

## **Indigenous cultural self-representation and its internal critiques: A case study of the Woodland Cultural Centre, Canada**

This research report discusses Indigenous cultural representation in an Indigenous-run museum and its internal critiques, based on the case study of the Woodland Cultural Centre, Canada. Since its establishment in 1972, the Woodland Cultural Centre has strived to promote Indigenous culture, especially First Nations art, and has challenged general public's and major museums' misconceptions that Indigenous cultures are "static" and merely existed in the past. However, interviews with the Centre's staff members suggest that the Centre's artistic representation of Iroquoian culture has not always been successful in attracting members of supporting bands. Also, while the Centre has organized cultural events to increase Indigenous visitations, the core functions of the museum, such as research, preservation, and exhibition, are predominantly conducted by museum professionals, which suggests that the museum remains foreign to many Indigenous people.

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The institution of the museum derives from western philosophy and has a history of colonialism (Bennett, 1995; Phillips, 2011). For example, the museum has long been interested in “exotic” non-Western cultures, has collected “curios,” and has represented and classified non-European cultures as “others,” “uncivilized,” and “inferior” (Iseke-Barnes, 2007). As Domosh (2002) argues, such a representation of “others” stressed the contrast between “civilized white” and “uncivilized non-white.” In the last half of the twentieth century, the museum experienced a major paradigm shift from being a colonial institution into a postcolonial institution. In North America, especially since the 1990s, major museums have eagerly developed collaborative projects with Indigenous peoples to realize a non-colonial style of cultural representation, repatriations, and the welcoming of communities (Peers & Brown, 2003; Phillips, 2011; Trofanenko & Segal, 2012). In parallel with this paradigm shift in major museums, Indigenous peoples have established their own museums (or cultural centers) to preserve and promote their culture based on their own perspectives and values. Indigenous museums are now widely discussed and literature on Indigenous museums is enriched (Clifford, 1997; 2004; Erickson, 1999; 2002; Simpson, 2001; Mauzé, 2003; Hendry, 2005; Nesper, 2005; Lawlor, 2006; Christen, 2007; Isaac, 2007; Stanley, 2007; Srinivasana, et al. 2009). The scope of the study varies, including repatriation, history, cultural revival, the politics and conflicts over cultural representation, eco-museum and community development, the recognition of women’s role, and public education.

The Woodland Cultural Centre, located in the city of Brantford, near the Six Nations Reserve, Ontario, Canada, is one of such Indigenous-run cultural centers (see Figure 1). Established in 1972, the Centre has strived to interpret and represent Iroquoian culture from an Iroquoian perspective and to challenge misconceptions of Indigenous cultures that the general public might have. This research report overviews the Centre’s representation of Iroquoian culture and addresses some issues that have been recently recognized by the Centre’s staff members.

My principle research involved periods as a participant-observer in a volunteer capacity at the Woodland Cultural Centre from October to December 2004 and from January to March 2006. The volunteer work consisted of joining a school tour, facilitating workshops and community events organized by the Centre, translating the museum tour guide into another

language, and sharing documents used for the literature review of my research. Open-ended interviews were conducted with eleven museum staff members. Follow-up interviews were conducted in October 2010. Due to research ethics restrictions, interviews with Centre's supporting band members were not conducted; therefore my analysis in this research report is limited within the internal perspectives of the Centre's staff members.

