The National Museum of Finland returned Pueblo Tribes’ ancestral remains from its collection for reburial in Mesa Verde, Colorado

The ancestors and grave items, which are estimated to date back to the 13th century and were part of the National Museum of Finland’s Mesa Verde collection, have been repatriated to the Hopi Tribe, the Pueblo of Acoma, the Pueblo of Zia, and the Pueblo of Zuni, indigenous tribes of the United States, to be reburied on Saturday 12 September 2020. This repatriation respects the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and its Article 12 on indigenous peoples’ right to the repatriation of their human remains. This repatriation is the first to return grave findings of the indigenous peoples in the Mesa Verde region from abroad to the representatives of the descendants. The National Museum of Finland and representatives of the indigenous peoples of the Mesa Verde region carried out the return, in cooperation with the Finnish and United States authorities. The four-year repatriation process also came up in the meeting between President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö and President of the United States Donald Trump in October 2019.

The Mesa Verde collection, which falls under the National Museum of Finland’s ethnographic collections, was originally compiled by the Swedish geologist Gustaf Nordenskiöld. The collection includes some 600 Pueblo artefacts from the 6th to the 14th centuries AD. The repatriation involves the remains of 20 individuals, and 28 artefacts buried with them. The rest of the collection remains in Finland.

“It is great that the long-prepared repatriation has now been carried out in excellent cooperation between the parties. Throughout this delicate and emotional process, it has been of the utmost importance for us to respect the wishes of the Tribes,” said Elina Anttila, Director General of the National Museum of Finland.

“Finland is committed to international agreements and museum ethics principles that underline the importance of cultural property for the peoples of their countries of origin. The increasingly important task of the National Museum of Finland is to strengthen intercultural dialogue, diversity and everyone’s right to their own cultural heritage,” Anttila added.

Because Finland’s national collections are government property, the repatriation required permission from the Government. The Government decided on the repatriation in its plenary session on 13 August 2020.

Annika Saarikko, Finnish Minister of Science and Culture, welcomes the decision.

“This decision is also of international importance and implements the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I would like to thank the National Museum of Finland for the responsible way in which it has carried out the
repatriation in amicable cooperation with the representatives of the indigenous peoples of Mesa Verde and the United States authorities. A successful repatriation is important for the peoples of Mesa Verde, but also for Finland and the National Museum of Finland.”

**Cultural sustainability requires continued international work**

Today, international conventions regulate the export of cultural heritage items from their countries of origin. In the 1890s, no such agreements existed, and today’s international conventions are not applied retroactively. Although exports of grave findings to Europe were not illegal at the time, it can now be concluded that the cultural and spiritual importance of graves for indigenous people was not taken into account.

During the repatriation process, the indigenous peoples were represented by four tribes: the Hopi, Acoma, Zia, and Zuni, which also carried out the reburial of their ancestors. In their joint press release, the Tribes’ representatives emphasised the importance and value of the fact that the ancestors of their peoples are now in peace, as well as the importance of intercultural dialogue and understanding.

This repatriation also implements the spirit of the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Paris 1970 convention.

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Press photo:
*In Mesa Verde area, the cliff dwelling 'Cliff Palace' had about 200 rooms. Photographed by Gustaf Nordenskiöld in 1891. (Finnish Heritage Agency)*

The National Museum of Finland

*The National Museum of Finland is a national cultural history museum that maintains and develops its cultural history collections, promotes the study and use of cultural heritage and provides exhibition and public*
services at its museums and castles throughout Finland. Serving as a provider of social commentary and an international influencer in the field of cultural history, the National Museum of Finland is part of the Finnish Heritage Agency, which operates under the Ministry of Education and Culture.