

# “We will be known forever by the tracks we leave.”

The “North-American Royal Collections” Project at the musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris

Éléonore Kissel, Stéphanie Elarbi, Elsa Debiesse, Clothilde Castelli,  
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The „North-American Royal Collections“ Project (Collections Royales d’Amérique du Nord: CRoyAN) was initiated by the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac (mqB-JC), Paris, in 2019. It focuses on approximately 250 artifacts collected in the lands that are today Canada and the United States between the 17th and 19th centuries. The project gathers participants from various fields including Heritage Conservation, Conservation Science, Curatorial Studies, Anthropology, History and Art History. Each object is studied through a detailed condition report, high-definition photography and several analytical techniques in order to identify their materials, manufacturing techniques and current condition. Material traces complete knowledge stemming from Indigenous communities, archives and museum documentation. Case studies show how such multiple points of views may inform conservation decisions. The collaborative aspect is emphasized: representatives of Native Americans are instrumental in working with the museum’s team to make decisions regarding preventive and curative treatments.

**Context: The “North-American Royal Collections” Project at the musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac**

The collections of the musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac hold an important set of artifacts obtained in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the current territories of Canada and the United States. Those from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were part of the so-called “royal collections” – pieces belonging to the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the Church which, after the French Revolution and the subsequent confiscation of nobility properties, were integrated into French national institutions. They constitute some of the oldest testimony of the material production of Native cultures of North America, before its profound transformation by Western colonization. This is an exceptional collection for the knowledge of the Native Peoples living in these regions, as well as for a better understanding of their relations with Europeans from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The collection is unique in the world and frequently requested on loan by European and North American institutions for local and international exhibitions. However, these objects are fragile and, to be presented to the public, require regular monitoring for conservation and restoration.

**„We will be known forever by the traces we leave.“**

**Das Projekt die „Nordamerikanischen Königssammlungen“ am musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris**

Das Projekt „Nordamerikanische Königliche Sammlungen“ (Collections Royales d’Amérique du Nord: CRoyAN) wurde vom musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac (mqB-JC) in Paris 2019 initiiert. Es behandelt etwa 250 Objekte, die in den Ländern des heutigen Kanadas und der Vereinigten Staaten zwischen dem 17. und 19. Jahrhundert gesammelt wurden. Das Projekt vereint Mitglieder verschiedener Disziplinen, wie Kulturguterhaltung, Kunsttechnologie, Curatorial Studies, Ethnologie, Geschichte und Kunstgeschichte. Jedes Objekt wird eingehend durch einen eigenen Zustandsbericht, hochauflösende Fotografien sowie verschiedene analytische Techniken zur Identifikation der Materialien, Herstellungstechniken und des gegenwärtigen Zustands untersucht. Materielle Spuren vervollständigen das Wissen von indigenen Gemeinschaften, Archiven und Museumsdokumentationen. Fallstudien zeigen, wie solche multiplen Standpunkte Konservierungsentscheidungen beeinflussen können. Der kollaborative Aspekt soll betont sein: Denn Vertreter indigener Kommunen sind maßgeblich an der Arbeit des Museumsteams beteiligt, um Entscheidungen über konservatorische Behandlungen zu treffen.

An interdisciplinary approach thus implemented for the study and the dissemination of this exceptional corpus: the CRoyAN Project – the French Royal Collections from North America<sup>1</sup>. The research combines the study of the collection’s history (axis 1), the material analysis of artifacts (technology and ergology, organic remains, traces of use) and conservation-restoration interventions (axis 2), and the collaboration with Native American and First Nations partners (axis 3). The research project aims to shed new light on the provenance and context of the collections preserved in France as well as on their past and present values and functions, and to ensure their transmission to future generations.

Documenting the collection requires a systematic inventory and revision of archival sources spread in various French institutions. Indeed, collections from North America were gathered through presents addressed to the king or from the acquisition of curiosities cabinets constituted by aristocrats and scholars, whose origins are tracked in order to gather information on the provenance of the objects and on the nature of the relations between Native American Nations and the French (Fig. 1).





1 Canadian (chief) of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one of the display cases from the ethnographic cabinet of the Versailles Public Library, silver gelatin-bromide glass plate negative, Anonyme, c. 1897, PHOTOS PV M 411, Versailles Public Library

The purpose of physical and chemical investigations is to offer new insights on the historical, ethnological, and anthropological information available. Indeed, identifying the materials can enable us to trace the origin and circulation of the substances used; the presence of tool marks informs production methods and technologies, while signs of wear are indications of how an item was used. Traces from the past inform on an object's life before and after it entered a museum collection, whether they are residues of organic matter linked with an artifact's use or indications of previous conservation treatments. This information helps conservators to choose appropriate remedial techniques and make recommendations on preservation methods.

