

The antimuseum: Indian history without a guide

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [Feb 08, 2005](#) issue

The new National Museum of the American Indian has become one of Washington, D.C.'s major tourist attractions. According to its own statements, the museum is "breathtaking . . . a truly Native place."

Yet not all observers are impressed. In a devastating review, Edward Rothstein of the *New York Times* describes the museum's approach as gratuitous and self-indulgent, presenting "comforting homilies behind every façade": it "has packaged a self-celebratory romance." *Slate's* Timothy Noah describes the museum's opening last September as "the museum world's gaudiest belly flop" in 40 years, and called for the immediate resignation of the institution's director and administration. The *Washington Post* called it "an exercise in intellectual timidity."

In order to understand the mixed but powerful emotions stirred by the museum, one needs to realize that the Indian Museum, alone among the various Smithsonian institutions, self-consciously denies any claim to be a museum, or to record a history. It is almost an antimuseum recounting an antihistory. This radical stance tells us as much about contemporary views of remembering and representing the past as it does about the Indian cultures that are meant to be the museum's theme.

A hundred years ago, most Americans thought that Native peoples were a fact of the past, and that any surviving Indians must be part of what journalist Julian Ralph called "a dead but unburied race." Visitors to the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 could visit a living museum of "primitive" cultures from around the world, and pity those fading races in their final decades of existence. As recently as 15 years ago, tourists could visit archaeological sites in which the skeletal remains of Native Americans were displayed in their excavated graves, to the delight and horror of visiting (white) children. While stringent federal laws have now ended the vulgar bone shows, many Native activists see the same dehumanizing principles still at work in the conventional museum treatment of Indian cultures. From this perspective, Indians

are treated as museum exhibits rather than as living beings: they have a past, but little present and, assuredly, no future.

It is to counteract this approach that after years of struggle the nation now possesses its spectacular new Indian Museum. Throughout, the museum asserts that Native peoples wish to be seen as a vibrant living tradition, who have the ability to tell their own story in their own voices, who wish above all to celebrate their “survivance” through a half-millennium of encounters with European civilization.

The core of the collection is the vast assemblage of artifacts collected through the early 20th century by the New York City banker George Gustave Heye. The museum itself was slow to emerge. Its appearance partly reflects the change in attitudes toward Native peoples that arose in the 1960s, which was accompanied by a powerful sense of collective guilt for the nation’s numerous acts of violence and confiscation.

Also, changing attitudes toward religion and spirituality meant that Indians, once viewed as benighted savages or devil worshipers, were increasingly seen as custodians of an ancient earth-centered faith that was at least equal to the Abrahamic creeds.

By the end of the century, the stereotype of the Indian as natural mystic and sage could be found in such mainstream culture productions as the films *Dances with Wolves* and *Pocahontas*. Public sympathy for Indians justified some sweepingly generous federal measures, including the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act 1990. This last measure, NAGPRA, revolutionized the whole structure of operating museums and presenting history in the U.S., giving Native peoples a dominant voice in deciding what remains could and could not be exhibited, and (in practice) how they should be interpreted.

Also critical to the new era was the federal legalization of casino gambling in 1988, which created what some have termed the new buffalo economy. Today, Indian “gaming” (the favored euphemism) is a \$15 billion a year industry, and the tribes are hugely important political players, especially in California. Despite continuing poverty and deprivation on many reservations, many people feel that these are good times to be Indian, and the U.S. census indicates a population explosion in self-defined American Indians. The Native population grew from 524,000 in 1960 to 2.5

million by 2000.

The movement to create the National Museum originated in the late 1980s, at just the time of those other strikingly pro-Indian measures, NAGPRA and casino legalization. In fact, tens of millions of casino dollars went to fund the new museum. Against this background, we can understand why the museum's authorities have the particular concerns and enthusiasms they do—namely a categorical insistence on Indian authenticity, on the predominance of Indian voices, and on the rejection of academic or anthropological perspectives.

From the first glimpse, the visitor can see that the National Museum is not seeking to blend in with its environment. Instead of a white classical building designed to harmonize with the National Mall, the museum uses curved walls and sandstone textures to suggest a western or southwestern intrusion into federal order and tradition. The location alone, cheekily close to the Capitol, proclaims the message: despite all the damage the U.S. has done to us—often in the name of benevolence—we are still here.

The museum has a different way of presenting objects. Instead of being used to represent particular cultures, eras or events, the objects are shown in their own right, as art rather than anthropology or history. Throughout, the interpretation overtly recognizes the relativistic nature of any process of sorting or presenting: labels simply declare that the presentation offered is only one of the possible interpretations, which visitors are encouraged to mull over in order to produce their own understandings. History is not “a single definitive immutable work but . . . a collection of subjective tellings by different authors with different points of view.” No account is authoritative.

The museum represents a bold and perhaps foolhardy approach to historical memory. While giving every single piece a historical context would suggest that the Indian creators are as dead as passenger pigeons, the museum goes to the other extreme in giving hardly any guideposts or markers, chronological or geographical. This is most evident in the display “Our Peoples,” “where evidence that has been buried, ignored and denied is finally brought to light. . . . Each gallery was developed by Native community members and presents history from their perspectives.”

