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AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY BEGINS MAJOR PROJECT TO RESTORE AND UPDATE HISTORIC NORTHWEST COAST HALL

MUSEUM TO COLLABORATE WITH COMMUNITIES FROM THE FIRST NATIONS OF
THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST AND WORK WITH ARCHITECTURE FIRM WHY

The American Museum of Natural History today announced a multi-year project to update, restore, and conserve the [Northwest Coast Hall](#) and to enrich the interpretation of the gallery's exhibits. The project is the first in a series of physical and programmatic enhancements to historic parts of the Museum leading up to its 150th anniversary and the opening of [the Richard Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation](#), a major new facility that will house resources for education, exhibition, and research, and reveal modern science to visitors of all ages.

As part of the project, Museum curatorial and conservation staff will be consulting with several Pacific Northwest Coast communities. Representatives from the Haida, Kwakwaka'wakw, Nuu-chah-nulth, and Tlingit communities traveled from the Pacific Northwest to New York City for the announcement. The architecture firm [wHY](#) – a design practice dedicated to serving the arts, communities, culture, and the environment – will work with the Museum to update the gallery's physical infrastructure while preserving the elegance of the historic space.

Beloved by generations for its magnificent totem poles and other extraordinary Northwest Coast cultural material – including the 63-foot-long Great Canoe that is currently displayed in the adjacent Grand Gallery – the Hall, which opened in 1899, is historically significant. Conceived by Museum Curator Franz Boas (1858-1942), known as the “father of American anthropology,” it was the first exhibition hall organized to convey

the idea that all cultures should be understood in their own right—a challenge to the prevailing approach of representing societies in evolutionary terms on a trajectory from “primitive” to “advanced.”

“As the Museum approaches its 150th anniversary, we are excited to refresh and enrich the Museum’s first hall and the first cultural gallery,” said Ellen V. Futter, President of the American Museum of Natural History. “With an eye on both history and the present, we are pleased to be enhancing this important and magnificent hall to reflect the living cultures of the Pacific Northwest. We are particularly gratified to be working with First Nations communities, deepening the Museum’s collaboration with indigenous communities as we prepare to enhance and enliven the gallery’s exhibits and presentations.”

Today’s program was attended by members of the First Nations, including Kwaxalanukwame’ ‘Namugwis/Bill Cranmer (a hereditary chief of ‘Namgis First Nation, Kwakwaka’wakw, and chairman of the Board of the U’mista Cultural Society); Kaa-xoo-auxch/Garfield George (head of the Raven Beaver House of Angoon/Dei Shu Hit “End of the Trail House,” Tlingit); Haa’yuups/Ron Hamilton (head of the House of Takiishtakamlthat-h, of the Huupach’esat-h First Nation, Nuuchahnulth, artist, and cultural historian); and Jisgang/Nika Collison (Ts’aahl clan of the Haida Nation, curator of the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay), who joined Lewis W. Bernard, the chairman of the Museum’s Board of Trustees; wHY Founding Partner and Creative Director Kulapat Yantrasast; Peter Whiteley, the Museum’s curator of North American Ethnology; and Ellen Futter. During the program, Nicky Eagle Eye Banks, a former trustee of the Shinnecock Nation of eastern Long Island and founder of the Shinnecock Foundation of Arts, as well as fellow members of the Shinnecock Nation Shane Weeks and 2017-2018 Miss Native American Autumn Rose Williams, welcomed attendees to the event. Later this fall, the Museum will host an interdisciplinary convening of Native and non-Native scholars, curators, artists, conservators, and others to consider exhibition design, interpretation, and approaches to the conservation and reinstallation of the Hall’s cultural treasures.

“We eagerly look forward to working with First Nations communities to create a modern exhibition hall that we hope will serve as a new exemplar,” said Whiteley. “We want to build on a long history of dialogue with Native experts as we develop an updated

installation with new understanding, transcending the boundaries that have too often divided museums and Native communities.”