Central to the project is the participation of contemporary Native American and First Nations communities. Their oral histories, traditions, and knowledge contribute to the research on usage, attribution, and cultural meanings. Furthermore, representatives of Native communities are able to establish connections between artifacts in the collection and contemporary cultural practices and values and use these connections to promote cultural and artistic revitalization. Their participation to the research enables new discourses and contemporary perspectives on these collections, thus highlighting their polyphonic history. Academic and museological questionings are often turned towards the past, but the history of museum collections, and this one most particularly, is also contemporaneous since the knowledge recovered from the objects and their biographies can nowadays be used to better know the past and to build the future.

### Looking for Traces

#### Scientific Analyses

Multiple analyses were performed in order to identify materials, technology, current material state of the objects and sensitivity to light<sup>2</sup>. Several approaches were taken in parallel, according to the specific questions raised by each individual item: imagery, through optical, digital microscopy; spectroscopy through infrared, X-ray fluorescence and Raman; differential scanning calorimetry and pH measurements, to characterize the collagen denaturation temperature of skins, etc. Non-invasive methods were preferred, while sampling was performed on a small selection of objects with degradations that required further investigation (Fig. 2). The data collected served a dual purpose: they were used in conservation decisions, all will be exemplified further, and contributed to research in conservation science. For instance, Raman spectroscopy was used in an innovative way to identify the dyes used on porcupine quills. Data collection also informed preventive conservation: micro-fading was undertaken on two painted hides, enabling the museum to make sustainable decisions regarding their exhibition. The results of this multi-analytical approach were presented at InArt 2022<sup>3</sup>, so this presentation focuses on conservation.



2 Installing the Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy unit, to analyze the physico-chemical constituents of the painted hide

#### Conservation Research Process

The museum team worked with contract conservators on the conservation research process of this project, developing the following objectives and methods. Among the 280 items considered, the first step was to define several groups of objects of a similar typology, in order to be able to compare closely the materials and the technologies used to build the pieces in each corpus. In collaboration with the curator in charge of the collection, bags, moccasins, wampums, robes and pipes were located, and set aside for consultation. Then, a technical study list was developed for each corpus, including: species used for hide, tanning techniques, types of porcupine quills embroideries, metal used for the ornaments, nature of pigments and painting techniques, manufacturing process of the shells beads, etc. An individual detailed condition report completed the research, focusing on the artefacts' current state and questioning the origins of the damages. Finally, photographs on former presentations, the objects' biographies and the conservation documentation are brought together to qualify the alterations either as damage, decay or traces of use, the latter being through everyday wear, social or ceremonial use as well as spiritual care. The aims of this preliminary research are to provide a solid informative base to share with both scholars and representatives of the communities that produced and used these belongings. The museum team collectively strive to enhance knowledge on the collection, build diagnostic and devise treatment proposals while taking in consideration specific cultural sensitivities.



## Collaborative Work in Conservation

### Past and Present Native American and European Collaborative Work in Conservation

Collaborative work between museums and Native American communities began in the 1980s. According to the published literature, collaborations were firstly initiated on curatorial projects such as the co-conception of exhibitions and their associated communication, focusing on material conservation issues only a few years later. This perception, however, may reflect the fact that most of the early publications on collaborative work pertain to exhibitions deemed deeply depreciative of Indigenous cultures, which generated a strong rejection by Native communities. Collaborative projects were conceived in reaction to such exhibitions. The best-known example is “The Spirit Sings” exhibition, planned at the Glenbow Museum in anticipation of the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympic Games. Albeit less extensively written about, evidence suggests that collaborations regarding conservation treatments as well as handling, housing and storage considerations were developed at the same period, within the framework of temporary exhibitions and permanent galleries jointly conceived by museum staff and representatives of Native American communities. In Canada, the 1988 “Preserving Our Heritage” symposium initiated a consultancy process within the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples. The ensuing 1992 report paved the way

for collaborative stewardship of Native cultural heritage, leading up to the “Moved to Action” process and the report presented by the Canadian Association of Museums in 2022. In the United States, the 1989 National Museum of the American Indian Act, followed a year later by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act laid legal foundational grounds for a new, bilateral paradigm regarding the preservation of archaeological and later historical cultural property produced by Indigenous communities.