### **Indigenous Museums as Sites of “Self-Representation”**

Simpson (2006) states that the Indigenous museum serves a dual purpose; accordingly, it “provide[s] resources for the preservation and transmission of culture within [an Indigenous] community,” while fulfilling “the educational function of displaying and interpreting Indigenous histories and cultures to non-Indigenous visitors” (p. 155). It is also argued that Indigenous museums are important sites of “cultural revival” and “self-representation” (Simpson, 2001, p. 135). In North America since the 1960s, approximately 150 Indigenous museums have been established (about one hundred in US and fifty in Canada), and they have functioned as a base to claim Indigenous cultural distinctiveness and to search for new identities for Indigenous peoples (Erickson, 2002, p. 17). Indigenous museums also mark some particular historical events. For example, the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay, BC, symbolizes the nation-wide repatriation movement of Indigenous objects (Mauzé, 2007). The achievements of Indigenous museums can be also observed in several community projects, which place emphasis on cultural heritage. Examples include: educating the younger generation about the tribe's history in the Aki-Chin Indian Community, AZ (Fuller, 1992); organizing a heritage exhibition at the Alaska Native Heritage Center (Clifford, 2004); and supporting the revival of whale hunting at the Makah Cultural and Research Center on the Makah Reservation, WA (Erickson, 1999; 2002). For Indigenous peoples, their own museums are “places to tell their stories, [which is] a much better situation than when their stories, along with their objects, were entirely appropriated by others” (Hendry, 2005, p. 52).

Meanwhile, Isaac's case study on the A:shiwi A:wam Museum and Heritage Center, NM provides a different perspective. Isaac (2007) demonstrates that the use of a museum for the self-representation of Zuni culture resulted in the institutionalization of knowledge wherein only elite members had access to this knowledge while some members, especially elders, who

were unfamiliar with the western-derived institution, felt excluded from this structure. In addition, the Zuni have long kept their traditional knowledge a secret to outsiders. Isaac clarifies that the cultural promotion based on the museum may have exposed Zuni traditional knowledge to outsiders and some Zuni felt that this was a taboo. Consequently, there has been a problem in the transmission of knowledge from elders to younger generations. Isaac therefore argues that the concept of the museum is not always relevant to the Zuni culture.

Through the case study, Isaac (2007) raises several questions for Indigenous museums as a collective:

If tribal museums are vehicles for self-empowerment, however, we need to know the following: Who develops and directs them? What facets of culture and history do they emphasize? Which individuals do they seek to recognize as tribal historians, and who receives this knowledge? In short, who empowers whom within the community? Until now these particular questions have largely been ignored, yet there is considerable need to look at how people experience these institutions and, more important, to address the political relationships that affect how these institutions empower particular people or groups. (p. 10)

These questions provide interesting perspectives to analyze the cultural representation of the Iroquois which is seen at the Woodland Cultural Centre.

### **The Woodland Cultural Centre and its Cultural Representation**

The Woodland Cultural Centre is a non-profit organization that was established in 1972 by the Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians in order to counteract stereotypes towards their culture. The Association also sought Indigenous cultural distinctiveness by having their cultural institution, in order to resist *The White Paper 1969* released by Trudeau's government, which was unsympathetic to arguments for Indigenous rights (Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians, 1971). Until 1969, the Centre's main building was used as the Mohawk Institute residential school, which was a notorious symbol of assimilation policies. The Centre is supported by three First Nations bands (Wahta Mohawks, Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte

Tyendinaga, and the Six Nations of the Grand River; see Figure 1 for the locations of the bands), and offers programs through four departments: language, education, library, and museum. These programs, in principle, are offered to members of the supporting bands. As of October 2010, the Centre had eight board members (three from the Six Nations, three from Wahta, and two from Tyendinaga), who create strategic plans and review if the Centre's overall activities are meeting community needs, such as cultural and historical education, language preservation and revitalization, and the safe guard of collections. According to the Centre's Executive Director Janis Monture, overall the board members have been supportive and the Centre has had much freedom; therefore most of the Centre's activities have been planned and organized at the discretion of the Centre's staff members, the majority of whom are from the Six Nations (personal communication, October 8, 2010). Some staff members, including Executive Director, Librarian, and Museum Coordinator, have credentials from post-secondary institutions. Between April 2009 and March 2010, the Centre's education program accepted 2,623 tour participants, 84 per cent of whom were non-Indigenous people, mainly from schools in the surrounding area.<sup>1</sup> The majority of Indigenous tour participants visited from outside the Six Nations in order to learn about another Indigenous culture or to see the former Mohawk Institute building (Tara Froman, personal communication, October 8, 2010). The former Education Extension Officer Bernadette Wabie suggested that the contribution of the Centre's education program to the supporting bands was small. She presumed that this was due to the availability of elders and educational materials at schools in the bands (personal communication, December 1, 2004). The Centre's education program is therefore designed primarily for public education and Ontario's school curriculum, where it is mandatory for students in grades three and six to learn about Indigenous cultures.

