PRESERVING CULTURAL STORIES

THROUGH COLLABORATIVE INTERPRETATION OF MUSEUM ARTIFACTS

Upsilon Pi Chapter

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Abstract

Our chapter investigated "The Power of Stories" Honors Study Topic and explored the "Preserving Stories" theme through preliminary research and chapter discussions before establishing our research question, "How do interpretations of museum artifacts influence the preservation of cultural stories?" Team members presented credible sources to each other and then compiled them together to form a foundation for our research. After extensive review, our team began noting threads of commonality among the sources to arrive at our comprehensive research conclusion, "Stories and knowledge are best preserved when artifacts are interpreted collaboratively between researchers and the communities from which the artifacts originated." With Native American Heritage Month approaching, our team seized the opportunity to form a research conclusion-based action that showcased Native American stories. We partnered with college staff and subject matter experts to organize a panel discussion about preserving Native American stories via collaborative interpretation and technology use in museums. Ultimately, our project produced many rewarding outcomes for our chapter,

campus, and community, including a deeper understanding of the preservation of stories and an increased appreciation for informed, intentional, and lifelong service. Additionally, our chapter raised three hundred dollars for Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site's Land Acquisition Fund, bringing a heightened awareness of self in relation to global issues surrounding story preservation.
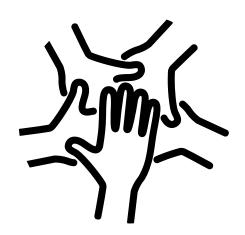
Research Objectives

Our research objectives were as follows:

- Develop a thoughtful and answerable research question.
- Have at least two team members complete Research Edge.
- Collaborate with our college's Research Librarian to ensure our research is efficient and credible.
- Compile at least twenty credible sources of diverse perspectives on our study topic.
- Trace connections between main points and common themes of credible sources to arrive at research conclusions.

Throughout chapter meetings and discussions, including conversations with other chapters at the Illinois Regional Convention and Honors Institute, we started forming a

research question during the spring semester of 2024. Over several months, our chapter developed and revised many academic inquiries before arriving at our final question. To prepare for rigorous investigation, four team members completed the Research Edge course. Our chapter collaborated with research librarians at our college and at Southern Illinois University to assist us with credible and efficient research and access to research databases.

Our team collected twenty-six credible sources from various perspectives and presented them to each other. Through meetings and online discussions, team members found common threads within the main points of the sources, leading us to our final research conclusion, "Stories and knowledge are best preserved when artifacts are interpreted collaboratively between researchers and the communities from which the artifact originated."

Research Question, Analysis, and Conclusions

With regards to theme four of the Honors Program Guide, Preserving Stories, our team developed the final research question, "How do interpretations of museum artifacts influence the preservation of cultural stories?"

Interpretations, preservation, and technology were all of interest to our team, and our research question guided our investigation into those topics. Chalvatza's (2021) research steered us to incorporate the importance of using technology when preserving stories and artifacts into our conclusion. Chipangura (2023) detailed the repatriation and collaborative interpretation techniques used by the Manchester Museum with artifacts from two African cultures. Griem et al. (2022) explored the processes that Kansas City museums applied to guarantee that artworks were represented accurately.

Herman (2022) explored the complexities and legal disputes surrounding the return of cultural artifacts, emphasizing the impact on cultural identity, justice, and preserving historical narratives while highlighting the ongoing challenges of reconciliation. Zeidan and Elhassan (2024) covered the enchanting power of storytelling through dynamic means like technology, reenactments, and musical performances and how these interpretations can shape cultural identities.

Through individual research and collective discussion, we began tying together common themes and main points across our sources. Our overarching conclusion was that "stories and knowledge are best preserved when artifacts are interpreted collaboratively between researchers and the communities from which the stories and artifacts originated." This conclusion encapsulated our research, answered the research question, and informed our action.

Action and Collaboration Objectives

Our team's action and collaboration objectives were as follows:
- Develop a plan of action from our research question conclusion.

- Invite individuals who work with Native American stories to participate in a Native American Heritage Month event hosted by our chapter.
- Collaborate with various departments at our college to ensure the event runs smoothly.
- Attract a multi-generational audience that includes college students and the general public.
- Bring awareness to collaborative strategies used to preserve Native American stories.
- Advocate for preservation efforts at Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.
- Ignite the audience's desire to engage with local Native American sites and stories.
- Present the audience with ways to learn about and support the preservation of Native American stories.
- Increase awareness of how museums use emerging technologies for story interpretation and preservation.
- Raise funds through donations to support story preservation efforts.
- Connect representatives from Southern Illinois University's Center for Virtual Expression to the panelists at our event.
- Design a survey and distribute it to the audience at our event to measure action outcomes.

