

Words for *shaman* in NWC languages

Tlingit | ǰt'

Haida | SḠaaga/SḠáaga

Nuxalk | alhukwala

Gitxsan/Tsimshian | Halait/halayt

The word *shaman* is misused, having become a fetishized term for a societal role in non-western communities. Each NWC Nation has their own term for these individuals who were respected as healers, doctors, judges, prophets, historians, and/or spiritual mediators. As such, their belongings could be inherently powerful, channels for power, or symbols of power.

Tlingit Voices meeting

Tlingit objects make up the majority of the Northwest Coast collection at AMNH. It was important to seek perspectives from many Tlingit clan leaders, not rely on a sole advisor. Members of the Curatorial, Conservation, and Exhibition teams hosted a gathering in Juneau, Alaska where they discussed the display, conservation, and handling of Tlingit *objects of power* with clan leaders, who also made the journey to Juneau from their respective homes.



AMNH curator, Peter Whiteley, addresses Tlingit clan leaders in Juneau, Alaska. September 2018

After speaking with members of the represented NWC Nations, conservators based lab protocols on the more conservative viewpoints towards the handling and treatment of *objects of power*.

George J Bennett Sr, (Sha wha Guwakaan), Hoonah (Xunaa Kwaan), of the T'akdeintain clan (crest-Black legged Kittywake):

“Shaman items are not the same as items of traditional cultural practice within the Tlingit Society; the ǰt use their items in a different, separate practice. Because of this, we do not lay eyes on these items. Out of respect they should not be viewed; only at the permission of the museum staff.”

Laurel Smith Wilson (Xsim Ganaa'w; House of Guuxsan and the Fireweed Clan, culture keeper and memorizer. Former Director and Curator of the 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum in Hazelton):

“If you aren’t born with the power, you cannot impact these things [*objects of power*] and they cannot work through you”

Link to NWC Hall Renovation Announcement

Our sincere thanks to the curatorial team, especially:

Peter Whiteley, Haa'yuuks (Ron Hamilton), Kaa-xoo-auxch (Garfield George), Judith Daxootsu Ramos, (Xsim Ganaa'w) Laurel Smith Wilson, Jisgang (Nika Collison), Snxakila (Clyde Tallio), Chief Ga'lastawikw (Trevor Isaac), Secelenəxʷ (Morgan Guerin), and Chief Wigvilba Wakas (Harvey Humchitt), and George Bennett

To conservators Judith Levinson, Samantha Alderson, & Gabrielle Tieu

And to the Mellon Foundation for supporting outreach and collaboration

Objects of Power

Protocols developed at the American Museum of Natural History
in partnership with Northwest Coast cultural advisors

