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Elder led research and creation project, Mootookakio’ssin, reactivates Indigenous objects

Mootookakio’ssin, at its simplest description, is a project to create detailed images of historical Blackfoot objects housed in British museums. At its most complex, it is creating a virtual home for Indigenous objects, a place to reactivate the Blackfoot relations within them and transfer that knowledge all the way from Britain back to their peoples in southern Alberta.

After two years of research, construction and creation, this collaborative project between University of Lethbridge and UK researchers, led by Blackfoot advisors and elders, is coming to fruition, culminating in presentations, exhibitions, workshops, and the launch of the digital object microsite in summer 2021, to be housed in the [Blackfoot Digital Library](#).



Named by Elder Dr. Leroy Little Bear (BAsc (BA) '72, DAsc '04), Mootookakio’ssin translates to “distant awareness.” The aim of the project is to connect people living in traditional Blackfoot territory with non-sacred, historical Blackfoot objects housed in museum collections in Britain, using digital imagery to record objects in great detail.

Mootookakio’ssin is truly guided by the peoples the project aims to serve. From the onset, Blackfoot elders have been involved, providing guidance, knowledge and appropriate cultural practices. Funded by the Government of Canada’s New Frontiers in Research Fund, principal investigator Christine Clark is leading the development of a microsite presenting the digital images and their associated knowledge. Alongside Clark and her U of L research team are a UK research team, a Blackfoot Elder advisory group, consultation with additional Blackfoot Elders, a design advisory group, and numerous

student researchers, developers and artists, all contributing to and aiding in the key outcome of the project -knowledge transfer.

“The items documented within this project opened doors for conversations that are holistic in nature, and that welcome the collectiveness of knowledge translation and transmission within the Blackfoot confederacy and its people,” explains Melissa Shouting, master’s student, artist and research assistant. Shouting was one of the Blackfoot members that visited with the objects in British Museums, alongside representatives from all four Blackfoot tribes, sharing and connecting their experiences and interpretations of the knowledge shared through the items.

Indigenous knowledge transfer is reliant on personal lived experiences and the interpretation of the knowledge shared through oral history practices, creation stories, ceremonies and kin-based knowledge systems.

“This mode of knowledge translation has the ability to connect individuals to the knowledge that is attached to the objects revealing a connection with their ancestors,” says Shouting. “In sharing this knowledge, it allows us to understand not only the objects but the purpose, the history and the teachings associated with crafting together such objects.”

The ability to bring this knowledge back to southern Alberta was tackled by Clark and a team of student developers. They created web-based prototypes featuring digital models of the objects using spatial web technologies to reunite the objects with their associated knowledge and culture. Clark continued to meet with Blackfoot advisors throughout the development of the prototypes and the microsite that will host them.

“My part in those discussions was to listen and learn about what was important to them, working to ensure that the microsite would support these goals,” says Clark. “Too often, Blackfoot items are displayed as relics of the past, of a culture that has died away. The collection should feel alive and feel connected to contemporary Blackfoot artistic practices. For the design of the site, we have animation incorporated into the 3D models, so it avoids them feeling static.”

In addition to public access to the microsite, the U of L Art Gallery continues to play a role in education and outreach through exhibitions and workshops, and by engaging students in the discussion. Partnering with Dr. Jackson Two Bears’ Indigenous Art Studio classes in Spring and Fall 2020, students, both Indigenous and not, created responses to Mootookakio’ssin – to the digital images, the techniques and knowledge that can be learnt from the historic Blackfoot objects, and to the research generated around the colonial history of these objects.

The first student exhibition, *Stories That Objects Tell*, was set for installation in March 2020 when the gallery closed due to COVID restrictions. Gallery staff completed the

installation behind closed doors and presented a virtual format in Fall 2020. The second exhibition, *Virtual Stories That Objects Tell*, was approached from the beginning as a virtual exhibition, putting new meaning to Mootookakio'ssin.

“The students had to make their work from home and make work that either exists purely in a digital format or that would work well when documented and presented online,” says Dr. Josephine Mills, art gallery director and curator. “The students created ambitious, insightful, and emotional works that engage with identity, personal history, the legacies of colonialism, and museum practices.”

To learn more about Mootookakio'ssin, join Danielle Heavy Head, Christine Clark (BFA '10, MFA '14), Melissa Shouting (BHSc '19), Louisa Minkin and Josephine Mills on Thursday, March 4, from 2 to 3 pm as part of the University's Indigenous Awareness Week.

Stay up to date on upcoming events and opportunities to participate at blackfoot.cctbd.ca/

Virtual Stories that Objects Tell is available online at ulag.ca/virtualstories.

To view online: <https://www.uleth.ca/unews/article/elder-led-research-and-creation-project-mootookakio%E2%80%99ssin-reactivates-indigenous-objects>

Attached photo: Melissa Shouting leads a beading workshop in the U of L Art Gallery (pre COVID-19).

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