Action

After our team finalized our research conclusions, we started developing a plan to carry out an action that was related to our research. We decided to host an event at our college where a museum professional could speak about collaborative interpretation and exhibit curation. A new member of our team proposed that we collaborate with Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, a Native American preservation site in southwestern Illinois, approximately 100 miles from our campus.

Cahokia Mounds ("Monks Mound, Cahokia State Historic Site, Illinois," 2007)

Our team contacted The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, The Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, and Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site to speak on our panel. We received an affirmative response from Cahokia

Mounds, and The Heard Museum connected us with an Indigenous curator who consulted on a recent revision of a long-term exhibition. We partnered with the Diversity and Inclusion office because they often host events that celebrate diverse cultural groups. They were eager to cohost the panel event for Native American Heritage Month and secured our third panelist, who represented the Trail of Tears Association.

Front of program handout

They all provided valuable insights and had vast knowledge not only about Native American stories but also about interpretation and preservation. Dr. Angela Cooper was the lead on interpretation at Cahokia Mounds, where they used augmented reality as a method of site interpretation. She inspired the audience to visit Cahokia Mounds, talked about ways to support story preservation, and discussed

difficulties with collaborative interpretation on ancient sites.

Patty Talahongva had firsthand experience with collaborative interpretation because she brought her personal experiences and cultural knowledge from her Hopi heritage for an exhibition at the Heard Museum. She brought awareness about Native Americans' experiences at boarding schools and the implications of collaborative interpretation. Dr. Mark Wagner served on the board of the Illinois chapter of the Trail of Tears Association, where they constantly work to preserve stories from the Trail of Tears and educate individuals on its history. Additionally, Dr. Wagner worked with Native American youth, helping them to form deeper connections with their heritage while diversifying the field of archaeology. He also emphasized the importance of communication and respect between researchers and Native American communities.

A member used the chapter's professional Canva account, funded by an Honors in Action grant, to lead the chapter in designing a brochure for the event. Every person attending the panel discussion received the brochure, which promoted nearby Native American sites to encourage

the audience to visit and support the sites. It also included two QR codes. One led to the augmented reality app used at Cahokia Mounds, and the other directed attendees to a brief survey about the event. Additionally, the first 20 attendees received $5 gift cards to offset the cost of downloading the Cahokia Mounds AR app. The chapter purchased the cards using Honors in Action grant funds.

Two panelists participated in the discussion via Zoom, so we collaborated with our school's Information Technologies department to ensure the proper accommodations could be made for the event. We also collaborated with the Student Life office to schedule the event. The Events and Conferences office helped us with event setup details and promoting the event to local historical societies. Our chapter collaborated with the Marketing department to advertise the event with campus flyers, social media posts, and emails and texts to students and college employees. We promoted the event through friends, family, classes, and instructors. An anthropology professor at Southern Illinois University even offered extra credit for students who attended the event. SIU's Center for Visual Expression sent four people, one of whom was a

chapter officer, to the panel discussion to connect with representatives from local historic sites.

Back of program handout

Outcomes

Twelve panel discussion attendees completed our survey. Over 58% indicated that their knowledge of Native American historic sites, preservation of Native American stories, and use of technology at Native American historical sites had significantly increased. Almost 92% claimed they were at least somewhat likely to visit local Native American sites and sites in other United States locations. Regarding emerging technologies, 58.3% of the respondents said they would be very likely to attend Native American sites that use artificial intelligence, augmented reality, virtual reality, and 3-D printing.

One question we asked the panelists was, "What can the general public do to help preserve cultural stories and support your mission?" The nearly unanimous answer was "donate," referring to donating money and time to the preservation of stories. So, as part of our commitment to the preservation of stories, our chapter donated three hundred dollars to Cahokia Mounds' Land Acquisition fund. Funds came from individual donations and the Honors in Action grant. We were also pleased to connect the graduate students and professor from SIU's Center for Visual Expression with the Trail of Tears representative to discuss the potential use of artificial intelligence for preservation and interpretation projects.

Audience at our panel discussion

This project pushed our team to invest our time in growing as scholars and leaders. The research portion of the project inspired four members to complete PTK's Research Edge course. The knowledge and increased proficiency they gained ensured that our project had a strong research foundation. As the project progressed, a team structure began to form. One member volunteered to be the lead writer for the Hallmark Award nomination and took on leadership of the project. Upon reflection, he recognized growth in his confidence and abilities to be a leader.