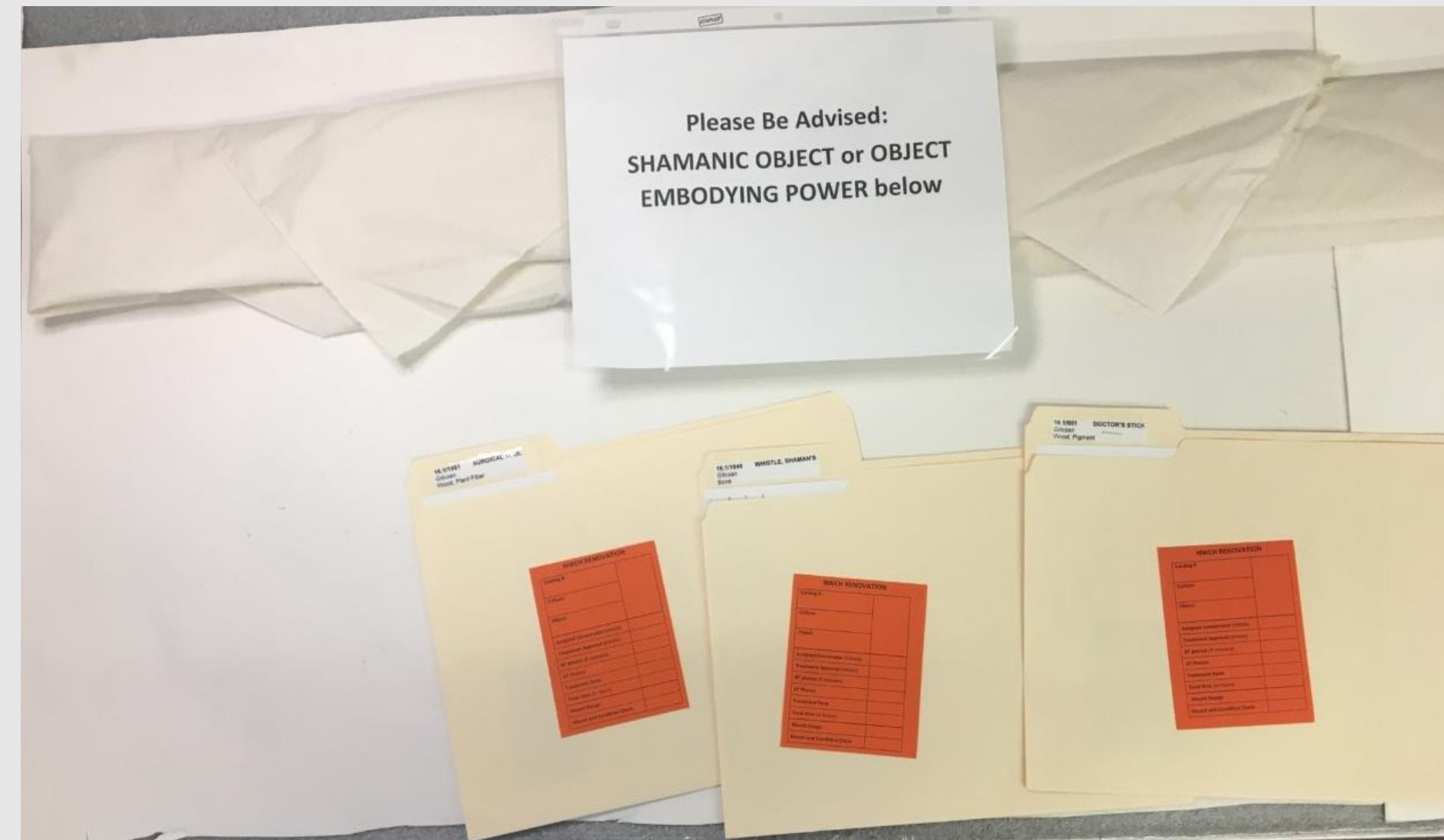
Amy Tjong, Michaela Paulson, Shyanne Beatty, and Samantha Alderson



