

# An Analysis in Diversifying Museum Studies: American Indians in Conservation

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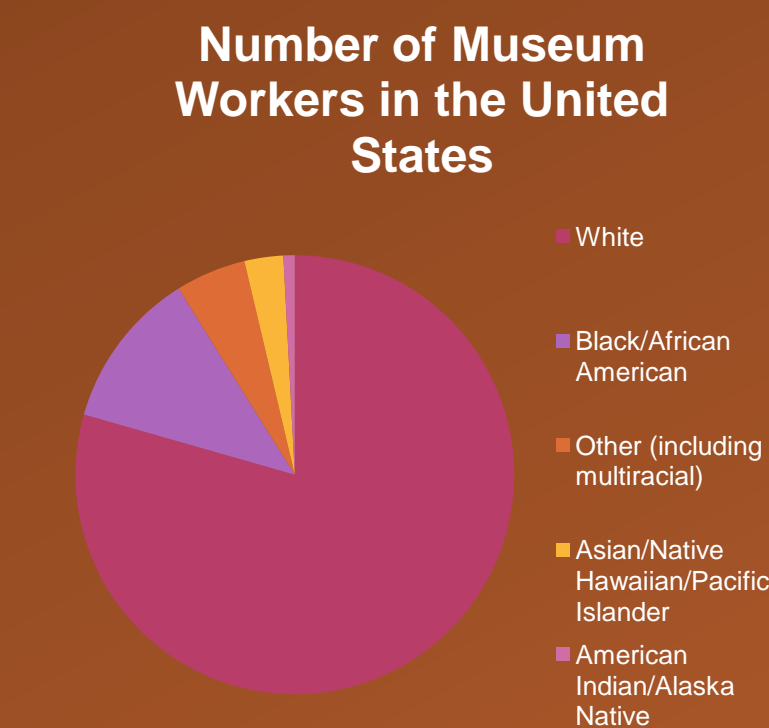
Archaeological Conservation, University of Arizona (2007). Photo by staff.

**W**hy do so few American Indians become conservators? An attempt to answer this question through an internship, Internet resources, a literature review, and conversations with local conservators, led to the observation that there are very few conservators of American Indian ethnicity. The available data to identify who's who among American Indian conservators in museums is scarce. There is a gap in the literature regarding American Indian conservators. One academic study published a report on the status of Latinos and American Indians in professional positions in museums nationwide (Rios-Bustamante, 1996). Other publications mention American Indians as collaborators and participants in conservation, but do not specifically name an American Indian as a professional conservator (Clavir, 2002; Erickson, 2002; Odegaard et al, 2005; Ogden 2004, 2006, 2007). A comprehensive and in depth investigation is needed to produce an up to date directory of American Indians who are conservators to reflect diversity at all levels in museums (Rios-Bustamante, 1996). Thus, as the topic of my dissertation research, locating and interviewing American Indian conservators is a major component of this study. The broad questions this study seeks to explore include: why there are so few American Indian conservators, are there American Indian conservators who oversee American Indian cultural material and human remains in both tribal and mainstream museums, and how might practicing American Indian conservators help to empower Native nations.

A brief back ground in my study revealed that as far back as the mid 1800s contemporary American Indians and their ancestor's material culture and human remains have been collected, analyzed, documented, stored, and displayed quite extensively (Deloria, 1988; Lonetree, 2006; Mithlo, 2004; Smith, 1999; Young, 2008). The nineteenth-century mindset was to preserve the dying savage through salvage archaeology, where scientist raced to collect as many specimens to classify and store for research (Lonetree, 2006; Mithlo, 2004). Museums are without a doubt very painful places for indigenous peoples as they are intimately tied to the colonization process (Lonetree, 2006). Although today, many Native American entities are working with museums not only to repatriate cultural items and human remains, but to also serve as consultants and participants in conservation. It has been up to tribal communities to enter the museums as professionals to gain access and control; and to cooperate with other museum professional to reach an understanding and partnership in caring for artifacts. Nevertheless, the less populated profession for native representation is within the preservation area of museums, specifically conservation.

The American Association of Musuem (AAM) 1984 report: "Museums for the Next Century," the problem of non-Anglo American representation among professional museum staff is underscored as a major challenge for the profession. (Rios-Bustamante, 1996)

Today:



Pottery Project, Save America's Treasures at Arizona State University (2008). Photo by staff.

