

Towards 'Creative Collaboration': Building on Consultation-Led Conservation

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Conservation and exhibit development at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) typically includes consultations with members of respective native groups. These consultants are referred to as "community curators." For this exhibit, which opened in October 2007, NMAI staff worked with several members of the Chiricahua and Mescalero Apache tribes. This work was carried out at the request of the community, as they felt these objects represented a central part of who they are. Permission was given to the NMAI to work on these objects; the conservation work was carried out after they conducted the appropriate prayers, with additional prayers offered at the opening of the exhibit.

The focus of this project is the conservation and display of a *Gahe*, or male dancer figure, with regalia representing a *Gaan*, or Mountain Spirit. Mountain Spirit dancers are also called Horn Dancers, Crown Dancers, and Fire Dancers. The Chiricahua Apache community curators chose to portray the *Gahe* dancer during the *Na'ii'es*, or puberty ceremony, which is the most important ceremony for the community. The Chiricahua Apache believe that the Mountain Spirits, sent by the Creator to bless and teach the Apache, are supernatural beings that dwell within the interiors of many mountains, where they live and conduct their affairs according to traditional ways.

Conservation: The hands-on conservation treatment of the headdress was carried out by James Kuneststis, assisted by Daniel Cull. The object was structurally unstable, with one of the wooden head rest pieces broken, and the vertical slats loose, as well as having several elements that were detached, and one missing.



Headdress before and after treatment.

James Kuneststis disassembled much of the headdress and then reassembled it using extant holes and hide strips and new brain tanned hide strips.



During reattachment, James Kuneststis noted that the feather bundle at the center of the headdress had been re-assembled incorrectly at some point, probably after acquisition by the museum. James decided to leave the feathers in this condition.



James Kuneststis and Daniel Cull replicating the missing element with a wooden dowel.

The Chiricahua Apache consultants requested community member James Kuneststis work with NMAI to restore the *Gahe* figure's headdress, dress the mannequin for display, and paint the torso of the mannequin appropriately. They also requested that mannequin should have "life-like" torso, arms, and hands. In addition, the community requested that the outfit be handled only by men.



James Kawayikla at Fort Sill, OK, in *Gaan* regalia, some of which is now in the NMAI collection.

Source: Opler, M. E. 1941. *An Apache Life-Way: The Economic, Social and Religious Institutions of the Chiricahua Indians*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London. [Plate: V]



Completed figures in the display case: girl's puberty outfit (left) and *Gahe* dancer outfit (right).

Mount making: A complex form was constructed according to the stipulations of the Chiricahua Apache curators. NMAI mountmaker Shelly Uhlir created the form from waist down, while the torso, arms and hands were cast and finished by NMAI mountmaker Robert Patterson, who also made the brass mount for the headdress.



James Kuneststis demonstrating desired position for the mannequin.



Mountmaker Shelly Uhlir carved the lower half of the mannequin from polyethylene foam plank. Due to gender handling restrictions for the object, Daniel Cull assisted her with measuring, handling, and dressing.



Oddy Testing Results



Choosing a material for creating a life-like torso, arms and hands in a very shallow display case presented some challenges. Mountmaker Robert Patterson solved these by casting the form with Duo-Matrix Neo, a gypsum based polymer casting system, which performed well in Oddy testing. The form was not cast in the round but instead as hollow relief.



James Kuneststis painted designs representing traditional body painting on the torso, arms, and hands of the mannequin.



The final adjustments to the outfit were made in the display case.

Results: All of the participants in this project were happy with the display of the Mountain Spirit Dance regalia, including community members who came to Washington for the opening of the exhibit. The success of this project underscores the value of a collaborative process in which sharing knowledge is as much a part of the project as the conservation.

The Objects: The regalia includes: *Gahe bide* (man's headdress), *Gansdij* (armbands), *Sash*, *Gahe bit'aakali* (kilt), *Gahe bikébane* (legging moccasins), *Gahe bigishi* (dance staff), Leather belt with silver ornaments. (NMAI 2/1179, 2/1190, 2/1208, 2/1212-13, 2/1240, 16/4454)

Materials Used: Artificial Sinew – wax coated nylon (Source: *Native American Trading Post*), brain tanned hide (Source: *Native American Trading Post*), Wooden Dowel (Source: *Craft Supply Store*), Ethafoam – expanded open celled polyethylene foam plank (Source: *Manufactured by DuPont available from various suppliers*), backer rod – extruded polyethylene foam with non-absorbing, smooth surface. (Source: *Manufactured by NOMACO available from various suppliers*), Duo-Matrix Neo (Source: *Smooth On www.smooth-on.com*), acrylic paints (Source: *Golden Artist Colors www.goldenpaints.com*).

Acknowledgements:

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