In Europe, collaborative work between Native Americans and museums, leading to on site examination of collections by representatives of North American Indigenous peoples, occurred about a decade later, a probable consequence of the physical distance between source communities and the institutions. Fienup-Riordan’s account of Yup’ik elders reviewing Alaskan collections in Berlin’s Museum für Völkerkunde in 1997, Peers’ description of Ojibwe representatives examining the Blackwood collection in Oxford in 2000 and Krmpotich’s account of the 2009 Haida delegation visit at the Pitt-Rivers and British Museum are a few of the landmarks regarding collaboration between Native American communities and European museums.



3 Studying the collection, September 2022



4 Seneca partner Jamie Jacobs leading a porcupine embroidery workshop attended by several CRoyAN project partners, March 2022

### Collaborative Conservation Processes at the mqB-JC

At the musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, collaborative work with Indigenous communities from the Americas include jointly initiating the “Savoirs autochtones wayana-apalaï” (SAWA) project<sup>4</sup> in French Guyana and Northern Brazil and fostering the CRoyAN project. Conservation per se, understood as in-depth studies of the collection’s materiality and preservation practices, is a specific feature of the latter. Between 2020 and 2022 representatives of the Haudenosaunee, HuronWendat and Choctaw Nations have partaken in conservation discussions. The objective was the mutual benefit of communities and museum staff, each partner sharing knowledge from a distinct personal and professional perspective. Three work processes were undertaken to elicit reciprocal relationships: collection reviews, training sessions, and reflective dialogues.

Whether online during the pandemic or in Paris afterwards, representatives of Native communities reviewed the collection in multiple contexts with curators, provenance researchers, anthropologists, conservators, conservation

scientists, registrars, exhibition designers, etc., focusing alternately on enquiries ranging from manufacturing technology to descriptive terminology, and conservation treatments to housing. These so-called “consultations” acted as entry-points to extensive discussions on exhibitions, publications, and preservation (Fig. 3).

Two training sessions on Native manufacturing techniques from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were undertaken. In 2021 Theresa Emmerich Kamper, experimental archaeologist affiliated with the University of Exeter, led a four-day workshop on traditional skin manufacturing techniques, both North American and European. On historical pieces, it can be difficult to accurately identify and ascertain the condition of skin-based artefacts: theoretical introductions, visual examination sessions and hands-on skin preparation practical works helped tremendously in understanding both the manufacture and current state of aged leathers. Jamie Jacobs, Seneca ritualist, curator, and artist, taught a two-day workshop on porcupine quill embroidery (Fig. 4).



For the museum staff, trying out quilling facilitated the comprehension of so far incompletely understood physical traces: the location of the holes, the patterns created by using variously colored quills, the losses induced by failing interlocking of materials. In addition, listening to Jamie Jacobs’ lecture about Seneca belongings provided an insight into the spiritual values embedded in them. For members of a conservation team trained in a Western, enlightenment derived science-based paradigm, it acted as a nudge to understand that Native Americans conceive objects as much more than material things: as the outcome of transgenerational craftsmanship, honoring past and present community members, they intrinsically carry the history and the spirit of a culture. Could this perspective be taken on board while making conservation decisions and if so, how?

Lastly, time was set aside specifically to dialogue about the preservation of collections in general, as well as about conservation of individual objects. It provided the opportunity to discuss such integrated pest management procedures, classification in storage areas, preferred housing procedures as well as curative conservation and restoration techniques. Extensive discussions occurred on the use of adhesives to stabilize porcupine quills’ unwrapping, on reasons not to remove soil from wampums, on the implications of removing former repairs from a bark canoe model or on the degree to which a tobacco pouch should appear full rather than flat. In the next section, case studies will exemplify the conservation work undertaken during the project (Fig. 5)<sup>5</sup>.

5 French conservators Camille Alembik, Diane Messenger and Mélanie Pichaud during the conservation treatment of a selection of moccasins in the conservation lab, November 2022



## Case Studies Within the CRoyAN Project

### Bags and Pouches

Bags, pouches, and other flexible containers are the carriers of traces of various nature that had to be identified and preserved. These belongings, usually made of fat-tanned leather or braided vegetal fibers decorated with bird- and porcupine quills (*Erethizon dorsatum*), beads and pigments, were examined in detail. Condition reports brought to light alterations typically due to previous museum display and conservation practices: holes made by hanger nails, general flattening or collapse resulting from unsuitable storage conditions, losses and galleries caused by ancient infestations or degradations due to inappropriate treatments such as waxing leather, inducing darkening and stiffening of the skin. Understood as real degradations altering the physical integrity of these objects, they have led to carry out minimal interventions, including the mechanical stabilization of beads or quills and gentle reshaping of the skin or textile support (Fig. 6).

