



2023
ANNUAL REPORT

Repatriation Activities at the Smithsonian Institution

Contents of Annual Report 2023

- 1 Repatriation and the Smithsonian:
An Overview
- 2 Repatriation Activities: Year at a Glance
- 8 Oversight of Repatriation Activities
- 9 Highlighted Repatriation Activities
- 17 Additional Information

Repatriation and the Smithsonian: An Overview

The Smithsonian Institution has a long and successful history conducting respectful repatriations of Native American human remains and certain cultural items to their communities of origin. Prior to the passage of federal repatriation legislation, the Smithsonian engaged in such returns, including the voluntary return of human remains in the early 1980s and the well-known return of certain cultural objects affiliated to the Pueblo of Zuni in 1987.

In 1989, Congress enacted the National Museum of the American Indian Act (NMAIA). This law established the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) as part of the Smithsonian Institution and authorized the transfer of the collections from the Museum of the American Indian-Heye Foundation in New York City to the Smithsonian. The NMAIA was also the first piece of federal legislation to address the repatriation of Native American human remains and funerary objects. The NMAIA requires the Smithsonian to return, upon request, Native American human remains and funerary objects to culturally affiliated federally recognized Indian tribes. The NMAIA was amended in 1996 to include the return of certain Native American cultural objects, including sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony. To assist in the repatriation process, both the NMAI and National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) have repatriation policies and procedures.

The Smithsonian has repatriated or made available for repatriation the human remains of more than 7,000 individuals, 250,000 funerary objects, and 1,400 sacred objects and/or objects of cultural patrimony. These totals for repatriation far exceed any other museum complex in the United States. The Smithsonian is committed to the repatriation and consultation process with Indian tribes throughout the nation. This report to Congress will be sent to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, House Subcommittee on Indian Affairs, Congressional Regents, and the Government Accountability Office. It will also be posted on the repatriation websites of the NMNH and NMAI.

Repatriation Activities: Year at a Glance

National Museum of Natural History



Human Remains and Funerary Objects Available for Repatriation or That Have Been Repatriated by the NMNH

	CY 2023 ¹	TOTAL ²
Human Remains³		
Number of Individuals	425	6,946
Catalog Numbers	467	6,340
Funerary Objects (Associated and Unassociated)⁴		
Total Object Count	573	225,551
Total Catalog Numbers	387	3,867

¹ CY 2023 lists the human remains and objects made available for repatriation during the calendar year.

² Total lists the number of Native American human remains and objects repatriated or made available for repatriation within the United States, through time, including CY 2023.

³ At the NMNH, Human Remains mean the physical remains of a human body of a person of Native American ancestry. The Number of Individuals refers to the minimum number of individuals or MNI, a concept commonly used in anthropology to represent the fewest possible number of individuals represented by a skeletal assemblage. Catalog Numbers refer to the quantity of museum numbers assigned to the human remains or objects.

⁴ Funerary Objects refer to an “object that, as part of a death rite or ceremony of a culture, is intentionally placed with individual human remains either at the time of burial or later.” NMAIA, 20 U.S.C. §80q-14.

Objects of Cultural Patrimony and Sacred Objects Repatriated by the NMNH

	CY 2023	TOTAL
Objects of Cultural Patrimony⁵		
Total Object Count	0	1
Total Catalog Numbers	0	1
Sacred Objects⁶		
Total Object Count	0	52
Total Catalog Numbers	0	10
Other Items⁷		
Total Object Count	0	9
Total Catalog Numbers	0	6

⁵ Objects of Cultural Patrimony mean items “having ongoing historical, traditional, or cultural importance central to the Native American group (Indian tribe or Native Hawaiian organization) or culture itself, rather than property owned by an individual.” NMAIA Amendments of 1996, 20 U.S.C. 80q-9a.

⁶ Sacred Objects mean items that are “specific ceremonial objects which are needed by traditional Native American religious leaders for the practice of traditional Native American religions by their present-day adherents.” NMAIA Amendments of 1996, 20 U.S.C. 80q-9a.

⁷ Other Items refer to circumstances in which the cultural item offered for repatriation does not meet the definition of an object available for repatriation under the NMAIA or the policy of the NMNH. Since the NMAIA was not intended to limit the authority of the Smithsonian to conduct repatriations of certain items from its collections, this category was developed to track and monitor NMNH museum collections offered for return for which no other repatriation category is available or appropriate.

