

AMERICAN INDIAN MUSEUM DIRECTOR SPEAKS OUT

The Smithsonian's newest museum is the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). In December 1992, Rick West, the Museum's Director, spoke to the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in San Francisco. An abridged version of his remarks follows the editor's note.

[Editor's Note: George Gustav Heye, a New York banker who died in 1957, amassed over one million American Indian objects between 1903 and 1956. This collection became the Heye Foundation museum in New York City. By 1976, discussions began exploring the possibility of the Heye Foundation becoming part of the National collections.

Thirteen years later, on November 28, 1989, President Bush signed legislation that established the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, in New York City as the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). Legislation called for the establishment of the NMAI as a living memorial dedicated to the collection, preservation, study, and exhibition of American Indian languages, literature, history, art, and culture. In June 1990, the New York State Supreme Court granted the petition of the Museum of the American Indian to transfer its collections, assets, and staff to the Smithsonian Institution. W. Richard West Jr., an attorney and member of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, was appointed Director on June 1.

The new museum, which will occupy the last space on the National Mall, will be built by the 21st century and will incorporate Native American perspectives in design, content, and programs. A research and study facility will be constructed in Suitland, Maryland. A third facility, the George Gustav Heye Center, located in the Custom House in New York City, is now open to the public.]

"Research And Scholarship at the National Museum of the American Indian: The New 'Inclusiveness'"

I embrace, warmly and eagerly, the opportunity to talk with you this evening through the medium of a presentation I have entitled, "Research and Scholarship at the National Museum of the American Indian: The New 'Inclusiveness'" ...From an historical perspective, perhaps no academic discipline or system of knowledge has a greater stake in this nascent Smithsonian museum than the field of anthropology. And we would be less than honest with one another if we did not concede at the outset that for several years now the waters between the Indian and anthropological communities have been roiled, and the discourse between them often characterized by considerably more heat than light....

I am here to take what I hope is a seminal first step in looking prospectively at the relationship between the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) and the work to which many of you, with diligence, sincerity, and competence, have devoted your professional lives.

First, I want to describe three principles that will guide the NMAI as it defines what the terms "research" and "scholarship" mean programmatically. The first two principles relate primarily to the area of research and the third to scholarship. Second, I want to suggest the programmatic processes, ideas, and initiatives that seem to flow from those principles.

The first [principle] is the NMAI's explicit recognition of the time continuum and contemporary existence of the indigenous cultures of our Hemisphere. Native peoples of this Hemisphere are still here in culturally definable forms. We have not remained static. We have been influenced by non-Native cultural forces, and we have even adapted, indeed, often brilliantly so. But "adaptation" is not to be confused with "assimilation." The essence of our indigenous nature continues to exist and to evolve in dynamic and culturally significant ways.

I remember the statement of an elder from the Fort Mohave Reservation in California that...appears in the National Park Service's recent report entitled *Keepers of the Treasures: Protecting Historic Properties and Cultural Traditions on Indian Lands*:

When we think of historical preservation, I suppose you think of something that is old, something that has happened in the past and that you want to put away on a shelf and bring it out and look at [it] every now and then.... In our way of thinking, everything is a significant event, and the past is as real to us as being here right now. We are all connected to the things that happened at the beginning of our existence. And those things live on as they are handed down to us.

The second principle is the pivotal role of the NMAI in affirming and supporting this cultural continuity. In a critical sense, this institution is as much an institution of living culture as it is a "museum" in the conventional meaning of the term. I believe that the Congress of the United States signaled that important distinction when it mandated in the Museum's authorizing legislation that Indians comprise a majority of the outside members of the governing Board of Trustees and that it "make available curatorial and other learning opportunities for Indians..."

I also view this cultural undergirding of contemporary Native communities as an integral part of a broader national cultural agenda rather than a gratuitous or ideological offering to Indian America. Just as our nation finally, if not too belatedly, is coming to grips with the devastating costs of a rapidly declining bio-diversity, so we also must begin to calculate and to remedy the cultural damage we suffer by permitting the further diminution of vital elements of our country's cultural diversity. The NMAI can and must be a critical aspect of that remedy.

My third and final principle concerns a question that goes to the heart of the NMAI's definition of the term "scholarship":

whose voices are heard in determining cultural "truth" as it relates to the cultural experiences and history of the Native peoples of the Americas? I recall my fascination with a metaphor used by David Hurst Thomas in his essay, "Cubist Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands: Past, Present, and Future":

[W]e compare traditional Spanish Borderlands scholarship to the work of Renaissance masters, both of which endeavored to capture reality from a single perspective--the snapshot of the past approach.

We argue instead that a more thorough understanding of the Columbian encounters is possible only through a cubist approach. Just as Renaissance painters believed that they were depicting reality, some borderlands scholars and special interest groups persist even today in pursuing and promoting their single-point version of the 'truth'--the way it really was. But the only truth is the artificiality of our perspectives because, to one degree or another, all views of the human past are created by those telling the story.



In a world heretofore dominated by scholarship that has been articulated in the third-person voice, however worthy those contributions have been...ours is a cultural institution that demands...multiple perspectives [that] must be enlisted in scholarship regarding Native peoples and their cultures. And, most emphatically, those multiple perspectives must include the voices of Native peoples themselves.

Where do [these principles] lead the NMAI in the fields of research and scholarship? More specifically, what programmatic directions and content do they suggest? In answering these questions, I would like to discuss "research" and "scholarship" discretely and successively.

