

Besieged! Contemporary political, cultural and economic challenges to museums in the academy as seen from Ann Arbor*

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss some recent experiences of two museums at the University of Michigan. We use these cases – of the removal of Native American dioramas from the Exhibit Museum of Natural History and of responses to repatriation by the Museum of Anthropology – as a lens through which to examine the challenges, and the potentials, of university museums. We begin by describing the museums within the broader framework of museum culture at the University of Michigan, and the recent financial and organizational challenges they have faced. Moving from these structural challenges, we shift to debates about the content and missions of two museums that in somewhat different ways are each involved in disputes over culture and ownership. We explore how each museum has responded to these disputes and how each has interacted with multiple stakeholder communities, both within and beyond the university. We conclude by suggesting that the conflicts themselves are productive and that university museums can play important roles in engaging students, researchers, descendent communities, and the larger public in discussions of complex ethical and cultural issues.

Introduction

University museums throughout North America have faced profound challenges over the last decade. Many are dealing with budget cuts associated with the economic recession. Some have been forced to close their doors. Others have experienced threats to their collections as universities and state legislatures have sought to sell collections in whole or in part to address budget shortfalls. The most extreme and celebrated recent case in the United States was the thwarted attempt by Brandeis University to sell the collections of its Rose Art Museum to raise funds for the university (KENNEDY & VOGEL 2009). More recently, the University of Iowa Museum of Art has been pressured by members of the Iowa legislature to sell its most valuable acquisition, a Jackson Pollock painting titled *Mural* to support student fellowships (POGREBIN 2011). University science museums have not been spared these pressures and, in fact, may be even more endangered as a result of changing scientific research priorities and increasing emphasis on molecular research over studies of the whole organism (see MACDONALD & ASHBY 2011).

In this article, we address recent experiences of some museums at the University of Michigan. Overall, these are far more positive than the examples cited above, as the university's central administration recognizes and values the contributions of its many museums to the intellectual and cultural life of the institution. Nonetheless, significant challenges exist. The sources of these challenges vary: some derive from the organizational and reporting structure of individual museums; others from the nature of the collections they curate and/or exhibitions they present.

After providing some general background on the University of Michigan museums, we explore these issues in more detail, by addressing recent challenges faced by two of our university museums: the Exhibit Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Anthropology. We focus on how each museum has addressed issues concerning politically sensitive exhibitions and collections and examine how each has interacted with diverse stakeholder communities within and beyond the university. For the

* The views expressed in this article are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Michigan administration, or the various stakeholder groups and individuals referenced in the paper.

Exhibit Museum of Natural History, we consider the events that led to the removal of one of the museum's most enduring and popular exhibitions: historical dioramas depicting the lives Native Americans.¹ In the Museum of Anthropology, we address recent issues around repatriation and compliance with the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

Neither of these examples fully represents the breadth or diversity of these two museums or the varied communities they serve. However, both have been sites of controversy and high emotion on the University of Michigan campus, and both provide a forum for the larger issues that we wish to address in our conclusions, specifically, the intellectual, and political, currents that can affect university museums and their diverse stakeholders; and, even more significantly, the potential role that university museums can play in encouraging our students to engage difficult and complex ethical, historical, and intellectual issues. Thus, while the title of our article reflects a powerful dimension of the experiences of these situations and their larger contexts – that of feeling 'besieged' – we ultimately end on a positive note, advocating that university museums provide 'ideal' venues for productive engagement of difficult issues, and as such play a core role in the educational mission of a university.

