

**"The National Museum of the American Indian:
Journeys in a Post-Colonial World"**

**Plenary Address
The Meaning and Values of Repatriation Conference
World Archaeological Conference
at the
Centre for Cross-Cultural Research
and the
National Museum of Australia
Canberra, Australia
July 8, 2005**

**By W. Richard West, Jr.
Director, National Museum of the American Indian
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.**

In contemplating this presentation, which I have entitled, "The National Museum of the American Indian: Journeys in a Post-Colonial World," I remembered a highly telling and instructive story told me, shortly after the Museum opened this past September, by a good friend and colleague in Washington, D.C. Some years ago he served as the head of one of the principal federal arts and humanities agencies, and is now a devoted and enthusiastic supporter of the Museum. He understands quite perfectly what the institution represents as a museological departure from past convention and takes great pleasure in bringing friends and family to the NMAI frequently.

On this particular occasion, he was showing the Museum to a number of friends who included a distinguished past

member of the board of trustees of one of America's most renowned art museums - and, without getting too specific, an institution located in a city, whose name you would recognize, just up the east coast of the United States from Washington, D.C. After her tour, and in apparent exasperation and frustration, she pulled my friend aside and exclaimed, "I do not like this museum! It is not a collector's museum. Something else is going on here."

At the conclusion of my friend's story, I reflected in smiling and gentle bemusement on how utterly prescient even oppositional and critical observations often can be, and why, like this devotee of American art museums, some people can be, as Claire Smith has remarked in her recent article in *Art and Antiquity* entitled "The National Museum of the American Indian: Decolonising the Museum," "disappointed, confused, or angry" about this new cultural and spiritual marker on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The irritated visitor was spot on, indeed - something very different is going on at the National Museum of the American Indian, and that subject is precisely what I want to talk with you about today.

Before turning to that discussion, however, I want, by way of preface, to be clear about what this presentation is not. Any new museum or cultural institution of the scope,

scale, magnitude - and innovative ambition - of the National Museum of the American Indian inevitably opens as, and should remain, perhaps indefinitely, a work in progress. It thus should be welcoming to criticism that may come its way as day one in its institutional life becomes day two, and it should be willing at all times to respond positively and without defensiveness to what critics may cast its way. This attitude is especially appropriate when, like the NMAI, the museological step taken is so different from what all visitors, including critics, are used to seeing. I agree wholeheartedly, in fact, with Claire Smith's sympathetic suggestion in the article from which I just quoted that we provide more guidance "to help the visitor successfully navigate these newly charted Indigenous territories." This kind of challenge, however, is transitory to me and will be addressed, as it should be, in due course.

My presentation today, instead, is very much focused on what I consider far larger questions occupying a much bigger horizon relating to the fundamental nature of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and what it aspires to beyond sometimes querulous reviews of its inaugural exhibits. And here is how I would like to explore those issues with you today. First, I want to

discuss this institution as a "museum," in this case representing the first peoples of the Americas, and how it probably differs markedly from previous models that have interpreted and represented Native cultures. Second, I want to posit why, in important respects, the NMAI hopes to become more than a "museum," certainly as we have known them in the past. Finally, I would like to address why the National Museum of the American Indian, I believe, has important implications for the broader international museum community in both of the respects I have just mentioned.

Let me begin, then, by looking at the NMAI as, indeed, a "museum" - and, in doing so, to exercise, if I may, a Directorial prerogative, by telling you what we *think* we are doing. The National Museum of the American Indian is not a random intellectual and museological happening on the National Mall of the United States, but, instead, was undertaken, always, with very specific intentionality.

The former art museum trustee paraphrased earlier is, as I said, correct: the NMAI will never be, at least in its inaugural regime, only another "palace of Native collectibles," presenting from either a conventional "art museum" or "ethnographic museum" viewpoint the cultural patrimony of the first peoples of the Western Hemisphere. It is, instead and without apology, an international

institution of living cultures that strives, consistently and specifically, to associate its vast collections with the people who made them, and to interpret both in the communal contexts, past, present, and future, that give them continuing and holistic life. Perhaps as important, it does so from the viewpoint, through the minds, hearts, and experiences of Native peoples themselves, with no intended denigration of systems of knowledge used elsewhere in other museums.

