

## **"Museums and Native America: The New Collaboration"**

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After serving as the director of a Smithsonian museum, as I have, for a decade, an inexorable condition called "reflection" inevitably sets in. Some days it leads me to contemplate how much longer it will be before I can liberate myself from the bounds of the Washington beltway to return to a life of more relaxed contemplation in my beloved Land of Enchantment, New Mexico - and, frankly, I am happy to wallow in that contemplation whenever I can. Other times, such as today, reflection causes me to sit quietly, at least for a while, with my splendid, if sometimes challenging, decade at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. I come to such moments from the convergence of my role as the founding Director of the NMAI and my life as a Southern Cheyenne, born mere miles from here, but raised in Oklahoma by my American Indian father and my Scottish mother. It is this reflection that, with the lengthening of my tenure as Director I think about more and more, and that I want to discuss with you today in addressing the subject, "Museums and Native America: The New Collaboration." In approaching this subject with you today, I first want to review the history of the relationship between the Native and museum communities. Its nineteenth century origins represent a time of great cultural and social tumult for the first citizens of this Hemisphere, and those beginnings have had great historic impact on the relationship, which often has hardly been characterized by mutual affection. I want to go beyond polemics and histrionics, however, to try to unearth some of the underlying reasons for the sometimes historically discordant relationship between museums and Native America. Second, being an inherently optimistic fellow, but hopefully no Pollyanna, which it is very hard for a former Washington lawyer to be, I also want to highlight some of the promising directions the museum and Native communities are taking that promise a far brighter, mutually productive, and collaborative future. Even in the decade that I have served as the

Director of the National Museum of the American Indian, the distance traveled by these inextricably linked communities has been enormous - especially considering the point of departure.

So let me now first return to the beginnings of the relationship between museums and Native America, and none personifies and reflects the fundamental nature of that inception more than the National Museum of the American Indian itself in its previous life as the Heye Foundation Museum of the American Indian in New York City. In the first decade of this century, a man of considerable wealth named George Gustav Heye began collecting Native objects from throughout the Western Hemisphere. For the next half century he collected diligently, indeed, some would say almost obsessively, dispatching teams of anthropologists and archaeologists to the far reaches of North and South America to collect Native material cultural. They sent Native objects back to New York, where Mr. Heye resided, quite literally in railway boxcars because the volume was so great. By the mid-twentieth century, Heye had created a collection of approximately 800,000 objects that was and still is considered to be the most comprehensive assemblage of Native objects of the Western Hemisphere in the world. Heye obviously was fascinated by the material - what he actually felt about the people who made it is less clear.

He appears to have been a man of his times, both as a collector and in his view of the place of the American Indian in history. Like many he believed that Native peoples and communities were on their way off the stage of history, and that his museum was literally a cultural salvage operation to collect the remnants of a dying people.

From a Native perspective, a different view of the matter was entirely reasonable and perhaps often completely appropriate. Specifically, museums were viewed by Native communities as the final ugly and unadorned edge of Manifest Destiny. Already reduced to abject poverty and social and cultural destruction from decades of military warfare and federal policies of explicit de-culturalization, for Native peoples the coup de grace was this ultimate act of colonialism, this final removal to far and foreign places of the material remnants, the cultural residuum of who they were.

These ambiguous beginnings, however, were compounded by what museums did in researching, representing, and interpreting Native peoples and cultures once these vast stores of material culture became the substantial collections of museums here and abroad. I would like to offer for your consideration three linked observations.

First, museums, consistent with the prevailing notions of the times, themselves treated Native communities as culturally vestigial, frozen in time and passing rapidly into the historical

beyond - in other words, distinctly historical rather than contemporary cultural phenomena. I remember reading once many years ago, in the writings of Alfred Kroeber, the definitive pronouncement that the last real California Indians had died in 1849. I always was puzzled about where this left the thousands contemporary Hoopas, Yuroks, and Karuks that I had good reason to believe still lived in culturally significant Native ways in northern California where Kroeber had done much of his work.

