

Exhibition Review: The National Museum of the American Indian

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Over the past century and a half, the Smithsonian Institution has built museums occupying the prime real estate lots along the perimeter of the Mall in Washington, D.C. On the last available space at the Mall's far southeast corner is the new National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). It is nothing new for indigenous people of the United States to get the last piece of available land, but in this case, the property happens to be located on a beautiful site, just at the foot of Capitol Hill with spectacular views of the Mall and the Capitol dome. Opened to the public on September 21, 2004, the NMAI houses over 800,000 objects, most of which were donated from the private collection of George Gustav Heye, the heir to an oil fortune. The collection contains an archive of over 125,000 photographs, with over 8,000 artifacts on permanent exhibit. It cost \$219 million, with just over half of its funding coming from the federal government, and the rest from private donors, including \$30 million from three tribes with successful casino gambling operations. Over 500 different American Indian groups attended the opening ceremonies for the institution, and during its first month of operation, the museum attracted more than 275,000 visitors. The curators for the NMAI project that 4.2 million people will pass through its doors over the course of its first year (Decker 2004; Trescott 2004; Epstein 2004).

The NMAI was created after passage of the American Indian Act in 1989 and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990. These two acts represent attempts to compensate for centuries of archeological and anthropological theft of objects and desecration of burial sites.



Figure 1: View of the southwest corner of the NMAI and the United States Capitol Building. Photo by Maxwell MacKenzie. Copyright 2004, Maxwell Mackenzie. Reprinted with the permission of the National Museum of the American Indian.”

They also connect the NMAI to power—specifically, the power of indigenous Americans to represent their own lives, their own histories, their own cultures, and their own forms of knowledge.

Issues surrounding the power of representation are central to this museum's institutional history. This is most dramatically seen in its own material collections which were once part of the private estate owned by a wealthy non-Native American. These themes are also central to the museum's exhibitions and design. The power of indigenous people to represent their own lives is seen in the rounded, sand colored limestone design of the building, in its cultural, artistic, and historical exhibitions, in its films, in its gardens, and even in the food that it sells in its cafeteria. More than one exhibit, in fact, introduces visitors to the term "survivance," a word widely introduced by Gerald Vizenor in his 1994 book *Manifest Manors*. An exhibition caption defines this term as meaning "more than survival. Survivance means redefining ourselves. It means raising social and political consciousness. It means holding on to ancient principles while eagerly embracing change. It means doing what is necessary to keep our cultures alive" ("Our Lives"; also see Vizenor 1994). In this regard, the NMAI has set out for itself a unique challenge to reconcile indigenous sovereignty with the patriotic nationalism that is also a core aspect of the Smithsonian's most prominent representations – a patriotism that celebrates a United States federal government that has been, historically, a primary agent of oppression, imperialism, and colonialism for indigenous people of the United States.

In his remarks during the opening ceremonies of the NMAI, President George W. Bush praised the new museum, and attempted to resolve this contradiction. Mistakenly calling the new institution the "National Museum of Indian Affairs," President Bush acknowledged that the history of American Indians "has involved great injustice against native peoples." In addition, he expressed support for Native American sovereignty, and respect for indigenous history, language, and culture. He said to the assembled crowd that the original inhabitants of North America "had jurisdiction over their lands and territories, just as you have today. And these sovereign tribal nations had their own systems of self-governance, just as you have today." While expressing this support for indigenous independence, he also took special care to point out the contributions to American national expansion and power by Sacagawea, who aided Lewis and Clark through the northern plains during their "Journey of Discovery," and the Native American code talkers, who provided an indecipherable code for secret messages during World War II (Bush 2004).

The President's comments illustrate the difficulty in reconciling indigenous rights and sovereignty with a larger, patriotic national story. Despite his expressions of support for indigenous sovereignty (which can be read as a pre-election speech during which New Mexico's Native American vote hung in the balance), the federal government still owes tribes tens of billions of dollars because of mismanagement of trust lands over the past 150 years. The code talkers whom

the President praised were not even acknowledged by the federal government until very recently because of the secretive nature of their mission. And Sacagawea's role in aiding Lewis and Clark is a complex one, since she was helping a party to survey land that the federal government had "bought" from France, even though neither party really owned it.