The explicit Mission Statement of the National Museum of the American Indian drives this approach, and for that reason, is worth quoting here, even in its considerable, lawyer-crafted length:

The National Museum of the American Indian shall recognize and affirm to Native communities and the non-Native public the historical and contemporary cultural achievements of the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere by advancing, in consultation, collaboration, and cooperation with Native people, knowledge and understanding of Native cultures, including art, history, and language, and by recognizing the museum's special responsibility, through innovative public programming, research, and collections, to protect, support, and enhance the development, maintenance, and perpetuation of Native cultures and community.

For those willing to see them, the results of the Museum's adherence to this Mission Statement are visible. As Lee Rosenbaum, the critic for *The Wall Street Journal*

who reviewed the inaugural exhibitions of the NMAI, remarked:

As an art museum, the Smithsonian Institution's new National Museum of the American Indian is a failure. But as a museum limning the lives, beliefs and histories of diverse Native American tribes from the Arctic to South America, NMAI is a substantial success. Only by accepting this museum on its terms can you appreciate the accomplishments of its staff and the 'community curators' from 24 tribes who collaborated to tell their peoples' stories from the inside.

Roger Kennedy, the distinguished former Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History saw matters similarly:

. . . [T]he point of it all is that the Indian Museum is a living Indians' museum, presenting without rancor or unctuousness certain valuable truths about living Native persons having a set of experiences special to them, but important to the rest of us

. . . .
This place is different. We will not find labels telling us which dead artist did what, or why a dead object is thought to be pretty, or how it has been authenticated by some expert as 'culturally significant.' Objects have been selected, as they are in any good museum, because they are significant and because they enhance the significance of other objects to which they are juxtaposed, but at the end of the day this is a companionable place, where it is a *people* who are 'culturally significant.' The critics have had real trouble reconciling themselves to that. [Original emphasis]

This integration of Native peoples and their objects, and the elevation of the Native voice in their interpretation, in the exhibitions of the NMAI also was no

random occurrence, but, instead, reflect a very specifically chosen representational methodology. The approach is premised on the critical linkages, for Native people, of what has been referred to in common museum parlance, as "tangible" and "intangible" cultural heritage - although I should point out that we Natives of the Americas do not bifurcate our heritage in this manner ourselves, since we see both as inextricably connected and fully integrated, in our lives, as parts of the same cultural whole.

From a Native standpoint, the process of creating the object actually is far more important than the tangible object itself. This viewpoint is central because it is the process of creation that implicates the many intangible aspects of heritage that often give objects their deepest meaning to their makers - traditions, songs, spiritual beliefs, and ritual and ceremonial practices.

Access to this dimension of meaning necessarily requires the direct involvement of those who, in fact, live the heritage. As Richard Kurin, the Director of the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, emphasizes in his article, "Museums and Intangible Heritage: Culture Dead or Alive?", in *ICOM News*:

In order to deal with intangible heritage museums must have an extensive, fully engaged, substantive dialogue and partnership with the people who hold the heritage. Such partnership entails shared authority for defining traditions, and shared curation for their representation. Museums cannot resort to the controlled recreation of idealized or romanticized living culture performed by scripted actors, but instead must deal with heritage as it is lived by real people. Nor can museums hide behind a history of elitism, ethnic, or class bias that has often afflicted the institution. Charged with the twin duties of cooperation and respect, museums will have to cross all sorts of boundaries that have sometimes kept them 'above and beyond' the broader populace. They will have to 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. They will have to overcome prejudices of class difference and taste, recognizing a diversity of legitimate aesthetics and values. They will have to recognize and in many cases confront biases of ethnicity, language, and religion that may prevent them from interacting and appreciating the cultural forms of 'other' people.

The application of this approach and practice at the NMAI, and the resulting empowerment and authority of the Native interpretive voice, make for exhibitions that look and are very different. As Claire Smith, in her article previously quoted, indicates:

This scheme of knowledge is given material substance in the manner that objects in the collections [of the NMAI] are arranged and described. 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, being based on neither the Linnean system of linking similarities of features, nor the tradition of Cutter's system of locating items in place, preferably adjacent to other items which share similar features. . . .