I found in this attitude a startling intellectual rigidity - indeed, wrongness - that brooked no quarter for the reality and the dynamism of cultural response, adaptation, change, and evolution - a steadfast refusal to recognize and concede the continuum that was and is Native cultures. I remember reading an illuminating passage in the Introduction to James Clifford's book, *Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* that makes the point I seek:

Throughout the world indigenous populations have had to reckon with the forces of 'progress' . . . . The results have been both destructive and inventive. Many traditions, languages, cosmologies, and values are lost, some literally murdered; but much has simultaneously been invented and revived in complex, oppositional contexts. If the victims of progress and empire are weak, they are seldom passive. It used to be assumed, for example, that conversion to Christianity in . . . colonial Massachusetts would lead to the extinction of indigenous cultures rather than to their transformation. Something more ambiguous and historically complex has occurred, requiring that we perceive both the end of certain orders of diversity and the creation or translation of others . . . . [Original emphasis]

I believe that Clifford is telling us that the Native peoples of this Hemisphere are still here in culturally definable form. We have not remained static. We have been influenced by non-Native cultural forces, and we have even responded - indeed, often brilliantly so. But "response," or "adaptation" as it is called in more anthropological terms, is not to be confused with "assimilation." The essence of our indigenous nature continues to exist and to evolve in dynamic and culturally significant ways.

I also remember the statement of an elder from the Fort Mohave Reservation in California that makes the same point in less ethnographic but equally compelling terms. The statement appears in the National Park Service's report of almost a decade ago entitled *Keepers of the Treasures: Protecting Historic Properties and Cultural Traditions on Indian Lands*:

When we think of historical preservation, I suppose you think of something that is old, something that has happened in the past and that you want to put away on a shelf and bring it

out and look at [it] every now and then. . . . I was so puzzled by the whole thing that I looked up 'historical' and it said 'a significant past event'. . . . In our way of thinking, everything is a significant event, and the past is as real to us as being here right now. We are all connected to the things that happened at the beginning of our existence. And those things live on as they are handed down to us.

Again, Native peoples as contemporary cultural phenomena that draw upon timeless traditions stretching back over thousands of years to respond to a vastly changed current environment and circumstances.

In addition to their failure to recognize Native peoples and cultures as continuing and contemporary, a second reason exists for the historically troubled relationship between the museum community and Native America. Most museums, grounded in anthropology as the governing system of knowledge and academic discipline, embarked, in their research and presentations, on a path of scientific objectification that ultimately almost bankrupted the entire field and, in the process, often denigrated and de-humanized Native peoples. In making this statement, and assuming that several distinguished anthropologists may be sitting in this audience, I want to emphasize that this characterization has far more to do with what anthropology was rather than what is today. Prior, however, to its more recent de-construction and reconstruction of itself, its application to Native peoples and their cultures could have distressing and untoward results. In the quest to be an objective science, it frequently degenerated into an almost mindless descriptiveness that not only sometimes failed to communicate culturally significant information and knowledge, but also put Native people into the category of a mere cultural object - and a rather sub-human one at that.

At its most ghoulish, this mind set took the form of the nineteenth century cranial studies undertaken by the Department of the Army of the United States and eventually passed off to a number of museums, including the Smithsonian Institution. The decapitated heads of Indians fallen in battle literally were swept from battlefields by the departing Seventh Cavalry and returned to Washington, D.C. as specimens for these studies.

On a slightly more benign but nonetheless disturbing note, I also remember looking at an entry sometime ago in a book of photography that again demonstrates what I am saying. One William Jackson compiled a volume entitled *Descriptive Catalogue of Photographs of North American Indians* in 1877. It contains the poignant photograph of an Apache man, Eskiminzin, dressed in his non-Indian finest, who is described in the following way:

Height, 5 feet 8 inches; circumference of head, 22 1/4 inches; circumference of chest, 37 inches; age, 38 years. Head chief of San Carlos reservation and of the Pinal Apaches. His family was among those slain at the Camp Grant massacre in 1871. Is now taking the lead in living a civilized life, having taken up a farm on the San Carlos River.

Whatever Eskiminzin might have thought about the good life on his San Carlos River farm, I always have had great difficulty believing that, if asked who he was and what was important to him, he would have responded by telling you the circumference of his head and chest. The approach seems so at odds with how we Cheyennes were taught, through time, to see ourselves: we call ourselves *tsis-tsis-tsas*, and the words mean simply, but so definitively, "human being."

The final reason I would cite that explains the historical relationship between the Native and museum communities is the complete vesting of intellectual authority regarding Native material culture that was assumed by the latter to the total exclusion of the former. For the most part Native people were, frankly, not welcomed in the collections rooms of the America's great museums after much of our cultural patrimony was transferred there. Beyond this physical exclusion, however, a far more fundamental and insidious intellectual exclusion occurred. The assumption was that we knew little of what was important about the material culture we had created, or at least that what we knew was not scientifically based and, therefore, of limited value. Our involvement, in many case, was at most as "informants" to anthropologists, where what we said and what we supposedly knew passed through the filter of a system of knowledge not known to us and, in fundamental ways, completely at odds with our way of thinking and viewing the world. The concept that cultural "truth" conceivably could be multiple and could differ depending on the commentator fell victim to the ineluctable march of Western science.

