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Visual Arts

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Seattle Art Museum removes Native objects amid new federal rules

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The Seattle Art Museum in the heart of downtown Seattle. The museum will remove five Native American cultural items from public view in response to new federal legislation that requires museums, universities and government... (Courtesy Seattle Art Museum) **More** 

By [Margo Vansyngel](#)

Seattle Times staff reporter

The Seattle Art Museum will remove five Native American cultural items from public view, a spokesperson said Thursday. The museum said

the items are all of Tlingit origin, a group Indigenous to what is now Southeast Alaska. They include three headdresses, a dagger and a staff.

The move comes in response to new federal legislation that requires museums, universities and government agencies to consult with tribes before exhibiting or doing research on human remains, cultural objects and sacred items.

The new rules, which [took effect Jan. 12](#), are meant to expedite the return of remains and sacred objects as part of revisions to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which was passed in 1990. The law requires federal agencies and institutions that receive federal funds, including museums, universities, state agencies and local governments, to consult with tribal organizations about items in their collections.

“The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act is an essential tool for the safe return of sacred objects to the communities from which they were stolen. Among the updates we are implementing are critical steps to strengthen the authority and role of Indigenous communities in the repatriation process,” U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, a member of the Pueblo of Laguna, said [in a statement](#) in December. “Finalizing these changes is an important part of laying the groundwork for the healing of our people.”

Since the new regulations took effect last month, several museums across the country, including the [American Museum of Natural History](#), the [Field Museum in Chicago](#) and [Cleveland Museum of Art](#) have closed or covered entire displays. Others, like Harvard’s [Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology](#) and the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), said they are removing items from galleries.

While SAM has complied with NAGPRA since its 1990 enactment, the museum has been working to review its Native American objects on display to ensure it complies with the

new regulations, a spokesperson said. Two objects were removed Wednesday, and three more are scheduled to be removed from view Feb. 5.

A spokesperson said the museum would share more information as the consultation process with several tribes moves forward.

Representatives of the Tlingit tribes weren't available for comment.

Additional Native American works may be removed from exhibition later as the museum continues to check its collection for compliance with the new guidelines and in consultation with tribes, the SAM spokesperson added.

Other Washington museums, like the Tacoma Art Museum and Seattle's Museum of History & Industry, said they were not affected by the updates to NAGPRA. The Washington State Historical Society, which oversees the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma, is assembling an internal team to determine whether it needs to take additional steps to comply with the new regulations.

Representatives from the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, part of the University of Washington's College of Arts and Sciences, said the institution wasn't closing any displays or taking any objects from view.

"These new regulations are something that we've known were coming for a while," said Justice McNeeley, the Burke's assistant registrar and repatriation coordinator. But even before that, the Burke had already instituted a process for ethically engaging with tribes about objects in its collection, McNeeley said, and added that the new regulations will merely strengthen this consultation process.

McNeeley, who is Iñupiaq, said the NAGPRA updates will affect how museums across the U.S. consult with tribes and define cultural affiliation. The changes are momentous, she said, because the law now encodes respect for tribal sovereignty, authority and knowledge.

"[It's] a huge deal for the tribes," McNeeley said. "Overall, it means a lot for Native people."

It also means that the time pressures on and workload for tribes and institutions will likely increase, she said, which will require funding and staffing resources to match.

The updates to the law will also speed up repatriation under NAGPRA, a process that has come under fire for being too slow. The updates to the law set a deadline of 2029.

“By best estimates, before this revision to the NAGPRA regulations, it was expected to take ... about 200 years or more to successfully complete repatriation,” said Sara Gonzalez, UW associate professor of anthropology and archaeology curator at the Burke Museum. “That time is [now] shortened to a more reasonable time frame.”

With these new regulations, Gonzalez said she’s hopeful that more people and institutions will take this work seriously by dedicating budget and staff to ensure timely repatriation.

“As a museum professional, it’s museums and anthropologists and other collectors who have created this problem, and it’s our job to fix it,” she said. “And it’s our job to commit those resources.”

In many cases, the sacred objects, human remains and funerary items currently in museums across the world were Indigenous belongings looted from ancestral sites in the 19th and 20th centuries.

“People went under cover of darkness to excavate freshly dug graves, freshly buried individuals,” Gonzalez said. “That’s the history that we’re contending with here.”

Still, Gonzalez sees signs of hope.

Much has changed since the 1990s, when various institutions opposed NAGPRA. Since then, the work done by Indigenous anthropologists and the practice of Indigenous archaeology, which is done by, with and for Indigenous communities, has become more mainstream, Gonzalez said.

Museums have made a similar shift in recent years, responding to calls for ethical collecting and display practices and improving relationships with Indigenous peoples and other communities.

The Washington State Historical Society, for example, is redeveloping its Native Heritage gallery, an effort that has been underway for two years. This new permanent gallery titled “This is Native Land” will open in 2025 and was created with the help of a Native American advisory committee.

SAM, meanwhile, has worked with multiple Indigenous advisory groups over the past years and recently [overhauled its American galleries](#) to offer a more expansive view of who and what belongs under that umbrella. A lightbox portrait from Portland-based Apsáalooke artist Wendy Red Star now welcomes visitors to the gallery. The work,

commissioned by SAM for this purpose, features Indigenous women and children against Pacific Northwest trees and the Space Needle.

For now, SAM says it is committed to working with tribes in reviewing its collection. This process is to ensure the institution is in compliance with the new law, a spokesperson said, as well as the museum's own policies around ethical collecting and display and its goal of strengthening its relationships with Indigenous communities and other "communities of origin."

To Gonzalez, the updates to the law bring it closer to its original intent.

"The spirit of the law really is human rights," she said. "And it's recognizing the rights of Indigenous peoples, to their ancestors, to their graves, to their sacred belongings and objects."

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