

On Display: Native American Stone Tools



Image: Arrow; Spear, British Museum



Image: Cumberland projectile point from National Museum of the American Indian

Collections and Displays

The above image is from the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of the American Indian collections. Many of the Native American stone material culture held by museums is kept in storage, where it is never seen, especially not by the ancestors of the original creators of the tools.

Heckel's article for the Museum Anthropology journal notes that the American Natural History Museum alone holds thousands of objects belonging to Indigenous peoples. She also comments that many of the objects have been "recontextualized and reclassified" in museums (Heckel 2021, 55). This is a widespread issue that has persisted for centuries. Two of the three examples within this zine characterize the concern with how they have chosen to present the lithic tools. The third example is from an Indigenous-run museum that treats the objects with care and keeps them within their community of origin.

Southern Ohio Museum



Image: Southern Ohio Museum, Vaughn Wascovich.

This photo from the Southern Ohio Museum’s “Art of the Ancients” exhibit situates various Hopewellian stone tools including celts, axes, chisels, and stone hoes. The labels for each item are not directly correspondent to their artifact, leaving the audience to guess for themselves on which stone is associated with which label. The label for the celts gives a short overview of how the celts were derived from the axes and the basic usage for the tool. An article accompanying the images from the 2022 exhibition describes the information provided within, noting that a glass panel “orients visitors” to the context surrounding the Adena and Hopewell peoples (Feight Paragraph 1).

While the display itself situates the tools completely out of the context in which they were used, Feight’s article does note that nearly all the objects on display came from one collection and are associated with the “Portsmouth Earthworks Complex” (Feight Paragraphs 1-4). Feight also quotes other historical work covering the bloody and colonialist history of collections of this type. He notes that Margaret Jacobs wrote on the attempts at “eliminat[ing] the physical evidence of indigenous people from the land,” though it is unclear whether the Southern Ohio Museum makes this fact apparent in its exhibition (Feight Paragraph 9).

Southern Ohio Museum Continued



"Art of the Ancients" Exhibition at the Southern Ohio Museum

By Andrew Freight, Ph.D. Screenshot of Freight's article from Southern Ohio Museum site by author.

Even though the display is from 2022, the little context and difficult identification within the display perpetuates many of the issues with museums and their handling of Native American artifacts. The example from the British Museum offers a similar display, though with even fewer notes of context. However, the Ziibiwing Center display situates the audience within a wigwam, with other items and context. The third example from the Ziibiwing Center will show the public a diagram from which they can identify each object on display, while also learning a small bit of info on each item, rather than the unclear labelling seen in the Southern Ohio Museum.



The British Museum: North America Exhibit



Screenshot of The British Museum's Hopewellian material culture display by author.

The British Museum: North America Exhibit

The British Museum display offers a similar visual experience to that of the Southern Ohio Museum, with a few exceptions. The British Museum exhibit places Hopewell pipes, celts, and blades on glass shelving within a glass case. There is a short infographic label on one side of the case that gives audiences a preview of the "first Americans" alongside a contemporary map of the United States and state political borders (British Museum). The inclusion of the contemporary map contributes to the colonialist perspective in many portrayals of Native Americans in museums. As this display chose to use the map with state borders rather than one with tribal regions, perhaps, the display situates the Hopewell peoples in specific regions that were the sources of great pain for many Indigenous peoples in North America since colonization.

Just as the Southern Ohio Museum displays the objects out of context, the British Museum display does as well. With the tools and pipes in the screenshot having been placed on glass shelves with short, identifying labels, the objects are presented in a cold and clinical manner that

is completely detached from the environment in which the objects would have been found or used in.

The description of the North America exhibit on the British Museum's website describes the room as exploring the "different cultural identities of Native North America" both from "ancient times and present" (British Museum). The exploration of present-day Native Americans in a museum exhibit is certainly a step forward from static representation and historical placements that museums have long executed. However, these objects are far from their place of origin, (even the Southern Ohio Museum is within part of the region the Hopewell and Adena peoples populated) continuing the long history of the British Museum holding artifacts from other locations, often illegally.

In an interview with I-M Magazine, curator of the Americas at the British Museum, Jago Cooper, discusses his focus on "Indigenous peoples of the north-west [America]" and how communities have lived there for "ten thousands years" (I-M Magazine). With a curator focused on presenting Indigenous cultures in the present, there is some hope that the British Museum, and Cooper, will continue to update their displays to keep them as relevant and truly representative as they can.