I recall my bemusement and amusement several years ago in looking at the object list for an exhibit of ours at the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City and reading through some of the comparative label copy of bygone years at the old Heye Foundation Museum of the American Indian. In one case a spectacular beaded apron from Guiana is described in part as follows: "These delicately hued costumes offer an appealing contrast against a brown skin." (Emphasis added.) Subsequently, but still many years ago, a scholar offered this description of an almost identical object: "These beautifully designed and beaded aprons are worn by women throughout the Arawak region. Their contrast with the tan skin color provides a pleasing contrast. . . ." (Emphasis added.)

I have never been clear about what happened in the interim to prompt this change in the

choice of adjectives to describe the object - perhaps intermarriage outside the tribe. I also do not know where this curatorial approach leaves us Cheyennes who at best are "off-white" in color. My far more serious point is that I doubt an Arawak woman herself would have described either object by reference to the color contrast with her skin.

This summary of a lengthy history is where we have been, the museum community and Native America, and it, admittedly, has not been an always happy place, so where, as I turn to the second part of my presentation today, are we now, and, perhaps more important, where are we heading? I firmly believe that Native America and the museum community, over the past decade, have turned an important corner together and have every reason to hope large as we encounter a collective future. My conclusions and perceptions are based, as they must be since it is my primary experience, on what has gone on during the past ten years at the National Museum of the American Indian. I believe, however, that the NMAI reflects an ever broadening trend in the Native and museum worlds rather than a solo performance, that we are representative at this point rather than exceptional.

This fundamental shift, ironically, has its origins, or at least its trigger point, in what, at the time I became Director of the National Museum of the American Indian in 1990, was a veritable maelstrom of conflict between the Native and museum communities: the federal repatriation legislation of the late 1980s and the early 1990s that required the return by museums, upon request, of certain kinds of cultural material to culturally affiliated contemporary Native communities. My reason for making this statement is that the repatriation legislation signaled a seminal, congressionally mandated shift in the balance of power and authority between Native America on the one hand and the museum community on the other. The legislation assumed the existence of millions of contemporary Native people here in the United States, to say nothing of the tens of millions of indigenous people who populate the rest of the Americas. It also assumed that these Native peoples continued to have fundamental, indeed, primal, ceremonial and religious connections to many of the objects that sit in the collections of America's great museums. Finally, and perhaps most important, the repatriation legislation, in determining who should have authority over those objects, struck a profoundly different balance between scientific values and human values than had been the case previously.

Entering this rather spirited conversation as a novice director in 1990, I felt that much of the museum community was missing the real point. I heard the considerable angst among my new colleagues about rumbling 18-wheelers at the back-bay doors of America's great Indian collections just waiting to cart our collections away, but I was focused on a different piece of

the far horizon - and by the way, the apocalypse of gutted Indian collections has never happened, and I would bet my daughter's dowry that it never will. What I saw in the repatriation legislation was a momentarily politicized and polarizing tip of a far larger and much more profound mountain of potential collaboration and common interest between the museum and Native communities. This vision, I truly believe, will be the ultimate legacy of repatriation legislation.

For the next few minutes, I would like to highlight, again based on my experience at the National Museum of the American Indian, how I think most museums in this country are moving to address the very history to which I referred earlier. First, museums increasingly recognize and affirm the contemporaneousness of Native peoples and cultures and their humanity. Some forty to fifty million people throughout the Americas still call themselves indigenous, and objects and art that reflect and embody the lives of Native peoples continue to be made. Some of the best ceramics work in the Southwest and some of the most aesthetically compelling wood carving in the Northwest Coast region is being done right now on the cusp of the new millennium - and it compares favorably with anything that preceded it.

Museums are beginning to respond to these facts in a variety of creative ways. Exhibits reflect, through the curation and presentation of objects and ideas, the vast time and cultural continuum that is Native life and community, past and present. At the NMAI we attempt to reinforce this reality by complementing all of our exhibitions with what we call the Expressive Culture Series, which is performance art that includes music, storytelling, theater, and dance, and brings to our audiences living Native peoples to confirm, quite literally, our continuing existence and cultural vitality.