First, with respect to research, the principles I have described have implications for both its process and substance, and I would like to address those two subjects separately. I want to indicate explicitly and clearly what the implications for process will not be... I have no intention of imposing a new, reverse exclusivity to replace the old exclusivity that typified the museum community's frequently defensive attitude toward the participation of Indian America in its work. Quite to the contrary, our purpose is to expand the circle of research rather than to contract it--all of you in this room will continue to be welcome at the National Museum of the American Indian.

But I also wish to be candid in stating that the rules of the road have changed. So, yes, our research agenda will reflect directly the stake of Native communities in what we do and their active participation in the establishment of that agenda. And yes, Native peoples will be entitled to call upon the research resources and programs of the NMAI in the direct support of their contemporary efforts to preserve culture. And yes, along the way, we are going to confront some tough and complicated issues, such as how to implement our recently adopted Collections Management Policy's provision that "public access to the collections for research, study, or viewing purposes may be restricted if such access offends religious or cultural practices or

beliefs." But these are exactly the kinds of hard questions that the NMAI--for that matter, any other institution that holds Indian materials--must be willing to take on as the process that drives the "new inclusiveness" of which I speak begins to lock in and to have real institutional impact.

At this point in time, I can only speculate about what the substance of the National Museum of the American Indian's research agenda and practice will be since it still is in formation. But, based upon some two years of direct consultation with our Indian constituents and others, I believe that some of the fundamental contours already are apparent, and here they are.

--Our Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland will revolutionize the accessibility of our collections, electronically and physically, to an ever widening circle of researchers, including artists, academics, non-traditional scholars, and community scholars.

--We will develop an array of collaborative research relationships among a wide variety of communities and interests, including Indians and non-Indians, academic or scholarly institutions and Indian communities, and traditional scholars and non-traditional scholars.

--We will develop the specific networks that support, facilitate, and extend these collaborations, including other museums, academic institutions, institutions in other sectors of this Hemisphere, tribal museums, tribal libraries, and tribally controlled community colleges.

--And, finally, we will direct our efforts toward areas of applied research that tribes indicate are crucial for purposes of cultural preservation, such as language, song, dance, and ceremonial practice.

I now would like to turn to the second subject I promised to discuss in programmatic terms: scholarship. Again, I want to begin by indicating what I am not

saying. I have nothing but the highest admiration for the intent of anthropology. With respect to the Native peoples of this Hemisphere, I always have understood that intent to be a definition of those very cultural essences that make us Indian. I also deeply appreciate the altruism that motivated many anthropologists in their relationships with Native peoples, at a time when it appeared that we would disappear from the earth forever.

But in the confessional spirit of this evening, let me also be candid and say that I do not believe anthropology ever has achieved its full potential in explicating and defining Indian cultures. And I will be equally blunt in stating why I think anthropology has fallen short of its potential: it has not allowed Indians, in any systematic way, to tell their own story. The scholarly result is not so much wrong as it is incomplete.

I firmly believe that the injection of the first-person Indian voice--not as an "informant" but as a genuine participant in the scholarly process--into the work of anthropology can dramatically enhance and amplify its contributions to scholarship. And the NMAI intends to do precisely that. Anyone who ever has heard Fred Begay, a Navajo and a distinguished physicist at the Los Alamos Laboratories in New Mexico, discourse on the subject of "Navajo physics" appreciates that ideas, systems of knowledge, intellectual constructs, and new ways of perceiving scientific and cultural realities exist that have yet to be known or described.

Keith Basso's cultural cartography project on the Fort Apache Reservation demonstrates the significant scholarly potential of anthropology's collaborating, in a truly participatory fashion, with Indians. There Basso worked with Apache colleagues to map some 467 places of cultural significance on the Reservation--all of which had their own Apache names and many of which had culturally rich stories attached to them. From his standpoint, he, as an anthropologist, gained substantial new knowledge that was physical, intellectual, and linguistic. From the tribe's standpoint,

the results were equally substantial--they represented a significant step down the road of cultural preservation because the information went directly back into the schools attended by Apache children.

In conclusion, I want to leave you with a brief story, a small piece of my own oral history, if you will, that I believe captures the essence of what I hoped to convey tonight concerning research and scholarship at the National Museum of the American Indian. I remember once, several years ago, visiting the Millicent Rogers Museum in Taos, New Mexico. I was contemplating a truly magnificent ceramic pot sculpted by the hand and spirit of Popovi Da, the brilliant son of Julian and Maria Martinez of the San Ildefonso Pueblo. The pot was breathtakingly beautiful. And I was content to stand there, transfixed, for a very long time, simply basking in its uncommon beauty.

But then my eye finally wandered to a piece of text that had been placed next to the pot. It was a statement by Popovi Da himself. I have never forgotten it because it spoke volumes about Popovi Da's world and how what I saw related to that world. Here is what he said:

We do what comes from thinking, and sometimes hours and even days are spent to create an aesthetic scroll in design.

Our symbols and our representations are all expressed as an endless cadence, and beautifully organized in our art as well as in our dance....

There is design in living things; their shapes, forms, the ability to live, all have meaning....Our values are indwelling and dependent upon time and space unmeasured. This in itself is beauty.

In those moments of intense reflection that passed as I read Popovi Da's statement, something crystallized for me. And it was

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("NMAI Director," continued from p. 10)

this: while all of us can recognize and appreciate the compelling beauty of Popovi Da's art, perhaps, in the end, it is only his voice that can trace his splendid art to its primal wellsprings of motivation, creativity, and belief.

You and I--together--need to draw near to Popovi Da to listen to what he has to say, to include it in our important work. And the National Museum of the American Indian intends to do precisely that. Because for us it is not an option--it is no less than a cultural imperative.

W. Richard West, Director
National Museum of the
American Indian

[Richard West's complete speech is printed in the *Anthropology Newsletter* 17(1), February 1993, pp. 5-8.]