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MUSEUM REVIEW; Museum With an American Indian Voice

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

Early Tuesday morning, 20,000 members of more than 500 Indian tribes from all over the American hemisphere are expected to gather on the Mall to begin a ceremonial march toward the National Museum of the American Indian. But they will not just be celebrating the opening of the Smithsonian's new building. This Native Nations Procession, organized by the museum and forming, perhaps, the largest assembly of America's native peoples in modern times, will also be a self-celebration.

That will be perfectly in keeping with the spirit of the museum. The celebration is echoed in the museum's exhibitions. It is even asserted in the way the museum's mesa-like structure of Kasota limestone thrusts itself eastward toward the Capitol building, as if declaring -- after centuries of battle, disruption, compromise, betrayal, defeat and reinvention -- "We are still here."

In fact, that kind of assertion, along with a six-day First Americans Festival of music, dance and storytelling that the museum predicts will attract 600,000 people, is not unrelated to the museum's project. The museum will, of course, mount exhibitions that draw on the 800,000 objects that the Smithsonian acquired from George Gustav Heye's famed historical collection of what he called "aboriginal art." But its mission statement also asserts another "special responsibility": to "protect, support and enhance the development, maintenance and perpetuation of native culture and community."

In other words, the museum will advocate not just for artifacts but also for the living cultures that once created them. Most museums invoke the past to give shape to the present; here the interests of the present will be used to shape the past. And that makes all the difference.

So it is probably no accident that Tuesday's procession begins in front of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, which still has a major collection of Indian artifacts, and heads toward the new museum. Because that is precisely the path the Indian museum's director, W. Richard West Jr. (who is a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of Oklahoma), has had in mind. In public statements he rejected "the older image of the museum as a temple with its superior, self-governing priesthood." Instead, he said, he would create a "museum different." Indians would tell their own stories; no outside anthropologists would intrude. The objects would even be available for ritual tribal use.

Unfortunately, the result proves that a genuinely celebratory march should really be heading in the other direction.

The Museum of the American Indian has much to boast of: raising \$100 million of its \$219 million from private sources (a third of that from Indian tribes made wealthy from gambling casinos), a building whose initial design -- by the Canadian architect (and Blackfoot) Douglas Cardinal -- hints at what might have been, a collection of surpassing aesthetic and cultural value. And with its verve and theatricality it could easily wind up welcoming the 4 million visitors a year it anticipates.

But the ambition of creating a "museum different" -- the goal of making that museum answer to the needs, tastes and traditions of perhaps 600 diverse tribes, ranging from the Tapirape of the Brazilian jungles to the Yupik of Alaska -- results in so many constituencies that the museum often ends up filtering away detail rather than displaying it, and minimizing difference even while it claims to be discovering it.

On top of that, the studious avoidance of scholarship makes one wish that the National Museum of Natural History's American Indian Program, with its scholarly staff (directed by an anthropologist, JoAllyn Archambault, herself a Standing Rock Sioux), could have proceeded with its once-planned revision of its aging exhibits instead of having to close them down, scuttle hopes of renewal and slink into insignificance in response to its new competition.

Some of these problems seem palpable in the Indian museum's building itself, which fills the last open spot on the Mall. In 1998 Mr. Cardinal was fired from the architect job and multiple voices came into play; he called the result a "forgery" and refuses to take credit. His vision of a sweeping earth-form, shaped by nature's force fields, can still be sensed. But the northwest corner of the building is leaden, its Mall-facing facade only half-heartedly awakening as it leads toward the east-facing front. The landscaping, which includes 33,000 plants of 150 species along with various invocations of Native American elements -- a boulder from Hawaii, growing stalks of corn and a recreated Chesapeake wetlands -- is marred by fussiness.

But the exhibits are where the problems begin in earnest. The display for the Santa Clara Pueblo of New Mexico, for example, explains: "We are made up of two major clans, Summer and Winter people." But, the Pueblo curator writes: "There is no dividing line. There is just a sense." The exhibit's commentary is limited to comments like "Respect and sharing of your self is very important." One does not learn what daily life is like or even what the tribe's religious ceremonies consist of.

Similarly with the Anishinaabe, who are 200,000 strong in the Great Lakes region. The explanatory panel reads: "Everything has a spirit and everything is interconnected." The central image is a "teaching lodge" in which the tribe learns seven teachings: "honesty, love, courage, truth, wisdom, humility and respect." A diorama with life-size mannequins shows various tribe members, including children, in the lodge. They use a bowl from 1880 and a dress made in 1920, but no information is given about whether or not these objects are like the ones currently used or precisely what the "clan system" is that one comment refers to.

Such detail, apparently, was not what the tribal curators thought important. In fact, there is an astonishing uniformity in the exhibits' accounts of religious beliefs, which may have been homogenized by subtle forces within the museum itself. The building emphasizes a kind of warm, earthy mysticism with comforting homilies behind every facade, reviving an old pastoral romance about the Indian.

But these were communities that at least at one time were vastly different, which farmed or hunted, engaged in war, suffered indignity, inspired outrage. The notion that tribal voices should "be heard" becomes a problem when the selected voices have so little to say. Moreover, since

American Indians largely had no detailed written languages and since so much trauma had decimated the tribes, the need for scholarship and analysis of secondary sources is all the more crucial.

But the museum almost seems afraid of distinctions. There are display cases of objects made with beads, organized with no particular logic; a beaded horse-head cover from 1900 North Dakota appears near a mid-19th-century sea-otter hat from the Aleutian Islands. One wall holds "star" objects, whose only connection is that they have pictures of stars on them. Some tribes are asked to present 10 crucial moments in their history; the Tohono Oodham in Arizona choose, as their first, "Birds teach people to call for rain." Their last is in the year 2000, a "desert walk for health."

The result is that a monotony sets in; every tribe is equal, and so is every idea. No unified intelligence has been applied. Moreover, with a net cast so wide, including South and Central America as well as Alaska, the only commonality may be the encounter with colonizers -- and even this must be simplified. The accidental epidemics that killed perhaps 75 to 90 percent of North American Indians is made far less central than the wars and forced migrations that followed. Internecine tribal wars such as those mentioned in the exhibit of the Brazilian tribe, the Tapirape, don't fit the model, either.

The focal point becomes a series of displays called "The Storm," which reflect three forces most terrible: "guns, churches and government." There are hundreds of guns and rifles on display, ranging from a 17th-century pistol to a 1985 Uzi. The church display includes nearly 200 Bibles translated into 175 languages. The government's assaults are in documents: laws, land deeds, violated treaties.

From this apocalypse one is meant to pass to an anthology of current-day tribal life, which includes examples of casinos, ice fishing, social clubs and platitudes.

But a great opportunity was missed in this museum. Individual tribes could have been explored in depth. Even the "storm" could have been illuminated with more detail rather than by just invoking the forces involved.

The museum, though, seems satisfied with serving a sociological function for Indians of the Americas. It may indeed succeed, because it has packaged a self-celebratory romance. Understanding though, requires something more. It is not a matter of whose voice is heard. It is a matter of detail, qualification, nuance and context. It is a matter of scholarship.