Yet the President, while guilty of botching the museum's name, can hardly be blamed for failing to reconcile these deep conflicts of history. They are a core part of the museum's fabric, and make up the central component of critical responses to the NMAI, from nearly all political and intellectual perspectives. Most critics, whether negative or positive, write that the NMAI emphasizes contemporary indigenous lives, not only in the United States, but across the Americas, while avoiding thorny historical issues. These opinions have been shared on internet reviews that have been posted since the opening of the Museum. Author and critic Diana Muir derides the NMAI as the "National Myth of the American Indian," arguing that the museum provides an ahistorical approach to Native American cultures (Muir 2005). Conservative critic Roger Clegg of the Center for Equal Opportunity (an anti-affirmative action organization) was pleased that the museum seemed to avoid "exhibit after exhibit of racist-white-people-breaking-treaties-and-murdering-noble-Native-Americans-and-isn't-this-country-awful" (Clegg 2004).

Both Muir and Clegg underestimate the degree to which history and historical questions inform the NMAI's exhibitions, but it is true that the institution is very much unlike any other representation of Native Americans that the Smithsonian has ever presented. First, many of those who work at, administer, and develop the museum's exhibitions are Native Americans themselves. As the museum's former Director of Public Affairs, Thomas Sweeney (Potawatomi), points out,

When you look at how we created the individual exhibitions, we worked with 24 Native communities and they had tremendous influence on how they were presented. The museum initially invited the communities to participate in an exhibition. Everyone said yes. From there, our curators even went to reservations and communities to discuss specifics about what our museum was about, and we hosted a dinner in each location. Each community selected cultural representatives as a group that went to our new cultural resources center, and there, they inspected every object laid out before them, and it was up to them which object that they wanted to represent. This was repeated for each of the 24. The stories that they choose to tell are varied, and some of them are not easy (Sweeney 2005).

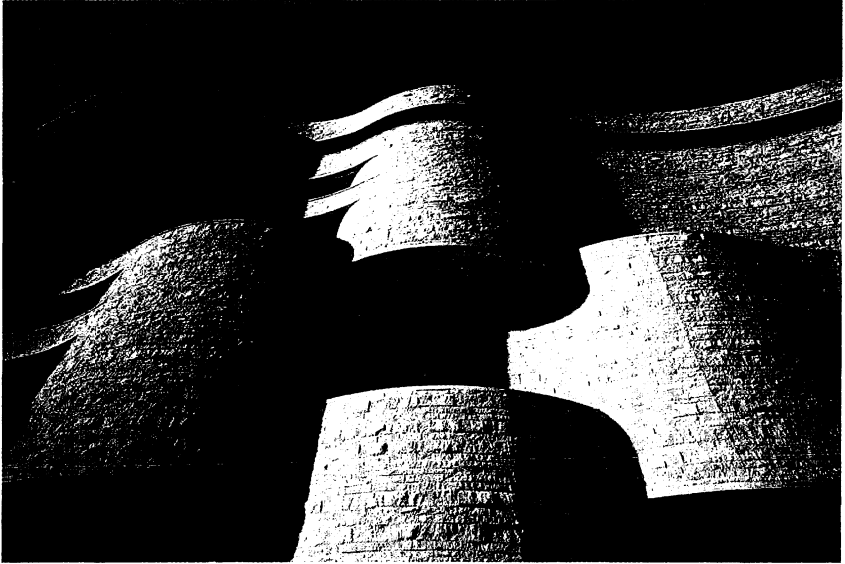


Figure 2: Exterior photo of the north side of the National Museum of the American Indian. Photo by Robert C. Lautman. Reprinted with the permission of the National Museum of the American Indian.

Previously, the primary Smithsonian exhibitions and collections related to indigenous people were located in the Museum of Natural History (conflating Native American history with a forever changed natural landscape of the frontier). The NMAI, by contrast, offers numerous exhibitions that provide a look at contemporary indigenous Americans, not only in the United States, but across the Americas. As Sweeny puts it, the museum's scope is "hemispheric," reflected in the language of the 1989 act of Congress that established the institution. When the museum does address indigenous history, it often directs visitors to reflect upon the historical narratives which comprise what most of us know about American Indians. There is a lot of advanced audio-visual technology and not a single diorama in the entire building.

