

Restoring Indigenous Perspectives

Museums that hold Native peoples' cultural histories need to center those communities in all facets of their operations.

By Jaclyn M. Roessel

There were no museums in my tiny hometown on the Navajo reservation. Regardless, I grew up exploring the interactive galleries of various museums in the Southwest with my dad, a photographer, as he attended meetings about museum exhibits.

Also, my late grandparents helped fundraise for a new facility that would become the Navajo Nation Museum, Library and Visitor's Center. In fact, we would eat dinner with the model of the museum on the table. This spirit of self-determination guided my choice to work in museums. My family saw them as a tool to facilitate our community's ties to our culture and history.

This positive introduction to the world of museums was the beginning of a lifelong journey in the field that has had many unexpected and troubling intersections.

Harmful Practices and Systems

During a visit to a prominent

museum with fellow interns, I had my first uncomfortable interaction. We were in the cultural resource department with other Navajo relatives, viewing our ancestors' belongings shelf by shelf, eagerly working our way up the compact storage unit. At one point, my friend was standing high on a ladder and slid a drawer open. At that exact moment, the curatorial staffer who was guiding us walked away. Atop the ladder, my friend let out an audible gasp. He then said a phrase in Navajo in a tone that was somber and cautionary. It was obvious that what he saw was alarming, and he warned us not to look.

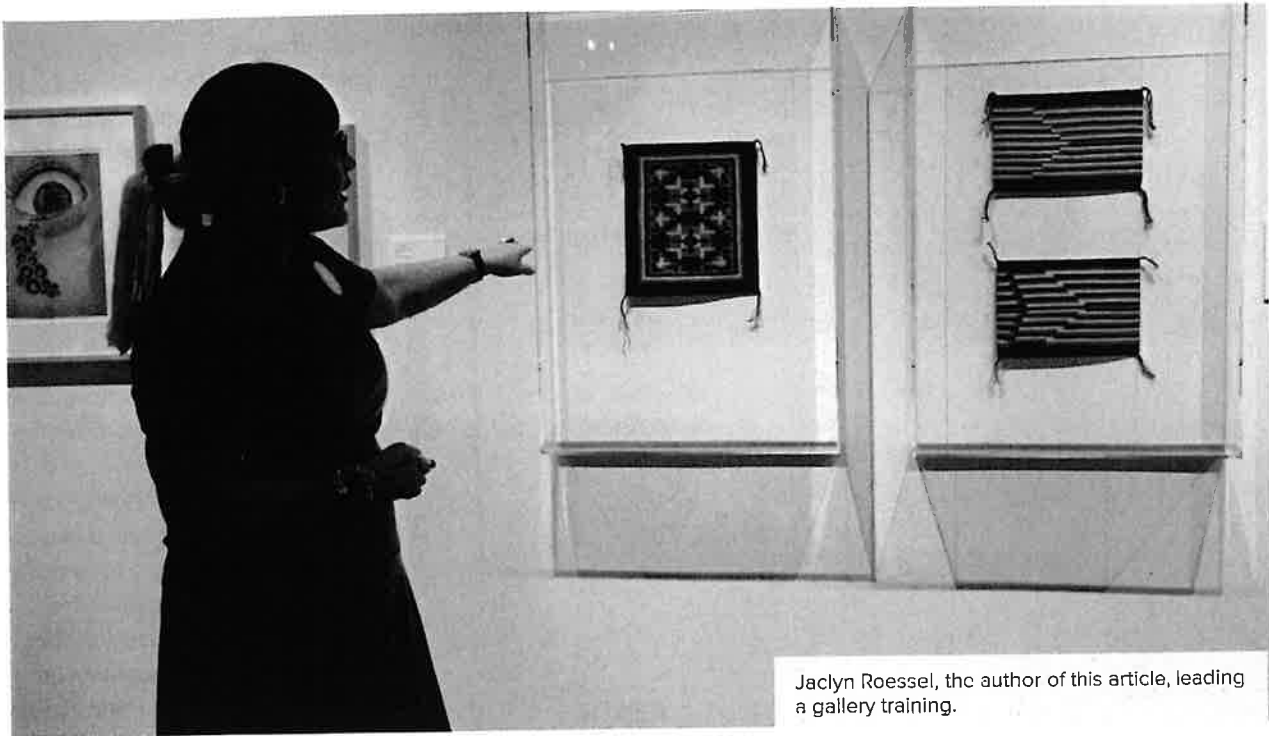
As he descended the ladder, we nervously waited for what he would share. He told us that the drawer was full of medicine bundles from our community along with other items, which I choose not to disclose in this article. As we stood there shaken, the curatorial staffer came around the corner and breezily said that we should be aware that the higher we look

