Heritage vs. History at the National Museum of the American Indian

Steven Conn

The opening of the NMAI is surely a cause for excitement and celebration. It is an impressive building which stands as the culmination of years of negotiation, fundraising, and lobbying. It also promises to be a major center for research and education about the whole of Native America, a place where scholars, the general public, and Native people themselves can interact on a host of levels.

But as it stands now, that great promise remains largely unfulfilled. Instead, all the hard work that created the NMAI has resulted in a contradiction wrapped around a neologism. The experience at the National Museum of the American Indian is sometimes confusing, sometimes incoherent, and ultimately disappointing.

The contradiction, simply put, is this: how to build a museum to display cultures which have a deep ambivalence about the notion of being displayed? Many Native Americans have rejected outright the notion that Native American cultures can or should be displayed in museums at all. Museums, after all, are simply part of the cultural apparatus of expansion and colonization. And Native Americans have reason to be suspicious of the museum enterprise at all levels.

Native American artifacts have many times been looted and stolen, and

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Native American human remains have often been pillaged from gravesites.[1] Once collected, Native American materials have usually been displayed in museums of natural history, down the hall from the stuffed birds and fossil dinosaurs, reinforcing the racist perception of Indians as part of the "natural" world, as something less than fully human. Museums thus can't be trusted to exhibit Native America properly because the very idea of the museum exhibit is alien—even hostile—to Native American sensibilities.

Those who have shaped and supported the NMAI, however, have been driven by the symbolic power, authority, and legitimacy that museums carry. That symbolism is even heavier, of course, because the NMAI occupies the last piece of prime real estate on the national Mall. Founding Director Richard West has underscored the symbolic importance of that location when he wrote that the NMAI is "the new kid on the block—the 16th of the Smithsonian Institution's world-renowned museums."[2] A new museum, but with all the gravitas and weight of those other fifteen. A museum couldn't invoke more thoroughly the authority that attaches to the very notion of "museum."

Trying to resolve this essential contradiction has, it seems to me, shaped most of the curatorial decisions that have been made. Institutionally, the NMAI traces its origins back to the Heye Collection, the largest single collection of Native American material ever assembled. Thus, the problem that the NMAI confronts is precisely the opposite of that which many new museums face. Museum building over the last generation has typically outpaced the assembling of objects that will form the core collection of any institution. Americans have been eager to build new museums whether or not they have anything to put in them. But the artifacts gathered by George Heye pose all the prickly problems I mentioned above—they have been taken out of context, many have no clear provenance, and the very existence of the Heye Collection stands as an act of Euro-American appropriation.

In the end, the Heye Collection isn't really here at the NMAI. Even more strangely, when Heye material is exhibited, it is unidentified: a wall of projectile points arranged aesthetically in some abstract pattern, not by chronology or cultural tradition; a wall of gold objects without any differentiation between the several cultures that made them. The "Window on the Collection" is a display of nearly three thousand artifacts in the corridors outside the main exhibition areas—the sheer number of pieces in such a small space makes it feel like an afterthought. Director West claims that there are roughly seven thousand objects for visitors to see, but this strikes me as a stretch indeed, unless one counts flat screen monitors, which there are in abundance.

Either way, objects are simply not at the center of what visitors experience.

1. This sentiment on the part of many Native Americans gave rise to Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and the move to return Native material—especially human remains—to their rightful owners, never mind that the question of ownership is often quite tricky and fraught.

2. Introduction, NMAI Map and Guide Book.

That's too bad, and not only because the Heye Collection is such an extraordinary resource. Museums have always tried to tell stories with objects. We might and should argue over which stories get told and how, but the notion that original objects can convey an immediacy and a "realness" to a narrative is at the very heart of what a museum is. Nowhere at NMAI are we asked to pause to consider an object, to study it, to admire it, ask questions of it. Apparently the curators at the NMAI have little faith in the power of objects to convey meaning.

In fairness, however, we aren't asked to pause much anywhere. Although the building itself conveys a sense of spaciousness and openness, the exhibit areas feel crowded and small. This is compounded by a pervasive sense of distraction. There are so many bells and whistles going off all the time, so many video projections and other audio-visuals, that it is hard to focus for long on any one display. These exhibits may try to convey a set of basic Native values and principles, but they are surely the products of the ADD generation. This was all encapsulated for me by the "exhibit" on potatoes. At a free-standing video kiosk a monitor flashes: "The potato changed everything." Nothing further—no elaboration of how or why the potato changed everything, simply that statement.

The neologism I mentioned at the outset is a particularly awkward one: Survivance. The word is defined on a piece of wall text as "more than survival. Survivance means redefining ourselves. It means raising our social and political consciousness. It means holding onto ancient principles while eagerly embracing change. It means doing what is necessary to keep our cultures alive." The definition continues almost like a catechism. Where is survivance? Survivance is everywhere. It "is found in everything made by Native hands, from beadwork to political action." The implication here I guess is that Native Americans can never simply be people, but are always "survivancers."

