ceremonial leaders, and there is no doubt that they supported these projects. However, their motives were not recorded, so it is not clear whether they, like their museum colleagues, felt that they were participating in an effort to salvage fading traditions.

**The Politics of Museums**

Until the 1980s, few people in the museum community were accustomed to thinking about museums as either instruments of state political agendas or as moulders of public opinion. The perceived objectivity with which museums carried out their work added immense credibility to anything presented by these institutions; the veracity of museum interpretation was rarely challenged, and those who did so were rarely heeded. Yet the motives that underlie the development of collections reflect prevalent attitudes toward both objects and the people who made and used them. The ways in which artifacts have been (and continue to be) exhibited and interpreted are determined by a matrix of influences that includes a museum’s corporate organization, funder relationships, special audiences, the “general” audience, academic and museological epistemological trends that influence how curators (and other museum staff) approach their work, and, increasingly, the people whose culture and history are represented in the collections and portrayed in the exhibits. Museums, of course, have never existed in a social or political vacuum. European museums may have originated as cabinets of curiosity, but the concept of the museum

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doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990172.01
was soon embraced by the ruling elite as a valuable means of defining and pro-
moting national ideals and values. Social and natural scientists studied and cate-
egorized artifacts and specimens in an effort to understand a world that seemed
to be ever expanding. The ruling elite found messages embedded in these same
objects that reinforced the social order and drew upon the loyalty and support
of the population.

In France, for example, the collections of the Crown, the Church, and the
aristocracy became the property of the state once the Republic was established
(Grasset 1996, 190). The decree of 17 July 1793 transformed the royal palace into
the Louvre, a public museum that guaranteed access to its collections for all
of the people of France and a place where the values of liberty, equality, and
fraternity were realized in a very tangible way. A decade later, as Napoleon I
(r. 1804–1815) conquered most of Europe and North Africa, the plunder that his
troops brought back from afar was housed in museums that were built not only
in Paris but throughout the country. The collections included many antiquities
and initially served as mementos of the past and as evidence of the growing
national prosperity as the French empire expanded. At the same time, as the
objects became a subject for study by scientists, they became a useful tool for
social and political propaganda. The citizens developed a strong sense of owner-
ship—and pride in that ownership—toward the collections. Concomitantly,
the state converted this pride of ownership into a pride in the nation and, by
association, in the nation’s leaders. The strength of the nation, and therefore
the resoluteness and foresight of its leaders, was exemplified by the marvelous
objects that became the property of France. These collections were housed in
publicly accessible museums throughout the country for everyone to enjoy.

In the United Kingdom, the strong conservative reaction to the revolu-
tionary attitudes that were emerging in France, Prussia, and elsewhere on the
Continent during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries inhibited
the democratization of museums. Rather than transfer private collections to the
public trust, the aristocracy retained ownership and controlled access to those
who were deemed to be suitable (usually, other aristocratic males). However,
by the late 1850s, industrialization had transformed British demographics as
people had migrated from the countryside to the burgeoning cities that were
the sites of manufacturing and commerce. This growing population of urban
poor was considered by the ruling class to be the source of innumerable social

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990172.01
ills. Some believed that museums and similar institutions could assume a new, socially responsible role that would draw the lower classes away from the taverns and toward the art, artifacts, and literature of Western civilization. Character reformation and a general improvement in the nature of the working class was sure to follow, as this passage from the opening of the Sheepshank Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1858 suggests: “The anxious wife will no longer have to visit the different taprooms to drag her poor besotted husband home. She will seek for him in the nearest museum, where she will have to exercise all the persuasion of her affection to tear him away from the rapt contemplation of a Raphael” (quoted in Bennett 1996, 5).

At the same time, Spencer’s social Darwinism and Pitt Rivers’s model of material culture evolution reinforced Britain’s imperialistic strategy, not only for the population at home but also for the military who conquered other peoples and for the bureaucrats in the Foreign Service who administered the colonies. The unidirectionality of these theories implied that the dominance of European culture was inevitable; the development of a quasi-scientific model brought credence to the theories. The museum displays transformed the intangible (the theory) into the tangible (the arrangement of artifacts) and provided the verification of theory through observable results that is so crucial to the scientific method. The displays also made these theories more understandable to the general population.