National Museum of the American Indian



Human Remains and Funerary Objects Repatriated by the NMAI

	CY 2023	TOTAL ⁸
Human Remains⁹		
Total Count ¹⁰	9	572
Total Catalog Numbers	5	268
Human Remains and Associated Funerary Objects¹¹		
Total Object Count	0	45
Total Catalog Numbers	0	42
Funerary Objects (Associated and Unassociated)¹²		
Total Object Count	0	29,679
Total Catalog Numbers	0	1,028

⁸ Total figures for NMAI include repatriations to tribes in the United States, First Nations in Canada, and Indigenous communities in Latin America.

⁹ At the NMAI Human Remains mean the physical remains of a human body, or any part thereof, whether or not naturally shed, freely given, or culturally modified. In some contexts, human hair may be considered human remains. For purposes of this policy, it is assumed that all human remains in the collection are of Native American ancestry unless otherwise known (NMAI Repatriation Policy 2022).

¹⁰ Historically, the NMAI did not assess the minimum number of individuals (MNI) but used other methods, including counts of individual elements, counts of the number of bone fragments, and other counting standards. The NMAI uses this legacy data for numerical consistency and, when possible, also calculates MNI in its case documentation.

¹¹ This includes human remains and accompanying burial objects that are counted and cataloged together.

¹² Funerary Objects are identified as a part of the death rite or ceremony of a culture reasonably believed to have been placed with individual human remains either at the time of death or later (NMAI Repatriation Policy 2022).

Objects of Cultural Patrimony and Sacred Objects Repatriated by the NMAI

	CY 2023	TOTAL
Objects of Cultural Patrimony¹³		
Total Object Count	0	19
Total Catalog Numbers	0	9
Sacred Objects¹⁴		
Total Object Count	12	1,155
Total Catalog Numbers	6	945
Objects of Cultural Patrimony/Sacred Objects		
Total Object Count	0	432
Total Catalog Numbers	0	358

Unethically or Illegally Acquired Objects Returned by the NMAI

	CY 2023	TOTAL
Objects Acquired Illegally¹⁵		
Total Object Count	0	31
Total Catalog Numbers	0	26

¹³ Objects of Cultural Patrimony are objects having ongoing historical, traditional, or cultural importance central to the Indian Tribe or Native Hawaiian Organization or culture, rather than property owned by an individual Native American, and which, therefore, cannot be alienated, appropriated, or conveyed by any individual regardless of whether the individual is a member of the Indian Tribe or Native Hawaiian Organization. The given object shall have been considered inalienable by the Indian Tribe or Native Hawaiian Organization at the time the object was separated from said group (NMAI Repatriation Policy 2022).

¹⁴ Sacred Objects are objects needed by traditional Native American religious leaders for the practice of Native American religions, including objects needed for the renewal of a religious practice (NMAI Repatriation Policy 2022).

¹⁵ Objects Unethically or Illegally Acquired refers to the longstanding Smithsonian policy stating that items that have been “stolen, unscientifically gathered or excavated, unethically acquired, or unlawfully exported from their country of origin should not be made part of Smithsonian collections” (SD 600, 2020, Section 9.2).

International Repatriation at the NMAI

The NMAI Act and its 1996 amendment address repatriation only to federally recognized Indian Tribes and Native Hawaiian Organizations within the United States. However, in accordance with its mission and in recognition of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the NMAI considers repatriation requests for human remains, associated funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony by Indigenous communities outside of the United States on a case-by-case basis. The following table lists the countries outside of the United States where the NMAI has conducted repatriations.

	Year	Province	Country
1.	1992	British Columbia	Canada
2.	1995	Pichincha	Ecuador
3.	1996	Ontario	Canada
4.	1996	Cusco	Peru
5.	1997	Ontario	Canada
6.	1997	Alberta	Canada
7.	1997	Ontario	Canada
8.	1998	British Columbia	Canada
9.	1998	Ontario	Canada
10.	1998	Ontario	Canada
11.	1999	Alberta	Canada
12.	2000	Alberta	Canada
13.	2002	British Columbia	Canada
14.	2002	Santiago de Cuba, Guantánamo, Pinar del Río	Cuba
15.	2002	British Columbia	Canada
16.	2007	Alberta	Canada
17.	2007	Alberta	Canada
18.	2007	El Loa	Chile
19.	2007	Arica	Chile
20.	2008	Ontario	Canada
21.	2012	Ontario	Canada
22.	2014	Ontario	Canada
23.	2016	Ontario	Canada
24.	2021	Alberta	Canada
25.	2021	Ontario	Canada
26.	2022	Ontario	Canada
27.	2023	Alberta	Canada
28.	2023	Pichincha	Ecuador
29.	2023	Manabí	Ecuador
30.	2023	Esmeraldas	Ecuador

