Book Reviews

Generally, the book is impressive and would make a very useful resource for a range of museum staff, from researchers to collections managers. The layout is inviting and the information contained in the margin notes throughout the book is easy to absorb quickly. It suffers slightly from being neither a ‘barefoot doctor’ manual explicitly for under-funded small and tribal museums, nor a ‘big museum’ reference guide, but does provide a very good overview that would be of use to all museums. The book might usefully be seen as part of an emerging genre of work on caring for indigenous material heritage. It is related thematically to Miriam Clavir’s Preserving What is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations (Vancouver, 2002), which analyses indigenous perspectives on heritage artefacts, and earlier, much less comprehensive guides to caring for American Indian materials. Caring for American Indian Objects is an extremely strong and welcome addition to this genre.

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Judy Thompson and Ingrid Kritsch, Yeeno dâi’k’ê’t’ii’i’t’ gânagwaandâii / Long Ago Sewing We Will Remember: The Story of the Gwich’in Traditional Caribou Skin Clothing Project (Mercury Series, Ethnology Paper 143), Gatineau, Québec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2005; xii, 61 pp., map, 30 colour and 7 black-and-white illustrations, 5 figures, map, bibliography; ISBN 0660195089; CAN$14.95 (paper).

This is an extraordinary book, a model for museum research and material culture studies. It documents a research partnership—involving staff at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre (PWHC) in Yellowknife, and the Gwich’in Social and Cultural Institute—to repatriate the knowledge and skills embodied in nineteenth-century Gwich’in summer outfits. The project used a summer outfit (tunic and leggings/moccasins) from the CMC collections, for which a pattern was made. A core group of seamstresses from four northern communities and staff from the northern research partner institutions traveled to CMC to study the historic garments with CMC and PWHC staff, and the First Nations participants began gathering brain-tanned hides, porcupine quills, silverberry seeds, sinew, and other materials for the final garments. After creating a mock-up in cotton, the seamstresses went on to make five outfits in total: one each for the communities of Inuvik, Aklavik, Tsiigehtchic, and Fort McPherson, and one for the collections of PWHC.

The book evocatively documents the entire process, as well as the project’s multi-stranded, cross-cultural research methodology: it includes oral history; archival documentation and nineteenth-century illustrations of Gwich’in clothing; comparative examples from the British Museum collection and elsewhere; Dorothy
Burnham’s detailed scale pattern of the CMC garments; detailed photographs and
drawings of porcupine-quill decoration and its application technique; an image of a
bead fringe in an archaeological context; marvellous images of Victorian travellers
dressed up at home in clothing they had brought back from northern Canada; inter-
views with the seamstresses; and a lesson in how to tan a moose-hide. The text
brings together, in useful and respectful ways, many kinds of knowledge, from many
perspectives, offering a number of ways to understand these historic garments,
which are found in many museum collections, but—until this project—had been
absent from northern First Nations communities for decades.

The voices of the seamstresses and other community members are included here
at all levels and all stages of the project. Elders’ initial responses to the garments in
the CMC, saying that they had never seen such old clothing before, gave way to the
frustrations of sourcing and preparing materials, then to the wonder (and pain!) of
relearning porcupine quillwork, and finally to feelings of happiness and delight
when they saw the finished garments modelled by young men from their communi-
ties. That one of these young men came home to his birth community, after being
raised outside, the very day the seamstresses needed to photograph their finished
garments was a lovely coincidence. These are clothes, yes, but they are also objects
for relearning identity along with skills and knowledge. The entire project was about
linking past, present, and future, using museum collections to build pride in First
Nations communities today. The book provides an inspiring model for research on
collections.

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