As private collections were transformed into public museums, the meaning embedded within the objects was profoundly affected. As Ames (1992, 21) observes, “The public . . . came to believe that they had the right to expect that the collections would present and interpret the world in some way consistent with the values they held to be good, with the collective representations they held to be appropriate, and with the view of social reality they held to be true.” So, while objects may have been used initially to reinforce certain values, over time the public grew to expect that the interpretation of collections would reflect the now commonly held world view. Museums became the temple for society (Cameron 1971, 17), reifying the principles and beliefs expounded by the educated classes. They were sites where one could compare private, individualistic perceptions of reality with those held by society at large. Voices of minorities were conspicuously absent, thus excluding Indigenous perspectives from the “reality” that was created in museum displays.
More recently, the philosophy of education systems in general has evolved toward a student-centred pedagogy that acknowledges that different individuals may have distinct learning styles and that a single, monolithic education program is unlikely to be effective for everyone. As the public has come to expect more diverse ways of receiving information, museums have realized the importance of developing programs and exhibit techniques that consider the needs of the visitor. The recognition of the visitor-centred museum experience (see Falk and Dierking 1992) as a vital prerequisite for success has led to what some professionals see as a declining role for curators: “The authority of curators has steadily diminished relative to that of other museum professionals and there is some concern over the effects of popularization on exhibit content” (Jones 1993, 202). Museums have also become financially vulnerable. As they struggle to find ways to remain viable by staying relevant to a public that has increasing access to an expanding variety of media, curators seem to “be losing power . . . to those who raise and manage money and those who design exhibitions and activities for the public” (202–203). In fact, the work culture of museums has become more collaborative and team based (Janes 2013).

At the same time, anthropology curators have been faced with a change in the framework within which they interpret their collections. While museums may have become “marginal to intellectual life” (McMullen 2009, 83), the theoretical frames of reference developed in academia continue to influence how curators work with collections and how critics evaluate exhibits and publications. By the 1980s, postmodernism and postcolonialism had focused attention on the processes by which collections had been amassed and the contexts within which they were exhibited. The formalist approach—which isolates objects from their cultural context and values them solely for their intrinsic, artistic value—was challenged as a perpetuation of the colonial (and usually racist) norm separating Us from the Other (see Price 1989; Torgovnick 1990). Similar concerns were raised by anthropologists who decried the objectification of Aboriginal people (see Trigger 1980, 1986; Wolf 1982).

Although much of the discussion has been phrased in language of academic discourse and has taken place in scholarly publications and at professional conferences, these are not just academic concerns. Museums are very public institutions, and they have found themselves accountable to those whose culture, history, and art they portray. When the Royal Ontario Museum opened
the exhibit “Into the Heart of Africa” in 1989 (Cannizzo 1989), the museum was not prepared for the vehemence of the negative reaction. A collection of African material, mostly gathered by Canadian missionaries, was displayed in such a way as to seemingly reinforce the negative racial stereotypes of the Victorian age. The curator had thought that the message underlying these stereotypes was being conveyed with an irony that would prompt visitors question their own lingering cultural and racial stereotypes. Was the approach too sophisticated for the public? Or was it inappropriate to use irony to address the racism of colonial powers? The African community in Toronto greatly disapproved of the exhibit’s content and approach, leading to public protests, a great deal of negative publicity for the museum, professional criticism of the curator, and personal threats to museum staff. As Ruth Phillips (2011, 60) notes, it can be dangerous to assume that the public will understand the use of “postmodern historicism and quotations to critique museums”; they may, instead, take the irony at face value.

