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Voices and Objects at the National Museum of the American Indian

SUSAN BERRY

DOUGLAS EVELYN DESCRIBES THE NATIONAL MUSEUM of the American Indian as “an international institution of living cultures.” It is a place where contemporary Native voices introduce visitors to new ways of thinking about Native American history and cultures and where exhibits challenge popular stereotypes of a “generic Native American.” In considering how successfully the NMAI’s new galleries meet these objectives, I focus on the “Our Peoples” and “Our Universes” galleries. It is in the former gallery that the vitality and complexity of Native American experiences are most effectively conveyed, and in the latter that the delivery of these messages falters.

Community-made Histories

The community-curated exhibits in the NMAI’s “Our Peoples” gallery follow an organizing concept that is at once brilliant and simple. Each exhibit interprets a set of eight to ten significant events in a community’s history as selected by the community curators. The choices that they make are sometimes surprising and always interesting. Taken in their entirety, these exhibits

reveal much about both the histories of particular Native American communities and the nature of historical understanding.

The Tohono O'odham exhibit, titled "We Are People of the Desert and We Hold This Land Sacred," opens with an audio installation relating the origin story "Earth Medicine Man Creates the World" in O'odham. An adjacent text panel presents the story in English. Not many visitors will be able to follow the O'odham version, but they will grasp that the language, like the story, remains a vital part of Tohono O'odham life. The next two displays likewise focus on events of "Long Ago." "Titoi Creates Games" discusses traditional games that the legendary ancestral figure gave the Tohono O'odham; a kickball, dice, and *toka* stick and ball are displayed. Supplementary text by NMAI curator Cecile R. Ganteaume explains that women played *toka* "as they traveled back and forth from their villages to gather water or wild foods." In "Birds Teach People to Call for Rain," an audio installation plays an excerpt from the mockingbirds' speech teaching the Tohono O'odham how to pray for rain.

These displays lay the groundwork for the exploration of events of the post-contact era. They include establishment of a Jesuit mission in Tohono O'odham territory, the arrival of horses and cattle, and salt pilgrimages to the Gulf of California. Visitors read how generations of Tohono O'odham crossed the desert to collect salt, often praying as they traveled "for a vision to become a great singer, hunter, fighter, or shaman." The displays are supported by a blown-up photo of San Xavier Mission, horse gear, sandals, and salt from the traditional gathering site. The final display, "Our Desert Walk for Health, Tucson, Arizona, 2000," relates how members of the Tohono O'odham nation trekked across the Sonoran Desert to promote the use of traditional desert plants. A video shows walk participants eating desert foods and discusses their health benefits.

By the time they reach this point, visitors have gained sufficient insight into Tohono O'odham culture to appreciate how the Desert Walk fits into the current of Tohono O'odham history. The Walk evokes the salt pilgrimages of the past; both are epic journeys undertaken in pursuit of physical and spiritual wellbeing. It speaks to the importance of plants, fed by the rains beckoned forth by the mockingbirds' songs. It even brings to mind the women who played *toka* while harvesting food. Over the course of ten display units, the curators have presented a compelling statement about the enduring connection linking the Tohono O'odham with their desert homeland.

"We're Still Here," the community-curated exhibit on Cherokee history, likewise opens with an origin story, in this case "Water Beetle Helps Create the World." Subsequent displays address Sequoyia's invention of the syllabary and the Cherokees' expulsion from the southeastern U.S. In titling this latter display "Cherokees Protest the Treaty of New Echota," the curators highlight Cherokee resistance to the treaty that sanctioned their removal rather than the treaty itself or the government's removal policy. The emphasis is on the Cherokee as architects of their own history. More recent historical developments include the revival of traditional dances in 1984, the opening of a tribe-

owned casino in 1997, and the tribe's purchase (with casino revenues) of Kituwah, an earth mound in North Carolina that the Cherokee identify as their place of origin. An accompanying video shows children carrying tortoise shells filled with soil to the site to "help build the mound back to its original size." Two of these shells are on exhibit, along with stone projectile points, potsherds, and other materials recovered during excavations at Kituwah.

Each community-curated exhibit in "Our Peoples" follows a similar narrative path, bringing history forward from events of "Long Ago" to the present. In so doing, they establish that Native American history is not defined by events recorded in written documents. They also demonstrate that it is an ongoing process; Native Americans continue to "make history." At the same time, the use of objects from different time periods to interpret a particular event emphasizes continuities and connections, while the circular arrangement of displays within each exhibit visually supports linkages between the ancient and recent past. These "self-told histories of Native communities" challenge visitors to consider alternative ways of thinking about Native American history, of considering what qualifies as historically significant and why, and of understanding how the past informs the present.¹

Dispelling—and Reinforcing—Stereotypes

The NMAI's efforts to challenge stereotypes of "the generic Native American" achieve more mixed results. While the exhibits discussed above make it plain that there is no single Native American perspective or way of life, others produce the opposite effect.