Additional Repatriation Activities at the NMNH and NMAI

CY 2023 Tribal Repatriation Visits: Repatriation Consultation Visits and SI-Sponsored Visits

	NMNH	NMAI	Joint NMNH-NMAI
Repatriation Consultation Visits¹⁶			
Number of Representatives	65	34	8
Number of Tribes	18	10	4
Number of Smithsonian-Sponsored Repatriation Visits			
Number of Representatives	32	10	8
Number of Tribes	6	3	4

Claims, Reports, and Repatriations

	NMNH		NMAI	
	CY 2023	TOTAL	CY 2023	TOTAL
Claims				
Claims Received in CY 2023	1	16	1	17
Reports and Repatriations				
Completed Repatriation Reports ¹⁷	7	158	2	116
Completed Repatriations ¹⁸	1	128	5	121

¹⁶ The Smithsonian under certain circumstances funds the travel of tribal representatives to visit the Smithsonian as part of the repatriation process. Sponsored visits at the NMNH include both consultation and repatriation visit totals.

¹⁷ For NMAI, Completed Repatriation Reports refer to the total number of assessments. This includes reports, addenda, and/or memoranda that have resolved repatriation cases. Due to the complexity of repatriation claims, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between reports and completed repatriations. A single report may address more than one claim and/or result in multiple repatriations. Conversely, a single repatriation may be the result of multiple claims and/or reports.

¹⁸ For NMAI, Completed Repatriations refer to the events where items have been physically returned to tribes, First Nations, or communities.

Oversight of Repatriation Activities

Native American Repatriation Review Committee National Museum of Natural History

The Spring Repatriation Review Committee meeting occurred in person at NMNH on May 9–10, 2023. The second meeting was also held in person on December 12–13, 2023. The committee is composed of individuals nominated by tribes, tribal organizations, and scientific and museum organizations. The six-member committee consists of Jamie Arsenault (White Earth Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe), THPO, Repatriation Representative, and Archives Manager; Irene Dundas (Ketchikan Indian Community), Cultural Heritage Specialist; Vincas Steponaitis, Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina; George Milner, Department of Anthropology, Pennsylvania State University; and Bonnie Styles, Executive Director of the Association of Science Museum Directors. Darlene Miller completed her term on the committee and was thanked for her service at the winter 2023 meeting.



The NMNH Native American Repatriation Review Committee and the NMNH thanked Darlene Miller for her service on the committee (L-R: Irene Dundas, Darlene Miller, Kirk Johnson [NMNH Sant Director], and Jaime Arsenault, back to camera).

Repatriation Committee of the Board of Trustees National Museum of the American Indian

The National Museum of the American Indian Board of Trustees meets three times a year to discuss museum business, including NMAI repatriation matters brought forth through the Repatriation Committee of the board. As necessary, NMAI Repatriation Committee members meet outside full board meetings to complete committee work. All meetings occurred virtually in 2023. The NMAI 2023 Repatriation Committee includes Committee Chair Shari Huhndorf (Yup'ik), Johnson Cerda (Kichwa of the Ecuadorian Amazon), G. Peter Jemison (Seneca Nation), Emil' Keme (K'iche' Maya Nation), Elaine F. Peters (Ak-Chin Indian Community), Angela Riley (Citizen Potawatomi Nation), Julie Fate Sullivan (Koyukon Athabascan), Brian Vallo (Pueblo of Acoma), and Leslie Wheelock (Oneida Nation).

Highlighted Repatriation Activities

National Museum of Natural History

Leadership Changes in the Repatriation Office

Bill Billeck, Program Manager for Repatriation, retired in June of 2023 after twenty-two years of leading the office. Bill was responsible for organizing the Repatriation Program as a permanent office within the Department of Anthropology. He specializes in the archaeology of the Great Plains and is widely recognized as an expert on glass trade beads and continues to support the museum as a research associate.



Bill Billeck (left) reviewing drawings with Ernie La Pointe, great-great grandson of Chief Sitting Bull.