A year earlier, the Glenbow Museum had faced public demonstrations as it hosted “The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples.” Developed as a cultural highlight for the 1988 Winter Olympic Games, this exhibit brought together items from Canada’s Aboriginal peoples that had been dispersed around the globe over the past three or four centuries. The initial issue arose when the Lubicon Cree, a non-treaty band from northern Alberta, targeted the exhibit as a means of drawing attention to the lack of progress in their treaty negotiations with the Government of Canada. Although the Glenbow had no role in those discussions, Shell Canada Ltd., the exhibit’s primary sponsor, was exploring for oil and gas in the contested area. This connection made the museum vulnerable to criticism for acting in collusion with an industry portrayed as more interested in profits than social justice. The Lubicon asked institutions to boycott the exhibit by refusing to lend artifacts. Some complied with the boycott; others agreed to loans. After the exhibit opened, other issues arose. Mohawk representatives requested that an Onkwehonwe (Iroquois) ga:go:h:sah (false face mask) be removed from display since it is considered a sacred object. Although the museum initially complied with the request, the matter was taken to court, where the right to exhibit the piece was upheld. The issues raised much discussion (see, for example, Ames 1989, 1992; Glenbow Museum 1988; Harrison 1988; Phillips 2011; Trigger 1989), and in the
end, the Glenbow was criticized for developing a high-profile exhibit about Aboriginal people without including them in the planning or curatorial process. Elsewhere, changes had already begun in museum-Aboriginal relationships that signalled a new era.

By the mid-1980s, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) had begun to work its way through the US legislative system. The impetus for NAGPRA arose over Native American concerns about the excavation and removal for study of their ancestral human remains. The issue may have been long-standing, but it was the political radicalism of the 1970s that empowered Aboriginal people to bring it to the fore and confront archaeologists, physical anthropologists, and legislators. Many archaeologists and physical anthropologists expressed great concern that limiting their ability to work with human remains would mean the loss of a great deal of important information (see Buikstra and Beck 2006; Rose et al. 1996; Thomas 2000). Museums, faced with the prospect of deaccessioning human remains and sacred material and returning them to situations that seldom conformed to museum standards of care and handling, wondered about the fate of this material and the changing values of society (Conaty and Janes 1997; Feest 1995).

NAGPRA does not, however, enable the wholesale removal of human remains and sacred material from museums. Before human remains can be returned, it must be demonstrated that they are affiliated with a formally recognized tribe as defined by the US government. Unaffiliated remains can be returned, but that requires consultation and agreement among all tribes who might have an interest. For cultural reasons, some may choose not to have the remains of their ancestors returned, in which case agreements are developed that define how and where the remains are to be kept.

The return of sacred material is similarly constrained by protocols and processes. NAGPRA recognizes that this kind of material can be personal, almost private, and may have come to an individual through a dream or vision. Other sacred material may be considered to be held in common by an entire nation but cared for by an individual or group of individuals. On the one hand, the law deems that personal material was owned by individuals and that those people had the legal right to sell, give away, or otherwise dispose of those objects. Communal material, on the other hand, could not have been legitimately alienated from the collective, and such materials are thus eligible
for repatriation. Determining whether a sacred item is personal or collective property can, however, be contentious (Bell, Statt, and Mookakin Cultural Society 2008; Conaty 2004; Echo-Hawk 2002). NAGPRA applies only to material in museums that receive funding from the US government (except for the Smithsonian Institution, which is governed by its own repatriation legislation) and only to Aboriginal people living in the United States—although since the 1990s, some Canadian First Nations have brought sacred material home through associated tribes in the United States. Nevertheless, the act raised expectations among Canadian First Nations people, and as requests for the return of material became more common, museums began to consider how best to react.

It was within this context that the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association formed the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples in 1989. Over the next three years, representatives of various First Nations communities and organizations and representatives of select museums met nationally and in regional working groups as they endeavoured to find a way of bridging what seemed to be an expanding chasm between museums and First Nations. While the task force’s final report (Hill and Nicks 1992) makes several general recommendations for ways in which museums and First Nations can work together, it was left to each institution to develop its own repatriation protocols and processes. Since most large museum collections in Canada are held by either provincial or federal institutions, overarching regulations might have required intergovernmental agreements that would have raised a great number of jurisdictional issues. Efforts to develop a national archaeological policy had been encumbered by similar problems. In fact, there is still no federal archaeological legislation or policy in Canada. The museum community felt that local solutions, rather than overarching bureaucratic directives, were more likely to result in meaningful projects and programs. The preference of museums for developing their own idiosyncratic repatriation processes was reaffirmed during a repatriation workshop sponsored by the Glenbow Museum in 1999.