This is especially true in "Our Universes." The guiding theme in the staff-curated portion of this gallery is the relationship between Native Americans and stars. Pinpoints of light stand out against the dark walls and ceiling, producing the effect of stars in a nighttime sky. Four large display cases loom up on the right; they hold "Star Objects," i.e. objects with the image of a star embroidered, painted, beaded, or carved upon their surfaces. Ten animated films narrating Native American star legends play on small screens set in front of the cases.

The "Star Objects" are of startlingly diverse function and cultural origin—one case features a Comanche medicine fan, a Cree vest, a Bella Bella mask,

1. Some voices, inevitably, are more audible than others. The majority of community curators are male; in some instances ("Anishinaabe Universe" and "Q'eq Chi Maya Universe"), all are. It is also worth keeping in mind that the term "community" refers to diverse social configurations. Santa Clara Pueblo is a small, cohesive settlement that readily conforms to popular notions of "community." The Anishinaabe Nation, on the other hand, encompasses some 150 distinct First Nations and tribes. The fact that the exhibit "Anishinaabe Universe" is curated by four individuals from two Manitoba First Nations does not diminish the legitimacy of the presentation, but it does suggest that the exhibit's perspectives may resonate more strongly with some Anishinaabe communities than others.

a Maniwaki bark box, and a skull-shaped bowl from the ancient Mississippian civilization. The specific cultural contexts that invest these spectacular objects with meaning, however, are not explored. Neither are the other images—flowers, crosses, a heart, a sun—with which they are adorned. By ignoring these essential aspects of the objects, the exhibit reduces the complex spiritual philosophies that informed their creation to a single common denominator. Most visitors likely will draw from this exhibit the simplistic message that Native Americans have a mystical relationship with the cosmos, a message that reinforces rather than dispels a well-established stereotype.

While the gallery's community-curated exhibits add substance to the discussion of Native American philosophies, the impulse to reduce complexity to a common element that visitors will easily understand is visible here, too. Introductory text panels for each exhibit present a schematic representation of the universe as understood by members of that community. The Kha'p'o (Pueblo of Santa Clara) universe, for example, is portrayed as a circle divided into quadrants; each quadrant is aligned with a cardinal direction, an animal, a color, and a stage of life. Individual displays within the exhibit are grouped under headings that correspond with these categories. Which animal or color is associated with which cardinal direction varies from one community exhibit to the next, but the format is the same. The formula becomes tedious, and it is hard to imagine that many visitors will make note that yellow is the color of the East for the Lakota and of the South for the Q'eq'chi Maya. They are more likely to leave the gallery thinking that Native Americans subscribe to a remarkably similar worldview.

The Place of Objects

I had heard before visiting the NMAI that the exhibits were artifact light. With some seven thousand objects on display, this patently is not the case. Still, the objects are downplayed and their presence muted. Several factors combine to produce this effect.

Almost every community-curated exhibit includes at least one video installation, and numerous videos or animated films play in each staff-curated gallery. These installations bring new voices to the discussion of key themes, but they also compete with artifacts for visitor attention. In "Our Universes," the animated star legends play on screens set up in front of the display cases. A visitor wishing to see an artifact up close can only do so by stepping in front of a screen and blocking the view of those watching the films. During the time I spent at these displays, many visitors stopped to watch a film or two, but no one tried to examine the objects.

Artifact labels further downplay the importance of object-specific information. They appear at the bottom of display cases, where they are less visually accessible; linking a particular object with its label requires work. Those who make the effort will likely be disappointed by the paucity of information

they find; most labels only supply basic data—object name, cultural group, community of origin, date of manufacture, and catalogue number. Visitors are left to guess how an object was used or what materials were employed in its creation.

Stories, in short, claim pride of place at the NMAI, and the objects on exhibit have been selected to enhance their narration. Rarely themselves the subject of interpretation, they function essentially as props. This use of objects as illustrative devices can be effective, but it can also underplay the objects' significance. Among the many wonderful objects featured in the "Lakota Universe" exhibit is the Lone Dog winter count, a buffalo robe on which the elder recorded the significant events of each year in Lakota history between 1800 and 1870. The text explains that winter count keepers used these pictograph drawings "to share the community's history and wisdom with the younger generations." The images that Lone Dog painted, however, are not identified or explained. The robe is not here to offer visitors insights into Lakota history; it is here as a representation of "the Elder Stage of Life." The opportunity to explore this significant historical entity, richly endowed with stories of its own, has been missed.

It's hard to argue with the NMAI's decision to privilege contemporary Native American voices and their stories of survival over an object-focused interpretation of the sort that museums so often present. The message that Native Americans "are still here" is a crucial one, and the NMAI delivers it well. Still, the museum is home to one of the world's premier collections of Native American artifacts, and its galleries showcase objects of extraordinary significance and artistry. These objects have histories of their own, histories linked with the people who created them and invested them with meaning. I left the museum impressed with the vitality and fresh perspectives that it offers, but wishing that I had learned more about the objects on exhibit.

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Views of the guns and Bibles that appear in the “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories” exhibition, National Museum of the American Indian. (Photo by Katherine Fogden [Mohawk], NMAI)