It is this notion, vaporous, baggy, and devoid of all but therapeutic meaning, that is supposed to tie together the otherwise disparate collection of displays on the main exhibition floor of NMAI. The boldest decision made by the museum's builders was to leave much of the curatorial work to "community curators" chosen by members of each group on display (though again, why these groups and not others were chosen for display is never explained, reinforcing the incoherence of the exhibit spaces). This decision to let Seminoles curate an exhibit about Seminoles, to take one example, responds to the feeling that Indians have always been "portrayed from the outside," as one of the video talking heads puts it, and provides instead "our way of looking at Native American history."

But history is not written by the winners, exactly. It is written by the writers, and writers—or professional curators—have narrative skills that most of the rest of us don't have. Letting a few members of different tribes speak for themselves might satisfy certain political desires, but it doesn't necessarily mean that the stories will be told well, and here they all wind up running together. By the end of a visit, one is left with an almost numbing sameness about

these stories of survivance. As Rita Swentzell puts it in the museum's guide book: "we are wonderfully diverse yet essentially similar." That seems an extraordinarily facile statement and one that if written by a Euro-American would bring—quite rightly—howls of rejection. Just because the exhibits that underscore that all Native Americans—from Nome to Tierra del Fuego—are "essentially similar" have been put together by Indians themselves does not make them any more acceptable.

There are, of course, other problems with "insider history." Very little that is complicated, controversial, or unpleasant tends to escape the confines of the group. No one likes dirty laundry blowing in a public breeze. But then the controversies and disagreements are the only things that are really interesting in the first place. Indians at NMAI don't disagree and they don't debate. Of course, that isn't true today, and it hasn't been true in the past, but these exhibits don't acknowledge that. Thus, in addition to the sameness, after a while these exhibits flatten Native history and culture rather than deepen it.

In fact, the idea that a Native American history, cosmology, and epistemology exist that are different from the mainstream is simply asserted at NMAI. It is never really explained, demonstrated, or even argued. "We are the evidence," declares the museum on a large piece of wall text, leaving us to wonder exactly how to engage with that. At its worst, NMAI is piece of what historian David Lowenthal has so aptly, and archly, called the "heritage industry." As he defines the distinction between history and heritage:

> History tells all who will listen what has happened and how things came to be as they are. Heritage passes on exclusive myths of origin and continuance, endowing a select group with prestige and common purpose. . . . History is for all, heritage for ourselves alone. . . . Heritage reverts to tribal rules that makes each past an exclusive, secret possession. Created to generate and protect group interests, it benefits us only if withheld from others. . . . We exalt our own heritage not because it is demonstrably true but because it *ought* to be."[3]

Nothing wrong with "heritage," necessarily, except if it is conflated with history, which it is at NMAI. To say at NMAI: "It's an Indian thing. You wouldn't understand," isn't sufficient for an institution trading on the authority that comes with Smithsonian museums. The job of a museum, first and foremost, is to make us understand, or at least to try, and in this sense, NMAI does not succeed as a museum.

As I have suggested above, there is an identity politics behind NMAI, and it has been seen by many Native American activists as a blow for Indian sovereignty, and for Indian cultural legitimacy. Yet even on this level there is something profoundly confused, and to me, at least, downright creepy, about this politics. Two examples. One plexiglass case exhibits dozens of guns. All kinds of guns, from simple muskets and rifles to sophisticated assault weapons, all

3. David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 128.

under the heading, "Guns as Instruments of Dispossession and Resistance." As the text explains, "Native American people made guns their own, using new technology to shape their lives and futures." That fatuity appears over an AK-47. Somewhere in the NRA hereafter, Charlton Heston is smiling.

Or this: there is a small exhibit on the 1934 law which defined who was an Indian by the amount of "Indian blood" any individual had. That law represents one of the last gasps of nineteenth-century so-called racial science in the United States, and biologists, anthropologists, historians, and others have spent over a generation demonstrating that racial categories are social and cultural constructions rather than biological facts. Rather than explore the deeply complicated question of who exactly is an Indian and why, and how those identities shift and change, we get several of the talking heads on those flat screens proclaiming quite proudly how much "Indian blood" they have. How bizarre, and frankly dispiriting, that a museum opened in 2004 should be used to reify the malodorous racial essentialism of 1934.

All of which seems a shame, since we do now know a great deal about Native America, pre- and post-contact, thanks to the work of scholars, Native and non-Native, working in fields like history, archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and biology. NMAI could well be a space to exhibit not only what we know, but how we think we know it, what we don't know, and where Native explanations agree with and differ from mainstream understandings of Native America. The final irony is that NMAI has done no better at presenting Native history or culture than any traditional museum exhibit. Visitors may well leave NMAI having had fun—I did—and having gotten some sense of the great diversity of Native groups, but not, I suspect, with any deeper understanding of Native America than when they walked in.

The NMAI is clearly a work in progress. It certainly faces a set of complicated institutional and political challenges as it evolves. But the achievement represented by the opening of the NMAI must now be matched with an equivalent seriousness about its intellectual and educational missions. I look forward to watching the NMAI grow in these directions in the future.

Steven Conn is the author of *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876–1926* and *History's Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century* both from the University of Chicago Press. He directs the Public History Program at Ohio State University.

Wall showing the many faces of Natives across the hemisphere in the "Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities" exhibition, National Museum of the American Indian. (Photo by Walter Larrimore, NMAI)