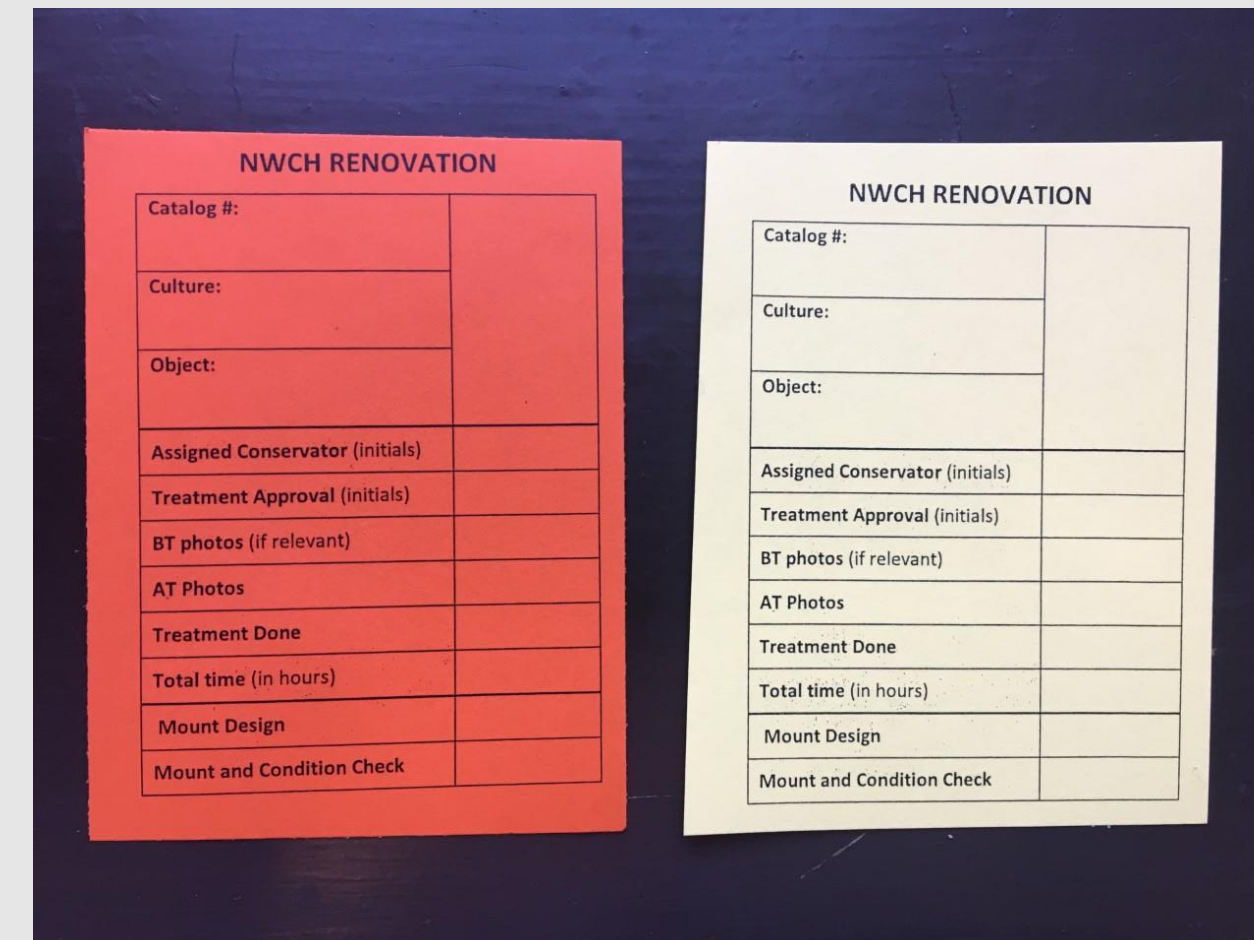
Renovation of the Northwest Coast Hall 2017-2021

AMNH regularly consulted with members of Pacific Northwest Coast (NWC) Nations during a multi-year project to update, restore, and conserve the Northwest Coast Hall and to enrich the interpretation of its exhibits. Outreach initiatives include the engagement of a co-curator, Haa'yuuks, and an advisory group consisting of ten Indigenous consulting curators from the Nations represented in the Hall. Advisors visited AMNH to thoroughly explore the collection in storage to develop themes, lists of objects for display, and case design. Members of the renovation team visited the advisors in their lands as well to discuss larger themes and sensitive subjects.

Some of the objects chosen for display are *objects of power*, i.e. **used in association with traditional/spiritual healers' practice, sacred ceremonies, or warfare**. Specific handling, treatment, and storage methods are required for these powerful objects, which are detailed in lab protocols developed with extensive input from members of the advisory group.



Objects to be treated covered in muslin (at top) with laminated card to warn others in lab about its presence. Orange cards used to identify objects of power above object folders with catalog information.



Yellow cards (right) are used for tracking conservation treatment and mount-making progress. Bright orange cards (left) were used to easily distinguish object of power.