An integral part of the Northwest Coast Hall restoration project is a major effort by the Division of Anthropology’s [Objects Conservation Laboratory](#) to conserve more than 1,000 items from the Northwest Coast collection. Leading up to the re-opening of the Hall, a team of Museum conservators will examine, document, and treat a broad range of items, beginning with six massive totem poles and then moving on to smaller pieces including ceremonial masks and rattles. This undertaking builds on the foundation established by the conservation of four carved and painted house posts that was completed in 2012, and continues an ongoing effort by the Museum to ensure that the collection is preserved for the future. In addition, this winter the Museum’s conservators treated a historic and elaborately carved wooden Haida chest, which had been acquired in 1901, before loaning it for a potlach ceremony and then an exhibition in an innovative collaboration between the Museum and the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Llnagaay. Before traveling back to New York, the chest will be removed from the gallery for two months so that accomplished Haida carvers can study it and create a replica that will remain in the community.

“I am very proud to announce that the American Museum of Natural History is a recipient of \$499,525 in federal funds from the Institute of Museum and Library Services for the conservation of the Museum’s historic painted totem poles,” said Congressman Jerrold Nadler. “The Museum is a world class and renowned center for science and culture that generations of New Yorkers have enjoyed, it is terrific that federal funds will go towards conservation of these magnificent totem poles.”

The Northwest Coast Hall restoration project – which has a total budget of \$14.5 million – is expected to be completed in 2020, during the celebration of the Museum’s 150th anniversary.

History of the Northwest Coast Hall

The Northwest Coast Hall highlights cultures and artistic expressions of the First Nations of the Pacific Northwest, from Alaska through British Columbia and Washington State.

To create the original gallery, Franz Boas worked closely with his long-term

collaborator George Hunt (1854-1933), whose mother was Tlingit and who was also a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw (then referred to as Kwakiutl) community at Fort Rupert, British Columbia, where he was born. Hunt played a major role in the collection of cultural materials and documentation of Native Northwest Coast life. In their work, Boas and Hunt communicated the extraordinary value of Northwest Coast cultures to the world, in the face of frequent government and missionary repression at home.

“Boas’s deeply thoughtful cultural relativism – developed in dialogue with First Nations collaborators like Hunt – was directly associated with his scientifically elaborated opposition to all forms of racism,” said Whiteley.

Collaboration between the Museum and First Nations has continued through the decades, including working together on the special exhibitions *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch* in 1991, *Totems to Turquoise* in 2004, and the addition of digital interpretation to the Northwest Coast Hall in 2016 as part of an ongoing effort to bring contemporary Northwest Coast voices into the gallery. A new interactive kiosk known as the Digital Totem, created in close dialogue with First Nations communities, features interviews with members of the Kwakwaka'wakw, Haida, Nuu-chah-nulth, Gitksan, Tlingit, and Tsimshian communities, while seasonal programs feature a live telepresence robot that facilitates two-way communication with representatives from the Haida Gwaii Museum as visitors explore the Hall.

The Museum gratefully recognizes the Eugene V. and Clare E. Thaw Charitable Trust and Lewis Bernard, whose leadership support has made the restoration of the Northwest Coast Hall possible.

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has provided critical planning support, including for consultation with First Nations communities.

The conservation of painted totem poles has been made possible by the Institute of Museum and Library Services under grant number MA-30-17-0260-17.

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AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY (AMNH.ORG)

The American Museum of Natural History, founded in 1869, is one of the world's preeminent scientific, educational, and cultural institutions. The Museum encompasses 45 permanent exhibition halls, including the Rose Center for Earth and Space and the Hayden Planetarium, as well as galleries for temporary exhibitions. It is home to the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial, New York State's official memorial to its 33rd governor and the nation's 26th president, and a tribute to Roosevelt's enduring legacy of conservation. The Museum's five active research divisions and three cross-disciplinary centers support approximately 200 scientists, whose work draws on a world-class permanent collection of more than 34 million specimens and artifacts, as well as specialized collections for frozen tissue and genomic and astrophysical data, and one of the largest natural history libraries in the world. Through its Richard Gilder Graduate School, it is the only American museum authorized to grant the Ph.D. degree and the Master of Arts in Teaching degree. Annual attendance has grown to approximately 5 million, and the Museum's exhibitions and Space Shows can be seen in venues on five continents. The Museum's website and collection of apps for mobile devices extend its collections, exhibitions, and educational programs to millions more beyond its walls. Visit amnh.org for more information.

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