Background: Museums at the University of Michigan

The University of Michigan was founded in Detroit, Michigan in 1817 and moved to its home in Ann Arbor in 1837. On the day that the Ann Arbor campus was formally created by the Michigan state legislature, the legislature also authorized the creation of a 'Cabinet of Natural History' at the university (RUTHVEN 1929, 3). Over succeeding decades, the cabinet was transformed into 'The University Museum', and in 1881 the growing collections were shifted from basement closets and faculty offices to the campus' first formal museum building. Today, as many as twelve University of Michigan museums (depending on how one defines a museum) trace their origins to this early vision (see table 1). Some are primarily dedicated to exhibition and public programming (i.e., the Exhibit Museum of Natural History), others lack exhibition space and instead curate large scientific collections that support the research activities of faculty-curators, students, and visiting scholars (i.e., the Museums of Anthropology, Paleontology, Zoology, the University Herbarium); and a few balance exhibition and research (the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, the Museum of Art, the Nichols Arboretum and Matthaei Botanical Garden). As university museums, all seek to engage undergraduate and graduate students, the larger university community, and diverse publics in their activities, albeit to widely varying degrees.

The University of Michigan museums reside in various administrative homes (table 1).

Museum	Primary Mission	Reports to
1. Exhibit Museum of Natural History	Exhibition and outreach	Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education, College of Literature, Science and the Arts (LSA).
2. Kelsey Museum of Archaeology	Exhibition and research	Dean of LSA
3. Herbarium	Research and collections	Chair of Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology
4. Museum of Anthropology	Research and collections	Dean of LSA
5. Museum of Paleontology	Research and collections	Dean of LSA
6. Museum of Zoology	Research and collections	Chair of Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology

¹ We'd like to thank the director of the Exhibit Museum of Natural History, Amy Harris, for giving us permission to include photographs of the dioramas in this paper.

7. Museum of Art	Exhibition and research	Provost
8. Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum	Exhibition and research	Provost
9. Sindecuse Museum of Dentistry	Exhibition and historical collections	Dean, School of Dentistry
10. The Detroit Observatory	Exhibition	Director, Bentley Historical Library
11. Stearns Collection of Musical Instruments	Collections and Exhibition	Dean, School of Music
12. The Virtual Museum	Digital exhibitions and research	Museum Studies Program

Table 1 - University of Michigan Museums²

The Museum of Art and Matthaei Botanical Garden and Nichols Arboretum (MBGNA) report directly to the university's highest academic and budget officer, the university Provost. The Kelsey Museum, Exhibit Museum of Natural History, and two of the four research museums – the Museum of Anthropology and Museum of Paleontology – report to the dean of the College of Literature, Science and the Arts (LSA), the university's liberal arts college, which serves more than 18,000 undergraduate students. Until July 2010, the other two natural science research museums – the Museum of Zoology and University Herbarium – also reported to the college dean. However, in a reorganizational move – that we find problematic and troubling (see below) – they have recently been absorbed by one of the college's departments, and now report to the chair of the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (EEB).

The diverse reporting lines that exist among the university museums play out in similar ways across the United States, though perhaps not often with so many variants at a single institution, and the 'ideal' reporting line for university museums is a frequent topic of university museum discussion lists (e.g., the listserv of the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries) and surveys. At Michigan, these reporting lines place the museums in dramatically different structural and budgetary positions within the university. The museums that report to the Provost have, in principle, the ear of the highest level of the university administration and their placements outside of the university's 19 academic colleges formally recognizes that they exist to serve both the entire campus and the larger community of Southeastern Michigan. Yet the Provost has much larger concerns than the needs of individual museum directors, and the museums risk not receiving adequate attention. Further, by not being closely tied to academic departments, these museums may struggle to remain connected to the larger intellectual mission of the university and must actively work to engage faculty and student priorities.

Curators in most of the museums within the College of LSA (and EEB) have half-time curatorial appointments in their respective museum and half-time faculty appointments in an academic department (excluding the Exhibit Museum of Natural History, which has a professional director and no curators). This has the advantage of linking these individuals closely with a single academic unit, though conversely may make it harder for these museums to connect to multiple departments that may have interests in their collections and mission. This structure also has the disadvantage of making curatorship half-time work and, in the research museums, curation has historically taken a back seat to teaching, fieldwork, new research, and the production of the scholarly publications that are essential for tenure and promotion in the curators' departmental homes (the museums are not tenure granting units).

