



## AMERICAN INDIAN MUSEUM OFFERS UNIQUE VOICE

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*The names of many places in the United States are derived from American Indian words -- Chicago, Alaska, Indiana, Kentucky -- yet many of us know little about the first peoples in this land. Perhaps this will change with the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian this week in Washington, D.C.*

The 254,000 square foot Museum of the American Indian is the newest addition to the Smithsonian Institution. Situated close to the U.S. Capitol, it may be the last major addition to the museums and monuments that make up the National Mall, an irony clear to many native visitors.

“Kind of fitting,” Merv George Sr., a Hupa medicine man, told the Washington Post. “First peoples here, last place on the Mall.”

### **Native Voices**

For 15-year-old Hupa Emmilee Risling, the mission of the museum – to present and encourage the contemporary living culture of the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere in their own voices – is in step with her thinking about herself and her culture.

“My culture is really important to me,” Emmilee, vice president of her Native American Club in Hoopa, Calif., told the Washington Post. “That’s the way I’ve been raised.”

Nicole Soulier, 19, an Ojibwa Indian from Bad River, Wis., who joined the colorful procession of thousands who celebrated the opening of the museum, agreed.

“It’s very important to represent where I come from, to celebrate with all the other nations,” she told the New York Times.

According to museum spokesman Tom Sweeney, the museum's origins make it unique.

“Each tribe or native community represented has selected the objects that represent them and speak in their own voice – and that’s the first time it’s been done this way -- from the architecture, public programs to exhibitions,” he explained.

## **A Living Museum**

Attempting to avoid traditional perceptions of museums as places highlighting the past, the NMAI creators hope visitors will recognize the active offerings of native peoples today.

“Visitors will leave this museum experience knowing that Indians are not part of history,” founding director, W. Richard West, a Southern Cheyenne, said in a statement. “We are still here and making vital contributions to contemporary American culture and art.”

The museum’s three permanent exhibitions “Our Universes,” “Our Lives” and “Our Peoples” focus on the philosophy, history and identity of native peoples from Alaska to Chile. Exhibitions featuring 24 tribes are on display at the opening. The museum plans to rotate two groups per year in order to represent all the tribes within eight years.

The various exhibits will showcase over 8,000 pieces from the complete collection of over 800,000 objects. Many came from the personal collection of George Gustav Heye, who amassed the most extensive collection of Native American art and artifacts in the world.

The artifacts range from the distant past to the present. A dog figure made in Mexico 1,500 years ago sits next to another by a Cherokee artist in 1972. Cheyenne moccasins made in Oklahoma in 1870 are alongside beaded Kiowa sneakers from New Mexico made just this year. The modernist sculptures of New Mexico artist Allan Houser, an Apache who died in 1994, join elegant 15th-century gold masks -- many of which were melted down to make European coins and swords.

## **A positive message**

Many see the museum as a way to let go of a painful past and start anew.

“I look at this whole museum opening as an opportunity for healing, for optimism,” Dave Anderson, who heads the Bureau of Indian Affairs, told the New York Times.

While others agree that the positive message fills them with pride, they think that the exhibits don’t touch enough on the atrocities that Native Americans have suffered over five centuries.

“We know that Old Glory should have blood dripping from every star for wiping out native peoples, and that is not reflected here,” Dwain Camp, of the Oklahoma-based Ponca tribe, told the Washington Post.

## **Native sensibilities**

The building itself mirrors native sensibilities. Designed by Canadian Blackfoot architect Douglas Cardinal, who left the project amid a legal dispute in 1998, the outer shell is made of Kasota limestone from Minnesota. The color and dramatic curves are meant to suggest a native landscape. True to tradition, it faces East toward the rising sun.

“The form of the building is really organic and curvilinear because we wanted this building to appear as if it's an abstraction of a natural rock formation that's been carved by wind and water over time,” said architect Duane Blue Spruce.

The exterior landscape features a wetlands area and important native crops such as corn and squash.

“The outside is an extension of the exhibit. It is an exhibit. It is who we are. From the native perspective, one shouldn't see the line between the building and the earth. That line shouldn't be there,” said Donna House, a Navajo landscape architect and botanist.

-- *Compiled for NewsHour Extra by Annie Schleicher*

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