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"The National Museum of the American Indian:
Journeys in the Post-Colonial World"

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Although I find the fact somewhat jolting, a full decade and a half has passed since I was appointed the Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian on the bright and beautiful first day of June in 1990 - when I actually had not a single gray hair in my head then. Much, obviously, has transpired in the intervening years as the incipient NMAI has grown and, indeed, flowered into young adulthood, opening in its grand and keystone place just over a year ago at the head of the National Mall in the very shadow of the nation's Capitol Building - a memorable event laden and rich with powerful political and cultural symbolism.

In honor of that chronology, I want you to join me in a journey of cultural retrospection, a museological

reprise, if you will. I want to discuss the National Museum of the American Indian not as the theory and vision of its beginnings, but as the fully formed and vital, if still young, physical, substantive - and spiritual - Native place it is in America's monumental core and political center.

In thinking of this presentation and in contemplating my specific topic, "The National Museum of the American Indian: Journeys in the Post-Colonial World," I recalled a quotation and a story that serve as highly guiding preface to what I would like to say to you today. The quotation is the words of my first boss at the Smithsonian, former Secretary Robert McCormick Adams. They have lasted well for the National Museum of the American Indian - they were seminal visionary guidance when he said them 15 years ago, and they remain cogent intellectual beacons for how we operate every day on the National Mall right now.

This is a national museum . . .
[that] takes the permanence . . . the
authenticity . . . the vitality and the
self-determination of Native American
voices . . . as the fundamental reality
. . . it must . . . represent.

. . . [W]e 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.

The story was told me, shortly after the NMAI opened a year ago, by a good friend and colleague in Washington, D.C. Some years ago he served as the head of one of the principal federal arts and humanities agencies. He is now a devoted and enthusiastic supporter of the Museum and frequently brings friends and family to visit the National Mall building. On this particular occasion, he was showing the Museum to a number of friends who included a distinguished past member of the board of trustees of one of America's most renowned art museums - and, without getting too specific, an institution located in a city, whose name you would recognize, just up the east coast of the United States from Washington, D.C. After her tour, and in apparent exasperation and frustration, she pulled my friend aside and exclaimed, "I do not like this museum! It is not a collector's museum. Something else is going on here."

Both Bob Adams and the frustrated art museum trustee have the National Museum of the American Indian pegged spot on, even if their positions reach the same point of conclusion from opposite ends of the museological spectrum: something else is going on here. I want to focus in this

presentation on that difference reflected in the National Museum of the American Indian as a maturing arts and cultural institution - without at all claiming monopoly or exclusive ownership of the distinction. The fact is that over the past decade and a half, a number of museums representing and interpreting Native peoples, arts, and cultures have been moving in this same direction. But none has done it at the NMAI's level of magnitude on the National Mall before 2.5 annual visiting members of the public.

Let me describe now how I want to organize our journey of exploration this afternoon. First, I want to discuss the NMAI in what I would describe as more conventional museum terms - a place that holds collections, in our case a vast, hemispheric array of 800,000 objects stretching from Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic Circle, and that interprets, represents, and programs those collections for the public. But I want to be clear about how the curatorial process at the NMAI has been recalibrated and refashioned along lines that have found increasing acceptance in museums and among anthropologists and art historians even as those processes depart from previous models and approaches.

Second, I want to discuss, as a museological matter, how this recalibration makes possible the NMAI's transcending the historical boundaries and definitions of what museums are and do. I want to describe what this different institutional formulation is without at all assuming it is every museum's destination. I would like to posit for your consideration how these places we know primarily and historically as "cultural destinations" centered on the presentation of collections also can be genuine civic space of far broader public import that speak beyond collections to peoples, communities, and a wide array of issues relating to all of the above - in other words, that dialogical forum to which Bob Adams aspired for the NMAI.

Let me turn, if I may then, to the first point of discussion - the fundamentals, in a museum context, of the NMAI's approach to representing and interpreting Native cultures, and we need go no further than the Museum's Mission Statement for guidance. First, the NMAI does not refer only to the ethnographic past of Native peoples, but, instead, is an international institution of living cultures of the Americas. Second, its interpretation and representation of these cultures is premised on a

consistent and systematic invocation of the first-person voice of Native peoples.

Finally, as the art museum trustee I referenced previously observed, the NMAI is not simply a "palace of collections." It aspires to the far more complicated task, which goes beyond the artful presentation of objects, of representing, interpreting, and associating the ideas, peoples, and communities that surround those collections and constitute the reality of the Native experience in the Americas, past and present.

