

# **A Story of Past and Present Power: The Blessing of Two Wampum Belts from the McCord Museum of Canadian History**

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# A Story of Past and Present Power: The Blessing of Two Wampum Belts from the McCord Museum of Canadian History

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*In September 1994, along with Moira McCaffrey, Curator of Ethnology at the McCord Museum of Canadian History, Montreal, Canada, the author participated in a Native ceremony focused around two wampum belts from the museum collection. The ceremony proved to be extraordinary due not only to the exchange that took place between museum professionals and Native people, but also to the enhanced significance of the power of the wampum belts. In this paper, the author shares the story so that it may inspire others in similar circumstances. Indeed, many conservators are now faced with questions as to whether or not museum objects should be used during Native ceremonies and whether or not the very treatments or handling accomplished in the laboratory or during storage may in fact jeopardize the spiritual or sacred nature of the artifacts. Although there are no universal answers to these questions, there is a certain attitude that can be adopted by museum personnel to allow for a balance between the respect for physical and for spiritual integrity. One need not jeopardize the other. However a fundamental understanding of our cultural differences is essential in order to find this balance.*

*En septembre 1994, avec Moira McCaffrey, conservatrice de la collection d'ethnologie au Musée McCord d'histoire canadienne, Montréal, Canada, l'auteur participa à une cérémonie autochtone centrée autour de deux ceintures de wampum de la collection du musée. La rencontre et la cérémonie ont été exceptionnelles, à la fois pour les échanges qui ont eu lieu entre les professionnels de musée et les Autochtones et aussi pour la reconnaissance du pouvoir de ces ceintures anciennes qu'ils ont permis. Dans cet article, l'auteur partage son histoire de façon à servir d'inspiration pour d'autres dans des situations semblables. En fait, plusieurs restaurateurs doivent maintenant prendre des décisions quant à savoir si des pièces de musée doivent être utilisées lors de cérémonies, ou si les traitements, la manipulation et les conditions d'entreposage ne risquent pas de nuire à la nature sacrée d'objets particuliers. Bien qu'il n'existe pas de réponse universelle à ces questions, il n'en demeure pas moins qu'une certaine attitude peut être adoptée par le personnel des musées qui permet un équilibre entre le respect de l'intégrité physique et spirituelle des objets. Mais pour trouver cet équilibre, il est essentiel de comprendre nos différences culturelles.*

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## Introduction

During the last few years, most conservators have heard about or have been directly involved in discussions or events relating to the repatriation or use of museum artifacts by the people for whom these objects still hold a sacred or ceremonial significance. In the field of ethnographic conservation, this issue has recently gained increased relevance in the wake of a spiritual renewal that is occurring within First Peoples across the North American continent.<sup>1,2</sup> In fact the ethnographic objects held by museums represent important concrete data that the First Peoples can use to re-establish and preserve a perception of themselves as a distinctive and separate population. Therefore it becomes even more important for us as conservators to consider these aspects of preservation that go beyond physical care and to include in our decision-making aspects relating to the less tangible, such as spiritual nature and conceptual integrity.<sup>3,4</sup>

The present case study directly relates to these issues. Spirituality is not taught in class, but rather is learned through experience and contact with others. So instead of relating what I myself have learned, through the ceremony that I will be

describing and my many contacts with Native people, this account instead relates the events step by step and hopefully will let readers come to their own conclusions. Although it is difficult to convey on paper the feelings and events of the real ceremony, it is hoped that the story will speak for itself and may inspire future decisions by conservators in similar situations.

I also wish to repeat something I heard during the ceremony, that the rites described do not belong to any particular groups among First Peoples. Rather, details may have been borrowed from any of those groups who were present, roughly from the whole northeast of the North American continent. No picture taking, recording, filming of any kind, or publicity was allowed at any point before or during the ceremony, and therefore no images will accompany my text.<sup>5</sup> Now let me tell the story...