The Task Force on Museums and First Peoples is considered by many in the Canadian museum community to have been a watershed in museum–First Nations relations in Canada, one that changed how museums viewed their collections, conducted research, and developed exhibits (Phillips 2011, 156). In fact, many projects had been undertaken in previous decades that had brought First
Nations people into the museum context. Both the British Columbia Provincial Museum (now the Royal British Columbia Museum) and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia had long-established programs that focused on coastal peoples. While these may not have given First Nations people a real voice in determining the content and expression of exhibits and programming, they did connect the audience with living First Nations people who were not frozen in time. On the prairies, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in southwestern Alberta (Brink 1992, 2010), the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History (now the Royal Saskatchewan Museum; Conaty 1989), and the Wanuskewin Heritage Park near Saskatoon, all included First Nations people as part of their exhibition development team. The Glenbow Museum established a First Nations Advisory Council to provide guidance throughout the museum on Aboriginal matters (see appendix 1) and began returning sacred objects in 1990.

At the Manitoba Museum, Katherine Pettipas developed a tradition of working respectfully with First Nations people to understand the collections. All of these projects contributed to a changing perspective in Canadian museums, one in which First Nations people were more integrally involved in exhibit and program development. This involvement, in turn, led to a greater openness in discussions about repatriation.

In Alberta, repatriation issues began to be a concern in 1989. Apatohsipiikani (Peigan) were looking forward to having an O’kaan, that is, a Sun Dance ceremony, and had accordingly asked the provincial museum for the loan of a Natoas bundle, which contains the headdress worn by the woman central to the ceremonies. After some discussion, the bundle was loaned, but only so that it could be replicated. The original was to be returned to the institution, while the new one would remain available for use. This was a controversial act: many people in the Piikani community were unsure whether it was proper to remake a sacred bundle, especially when the original was still intact. Nevertheless, the museum was firm that the items in the collection were to be preserved for study and not used. The bundle would remain as a reference for future generations of Piikani should the newly made bundle either fall into disrepair or be sold to a collector.

The Glenbow Museum also received repatriation requests at that time but reacted very differently. The first bundle that was requested was loaned to the Weasel Moccasin family, initially for a four-month term, but eventually on a
permanent basis. When other requests were made, we repeated the same loan process. The president and CEO, Robert Janes, and I both believed that it was important to assist in the revival and preservation of traditional ceremonial knowledge. As we understood the Blackfoot process of knowledge transfer, bundles must be physically present, and bundles with a history are more effective than newly made ones.

At some point in the 1990s, the provincial museum also began loaning bundles for ceremonial use, and, by the end of the decade, both institutions had a large number of bundles in Blackfoot communities with no expectation that they would be returned. Although, under such circumstances, the most straightforward procedure seemed to be to deaccession the material, it was not appropriate to apply the 1996 provincial “Policy on Disposition of Museum Collections and Objects” to First Nations sacred material, especially since the policy requires that material to be deaccessioned must first be offered to other Alberta institutions. Instead, the First Nations Sacred Ceremonial Objects Repatriation Act (FNSCORA) was created in recognition of the special nature of the material and of the repatriation process itself.

While NAGPRA and FNSCORA are meant to achieve the same ends, they differ from one another in some important ways. First, NAGPRA makes a clear distinction between communal and private property. FNSCORA is less concerned with this difference, but, unlike NAGPRA, it does require proof that an item is an integral part of an ongoing ceremony before it can be repatriated. Second, whereas NAGPRA requires the written support of elected tribal officials for any repatriation request, the Alberta act recognizes, at least tacitly, that an elected body does not necessarily have a right to consider sacred matters. Instead, FNSCORA requires communities to establish not-for-profit societies that are authorized, by band councils, to initiate repatriation requests and receive repatriated material. This process, in which items are returned not to individuals but to the collective, ensures that the provincial authorities are seen to be fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities with regard to the care and disposition of the provincial collections. Both acts apply only to people residing within the jurisdiction of the respective governments. Canadian Blackfoot people must thus enlist the assistance of the Ammskaapipiikani (Blackfeet) in Montana when requesting the repatriation of sacred objects from American museums. Similarly, First Nations from outside of Alberta must find people...
within the province to act on their behalf if they wish to repatriate their sacred material.