Roger Kennedy, the distinguished Director Emeritus of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, in an essay regarding the opening the NMAI, saw matters precisely in these terms:

. . . [T]he point of it all is that the Indian Museum is a living Indians' museum, presenting without rancor or unctuousness certain valuable truths about living Native persons having a set of experiences special to them, but important to the rest of us.

. . . .
This place is different. We will not find labels telling us which dead artist did what, or why a dead object is thought to be pretty, or how it has been authenticated by some expert as 'culturally significant.' Objects have been selected, as they are in any good museum, because they are significant and because they enhance the significance of other objects to which they are juxtaposed, but at the end of the day this is a companionable place, where it is a *people* who are 'culturally significant.' [Original emphasis]

As I explained before in describing the NMAI's Mission Statement, this integration of living Native peoples and their communities with their objects, and the elevation of the Native voice in their interpretation was no random intellectual occurrence on the National Mall, but, instead, reflect an explicitly studied and chosen representational methodology. The approach derives, in significant part, from the critical linkages, for Native peoples, between, to use common museum and anthropological parlance, "tangible" and "intangible" cultural heritage.

Native peoples, of course, do not bifurcate their heritage in this manner, since we see both as inextricably connected and fully integrated, in our lives, as parts of the same cultural whole. Thus, from a Native standpoint, the object itself is no more important and, indeed, probably is less so, than the processes leading to its creation because it is those aspects of life and culture that speak more completely to the fullness, the totality, and the wholeness of living a Native culture - traditions, songs, spiritual beliefs, and ritual and ceremonial practices.

Access to this dimension of meaning necessarily requires the direct involvement of those who, in fact, live the heritage. As Richard Kurin, the Director of the

Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, emphasizes in his article, "Museums and Intangible Heritage: Culture Dead or Alive?", in *ICOM News*:

[T]o deal with intangible heritage museums must have an . . . engaged, substantive . . . partnership with the people who hold the heritage. Such partnership entails shared authority for defining traditions, and shared curation for their representation. Museums . . . must deal with heritage as it is lived by real people. . . . [M]useums [cannot] hide behind a history of elitism, ethnic, or class bias that has often afflicted the institution. Charged with the . . . duties of cooperation and respect, museums will have to cross . . . boundaries that have sometimes kept them 'above and beyond' the broader populace. They will have to recognize that knowledge exists in homes, villages, slums, out in the fields, in factories and social halls as well as in the halls of academia and in their museums. They will have to overcome prejudices of class difference and taste, recognizing a diversity of legitimate aesthetics and values. They will have to recognize and in many cases confront biases of ethnicity, language, and religion that may prevent them from interacting and appreciating the cultural forms of 'other' people.

This scholarship of inclusion, this turning of the conventional interpretive paradigm on its head - however one wishes to characterize it - is not without implications. The first is that for the museum visitor the very appearance of exhibitions, the mainstay of museum presentation, may look very different. As Claire Smith, an Australian

archeologist of the indigenous communities in that country, pointedly observed in her recent article in *Art and Antiquity* entitled "The National Museum of the American Indian: Decolonising the Museum":

This scheme of knowledge is given material substance in the manner that objects in the collections [of the NMAI] are arranged and described [in exhibitions]. Deriving from Indigenous conceptual readings of the world, the classificatory systems of the NMAI reveal a holistic concern with the relationships between plants, animals, humans and places as well as between past and present. This is contrary to non-Indigenous classification systems, being based on neither the Linnean system of linking similarities of features, nor the tradition of Cutter's system of locating items in place, preferably adjacent to other items which share similar features. . . .

The second implication is more far-reaching and has much greater substantive impact museologically. Specifically, it signals an important shift in interpretive and representational power relationships. As Claire Smith also pointed out:

In deciding to create a museum in which Native Americans tell their own stories, unfettered by the interpretive lens of the dominant society, the NMAI has realized its potential to provide unprecedented richness in interpretation and to offer rare insights into the lives of Native peoples. . . . [N]ew vistas, directed by Indigenous eyes, are opened to the public.

. . . .

The empowerment of new voices, however, also can involve a diminution of the authority of established voices. By widening the concept of authority to include the voices of Indigenous

peoples, many of whom feel they have been silenced too long . . . the NMAI, either intentionally or inadvertently, challenges the position of non-Indigenous peoples as authorities on Indigenous cultures.