The most striking aspect of the museum that visitors first confront is its architectural design. Native American architects Douglas Cardinal (Blackfeet), Johnpaul Jones (Cherokee/Choctaw), Ramona Sakiestewa (Hopi), and Donna House (Navajo/Oneida) all worked on the design of the building, while Lou Weller (Caddo Indian), and the Native American Design Collaborative contributed as architects. Made of a rough, golden sandstone exterior, the museum's walls are constructed around gentle curves, terraces, and circles. The exhibition spaces are in asymmetrical rooms with walls comprised of both sharp angles and curves. Surrounding the building are gardens that replicate grasslands and

wetlands, with terraced fountains and open plazas. After entering through large, copper doors and passing through security, visitors are guided around the left side of a giant circular rotunda area called “The Potomac,” which, in the Piscataway language, translates into “where the goods are brought.” A long, woven copper wall blocks a view of this rotunda until one has finished ascending a gentle, curved ramp. The floor is surrounded by a carved, wooden bench, and above is a circular skylight that enhances the artificial lighting already provided within the building.

The center of the Potomac is used as both an open space (where restless toddlers can play while their parents rest on benches), and as a place for exhibition. On display in May 2005 were two examples of indigenous boat-making: a Native Hawaiian canoe carved by Jerry Kaumuali’i and George “Keoki” Kawelo, and a central Arctic kayak made by Levi Illuitok and Thomas Kayitok. Next to each watercraft was an explanation of how the boat has traditionally been used, and photographs of the people who built them.

The first floor also contains one of two museum stores, and the Elmer and Louise Rasmusson Theater, a venue built for stage presentations, films, storytelling, and multi-media programs. The theater holds more than 400 people, its walls paneled with light colored hard wood. Its ceiling is painted like the night sky, with a dark blue background and the stars in gold. Outside the theater, across a hallway, is the Mitsitam Café. Mitsitam translates to “Let’s Eat!” in Lenape, and the café features cuisine from throughout the indigenous western hemisphere: Northern Woodlands, South America, the Northwest Coast, Meso America, and the Great Plains. One can sample everything from wood-smoked Pacific salmon to blue cornbread to buffalo burgers. About half of the tables in the café are situated along a windowed panel wall that looks out upon what the museum bills as “the Native habitat and water features of the museum’s landscaping.”

Visitors are directed to begin on the fourth floor, accessible through either elevators, or a wide, open stairway that traverses upward, looking down upon the Potomac floor. A 13-minute film titled *Who We Are* in the small, 120 seat, circular Lelawi Theater introduces visitors to one of the main themes of the museum—the diversity of indigenous life in the Americas and the continuing presence of Native peoples in the western hemisphere. From here, people can move on to one of three permanent exhibits or to the Changing Exhibitions Gallery on level three. The permanent exhibitions are divided into three sections, titled *Our Universes*, *Our Peoples*, and *Our Lives*. Each exhibit corresponds to one of three major themes: philosophies, histories, and identities.

The section titled *Our Peoples* is across a hallway from the Lelawi Theater, and because of this, it might be easy for visitors to miss. However, it is the area that addresses indigenous history, and it does so in some very subtle and provocative ways. The main entrance to the exhibition room contains a display titled “Making History.” This exhibit features images painted by George Catlin.

The caption informs visitors that Catlin was a white person who had great sympathy for American Indians, and who advocated against Indian removal. At the same time, it states that he also encouraged British investors to profit from the California gold rush, something that he knew would certainly kill off many Native peoples. In a video accompanying this display, a narrator (Canadian actor and playwright Floyd Favel/Plains Cree from the Poundmaker First Nation in Saskatchewan), expresses the problems involved in the telling of Native American history, noting that while attempting to tell the past from indigenous points of view, some perspectives are inevitably going to be left out. He acknowledges that many visitors might find interpretations of history that they had never seen before, and encourages all to debate, disagree, and ask questions.

In the center of the *Our Peoples* exhibit is an installation art piece by Edward Poitras (Saulteaux/Metis) surrounded by a pair of curved walls that form a circle. On the outside of the walls are various displays that address not only Native American history, but also the meanings and myths associated with their history. “Symbols of Liberty” illustrates the use of images of Native Americans on money, noting that American Indians eventually became portrayed as symbols of liberty, but only after having been displaced and dispossessed. Another display called “Stated Intentions” allows visitors to see the actual treaty documents that were collected and signed during the era of treaty making (which



Figure 3: The “Gold Wall” in the *Our People*’s exhibit. Photo by Leonda Levchuk, NMAI. Reprinted with the permission of the National Museum of the American Indian.”