² lsa.umich.edu/museumstheme/museums/museums-list.asp (accessed September 14, 2011).

In general, the research museums occupy a distinctive place in the university's museum structure. They reside within the university's largest undergraduate college, yet their primary mission lies in research and collections rather than teaching. They lack dedicated exhibition space, yet contain the university's largest and most diverse natural history and archaeological collections, mostly held in locked storerooms. As such, they are hampered by their relatively low visibility and limited accessibility to diverse university and public audiences. As befits their research mission, curators have been hired because of their scholarly excellence rather than their museum experience, and many have privileged new field research and scholarly publication over collection-based scholarship and basic curatorial activities. While this model has worked very effectively for more than a century, generating world class collections and leading scholarship, the value of the research museums, the collections, and the space and staffing resources they consume, and their contributions to the university's core mission have increasingly come under question.

The research museums were created over several decades, from the late 1800s through the 1920s, during a pre-digital era when direct access to the objects of study (biological, paleontological, or archaeological specimens) was considered essential to education and research. The primary mission of these museums was to acquire collections for the university, to conduct research on those collections, and to expose students to distant regions and the world beyond the conventional classroom. Until the mid-1950s, these museums reported to the central administration; since then, they have reported to the liberal arts college and all curators came to hold joint faculty appointments. But by and large, over the last century, the formal mission of these museums has not changed significantly. However, the academic landscape they inhabit has, and the museums have come to be seen both by some non-curator faculty colleagues and the college administration as costly, antiquated, and problematic, especially at a time when molecular studies and digital access to the world's biological and archaeological heritage has, for some, rendered physical collections anachronistic.

One response to these perceptions has been the rethinking of the administrative structure of two of the research museums. Ironically, these changes occurred at the end of a year-long celebration of museums in the academy, during which an array of special courses, lectures, and events highlighted the important work of the university's museums. As noted earlier, in July 2010, the Museum of Zoology and University Herbarium were reorganized and incorporated into their associated academic department. Thus, they no longer function as freestanding units with direct reporting lines to the LSA dean. While this decision was made at a time of budgetary stress and has, to a certain extent, reduced administrative costs, the stated objective for this merger was to strengthen evolutionary biology on campus – though precisely how this was to be accomplished was never articulated. To our minds, the loss of administrative independence has serious implications for these museums – including loss of budgetary autonomy, loss of control over their collection and research facilities, and perhaps most important, the loss of the ability to set priorities and make decisions about future curatorial and staff appointments. Though (supposedly) not economically motivated, it seems likely that the budget dedicated to the museums will shrink, that staff and curatorial positions will be lost, and that the commitment to the collections will decline. Finally, the precedents and potential long-range consequences of this merger have heightened tensions within the other museums in the college, creating a sense of anxiety and uncertainty about the future.

In addition to economic and organizational challenges and their consequences, two of our museums, specifically the Exhibit Museum of Natural History and Museum of Anthropology, face socio-political challenges that are exacerbating already difficult situations. We turn to these issues in the next section.

Who owns culture?

The term 'culture wars' is used in North America in reference to a number of museum exhibitions developed in the late 1980s through the 90s – for instance, *The Spirit Sings* at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary (1988), *Into the Heart of Africa* at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto (1990), *The West as America* at the National Museum of American Art (1991), *Enola Gay* at the National Air and Space Museum (1994), *Sensation* at the Brooklyn Museum in New York (1999) – that sparked considerable controversy primarily centered around the representation of culture and contested readings of history. During the last decade there have been a number of celebrated claims for the repatriation of cultural artifacts. In effect, these controversies stem from the very basic question, who owns culture? Here we are not only referring to material culture – the object itself – but to the narratives inscribed upon and around the object. In other words, we are talking about both tangible and intangible cultural property. Universities have not been immune to such controversy. Indeed, at times some of the most heated debates concerning these issues occur on academic campuses where debates can become highly politicized.