And the National Museum of the American Indian well knows that such fundamental shifts sometime will not be taken lightly, particularly among critics whose museological paradigm emanates from more conventional origins. A critic at one of America's most august publications, *The New York Times*, expresses deep regret that the NMAI is moving away from the "museum as a temple with its superior, self-governing priesthood" and opines that it should have moved "in the opposite direction." He opposes the museum's making objects available to tribes "for ritual use," believing that this kind of sensitivity constitutes evidence of a "studious avoidance of scholarship." He expresses open indignation about the specific choices made by the Tohono O'odam community of Arizona in the NMAI's opening permanent exhibition, "Our Peoples," when asked to describe the 10 most important events in their history.

Roger Kennedy analyzed this review in the following terms, perhaps in stronger words that I might have used - but, then, he is a "Director Emeritus," and has the

wonderful latitude for expressing his views that I, as a sitting director, probably do not yet have:

The patronizing stench emerging from that passage [about the studious avoidance of scholarship] grows stronger in another, suggesting that Indians' lack of 'detailed written languages (sorry about that, all ye Aztec poets and all ye Mayan historians and merchants) resulted from their having 'so little to say.' Compassionately, he would have us grant eternal silence to these mute fellow citizens not only because they were linguo-deprived but because 'so much trauma decimated . . . the tribes.' A little well-applied trauma might be helpful to shake that kind of self-assurance.

. . . .
If he had a sense of humor, a critic of this sort might be worth attending even though tone-deaf to the numinous, and color-blind to the symbolic. But what can you do with someone who can write with indignation of the Tohono O'odham's response when 'they were asked to present 10 crucial moments in this history,' and chose, as their first, 'Birds teach people to call for rain,' and as their last 'in the year 2000, a desert walk for health'? The Tohono O'odham refused to be talked down to. Their little parable says with a smile, 'we will listen to the elders who have earned our respect, but we will not be patronized by puppies.' I'm with them.

And as the Director of the National Museum of the American Indian, so am I. I am so because I have an ethical and intellectual commitment to the simple, yet so fundamental, proposition that Native peoples possess important and authoritative knowledge about themselves and their cultures, past and present, and deserve to be at the museological table of interpretation and representation. I

believe that their presence there opens real windows of learning opportunity for the 2 million visitors who will pass through the doors of the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall every year. I think that the potential for new scholarship and insight into Native peoples and cultures at the NMAI is real and is to be valued highly, whatever the intervening and intermittent challenges along the way may be as we introduce new paradigms of interpretation and representation.

When all is said and done, I aspire to the day, as the Director of the National Museum of the American Indian - and I am fully confident that ultimately it will come - when all of those visiting and experiencing this Native place on the National Mall, including most critics, will no longer be "strangers in the room." We will pursue this pivotal intellectual and working aspiration with character, grace, good humor, and, I should emphasize, uncompromising and unrelenting tenacity.

I have never claimed, during my tenure as the Director of the National Museum of the American Indian, exclusivity or an ascendancy of right, for our use of the first-person Native voice in interpreting and representing Native peoples and cultures. We appreciate that in the museum setting the roads to interpretive legitimacy and relevancy

can be several. All I ask is that those, like us, who have labored long, and will continue to do so, to develop new approaches to representation, grounded directly in Native communities themselves, be granted the same respect as truth-seekers from other quarters.

Just this past week, the National Museum of the American Indian opened its first new exhibit since the fall of 2004 when we took our place on the National Mall. It is called *Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life Along the North Pacific Coast*. Its 400 objects are drawn almost entirely from the vast, distinguished, and beautiful North Pacific Coast collections of the Museum, and they are seen through the eyes of 11 Native communities with which we collaborated in the United States and Canada over a four-year period.

As benediction to this first part of my presentation this afternoon, and perhaps as poetic release from my sometimes intensely cognitive and rationale approach to all subjects, I want to quote the words of my friend and colleague, Bruce Bernstein, the Museum's Assistant Director for Cultural Resources. They are the last words a visitor reads when leaving the gallery, and they are a powerful, elegant, and eloquent message to take home.

Listening to the Ancestors began with one idea: reconnecting Native peoples to the museum's collections. The collections are not mere objects or things, but rather ideas and words given form and substance. Making a piece increases its volume and tone by stretching the Native universe into other worlds, where it is accessible and knowable, whether for use at home or in the world of museums, curators, and collectors.