## Before...

I first heard about the ceremony at the end of August 1994 through the standard museum channel, when the McCord Museum of Canadian History's Collections Manager asked if I could prepare for the loan of two wampum belts for a Native

ceremony. Being aware of the spiritual significance, as well as other political and sometimes legal attributes that wampum belts possess for Native peoples, I immediately contacted Moira McCaffrey, Curator of Ethnology at the McCord Museum. She informed me that the two belts had been requested for a special gathering scheduled for September 11, 1994, hardly two weeks later, at a remote site northwest of Ottawa, Canada. The stated purpose of the ceremony was purely spiritual and its focus was on the meaning and knowledge of the wampum belts. Moira was already in the process of having the loan accepted by the Board of Trustees, arguing that the loan request should be approved, based on our establishing relationships of mutual trust and respect with Native partners, this in agreement with the terms of the 1992 Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples.<sup>6</sup>

Included in the list of guests to the events were several influential Native leaders, as well as Native people from all over the Northeast. The guest list comprised also representatives of two other museums, as well as members of the National Film Board of Canada who were in discussion with Native spiritual leaders to put on film the essence of these spiritual and highly private gatherings.

Despite some hesitation on the part of the Museum Board to allow this loan, due to the belts' fragility and potential political association (as this took place just before a federal election), Moira was able to secure the museum's agreement to the loan. She used the added incentive that I, a conservator, would be present to ensure that these objects were handled and stored appropriately for the duration of the ceremony.

The two wampum belts used during these events are in good condition. They consist of shells (white wampum from the central column of the whelk (*Buccinum undatum*) and purple wampum from the hard-shell of the quahog clam (*Mercenaria mercenaria*),<sup>7,8</sup> that are drilled through, strung on strands (skin with remnants of red ochre in one case and on jute or hemp for the other), and woven together into elaborately patterned belts. Although both have old losses, all the shells remain well secured onto the strands, which still appear quite strong. There is no evidence of shell deterioration, for instance, powdering or other form of efflorescence sometimes associated with shells.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Moira and I had requested that the belts be minimally handled and that during the ceremony they be laid on a board covered with unbleached cotton, to which the organizer and other people involved in the gathering had agreed.

Even though we had only two weeks to prepare for this particular gathering, the museum had been involved since 1991 in discussions about the organization of such an event, mostly with Claude Aubin, a resident of Aylmer, Quebec, and a member of the Métis Nation. In many ways, it was already clear that Claude Aubin, the main organizer, as well as the Native elders involved in this event, shared with us concerns for the well being of the belts. They were willing to accept the special conditions

which we felt were warranted, for instance the fact that the belts would remain on their supports and would be kept flat on a table throughout the event. We did not anticipate any problems as to the safe return of the belts as Claude Aubin had himself "given his word" in writing to that effect. Still I must say that when we left, with the belts tightly secured in custom-made, padded corrugated polyethylene boxes,<sup>10</sup> we anticipated some discussions on their ownership. Two questions that were written on the invitations to the gathering had particularly caught our attention. They read: "Many elders have confirmed that these spiritual objects belong to the people and to no nation in particular. Should the wampum belts be made available by all keepers when needed to perform the special ceremonies that go with them?"; "Is it time to focus on the meaning of the content of the belt rather than to lose (sic) precious time on possessiveness, arguing to whom they belong when they belong to no one or to no nation?"

### **During...**

The four and one half-hour drive to the site was uneventful. We were given precise directions as the site is very remote. We met Claude Aubin at his house and he led us several kilometres to the site itself, whose exact location we were asked to keep secret. We drove over tractor tracks and then through a series of fields before we arrived at a large clearing in the forest where a lodge was being erected. Several people were busy assembling aspen saplings for the frame and laying canvas over it, while others were gathering dry wood for the fire or were setting tables for the feast. The events to take place were specifically orchestrated so that some ceremonies would take place at sunset and others during the darkest hours of the night. We were aware that there would be a "talking circle" (described below), a "ritual" cleansing of the belts, and a "night ceremony," but we were to grasp the overall significance of the ceremony only later.

As we arrived, there clearly was a sense of relief that indeed the precious "cargo" had arrived. We were introduced to the two main spiritual leaders of the event: David Gehoe, Mi'gmaq from Nova Scotia and Marc Thompson, Saulteaux from Manitoba. There were many Nations represented: Mi'gmaq, Abenaki, Huron, Wendat, Innu, Métis, Algonquin, Penobscot, Mohawk, and Cree, to name those that we got to know. The ceremony took place mostly in English, although several other languages were spoken at different moments. No indigenous regalia was worn as the events were clearly spiritual rather than festive. The physiognomy or accessories of only a few people clearly identified them as Native people.

