

❖ CAROLYN RAPKIEVIAN The National Museum of the American Indian

“THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN: CULTURAL RECONCILIATION AND THE SEEDS OF WORLD PEACE”

“Let us bring our minds together to greet each other as human beings.” So begins the “preparation experience” at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian which opened on September 21, 2004 in Washington D.C. So too begins the process of cultural understanding, cultural respect, cultural reconciliation, and the seeds of world peace. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian is an institution of living cultures dedicated to the preservation, study, and exhibition of the life, languages, literature, history, and arts of the Native Peoples of the Western Hemisphere. This intergenerational institution of living Native cultures and communities represents a meeting ground for dialog and a significant historical opportunity for Native and non-Native worlds to achieve a cultural understanding and reconciliation. This is based not only in recognition of the legitimate place of Native peoples in the histories of the Americas, but also in an appreciation on the part of both Native and non-Native people, that all of us share a common humanity that transcends ethnic and cultural differences at the same time that it recognizes and celebrates them.

The National Museum of the American Indian was established by congressional legislation in 1989. It is home to one of the finest and most comprehensive collections of Indian cultural materials in the world assembled over a 54 year period beginning in 1903 by George Gustav Heye who traveled throughout North and South America. Over 800,000 cultural materials are cared for at the museum’s Cultural Resources Center, accessible to the museum’s Native constituents as well as to others wishing to study the objects. The George Gustav Heye Center, an exhibition and educational facility of the National Museum of the American Indian, opened in 1994 and is located in lower Manhattan in New York City.

The National Museum of the American Indian opened this past fall on the National Mall in Washington D.C. with a gathering of an estimated 25,000 Native peoples – perhaps the largest gathering of indigenous peoples in the Americas in history.

Native communities, though devastated by colonial disease, violence, and cultural repression, assert that they are not, ultimately, the victims of that history – they retain a vigorous contemporary cultural presence in the Americas and a continuing self determination and definition. As noted by our Director, W. Richard West, Jr., a Southern Cheyenne Chief, an accomplished attorney, and former Chair of the American Association of Museums, rather than presenting Native peoples as victims, in the process perpetrating the disempowerment of Native peoples, the National Museum of the American Indian affirms, in its exhibitions and public programs, this cultural vitality and continuance - this profound “survance”.

Long before and throughout all of the planning for all of the museum facilities, the National Museum of the American Indian held over 25 consultations with groups of Native people. These consultations forever shaped and directed the museum. We heard from Indian people about what the architecture should be like, what should and should not be exhibited, what should be taught, and how we should care for the collections.

Former Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Robert Adams reflected on the potential of the National Museum of the American Indian: [We] move decisively from the older image of the museum as a temple with its superior, self-governing priesthood to . . . a forum . . . committed not to the promulgation of received wisdom but to the encouragement of a multi-cultural dialogue.

This philosophy is in harmony with the new UNESCO International Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. According to the convention, communities must have a major role in defining their own intangible cultural heritage and how it is documented, preserved, recognized, presented, transmitted, and legally protected. There should be fully engaged, substantive dialog and partnership with people who hold the cultural heritage. Such partnerships entail shared authority for defining traditions, and shared curation for their representation.

Historically, the relationships between museums and Native peoples have not been relationships of collaboration. Many Native Americans understandably have a negative view of museums so we had great hurdles to overcome in creating the museum. We recognize that the intellectual and spiritual realities Native peoples bring to the table differ, often profoundly, from ways others may see the world. At the National Museum of the American Indian we do more than merely acknowledging the differences in cultural perspectives and realities between the Native and Western worlds. We confirm and validate those distinctions.

The Museum’s goal is to create a Native world on the National Mall and invite its visitors in. For some it will be an unfamiliar experience. The museum assists visitors in preparation for this by offering strong environmental and sensory cues, welcoming experiences, and an immersive orientation. Only after thus preparing, do visitors explore the museum galleries and other public program spaces.

The museum’s circular Lelawi Theater offers a dazzling multi-media experience designed to prepare visitors for the themes and messages they will encounter in the museum. The presentation, “*Who We Are*”, immerses viewers in the vibrancy and diversity of contemporary Native life and introduces from a Native perspective, the strength that different communities from across the Western Hemisphere derive from their connections to land, community, religion, self-government, and self-expression.

Consistent with the holistic nature of the Native views, the Museum considers the entirety of its ground and building on the National Mall in Washington D.C. to be the instrument of its interpretive programs. Native sensibilities are evident in the landscaping, the design of the building, and decoration of the interior spaces, and most particularly, the way in which programs are presented to the public. Elements of the natural world such as flowing water, natural light, plant life, and grandfather rocks are integrated with the built space inside and out. This results in a very different kind of museum experience than that to which most visitors are accustomed.