It comes down to one word - voice. Not history, not geography, but rather the indelible transposition and use of the world that surrounds us, which we hear and experience as voice. Artists place this deep knowledge - consciously or unconsciously - into every piece they make, through their choices of materials to the designs they paint. Objects work in powerful ways. Perhaps subversive, perhaps not, these pieces come home with us, permeating our consciousness, reminding us of a broader and bigger Native place.

Now, as I indicated I would, I want to turn to a second inquiry regarding the National Museum of the American Indian - one that takes us beyond the presentation I have just finished about the fundamental nature of the institution as a "museum" - because I always have thought of the NMAI as being more than only a cultural destination on America's National Mall, a stop on the local tour bus route. I probably can explain myself best by recounting the mild epiphany I experienced on the Museum's opening day on September 21, 2004.

As I was standing there on the National Mall watching some 30,000 Native people from all over the Americas who

had come to bear witness to the opening, as well as 80,000 other friends, supporters, and observers who also had joined these first Americans in support, I had a powerful sense that I was experiencing something far more significant and seminal than the opening of a dazzling new museum building in the monumental core of the nation's capital, and even more than the opening of the newest gem in the illustrious crown of the legendary Smithsonian Institution, America's national cultural organization. The inauguration of the National Museum of the American Indian represented something that transcended even these important historical events - it signified a fundamental shift, a reckoning that acknowledged at last the centrality of an entire set of peoples and cultures in the heritage of every one of the tens of thousands of people in attendance on that memorable day - Native and non-Native alike.

Viewed in this light, the National Museum of the American Indian possesses the potential for becoming more than a "museum." We have learned that you cannot put culture in a cabinet. You can put cultural *objects* in cabinets, vitrines, and exhibitions, but to truly reveal the vitality of Native cultures, you need to open up the intellectual and psychic space. At the NMAI a quite extraordinary array of cultural expression starts to

suggest the ways in which the Museum has the capacity to become a larger social and civic space. Powwows, films, lectures, performances by leading Native musicians, readings by some of the creative powerhouses of Indian literature, provocative symposia, cutting-edge books - these all create an environment within the Museum where Native peoples can bring their broad and deep experience, past and present, to a multitude of discussions regarding indigenous peoples and cultures that transcend extant institutional definitions of a "museum." It is this breadth and depth of concept and practice that creates the possibilities of the true forum that Bob Adam's envisioned in the National Museum of the American Indian a decade and a half ago.

The permanent exhibitions, a very conventional museum medium normally, themselves offer cues to the broader and different intentions of the National Museum of the American Indian. The exhibitions do contain objects, thousands of them to be exact, but the objects do not themselves determine or define the installations in the often customary way. Broad ideas and themes, Native peoples themselves, and the role of communities hold equal sway, and the integration of all of the above in the presentation is the key. Furthermore, the focus of the exhibitions, as

well as the individual Native community components, are diverse and address subjects as variant as cosmology, casino operations, health issues, urban Indian life, and hunting and fishing rights.

Earlier this fall representatives of the Gwich'in Nation of Northeast Alaska and Northwest Canada quite literally set up a day camp across Maryland Avenue from the National Museum of the American Indian. Through loudspeakers and the distribution of written information, they lobbied any passerby, including numerous visitors to the NMAI, willing to listen regarding their staunch opposition on religious and cultural grounds to legislation then pending in the Congress concerning the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

I applaud their choice of a protest site, and, in some ways, what I appreciate most - perhaps somewhat ironically - is that they were not invited. The Gwich'in chose us as the site to unfold what I regard as a potent formula for transformation: the passionate expression of profound aspiration. For what links both this example and my comment on the nature of our permanent exhibitions, one directly associated with the Museum and the other not, is that both intend to promote a broad civic discourse

regarding Native peoples and cultures that transcends historical definitions of what constitutes a "museum."

In her paper entitled, "Choosing Among the Options: An Opinion about Museum Definitions," Elaine Heumann Gurian, describes, among others, the model of the "community museum" in the following, and for the NMAI, instructive terms:

Community museums look the least like museums and are often named cultural or community centers. They are often a mixed-use space of affiliated organizations and functions, with a blend of meeting spaces, gathering spaces and stages, offices, food service, and teaching spaces. . . .

There have been community-centered museums in many countries and over many decades. Tribal museums of indigenous peoples often concentrate on the societal needs of their people as their primary agenda. Eco-museums are a kind of community-centered museum started to preserve in living history fashion, the work, crafts, or information known only to the elders of the community. . . . Community-centered museums often make their objects available for ceremonial use and study as a matter of course.

