

# The National Museum of the American Indian: Journeys in the Post-Colonial World

By

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Not very long ago——in September 2004——the National Museum of the American Indian opened its keystone building in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol, an event laden with powerful symbolism. With the Museum on the National Mall up and running, I want to discuss with you the NMAI as the vital Native place it is in America's monumental core and political center.

Fifteen years ago, when I started in this position, my first boss at the Smithsonian, former Secretary Robert McCormick Adams, urged that the Museum be built on recognition of "the vitality and the self-determination of Native American voices." He challenged us to "move decisively from the older image of the museum as a temple with its superior, self-governing priesthood." Dr. Adams's visionary words remain guideposts for how we operate every day on the National Mall.

More recently, a good friend, the former head of a federal arts and humanities agency, led a number of distinguished visitors on a tour of the new Museum. Afterwards, one of his guests——a former trustee at one of America's renowned art museums——exclaimed in exasperation, "I do not like this museum! It is not a collector's museum. Something else is going on here."

Both Bob Adams and the art-museum trustee have the NMAI pegged spot on: something else is, indeed, going on here. I do not claim a monopoly on our approach, which puts Native voices in charge of our narratives. Over the past decade and a half, a number of museums have been moving in this same direction. But none has done it

at the NMAI's level of magnitude, on the National Mall before approximately 2 million annual visitors.

I would like to start today with a discussion of the NMAI in more conventional museum terms, as a place that holds a hemispheric treasure of 800,000 objects, and that interprets those collections for the public. But I also want to be clear as to how the curatorial process at the NMAI has been refashioned along lines that have found increasing acceptance in museums and among anthropologists and art historians.

Then, I would like to discuss how this recalibration makes possible the NMAI's transcending historical definitions of what museums do. I want to describe how these places we know as "cultural destinations" also can be genuine civic spaces of broad public import.

First, let me turn to some fundamentals. The NMAI does not refer only to the past history of Native Americans. Rather, it is an institution of living cultures, representing peoples from South America to the Arctic Circle. As the frustrated art-museum trustee observed, the NMAI is not simply a "palace of collections." It aspires to go beyond the artful presentation of objects, to represent and interpret the ideas, peoples, and communities that surround those collections.

Roger Kennedy, Director Emeritus of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, saw matters precisely in these terms when he wrote that NMAI should be "a living Indians' museum, presenting . . . certain valuable truths about living Native persons [who have] a set of experiences special to them, but important to the rest of us [as well]."

This integration of living Native peoples and their communities with their objects, and the elevation of the Native voice in those objects' interpretation, is no random intellectual occurrence, but our chosen methodology. Native peoples do not divide their heritage between what curators and anthropologists have called "tangible" and "intangible" cultural heritage. We see both as connected and fully integrated in our lives. From a Native standpoint, the object itself may be less important than the processes leading to its creation. It is those aspects of experience——traditions, songs, spiritual beliefs, and ritual and ceremonial practices——that speak to the wholeness of living Native cultures.

In the words of my Smithsonian colleague Richard Kurin, Director of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, scholars and curators must "recognize that

knowledge exists in homes, villages, slums, out in the fields, in factories and social halls, as well as in the halls of academia and in their museums.”

This scholarship of inclusion is not without implications. To begin with, exhibitions may look quite different. Australian archeologist Claire Smith addresses this in her essay, “The National Museum of the American Indian: Decolonising the Museum”: “Deriving from Indigenous conceptual readings of the world, the classificatory systems of the NMAI reveal a holistic concern with the relationships between plants, animals, humans and places, as well as between past and present. This is contrary to non-Indigenous classification systems. . . .”

The second implication of inclusion has an even greater impact, for it signals an important shift in power. As Claire Smith observes:

*In deciding to create a museum in which Native Americans tell their own stories, unfettered by the interpretive lens of the dominant society, the NMAI has realized its potential to provide unprecedented richness in interpretation and to offer rare insights into the lives of Native peoples. . . . [N]ew vistas, directed by Indigenous eyes, are opened to the public.*

. . . .  
*The empowerment of new voices, however, also can involve a diminution of the authority of established voices. By widening the concept of authority to include the voices of Indigenous peoples, many of whom feel they have been silenced too long . . . the NMAI, either intentionally or inadvertently, challenges the position of non-Indigenous peoples as authorities on Indigenous cultures.*

Such fundamental changes are not taken lightly by more mainstream critics.

Reviewing our opening, a *New York Times* writer objected to NMAI’s moving away from the “museum as a temple with its superior, self-governing priesthood” and to our making objects available to tribes “for ritual use,” believing this to be evidence of a “studious avoidance of scholarship.” And he voices disdain for the choices made by the Tohono O’odham community of Arizona in one of our opening exhibitions.

In response, let me again quote Roger Kennedy:

*If he had a sense of humor, a critic of this sort might be worth attending even though tone-deaf to the numinous, and color-blind to the symbolic. But what can you do with someone who can write with indignation of the Tohono O’odham’s response when ‘they were asked to present 10 crucial moments in this history,’ and chose, as their first, ‘Birds teach people to call for rain,’ and as their last ‘in the year 2000, a desert walk for health’? The Tohono O’odham refused to be talked down to. Their little parable says with a smile, ‘We will listen to the elders who have earned our respect, but we will not be patronized by puppies.’ I’m with them.*

And so am I. As Director of the NMAI, I have an ethical and intellectual commitment to the fundamental proposition that Native peoples possess authoritative knowledge about their cultures, past and present. Their presence provides the museum's 2 million annual visitors with new sources of learning, new scholarship and insight into Native peoples and cultures.