In our programs and exhibitions we present the insights, perspectives, and voices of Native people themselves. In doing so, we depart, as other museums have now, too, from the historically conventional approach of interpreting and representing Native cultures and communities from third-party viewpoints. Our director notes: We do so because we believe the cultural expertise of Native peoples is authentic, authoritative, and real concerning their cosmologies, philosophies, life and cultural experience, past and present. To the worthy contributions of archeology,

anthropology, art history, and history, we wish to add, in a serious, rigorous, disciplined, and scholarly way, the voices of Native peoples themselves, always to the end of enriching and broadening the experience of every visitor to the Museum.

This same sense of Native authority is clearly present in the Museum's three inaugural permanent exhibitions, "Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our Worlds," "Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories" and "Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identity," which focuses specifically on the challenging issues of communal and individual cultural identity that confront contemporary Native communities in the changed cultural landscapes of the Americas in the 21st century.

The museums collaborated, in a thoroughly mutually participatory way, with 24 Native communities from throughout the Americas – seven from Latin America, one from the Caribbean, four from Canada, and 12 from the United States. In each case the NMAI followed a specific protocol which ensured that the community itself, selected objects from our collections and provided its own interpretation of them. This curatorial approach resulted in exhibition presentations that produced unique perspectives into the historical and contemporary life and cultural experience of the Native peoples of the Americas.

To communicate this collaborative approach to visitors, all labels and text panels are signed by the author. Many but not all are first-person quotes by Native community curators. By identifying the authors of the "words" in our museum, we enable the visitor to understand the complexity of multiple perspectives. First-person narratives convey the immediacy of Indigenous peoples' experiences and provide visitors with a direct connection to Native people. Exhibit narratives call upon the authority of individual people's life experiences and avoid the impression that knowledge is being imparted from an all-knowing singular authority.

As a result of our collaborations, objects are not displayed in ways which museum visitors have learned to expect - in chronological sequences or geographical groupings.

Many narrative accounts are not chronological, which contrasts with traditional museum formats but is consistent with the characteristics of Native histories. As with Indigenous ways of teaching, stories presented by community members are personalized.

According to scholar Claire Smith, visitors "have to work at understanding the exhibits—and perhaps this is the point. They have been given the power to determine what is important for themselves, and this will vary according to each individual, each having their own interpretation. This is an Indigenous, not a Western, route to achieving knowledge." Describing his visit to the museum, a non-Native man with his young son told us, "At first we did not understand the order of the museum and we were having a bad time. Then we realized the museum is like a walk in the woods and then it all made sense. You can choose where you want to go and what you want to learn."

As part of the National Museum of the American Indian's mission to serve its Native constituents, we have a pro-active position on repatriation. We are committed to returning human remains, funerary objects, communally owed Native property, ceremonial and religious objects, and objects transferred to or acquired illegally to Indian tribes or to individuals with tribal or cultural affiliation. Repatriation, as a national movement, is but one part of the renewed

dialogue between Native Peoples and museums. Repatriation is essential to re-establish spiritual harmony I believe one of the greatest things we can do is teach our visitors respect for other cultures and we can do this by setting an example by our actions.

It is my personal observation, in our work at the museum with Native communities, that it is not simply the product of the museum that has led to a new era of mutual respect. Philosophies and values that have shaped and defined the development and character of the National Museum of the American Indian have led to processes that in themselves have built new relationships of trust. The National Museum of the American Indian creates for the future, cultural relationships that are reconciled in ways that have proved elusive in the past.

What are Native visitors saying about the museum? Some of the comments we have received include:

"I think (we) are portrayed very well in this museum - it makes me proud of my heritage."

"When going through the museum, I feel like a part of me is here."

"The museum seems to say we are proud of who we are as Native people and at the same time we are progressing into the future what ever it may hold for us."

What are visitor perceptions of our role as a museum of cultural reconciliation that contributes to a culture of world peace? Without explicit museum narratives about reconciliation and peace, visitors are responding in visitor comment books with messages such as:

First Nations museum is key in education for everybody - our goal for all to live together in peace.

All people deserve to have their story told. I hope this museum helps to bring education and understanding to the masses.

Everyone in the whole world should be able to live in peace and comfort. All countries should not make war.

This museum really made me think.

To me this museum is a symbol of peace between nature and humankind.

This museum holds a great promise as a place of honor for the diversity of our nation. One day, perhaps we'll TRULY be a great nation which honors ALL the diversity of this land.

I marvel at the quality of life exhibited throughout the American Indian museum. Hopefully this knowledge exhibited will help all people of all nations live in peace.

So we believe that the National Museum of the American Indian is a civic space for contemporary Native communities to engage in cultural dialog with human beings of the world. Through dialog we hope to expand the cultural consciousness of our visitors, encouraging respect and understanding between Native and non-Native peoples. Validating Native cultural authority, shaping historical memory and national identity, we hope to lead citizens of the Americas down a path of reconciliation. And even, we hope, plant the seeds of world peace.