This approach, as the NMAI well knows, includes both immense positive potential and considerable risk at once - it can produce genuine fresh and new knowledge about Native peoples, past and present, but does so by, at least in perception, implicitly challenging the authority of others who have done so in the past. As Smith notes similarly:

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.

And some do not take those challenges lightly, including the critic at one of America's most august publications, *The New York Times*, whose review I want to discuss briefly, not for purposes of singling it out for counterattack, but more as example of the discomfiture the

NMAI can cause for adherents to more conventional museum paradigms. The critic expresses deep regret that the NMAI is moving away from the "museum as a temple with its superior, self-governing priesthood" and opines that it should have moved "in the opposite direction." He opposes the museum's making objects available to tribes "for ritual use," believing that this kind of sensitivity constitutes evidence of a "studious avoidance of scholarship." He expresses open indignation about the choices made by the Tohono O'odam community when asked, in one of the exhibitions, to describe the 10 most important events in their history.

Roger Kennedy, my former Smithsonian fellow museum director previously quoted, analyzed this review in the following terms, perhaps in stronger words that I might have used - but, then, he is a former director, and has the wonderful latitude for expressing his views that I, as a sitting director, probably do not yet have:

The patronizing stench emerging from that passage [about the studious avoidance of scholarship] grows stronger in another, suggesting that Indians' lack of 'detailed written languages (sorry about that, all ye Aztec poets and all ye Mayan historians and merchants) resulted from their having 'so little to say.' Compassionately, he would have us grant eternal silence to these mute fellow citizens not only because they were linguo-deprived but because 'so much trauma decimated . . . the tribes.' A

little well-applied trauma might be helpful to shake that kind of self-assurance.

. . . .
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 as the Director of the National Museum of the American Indian, so am I. I am so because I have a moral and intellectual commitment to the simple, yet so fundamental, proposition that Native peoples possess important and authoritative knowledge about themselves and their cultures, past and present, and deserve to be at the museological table of interpretation and representation. I believe that their presence there opens real windows of learning opportunity for the 3 to 4 million visitors who will pass through the doors of the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall every year. I think that the potential for new scholarship and insight into Native peoples and cultures at the NMAI is real and is to be valued highly, whatever the intervening and intermittent

challenges along the way may be as we introduce new paradigms of interpretation and representation.

As Kennedy noted emphatically in his critique of the critics:

Would it not have been refreshing if any of these self-assured commentators had said to us: 'Guess what! This is what I thought when I came, and this is what I learned'? Or 'this is how I felt, and this is how I now feel?' Scholarship? Scholarship, gentlemen, is about learning. That is why the first revisionist was the second historian. Instead of encouraging readers to experience a shock of surprise and to learn, these critics hector from preconceptions in a situation to which they are strangers.

When all is said and done, I aspire to the day, as the Director of the National Museum of the American Indian - and I am fully confident that ultimately it will come - when all of those visiting and experiencing this Native place on the National Mall, including most critics, will no longer be "strangers in the room," an intellectual and working aspiration that we will pursue with character, grace, good humor, and, I should emphasize, uncompromising tenacity.

But now, as I indicated I would, I want to turn to a second inquiry regarding the National Museum of the American Indian - one that takes us beyond the presentation I have just finished about the fundamental nature of the institution as a "museum" and how it does or does not

represent some kind of paradigmatic museological shift - because I always have thought of the NMAI as being far more than only a cultural destination on America's National Mall, a stop on the local tour bus route. I probably can explain myself best by recounting the mild epiphany I experienced on the Museum's opening day this past September 21st.

As I was standing there on the National Mall watching some 30,000 Native people from all over the Americas who had come to bear witness to the opening, as well as 80,000 other friends, supporters, and observers who also had joined these first Americans in support, I had a powerful sense that I was experiencing something far more significant and seminal than the opening of a dazzling new museum building in the monumental core of the nation's capital, and even more than the opening of the newest gem in the illustrious crown of the legendary Smithsonian Institution, America's national cultural organization. The inauguration of the National Museum of the American Indian represented something that transcended even these important historical events - it signified a fundamental shift, a reckoning that 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.

