This book is the result of a significant dilemma I faced as a conservator at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia. In the early 1980s, a few years after I began working there, I was asked to agree to the loan of objects catalogued into the museum’s collection for use by a First Nations community member. More requests soon followed. Most of the material was being loaned back to the contemporary artist who had created it; nonetheless, my obligation as a professional conservator was to serve as an advocate for the preservation of cultural property. Use often results in wear and loss to the original physical object, and I saw the loaning of museum collections for uses in dances and ceremonial events as being in opposition to the professional codes of ethics adhered to by conservators. Removing weavings and masks, for example, from the museum environment so that they may be worn and danced during ceremonies involves the potential risk of damaging the object. The professional dilemma of how to resolve the apparently opposing needs of First Nations members and my responsibility as a conservator was also a personal dilemma: was I ready either to be drummed out of MOA for not signing the loan forms or to be drummed out of my profession for willingly putting museum objects at physical risk?

At the time, I saw that preserving the physical integrity of an object and preserving its conceptual integrity were very much in conflict. In attempting to resolve this conflict, I began to think about the meaning of “preservation,” the meaning of “use,” the meaning of “object,” and the meaning of the phrase “integrity of the object.” Conservators believe that their values are consistent with the best methods of preservation. How does this fit with the kind of preservation represented by dancing a mask (i.e., cultural preservation)? When I think of the materials housed in museums as “material culture” or “collections” or “objects,” what am I telling their originators
about their heritage? What role do museums have or want, especially today, in “preservation”?

Working to resolve my dilemma before I was drummed out of anything led to more research, and, in 1998, to a doctorate entitled “Preserving What Is Valued: An Analysis of Museum Conservation and First Nations Perspectives.” This dissertation was written for the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, England, and it forms the basis of this book.

I wrote this book for people interested in conservation, museum studies, and the diverse areas involving First Nations perspectives. The most fundamental part of it, however, I did not write; I only recorded. The information First Nations people shared about their own thoughts on preservation is at the heart of this publication. I sincerely hope that this book can serve as a means to present what they told me about preservation and museums.