



THE ART NEWSPAPER

[Frieze Week](#) [Russia-Ukraine war](#) [Art market](#) [Museums & heritage](#) [Exhibitions](#) [Books](#) [Podcasts](#) [C](#)

Restitution
[Archive](#)

Oh, what potlatch: Harriman plunder returned to Alaska after a century

To great tribal feasting, five American museums have returned totem poles stolen from an Alaskan tribe in 1899

Jason Edward Kaufman

31 August 2001

In 1899, railroad tycoon Edward H Harriman led 24 scientists, naturalists, and artists on a survey of the Alaska coast. On the last leg of their two-month 9,000-mile journey they anchored off a Native American village at Cape Fox, near Alaska's southern border with British Columbia. The settlement appeared abandoned, so Harriman's party went ashore and helped themselves to totem poles, a decorated house, ceremonial blankets and other items, some of which later ended up in museums.

This summer, five prominent US museums returned a large part of the Harriman plunder.

The Smithsonian Institution, the Field Museum of Chicago, the Peabody Museum at Harvard, the Johnson Museum at Cornell, and the Burke Museum at the University of Washington sent

back four carved and painted totem poles and five large architectural fragments from a clan chief's house, all dating to the early to mid 19th century.

The 44-foot red cedar pole from the Smithsonian is the largest item ever repatriated under the 1990 Native American Graves Repatriation Act (NAGPRA, see box), which requires federally funded museums to inventory their Native American materials, and offer to return certain objects to the tribes.

All of the items were handed to the Cape Fox Corporation, a native body whose 290 shareholders include most of the descendants of the Tlingit Indians who had lived at Cape Fox until five years before Harriman arrived, when, decimated by smallpox, survivors moved to a federally funded village near Ketchikan.

“A hundred years ago museums were interested primarily in enlarging their collections, whereas my primary concern is building relations with native communities,” says Burke Museum curator Robin Wright, who adds that her museum decided the items were “stolen property”. “We’re giving back their history”, she says.

At the repatriation “potlatch”, hundreds of tribal elders in full regalia danced, sang, and feasted. The ceremony became a highlight of the opening days of “Harriman Retraced,” a recreation of the 1899 scientific expedition organised by Smith College, and documented in a PBS film to air next year.

Irene Dundas, repatriation manager for the Cape Fox Corporation, says the works will go into a new cultural centre to open next year. The locale already boasts “the largest totem park in the world” and attracts half a million tourists each summer.

“We’re trying to find the rest of the things that were taken,” she says, referring to masks, helmets, blankets, boxes, drums, and bear-shaped graveposts, most of which are probably in private collections exempt from NAGPRA.

Dundas adds that the Cape Fox Corporation recently purchased 1,000 Tlingit objects which may one day join the repatriated objects in a tribal museum.

How NAGPRA works

The US Native American Graves Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA) requires museums that receive any Federal funds to inventory their Native American materials, and offer to return

certain objects to Native American tribes. The main target of the act is the human remains of individuals lying in US museums and agencies. Native spiritual beliefs demand that ancestors be laid to rest along with their associated funerary objects. The legislation applies also to items deemed crucial to communal identity or ongoing religious practice.

Opponents of NAGPRA contend that the act subordinates scientific inquiry, vacates legitimate commercial transactions, promotes reburial or the destruction of significant objects, and relies on tenuous, even specious, claims of tribal affiliation.

A Federal district judge in Portland, Oregon, is about to rule on the fate of “Kennewick Man,” a 9,200-year-old skeleton that scientists are eager to study, but tribes as far away as Samoa claim as a distant relative. However, NAGPRA cases more typically are the equivalent of people asking museums to return their grandmother’s gravestone, or, in some cases, their grandmother herself.

Tim McKeown, NAGPRA coordinator for the National Park Service, reports that in 1990, the Congressional Budget Office estimated that US museums and Federal agencies held not only some 200,000 Native American human remains, but also 15 million other objects that were to be reviewed for repatriation. He and other experts say these estimates are “reasonable.”

More than 1,000 institutions have submitted documentation of their collections to tribes, and declared their readiness to repatriate the remains of a whopping 23,985 individuals and nearly 600,000 funerary objects (somewhat exaggerated by counting individual beads as single items), as well as more than 1,500 sacred or communally owned objects of cultural patrimony.

A backlog of such notifications awaits publication by the Park Service. And this doesn't even include the Smithsonian, which has repatriated just 3,000 of the 18,500 Native American remains it held in 1990.

[Restitution](#)

[Repatriation](#)

[Indigenous art](#)

[Alaska](#)