This overview of the history of museums helps us to understand the perspectives and values of the museums that Blackfoot people visited as they began repatriating sacred bundles. Of course, these museums were not uniform: each had developed in its own way. But they all held in common a respect for objects and a dedication to their preservation. Often, the Blackfoot had a very different understanding of the sacred material from that of museum personnel, and these differing views sometimes resulted in difficult discussions. It is therefore useful to consider why objects have become so important to museums and how these institutions care for and interpret their collections.

MUSEUMS AND OBJECTS

Objects are at the core of museum identity. As Barker (2010, 300) explains: “Of all the elements that constitute a museum (staff, buildings, donors, galleries, collections, etc.) any one could be removed without changing the fundamental character of the institution, except the collections. They define the profile and prospects of the institution in ways more profound and lasting than the mission statements and current situations.” Each museum defines itself by the content of its collections, by the kinds of objects collected by past and present staff. These collections shape the exhibits that are developed, the audiences that are attracted to the museum, and the relationships with donors. Museum personnel, perhaps especially curators, often define their professional (and sometimes personal) identity through the collections for which they care and for which they are responsible.

Concern with objects entails an obligation toward their well-being: “Conservators approach preserving the cultural significance of a heritage object by preserving its physical integrity (which they can ‘read’ through scientific evidence) and its aesthetic, historic, and conceptual integrity (which is interpreted through scholarship in related disciplines as well as ‘read’ through physical evidence)” (Clavir 2002, xvii). While this description is explicitly concerned with conservators, it may just as readily apply to curators and other museum professionals. Items that have been brought into a collection have been

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990172.01
chosen because of their special nature. In the discussion of the history of museums, we saw how that special nature may have changed over time, from exotica, to scientific facts, to physical records of disappearing cultures. Sometimes, the objects in collections are simultaneously all of these, and more.

What is it about objects that make them so important to us? This question has been addressed from many different perspectives (see Appadurai 1986b; Godelier 1996; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Lowenthal 1985; Pearce 1990, 1994b). Some contend that objects have embedded meanings that can be “read” objectively, much as a text is read (Hodder 1987; Pearce 1994a; Taborsky 1990; Tilley 1994). How that meaning is understood by the observer raises many questions: Is the meaning constructed by observers, on the basis of their previous knowledge and experiences (Taborsky 1990, 59)? Or does the object contain objective information that is accessible to everyone? To what extent does personal experience “cloud with misconceptions and prejudice” one’s ability to understand the meaning embedded in an object (Taborsky 1990, 60)? Curators struggle with how to understand the objects in their collections and how to convey that information to their publics. While the temptation is to provide all available information and let the observers decide for themselves, Sandell (2007, 17) warns that “by including different viewpoints but failing to arbitrate between them museums imply that they are of equal value, an implication which, in some instances, might be undesirable.”

However one approaches the interpretation of artifacts in a museum, there is an implied common agreement on the nature and worth of the objects among museum professionals and the museum-visiting publics. These values are not necessarily inherent in an object but may instead be ascribed and may change over time.

The recognition that “things” have social lives and that their status changes at different times and in different circumstances has been an important insight for students of material culture (Appadurai 1986a; Kopytoff 1986). These researchers believe that the role of an object at any time is culturally defined: as cultures change, so too can the meaning of material items. Much of this discussion has focused on the analysis of commodities (objects that can be exchanged through economic transactions) and the commodification of objects as they transition from one state to another, as well as on the concept of ownership. This perspective helps us to understand, for example, why there is often
such a negative reaction to the deaccessioning of objects from museum collections (Davis 2011). Items collected by museums are assumed to have attributes that make them special, unique, and thus unavailable as a commodity suitable for exchange. Transferring them to a commercial category leads to questions about the values and principles of society and how these may be changing.

Of special concern is a change in status of those items that are understood to be sacred. It is generally agreed that sacred objects cannot become commodities used in exchange (Appadurai 1986a; Kopytoff 1986). “So where do sacred objects stand?” asks Godelier (1996, 122), and then offers an answer:

*Between two types of gift,* but without being giveable. They hold this position because they were originally a gift from the gods to the ancestors of men. The gods therefore remain their true owners, and they have the right to repossess their gifts. But because these gifts were given by the gods to men, they can no longer be given by men to other men, except in special circumstances or for extraordinary reasons. On the other hand, what men may (and even must) give are the benefits, the positive effects emanating from the powers contained in these objects from the beginning.