All team members freely expressed ideas and observations during chapter discussions and in a collaborative journal dedicated to our project. Even when members had to step away from the project, others in the chapter felt confident to step in and take on their responsibilities. While planning and executing our action, we learned efficient collaboration and professional communication skills while corresponding with possible collaborators. The project taught us to adapt to unforeseen circumstances that come with hosting an event, moderating a panel, and public speaking. Finally, one member's view of group projects completely transformed from dreading them in classes to loving teamwork with her fellow highly motivated PTK members.

Project Sources

Chalvatza, F. (2021). Impact of emerging technologies on student engagement with museum education. Retrieved September 21, 2024, from http://hdl.handle.net/11544/30002

The author prepared this research while pursuing a master's in strategic product design at International Hellenic University. The study explored the interpretation of artifacts with different technologies, specifically 3-D printing, augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR). The research occurred at the Diachronic Museum of Larissa and involved stations where visitors used 3-D printing, AR, and VR to interact with artifacts. Chalvatza concluded that modern technologies increased people's understanding and enjoyment of artifacts and history. The research showed the benefits of incorporating technology in preserving and interpreting artifacts, cultures, and histories. This source also inspired our team to work with Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site because of how they use AR at their pre-Columbian/precontact site.

Chipangura, N. (2023). The Benin tusk and Zulu beadwork: Practicing decolonial work at Manchester Museum through shared authority. *Museum Anthropology*, 46(2), 106–116. https://doi.org/10.1111/muan.12279

Dr. Chipangura, the Curator of Living Cultures at Manchester Museum (MM), received his PhD in anthropology from the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. In the article, he discussed the procedures that MM used to curate Zulu beadwork and repatriate a Benin tusk. In the case of the Benin tusk, MM gathered community input and reached out to the appropriate people in West Africa to discuss the Tusk's return. The Zulu beadwork, however, remained at MM, with the communities in which the beadwork originated having authority over curating the beadwork. According to Chipangura, this co-curation process allowed stories unknown to MM to be revealed and thus preserved.

Griem, M., & Allen, D. L. (2022). Challenging whiteness and storytelling in museums: An examination of racial representation in Kansas City heritage institutions. *Southeastern Geographer*, **62(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1353/sgo.2022.0002**

At the time of publication, Griem was a graduate student in museum studies at Indiana University, and Allen had a PhD in cultural geography and Black geographies from Florida State University. The authors covered processes that Kansas City museums were using to preserve stories that were not being represented or were presented inaccurately. The article discussed decolonizing and decentering whiteness in museums and applying methods that include curators working with artists to truthfully represent their artwork and other ways to guarantee stories are being told honestly.

Herman, A. (2022). *Restitution: The return of cultural artefacts.* **Lund Humphries.**

Herman's book examined the complex process of returning cultural artifacts to their countries or communities of origin. Herman looked into notable cases involving museums, Indigenous artifacts, and stolen or looted items, highlighting how these disputes have transformed cultural institutions and international law. The book analyzed how countries, legal bodies, and institutions navigated restitution cases, sometimes arguing for the universal return of artifacts, the need to preserve historical stories, and the importance of global access to essential artifacts. Herman's questions about cultural identity and justice explicitly addressed our chapter's research. Acknowledging that while restitution is a step toward reconciliation, it is often a complicated, unresolved issue due to differing interpretations of historical events. Overall, the book presented a balanced view of why returning cultural artifacts is the best way to preserve the story behind them, which made it a valuable resource for our research on representing the story and cultural community behind a representative artifact.

Zeidan, J., Elhassan, A. (2024, March 7). Transformative experience through storytelling. *MuseumNext*. https://www.museumnext.com/article/transformative-experience-through-storytelling/

In this article, the authors touched on transformative experiences through various means of storytelling utilized by museums and historical sites. Zeidan and Elhassan recognized museums as distinctive opportunities for individuals and communities to explore and celebrate cultural heritages through concrete and abstract ways. The authors praised museums for also seeking new and innovative ways to engage younger audiences through the utilization of interactive technologies like virtual reality and augmented reality experiences, which "breathe life" into static-like exhibits. These methods allowed museums to remain a "cultural portal" by transcending geographical limitations and ultimately enriching the audience's understanding of the world and even themselves. The article focused on Ennejma Ezzahra Palace in Tunisia, where the authors first encountered the magic of storytelling through multiple immersive cultural experiences. This article related to our chapter's research conclusion by demonstrating how well narratives are preserved when interpreted collaboratively with researchers and the public.

Cahokia Mounds Photo Source

"Monks Mound, Cahokia State Historic Site, Illinois." Encyclopedia Britannica, uploaded by Encyclopedia Britannica, 22 Mar. 2007, www.britannica.com/place/Cahokia-Mounds#/media/1/1309069/101064.

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