The Ziibiwing Center

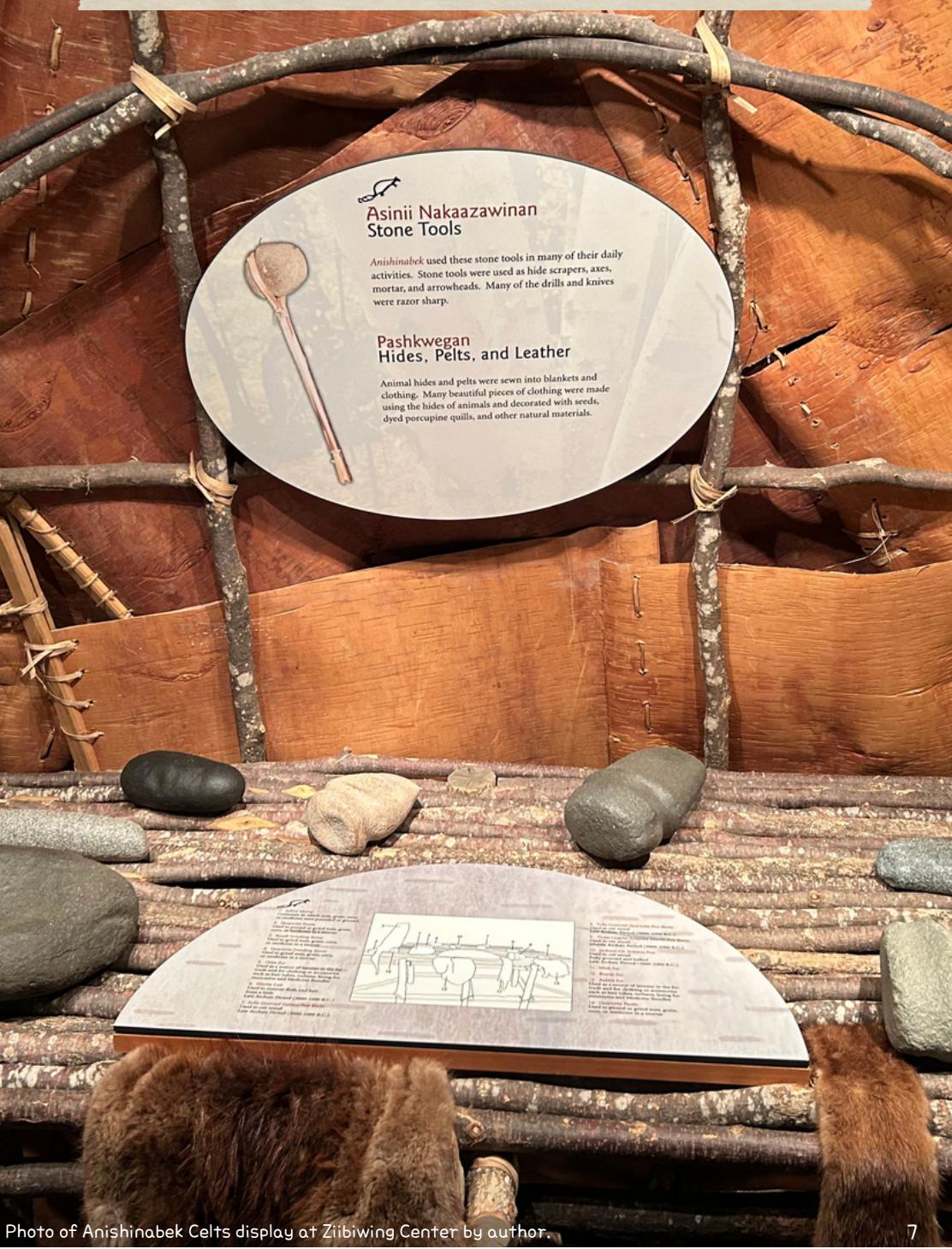


Photo of Anishinabek Celts display at Ziibiwing Center by author.

Anishinabek Celts and Stone Tools

In the display at the Ziibiwing Center in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, there is a main label that provides background for the uses of stone tools and the hides, pelts, and leather that are on display. The objects are placed within a wigwam and on a constructed table that present all items within the context in which they would have been found and used in. A diagram in the middle of the table provides outlines and identifications alongside relevant facts for each item. This allows the audience to view the items for themselves, then look to the reference diagram, rather than having individual, short labels near each object.

In comparison to the previous two examples, this display offers the audience a look at the stone tools within something close to their original context, harkening back to Heckel's article concerning the tendency of museums to "recontextualize" Native American objects. While the Southern Ohio Museum and British Museum both provide background for the stone tools through brief labels, the Ziibiwing Center constructs and fills the environment around the objects to keep the audience in touch with how and where the tools were originally used.

One of the largest issues with the previous two displays is that the objects are in the possession of institutions that are not Indigenous, and the history of the British Museum is particularly drenched in pain and crime, including the holding of thousands of Indigenous remains. The passing of the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act in 1990 was a step forward in bringing the bones of Native Americans back to their communities for reburial. This act did not include anything beyond remains and funerary objects, which excludes items such as the stone tools explored in this zine. The Ziibiwing Center displays information on NAGRPA, once again tying the exhibits into the current everyday life and struggles of Native Americans, rather than continuing to only see them in the past.