Devil's club bundle suspended in doorway to conservation space

LAB PROTOCOLS FOR OBJECTS OF POWER

When approaching for assessment and treatment:

- Greet object and explain permission is granted from community representatives for interventions; demonstrate good intent and respect for the power inherent in the object.

- **DO NOT APPROACH** if you are feeling discomfort, i.e. if you are in a physically or emotionally vulnerable state (including menstruation and pregnancy). It is okay for conservators to request treatment of other items if they are not comfortable.

- Do not use saliva to clean *objects of power*. Discuss suitable alternatives to this.

- Do not compensate for aesthetic loss without permission from the advisor. Be wary of any object that incorporates human hair, which should be approached with more caution.

- Some *objects of power* are not intended for public display. Others are not safe to handle or display (both for the conservator and for the object). Remember that handling and treatment decisions are not solely up to us and we may be asked to perform interventions that do not agree with our initial proposal.

- As they move between departments, *objects of power* are clearly tagged with **ORANGE** tracking cards to emphasize and differentiate them from other items in the collection that have YELLOW tracking cards.

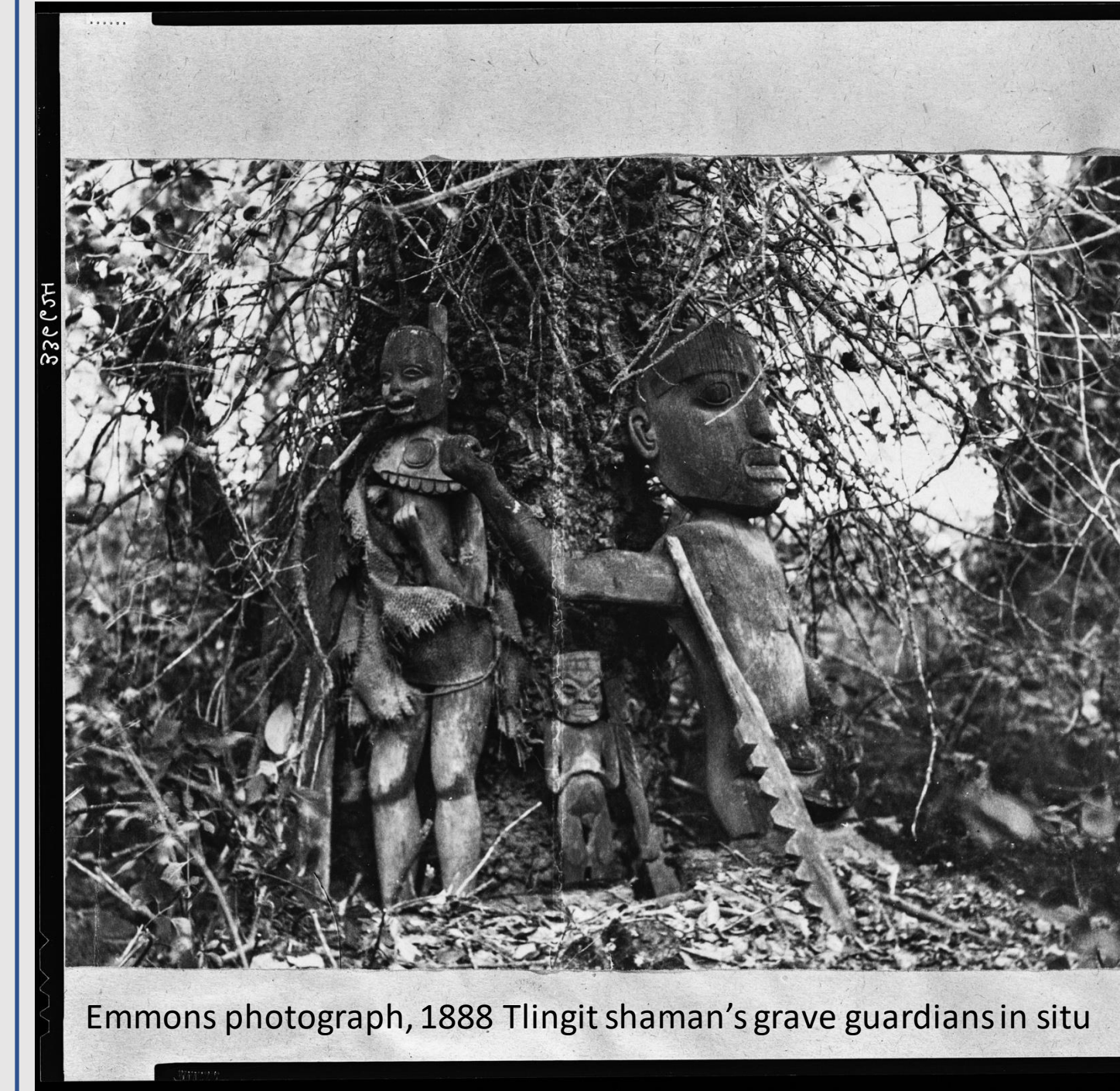
- Designate one room for treatment and storage to avoid unintentional interaction (especially with Native interns, staff, and visitors); clearly mark all doors with warning signs.