in the storage, the more sensitive the items would be. This delayed, nonchalant warning has stayed with me for 15 years.

You may be asking why this mattered. For my community, and many other Indigenous people, these items are not simply "sensitive"; they are sacred. The experience was a blunt reminder of the colonial history our community and ancestors survived. The belongings in that drawer are powerful parts of our people's religion. We stood there knowing these sacred belongings should not be in a drawer thousands of miles away from our homelands, separated from our people.

That moment in the cultural resource department was only the beginning of me questioning whether museums were where I wanted to work. In her book, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, Ho-Chunk scholar Amy Lonetree explains, "Museums can be very painful sites for Native peoples, as they are intimately tied to the





Jaclyn Roessel, the author of this article, leading a gallery training.

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colonization process.” Each new instance or interaction that made me question my work in museums illustrated this truth to me.

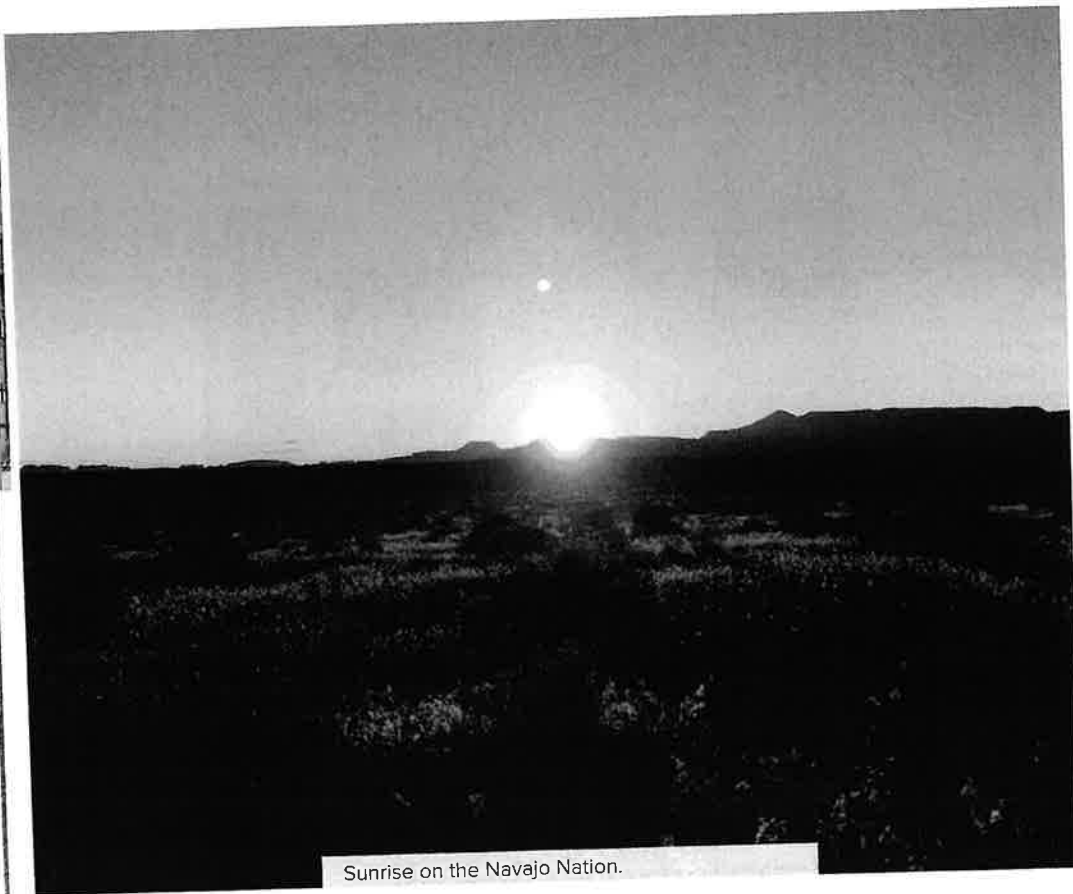
Lonetree’s scholarship about decolonizing museums has given me the language and tools to articulate the tensions I felt working in museums. Most important, her research has complemented the teachings of my upbringing as a Diné person. While my family

