



Above: *Culture at the Centre* gallery entrance, MOA.
Photo credit: Derek Stevens, courtesy of MOA

COLLABORATION

What Does Doing it Right Look Like?

Jill Baird and Pam Brown

MOA opened a new exhibition on March 18, 2018 in collaboration with the Musqueam Cultural Education and Resource Centre, Squamish-Lil'wat Cultural Centre, Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre, Nisga'a Museum and Haida Gwaii Museum and Haida Heritage Centre at Kay Llnagaay. The exhibition is called *Culture at the Centre*. It is the first of its kind where five Indigenous cultural centres come together to share their knowledge in a mainstream museum. The exhibit is co-hosted by Musqueam, and therefore protocol dictates that Musqueam should not only welcome museum visitors, but also welcome collaborators from other

First Nations to work and share their culture on Musqueam unceded territory.

The exhibition offers insights into the important work Indigenous cultural centres and museums in British Columbia are doing to support language, culture and history. By bringing the diverse centres together in a single space for the first time, the exhibit shows the kind of research they undertake, the types of cultural activities they support, the way they communicate their histories, teach and mentor their youth, as well as help non-Indigenous visitors understand that for these communities, land, language and culture are all interconnected and inseparable.

The Idea

The project started with a question raised at the BCMA conference in Whistler in 2016. How can BC museums actively support the work of BC Indigenous communities through their cultural centres and museums?

For us at MOA, the question became how can MOA support our colleagues in Indigenous cultural centres and museums. What is needed and what can we do? The short answer was two key things. First, offer a venue for the community to speak, raise issues and have a forum, and second, bring people and financial resources to the table to support and advance the work already

taking place in Indigenous cultural centres and museums. Simple, right?

Yes and no. The commitment needed to do collaborative work is a major one. Time is really what is needed most. Time to build and enrich relationships. Time to determine what needs to be said, how and by whom. Time to get to know new people. Time was one thing we were short on. The five Indigenous cultural centres and museums in our project had never worked with each other before.

The Process

This project started with a few colleagues in February 2017. By May 2017, we had a working group of six Indigenous cultural centres and museums and met in person for the first of only two face-to-face meetings. Due to institutional changes, one museum had to step away. In June of 2017, the group was set and communication strategies were put in place. They included regular conference calls, emails (thousands), Trello (an internet communication board) and a drop site called workspace UBC for file sharing.

The project was managed centrally by us, the MOA co-curators, though everything from budgets, to timelines and all content was in the hands of the larger working group. We did many things collectively and some just between individual centres and MOA. Working at a distance was a challenge. We had one-hour

phone calls every three weeks until January of this year – then we moved to weekly phone calls. Most of the group participated in most of the conference calls despite the fact that every organization at the table was busy on many fronts. It needs to be said that most of our partner organizations are small – two to five staff persons. Work in their organizations did not stop.

The themes of *Land and Language*, *Community and Continuity* and *Repatriation and Reconciliation* formed the backbone of the exhibition and were generated at our first in-person meeting at MOA in late May 2017. The themes then drove the discussion and the selection of belongings, artworks, video, photographic and written contributions. Nothing really fit into just one theme, as our discussions kept

returning to the fact that from an Indigenous perspective, everything is interconnected.

Land, language and culture are inextricably linked.

To demonstrate this interconnectedness, the Indigenous cultural centres and museums in the exhibition draw on their teachings, ancient stories and material and cultural riches.

Connecting a sturgeon harpoon, a moon mask, a model canoe and an oolichan scoop to *Land and Language* proved easier than you might think. A 35-foot sturgeon harpoon speaks volumes to Musqueam ancestral knowledge that is still in the community, and still teaching valuable lessons. The model canoe



Above: Inside view of the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre, Bella Bella. Photo credit: Courtesy Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre.

**“Everything connects to everything else”
—Jisgang Nika Collison, Haida.**

Right: Gallery view of *Kalga Jaad*, by Haida artist *skil kaat'las, Reg Davidson*, 2010.
Photo credit: Ken Mayer, courtesy of MOA.

Below Right: *Carl Point, Musqueam* singing and drumming in exhibition team at the opening of *Culture at the Centre* at MOA, March 18, 2018.
Photo credit: Derek Stevens. Courtesy MOA..

Below Left: *Jisgang Nika Collison, E.D. Haida Gwaii Museum and co-curator Culture at the Centre* at MOA at the opening March 18, 2018.
Photo credit: Photo by Derek Stevens. Courtesy MOA.



teaches how to build and navigate the rivers of Squamish territories and the Heiltsuk moon mask signals the arrival of the herring, while the oolichan scoop illustrates the idea of the Nisga'a common bowl philosophy.