Soon after we arrived, the lodge was completed, large enough to contain about seventy people. A space was made in the middle for the belts. The ground in the centre was covered with freshly cut spruce boughs, over which were laid a black bear hide and the board covered with unbleached cotton. Before we

brought the belts inside, the leaders performed a ritual cleansing of the lodge, which involved the burning of ritual herbs. As I laid down the belts on their allocated space, the air around us was fragrant, and people were excited to see the belts, almost all of them for the very first time. I wore cotton gloves, as much to demonstrate good conservation practice as out of respect for their significance to the people assembled.

Everyone then filed into the lodge and sat on the ground for the "Talking Circle," a kind of extended introduction designed to establish a rapport among the participants, a "drawing together of minds" as Native peoples call it. A pipe was circulated for everyone to smoke and make offerings. The leaders clearly stated the intention of this meeting and the rules to be observed by all. For example, anyone who had drunk alcohol or used drugs in the last four days, or who had abused their wives or children were to refrain from inhaling directly from the pipe. In fact, everything that occurred followed the rituals of deeply religious observance and clearly the message conveyed by the leaders concerned the realities of modern day life.

The presence of the wampum belts added to the importance of the rituals, perhaps through their own power, but more importantly through the significance they have for Native peoples. Besides serving a role as records of important events and agreements, wampum belts are also considered as instruments for establishing and maintaining contact among the participants and as holding a link to the present, acting as catalysts to ensure that the "right" ways continue into the future.<sup>11,12</sup> In that way, they simultaneously act as both the message and the medium.

After the Talking Circle, there was a "Naming Ceremony," whereby the leaders give symbolic animal names to those who desire. Most people went to the leaders to receive a name, once again attesting to the importance of the leaders and the ceremony. As we left the lodge afterwards, we were all given a tiny bag with some tobacco inside. Tobacco is considered as a ceremonial element to many Native peoples and I believe that it was meant to serve as a link to and souvenir of the event.

It was then time to share an outdoor feast, which was contributed by all of the participants. Spontaneously, some of the younger participants began to play some drum music and they were soon joined by many others who sang along. Most people had brought special dishes, all coming from the land, and we tasted corn soup, moose stew, grilled sturgeon, wild rice, and bannock. While we were eating, people in small groups went into the lodge to look at the belts. I myself went in a couple of times out of curiosity rather than fear that something would happen to the belts. I guess that every participant was trying in their own personal way to connect to the belts, either by meditating or praying in their proximity or by "laying hands" over them to feel and absorb some of their powers. Again, this

was a very personal and respectful affair between the people and the belts and interfering in any way would have felt wrong.

I must say that seeing the belts in that context was to me an important part of the whole experience. Somehow the belts belonged there in a very special way, which had to do as much with the environment, for example the diffuse light coming through the canvas, the smell of tobacco and sweetgrass smoke, the bear hide underneath, as with the reverence felt by the people around the belts. Already at this moment, there was no doubt in my mind that we had been right to bring the belts to this ceremony. In many ways, it was demonstrated to me how they are still part of a living tradition and why their spiritual as much as their physical integrity remain important for the First Peoples.

As dusk approached, people gathered around the fire, chatting with old friends and making new acquaintances. Many people came to Moira and me to thank us for bringing the belts to the ceremony. I chatted for a long while with one of the female elders, an Ojibwa from Ontario. Traditionally, the responsibility for the care of wampum belts went to some of the women elders and she clearly wanted to find out how I personally cared for the belts. Her questions, though, all related to matters of "spiritual respect," rather than physical aspects of deterioration. I did ask her if there was any special consideration I should pay to the belts, in response to which she laughed, saying that I was the scientist and that for these matters she knew little. Clearly our physical care of the belts was not being questioned. Furthermore though, we were being recognised more or less as "Keepers of Wampum." Traditionally this role consists in safekeeping the wampum belts, but it is important to understand that they nevertheless remain the property of all.<sup>13,14</sup>