taught me the value and power of building stronger communities, Lonetree showed me that it is also necessary to dismantle inequitable structures to ensure that the foundation upon which we build our community is healthy and strong enough to support the growth we want. Lonetree relates the work of decolonization to three actions: commit to truth-telling, collaborate with Indigenous people, and

center Indigenous perspectives.

During my later years working in museums, I was the only Native senior manager at an organization focused on educating the public about Native American art and culture. It was a lonely and exhausting time. I was constantly educating non-Native staff and visitors about various Native cultures and protocols. It wasn’t until I established my consulting career

Photo by Kirsten Dorsey



Sunrise on the Navajo Nation.

that I learned the necessity of directly acknowledging the harmful practices and systems that exist within museums and their toll on Native peoples.

Preserving Our Culture

A common misconception museum staff hold is that Native people don't want to preserve their own cultures. On the contrary, Indigenous people think about the preservation of their cultures on a daily basis. Because of modern influences, we are under continuous threat of not knowing our traditional values and practices. Cultural preservation may look different in our communities, but it doesn't mean it isn't valued.

In my community, more than half of the Navajo population is under the age of 30. In the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, more than half the

HOW CAN YOU DECOLONIZE YOUR PRACTICE?

Integrate land acknowledgements into the guiding protocols of your museum.

Paying homage to the homeland community a museum sits on aids in the truth-telling that every organization can do. It helps center Indigenous perspective and history.

Rethink the language your museum uses to describe the cultural material of non-Anglo cultures.

Terms like "artifact" and "object" contribute to the erasure of the Indigenous histories. Using community-centered terms like "belonging" and "cultural resource" acknowledge the ownership and value these items have within Indigenous communities that still exist today.

Establish working groups of Indigenous community members.

Engaging Indigenous community groups around action-oriented issues involves community members in the decision-making of the museum. It is also critical to consider how Native community members and scholars can help shape your museum at all levels, from the board to front-line staff.

population is under the age of 18. Across Indian country, this growing tide of Native youth is challenging us to think about how they will learn how to carry on our ways.

Because of this demographic shift and the migration of our people to urban areas, more Native youth are growing up away from their culture and homelands. As Native communities think about how our cultures will continue to be introduced and taught, it is clear that Native youth will need more opportunities to engage with their peoples' belongings.

This is a need that our communities will continue to have, and our people should not be expected to simply interact with museums on

the museums' terms. Instead, we have the right to commune with our cultural belongings in environments and in ways that will help nurture curiosity and foster ties to home communities.

I envision future generations of Native youth having evolving access to their cultural belongings so that they can study them within museums but also have the unhindered ability to return them to their communities for seasons or years at a time. I hope more museums institute community days so Indigenous people have time to pray, sing to, and commune with their ancestors' creations while under the stewardship of the museums.

For museums to evolve and remain relevant, they must de-center and relinquish their power of interpretation and ownership over Indigenous belongings. This is the future that I work toward—one that rightfully restores the perspectives of Indigenous communities and allows us to be stewards of our culture both inside and outside the museum walls.

Jaclyn Roessel is president/founder of Grownup Navajo, a company dedicated to sharing how Native American teachings and values are tools to help build greater cultural equity and inclusion in our society.

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