In the past two decades, anthropological thinking has moved well beyond the notion of Native "informants" to one that embraces collaborative relationships with Native peoples. These new partnerships reveal nuances of culture and levels of knowledge unavailable a generation ago.

Clearly, there are multiple paths to interpretive legitimacy. All I ask is that those of us who labor to develop new approaches grounded in Native communities be granted the same respect as other truth-seekers.

This approach takes us beyond the fundamental nature of the institution as a "museum." As I watched some 30,000 Native people from all over the Americas at the Museum's opening, I had a powerful sense that I was experiencing something far more significant than the opening of a dazzling new gem in the Smithsonian's illustrious crown. The inauguration of the National Museum of the American Indian in the heart of the nation's capital acknowledged at last the centrality of an entire set of peoples and cultures in the heritage of every one of the tens of thousands of people in attendance on that memorable day——Native and non-Native alike.

Viewed in this light, the NMAI possesses the potential to be more than a "museum." We have learned that you cannot put culture in a cabinet. You can put cultural *objects* in cabinets, vitrines, and exhibitions, but to truly reveal the vitality of Native cultures, you need to open up the intellectual and psychic space. At the NMAI a quite extraordinary array of Native cultural expression starts to suggest the ways in which the museum has the capacity to become a larger social and civic space. Powwows, films, lectures, performances by leading Native musicians, readings by some of the creative powerhouses of Indian literature, provocative symposia, cutting-edge books—— these all create a cultural environment within the museum where Native peoples can bring their broad and deep experience, past and present, to a multitude of discussions regarding indigenous cultures.

Likewise, our permanent exhibitions offer clues to these intentions. The exhibitions address subjects as variant as cosmology, casino operations, health issues,

urban Indian life, and hunting and fishing rights. They showcase objects, of course, thousands of them, but broad ideas and themes, Native peoples themselves, and the role of communities hold equal sway.

Earlier this fall, representatives of the Gwich'in Nation of Northeast Alaska and Northwest Canada quite literally set up a day camp across Maryland Avenue from the museum, where they lobbied passersby about the Gwich'in Nation's staunch opposition, on religious and cultural grounds, to legislation then pending in the Congress concerning the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. I applaud their choice of a protest site, and, in some ways, what I appreciate most——perhaps somewhat ironically——is that they were not invited. The Gwich'in chose us as the site to unfold what I regard a potent formula for transformation: the passionate expression of profound aspiration. For what links this political event and our exhibitions and programs is that both intend to promote a civic discourse regarding Native peoples and cultures that transcends historical definitions of a “museum.”

Elaine Heumann Gurian, one of my first colleagues at the NMAI and still a cherished mentor, cites the model of the community museum or cultural center in a way I think is instructive:

*Community museums look the least like museums and are often named cultural or community centers. They are often a mixed-use space of affiliated organizations and functions, with a blend of meeting spaces, gathering spaces and stages, offices, food service, and teaching spaces. . . .*

*There have been community-centered museums in many countries and over many decades. Tribal museums of indigenous peoples often concentrate on the societal needs of their people as their primary agenda. Eco-museums are a kind of community-centered museum started to preserve in living-history fashion, the work, crafts, or information known only to the elders of the community. . . . Community-centered museums often make their objects available for ceremonial use and study as a matter of course.*

I would not want to stretch the analogy too far, but envision, as I have, the National Museum of the American Indian as, in important respects, a community institution relating to Native peoples of the Americas that happens to sit squarely on the National Mall. It is not only a place where others can learn about Native history, cultures, and communities. It assumes a broader social and civic commitment to support those communities, through language preservation and repatriation, for example, into a sound cultural future.

Equally key, the NMAI serves as an important national forum where individuals and communities can address important, timely, and sometimes controversial issues regarding Native peoples. And it does so at a time when alternate civic forums that historically have been places of social and political discourse appear to be in a state of collapse in the United States.

Smithsonian Folklife's Richard Kurin notes that "[T]here are many signs and cases worldwide where museums have come forward to take on this larger, more expansive task." Indeed, museums have, in our staffs of cultural specialists and our historic mission to disseminate knowledge, what Richard calls a "toolkit" for serving the larger social purpose. This potential for far broader civic engagement, so embedded in the NMAI in theory and practice, is our real offering to museum theory of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Claire Smith has crystallized the potential meaning of the arrival of the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., this way:

*As a national museum charting new territory, the NMAI is leading a nation down a path of understanding and reconciliation. Museums shape our sense of historical memory, and national museums shape our sense of national identity. . . . Through being consciously shaped by the classification systems, worldviews and philosophies of its Indigenous constituency, this new national museum is claiming moral territory for Indigenous peoples, in the process reversing the impact of colonialism and asserting the unique place of Native peoples—past, present, and future—of the Americas.*

With humility and with the knowledge that much always remains to be done, I take pride in the accomplishments to date of this physical and spiritual Native marker on America's National Mall. We will continue to strive to invoke the Native voice in all aspects of the Museum, because we believe that the Native voice brings new knowledge and perspectives to learning about the first citizens of the Western Hemisphere, and because we have an abiding faith in its authority to limn the peoples, lives, and cultures of Native America. But we will also reach beyond earlier conceptions of museums to address, within the context of Native America, the broader civic and social responsibilities that will allow these institutions to have far greater impact in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than they did in the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.