






Project Gallery

Nunalleg Digital Museum: multi-vocal narration of a Yup'ik past

Charlotta Hillerdal^{1,*} , Alice Watterson² , Lonny Alaskuk Strunk³,
Jaqueline Nalikutaar Cleveland³ & John Anderson⁴ 

¹ Department of Archaeology, University of Aberdeen, UK

² Hornafjörður Research Centre, University of Iceland, Höfn, Iceland

³ Native Village of Kwinhagak, Alaska, USA

⁴ 3DVisLab, University of Dundee, UK

* Author for correspondence ✉ c.hillerdal@abdn.ac.uk

Digital technology facilitates remote access to archaeological collections and offers an accessible platform for knowledge sharing and innovative storytelling. Here, the authors present a newly developed online museum resource co-curated by archaeologists and the descendant community in Quinhagak, Alaska.

Keywords: North America, Alaska, Indigenous archaeology, Yup'ik heritage, digital media, co-creation

Introduction

The Nunalleq Collection is the product of nine excavation seasons at the Nunalleq site, located just south of the Indigenous Yup'ik village of Quinhagak, Alaska. Over the past 15 years, the Nunalleq Project has contributed ground-breaking new information to our collective knowledge of pre-colonised Yup'ik culture. 'Nunalleq' translates as 'the old village' which is how the site is known locally. A core dimension of the project is collaboration with the local Yup'ik community who initiated the excavations in 2009 as a way to safeguard their heritage against climate-change-induced coastal erosion, and to re-engage younger generations with traditional culture.

A long-term repository of the archaeological collection was initially planned at one of the larger Alaska museums. However, after careful deliberations, in 2016 the village board took the important decision to permanently house the artefacts in Quinhagak. Under the care of the local community, the Nunalleq Museum opened in 2018 (Hillerdal *et al.* 2023). Yup'ik management of the collection in Quinhagak is an important example of Indigenous museum sovereignty and since the museum opened, the collection has become a crucial anchor for a wide range of local and international research and educational efforts (e.g. Knecht & Jones 2019; Mossolova & Michael 2020; Hillerdal *et al.* 2022). Yet the remote location limits

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opportunities for wider engagement. Consequently, a major focus has been on public outreach and online accessibility.

The Nunalleq Digital Museum

The Nunalleq Digital Museum (www.nunalleq.org), which launched in 2023, features an exhibition presenting a shared narrative between archaeological and local knowledge that organically links past and present Yup'ik lifeways and traditions. More than 6000 objects, labelled both in Yugtun (the Yup'ik language) and English, are in the catalogue. The website is hosted by the University of Aberdeen, with restricted-access archiving of content at the University of Dundee, to ensure its longevity and maintenance. It was agreed that the village board of the Native Village of Quinhagak, as rights holders for the artefacts represented in the 3D scans, would decide governance procedures for publication of data outside the Digital Museum to ensure culturally appropriate reuse.

The authors of this article were members of the core project team, which was balanced between archaeologists and local Yup'ik expertise. Building on the Educational Resource (Watterson & Hillerdal 2020), launched in 2019, the team learned that successful co-curation does not happen simply by inviting everyone to participate. Rather, it requires the creation of equitable spaces for collaboration which bring balance to various types of knowledge and different ways of engaging with artefacts. Art-based workshops focusing on drum-making, hunting equipment, clothing and dance-fans were held between 2022 and 2023. Led by invited culture-bearers or Elders, workshops were open to everyone and attracted a broad age range. Workshops provide a tangible connection to the Nunalleq material, creating a forum for co-production of new knowledge through the learning and lived experiences of participants as they made their own cultural objects inspired by the past (Figure 1). These workshops together with one-on-one sessions with local Elders, culture-bearers and artists were recorded for inclusion as short-film, photo-story and sound-bite content.

The digital exhibition is a practice-based design response to Smith's (2012) assertion that Indigenous peoples should recognise themselves in representations of their heritage. The exhibition's homepage is a panoramic view of the area incorporating Nunalleq and Quinhagak (Figure 2). Users can click to change subsistence seasons and, as the background cycles from summer to autumn, winter and spring, different themed pages with reconstructions of life at Nunalleq become available. The reconstruction paintings are based on places in the local landscape and were created through a collaborative process whereby Jacqueline Nalikutaar Cleveland (Yup'ik photographer and videographer) curated photographs for Alice Watterson (archaeologist and artist/designer) to use as reference (Figure 3). This informed the reconstruction artworks from a local perspective, which we hope gives our Yup'ik audience a sense of familiarity that in turn affords a feeling of ownership over the outcome. For our non-local audience, we equally wanted to convey a strong sense of place and experience of the Yup'ik homeland.

The Nunalleq assemblage was recovered from a dwelling but reveals an active narrative of a site dispersed in the landscape. We chose the page themes from topics that resonated with the Yup'ik community and their active subsistence lifeways—for example hunting, fishing, grass weaving and oral histories—and also topics that hit key 'story points' from the archaeological



Figure 1. The archaeological material inspires arts-based workshops (figure by Alice Watterson, Stephan Jones, Rick Knecht & Anna Mossolova).