Language is heard and seen throughout the exhibition. Due to the colonial assault on Indigenous languages through residential schools and other assimilative pressures, the number of fluent speakers in each community has dropped drastically. The role of cultural centres is critical in supporting language revitalization.

For the theme of *Community and Continuity*, we created eleven short films drawn from video resources provided by the communities. In

their own words and moving images, the centres show their teachings, histories, and territories. The media installation reveals the diversity of Musqueam, Squamish, Lil'wat, Heiltsuk, Haida and Nisga'a cultures and languages, and the challenges and responsibilities the centres carry on behalf of their communities.

“We dance in both worlds.” Jolene Sampare, Nisga'a

The theme of *Community and Continuity* is further explored by juxtaposing generations of artists within and across cultures. When cultural practices were discouraged and driven underground by missionaries and colonial legislation, artists

worked at keeping the arts alive. These historic artists continue to influence new generations.

In the *Repatriation and Reconciliation* section of the exhibit, we speak to modern treaty-making by showing a Nisga'a button blanket gifted to the Lieutenant Governor of BC. We also illustrate reconciliation between Indigenous communities by showing the Musqueam-Squamish Agreement, and acknowledge the ongoing need for repatriating cultural wealth back to the communities by giving an example of a Haida repatriation in progress at MOA.

Repatriation and reconciliation are calls to action: steps toward changing the relationships between Indigenous people and museums, and the communities museums serve. Without exception, the five cultural centres have taken up the challenges of repatriation and reconciliation within and outside their communities. Repatriation concerns the return to Indigenous communities of control and authority over material currently held in museums. This includes the return of ancestors as well as cultural riches: personal belongings, ceremonial objects, oral history and song recordings and other research and materials that over generations have been sold, stolen, traded and otherwise removed from Indigenous communities.



Above: Visitor exploring the HíłZAQV (Heiltsuk) online dictionary.
Photo credit: Ken Mayer, courtesy of MOA.

FEATURE ARTICLE

“The process that we have engaged in has created a web of connection lines that criss-cross this province, a communication network that will endure long past the run of this exhibition.” Yukiko Stranger-Galey, *Beaty Biodiversity Museum*.



Photo: Community and Continuity media installation *Culture at the Centre*.
Photo credit: Derek Stevens. Courtesy of MOA

The Legacy and the Lessons

By whatever measure, we believe *Culture at the Centre* was a success. Relationships were deepened, new ones established, friends made.

We used technology to help us overcome some of the challenges. Sharing drafts of design and text electronically was helpful in some ways, and created problems in others. Discomfort and lack of experience with different electronic platforms and their requirements was a hurdle. Access to reliable internet connections was an issue for some, as was version control of text and edits in the Google documents we created.

For MOA, balancing the expectations was often difficult. It was not until we had a draft exhibition design, and some draft text for the overall themes that we were all able to see more clearly how each contribution could connect.

Our job was to link the different perspectives and themes into a whole.

Exhibition and graphic design were critical components that really helped bridge the differences between the centres, bring a cohesive look for the show and create a welcoming space that allowed for the media installation to communicate the diversity and vibrancy of the communities.

The opening was important too, not just to mark the beginning, but to acknowledge the work and the communities' participation. Over 1200 visitors came to MOA to witness.

Reconciliation is about finding a way forward to deal with the history of colonization and to take meaningful steps toward decolonizing our hearts, minds and institutions. *Culture at the Centre* is one way of working towards reconciliation between non-Indigenous and Indigenous cultural centres and museums, and the communities they represent.



Dr. Jill Baird is Curator of Education at the UBC Museum of Anthropology. She has worked in cross-cultural education through collaborative program development for two decades. Working with cultural practitioners, knowledge keepers and artists, she has co-developed a range of museum ed-

ucational resources for schools and for the general public. Her doctoral research focused on Indigenous and non-Indigenous museum collaborations, and she currently teaches in the Masters of Museum Education at UBC.

Pam Brown is of Heiltsuk and Kitasoo ancestry. She is an anthropologist and curator, Pacific Northwest at the UBC Museum of Anthropology. Her expertise includes material culture, collaborative research, community exhibitions and Aboriginal internships. Pam's priority is to make museum resources more accessible to Aboriginal artists, Elders, youth, communities and organizations.



She has been privileged to direct the Native Youth Program since 1994, and is currently a part of the Hítzaqv Language Mobilization Partnership team at UBC working with the Heiltsuk Cultural and Education Centre.