



Smithsonian
National Museum of the American Indian

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**Remarks by W. Richard West, Jr., Founding Director:
“The National Museum of the American Indian:
A Historical Reckoning”**

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The coming of September 21, 2004, the opening date of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall, just blocks from where I stand now, caused me to reflect recently on the insights of my first boss at the Smithsonian Institution, the distinguished anthropologist and former Secretary, Robert McCormick Adams. In thoughtful reflection on the mission of the Museum, as articulated by its Board of Trustees and staff, he made the following statement, which has served as the guiding beacon for me throughout my journey of the past decade and a half at the Museum:

. . . [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 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.

As we prepare to open, two weeks hence, to millions of visitors annually, in this last designated site on the hallowed grounds of the National Mall, I want to introduce you to the National Museum of the American Indian, as I envision and understand it after almost fifteen

years at its helm as Director. First, I would like to describe, in the context of its opening, the philosophy and values that have shaped and defined its development, character, and institutional persona. Second, as preface to the visits many of you and others will have in person when the Museum opens, I want to offer, as illustration and example, how those values and philosophies translate physically and concretely into what you actually will see and experience at the NMAI.

My summary of what sits at the core of the mission of the National Museum of the American Indian is twofold. First, we want all who enter this Native place in the political core of the United States to understand the deep and wide cultural continuum that is Native America, honoring, to begin with, the great time depth of the cultures and communities of the first citizens of the Western Hemisphere. How many know, for example, that, at the time of initial European contact in the Americas, two of the five largest cities in the world were located in this hemisphere? Or that, during Europe's Middle Ages, a city called Cahokia, near what is now St. Louis, and with a population estimated at some 50,000 people, was much larger than London, England, at the very same time? Or that, during approximately the same period of history, the knowledge of astronomy and geometry in several Native civilizations in North and South America, matched or exceeded anything known in Western Europe?

We also want to emphasize, however, as much or even more, that the Native peoples of the Americas are not some mere ethnographic remnant of cultures and communities long passed, swept progressively from the stage of history following European contact. Buffeted though we may have been by the often cruel and destructive edge of colonialism, we are not, ultimately, the victims of that history – indeed, we retain a vigorous contemporary cultural presence in the Americas. In the United States alone, over 500 distinct Native cultural communities continue to be recognized by the national government, and the individual states have acknowledged dozens

more – to say nothing of the hundreds of Native communities and First Nations throughout Canada and Latin America. As I stand here today, some 35,000,000 people in the Americas, more than 2,000,000 here in the United States, just less than 1,000,000 in Canada, and the balance in Latin America, continue to call themselves indigenous and to live accordingly.

The National Museum of the American Indian intends to affirm, in exhibition and public program, this cultural vitality and continuance – this profound survivance. At the time of the Museum’s opening itself, some 300 Native performing artists, dancers, singers, storytellers, and other community cultural experts, from throughout the Hemisphere will join us, in association with our First Americans Festival, in literal demonstration of the fact that we are very much among the living. On a far more permanent basis, the Potomac area, that grand and defining architectural element of the Museum on the Mall, soaring the full height of the building in an atrium that connects earth and sky and aligns itself according to the four cardinal directions, will serve as continuing place and space for demonstration and performance by living Native peoples.

Two examples from the Museum’s inaugural exhibitions carry the same pivotal cultural message. One of the Museum’s three permanent exhibitions, “Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identity,” 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 – from the impact of casino operations for the Campo Band of Kumeyaay Indians in California, to the efforts of the urban Indians in Chicago to maintain a Native community identity in the midst of great tribal diversity, to issues regarding resource protection and development of the Yakama Nation in the State of Washington, to cultural challenges facing the Pamunkey Tribe, a state-recognized Native community in Virginia whose ancestors were among the first to feel the devastating impact of European contact. In addition,

the Museum's first changing exhibition, "Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser," charts the ground-breaking and distinguished careers of two legendary contemporary Native artists to address, artistically, the confluence of Euro-American modern art with their own deeply rooted origins in Native culture and art.

Finally, I mention an aspect of the NMAI's deep commitment to the concept of a contemporary Native America that relates directly to what I have just discussed. The Museum is very much, in reality, a hemispheric and international institution of living cultures whose intention is to use our considerable material and human assets in direct support of cultural continuance and viability in contemporary Native communities of the Americas. Most of our work in this area originates in the Cultural Resources Center, our state-of-the-art collections study and research center located in Suitland, Maryland, just outside of Washington, D.C. and opened in 1999.