Exhibiting Indians in the Natural History Museum

The University of Michigan Exhibit Museum of Natural History was formally created in 1956 in the same museum building that housed the university's four research museums. Its mission was to serve as the public face for the collections and scholarship undertaken in the museums. This was not an entirely new role; exhibition was an important facet of the museum building from its opening. But the founding of the Exhibit Museum was a formal recognition that producing vibrant exhibits and educational outreach required a dedicated staff and administrative structure. The Exhibit Museum does not curate significant collections; nor does it have any academic curators. Instead, the museum's professional staff relies on the collections and expertise of the research museums, and collaborates with faculty from a range of departments beyond the museums (e.g., geology, astronomy, Native American studies, museum studies, and many others) to develop exhibitions and educational programming.

From the beginning, the Exhibit Museum has been committed to presenting natural and physical sciences (botany, zoology, paleontology, astronomy, geology) and anthropology exhibitions. The latter largely focused on non-European cultures – especially Native American – and on prehistoric archaeology. In contrast, archaeological collections associated with classical antiquity (the Mediterranean world and ancient Near East) have been housed in a separate museum, now called the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. As such, the Exhibit Museum of Natural History is typical of many natural history museums in North America and Great Britain that were founded in tandem with the ideologies of social Darwinism prevalent during the early years of anthropology. The natural history museum became the institutional setting for the study and display of colonized peoples (from Africa, the Americas, Asia and the islands of the Pacific) – peoples who were perceived as less 'civilized' than Europeans, and who did not possess their own histories. Indeed, it was European scholars who were charged with writing these histories. Though the ideologies that served as the foundation for the natural history museum were jettisoned long ago, the original framework defining the institution's purview remains. This has been the source of considerable debate in many natural history museums over the last fifty years. Indeed, the display of Native peoples in the Exhibit Museum has been the subject of heated contestation for the better part of the last twenty years.

The most significant and sustained concerns have been focused on a group of fourteen dioramas of miniaturized historical scenes of Native American life. Members of the Museum staff created these dioramas in the 1950s and 1960s, based on archaeological and ethnographic information provided by university researchers (fig. 1). They are regarded as relatively accurate historical interpretations of

Indian life prior to the arrival of Europeans, and were among the museum's most popular exhibits, particularly with children, one of the museum's primary target audiences. For the last twenty years however, Native American students and some members of the Native American studies faculty have voiced concerns about the dioramas and called for their removal.



Fig. 1 - Native American dioramas in the Exhibit Museum of Natural History prior to the decision to remove them from view. Published with the permission of the University of Michigan Exhibit Museum of Natural History.

A number of objections were raised, but a few were particularly persistent. Since all the dioramas are historic, they convey a sense of Indians as having existed only in the past, that Indians, like the dinosaurs, also on view in the museum, are extinct. With the exception of four dioramas depicting the 'seasonal lifeways' of Michigan's indigenous peoples, each of the dioramas represents an entire culture and thus reinforces stereotypes and overly simplified views of Native American society. Many critics had problems with the specific idiom of representation, miniature dioramas that presented 'little Indians' and that trivialized Native Americans.³ Ultimately, most of the concerns arose from the perception of Indians as objectified artifacts displayed in the same general context as rocks, plants and animals – as part of nature's history.

Various interventions were conceived and deployed to address these issues. Roughly ten years ago, Lisa Young, a member of the Museum of Anthropology's research staff, worked with Native students, tribal consultants, and anthropology students rewriting the diorama labels so that they presented a more accurate temporal and geographic context for the narratives portrayed in each diorama. In addition, Native American graduate student Veronica Pasfield helped develop an exhibit case that was placed opposite the dioramas that presented information about contemporary *powwows* (Native

³ Though this was a common criticism, there is ample evidence demonstrating that there is nothing inherently wrong with miniaturization as a mode of representation. In fact, it is an interpretive strategy that encourages close looking. The miniature is recognized as an effective means for exaggerating the content of that which is depicted and of engendering a sense of awe in the observer. There are many examples of miniature dioramas of Native Americans that live quite happily in museums throughout the US, including tribal museums. For additional insight into the power of the miniature see MACK 2007.