The NMAI, however, has moved, as have other museums, not only to reflect Native cultural continuance but to support it directly. The Cultural Resources Center, or CRC, of the NMAI, opened over a year ago just outside of Washington, D.C. in Suitland, Maryland, is a place of welcome, hospitality, and access to information and collections for Native Americans. In addition to the collections areas themselves, we have designed and programmed study areas where more limited numbers of objects can be brought to Native and non-Native visitors. The Cultural Resources Center includes interior and exterior spaces and areas where the ritual and ceremonial care of Native objects by Native people can take place, where smoke from smudging is welcome and green rooms have been built to accommodate Native people who need to change from their street clothes to conduct ceremonies. The CRC also has a resources center, modeled after a similar programming area at the George Gustav Heye Center in New York, that will contain extensive data bases of information, including, eventually, digitized

images of every object in our 800,000-object collection and associated textual and archival information. All of this data and information ultimately will be available and accessible not only at the CRC in Washington, D.C., but online, through the internet and our Web site, at remote locations and on an interactive and real time basis, in schools, museums, and cultural centers on the mesas of Hopi, in the Far North of the Inuit, and in the Andes of Quechua-speaking Peru.

In delineating how I believe museums like the NMAI can assist and support Native America, I want to emphasize that a powerful flip-side advantage for museums exists. Through the collaborations between museums and Native communities that began with repatriation, but have gone on to encompass so much more, the museums of the United States holding Indian objects and cultural material have learned infinitely more about what they have and will continue to hold. The NMAI, as many of the scholars in the audience know, notwithstanding its quantitative and qualitative abundance, has a collection that was sometimes spottily and cavalierly documented by its originating collector. For us important gaps in that documentation have been filled, during the past decade, through information visiting Native delegations have provided willingly and lovingly - and I have every reason to believe that we are not exceptional in this regard.

I also want to accent a second trend line that responds directly to some of the history I sketched earlier in this presentation. Specifically, museums are moving, with increasing consistency and comprehensiveness, to include and to invoke the voices of Native peoples themselves in their own representation and interpretation. In making this observation, I intend no judgment, let alone any denigration, of those systems of knowledge, such as archeology, anthropology, art history, or history, that have been employed historically to interpret Native peoples and cultures. They constitute valid bases of analysis and viewpoint, and they will continue to be vital aspects of the way we view Native peoples and cultures in museums - and they should be.

What I also am saying, however, is that Native people themselves have an indispensable role to play in the process and substance of the museum's representation and interpretation of Native peoples and cultures. At the present time, the National Museum of the American Indian's governing policies require that every exhibit we develop and mount be conducted in direct consultation with the Native communities it purports to represent, from its originating concepts to the selection of its objects to the set of educational products it generates for the public.

The why of this commitment to the invocation of the Native voice in the galleries of the

NMAI and other museums is absolutely critical to me. I believe, based upon my own upbringing and life's experience as a Cheyenne, that Native views of the world, of reality, of cosmology are profoundly different from those that have grown out of the Euroamerican cultural experience - and these differences have real impact on the meaning and interpretation of the millions of objects sitting in the collections of museums.

I remember an experience several years ago that illustrates how differently Native people often see objects. I was visiting the Millicent Rogers Museum near Taos, New Mexico, with its gem-like collection of Native objects from the Southwest. I was standing in front of an exhibit case looking down at a ceramic pot sculpted by the renowned Native artist, Popovi Da, the son of Maria and Julian Martinez, who are largely credited with reviving, in the twentieth century, the Pueblo pottery tradition. Popovi Da's ceramic piece was exquisite, and I was completely content to stand there, in reverential silence, for a very long time, simply basking in its uncommon beauty.

Then my eye finally moved to a piece of text that had been placed next to the piece, and it was a statement by Popovi Da himself. I have never forgotten the words because they spoke volumes about his world and how what I saw related to that world:

We do what comes from thinking, and sometimes hours and even days are spent to create an aesthetic scroll in design. Our symbols and our representations are all expressed as an endless cadence, and beautifully organized in our art as well as in our dance....

There is design in living things; their shapes, forms, the ability to live, all have meaning. . . . Our values are indwelling and dependent upon time and space unmeasured. This in itself is beauty.

I distill the following two points from what Popovi Da had to say about his own work. First, while it often comes as a considerable shock to those grounded in the traditions of Western art and less familiar with Indian material culture, the object, if anything, was a secondary consideration to the primacy of the ceremonial or ritual process that led to its creation. In other words, despite the remarkable aesthetic qualities of much of the cultural material we created, our purpose, in the end, was not the creation of an "art object."

A former colleague of mine at the National Museum of the American Indian spoke directly to this point when she wrote:

[T]he Native artist . . . [values] the creation [of art] . . . over the final product. Process speaks to historical or cultural significance because it is testimony to cultural continuity and change.

