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Anthropological Collections

Documenting Oregon's Cultural Heritage:

The University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History

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The University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History curates one of Oregon's most significant collections of Native American historical and archaeological artifacts, which is comprised of more than 300,000 objects, spanning 15,000 years. The Oregon Legislature officially established the anthropological collections in 1935. They were integrated into the Museum of Natural History (now MNCH) in 1936, making



Fort Rock sandals. (Photo by Jack Liu)

it Oregon's official anthropological repository. Perhaps best known for its 10,000-year-old sagebrush bark sandals, the museum's archaeological holdings continue to grow through field studies undertaken by the MNCH Research Division and other archaeologists and agencies, often in conjunction with highway projects and other developments. Its anthropological collections and extensive holdings of fossils and biological specimens from Oregon, the Pacific Northwest, and around the world, make the museum a center of interdisciplinary research, preservation, and education.

Exhibits and Collections

On the map, Oregon is a small corner of the United States. Zooming in on the region, however, reveals an astounding physiographic diversity, matched by the cultural diversity of Native peoples. Members of Oregon's nine federally recognized tribes represent speakers of more than twenty languages, recorded even after genocide and introduced epidemic diseases wiped out an enormous portion of the population. The material culture of Native Oregonians is equally diverse, varying over space and time in style, function, and materials.

With items from the anthropological collections at the core of the museum's main exhibit, *Oregon - Where Past is Present*, visitors appreciate the depth of its Oregon-based holdings (Oregon items comprise almost 73 percent of the collection). They learn, through interpretive material and the objects themselves, that some Native Oregonians lived in rectangular plank houses and others in round pit houses; that diets consisted of game, fish, and plant foods in varying proportions, depending on season and availability, and that indigenous peoples' lifestyles were and are dynamic, affected by their changing social and natural environments.





Plateau section, Oregon—Where Past is Present, MNCH.

The amazing variety of Native American baskets presents a window on the influence of local resources, ranging from the cylindrical baskets of Wasco and Wishram weavers near The Dalles to the soft flat rectangular bags of Plateau peoples in the northeast, and from the round twined trays that are signature Klamath weavings, to the coiled and imbricated baskets of the northwest, a tradition extending into Washington and British Columbia. Even projectile points, superficially similar, show differences in style over space and time, and tool stones include more chert, obsidian or basalt, depending on local availability, travel routes and trading ties. To showcase its global holdings, MNCH organizes special exhibits such as the recent *Face to Face with Masks from the Museum Collections*, which featured traditional masks from North America, Africa and Oceania.

Digital Collections

In 2007, the Museum of Natural and Cultural History began an extensive initiative to digitize its collections and make them available to online visitors. Digitization serves the museum in many ways: the image of an object at the time of its arrival establishes a baseline record of its condition and allows tracking for continued preservation. Representative photos are uploaded into an electronic collections database, enabling museum staff and researchers to view objects without removing them from storage. Capturing multiple views of a specimen and including a scale and color bar in an image create a standardized and accurate record of an object's size and appearance. There is less handling and less risk of damage and the wonderful opportunity to share the museum's holdings with a world-wide audience.

In addition to internal documentation and archival safekeeping, the digital images are used in physical exhibits and publications; public access is made available in a growing number of online web galleries, eighteen of which showcase the museum's anthropological collections (<http://natural-history.uoregon.edu/collections/web-galleries>).



Native American basket from the Oregon Coast, example of MNCH digitization. (Photos by Chris White)



Teaching and Outreach

MNCH utilizes its collections for teaching and outreach in a variety of ways. Last year alone, the museum presented thirteen exhibits, twenty-seven events, and 253 public programs that leveraged its collections and expertise to engage audiences of all ages and backgrounds. In addition, sixteen University of Oregon classes used museum exhibits and collections to enhance teaching and learning in anthropology, geological sciences, environmental studies, classics, landscape architecture, arts and administration, and human settlements and bioregional planning. Tours for the K–12 audience also utilize items from the MNCH’s anthropological collections. For example, 3rd–5th grade tour groups participate in an “Oregon Archaeology Detective” activity, during which students investigate artifacts on display and handle teaching specimens and replicas while exploring the environments and Native peoples of Oregon. Students in 6th–12th grades become “CSI” (Cultural Scene Investigation) detectives as they inspect artifacts and consider oral traditions to reconstruct a cultural “scene.”



Installation of Face to Face with Masks from the Museum Collections. (Photo by Liz White)



Mask-making activity. (Photo MNCH Archives)

Conclusion

Specialized regional museums and cultural centers must exist to explore local history and it is important that they have collections to share with their communities. But it is also essential to understand the natural and cultural diversity of the entire state in a holistic way, as well as the interdependence of the region’s nature and cultures. Promoting this understanding is basic to MNCH’s mission as Oregon’s central anthropological repository; collections from across Oregon and other regions allow comparative studies that would otherwise be difficult, and growing academic emphasis on interdisciplinary research is increasing opportunities to study human interaction with the natural environment. By preserving and sharing objects and documents, this knowledge will continue to grow, and hopefully provide enlightenment for us all. 🌿

References

Portions of this article were previously published as “MNCH Collections: A Window on Oregon’s Diversity,” by Pamela Endzweig, *Museum of Natural and Cultural History Fieldnotes*, Spring 2012.