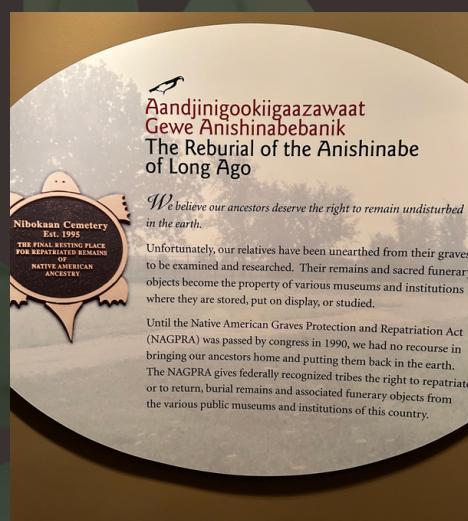


Photo of NAGRPA display by author.

The Ziibiwing Center Continued

The nature of the Ziibiwing Center is also vital to the understanding of the care and reverence behind the curation of the display of the stone tools. The Ziibiwing Center was founded in 2004 by the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe of Isabella County. According to the museum's exhibit, their goal has been to "reclaim the history of our people" and to "share it with the rest of the world" (Saginaw Chippewa). By having this outlet to share their history on their own terms, the displays within the museum are largely from the first-person voice, which offers an air of authority to visitors, while also connecting the objects and ideas in the exhibition to real, living people.

The image on the right shows the entrance to the Ziibiwing Center, as well as the tribal logo. On the display for the tribal logo, the words of Julius Simon Peters are quoted as he discusses how the logo "not only represents the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe," but also his grandparents. The present voice that is used throughout the entirety of the museum is also present in the display of the stone tools, which brings in the concerns discussed in Chip Colwell's *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*.

Colwell writes on the topic of Indigenous-run museums by saying that "some two hundred tribes have built museums of their own" after centuries of museums being "distant places divorced" from Native Americans (Colwell 265).



Photo of Entrance and Tribal Logo at Ziibiwing Center by author.

The Saginaw Chippewa Tribe's efforts in their own museum are apparent in the quality of their displays. That Colwell would mention the importance of Native Americans having voices and authority in the narrative around their own existence, is vital to the understanding of the complications behind many depictions of Indigenous peoples that continues in museums today, including the treatment of objects such as stone tools.

Conclusions

After exploring the three cases presented in this zine, the treatment of Native American stone tools by most museums remains in desperate need of revision and Indigenous consultation. The diagrammed and first-person perspective offered by the Saginaw Chippewa tribe in Mount Pleasant, MI is one that other institutions could learn from in their own displays. The power behind the first-person voice in an Indigenous-run museum is vital to the complex and painful story behind the peoples and their objects represented in these spaces.

It is telling that all of these examples are contemporary to one another, but differ so widely in their presentation of the objects. With large, well-known institutions such as the British Museum continuing to display a multitude of stolen objects, and in a less-than-progressive manner, the need for further public education on the existence of Indigenous-run museums is apparent.

With such museums as the Ziibiwing Center taking a firm stance on ensuring that Native Americans are represented as the existing and present peoples that they are, sets the precedent for other institutions to update and evolve their own displays.

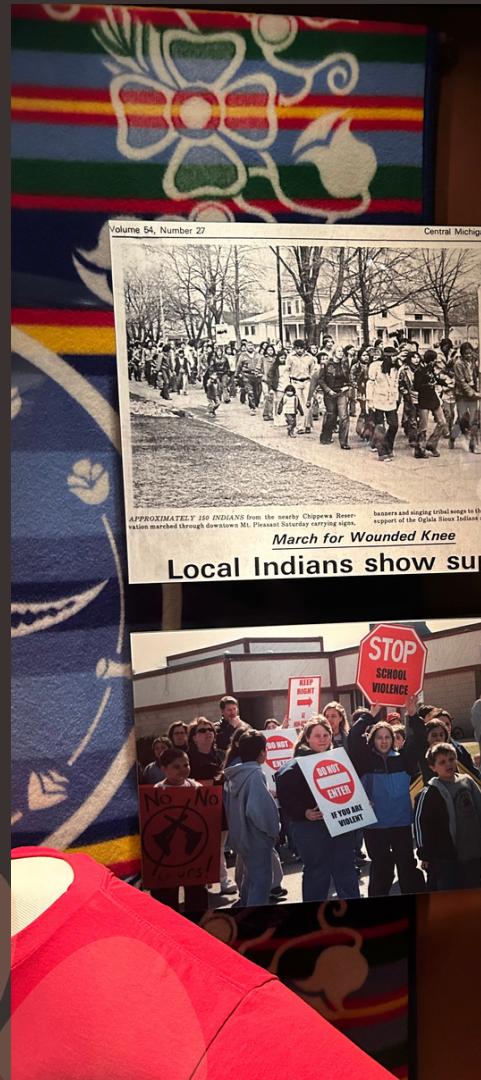


Photo of Present and Past Activism display at Ziibiwing Center by author.

Citations

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