Dorothy Lippert became the third Repatriation Program Manager in August of 2023. She is a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, the first Native American and first woman to lead the office. Dorothy had previously served the Repatriation Office as a Tribal Liaison beginning in 2001, and has worked with tribes in the U.S. Southeast, Southwest, and parts of Alaska. Lippert has participated in many of anthropology's most esteemed organizations. These include membership on the Boards of Directors for both the Society for American Archaeology and the World Archaeological Congress as well as service on numerous committees for both organizations. In 2011, she was appointed by President Barack Obama to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, serving two terms as an expert member and Chair of the Archaeological Subcommittee and Vice Chair of the Committee on Native American Affairs.



*Dorothy Lippert, NMNH
Repatriation Program Manager*

Near Islands, Aleutian Islands Archipelago of Alaska (June 12–13, 2023)

The NMNH Repatriation Office completed return of remains of 51 individuals from the Near Islands, the western-most group in the Aleutian Islands archipelago of Alaska. The majority of the remains were collected in 1936 and 1937 by Smithsonian physical anthropologist Dr. Aleš Hrdlička. They were repatriated to the Native Village of Atka and the museum worked with Atka, the non-profit group Atuġ Forever representing descendants from the islands, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to coordinate the return. Representatives of the Village of Atka worked onsite with Repatriation Office staff to wrap the remains of these people and prepare them for their return home. The museum then transferred these individuals to Alaska where the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Alaska Maritime Wildlife Refuge transported them, accompanied by a delegation of community representatives, to the islands from which they had been removed for reburial. The NMNH Repatriation Office is continuing to work with the Village of Atka and other Unangaġ communities, to return remains and funerary objects from other Aleutian Islands.

Hosting the Piscataway Indian Nation (September 19, 2024)

The Repatriation Office hosted a visit from Chief Mark Tayac of the state-recognized Piscataway Indian Nation and other Piscataway representatives. This visit was particularly significant given that the NMNH sits on Piscataway land. The good relationships that were strengthened by this visit allowed the NMNH to successfully invite Chief Tayac to provide a Welcome to Country for a repatriation of human remains to Australia.

Virtual Engagement at the NMNH

With funding from both the Repatriation Office and the Information Technology Office, the NMNH Anthropology Department now has a large monitor, computer with wireless keyboard, overhead camera, camera on tripod, lights, and rig systems that allow for multiple cameras to facilitate remote, real-time engagement by tribal communities with collections. This setup has been designed to assist tribes who wish to review collections and consult on repatriation but who are not able to travel to the NMNH. It allows tribal members in multiple locations to come together to discuss repatriation and share information.



NMNH staff testing virtual engagement equipment.

National Museum of the American Indian

Gila River Indian Community, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, and Tohono O'odham Nation (April 24–25, 2023)

The Repatriation Department hosted meetings with representatives from three Native communities in April 2023. From the Gila River Indian Community, participants included Barnaby Lewis, THPO; Darius Enos, Cultural Resource Specialist; and Reylynne Williams, Repatriation Representative. From the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, representatives were Shane Anton, THPO, and Angela Garcia Lewis, Cultural Preservation Compliance Supervisor. From Tohono O'odham Nation, participants were Samuel Fayuant, Cultural Affairs Specialist, and Linda Fayuant, Program Manager for the Native Connections Program. This consultation was initially requested by the Gila River Indian Community as a follow-up to their 2013 consultation. It expanded to include representatives from Salt River Indian Community and Tohono O'odham, who had not previously consulted with the NMAI. Following two days of consultation with NMAI, the representatives spent two days in consultation with the NMNH Repatriation Office as part of their joint consultation visit.



L-R: Shane Anton, Samuel Fayuant, Barnaby Lewis, Reylynne Williams, Darius Enos, and Linda Fayuant viewing collections with NMAI staff Risa Arbolino, Samantha Hixson, and Dakota LaPlante. Photo Credit: Nancy Kenet Vickery



*Repatriation representatives of the Gila River Indian Community and Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community viewing collections.
Photo Credit: Nancy Kenet Vickery*

Tsuut'ina Nation (May 9, 2023)

A delegation of Tsuut'ina First Nation citizens traveled to the NMAI Cultural Resources Center (CRC) for the return of a medicine bundle approved for repatriation by the NMAI Board of Trustees on November 16, 2022. The group escorting the bundle home included Minor Chief Andrew Onespot Sr., Elder Audrey Pipestem, Elder Josephine Bigplume Cutknife, Andrew Onespot Jr., Executive Assistant to the Chief, and Jacob Crane, Consultant to the Chief. Repatriation staff have worked with the Transportation Security Administration and the Indigenous Affairs Secretariat under the Canadian Border Services Agency to assist with multiple First Nations to ensure the safe return of their cultural items into Canada.