Figure 4: A close up of Sioux bibles and hymnals on display in the *Our People's* exhibit. Photo by Walter Larrimore, NMAI. Copyright Smithsonian Institution/National Museum of the American Indian. Reprinted with the permission of the National Museum of the American Indian.

ended in 1871). Another wall displays over 100 different bibles translated into 75 indigenous languages, and reflects upon the contradictory history of Christianity in the Americas, used simultaneously as a tool of control by colonial occupiers and an inspirational resource by Native Americans.

Poitras' art inside serves as a reflection upon the complexities of life for Native Americans today who have survived the history displayed on the exterior walls of the circle. In the center is a table divided into four sections. Underneath a glass top, Poitras placed objects in each section created by the cardinal direction markers: "seeds of corn . . . pages from the Biblical Book of Revelations; and the hat similar to the one worn by Wovoka (1858-1932), a Paiute Holy Man whose prophecies of regeneration inspired the Ghost Dance movement of the 1890's." On the walls, a narrator reflects upon these themes in a multi-media video and sound display. One of the key themes is the way that Native people have often used tools of oppression in ways that have helped them survive. About Christianity, for example, the narrator says that it has been a "weapon of slavery and oppression, and of social justice."

Visitors exit this exhibit to a display on the back wall titled "All My Relations," a permanent part of the *Our Peoples* exhibit. This features a projected display of the names of many languages that are no longer spoken in the western hemisphere—a list acknowledged in the display as incomplete. Paul Choat Smith's narrative caption below states that nine of ten Native people died after

the first 100 years of contact with Europeans. “Entire nations perished in the wave of death that swept the Americas. Even their names are lost to us. We cannot tell you where they lived, what they believed, or what they dreamed. Their experiences are buried and unknowable. Like much of Indian history, only fragments are left to us” (Smith 2005). The sea of names is a moving exhibition that seemed to touch visitors. On one of my recent visits, a mother read the entire narrative to her son, and later a man, after talking to a friend about this incredible tragedy, paused and commented quietly, “They’re lost to the earth, but not to the heavens.”

The other two permanent exhibitions address contemporary indigenous life, but importantly do not limit their scope to the boundaries of the United States. Emphasizing the overlapping national boundaries that have characterized the history of Native Americans and the nation states of the western hemisphere, the section titled *Our Universe* displays Qeqchi Maya alongside Hupa from northern California; Peruvian Quechua next to northern plains Lakota and down the hall from Kha’p’o’ (or Santa Clara Pueblo). The *Our Universes* exhibit focuses upon indigenous philosophies. If the theme of *Our Peoples* is change, the theme of *Our Universes* is continuity. The exhibits reveal practices and traditions that still exist among different indigenous cultures. At the same time, the displays illustrate how members of contemporary tribes live in a world where they have other identities as well. The Hupa display contains a photograph of the late David Risling, identified as a retired professor from the University of California Davis, wearing a U.C. Davis baseball hat.

On the third floor, the exhibit titled *Our Lives* follows this theme of Native Americans in the contemporary world. A video-paneled wall provides a special effect as visitors walk into the exhibit, making it seem as if they are walking among contemporary Native Americans, some walking in families, others in Marine Corps uniforms, and others as construction workers. A caption reads “anywhere in the Americas you could be walking with a 21st century Native American.”

The images that walk along side visitors as they enter this exhibit illustrate one area in which the museum attempts to bridge the gaps in the narratives of Native Americans and the more patriotic or consensus narratives of United States history that have been represented for years in the Smithsonian. While the caption states one can encounter a Native American anywhere in the *Americas* [italics mine], there are codes in the images that seem to reflect mainstream, middle-class culture in the United States—hard hats, baby strollers, U.S. military uniforms. Yet the images also reflect realities of indigenous life in the United States. For example, while the image of someone in a U.S. Marine Corps uniform might connote patriotic loyalty to the country, it is also true that Native Americans have the highest per capita record of military service of any group in the United States.

A photo collage in the exhibit displays scores of black and white photo portraits of faces, all of whom are identified as contemporary Native Americans. Displays show the integration of indigenous people in modern American life, from the streets of Chicago to a pair of Converse All Star sneakers, covered completely in ruby colored beads and designs by Teri Greeves (Kiowa) for a traditional dance done for children in preparation for their future entry into tribal leadership. Like the entry into *Our Lives*, the effect might be to reconcile narratives of Native American identity with a sense of national consensus, illustrating expressions of that identity through widely familiar objects like canvas high-top sneakers, or common places like urban community centers. Yet the theme of survivance is also strong here, as Native Americans use the products and places of the contemporary Americas for their own purposes.

