

Onondaga Nation thanks Cayuga Museum with replica wampum belt



The Cayuga Museum of History and Art in the city of Auburn returned 21 objects of spiritual significance to the Onondaga Nation. Nineteen masks and two wampum pieces. As a symbol of good will the Onondaga Nation's Faithkeeper Tony Gonyea (right) made a replica for the museum in a presentation Wednesday. Gonyea points out the bead work done on the belt. On the stage from left are museum curator Lauren Chyle, Faithkeeper Oren Lyons, and Tadohaho Sid Hill. *(Photo by Dennis Nett / The Post-Standard)*



By [Sarah Moses, The Post-Standard](#)

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Auburn, NY -- Leaders of the Onondaga Nation presented the [Cayuga Museum of History and Art](#) Wednesday afternoon with a facsimile of a wampum belt that the museum repatriated to the Haudenosaunee earlier this year.

"This is a very significant event," said Onondaga Nation Faithkeeper Oren Lyons. "It reverses the trend when museums were collecting everything from us. Now, they are giving it back."

The Cayuga museum in Auburn returned 21 sacred objects to the [Onondaga Nation](#) this summer, including two wampum belts and 19 masks. The wampum belts were believed to be taken from a grave sometime in early 1900s,

said Cayuga Museum Curator Lauren Chyle.

“These are pieces that the museum cannot ethically display,” Chyle said.

The 1990 Federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) mandates that federally funded museums return Native American “cultural items” to the lineal descendants or culturally-affiliated groups of the people who created them. The cultural objects covered include human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and items of cultural patrimony.

The Cayuga museum is not federally funded and is not mandated to return the items, but the museum’s board of directors voted unanimously to return the items to the Onondaga Nation.

The Onondaga Historical Association also voluntarily returned a wampum belt to the Haudenosaunee in June. In both cases Onondaga Nation Faithkeeper Tony Gonyea made a replica of the returned belt and presented it to the museums for display.

Gonyea, an artist, said the process of creating the wampum belts takes several hours and has to be done a little a time because it can be difficult and tiresome. Gonyea said he taught himself how to make the wampum by studying the artistry of the originals.

The replica wampum belt will be the focus in a future Haudenosaunee display at the museum, Chyle said.

“As we move forward with this exhibit we’ll have meetings with representatives from all of the nations to make sure they have input and feedback and a dialogue about what this exhibit will look like, so that we are representing the Haudenosaunee from their perspective,” she said.

Tadodaho Sidney Hill said he hopes the exhibit will start dialogue and education about the Haudenosaunee people. Hill also said the voluntary repatriation of the sacred items allows the Onondaga Nation and the Haudenosaunee the ability to use the items in cultural ceremonies.

“These masks belong with us,” Hill said. “They are used in our ceremonies. They are very powerful and we are glad to have them back.”

Clan Mother Wendy Gonyea said the Onondaga Nation has received several cultural items and human remains from federally funded and private museums over the years, but she said she knows there are more items that need to be returned.

“We’re very grateful to be given back these items,” she said. “We know there’s more out there. It’s a slow process, but we’re patient.”

Contact Sarah Moses at smoses@syracuse.com or 470-2298. Follow [@SarahMosesPS](https://twitter.com/SarahMosesPS)

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