Closer examination under Hirox® 3D digital microscope of a group of similar bags<sup>6</sup> helped identify guilloche marks as technological traces: their contrast could then be enhanced by dabbing the skin surface with a soft latex sponge (Fig. 7). In the same way, p-XRF analysis of samples taken from darker leather bags<sup>7</sup> pointed to mud residues: used in the skin dyeing or coloring process<sup>8</sup>, they therefore had to be preserved.

7 Detail of the guilloche marks on bag (inv. 71.1878.32.127), Northeastern North America, 18<sup>th</sup> century



6 A selection of bags and pouches from Northeastern North America (17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries) after conservation treatment, November 2022







8 Bag (inv. 71.1878.32.146), Central Plains, 18<sup>th</sup> century before conservation treatment, 1968 (Musée de l'Homme Photo Library)

Collaboration with Native American partners also contributed greatly to define the levels of treatment. Discussions on a tobacco bag from the Great Lakes region<sup>9</sup> with curators from partner institutions Seneca Art and Culture Center and Rochester Museum and Science Center<sup>10</sup> led to engage in a more fundamental intervention. Initially in poor condition, the bag exhibited an interesting combination of decorative techniques which led to perform a curative intervention. The treatment consisted in a notable reshaping of both pouch and shoulder strap, infilling the leather losses and a rather thorough cleaning allowing to showcase the sophisticated skills embodied in this container, modest at first glance yet outstanding (Fig. 8, 9).



9 Bag (inv. 71.1878.32.146), Central Plains, 18<sup>th</sup> century after conservation treatment, November 2022



10 Choctaw partner Jennifer Byram studying the bear paw moccasins, September 2022

Three pairs of moccasins were particularly interesting to study in terms of material transformation. The first was made during the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup> in Louisiana from a brown bear's paws (hide of *Ursus arctos*): it shows an additional outer sole sewn to the forefoot. This is an oddity according to delegates of the Choctaw Nation, for the function of these moccasins was to blend in with the tracks left by the animal (Fig. 10, 11). However, the skin and sewing techniques used for these outer soles appear traditional. Two other pairs of moccasins present major modifications: one<sup>13</sup>, from the Great Lakes, has been re-soled with typical European manufactured soles (Fig. 12). The other pair<sup>14</sup> has drilled holes under each foot, presumably to pass vertical rods joining the base to a mannequin: museum traces can unfortunately remain highly visible.

11 View of the soles of the bear paw moccasins (inv. 71.1934.33.13.1-2 D), Mississippi Valley, 18<sup>th</sup> century



### Moccasins

Following the approach initiated on the bags, examination of the moccasins was informed by the concern to understand which kinds of traces are visible today. The condition on this typology is very different if the flexibility of the skins, the preservation of the original shape and seams, as well as the conservation of the ornamentation (quills, glass beads, textile) are compared. The dark and very stiff features observable on several pairs<sup>11</sup> of flattened moccasins could be due to original processes used to dye the skin, as the analyses highlighted the presence of iron, which can explain the skin's level of degradation. Apart from those extreme cases where the shoes may no longer be exhibited as part of a costume, the most frequent alterations are a collapse of the shapes due to unsuitable storage conditions, missing parts of skin and quills from previous insect infestations and a dusty, greyish appearance. It is quite difficult to discriminate the origin of these condition changes between local uses, transportation overseas, practices in former collections or in a museum context.





12 View of moccasin (inv. 71.1934.33.15.1 D), Northeastern North America, 18<sup>th</sup> century

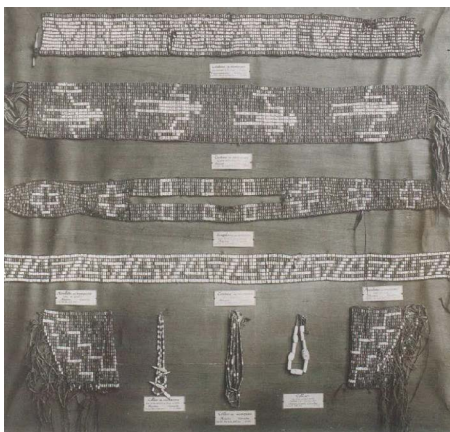
### Wampums

Wampum belts and strings are polysemic devices, made and used for setting contracts: they materialized an act of diplomacy or peace, and took a central place in the history of Northern Iroquoian and Eastern Algonquian Nations. They are the witnesses of political and social uses as high value ornaments, conferred by the long and complex processes to produce beads from snails and shells. In order to discriminate traces of the multiple uses of those items from museum damage, information gained from technical studies, chemical analyses, written sources is brought to-