At the Museum on the Mall, however, you also will see evidence of this deeply held commitment to contemporary Native America. The individual Native community installations in the permanent exhibitions, for example, which I will discuss more in a moment, will be circulated, in some form, to each of those communities as they are retired from our exhibitions on the National Mall.

Furthermore, the resources center at the Mall Museum is in the process of developing substantial and varied electronic databases of information that, in the end, will include digitized images of every object in our 800,000-object collection, associated with other textual and photographic archival material – all in recognition of a fact I always have respected: only a small percentage of the Native peoples of the Americas, for a host of reasons, will ever set foot in our home on the National Mall. We thus must design and execute ways in which we can bring

the NMAI, electronically, to Indian country, and to its schools, community museums, and cultural centers, rather than expecting Native America always to come to us.

The second mission-driven core value of the National Museum of the American Indian that I want to emphasize today is this: in telling the story of the first citizens of the Americas, from its ancient origins millennia ago through the 21st century, we will invoke, in a conscious, systematic, and focused way, the insights, perspectives, and voices of Native peoples 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. 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, as well as the remarkable assemblage of material culture that is the Museum's collections.

To these ends, the NMAI began the journey that led to September 21, 2004, with some 25 to 30 consultations, over a period of two and a half to three years in the early 1990's, with predominately, if not exclusively, Native political leaders, traditional leaders, cultural elders, museum and cultural center directors, artists and artisans, and educators. Those consultations resulted in a seminal document that forever shaped and directed the Museum, entitled "The Way of the People," which addressed not only the design of its buildings in Suitland, Maryland, and on the National Mall, but which also described in great detail what should go on inside those spaces and beyond in exhibitions, public programs, and other NMAI cultural initiatives.

From these consultations came the basis for some of the very architectural features that define our new Native places in the Washington, D.C. area, the Cultural Resources Center and the Museum on the National Mall. You will see those architectural elements, I promise, when

you visit the building on the Mall – its strong horizontal lines that suggest a close connectedness to and respect for the land on which it sits and out of which it almost seems to grow, the intensely sculptured organic and curvilinear façade that so closely honors the almost complete lack of linearity in nature, to which Native peoples look for inspiration in design, the integration of built space and the non-built eco-environment that surrounds it in recognition of the aesthetics of wholeness so intrinsic in Native artistic outlook, the color and texture of the stone cladding of the building that evokes the earthly connections Native people feel so profoundly, the abundance, within and without the building, of the most beautiful and essential elements of the natural world such as flowing water, natural light, plant life, and grandfather rocks.

This same sense of Native authority is clearly present in the Museum’s three inaugural permanent exhibitions, “Our Lives,” which I discussed briefly a few moments ago, “Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our Worlds,” and “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories.” In connection with these exhibitions, the National Museum of the American Indian 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 involving prescribed steps, the most important of which for present purposes ensured that the community itself, within the context of the exhibition themes described above, 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. From the presentations of the Pueblo of Santa Clara of New Mexico and the Lakota of South Dakota in “Our Universes,” we learn of those enduring and abiding

perceptions of the universe and nature that have bound these communities together culturally through the ages. In “Our Peoples” the Seminole of Florida, the Tapirapé people of Brazil, and the Eastern Cherokee of North Carolina speak forthrightly about the efforts of non-Native peoples and governments to eradicate, as a matter of personal action and official policy, cultural practices, ways of living, and, for that matter, the very existence of entire communities. In the exhibition, “Our Lives,” with its far more contemporary cant on Native life and culture, the St. Laurent Metis community of Manitoba, Canada, the Kalinago community of Dominica, and the Igloolik community of Nunavut, Canada tell us of their efforts, in the face of vastly changed contemporary social, cultural, and economic landscapes to sustain cultural community and future.