Since the early 1980s, under the Seneca curator and former Museum Director Tom Hill's supervision, the Centre has organized a number of special exhibitions and collaborative projects with other major institutions, including the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto (ROM) and the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. (McLuhan & Hill, 1984; Hill & Duffek, 1989; Hill & Hill, 1994; Nicks, 2002). In regards to the benefit of collaborative projects, Trudy Nicks, the curator of the ROM, who developed *Mohawk Ideals, Victorian Values: Oronhyatekha M.D.* with the Centre in 2001, states:

Exhibition teams that include First Nations as well as non-Native curators are effective in bringing more representative perspectives to a project. First Nations curators contribute their own specialized knowledge to a project, and they can often help the team to build relationships with local community members. (2002, p. 154)

However, besides those collaborative projects and some unique special exhibitions,<sup>2</sup> Tom Hill in particular stressed the significance of the annual First Nations art show, beginning in 1975 (personal communication, December 2, 2004; Crain, 1976; Hill, 2003). As the only annual open invitation exhibit for contemporary First Nations artists in Canada, the show has provided emerging and young First Nations artists opportunities to exhibit their artworks, and has been “a key venue in artists’ career development by encouraging their art to be more widely seen and appreciated” (Hill, 1992, p. 5). Monture (2005) states that “[t]he works of art of the past thirty years in First Nations Art exhibits are truly an inspiration not only to our organization, having the capacity and opportunity to provide a space for them to create and showcase, but also as pieces that can tell a history of our people through Native eyes” (p. 2).

The storyline of Centre’s permanent exhibition was also created by Tom Hill in 1984. It tells the Iroquoian history of the region from around 1600 to the present, using a variety of artworks. The visitor guide states that visitors will be “immersed in the cultural tapestry of the Eastern Woodland journeying through time” (Froman, 2005). In a diorama of a “typical” Iroquoian village of the fifteenth century, a large canvas depicts an Iroquoian farm and longhouse, wherein the women’s role in agriculture is emphasized. Displaying a painting by Mohawk artist Bill Powless and a mannequin of French Missionary Father Joseph de la Roche Daillon, the second room represents a European encounter in 1626 when this Missionary arrived at a Chonnonton village from Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. The section on the expansion of the fur trade exhibits glass beads and beaver fur. This section is followed by displays about the Iroquoian Confederacy and on treaties with the Europeans which display reproductions of wampum belts. In the section about the American Revolution, the Revolution’s impact on the Iroquois is explained through a portrait of Mohawk leader Joseph

Brant (Thayendanegea) and some maps on the Six Nations' forced relocation as the result of American independence. In the following section, Iroquoian individuals who achieved "success" in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canadian society are introduced. The celebrated individuals include poet and entertainer Pauline Johnson and athlete Tom Longboat. This section is followed by an exhibit about Iroquoian ironworkers who constructed the Empire State Building in New York, as well as the CN Tower in Toronto. The next section focuses on commonly held stereotypes of the "Indian" such as found in "false" representations in Hollywood movies. A huge "Indian" totem pole and some Wild West Show posters are displayed. The final exhibits focus on the cultural diversity of First Nations and the concept of pan-Indianism. The displayed artwork and regalia represent the cultural difference between Iroquoian and Algonquian nations while also addressing shared cultural elements with other First Nations. The displays continue into a gallery for special exhibitions where contemporary First Nations art showcases the creativity of Iroquoian artists.

Tom Hill aimed to inform visitors of the unique Iroquoian history and their social and cultural adaptation. The Centre's representation must have been innovative in the 1980s, when major institutions were predominantly displaying Indigenous objects based on the mainstream classification systems "without regard to their relationship and use in distinct Indigenous cultures" (Iseke-Barnes, 2007, p. 9). Typically, *The Spirit Sings* exhibition at Calgary's Glenbow Museum in 1988 statically represented Indigenous cultures as the existence of the past and the concept of the exhibition was criticized by several Indigenous groups and museums (Phillips, 2011).