Robert Talarico, Chief of Operations, and accompanying officers at the Calgary International Airport greeting the Tsuut'ina Nation delegation upon arrival. Photo Credit: Canada Border Services Agency



Tsuut'ina Nation Repatriation Receipt and Release signing ceremony (L-R: Josephine Bigplume, Andrew Onespot Sr., Andrew Onespot Jr., Cynthia Chavez Lamar, Samantha Hixson, Lauren Sieg, Risa Arbolino, Rachel Shabica, Jackie Swift, and Jacob Crane). Photo Credit: Nancy Kenet Vickery

Repatriation of Ancestral Remains to Ecuador (May 23–24, 2023)

Research for the return of ancestral remains to Ecuador was initiated in 2015 and culminated in multiple community consultations and a signing of a memorandum of agreement between the NMAI and the Ministry of Culture and Heritage of Ecuador in 2019. The physical repatriation, initially scheduled to occur in March of 2020, was suspended due to the pandemic.



U.S. Ambassador Michael J. Fitzpatrick, Minister of Culture and Heritage of Ecuador María Elena Machuca, and INPC Director Catalina Tello, with staff members from the NMAI, Ministry of Culture and Heritage, INPC, and National Police of Ecuador who played an integral role in facilitating the repatriation process between the museum, government, and communities. Photo credit: National Institute of Cultural Patrimony

On May 22, 2023, NMAI staff members Jackie Swift, Nancy Kenet Vickery, and William Chimborazo escorted the ancestral remains from the NMAI CRC to the National Institute of Cultural Patrimony (INPC) in Quito to be officially registered in country. NMAI staff stayed on-site during this process, as the ancestral remains were to be repatriated to four Indigenous communities and organizations in the days to follow.

Confederation of Pueblo Kayambi, Pichincha Province, Ecuador (May 23, 2023)

After the registration process at the INPC, NMAI staff traveled to Cayambe to meet community members in their cultural center, Centro Cultural Tránsito Amaguaña, in La Chimba. Following a ceremonial blessing the President of the Confederation of Pueblo Kayambi, Dennisse De La Cruz, accepted the ancestral remains on behalf of the Kayambi community of La Chimba in Pichincha Province. “It is of great importance that our ancestors, our Indigenous brothers and sisters, rest in their territory,” De La Cruz said. “We do not believe that the remains of a Kayambi should be in a strange world, far from their home and their loved ones.”

Comuna Sequita and Comuna Pepa de Huso, Manabí Province, and the Federation of Chachi Centers of Esmeraldas, Esmeraldas Province (May 24, 2023)

A collaborative ceremony and lunch, hosted by Modesto Carillo, president of Comuna Sequita, and Cristóbol Anchundia, president of the Comuna Pepa de Huso, took place in Manta to commemorate the occasion for the remaining three communities. Carillo and Anchundia welcomed the Chachi Federation’s representatives, Lugardo Añapa and Edson Vinicio Torres, as their Ecuadorian brothers to attend the repatriation event in their community. Añapa and Torres traveled from Esmeraldas to Manta to join the repatriation event and represent Santiago Delacruz Añapa, President of the Federation of Chachi Centers of Esmeraldas. Following a presentation and ceremony at the cultural center, community members and NMAI staff were invited to the Hojas Jaboncillo Archaeological Research Center for the ceremonial signing of the official receipt and release, signifying the official transfer of ancestral remains to each of the communities.



Members of the Kayambi community of La Chimba attending the ceremonial signing of the Receipt and Release document, which signified the official transfer of ancestral remains from the NMAI to the Pueblo Kayambi. Photo credit: Nancy Kenet Vickery



President of the Pueblo Kayambi, Denisse De La Cruz, preparing for a ceremonial blessing of the ancestral remains. Photo credit: Nancy Kenet Vickery

Additional Information



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National Museum of Natural History

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Repatriation Websites:

NMNH Repatriation:

<http://Naturalhistory.si.edu/research/anthropology/programs/repatriation-office>

NMNH Guidelines and Procedures for Repatriation:

[Repatriation Guidelines and Procedures 2012 \(si.edu\)](#)

NMAI Repatriation:

<http://AmericanIndian.si.edu/explore/collections/repatriation/>

NMAI Repatriation Policy:

[Repatriation Policy - June 2022 \(si.edu\)](#)

Smithsonian Collections Search Center:

<http://Collections.si.edu/search/>