American festivals) in Michigan. In the end, these interventions proved inadequate. The additional context that the new labels provided and the balance offered by an exhibit on contemporary Native American communities could not offset the overpowering visual and material presence of the dioramas themselves.

The same Native American voices that had for years called for the removal of the dioramas continued to press. In 2009, the director of the Exhibit Museum, Amy Harris, decided to remove them, after a process of consultation with the Native community and with the support of the LSA dean and the Native American studies program faculty. This was a controversial decision. However, rather than simply take them off view she chose to develop an exhibition, *Native American Dioramas in Transition*, around their removal that provided an opportunity for expressing views about what the dioramas represent and why or why not they should be removed (fig. 2 and 3).⁴ The exhibition was on view during the first term of the *Museums in the Academy* theme year, and then in January 2010, they were removed, put in storage, perhaps to be used later in some other context. They were replaced with a geology exhibit – rocks.



Fig. 2 - *Native American Dioramas in Transition*, an exhibition that addressed why the dioramas were being removed from view. Published with the permission of the University of Michigan Exhibit Museum of Natural History.

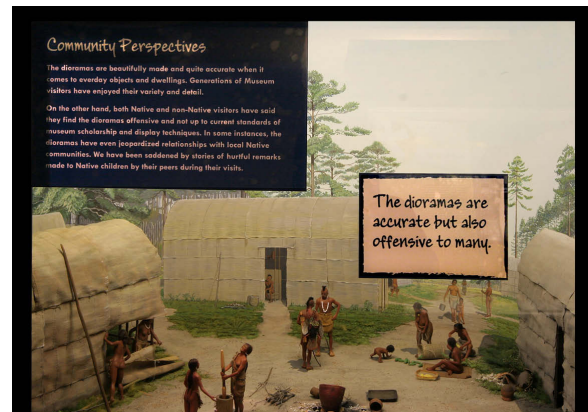


Fig. 3 - An example of the interpretive labels prepared for *Native American Dioramas in Transition*. Published with the permission of the University of Michigan Exhibit Museum of Natural History.

The Exhibit Museum responded to the concerns of a small but significant group of individuals – members of the communities on exhibit in the museum. This episode in the history of the Exhibit Museum begs a number of important questions concerning the role of museums in contemporary society, specifically on university campuses. Indeed, the ‘diorama dilemma’ deserves a proper critique that is beyond the purview of this short paper. Exhibition is a kind of narrative, a type of story telling. In this particular situation, it wasn’t the content of the story being told, or who was telling it; the crux of the problem was where the story was being told.

There no longer is a public space on the University of Michigan campus devoted to the representation of Native Americans. If stories about America’s indigenous peoples are going to be told in the future, existing venues either need to be reconceptualized or another venue will need to be created – perhaps a museum of cultural history that tells stories not only of Indians but of peoples all over the world, including Europe. In sum, the controversy over the Native American dioramas serves as a poignant example of just how susceptible our museums are to the social and political dynamics of contemporary society.

⁴ The responses to an article by Janet MILLER (2009) about the removal of the dioramas offer some of the different views that were expressed.

The theory and practice of repatriation

For the Museum of Anthropology, the tensions lie less in the representation of Native Americans than in the physical remains of America's ancient peoples and the objects they made, which are maintained in the museum's collections. The Museum of Anthropology curates archaeological and ethnographic materials from around the world, with collections numbering more than three million objects. The museum was created in 1922, though the collections it curates began coming into the university as early as 1840. Today, the museum has twelve curatorial divisions, eight half-time curators, and associated researchers, and staff and is the physical home of doctoral students in anthropology specializing in archaeology. The archaeological divisions or 'ranges' are organized by geography (Africa, Asia, Europe, Great Lakes, Latin America, Near East, North America) and research focus (zooarchaeology, ethnobotany, human osteology, and analytical collections [material sciences]). There is also a division of ethnology and the Asian division includes ethnographic objects from that region, with total ethnographic collections of c. 14,000 objects. In addition, the museum has collections of more than 60,000 photographs, and field notes, maps, drawings, and records from the many field projects it has sponsored.