gether and discussed with scholars and Native American Nations' representatives (Fig. 13). Wampum belts are created by weaving cylindrical white and purple beads made of two types of shells: a white whelk (*Sinistrofulgur sp.*) and the purple border of a clam (*Mercenaria mercenaria*), with leather strings as warps, vegetable fibers as wefts, sometime completed with porcupine quills on edges or fringes<sup>15</sup>. These devices are worn (around the neck or on the chest), shown, kept, exchanged and beads can be reused to create new wampum belts.

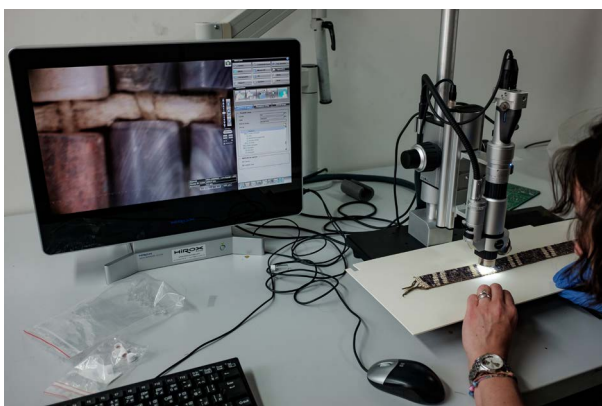
13 Study session of the wampum belts, cuffs and strings from the Natural History Museum of Lille, with Huron Wendat partner Jonathan Lainey and French partner David Verhulst, May 2022





14 Michel Berthaud, *Huron Wampum. Canada. Seventeenth century* (View of the wampum presentation case at the Musée d'Ethnographie, Palais du Trocadéro). In: *Galerie américaine du Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro. Choix de pièces archéologiques et ethnographiques décrites et publiées par le Dr E.-T. Hamy*. Paris. E. Leroux, 1897, pl. 1. Paris, BnF, département Réserve des livres rares, GR FOL-P-1010

During their museums past lives, damages occurred such as folds or distortion due to former conservation or display conditions (Fig. 14). The latter was often consolidated with mercerized cotton yarn by museum staff, a practice which has proven to be still effective today. Beyond stabilization and local reshaping, the question of cleaning was discussed. Discussions between researchers from the CRoyAN team and Haudenosaunee representatives shed a light on some uses of wampum beads, which can be covered with red ochre on specific occasions: were there remaining traces? Observation with a digital microscope allowed locating red paint residues, and infrared X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy showed a high amount of iron, confirming the hypotheses of an original red ochre paint (Fig. 15). No cleaning was performed, in order to keep those traces and the information accessible directly on the belt. Conservation and display mounts were manufactured to ensure the conservation of wampums during exhibition, and to give a better understanding of their use and wear (Fig. 16).



15 Wampum belt (inv. 853.50.74, Natural History Museum of Lille) under the digital microscope head

16 Wampum wrist cuffs on their mount (inv. 71.1878.32.60), Northeastern North America, ca. 1720s





## Conclusion

The CRoyAN project enabled the curatorial and conservation staff to work with representatives of Native American Nations on an outstanding historical collection. It was attempted to make this process as bilateral as possible: the onsite consultations enabled Native American scholars, ritualists and artists to reconnect with a collection that is a sign of past yet enduring relationships between peoples from both sides of the Atlantic (Fig. 17). Thorough technical examination is the landmark of CRoyAN as a research endeavor, and it was performed by everyone involved. However, beyond these material encounters, a more personal kinship with Native belongings was expressed by some members of the delegations during or after the collection reviews. Some barely touched upon it, some were more vocal about their feelings but there was a sense of spiritual connection within the walls of the conservation lab. It must

be admitted that the team was not always at ease in dealing with such emotions. In a hope to make the most of time spent in common, powered by a strictly material apprehension of cultural collections, discussions were started about what was laid on the tables without allowing for a quiet moment of welcome between people and wampums, pouches, moccasins or robes. Progressively, exchanging views with Native colleagues led the conservators to gain a better understanding of the intangible dimensions of collections. Following these moments together, it will bear on the museum’s team to acknowledge non-material significance, while being careful not to overinterpret what was so generously shared by Indigenous cultural bearers. For sure, looking for traces collectively and gathering knowledge from a multiplicity of viewpoints teaches more than meets the eye.