As the evening went on, the leaders went back into the lodge. It is only later that I learned that they performed "Healing Ceremonies" with those individuals who needed their help or advice. We do not know how the belts were used during this time. Meanwhile, we were talking with several participants around the fire. Earlier I had noticed that several people were wandering to the north edge of the clearing and disappearing into the forest. After some nice discussions with a group of Hurons from Wendake, Quebec, I was told that I should come to see something special. They led me to the edge of the forest to a narrow path that wound uphill to a moss-covered rocky prominence. On it was laid an old arrangement of stones, outlining an ancient sacred site. Openings were oriented according to the four cardinal points and corresponded to the orientation of the lodge where the ceremonies were taking place.

Once again I had been introduced to another aspect of Native spirituality. This introduction was made possible only through our willingness to bring the belts to the ceremony and our respect of cultural traditions different from ours. It made me realize that there were probably many other rituals and rules that were being observed but which I did not know about. Obviously I was being

led to some degree to understand a culture that is quite different from my own and the sacred nature of the site itself made it a proper location for the “reading” of the belts, described below.

It was only well into the night that we were all invited back into the lodge by the leaders for the “Night Spirit House Ceremony.” Beforehand the leaders had called upon the spirits of the night through the connective powers brought by the belts. They were now ready to “read” the belts. The lodge was crowded to absolute maximum capacity and everyone sat tightly together on the ground. The whole ceremony was conducted in total darkness and utter silence, except for the soft chanting and explanations by the leaders. In a very moving manner, they explained the significance of the belts, referring to their ancient powers and how they had made possible this very gathering. The leaders explained the significance of the symbolic designs of the belts, the seven levels, the pipe and the white lines. I myself believed that these symbols referred to alliances between people, but the leaders gave them an increased significance, mentioning levels of consciousness, degrees of understanding, and how Native peoples were being asked to access a new modern spirituality to come to grips with problems of alcoholism, drug abuse, and family violence.

Many messages were passed along metaphorically to different people who were present. As those who had brought the belts, we were deeply thanked. Gratitude was also shown in the way that we have cared for and conserved the belts for all this time. That is when one of the leaders also warned anyone against trying to “gain” these belts for personal use in the future. He said that museums were taking good care of them and that their collaboration for now was satisfactory. He said that the belts were only the link and that it depended on each one of the participants to take their lives in their own hands. He also asked everyone present and especially those who are in close contact with the belts to tell the story to others.

#### After...

In many ways, this experience reinforced my belief that our concerns as conservators must encompass a broader scope than we have been initially taught. In dealing with ethnographic collections, the efforts made in the last few years towards expanding the notion of spiritual significance and sacredness<sup>15-19</sup> definitely are paying off. Once the initial reluctance was passed, our general co-operation with First Peoples toward respecting their wishes to use or specially treat a few significant objects has opened a new door of communication, one that can only lead to a better preservation of the integrity of these objects, both physically and spiritually.

In some ways as well, I began to realize that the power of the wampum belts and probably of other sacred objects does not so much reside in the objects themselves as it does in the people for whom these objects have meaning. This notion becomes very

significant for conservators as it implies that if a treatment is applied with respect and to the best of our knowledge, little harm will be done to the object in terms of its spiritual contents. In terms of our role as physical guardians of precious and meaningful objects from the past, it is being enlarged to include the need for some of these objects to be read, smudged, or somehow blessed so that they continue to pass on the “powers” they carry.

After the ceremony was over and most of the participants had left, I carefully took the belts and placed them in their padded containers. I had asked myself before the ceremony if this alone somehow might be seen as profane by the Native people I was about to meet at the ceremony. I knew now that it was not in this instance, even though I could not help somehow being shaky about doing it improperly as the leaders were still watching. As the first light of day began to brighten the sky, we drove out of the site.

During the drive back, I could not help thinking about the theme of renewal which runs deep in the Native world. Certainly the belts were being returned intact to the museum, despite having renewed their link with the First Peoples of today. As well Moira and I were returning with a new awareness and commitment to Native heritage which extends beyond the museum walls.

It is my hope that others may be similarly inspired by this account.

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