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Museum Workers	Percent	Total U.S. population
White	320,033	79.40%	74.80%
Black/African American	47,118	11.70%	12.40%
Other (including multiracial)	20,889	5.20%	7.30%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	11,524	2.90%	4.60%
American Indian/Alaska Native	3,360	0.80%	0.80%
<b>Total</b>	<b>402,924</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

(AAM November 2011)

**T**he context of my study involves interviewing and administering surveys in various public forums, mainly museums and conferences throughout the country, placed in states with an American Indian population of at least 10 percent, as well as metropolitan areas and specific localities with American Indian populations. The study population consists of male and/or female adults. Participants are currently associated with mainstream, universities', and colleges' museums, students of museum studies and participants of conservation-related events such as conferences, seminars, and workshops. Consent from participants prior taking the survey and being interviewed is mandated through the University of Arizona's Human Study's Internal Review Board (IRB). Data Collection via the online survey tool *Survey Monkey*® is currently being administered through the internet to produce data for demographic analysis. The link below has been delivered via emailed and posted onto [f facebook](https://www.facebook.com)®.

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/P26R6YP>

Interviews are on-going through in-person, over the phone, and/or email correspondence. Interviews consist of open ended questions. Interviews and interview questions are available upon request. Analysis of the interview and survey data will revolve around these specific details:

- Number of federally recognized American Indian who are conservators, both educated and trained.
- Factors that may influence the low number of American Indian conservators.
- Potential benefits for American Indians as professional conservators.

All data sources will be carefully and thoughtfully analyzed through qualitative and quantitative theoretical approaches to be determined. The analysis and interpretations of the data will be used to describe the implications and perhaps a basis for future research.

**R**esults from the on-going online survey and interview, at this time, show that conservators of American Indian decent is non-existent. The following data comes from the survey and current results are as follows:

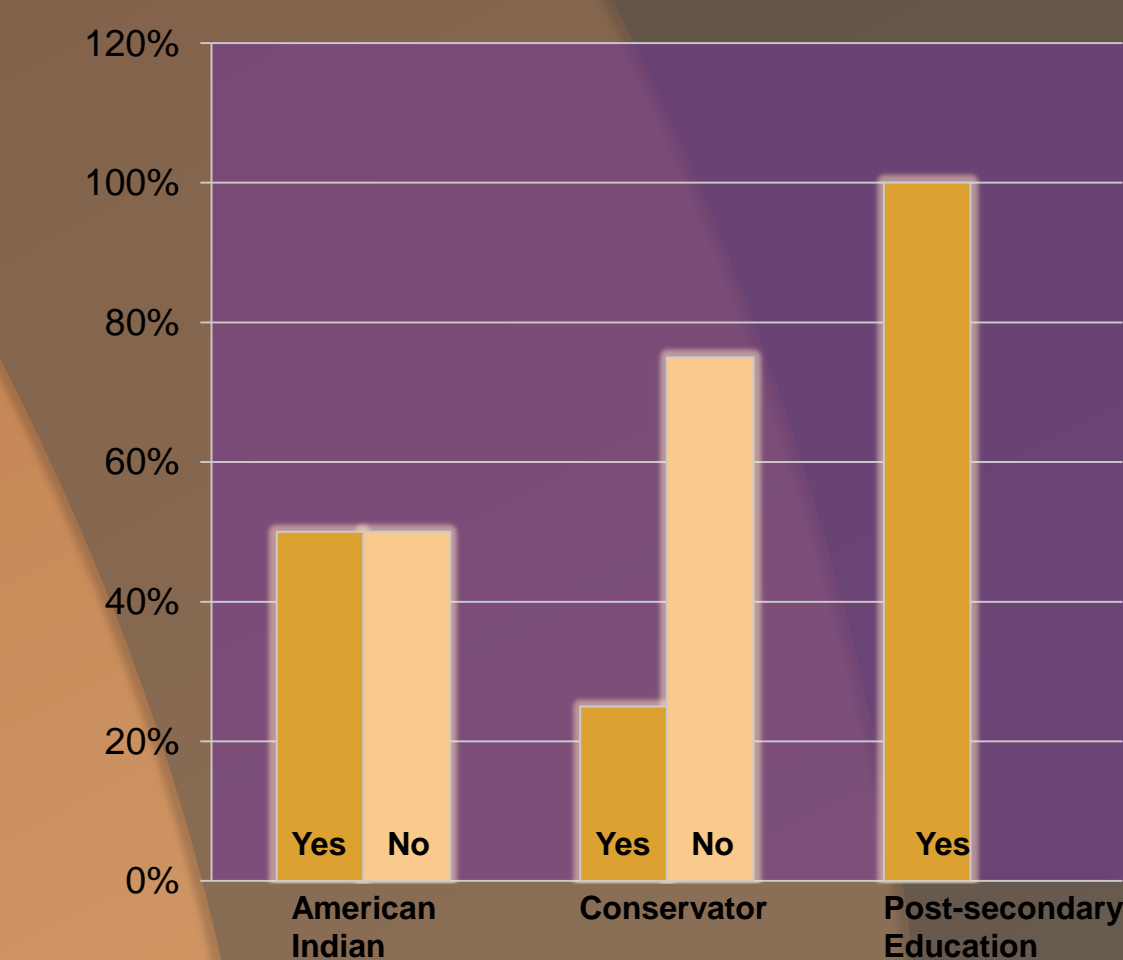
- American Indian: 50% YES 50% NO
- Conservator: 25% YES 75% NO
- Level of Education: 25% B.A. Conservation 50% B.A. other 25% Graduate level Conservation