I would not want to stretch the analogy too much or too thin, but in a variety of ways, envision, as I have, the National Museum of the American Indian as, in important respects, a "community" institution or cultural center relating to Native peoples of the Americas that happens to sit squarely on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. It is not only a place of and by Native peoples to learn about

them, their cultures, and their communities, but it assumes with seriousness and consistency of purpose a broader social and civic commitment to support that community, through programs relating to language preservation and repatriation, for example, into a sound cultural future.

At the same time it serves as an important national forum to address, on an ongoing basis, in exhibition galleries and elsewhere, an array of important, timely, and sometimes even controversial issues regarding Native peoples and cultures, past and present. Moreover, it does so at precisely the time that alternate civic forums, whether it be the Congress of the United States, churches, or "town hall" settings that historically have been the locus of important social and political discourse, appear, at least for this purpose, to be in a precipitous state of collapse in the United States.

Richard Kurin, in the article I quoted previously in *ICOM News*, states more generally not only the conclusion but also the rationale for what I have just said:

There are opportunities . . . for museums to expand their connection to their constituencies . . . and play a positive role in society by serving a larger social purpose. Museums do have a tool kit for this role. They value cultural heritage. They employ specialists knowledgeable about and appreciative of cultural heritage. They engage in a useful social function - the broad dissemination of knowledge. They help

legitimate understandings and values in the public sphere. Museums can encourage and promote cultural diversity, the continuity of tradition, and ongoing cultural creativity. . . . [T]here are many signs and cases worldwide where museums have come forward to take on this larger, more expansive task.

Kurin's trenchant observations serve as transition to the implications of the National Museum of the American Indian for the broader international museum community.

I always have been drawn to Elaine Heumann Gurian's articulation of museums as places of memory and remembrance because this vision speaks to a much larger potentiality. In a paper entitled "Offering Safer Public Spaces," she observed as follows:

Museums . . . have a core purpose that is inherently important to our survival. It is not, as you might automatically think, that we have collections, access to the 'real thing.' Instead, it is our role as institutions of memory. As members of a society, we must be rooted in our collective past as well as willing to face our collective future. Museums can capitalize on their significant place in the community. They can enhance and elevate the congregant behavior that happens within their walls. . . . [T]hey also contribute to preserving and building a sense of safety and community.

It is this potential for far broader civic engagement, so embedded in the National Museum of the American Indian in theory and practice, that is its real offering to the museum models of the 21st century. Ellen Hirzy, in her essay "Mastering Civic Engagement: A Report from the

American Association of Museums" in the book *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, says the following on this very subject:

Civic engagement occurs when the museum and community intersect - in subtle and overt ways, over time, and as an accepted and natural way of doing business. The museum becomes a center where people gather to meet and converse, a place that celebrates the richness of individual and collective experience, and a participant in collective problem solving. It is an incubator of change. These are among the possibilities inherent in each museum's own definition and expression of community.

So there, my friends, you have the 40-minute summary of the nature and place of the National Museum of the American Indian, at least through the eyes of its Director. With humility and with the foreknowledge that much always remains to be done in growing and perfecting complex new institutions, I take pride in the accomplishments to date of this physical and spiritual Native marker on America's National Mall.

We will continue to strive, as we have for the past decade and a half, to invoke the Native voice in all aspects of the Museum because we have an abiding faith in its authenticity and authoritativeness in limning the peoples, lives, and cultures of Native America and because we believe that it brings new knowledge and perspectives to what we learn about the first citizens of the Western

Hemisphere. But the NMAI also reaches far beyond its conceptual origins as a museum to begin to address, itself within the context of Native America, but also as a potential model for other museums, the broader civic and social responsibilities and engagements that, in the 21st century, will allow these institutions to have far greater and broader impact than they have in the 20th as at least some move toward transforming themselves from cultural destinations to true public forums of civic and social dimension.

I return to Claire Smith, in conclusion, to encapsulate and crystallize, perhaps far better than any attempted eloquence of mine can, the meaning and import of the arrival of the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. She writes:

As a National Museum charting new territory, the NMAI is leading a nation down a path of understanding and reconciliation. Museums shape our sense of historical memory, and national museums shape our sense of national identity. A cultural and spiritual emblem on the National Mall in Washington, DC, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian exemplifies decolonisation in practice. Through being consciously shaped by the classification systems, worldviews and philosophies of its Indigenous constituency, this new national museum is claiming moral territory for Indigenous peoples, in the process reversing the impact of colonialism and asserting the unique place of Native peoples, past, present and future of the Americas.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.