

Report & Recommendations

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Tread of Pioneers MUSEUM

Tread of Pioneers Museum
Native Arts Re-imagined Exhibit



by
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Report & Recommendations for the Native Arts Exhibit

Tread of Pioneers Museum

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Introduction

The Tread of Pioneers Museum in Steamboat Springs holds a unique collection of historic Native American Southwest artifacts and local pre-contact materials originating from Routt County and beyond. The core of the historic Native American artifacts comprises the H.B. Pleasant Collection. H.B. Pleasant, a resident of Maybell, Colorado, assembled a substantial body of Indigenous items from the American Southwest. The collection also includes photogravures by renowned early 20th-century Native American photographer Edward S. Curtis. Over the years, these collections have been featured in the Zimmerman House, regional traveling exhibits, and most recently, in a 2022–2023 temporary exhibit exploring Southwest ceramics, basketry, and the history of the collection’s acquisition and donation.

For many years, the second-floor bedroom of the Zimmerman House has been designated as the Native Arts Room. It features artifacts from the H.B. Pleasant Collection and additional pre-contact materials donated over time. A rotating Edward S. Curtis photogravure is also exhibited. In 2023, the Museum engaged Interpret Site L.L.C. to develop a plan for reimagining the space into a permanent exhibit using effective interpretive strategies grounded in professional museum standards.

As part of this reimagining, Interpret Site is committed to aligning with established standards for interpretive exhibit planning. The **National Park Service (NPS)** emphasizes **resource-based interpretation** that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the visitor and the resource. Interpretation should be thematic, relevant, and organized around core meanings. Foundational to this approach are **Freeman Tilden’s principles of interpretation**—such as provocation, revelation, and unity—which guide the design and delivery of engaging public interpretation.



Our mission is to provide clients with top quality finished projects for collections care, public exhibition and related management, consultation planning services and products.

Complementing this, the **National Association for Interpretation (NAI)** outlines that interpretation must be **purposeful, enjoyable, relevant, and organized**. Exhibits should address the needs of diverse visitor types—**streakers, browsers, and studiers**—by providing accessible layers of information. Techniques such as **storytelling, provocative questions, and inquiry-based labels** are encouraged to foster active engagement and reflection. These principles provide the framework through which the Native Arts exhibit can move beyond display toward a more **experiential and participatory narrative**.

Tribal Connections in Brief

Interpret Site L.L.C. began outreach efforts using History Colorado’s list of Tribal contacts. Additional contacts were compiled for Arizona-based Tribes connected to the Akimel O’odham (Pima) and Tohono O’odham (Papago), who were not initially included. A total of twenty-five initial outreach attempts were made through phone calls to confirm the appropriate contact person, followed by email submissions with materials tailored for each Tribe.

Subsequent follow-up calls ensured delivery of materials. Eventually, Twenty-seven Tribes responded. Some requested more information, while others did not follow up further. Several Tribes asked for images of artifacts related to the collection. The Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) of the Tohono O’odham Nation confirmed that the artifacts in question were considered trade items and not subject to NAGPRA. Nevertheless, they expressed interest in sending contemporary basketry artisans to participate in exhibit programming, highlighting a valuable opportunity for **living interpretation and co-created content**.

Lisa R. Velarde, representing the Jicarilla Apache Nation’s Cultural Affairs Office, confirmed the artifacts were not associated with the Jicarilla and advised reaching out to other Apache



Tribes. Despite outreach, those Tribes did not respond further.

Ulysses Reid and Sheldon Lucero (THPO) of the Pueblo of Zia corrected the classification of a Zia pottery piece as "slipped" and discussed potential inter-museum loan opportunities and demonstrations.