This special nature of sacred objects would seem to have been compromised when they were incorporated into museum collections. While museum artifacts are acknowledged to be “special,” they are still considered material objects. Moreover, the process of turning a sacred object into a museum object has invariably involved the commodification of the item. That is, as these objects were sold to museums or to collectors, they became part of a secular exchange. Sacredness would, therefore, seem to have been doubly violated.¹¹

Lokensgard (2010) is concerned with how we can understand the alienation of sacred bundles from Blackfoot communities and how the meaning of those items can be very different for museums and for First Nations. He suggests that items can, and do, change their meaning as they move from one context to another. His insightful discussion and analysis of the meaning of sacred bundles illustrates their vitality and their significance within Blackfoot society. Following economic models developed by Karl Marx, Lokensgard sees the sale of sacred items to museums and other collectors as a process of
commodification during a period when Blackfoot people faced intense pressure to change their culture and adopt Western values. It is a compelling model, similar to those developed by Oscar Lewis (1942) in his examination of the impact of the horse on traditional culture, and David Nugent (1993), in his analysis of the changing modes of production following from the burgeoning growth of the bison robe trade in the late nineteenth century.

The analyses by Lewis, Nugent, and Lokensgard all suggest that Blackfoot culture changed radically at various times and that these changes altered fundamental cultural values. In fact, the Blackfoot found ways to incorporate these changes into their culture so that the core values remained strong. In the words of one Elder, “We adapted these things into our culture. We did not adapt our culture outward to them” (Frank Weasel Head, pers. comm., 2000). For example, early in the fur trade era, when guns were still a novel item, a formal transfer ceremony was developed in which a man was given the rights to load, prime, aim, and shoot a musket (Reg Crowshoe, pers. comm., 1992). This paralleled ceremonies through which men were given the rights to undertake various ceremonial duties, such as lighting a smudge. Similarly, following the introduction of horses, ceremonies were developed that served to incorporate horses into Blackfoot culture. The bison robe trade had a much more intrusive effect on Blackfoot culture, undoubtedly because of the widespread use of alcohol as an item of trade at the time. Nevertheless, Nugent’s (1993) conclusion that the need to produce hides to satisfy the demand for robes was the foundation of a polygamous system that favoured wealthy men does not take into consideration traditional Blackfoot social relationships that fostered care for extended families (see Conaty 1995). As disruptive as the robe-and-whisky trade was, the Blackfoot were able to adapt into their traditional culture and values many of the changes it brought.

Although the commodification of sacred bundles was antithetical to Blackfoot traditions, the property that is exchanged during traditional bundle transfers has been interpreted as a “payment” for the bundle and associated rights:

The transfer ceremony ends when the retiring Owner dances four times with the sacred Pipe. During the dance, he goes outside to inspect the goods offered as material payments for the Bundle. If he accepts them, he
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gives the Pipe to the new Owner. If he does not, he may either sing a song specifically requesting something the new Owner should sacrifice, or he may instruct the leader to close up the Bundle and call off the transfer. He would do the latter only if the prospective Owner’s lack of material sacrifice was a mockery. (Hungry Wolf 1977, 139)

As these comments imply, however, the “payment” is more properly explained as a sacrifice on the part of the new bundle keeper, an indication of his or her respect for all that the bundle symbolizes and of a commitment to caring for it with the appropriate respect. “Owner” is more correctly understood as the person who cares for the bundle on behalf of all Blackfoot people.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Aboriginal people who were working with non-Native scholars may not have fully grasped the conceptual framework underlying terms such as “payment,” “purchase,” and “owner.” Moreover, the terms used by the Blackfoot themselves in discussing the transfer of sacred bundles may not have been accurately translated, in a way that reflected the culture’s frame of reference. Words like “owner” and “purchase” nonetheless became entrenched in the literature about Blackfoot sacred bundles (McClintock 1999; Wissler 1913, 1915, 1918, 1975a, and 1975b) and, until the late 1990s, were often used by Blackfoot people themselves when discussing bundles and their transfers. Today, people who are working to repatriate bundles are very careful about the language they use. Still, when the Backfoot point out that “ownership” and “purchase” are not the correct translations, they are sometimes met with skepticism. Some argue that these words were correct at the time of the sale since the culture had already changed to such a degree that the sacred material had indeed become a commodity.

