Accessibility and Considerations with the Repatriation of Objects

The repatriation of material cultural heritage offers Native community members a process to reacquire artifacts covered by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), including human remains and associated funerary objects; unassociated funerary objects; sacred objects; and objects of cultural patrimony (McManamon, 2000). Internet databases, such as the Notices of Intent to Repatriate (NIR) Database by the National Park Service (NPS), provide public information on accepted claims made by a tribe for NAGPRA-eligible artifacts held in a museum or Federal agency. It is important to note that the listing under the NIR database only covers Federal Register documents published by this agency, and other Federal Register documents are held with the National Archives and Records Administration. Searchable databases containing up to date repatriation records that are available to the public can increase accessibility to information and communication between Native communities and museums.


Notices of Intent to Repatriate (NIR) Database, National Park Service (NPS) found at https://www.nps.gov/nagpra/onlinedb/index.htm
The National NAGPRA Online Database does not appear to have any records relating to basketry from the Cahuilla tribe located in Southern California (observe red box in map). However, when Cahuilla basketry is searched, 1 record from 2013 was found in the database and pertained to basketry found in a burial. This was posted from the Coachella Valley History Museum in Indio, CA, and found within the database, but as a Notice of Inventory Completion submitted by the museum. Therefore, no notices of repatriation are found involving Cahuilla basketry.

Once approved for repatriation, it is suggested to implement non-invasive testing on objects made from organic resources, such as animal and plant materials. Organic-based objects were commonly treated with pesticides as a past preservation method to protect an object from destruction by pests. Common pesticides applied to museum objects include, and are not limited to, heavy metals (lead, arsenic and mercury) as well as organic pesticides. These chemical elements can be harmful with prolonged contact with the skin or ingested, and should not be handled by children, the elderly or expectant mothers (NMAI Repatriation Department, 2014). A factor that could give a false positive for heavy metal pesticides can be from the object itself due to materials from its manufacture (i.e., applied pigments), or through exposure to lead-rich environments. These materials should also be handled with caution. Some museums offer methods of qualitative analysis and information regarding the presence of harmful elements on an object. It is recommended to have the results interpreted by a toxicologist to determine the severity of the contaminant, and how to safely handle and store the object.
Sources:

