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

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'yuus, 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.

Renovation of the Northwest Coast Hall 2017-2021

When approaching for assessment and treatment:
- Great 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 objects 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

LAB PROTOCOLS FOR OBJECTS OF POWER

When handling can be dangerous.

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.