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***Stories for British Museums*, student art exhibition on Indigenous object repatriation project, goes virtual**

Interrupted and reimagined, *Stories for British Museums*, a new University of Lethbridge student art exhibition showcasing works inspired by the [Mootookakio'ssin](#) Indigenous object repatriation project, is now in the virtual space.

The U of L's Hess Gallery was initially preparing to open the exhibition of student work as the global pandemic was declared in March. Students in Dr. Jackson TwoBears' Indigenous art studio class were dropping off works and finishing up their projects when the University was forced to close, leaving the gallery with a patchwork of finished works, some ready for installation and others not yet delivered.



“As we all adjusted to closures of public spaces and working from home, the issue of how to finish this exhibition hung over us,” says gallery director and curator Dr. Josephine Mills. “The students had done a fabulous job, working hard and engaging with processes, concepts and imagery of objects involved with Mootookakio'ssin.”

The Mootookakio'ssin project is a major research project to create detailed digital images of historic Blackfoot objects housed in three museums in Britain. A Canadian contingent of Elders from all four tribes in the Blackfoot Confederacy, U of L researchers, and artists travelled to Britain in July 2019 to meet with the British team members. Together, they visited the British Museum, the Museum of Archeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University, and the Horniman Museum, London to view

Blackfoot objects that had come from Blackfoot territory (throughout southern Alberta and Montana) and now are held in the UK.

“The Elders selected the objects we looked at, told stories prompted by the objects, and the team then made digital images of them,” says Mills. “Words fail to describe how deeply moving and emotional these visits were.”

TwoBears’ students are the first to tackle the daunting task of working with the Mootookakio’ssin project. Their exhibition is an initial step for students from or living in Blackfoot traditional territory to connect with those students working with their research partners in Britain.

For the Blackfoot, there is no equivalent to the term ‘object’ because all things are living beings – the ‘objects’ have a life force and the Elders were waking these objects after a century or more of separation from their people.

“It’s hard for non-Indigenous people to conceptualize this crucial idea of the connection between the objects and the people, of the life force that they each generate in the other,” shares Mills. “I could see how lifeless and incomplete the objects were without the people to wear them, use them, and have them play their role in telling stories and sharing knowledge.”

When Mills returned to campus in October and had an opportunity to see the incomplete works from the proposed student exhibition, she realized a connection to the historical objects in Britain.

“When restrictions began to open up, I went with David Smith, assistant curator and preparator, to remind ourselves what student work we had as we began to think about an online version of the exhibition,” she says. “Standing in that small storage room, I felt so sad looking at objects that lacked the vibrancy of the artists, the energy surrounding the exhibition; works that were incomplete, that didn’t have their context. And then it struck me, this is like visiting the historical objects in the museum storage in England.”

Historical objects convey information, and in the case of Indigenous objects in British museums, they provide the means to explain the ongoing legacies of colonialism and have the power to dismantle colonial narratives and rebuild relationships between people. Talking about the objects opens doors and creates paths to understanding.

Stories for British Museums is a crucial first step in building connections between historical Blackfoot objects and current artists and audiences. The exhibition presented on the [art gallery’s website](#) is not the same as the one that never came to be but is a valuable link in the research process and demonstrates the strength of the student artists and their work.

Attached photos:

Stories-1: Xiaosi Chen, Welcome to Blackfoot Territory, Printed Matter

Stories-2: Ines Catalini, Come Over, Mixed Media Installation

Stories-3: John Little Bear, Ihkitsikammiksi, 7 Brothers, Big Dipper, Acrylic paint on leather and suede

To view online: <https://www.uleth.ca/unews/article/stories-british-museums-student-art-exhibition-indigenous-object-repatriation-project-goes#.X9j5welKjeo>

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