

Privileging Knowledge, who's right is it?

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The importance of recording historical data is universally recognized by museum staff, but what about other forms of knowledge which might be equally important to understanding objects? Ethnographic objects which exist far from their place of origin inevitably lose some if not all contextual meaning. The need to identify and work with other forms of data over and above the historical data is a key concern at the Pitt Rivers Museum. [PRM]

The PRM has always privileged the identification, retention and accessibility of historical data for scholars. This data often concentrated on the history of the object after it left its source community. However details of manufacture, the circumstances in which the object was used, and cultural sensitivities were often not recorded. The museum is evolving its database to incorporate indigenous knowledge and current research in addition to maintaining the full historical record.

Using the Haida collections at the PRM as a case study, I will look at how different knowledge forms are presented and retained. I will show how the structures as well as the content of museum documentation might need to change. Our systems of classification and organisation of information naturally privileges institutional and historical documentation. Do our approaches to documenting ethnographic collections need a more radical rethink? I also hope that an exploration of our documentation experiences can be helpful to other museums as we all develop museum care of collections in the twenty-first century.