But how do these aspirations work in practice? Entering the display, we first see an exhibit titled “1491,” which is composed of a wall of faces, perhaps 200 small carved

and cast busts and masks from a variety of Native cultures, from North and South America. The aim is to show the diversity and complexity of Indian cultures on the eve of contact with Europeans, but the effect is thoroughly bewildering. None of the objects is explained or contextualized. A given mask might be a Maya object from 800 AD or a Peruvian figure from 1700, and who but an expert is to say?

Throughout the museum, objects are juxtaposed with little sense of chronological connection. The materials that make up the 1491 exhibit are dazzling in their profusion and, who knows, their historical importance, but they are given no more significance than a papier-maché mask from a contemporary school project.

Equally unsorted are the (literally) hundreds of gold objects assembled nearby in a wheel pattern to illustrate “The Prize,” the material treasures that drew conquistadors to the Americas. Just as deracinated and unexplained are the 80 or so “coiled dragons,” the guns presented as “instruments of dispossession and resistance,” which range from flintlocks to modern machine pistols and assault rifles. While no individual weapon is labeled, scattered texts provide snippets about “Apache rifles” or the use of firearms against Indian peasants in modern Latin American political conflicts.

As in the 1491 exhibit, or anything else in “Our Peoples,” this material is of immense value to the visitor with a solid knowledge of Native history in both North and South America—someone who thoroughly understands the chronology, and can provide his or her own context to the story. The vast majority of visitors, meanwhile, are consigned to a journey without maps.

In trying to eliminate white-imposed labels, museum authorities end up imposing other equally artificial and academic categories, especially by ignoring the differences between Native societies in various times and places. While Native and Indian communities are obviously not seen as totally homogeneous throughout the Americas, amazingly little attention is paid to the vast cultural distinctions that assuredly do exist—just look at the very diverse Navajo, Hopi and Pueblo in the contemporary Southwest. For the National Museum, the message is one of simplistic cultural and political unity: we Native peoples are one, we must unite to assert our rights.

This optimistic theme is evident in the large exhibit “Our Universes,” which presents the worldviews and spiritualities of a dozen different tribes and peoples. The deities

and mythologies are different, but ultimately the core messages emerge as amazingly akin: “Everything is connected, interrelated, and dependent in order to exist”; “To be Anishaabe is to understand your place in all creation”; “Our elders have created for us a sacred way of being in the universe—it is our responsibility to pass on this understanding to the next generation.” Indian is Indian, Native is Native, *quis separabit?*

The failure to provide a narrative and a chronology is in itself a powerful statement about both narrative and chronology, since the implication is that Native peoples have changed little over time and remain rooted to the lands where, it is implied, they originated.

To study Indian history is to study one’s ancestors, who are ultimately one with the land. In fact, any acquaintance with Native American history shows population groups emerging and disappearing over time, merging with more powerful groups, and often moving far from their original homes. Nor, of course, do we hear any reference to anthropological theories that Native peoples originated elsewhere, that they came from Asia, or even (the latest heresy) that the Americas were first populated by European hunters skirting the Atlantic ice sheets in their skin boats.

For the National Museum, all interpretations are equally subjective. Anthropologists tell their stories, the tribes tell theirs. Beliefs are beliefs, not facts. In its passionate desire to avoid imposing a Western framework upon the material, Museum authorities themselves exemplify a profoundly Western theory of the past, namely a postmodernism that rejects all master narratives. In trying to avoid the academic Euro-American mold, the museum proclaims itself absolutely a product of American academic theory, as much a child of its time as the great world’s expositions were in their day.

Not surprisingly, Christianity fares poorly in this post-colonial context. One component of “Our Peoples” focuses on “God’s Work,” and explores “churches as instruments of dispossession and resistance” (the relevant cases are immediately adjacent to the display describing how guns filled exactly the same historical roles). We see a hundred Bibles in 70 or so Native tongues—none, of course, explained or labeled—and are told, accurately enough, how Indian conversions were “a story not only of choice but also of adaptation, destruction, resistance and survivance.” The exhibit sympathetically depicts a few of the syncretistic Native movements that drew on Christianity, including the Ghost Dance and the Indian Shakers, stressing

prophetic, apocalyptic and messianic themes. What is missing, though, is the innovative and creative process of cultural adaptation that has so often marked the Native response to European Christianity, and which has so many parallels to the remaking of the religion in contemporary Africa and Asia. From the museum account, we would never guess that across both North and South America today, Pentecostalism challenges older established churches for the souls of tens of millions of Native people.

Just to take one individual example: think of the Lakota Black Elk, widely regarded as one of the great visionaries and spiritual leaders of North America. The classic book *Black Elk Speaks* brought his visions to a global audience, yet most of his readers are still unfamiliar with the profoundly Christian and Catholic cast of his later career, or his daring attempt to integrate traditional spiritual symbols into his church's seven sacraments. That story is not presented in the National Museum. Nor are most of the obvious heroes and heroines of Native history; nor indeed is most of that history.

One can certainly understand why the National Museum resists portraying the Native experience as solely historical or anthropological; but in the process, it leaves out a very large part of an often heroic story.