In addition to these more traditional exhibition spaces, the NMAI contains a resource center on the third floor, described as “a public reference area where visitors can learn more about the Native peoples of the Americas and exhibits, programs, and collections of the museum.” It contains eighteen public-access computers in a work-study area that can be used for research on a variety of topics, from genealogy and medicine to sports and women. There is also a classroom area that can be reserved for groups.

Throughout all of these exhibits and displays, one can see attention to problems that have been associated with representations of Native Americans in academic books, popular culture, and museum settings themselves. For example, on the third and fourth floors terraces overlooking the Potomac, there are *Window on Collections* exhibits. These consist of artifacts from the Heye collection donated to the museum. In contrast to the dioramas that had been employed by the Natural History Museum, which often used stereotypical conventions of hunting and warfare to provide a narrative hook for such objects, the *Window on Collections* displays are more like visits to the storage room of an archive. In front of each is a computer touch screen where one can find an object on display and find information about it. However, the information provided is simple catalogue content: object name, culture, place of origin, date, and catalogue number. For the displays of arrow points, peace medals, and animal icons, there is a general caption, but little information for each individual object.

The difficulties faced in the display of these objects are, in part, a result of the sheer volume of material possessed within the National Museum of the American Indian. As Sweeney points out, “We could have put in labels everywhere, but it would have been more difficult to read” (Sweeney 2005). The issues involved in these displays, however, are also connected to the inherent political explosiveness of the museum’s mission itself. They reveal the important questions that the museum has had to face regarding how to most appropriately and accurately represent indigenous Americans, and how to best represent the history of contact between indigenous and European peoples. For some prominent Native Americans, such as Clyde Bellecourt (Anishinabe-Ojibwe) of the

American Indian Movement in Minnesota, the museum should focus upon the destruction wrought by the invasion of Europeans 500 years ago. Pointing out injustices such as the \$200 billion dollars owed to indigenous people by the federal government from unpaid lease agreements, Bellecourt has said, "This museum should be called The National Museum of the American Indian Holocaust" (Alcindor 2004).

At the same time, scholars such as Nancy Marie Mithlo are critical of the responsibility that Native museum professionals often feel to "literally sort through the culmination of colonial legacies via museum collections." She calls the attempt to reverse the conventions upon which a white privileged society has framed indigenous life the "Red Man's Burden" (Mithlo 2004, 748). Mithlo writes that this problem is one directly faced by the NMAI. "The existence of the National Museum of the American Indian—its establishment via Congress, its location on the last remaining space of the Mall, its implicit mandate to be the public face for Native concerns of the Western Hemisphere from history to the present—is nothing short of monumental. . . . In an era where Native Americans are still among the nation's poorest, least educated, and most exploited peoples, yet another task is given—to take up the cause of archaeology for educating the 'foreign scholars.'" (755-6).

The comments made by President Bush during the opening ceremonies of the NMAI, which exclusively celebrated Native Americans who sacrificed themselves for the progress and expansion of the nation, certainly suggest that Mithlo has a point. In many respects, the aim of the Smithsonian reflects a larger connection between American tourism and what Marguerite S. Shaffer calls a "ritual of citizenship," reassuring white, middle- and upper-class members of the population that they could enjoy a sense of "identity, security, and control" even within a diverse and ever changing national landscape (quoted in Hutchinson 2004, 1090). As Sweeney acknowledges, the vast majority of the NMAI's visitors are non-Native American tourists, and the museum shoulders the responsibility of directing its information and messages to this audience. Throughout the three permanent exhibitions, it is clear that the museum's directors not only are attempting to teach histories and cultures that are unfamiliar to many visitors, but are also working to do so against five centuries of received images and stereotypes.

However, after leaving the museum, one cannot help but appreciate the enormous possibilities that this institution holds for Native Americans. That the museum cannot reconcile narratives of national cohesion with past and contemporary indigenous life is not necessarily a failure. Because its exhibits and displays address questions about the colonial history of European and United States expansion, they can serve as the basis for productive dialogue about the autonomy, welfare, values, and self-determination of Native Americans into the future. As Habiba Alcindor reported of the opening ceremonies at the museum, the tribal members who congregated for the festivities already were using the

museum as “a starting point: an opportunity to educate one another, as well as the general public, about their cultures.” The creators of the museum seem to be aware of this, and have created an institution that has the opportunity to become a valuable resource for Native and non-Native peoples from across the western hemisphere and from around the world.

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