It is the evidence of lost traditions, innovations, preserved cultural knowledge, historic perspective and vision of the future. . . . It takes into account a sort of 'spiritual evidence' that is integral to the creative process. The integrity of the creative process is foremost. The object is meaningless without it.

I also take a second important cultural precept from Popovi Da's eloquent observation. Native objects, in their most profound and ultimate dimension, really were statements and reflections - and were intended to be so - of collective and communal values as much or more than they were to be considered individual acts of creativity with a universal meaning.

I recall reading many years ago a statement by Claude Levi-Strauss that also addresses the very differences of which I speak. Levi-Strauss wrote the following regarding the nature of the aesthetically compelling material culture of the Native peoples of the Northwest Coast areas of the United States and Canada:

A vase, a box, a wall are not independent, pre-existing objects which are subsequently decorated. They acquire their definitive existence only through the integration of the decoration with the utilitarian function. Thus, the chests of the Northwest Coast are not merely containers embellished with a painted or carved animal. They are the animal itself keeping an active watch over the ceremonial ornaments which have been entrusted to its care. Structure modifies decoration, but decoration is the final cause of the structure, which must adapt itself to the former. The final product is a whole: utensil-ornament, object-animal, box that speaks.

This fusion of the profoundly spiritual with the otherwise purely physical, this primacy of the process of creating an object over the beautiful object itself, this utter inseparability of the object from the conduct of daily life - all are Native ways of viewing objects that arguably are significantly different from the paradigms of Western art and art history.

I also believe that they represent the very reasons why the National Museum of the American Indian needs the interpretive voices of Native peoples themselves in our exhibits. I remember the revealing and, indeed, poignant statement made in the catalogue for an exhibit of ours by Tom Hill, a colleague and friend who serves as the Director of the Woodland Cultural Centre in Ontario, Canada. A Canadian Seneca Indian, he tells the story of how and what he learned, as a boy, about Iroquois ceremonial masks from his relative Ezekiel Hill, an elder in Tom's community:

Ezekiel told me about the masks, but only when I asked. 'Why is the nose crooked?' I would ask. Or, 'What do you feed them?' And Ezekiel would explain. He told me how the masks

were carved from living trees that consented to sacrificing a part of themselves. He reaffirmed my confidence in what I had seen and experienced: that, in the ceremonies, the masks had the power to focus the attention of all who saw them on natural forces that we experience but cannot understand. Through the masks, I learned about good and evil, the Creation, healing, and respect. They gave me a sense of history, too, a feeling of being part of a long chain of life.

I realized later that Ezekiel was not the only one who had masks: museums found them irresistible public favorites, amusing displays. But these exhibitions never captured the masks' spirit. Whenever I see a mask in a museum, I think how different it is from those that hung by Ezekiel's stove. Behind glass, they become [only] objects.

I want the audiences of the National Museum of the American Indian to know and to understand, through Tom, the meanings the masks held for Ezekiel Hill. That knowledge is authentic, it is worthy, and it will add substantial value to the experience of every visitor who walks through the doors of the National Museum of the American Indian and any other museum that purports to represent the deep and wide cultural contributions of Native peoples from the millennia of the past into our collective and shared cultural future.

In conclusion, not long ago, at the end of one of those grinding, crunching, 12-hour Washington days, after everyone else had left the office, the telephones had stopped ringing, the fax machine had stopped whining, and my pager and cellular telephone had been turned off, I was thinking about the future of the National Museum of the American Indian and, more particularly, of its relationship to Native peoples and their cultures. I walked over to my office window, and looked east toward the Capitol Building to that last piece of precious territory on the hallowed National Mall that is ours and from which our museum is now rising, like the Phoenix of Egyptian legend.

As I was standing there, the words of a favorite poem came to me. It is entitled "It Doesn't End, Of Course," by Simon Ortiz of the Pueblo of Acoma in New Mexico. Simon, I believe, was writing of his own personal cultural survival and continuance, but, metaphorically, he well could have been speaking for all of Native cultural survival:

It doesn't end.

In all growing from all earths to all skies, in all touching all things, in all soothing the aches of all years, it doesn't end.

The National Museum of the American Indian will give the Native peoples of this Hemisphere, at long last, the powerful symbolic presence in this nation's political center that their vast cultural contributions demand. In the final analysis, however, the truly profound

legacy of this 21st century institution of living cultures and other museums like it will be the realization by every person in this room, Native and non-Native, that all of us have a vital stake in the fact that "it doesn't end."

Thank you very much for your kind attention.