



## Preserving the Past

In museums all around the world, Indigenous remains and ancestral objects have been stored and held against the wishes of descendent communities today. The Pueblo communities of the present have launched extensive efforts to reclaim the remains of their ancestors, as have other Indigenous American communities across the United States. In this video, Jerad Koepp interviews Pueblo leaders and educators about the importance of these efforts and how they help Pueblo people reclaim historical narratives and protect sacred places in the present.

0:11

*Narrator speaking in room with indigenous art; photos of boxes on a shelf, indigenous pottery, and museums*

In dark rooms around the world, there are shelves upon shelves, drawers upon drawers, filled with the cultural artifacts and human remains of Pueblo people, and so many other Indigenous communities. These artifacts are often displayed in museums, as some remnant of an ancient, vanished culture. But Pueblo people are still here, still maintaining active relationships with their land, and cultural heritage. Material remains and artifacts contain deep connections to their history and are vital to their communities in the present.

In an increasingly global world, as our identities and experiences grow evermore interconnected, it can be easy to forget the diversity and complexity of the cultural webs that unite us all with our ancestors.

*Clip of people examining old photographs*

We all carry the memories of those who came before us, and our connections to them helps define who we are. It's part of what makes us human. And it's a big part of the reason we study history.

1:09

*Text box: Jerad Koepp; clip of Poeh Cultural Center; map of New Mexico showing Pojoaque Pueblo; transition music; header: Preserving the Past*

Hi. I'm Jerad Koepp. I'm Wukchumni, a tribe in Central California. And I'm the Washington State teacher of the year. I'm standing here in New Mexico, at the Roxanne Swentzell Tower Gallery at the Poeh Cultural Center in the Pueblo of Pojoaque. I'm here to speak with Pueblo educators about how their cultural heritage is under threat and the strategies they are using to preserve the legacy of their ancestors and protect their communities today.

*Textbox introducing Theresa Pasqual*

KOEPP: What's it meant to you to sort of reclaim our stories from anthropologists, to reclaim those stories from archaeologists, and start to tell the stories in the ways that are meaningful to us, and honor the, the history and story of our ancestors?

2:00

*Clips of a Pueblo architecture*

PASQUAL: Yeah, I think part of the struggle that I've had has really been dealing with the terminology that has used, that has been used really to objectify us—from a Pueblo perspective, our responsibility to these places that are seen as quote-unquote "ruins" that have been abandoned, that terminology doesn't allow for that living space in that we don't see these things of the simply of the past that we no longer have a responsibility to.

2:38

*Clips of Pueblo architecture*

How Pueblo people see these places is that we are descendants of, we are stewards of, and it's the reason why as Acoma Pueblo, but also as a collective of Pueblos, that they have worked together so diligently to protect those cultural resources that are so dear to us, because that's our narrative.

Our history, unlike Western history where you can pull the books from the library or the bookshelf and take a chapter of that history, our history isn't written that way. It's not written at all.

We don't have a written language. We don't have an alphabet. All of our history here at Acoma is held in that collective oral narrative.

**3:30**

*Photo of a closed off site*

*Black and white photo of a man examining indigenous pieces; photos of indigenous tools*

*Photos of indigenous art*

**4:29**

*Photos of whole and fragmented pieces of indigenous pottery; photos of shelves; text: Who was that...*

*Illustrations and photos of an indigenous women making pots*

**5:29**

*Illustration of indigenous women making pottery; transition music; header: Preserving...*

*Textbox introducing Porter Swentzell; clip of indigenous land*

**5:59**

*Photos and clips of indigenous architecture*

*Clip of a boulder in New Mexico*

*Census map showing locations of indigenous civilizations; clip of people mining; photo of graffiti art protesting fracking on Native land*

And so, what we say as Acoma people and in the field that I work in, is that when those chapters, such as these sites or places on the land are destroyed by development, then we lose those pages of the history book. We are unable to take our children back to see those places.

We are unable to regenerate those things that become destroyed, or when things are held in collection, these traditional cultural resources that were, that were formed by our ancestors' hands, whether they're pottery or obsidian points, these things that are referred to as artifacts, and they're objectified when we use that term.

Every time I see, whether it's in fragment or in whole, a piece of pottery that was taken from or excavated from these sites, as archaeologists have done, and housed now in curation, in an institution that has rows upon rows of sliding drawers and shelves, and I can look inside the interior of the bowl and see fingerprints, the impression of hand prints on that bowl, I think about, who was that grandmother? Who was that mother, that aunt, that relative, that formed this pot?

What was her prayer? What was her song that she did as she formed wet clay into that form of a jar, of a bowl?

What was her prayer and her thought at the time when she decided to paint that bowl?

KOEPP: What sort of challenges or successes have Pueblo people had working to preserve cultural spaces, sacred spaces, when so much of that land is under the control of federal, state, or even private ownership?

SWENTZELL: Many of our areas, our sacred sites, those places often are not located on our lands—maybe at best they're on public lands, but also, even oftentimes, they're in the private ownership of an individual who doesn't allow people to visit these places of in-incredible, um, cultural importance,

the places where our forebears, their sweat is soaked into the land, their blood is soaked into the land.

