

The Far North

Amber Lincoln '94 Curates Major Arctic Exhibit



Upper Right:
Cover image of Arctic
exhibit catalogue.
Inkjet print, 2019.
Kiliiii Yuyan (b. 1979),
Umiaq and north wind
during spring whaling.
© Kiliiii Yuyan.

Amber Lincoln co-curated the major exhibition “Arctic – culture and climate” at the British Museum in London. Here are her thoughts about the process of putting this exhibit together, the things she most wanted to share with visitors, and the challenges of curating an multinational exhibit in the midst of a global pandemic.

This exhibition results from many years of working with Indigenous Arctic communities and studying the North at various Northern-focused academic institutions. I relied on cultural experts, anthropologists, archaeologists, political Indigenous leaders and friends. I pulled a lot of favors! And the widespread contributions and help we received really demonstrated just how committed Arctic scholars and Indigenous Arctic People are to sharing information about their worlds and issues associated with Climate Change.

Peter Looovers was a co-curator. Like me, he worked in the Arctic with Indigenous communities for years. He and I were graduate students together and so knew many people we could rely on for information about historic museum collections, contemporary Indigenous artists, as well as photography and film to illustrate the messages in the exhibition. There are several short film clips throughout the exhibition that we asked friends and colleagues to supply. (See QR Code at left.)

I also had a few ongoing Arctic research projects that we were able to incorporate into the exhibition. I’ve been working in Shishmaref, Alaska on topics related to how climate change is impacting Inupiat material culture, like boats, made artwork (which comes from

raw material found locally, like fossilized ivory, or mammoth tusk). I also worked in Pond Inlet, Nunavut, Canada with seamstresses to learn how changing weather patterns are impacting skin sewing techniques. We were able to use the knowledge and quotes from Inupiat and Inuit informants into the exhibition labels, short films and catalogue. We also asked a few of these people to write essays for the catalogue.

In 2018 and 2019, I traveled quite a bit to different museums in Scotland, Denmark, Canada, Russia and the US to figure out what objects we might include in the exhibition. This was amazing to see various Arctic collections throughout the world. In the end, the exhibition is about 2/3 British Museum objects and 1/3 from other museums. You can see the website for a list of contributing museums. Building relationships with staff at these institutions was really important during the negotiations and changing schedules associated with the pandemic. In the end, we only lost 1 of 12 loans from our lending institutions, so our partners were also really committed to the project.

The exhibition is currently scheduled to run through the 21st February 2021. Most of England, including London, is in a lockdown from the pandemic, so the exhibit and British Museum is closed to the public. We don’t currently know if it will be extended.

– Amber Lincoln '94

Amber is a cultural anthropologist with degrees from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, a master’s from Cambridge University, U.K., and a PhD from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. She holds the position of Curator: Americas at the British Museum.



Above: Scan QR Code
to see Amber highlighting
an Alaskan parka
Below: Scan QR Code
to view the Curators’
Tour of the exhibit



Screen shot of Amber
explaining the significance
of Arctic Peoples’ way of
life in Curators’ video