Viewed in this light, the National Museum of the American Indian possesses the potential for becoming more than a museum, or at least more than a museum that serves only as a sometime cultural destination for Washington tourists and other visitors. More specifically, it has the capacity for becoming larger social and civic space, a national and international forum, if you will, regarding Native peoples and cultures and their broad and deep cultural experience, past and present.

The NMAI takes its cue on this subject from two sources. First, the Mission Statement of the Museum itself references this greater responsibility and, indeed, obligation. You may recall the part of the Statement, which I quoted in full previously, that affirms the "museum's special responsibility . . . to protect, support, and enhance the . . . perpetuation of Native culture and community." "Protection," "support," and "enhancement" of future Native culture and community reference a civic and social responsibility of the Museum with respect to Native peoples that transcend its role as only a cultural destination on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

In her paper entitled, "Choosing Among the Options: An Opinion about Museum Definitions," my good friend and respected colleague, Elaine Heumann Gurian, describes, among others, the model of the "community museum" in these following terms:

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. They mix social service, day-care, performance and community events with exhibitions. The target audience is often [those] who live in the neighborhood, who do not traditionally use museums, and whose group activity is under stress or in great transition.

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. Controlled by the community themselves, they hope to create a new economic reality by turning this knowledge into a tourist attraction. Community-centered museums often make their objects available for ceremonial use and study as a matter of course.

I do not want to stretch the analogy too much or too thin, but in a variety of ways, 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 sits squarely on the National

Mall in Washington, D.C. It is not only a place of and by Native peoples to learn about them and their cultures, but it assumes with seriousness and consistency of purpose a broader social and civic commitment to support that community, through programs relating to language preservation and repatriation, for example, into a sound cultural future.

At the same time it serves as an important national forum to address, on an ongoing basis, completely apart from and in addition to, what goes on in exhibition galleries, an array of important, timely, and sometimes even controversial issues regarding Native peoples and cultures. Moreover, it does so at precisely the time that alternate civic forums, whether it be the Congress of the United States, churches, or "town hall" settings that historically have been the locus of important social and political discourse, appear, at least for this purpose, to be in a precipitous state of collapse in the United States.

Richard Kurin, in the article I quoted previously, states more generally not only the conclusion but also the rationale for what I have just said:

There are opportunities . . . for museums to expand their connection to their constituencies . . . and play a positive role in society by serving a larger social purpose. Museums do have a tool kit for this role. They value cultural

heritage. They employ specialists knowledgeable about and appreciative of cultural heritage. They engage in a useful social function - the broad dissemination of knowledge. They help legitimate understandings and values in the public sphere. Museums can encourage and promote cultural diversity, the continuity of tradition, and ongoing cultural creativity. . . . [T]here are many signs and cases worldwide where museums have come forward to take on this larger, more expansive task.

Kurin's trenchant observations serve as transition to the third and final subject, as promised, that I would like to discuss with you today - namely, the implications of the National Museum of the American Indian for the broader international museum community. Let me first emphasize that I do not underestimate its significance solely with respect to the realm of contemporary museum practice, especially as it relates to the interpretation and representation of the Native peoples of the Americas. The approach that we have used is by no means unprecedented, and I emphasize that fact - other institutions also have invoked the Native voice in their exhibitions and public programming - but it has not been attempted on the scale or at the magnitude of the National Museum of the American Indian, or, for that matter, on the National Mall within clear sight of the national Capitol Building.

I also realize that some might think this area of consideration should be our primary focus simply because it

has been the immediate source of some of the more heated discussion about the Museum. Patience and graciousness, coupled with a deadly persistence, however, are at this point part of my Native genetic code, and I thus have less doubt about the outcome of that issue than I do about the fact that I am here right now talking with all of you.

The plain fact is that paradigmatic shifts are not new phenomena, either in the academy or museums. In the past generation of both scholars and scholarship, the fields of anthropology and archeology, and even art history, for example, have loosed their Eurocentric moorings, grounded in the colonial experience of the dictation and domination of the interpretation of others, and embraced the fresh breezes of intellectual openness that recognize the place and the authority of indigenous peoples in their own interpretation and representation. I have every confidence that the institution of the museum will be no different notwithstanding the sometimes shrill objections of culture critics borne from a different era and paradigm - and I thus see this set of issues as part of a shorter and thoroughly manageable horizon.

