

"Museums and Native America: The New Collaboration"

**ICOM/INTECOM
2007 ICOM General Conference
Vienna, Austria
August 21, 2007**

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After serving as the director of a Smithsonian museum, as I have, for almost two decades, 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", in my nation's capital, to return to a life of more relaxed contemplation in my beloved Land of Enchantment, the State of New Mexico in America's Southwest - 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, near two decades 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 and raised in the State of Oklahoma by my American Indian father and my Scottish - American mother.

It is this reflection that, with the nearness of the conclusion 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 revisit 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 the Western 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 almost two decades 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.

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 deculturalization, 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.

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. 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.

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 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.

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 eighteen 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 in the United States 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 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 the United States 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 regions of the United States are being done right now in 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, which is performance and art programming 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 in 1999 just outside of Washington, D.C. in Suitland, Maryland, and 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 Qechua-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, some scholars in this audience may 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."

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. 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 both my cellular telephones 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. 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 the Americas, 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" - and that museums of the new millennium should be active and powerful agents of change to those noble and worthy ends.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.