The most comprehensive consultations occurred with the **Gila River and Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Communities**. Two virtual meetings were held with Gary Owens, Museum Director at the Huhugam Ki Museum, and Franak Hilloowala, Collections Manager. In July 2024, Mr. Owens met with Katie Adams (Museum Curator) and Todd McMahon (Interpret Site L.L.C.) to review the exhibit content. Mr. Owens recommended using **Indigenous names followed by English translations in parentheses** and removing religious language from pottery interpretation. He also noted catalog inaccuracies, such as describing baskets as being made from yucca when they are willow and advised against displaying visibly used parching baskets.

Importantly, Mr. Owens and Shirley Jackson (Gila River Huhugam Heritage Center) emphasized that **Tribal people are not "gone"**—and that the exhibit must affirm that **these cultural practices and communities remain vibrant today**. This aligns with best practices for including Native American perspectives in museum interpretation, which include:

- Involving Tribal members in co-curation and review processes.
- Representing Native voices in their own words.
- Highlighting the **continuity** of Native cultures by avoiding terms such as "extinct" or "ancient."
- Using **Tribal language** followed by English translations if possible.
- Including **contemporary images and multimedia** to reflect cultural vibrancy.
- Ensuring that Tribal consultants and cultural contributors are **compensated**.



These recommendations reflect a growing consensus among museum professionals that **cultural representation should be collaborative, current, and respectful**—a theme echoed throughout the next section.

Indigenous Connections Summit

From March 19–20, 2025, Candice Bannister (Executive Director), Katie Adams (Curator), and Todd McMahon attended the **Indigenous Connections Summit** in Golden, Colorado. The event featured over a dozen Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPOs), artists, and co-curators. Keynote speaker Dr. Tink Tinker (Osage Nation) and other Native leaders shared critical insights on engagement, interpretation, and representation.

Key takeaways included:

- Native communities are present and active—**never refer to them as “ancient” or extinct.**
- Exhibits should incorporate **the Native language**, where possible, as a marker of cultural continuity.
- Use **contemporary photos** of Native individuals in exhibit graphics and promotional materials.
- Consider **co-curation, collaboration, or co-management** of exhibitions.
- **Fair compensation** or mutual hospitality (e.g., shared meals) is essential for meaningful Tribal consultation.
- The **Denver Indian Commission’s Indian Resource Guide** is a useful reference for community outreach.

These insights reinforce NAI’s emphasis on inclusive, participatory interpretation that provokes thoughtful engagement. In the context of this exhibit, they encourage a **shift from static display to dynamic cultural dialogue.**



Recommended Actions

1. **Re-write exhibit labels and text** to include appropriate Native terms, using Tribal names first (e.g., Akimel O'odham), followed by English in parentheses (as much as possible). Use **provocative questions and thematic statements** to align with NPS and NAI interpretive standards.
2. Focus first on collections associated with the **Tohono O'odham, Akimel O'odham and Pueblo of Zia** since the Museum has started initial positive connections with representatives of these Tribal Nations. Other Tribal representative collections can be added where possible and/or on a schedule of rotation. Further consultation could be done with collections targeted for addition to the exhibition with possible assistance facilitated by museum consultants.
3. **Incorporate maps, Native language, and contemporary photographs** of Tribal communities to affirm that Native Peoples remain active participants in today's world.
4. Apply **interpretive techniques** such as storytelling, visitor provocation, inquiry-based labeling, and layered content to serve different visitor types: **streakers, browsers, and studiers**.
5. Continue engagement with the Gila River and Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Communities. Share revised text for feedback and explore **co-curated elements** and guest interpretation opportunities.



6. Invite Tribal representatives to contribute during exhibition development and at the public opening. Consider **programming with contemporary Native artists, cultural practitioners, and language speakers.**

Interpretive Plan Revisited

The re-imagined exhibit will center on the **H.B. Pleasant Collection**, with a renewed interpretive framework that emphasizes **cultural context, craftsmanship, and continuity**. Artifacts associated with the Ute Tribe (from a Ute perspective) will be relocated nearer to the entry of the “History of Steamboat” space. Non-tribal-specific indigenous stone tools will be excluded from this reworked space to maintain cultural specificity. The Edward Curtis prints are proposed for rotational display in a hallway, allowing for broader thematic integration.