### **Challenges to Attracting the Members of the Supporting Bands**

The Woodland Cultural Centre appears to be a good example of a site of Indigenous self-representation. Perhaps some might argue that Indigenous museums are the result of postcolonial transitions and are effectively being used by Indigenous peoples. However, hierarchies in Indigenous cultural representation need to be mentioned. Also, what is missing from this representation?

Indeed the Centre has not been free from critiques. The Centre's staff members reveal some controversial issues over the representation of their culture. One example of this is an

Iroquoian false mask that was on display in the permanent exhibition. An Iroquoian false mask directly carved into wood had long been viewed by visitors; however Iroquoian false masks are sacred objects and most mainstream museums removed masks from their exhibits to respect their sacredness (Phillips, 2011). At the Centre, the mask on display was not separated from the wood and the Centre's interpretation was that before separated from the wood, the mask had not yet been inspired by a soul. Still, several Iroquoian people, including some of the Centre's staff members, felt uncomfortable with the mask on display, even under this interpretation. According to Museum Education Coordinator Tara Froman, masks symbolize Iroquoian spirituality rather than artistic value, which does not need to be exposed to the general public (personal communication, October 8, 2010). Eventually, the wood that the mask was carved onto was turned around and visitors now only see the back side of the wood but not the mask itself.

Another challenge to more equitable engagement of the different bands that support the Centre is the lack of some particular memories and shared experiences among many community members, including those of residential school. Despite the fact that the Centre's main building used to be the Mohawk Institute, the permanent exhibition had long lacked the representation of residential schools until the Centre included some panels on this topic in 2008. The reason why the residential school was not represented is because this particular topic might not have fit with Centre's approach to Iroquoian culture during Tom Hill's tenure, which emphasized artistic representation. Likely also in the early 1980s, survivors' memories may have been still too painful to be included (Tara Froman, Judy Harris, personal communications, October 8, 2010).

Sometimes, the Centre was even perceived as "colonial." The Centre's curator, Keith Jamieson, revealed that the Centre had received negative comments on its exhibition from Indigenous visitors, including when *Mohawk Ideals, Victorian Values* was organized with the ROM. Some of the critics claimed that the objects owned by the ROM should belong to the Centre or to the supporting bands. Some critics even felt uncomfortable about objects being displayed inside glass cases. For those Indigenous visitors, the objects should not have been separate from living people. They viewed objects differently, in terms of their sense of ownership, spirituality, and memory, even though the exhibition story was told from an



Indigenous curator's perspective (personal communication, February 15, 2006). This particular example suggests that some Indigenous people are not necessarily familiar with institutionalized Indigenous knowledge or museum methodologies to represent Indigenous culture (cf. Isaac, 2007).

Furthermore, the Centre has not always been successful in serving its supporting bands. Monture admits that she was embarrassed with the lack of communication between the Centre and the supporting bands when she began in her position in 2003. She stated that the Centre had "some programs in the community. But a lot of people in the Six Nations don't even know what we do, and they see the Centre located in Brantford, outside their world" (personal communication, December 8, 2004; cf. Monture, 2006, p. 1). The Centre's lack of communication with two of the supporting bands, Wahta and Tyendinaga Mohawks, has been particularly concerning. The Centre's staff members clarify that people from those bands rarely visit the Centre due to distance (see Figure 1). Collections from them are also few. As a result, even the permanent exhibition fails to adequately represent those two bands, which results in the over-generalization of the Six Nations.

Judy Harris, who served as the Museum Director until March 2011, and Monture both praise Tom Hill for his achievement and see him as the icon and the pioneer in the First Nations art field. Hill extended the Centre's museum program beyond the Centre and the supporting bands and strived to educate mainstream museums that had been dominated by colonial epistemologies. As Hill also served a co-chair on the Task Force for Museums and First Peoples (1992), his approach and perspective must have been instrumental in the transformation of the relationship between museums and Indigenous peoples in Canada. Without Hill's strong leadership in the North American museum network, the recognition of First Nations art would have been much weaker (personal communications, October 8, 2010). Monture stated that a large part of Centre's activities still benefits from Hill's legacies. However, it cannot be denied that Hill's philosophy and firm belief in making the Centre a strong research facility, as seen in *Feasibility Study and Report Mohawk Institute* (Hill, 1972), and his activities beyond the supporting bands have somewhat made the Centre psychologically apart from many Iroquoian people.