Through these presentations we come to understand, from a Native perspective, and in compellingly personal and communal terms, the major markers of the experience that is Native America. The original citizens of the Americas have not dwelt always on the sunny hillsides of history, but, instead, often have lived in the shadow lands of its valleys – and the National Museum of the American Indian does not pretend otherwise. In the end, however, these stories, while speaking frankly about the ill winds that have buffeted Native America from the time of European contact, are, ultimately, about a deep and enduring resonance with values closely and long held, a vast capacity to respond with resilience, intelligence, and dignity to all that has come our way – and with our sense of humor about all of it thoroughly intact, and a fundamentally optimistic and committed view of the future that is premised on the triumph of continuing cultural self-determination and definition.

In describing these exhibitions, I wish to emphasize that our determination at the National Museum of the American Indian to bring these first-person Native voices forward, and to seat

them with definitiveness at the table of conversation regarding Native peoples, past and present, in the Americas, occurs with a spirit and intention of complete respect for the disciplines and systems of knowledge that, historically, have guided the interpretation and representation of Native peoples by museums. Our singular purpose and point, throughout the history of the NMAI, in all of our programs, including exhibitions, is that, 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 who enters the portals of the Museum.

Having been Director of the National Museum of the American Indian for a decade and a half, and with the arrival of this beautiful physical and spiritual marker on the National Mall two weeks from now, you will not be surprised that, in quieter moments of reflection, I continue to ponder its real and enduring meaning – and here is what I have concluded. I take immense pride, along with the tens of millions of other Native peoples, in the commencement of this 18th jewel in the illustrious crown of the Smithsonian Institution. Poignancy abounds in its occupying the last currently designated site on the National Mall that also is the first place on the Mall, sitting, as it does and as it should, at the very head of the national capital's monumental core. I believe – and it was not always a simple and easy birthing process – that we have succeeded in creating, physically, a breathtakingly beautiful Native place in the political center of the nation that also has a powerful heart and mind in affirming the genuinely important place of the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere in the heritage of all people, Native and non-Native, who call themselves citizens of the Americas. I value – I truly do - that, through the medium of this 21st century museum and its capacity to reach far beyond its four walls in Washington, D.C., the

NMAI will have the capacity to teach these cultural insights and truths to its millions of visitors and audiences through time.

But what I bear witness to today is something even more powerful, even more significant, than the opening of a Smithsonian museum on the National Mall, but of which the NMAI is an inextricable part - and it is this. The National Museum of the American Indian serves as a revealing symbol, a powerful metaphor for a seminal convergence of the histories of this hemisphere that has the potential to alter forever, and to expand at the same time, the cultural consciousness of the Americas and its rich, diverse, and valuable heritage. This convergence brings bright illumination to those shadow lands of the history of the Americas, and in so doing offers resolution to a long and often troubled past relationship between peoples. Even more important, it also creates for the future the very real possibility of fresh points of beginning in cultural relationships that are newly and mutually understood, respected, and reconciled in ways that have proved elusive in the Americas heretofore. This kind of movement in the cultural consciousness of the Americas far surpasses even the importance of the opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, but it is the powerful linkage between them that makes September 21, 2004, a historical and cultural marker for citizens of the Americas, Native and non-Native – because, in the profoundest possible sense, this institution speaks to all of us about cultural memory, remembrance, and future that, in the end, transcend its creation to reside in far broader cultural territory.

I conclude as I began today, with the words of my first mentor at the National Museum of the American Indian, Secretary Adams. Writing to a loyal supporter and long-standing patron of the NMAI, he had the following to say, early in its history, about this remarkable cultural enterprise of the 21st century:

Looking forward as well as backward, I have no doubt that the launching of the National Museum of the American Indian represents a fundamental turning point for the Smithsonian. It begins to correct a vast wrong, and all the myths and stereotypes with which we surrounded it in order to hide it – or at least not to have to confront it ourselves. It envisions a partnership of a new and unprecedented kind – with those whose history and culture, once torn away from them, will now be represented only with their full complicity. It creates a model of a dialogue with wider relevance than any in which we have participated, ending the separation between specialists as embodiments of authority and a passive audience, and leading in the direction of a museum without walls. It saves for posterity a magnificent collection that will lead the world to look at the cultural and artistic achievements of Native Americans with new and admiring eyes.

This soaring and eloquent declaration of the place in time and space of the first citizens of the Western Hemisphere is not just for the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian – it can be and should be a clarion call for how we perceive and value the cultural memory and future of all of the Americas. That vision is the true promise and poetry of the National Museum of the American Indian on September 21, 2004.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

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