Biases may include; conservation training programs are few, located far from home, and expensive; not to mention admissions are selective (Mithlo, 2004). In addition, most high schools on Indian reservations do not adequately prepare American Indian students in the material sciences, fine arts, and art history, all of which are required subject toward a degree in conservation. American Indian students are commonly encouraged to choose more culturally and socially acceptable professions such as law, education, or medicine (Mithlo, 2004). Interest in museums studies fall into the extracurricular activities at tribal cultural centers focusing on revitalization of Indian arts and crafts and cultural practices. Although, current trends toward curatorship has risen to associate native youth in the museum setting focusing on contemporary art and ways to represent themselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ultimately, most American Indians do not pursue anthropological-type (ie. archaeological conservation) studies nor do they approve of direct contact or adhere to the removal of burials, abandoned, or offered cultural artifacts from its context.

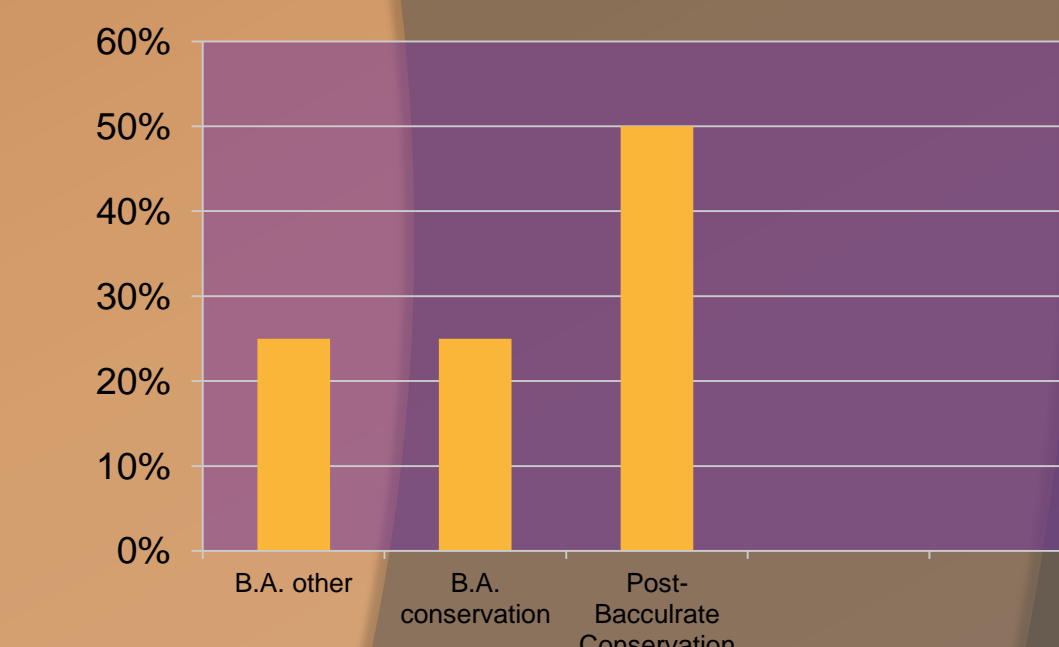
**M**y research findings has the potential to assist in creating diversity in museum studies, as it pertains to conservation. Participants are gaining a sense of awareness in the disparities within mainstream and tribal museums and cultural centers. I feel confident that the data from this study will help create a model based on higher education in the field of conservation for American Indian students to gain the skills and training needed to pursue a future in museum studies to hopefully benefit as those involved, native and non-native. Therefore, more surveys and interviews are needed to produce substantial data for this study.



Mike Marshall and Steve Tamayo, Lakota artists from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, examine a set of Apache playing cards (64592) selected for the Windows on Collections exhibition, "Toys, Games and Children's Clothing". NMAI website: <http://nmai.si.edu/explore/collections/conservation/outreach/>



Level of education



*Curator* is sometimes synonymous with *conservator*, thus required information to distinguish the difference between the two has to be critical.

"[The student curators] really wanted something that represents youth identity and modern identity. Native American youth will see themselves in these pieces in a way they don't in other exhibits," said Barnes, whose background includes Cherokee, Huron, and Blackfoot. "They're going to see things inspired by the past but not buried by it."—Harvard Gazette article about student curators

This is a research project done at the [University of Arizona](http://www.arizona.edu)  
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