Repatriation confronts museums with multiple paradoxes. It was inappropriate in the first place for sacred objects to leave their originating cultural realm and enter into museum collections by becoming commodities. Within the museum, however, they have once more become special, and it is now difficult to remove them from their context as part of a collection. Both NAGPRA and FN S CORA acknowledge the sacredness of certain objects and recognize the inappropriateness of keeping them outside of their originating culture, and both acts address ways in which the objects can be removed from collections held in the public trust. NAGPRA insists that objects be defined as either

doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990172.01
personal or communal property, with only the latter eligible for repatriation, while FNSCOR A specifies that, in order to be considered for repatriation, an object must be shown to be vital for the continuation of collective ceremonial practices, rather than of purely personal or familial value. The problem that remains, however, is the non-Native perception of these items as “objects” rather than “beings,” thereby obliging Blackfoot people to comply with laws that concern property when seeking the return of sacred material. The following chapter examines the Blackfoot understanding of sacred material and the history that contributed to their alienation and eventual repatriation.

NOTES

2 For a useful overview, however, see Alexander, Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums (1996).
3 For a summary of Heye’s activities as a collector, see “George Heye’s Legacy: An Unparalleled Collection,” www.americanindian.si.edu/exhibitions/infinityofnations/george-heye.html.
5 In the 1960 film Circle of the Sun, Pete Standing Alone predicted the demise of Blackfoot ceremonial life. Within the decade, he became one of the main leaders of Itskinaiksi and continues to be a respected Elder.
6 Okan, Sun Dance of the Blackfoot (1966) was produced by the Glenbow Foundation, under the direction of Bill Marsden. At the request of Siksika ceremonial leaders, access to this film is restricted to Blackfoot people who are involved with sacred societies. According to Betty Bastien, in Blackfoot Ways of Knowing (2004, 195), Aako’ka’tssin literally means “circle encampment.” Her book includes a very useful glossary of Blackfoot names and terms.
7 See Colwell-Chanthaphonh, Maxson, and Powell (2011) for a discussion of the complexity of this issue.
8 See Burley (1994) and the ensuing dialogue.
9 The policy, presently available at http://www.museums.ualberta.ca/en/AdvisoryServices/~media/museums/Documents/Forms%20Cabinet/Policy-Disposition-of-Museum-Collections-and-Objects.pdf, states: “Whenever public funds are made available by the Provincial Government to a public museum or other public trust to purchase, acquire, restore, or maintain any historic artifact, natural history specimen, work of art, sculpture, archival document or similar object deemed to be primarily of value for its historical interest, every reasonable effort shall be made by the agency or institution to
have such materials remain in the care and custody of an appropriate public body in Alberta.” On deaccessioning, see p. 2.

10 See also Brown (2011) for an analysis of the controversy surrounding the Manchester Museum’s “polyvocal” exhibit, in 2008–2009, of the two-thousand-year-old body of the Lindow Man. By combining multiple viewpoints, the exhibit sought to explore differing perspectives on the physical remains and on the violent manner of the man’s death.

11 The violation of sacred status through commodification was one aspect of the controversy that erupted in the Blackfoot community following the sale, by Montana sculptor Robert Scriver, of his family’s collection of Blackfeet artifacts to the Provincial Museum of Alberta, which Frank Weasel Head discusses later in this volume. The collection, reportedly valued at over a million dollars, included numerous sacred bundles and other ceremonial items. In addition, many of these items originated in Canada, which further complicated questions of “ownership.” For a discussion of the legal issues involved, see Bell, Statt, Solowan, Jeffs, and Snyder (2008, 370–72). On the exhibit that accompanied the acquisition, see Stepney et al. (1990).

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doi:10.15215/aupress/9781771990172.01