Interpretive Planning Framework

In developing this exhibit, the Museum has adopted a **tiered planning approach** aligned with best practices in interpretive exhibit design. The planning framework incorporates **organizational mission, interpretive goals, audience-focused objectives, and indicators of success**. These layers reflect the institutional mission and enable measurable and meaningful outcomes.

Mission and Aim (Specific to This Exhibit)

To preserve, share, and celebrate the history and heritage of Steamboat Springs and Routt County—including the Indigenous cultures of the West as reflected in the H.B. Pleasant Collection—through high-quality and engaging exhibits, programs, and education.

Interpretive Goals (Cognitive Objectives)

- Tell the story of the H.B. Pleasant family and their intent in collecting these artifacts.
- Explain the **craftsmanship and manufacturing processes** involved in pottery, basketry, and textiles.
- Promote **object stewardship** by rotating artifacts to protect them from overexposure and enable deeper storytelling.
- Provide expanded information using audiovisual enhancements, **QR codes**, or printed **“flip books”** to encourage deeper engagement.
- Align interpretation with **National Park Service (NPS)** and **National Association for**



Interpretation (NAI) standards:

- Interpretation must be **resource-based, thematic, and provocative** (per NPS).
- Interpretation must be **purposeful, enjoyable, and accessible** to all visitors (per NAI), including streakers, browsers, and studiers.
- Interpretive techniques such as **storytelling, visitor provocation, and inquiry-based labels** will be employed throughout.

Themes and Sub-themes

Artifacts will be grouped by material category (pottery, basketry, textiles) and interpreted through one or more of the following themes:

- **Theme 1:** Craft as Cultural Continuity
- **Theme 2:** Trade, Exchange, and Influence
- **Theme 3:** Cultural Identity and Expression

Sub-themes supporting these core messages:

- **Landscape Tie-in** – Where do the materials originate? How does place shape process?
- **Iconography** – What meanings do patterns, shapes, and symbols convey?
- **Generational Knowledge** – Who are the artisans? What is the legacy of craft within their communities?

Supporting tools

- Orientation map showing the location of Pueblo and affiliated Tribes (adapted from the previous exhibit).
- Timeline of trade, contact, and collection history.
- Historic and contemporary photos depicting the craft-making process.

Indicators of Success

- A feedback wall or interactive response station (as space permits) to gauge **visitor reflection and learning**.
- Increased membership or financial contributions as evidence of **community connection** to the collection.



Target Audiences

The Museum aims to engage several key audience segments while remaining inclusive of general visitors:

- **Art Enthusiasts** – Individuals interested in design, craftsmanship, and cultural aesthetics.
- **Native American Visitors** – Particularly members of Tribes with historical ties to the objects on display.
- **K-12 and Post-secondary Students** – Educational outreach remains a priority.

Preliminary Strategies

For Art Enthusiasts:

- Promote the exhibit through arts-focused community events, including partnerships with the Steamboat Art Museum.
- Encourage “backjacket” exhibit reviews by artists and curators.

For Native American Communities:

- Send formal invitations to affiliated Tribes, offering free admission for Tribal members.
- Build on consultation relationships to promote **co-curation** and community visibility.
- Coordinate museum participation in culturally relevant local events.

For Educational Audiences:

- Continue outreach to regional schools and homeschool groups.
- Develop curriculum-aligned gallery guides, including “search and find” activities.
- Explore interactive or “meet-up” events for college students.

Audience Tools

- Host **speakers and cultural practitioners** throughout the year to build connections with the themes of the exhibit.
- Introduce **audio-visual enhancements** (e.g., videos or ambient music) where appropriate, with attention to ease of maintenance.



List of Tribal Contacts and Responses

(See attached spreadsheet)

Email Letter Example

(See attached)

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