17 Study session of a selection of bags, moccasins and straps with Washoe/Mono Lake Paiute partner Michael Galban, Director of the Seneca Art & Culture Center, and Seneca partner Jamie Jacobs, March 2022



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### Éléonore Kissel

Head of Preservation  
musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac  
222, rue de l'Université 75007 Paris France  
[Eleonore.Kissel@quaibranly.fr](mailto:Eleonore.Kissel@quaibranly.fr)

### Stéphanie Elarbi

[Stephanie.Elarbi@centreprompidou.fr](mailto:Stephanie.Elarbi@centreprompidou.fr)

### Elsa Debiesse

[Elsa.Debiesse@quaibranly.fr](mailto:Elsa.Debiesse@quaibranly.fr)

### Clothilde Castelli

[Clothilde.Castelli@quaibranly.fr](mailto:Clothilde.Castelli@quaibranly.fr)

### Paz NuñezRegueiro

[Paz.NUNEZ-REGUEIRO@quaibranly.fr](mailto:Paz.NUNEZ-REGUEIRO@quaibranly.fr)

### Nikolaus Stolle

[stolle@lindenmuseum.de](mailto:stolle@lindenmuseum.de)

### Céline Daher

[Celine.Daher@mnhn.fr](mailto:Celine.Daher@mnhn.fr)



## Notes

- 1 Website musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac: <https://croyan.quaibrantly.fr/en/> [access: 27 February 2024]
- 2 The following techniques and equipment was used for physical and chemical investigations: digital imaging (Hirox® digital microscope, model KH 8700); Fourier Transform Infrared spectroscopy (FTIR, Alpha, Bruker®); portable X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (p-XRF, Elio and Tracer V, Bruker®) and Raman spectroscopy (Infinity, Horiba-Jobin-Yvon®); differential scanning calorimetry (DSC8000, Perkin Elmer®).
- 3 Céline Daher, Nikolaus Stolle, Éléonore Kissel, Fabrice Sauvagnargues, Laurianne Robinet, Sylvie Heu-Thao, Aline Percot, Céline Paris, Jacques Cuisin and Paz Nuñez-Regueiro, A multi-technical study of Native North American objects dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Innovation in Art Research and Technology, Paris, France, July 28, 2022; <https://inart2022.sciencesconf.org> [access: 27 February 2024]
- 4 Website Labex “Les passés dans le présent”: <http://passes-present.eu/fr/sawa-savoirs-autochtones-wayana-apalai-guyane-2591> [access: 27 February 2024]
- 5 Freelance conservators involved in CRoyAN project are: Pernelle Polpré (Organica), Camille Alembik, Alexandra Bouckellyoen, Alice Flot, Charlotte Goemaere, Anne-Catherine Goetz, Astrid Gonnon, Stéphanie Legrand-Longin, Adrien Lemaître, Mélanie Pichaud and Diane Messenger (intern).
- 6 Inv.-No.: 71.1878.32.127; 71.1878.32.128; 71.1878.32.136
- 7 Inv.-No.: 71.1878.32.68; 71.1878.32.84; 71.1878.32.263
- 8 CRUICKSHANK/DANIELS/KING 2009, pp. 63–64
- 9 Inv.-No.: 71.1878.32.146
- 10 Convening in Paris, March 2022, including Michael Galban, G. Peter Jemison, Jamie Jacobs and Katsitsionni Fox
- 11 Inv.-No.: 71.1878.32.137.1-2; 71.1878.32.138.1-2; 71.1878.32.149; 71.1878.32.265.1-2
- 12 Inv.-No.: 71.1934.33.13.1-2 D
- 13 Inv.-No.: 71.1934.33.15.1-2 D
- 14 Inv.-No.: 71.1878.32.265.1-2
- 15 Inv.-No.: 71.1878.32.56; 71.1878.32.57; 71.1878.32.58; 71.1878.32.60; 71.1878.32.61; 71.1878.32.155

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### Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, Assembly of First Nations, and Museum Association

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### Fig. 8:

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Detail from fig. 10

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