Sharing Aboriginal Heritage in a Digital World

Ruth Phillips, PhD
Carleton University’s Canada Research Chair in Aboriginal Art and Culture
Ruth Phillips
and Team are Creating Access and Understanding for Great Lakes Indigenous Heritage

Europeans and the First Nations of the Great Lakes region have been in contact for more than 400 years. Yet the fascinating and rich collections of art, artifacts and souvenirs that have resulted from these encounters are far less-known than the totem poles or Inukshuks of the Northwest Coast and the Arctic.

European explorers, soldiers, fur traders, missionaries and settlers collected painted drums, woven baskets and beadwork, finely carved clubs and pipes, and other artefacts that reveal how Aboriginal culture evolved in the face of the growing power and repressive policies of colonial governments.

Ruth Phillips has studied how Aboriginal creativity came to adapt European styles while preserving Aboriginal traditions over the centuries, especially once colonial power was consolidated in Canada.

Exploring and documenting the arts, cultures and histories of Aboriginal peoples in Eastern North America is the focus of Phillips's research. She believes that the fullest understanding can be achieved only when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers collaborate to share their perspectives and different areas of knowledge.

She and her partners are using digital technology to create a multi-disciplinary data base that allows different kinds of heritage—art, material culture, Indigenous language, historical documents, and photographs—to be brought together dynamically in virtual space from institutions at home and abroad.

The Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures (GRASAC) is investigating a wide range of heritage items from historic treaties to beaded deer-skin shoulder bags and Indigenous languages. GRASAC draws from more than 65 institutions and has more than 200 members based in in museums, universities and Aboriginal communities.

“Our ability to address everything from missing and murdered Aboriginal women to the environmental crisis depends on our ability to understand our shared histories through access to heritage.”

Phillips's research with GRASAC has unearthed materials from large and small institutions in Canada, the United States, England, France, Italy, Germany and beyond. The team also works with Elders whose narratives fill in historical gaps that are, in fact, part of Canada's own living heritage.

Through their work they are building an interactive web-based resource that supports the work of students and professional researchers and, through a public website, responds to the interest of the general public.

THE RESEARCH
What I do
Research and make accessible, in partnership with Aboriginal and international scholars and curators, the artistic and cultural creativity of First Nations in Eastern North America.

Why it matters
Few Aboriginal materials are published. The survival of Aboriginal knowledge is not fully recognized.

What it will change
Increase awareness of Aboriginal agency throughout Canada's history and strengthen recognition of Aboriginal cultural authority today.

THE RESEARCHER
2010 Premier’s Discovery Award in Arts and Humanities, Ministry of Trade and Innovation, Ontario.

2010, 2003 Canada Foundation for Innovation grants to establish database and research platform for the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures (GRASAC).

2007, 2006, 2005 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grants for collaborative research leading to GRASAC.

Former Director, University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver.

PARTNERS
Ojibwa Cultural Foundation, Woodlands Cultural Centre, Canadian Museum of History, National Museum of the American Indian, British Museum, Library and Archives Canada, the Royal Ontario Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum (University of Oxford), Musée du quai Branly (Paris), and others; and industry partner Idéeclic Inc.

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