One of the most enduring foci of Museum of Anthropology research has been in the archaeology of Michigan, with a particular emphasis on prehistoric periods. The Great Lakes division curates some of the largest and most important collections in the museum, with more than one million objects from some 2,000 archaeological sites in Michigan and Ontario. The North American Division is similarly large, and contains diverse collections from the Eastern and Western United States. In both of these divisions, a small portion of the collections (less than one percent) derive from burials and include human skeletal remains (many formally curated in the osteology division) and funerary objects. And it is the status, history, processes, and perceptions around these materials that have been the locus of considerable controversy for the museum. While this is a long and complex story, extending back to at least the early 1970s, here we limit our focus to the museum's activities over the past two decades.

Since 1990, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) has provided a framework for the repatriation of Native American skeletal remains, funerary objects, sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony to tribes to which they are culturally related, or in the terms of the law, "culturally affiliated".⁵ The law provides a description of categories of evidence for determining cultural affiliation and a set of procedures for museums to conduct and disseminate collection inventories, engage in consultations with tribes, and carry out repatriations.

The initial phase of NAGPRA implementation in the Museum of Anthropology occurred in the early 1990s, shortly after the law was passed. With supplemental funding from the college, the museum devoted three years and thousands of person-hours to conducting an inventory of NAGPRA-relevant collections, which largely consist of human remains and associated artifacts from prehistoric sites in Michigan (though also include materials from across the United States) and made determinations, where possible, of cultural affiliation. Letters requesting information for tribal consultations were sent to tribes when the inventory was initiated. In general though, little effective consultation took place during this period, a consequence of both the time pressures the institution was under to meet federal reporting requirements, limited outreach on the part of the museum, the lack of response from tribes to initial letters, and the lack of preparation of both museum and tribal authorities as logistics and best practices were still being formulated.

After the initial inventory was complete, no specific funds were dedicated to NAGPRA until 2007, when the Provost provided two years of supplementary funds to allow the museum to meet a new NAGPRA

⁵ See 43CFR 10, www.cr.nps.gov/local-law/FHPL_NAGPRA.pdf (accessed September 14, 2011).

requirement, the ‘future applicability’ requirement to report any NAGPRA-relevant collections that had come into the museum since the original inventory was completed. Several consultations and a number of repatriations were conducted during the mid- to late-1990s, but progress was slow, and a variety of interactions and experiences (including conflicts over the repatriation of a Canadian First Nations collection and DNA research on some of the Great Lakes human remains) led to increasing tensions between the museum, a number of native students on the campus, and representatives of Michigan’s tribes. While some of the basic work of NAGPRA (consultations and repatriations) continued to occur, communication was poor to hostile and mutual distrust and rumors exacerbated an inherently difficult situation.

Another issue that complicated the relations was that, during the inventory, a significant portion of the museum’s NAGPRA-relevant archaeological collections (i.e., human remains and funerary objects) had been deemed to be ‘culturally unidentifiable’. That is, the museum determined that they could not, with currently available information, be affiliated with contemporary tribes – because they were too old, lacked sufficient information on their provenience or origins, or for a variety of other historical or contextual reasons (an assessment not necessarily agreed upon by tribal members or native students). While the formulators of the NAGPRA regulations recognized that this category of materials would someday have to be addressed, the reserved section of the regulations on culturally unidentifiable remains was not approved until 2010. During this interval, museums were required to retain possession of these remains, though they could seek special approval from the Department of Interior for their transfer to tribes if the institution and tribes reached a mutual agreement.