Since Tom Hill's retirement from the Centre in 2005, the direction of the Centre has

changed somewhat. Monture wishes members of the supporting bands to learn more about Centre's activities, as she states:

I want the Centre to be more community-involved. So I think it's good to educate them. We used to offer many good programs twenty years ago. I would like to bring some of the ideas back. I also really would like to work more with young people. Here we are missing people between sixteen and twenty-four. We do not have so many people from that generation, except summer students, and we only get about five or six a year. But most summer students like working here and most of them come back next year. I'd like people to know more about our Woodland culture and to learn more about language. We still have to do some projects in the national context, but I want to go back to more community-grass-root programming, because we are from the community. (personal communication, December 8, 2004)

The Centre has since focused on organizing a number of language, cultural, historical, and art programs at the Centre and has advertised this programming through brochures regularly mailed to all households in the Six Nations Reserve as well as online advertising. According to Monture, the strategy to target the supporting bands has been effective. At least, the Centre has witnessed an increase in visitation from the Six Nations.

During this transition, however, the Centre has had to cancel some events for the general public, partly due to a limited budget. Monture also admits that collaborative exhibitions have become less frequent and that the Centre has been losing international attention (personal communication, October 8, 2010). In nature, this shift is from the gallery-focused representation to community-out-reach events. These events merely provide one-time experiences to the members of the supporting bands; however, it cannot be assumed that the members acknowledge part of Centre's mandate through the participation in the events. As Monture admits, the participants do not always come and see Centre's exhibition before or after an event. Furthermore, the members of the supporting bands are rarely involved or consulted in regards to the core functions of the museum, including research, collection, display, preservation of "valuable objects," exhibition making, and public education. At the

Woodland Cultural Centre, these core functions of the western-originated institution of the museum are predominantly done by museum professionals. For non-professional individuals, the museum might still be an unfamiliar place (cf. Isaac, 2007; Stanley, 2007).

### **Concluding Comments**

As this research report lacks perspectives of members of the supporting bands that the Centre serves, the analysis, based on my observations with a relatively small sample of informants who are somewhat biased in their assessment as employees of the institution, would be limited. Still, some lessons can be learned from the case study.

Erickson (2002) states that the North American Indigenous movement has successfully revolutionized “museums to become a more proactive participant in community development and in empowering cross-cultural communication” (p. 160). In reality, however, Indigenous museums still need to let community members be directly involved in museums’ core functions in order to be sites of self-representation. If community members do not see the value in these functions, can the museum be Indigenous and postcolonial?

As Isaac (2007) argues, the “postcolonial critique [often] simply acknowledges that tribal museums have been developed in order to promote self-representation within a postcolonial world” (p. 13). The development of Indigenous museums in North America has often been understood as a challenge for the western-centric representation of Indigenous cultures. However, as the Woodland Cultural Centre demonstrates, Indigenous museums are still trying to attract more Indigenous community members, just as major museums have tried to attract wider audiences and become more diverse. Also, as Trofanenko and Segall (2012) argue, it is important to consider what is not represented, regardless of who represents a culture. In case of the Woodland Cultural Centre, the development of participatory practices with community members for organizing exhibitions, public education, and cultural resource collections might be a necessary step to take.

### **Notes**

1. The number of walk-in visitors in the same period was 9,378.
2. These special exhibitions include: Ironworkers, 1987, focused on the history of Iroquoian

ironworkers; *Fluffs and Feathers: An Exhibit on the Symbols of Indianness*, 1988, the exhibition on false symbols of Indianness, and attempted to present samples of the images of Indian in historical and contemporary Canadian society; and *Sound of the Drum*, 1990, celebrated the many forms of music.

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