If it's not in an area that we can control, you know, what are the things that are happening there, if it's on public lands, is there grazing? Is there mining or mineral extraction going on? Gas and fracking going on? And so, what are the things happening there, right? And these are, you know, the parallel is, think of those places that are held most dear, you know, and any sort of nation, right?

**6:56**

*Photo of the Lincoln Memorial*

*Textbox introducing Brain Vallo*

*Photos of archeologists digging on indigenous land*

*Drawing of two men building a display*

You imagine, that people would start fracking the front steps of the Lincoln Memorial or something like that.

KOEPP: Why is it important to excavate some things and protect others?

VALLO: Well, there is no need to excavate from our perspective. Uh, especially when it comes to the extent that our ancestors have been removed from their places of rest.

When house blocks or ceremonial chambers have been totally desecrated, when those items that were planted by or left by our ancestors for a reason or excavated and now sitting in storage, in museums, and universities, or in private collections.

**7:51**

*Black and white photo of a man and a collection of indigenous pottery; photo of a room full of indigenous porrery*

When that material culture and cultural heritage is removed, that is problematic. From our perspective, it is not necessary to do that. And so in this time, part of our preservation is not only concerned for the structures and the resources and the land and air, but it's also our desire to bring back those ancestors that are on shelves in museums, to bring them back to these landscapes, to reenter

them, um, and to also bring back the cultural items that are significant to these places. Because that's why we return. We return to visit them.

**8:45**

*Transition music; header: Preserving...*

*Photo of a man working with archeological finds*

But when they have been removed, and when these places have been desecrated, then that directly impacts our ability, again to fulfill that inherent responsibility to maintain and preserve our culture.

KOEPP: Could you explain a little bit, uh, for people who may, may not understand why, why we spend so much effort returning our cultural objects and artifacts, how we're trying to return these ancestors back home?

VALLO: My thinking is that, if it was anyone else, I don't think any of us would like the idea of our family members being stripped from their graves, along with everything special that was planted with them.

**9:42**

*Transition music*

I understand that Western science has a desire to know and is very inquisitive, but the ways in which these items are removed from place and space is inhumane. From a native, cultural, value system and way of knowing and thinking, we don't, we don't do that. Once our loved one has departed this Earth, we are never to disturb them.

KOEPP: What has been some of the work that the Pueblos have been engaging in to-to reclaim their history and bring their ancestors home?

**10:30**

*Photo of a Tewa exhibit;  
clip of indigenous pottery  
on display*

SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So the exhibit, the place where we're standing right now, contains many pieces of pottery that originated from not just this Pueblo, but also surrounding Pueblo communities, and that they've come home, right? That they've been brought home through the efforts of this Pueblo at Pojoaque. The human remains are excavated, um, those, those, um, people who came before, they were, they were left there. They were interred there in a specific way where they were never supposed to be dug up again, right?

How do you remedy a harm that is so grievous that it was never supposed to occur in that way, right? So the harm is, is, um, not easy to just repair.

*Transition music*

Like, oh, it would just give stuff back or whatever, you know? Because, uh, in many cases, it's not clear where it should go. . .

**11:25**

*Clips of indigenous  
architecture; clip of  
Vallo and Koepp walking  
through indigenous  
architecture*

VALLO: Many of our ancestors were removed from their burial sites or placement when they departed this earth, uh, when places like Bonito and Chetro Ketl and other locations in outlier areas of Chaco were being excavated. So now, we are quite busy repatriating these ancestral human remains, their associated funerary materials, and bringing them back if possible to places within the areas from which they were taken to be reburied.

*Photos of indigenous art*

The other thing that we are always concerned about is not only the material culture, but those objects of cultural patrimony that were made by our ancestors, and that need to come back to these places.

**12:13**

*More photos of indigenous  
art*

Many of these items have changed ownership over the years because they've been sold at auction, perhaps the heirs of the collector didn't wish to maintain those collections, so they get spread all over the world.

*Photo of the U.S. Embassy  
in Finland's website*

In 2019, we repatriated a group of ancestors and their associated funerary materials from the National Museum of Finland.

*Photos of members of the  
indigenous community  
working with the federal  
government; clip of Mesa  
Verde*

And this was a great example of how Indigenous peoples, sovereign nations work directly with the federal government to ensure that those ancestors return back to the United States and they were re-interred at Mesa Verde.

*Photo of Vallo speaking at  
a auction*

We also were successful at repatriating a ceremonial shield that was on the auction block at the Eve auction house in Paris, France. So that was a voluntary return.

**13:03**

*Transition music; header:  
Building...*

And collectors are now looking at that option of voluntarily returning these significant items back to tribes.

*Narrator speaking*

Indigenous communities, like the 19 Pueblos of New Mexico, have resisted and endured through conquest, displacement, and cultural theft. In many parts of North America, Indigenous communities have undertaken a resurgence, reasserting their traditions, expanding their communities, reclaiming stolen remains, and building their future.

Still, as you've heard in this video, huge challenges remain. This is one of the reasons we study history.

*Outro music; OER logo*

Our past can help us understand the world we live in today and help us prepare to build a more equitable future.



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