In the absence of federal regulations, museums took a variety of approaches to the transfer, or ‘disposition’, of these “Culturally Unaffiliated Human Remains” (CUHR). Some institutions working proactively to transfer remains to tribes – most often based on geography rather than a clear cultural relationship (that is, remains were transferred to tribes that could be argued to be contemporary stewards of the lands from which they derived, even if a cultural affiliation could not be determined). Other museums resisted such transfers, strictly following the NAGPRA guidelines that collections should be retained, and privileging the value of the collections to research over contemporary tribal interests. The Museum of Anthropology fell on the latter end of the spectrum and did not support the deaccessioning and transfer of unaffiliated remains prior to the passage of the relevant regulations. During this nearly 20-year interlude, scientific research continued to be conducted on Museum of Anthropology NAGPRA collections.

Not surprisingly, the museum’s stance generated intense negative reactions from Native American and other students, faculty, and tribes. Given the poor communication between the museum curators and other stakeholders in this issue, many of these conflicts played out in public – in articles in the university and city newspaper, in protests at the annual student run *powwow*, and in other public events. In addition, both student groups and tribal representatives presented their grievances directly to the university President and Regents.

By 2009, the inflamed emotions and political sensitivity around the issue led the University’s Vice President for Research (responsible for federal compliance) to create a high level university task force to make recommendations on how to improve the situation. During the 2009–2010 academic year, the task force consisted of twelve members drawn from a range of academic units. It included two native faculty (a mathematician and historian) and one native doctoral student and no representatives from the Museum of Anthropology.⁶ As the committee was deliberating, new regulations were finally issued concerning the disposition of culturally unaffiliated remains in March 2010.

⁶ In 2010–2011, the committee was expanded to include the museum’s director (Sinopoli) and a representative from a Michigan tribe.

There is much that could be said about the process and consequences of this additional level of oversight concerning repatriation – both positive (investment of new resources and staffing for NAGPRA activities) and negative (what seems to the museum at least, to be a continued scapegoating and exclusion from major decisions affecting its core activities). But that is the topic for a different paper. Here, we simply note that from the museum’s perspective, the process and consequences of these developments have been and continue to be painful and challenging for the museum’s curators, staff, and associated graduate and undergraduate students. While we hope that we are moving toward a more productive ‘new normal’, the addition of these tensions to the very real economic, structural, and organizational tensions that all of our museums are now experiencing has indeed led us to feel, as the title of our paper indicates, “besieged”.

Conclusions

We would argue that ‘culture wars’, at least the ones that are fought in museums, are not necessarily a bad thing – valuable lessons have been and will continue to be learned from the difficult processes of reconciling such conflicts. And we would argue that here we have a viable and compelling justification for the value of museums, as sites of social and political mediation. Obviously, this is easier to say when phrased as an intellectual position, and harder to espouse when actually “seeing action” in these wars.

It seems that in considering how we might mitigate the challenges that face museums in the academy, we need to think about strategies for realigning museums within the academy. It is the general perception that though museums are valued, they are not seen as central to the mission of the university, they are not essential. Indeed, museums are generally perceived as having migrated away from the core of what universities are about: research and teaching. While there are reasons to reject both of these perceptions, they nonetheless exist, and we are hearing a number of justifications from administrators for reducing allocations to museums. One of the most common concerns the value of maintaining collections once they’ve been digitized. If one has good digital surrogates of these objects that can be stored on a computer at very little cost, why continue to maintain (at considerable expense) collections of ‘real things’? Add to this the fraught nature of contested objects, such as those now being claimed by source communities; some administrators are of the mind that we should just “give the stuff back” or sell it off. To those of us who work with these collections, such positions seem absurd. But unless we can articulate why these things are important to our institutions, at this time, the future is bleak. What can we do to bring our museums closer to the core? How can we help university administrators justify the costs of maintaining museums and their collections?

To do this, it is essential that the scholars and scientists engaged in and with these institutions work to make the case for their continued value. At the University of Michigan, we believe that this work includes a recognition of the need to broaden the missions of our museums to better engage a wider spectrum of the university community, as well as the diverse stakeholders outside of the university who have interests in the collections museums hold, the exhibits they mount, and the educational and cultural opportunities they can offer.

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