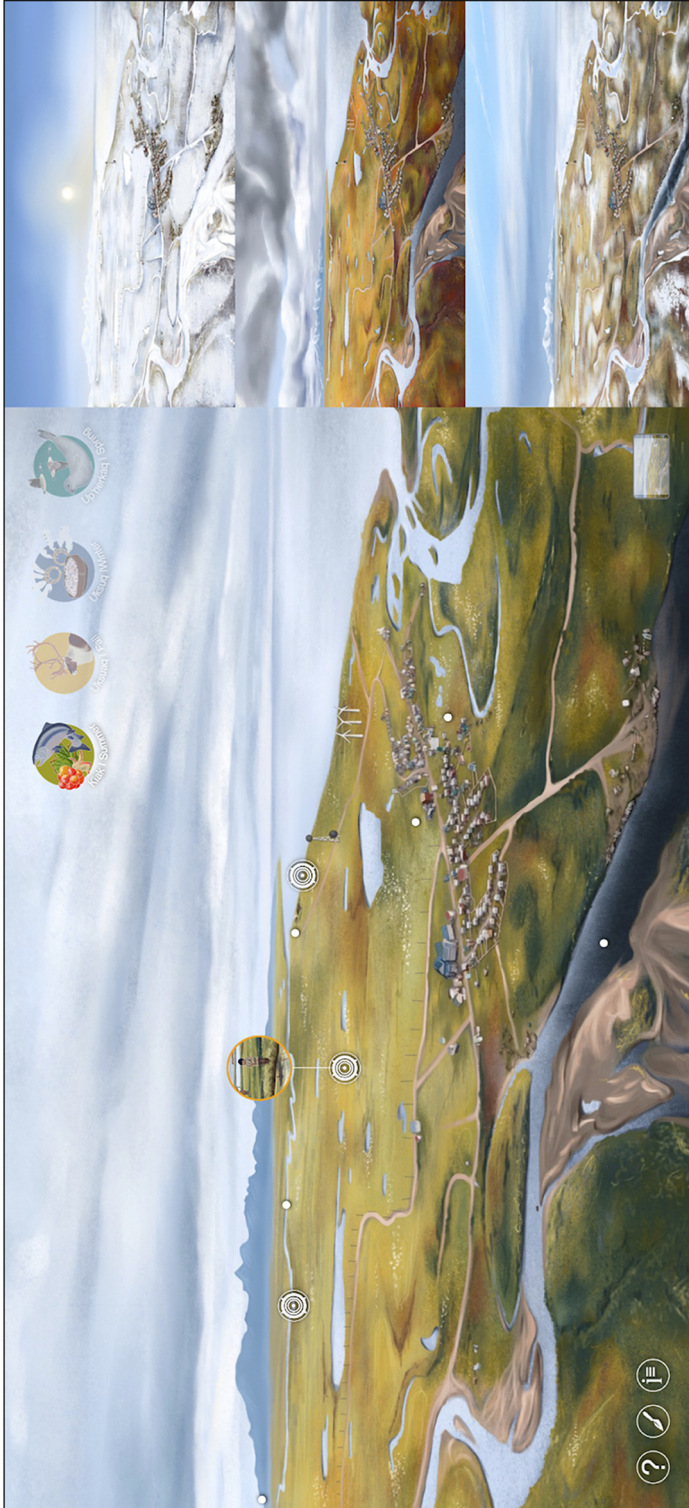


Figure 2. The Digital Museum home-screen (figure by Alice Watterson).



Figure 3. Watterson's reconstruction artwork beside photographs curated by Cleveland (figure by Alice Watterson & Jacqueline Nalikutaar Cleveland).

findings, such as social hierarchy, dietary reconstruction, and play and learning for children at Nunalleq.

King (2017) states that there is simply no ‘blanket solution’ to Indigenous museum sovereignty and we agree that each museum, collection and community should be afforded the space to explore their own pathway towards self-representation. A core dimension of ‘Indigenising’ museum work involves a fundamental shift in curatorial power dynamics (Peers & Brown 2003). Our approach to co-curation for the Digital Museum was therefore adaptable and responsive by design. Much of the interactive content was designed in response to interviews and workshops. For example, relevant soundbites from interviews were paired where possible with artefacts from the collection identified as being of particular interest to the interviewee—a simple but effective pathway towards co-curation, particularly for members of the community unfamiliar with collections work. Additionally, ‘exploding’ and animated 3D models were designed to complement some of the community-curated content by visually illustrating observations made by the interviewee or workshop leader (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Co-curated content in the Digital Museum (figure by Alice Watterson).

This responsive design aimed to build content around topics and experiences important to the Nunalleq archaeological narrative, while also being relevant and meaningful to the community today. This approach ensured that the community led the choice of artefacts for exhibition. There were no artefacts that the rightsholder community did not want displayed online, but we acknowledge that Yup'ik communities elsewhere may have elected not to display certain objects. This is something we remain aware of and will address if the issue is raised in the future.

Specific words and phrases in the exhibition were translated to Yugtun and can be clicked to play a pop-up soundbite for pronunciation where users can launch a Yugtun sentence builder (www.yugtun.com) developed by Lonny Alaskuk Strunk and Christopher Egalaaq Liu. Further integration of the Yugtun language is a priority and we are working to develop this in updates to the Digital Museum.

Conclusion

This project responds to questions surrounding accessibility, authenticity and accountability. Digital technology has sometimes been offered as a solution for data sharing—and even knowledge repatriation—between museums and source communities. However, this communication is often asymmetrical and one-directional (Boast & Enote 2013). This project shifts the established power-dynamic by placing agency and sovereignty of the collection in the hands of the community. The Digital Museum provides multi-vocal interpretations of the collection and allows interactive study of the objects via 3D renderings, while, most importantly, the authentic object remains with the descendant community for whom it has the most impact.

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