But I always have been a bit of a dreamer - and I seek for that reason the exploration of a farther and larger museum horizon, and it is really this area of consideration

with which I would like to close today. I always have been drawn to my friend Elaine Heumann Gurian's concept of museums as places of memory and remembrance because this vision speaks to a much larger potentiality. In a paper entitled "Offering Safer Public Spaces," she observed as follows:

Museums . . . have a core purpose that is inherently important to our survival. It is not, as you might automatically think, that we have collections, access to the 'real thing.' Instead, it is our role as institutions of memory. As members of a society, we must be rooted in our collective past as well as willing to face our collective future. Museums can capitalize on their significant place in the community. They can enhance and elevate the congregant behavior that happens within their walls. . . . [T]hey also contribute to preserving and building a sense of safety and community.

It is this potential for far broader civic engagement, so embedded in the National Museum of the American Indian in theory and practice, that is its real offering to the museum of the 21st century, while at the same time conceding it will not be the path for all museums. Ellen Hirzy, in her essay "Mastering Civic Engagement: A Report from the American Association of Museums" in the book *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, says the following on this very subject:

Civic engagement occurs when museum and community intersect - in subtle and overt ways, over time, and as an accepted and natural way of doing

business. The museum becomes a center where people gather to meet and converse, a place that celebrates the richness of individual and collective experience, and a participant in collective problem solving. It is an incubator of change. These are among the possibilities inherent in each museum's own definition and expression of community.

In the new century I believe that at least some museums will work more diligently to explore these broader civic possibilities. As Gurian, again in her essay, "Function Follows Form: How Mixed-Used Spaces in Museums Build Community," has urged, "Considering museums and community, writers within our profession have focused on broadening audiences, public programs, collections and exhibitions. Physical spaces have been regarded as necessary armature but not as catalysts themselves. And the element which authors outside our profession refer to as 'informal public life' which arises spontaneously within these spaces - has been largely ignored in museum writings."

This broader social and civic conception of the reconfigured role of the institution we call a museum also extends beyond the national and domestic to encompass the global and international. As Doug Evelyn, actually my Deputy Director at the NMAI, but writing in his capacity as a member of the Board of Directors of AAM/ICOM, the

international arm of the American Association of Museums, has written in an essay entitled "American Museums in Global Communities," which appeared in *Curator* magazine:

American citizens live in a globally interconnected world that affects every aspect of our lives and well-being. We find examples in demographic changes, economic trends, environmental conditions, worldwide institutions, communications, and issues of biodiversity and science that transcend borders. Globalization can have both positive and negative impacts; societies need to become more aware in order to make better-informed choices. Museums can be stabilizing influences, acting to sustain heritage and building understanding of complex issues and concerns.

So there, my friends, you have the 45-minute summary of the nature and place of the National Museum of the American Indian, at least through the eyes of its Director. With humility and with the foreknowledge that much always remains to be done in growing and perfecting complex new institutions, 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, as we have for the past decade and a half, to invoke the Native voice in all aspects of the Museum because we have an abiding faith in its authenticity and authoritativeness in limning the peoples, lives, and cultures of Native America and because we believe that it brings new knowledge and perspectives to what we learn about the first citizens of the Western

Hemisphere. But the NMAI also reaches far beyond its conception as a museum to begin to address, itself within the context of Native America, but also as a potential model for other museums, the broader civic and social responsibilities and engagements that, in the 21st century, will allow these institutions to have far greater and broader impact than they have in the 20th as at least some move toward transforming themselves from cultural destinations to true public forums of civic and social dimension.

I return to Claire Smith, in conclusion, to encapsulate and crystallize, perhaps far better than any attempted eloquence of mine can, the meaning and import of the arrival of the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. She writes:

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. A cultural and spiritual emblem on the National Mall in Washington, DC, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian exemplifies decolonisation in practice. 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.

As the founding director of the National Museum of the American Indian who arrived there on a bright and beautiful June day a decade and a half ago, and who has seen it all, I can say only, with both humility and gratitude, "Amen."

Thank you very much for your kind attention.