- Cover objects with **muslin** (natural fiber) when not undergoing treatment; cover glass storage cabinet doors with brown paper to prevent disturbance and unintentional encounters; clearly label all covered objects.

- Suspend bundles of **Devil's Club** (*Oplopanax horridus*, a shrub used to contain power) in doorways and cabinets where *objects of power* are stored

Case Studies

1) Tlingit Grave guardians



Emmons photograph, 1888 Tlingit shaman's grave guardians in situ

A grave guardian (E/1915) (standing, left) that Emmons brought to AMNH. It will be on view with another Tlingit grave guardian (E/2208), with permission from Tlingit advisors.

Opinions among the Tlingit concerning display of their *objects of power* vary. Some advocate for restricting all handling and display, both physical and photographic. Others believe teaching future generations through their display outweighs the risk. AMNH has implemented methods of mitigating interaction by placing the objects in discreet locations and using obvious warning signs.



E/2208 Partially covered by muslin before treatment

Some advisors feel that the guardian had served its purpose. Should the guards be repatriated, another ceremony would have to be conducted.

2) Haida Orca Headdress (16/260)



Community members instructed the museum not to put this headdress on view. Museum professionals were warned that handling can be dangerous.

Headdress materials: human hair, fur, abalone, and painted wood



AMNH Library Archive | copy negative 337197

Historical photo of Dr. Kudé (second from left) and other healers of Masset. Kudé wears the Orca headdress. This is the only known photo of Haida healers wearing masks.

Photograph by Edward Dossetter, 1881.

3) Nuxalk and Gitxsan Whistles

Whistles are so powerful they have caused intercultural conflicts, according to Clyde Tallio, consulting curator from the Nuxalk Nation. They are such significant items that there is still a caretaker of whistles in Nuxalk communities. Nuxalk elders say whistles would not normally be on display, but instead are traditionally stored in boxes. Tallio suggested displaying them in closed boxes next to a picture of the object with text explaining its sacredness.



16 / 1462 Nuxalk Kusiut whistle

This whistle (right) was instead removed from display entirely, as it is a summoning tool for supernatural beings

This whistle, carved from a bird ulna (confirmed by an AMNH ornithologist), will be on display in a women leaders case, with permission from the Tsimshian consulting curator.



16.1/1545 Tsimshian whistle

It is not our right - as conservators - to designate objects as sacred nor to decide on associated prohibitions

Historical/archival records, primary sources, etc. serve as references. Collaboration with Indigenous advisors and/or community leaders can and should be done with regular and repeated consultations regarding approaches to handling and treatment.