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EXHIBITING CULTURE: AMERICAN INDIANS AND MUSEUMS*

Duane H. King, Ph.D.**

As long as museums have been in this country, American Indians have been represented in them. How Native American subjects have been treated by museums over the years has changed considerably. Much of the change I have witnessed firsthand. I entered the museum profession over 40 years ago. My first museum job, as a teenager, was scrubbing potsherds in a sink in the basement of a museum. It provided invaluable experience and lessons, the most important of which was that it made me realize that I did not want to scrub potsherds for a living. After some additional experience as a field archaeologist and university professor, I was offered the job of director of the tribal museum then under construction. After some contemplation and reflection, I agreed to take a year's leave of absence from my teaching position at the University of Tennessee and help start the museum. Seven years later, I was still there. Now, almost three and a half decades later, I am still a museum director, and have crisscrossed the country several times in my career working for three tribal museums and two other museums with outstanding Native American collections before coming to Tulsa in 2008.

In my career, I have lived and worked in native communities, on isolated reservations, two of the largest cities in the United States, and our nation's capital. In the process, I became acquainted with politicians, business people, philanthropists, craftspeople, the elite of the museum profession, and the cultural authorities of native communities.

Although I am proud to be a museum professional and an American, I still have difficulty reconciling the ideals we espouse with the history we have experienced. For the purposes of this presentation, I will confine my remarks to the museum profession past, present, and what I see as the future of Native American influence on museums in this country.

For much of our history, Native Americans and Native American objects have been most often treated and exhibited as exotic curiosities with little or no interpretive context. The emergence of the field of anthropology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries gave rise to a more compassionate perspective, but still did not erase the ethnocentric bias by the dominant society and its treatment of Native American material

* See also Duane King, *American Indians and Museums: A Changing Landscape*, Museum Views: A Quarterly Newsletter for Small and Mid-Sized Art Museums 2 (Fall 2007) (available at <http://museumviews.org/Fall.07.pdf>).

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as remnants of memory cultures and vanquished peoples.

Enthusiastic collectors and anthropologists in the early 20th century rushed to native communities to collect objects and recollections from people whose life-ways were rapidly changing. Many museums in the early 20th century sponsored archaeological expeditions, ostensibly for scientific inquiry, but frequently measuring success by the recovered treasures of “museum quality” suitable for display. The methods for collecting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries facilitated the inclusion of Native American material in natural history museums alongside exhibits of dinosaur bones and the fanciful creations of taxidermists. For many people today, the historical absence or under-representation of Native American material in “fine art” or American history museums is as inexplicable as the general acceptance of indigenous ethnographic collections in natural history museums that some activists disparagingly describe as “dead animal zoos.”

Human remains were commonly displayed in American museums as late as the 1960s and 1970s and, on a few occasions, living people were placed on exhibit. In 1897, a young boy named Minik, his father, and four other polar Eskimos were brought by ship from Greenland to New York.¹ They were escorted by Admiral Robert Peary whose ship hosted 20,000 people on a single day to see these native curiosities.² They were appropriately dressed in fur-lined parkas in stifling heat.³ They were housed at the American Museum of Natural History where visitors would crowd around a ceiling grate above their living quarters.⁴ They later contracted pneumonia and soon became gravely ill.⁵ After death, their bones were put on display and their brains removed for study.⁶ The young boy, Minik, and one other Eskimo were the only survivors.⁷ Minik was placed with a white family as an experiment in assimilation by the museum while the adult Eskimo was returned to his home in Greenland.⁸ Despite decades of appeals, Minik’s father’s remains were not returned to Greenland until 1991, long after Minik himself had died.⁹

Another case in point is that of Ishi (ca. 1860–March 25, 1916), the pseudonym of the last member of the Yahi, the last surviving group of the Yana people of California. Ishi is believed to be the last Native American in northern California to have lived most of his life completely outside of Euro-American culture. He emerged from the wild near Oroville, California, leaving his ancestral homeland in the foothills near Lassen Peak in 1911.¹⁰ *Ishi* means *man* in the Yahi dialect of Yana; his real name was never known because it was taboo in Yahi society to say one’s own name. Since he was the last

1. See Kenn Harper, *Give Me My Father's Body: The Life of Minik, The New York Eskimo* 15–20 (Wash. Square Press 2000).

2. *Id.* at 21.

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.* at 28.

5. See *id.* at 30.

6. Harper, *supra* n. 1, at 90.

7. See *id.* at 42.

8. See *id.* at 41.

9. See *id.* at 227.

10. Orin Starn, *Ishi's Brain: In Search of America's Last "Wild" Indian* 32–37 (W.W. Norton & Co. 2004).

member of his tribe, his real name died with him.¹¹ Prior to the California Gold Rush, the Yahi population numbered approximately 400. In 1865, Ishi and his family were victims of the Three Knolls Massacre, from which approximately 30 Yahi survived (while 40 were killed). The remaining Yahi escaped but went into hiding for the next 40 years after cattlemen killed about half of the survivors. Eventually Ishi's mother and other companions died, and he was discovered by a group of butchers in their corral at Oroville, California on August 29, 1911.¹²

After being noticed by townspeople, Ishi was taken into custody by a local sheriff for his own protection.¹³ The "wild man" caught the imagination and attention of thousands of onlookers and curiosity seekers. He was then moved to the museum of Anthropology at the University of California Berkeley, where he lived the remainder of his life in apparent contentment. He died from tuberculosis in 1916. While at the museum, Ishi was studied closely by the anthropologists Alfred L. Kroeber and Thomas Talbot Waterman. He helped them reconstruct Yahi culture by identifying material items and showing how they were made. He also provided information on his native Yana language; which was recorded and studied by Edward Sapir, who had previously done work on the northern dialects.¹⁴

After Ishi's death, Alfred Kroeber appealed to museum officials for a decent burial for Ishi, so as not to treat his remains as a specimen. This was done with one exception: his brain was removed and placed in a jar on a museum shelf. It was not until 2000 that his brain was re-united with his cremated remains.¹⁵

The few Indians who did find employment in museums in the early 20th century had difficulty finding respect. Amos Oneroad, who worked for George Gustav Heye at the Museum of the American Indian in New York, was employed in the technical department. Aside from doing maintenance for the museum, he was occasionally called on for field expeditions to help convince other Native Americans to sell their heirlooms to his employer.

Numerous native informants who shared their knowledge with anthropologists were never given the opportunity to excel as scholars or researchers. Some, such as Will West Long, an eastern Cherokee, who worked with a half dozen anthropologists from 1887 until his death in 1947, were clearly as intelligent as the scholars who received acclaim for recording their insights.¹⁶

With the popularity of museums such as the Museum of the American Indian in New York and the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles (beginning in the 1910s), and numerous natural history museums throughout the country, the public interest in American Indian culture began to intensify. Some Indian reservations became tourist destinations in the 1920s and 30s. Paved roads and automobiles made it possible for the curious public to visit tribal communities.

For those with public access, tribal economies shifted to produce traditional crafts

11. *Id.* at 40.

12. *Id.* at 111 et seq.

13. *Id.* at 34.

14. *See generally id.*

15. Starn, *supra* n. 10, at 154 et seq.

16. John Withoft, *Will West Long, Indian Informant*, 50 *Am. Anthropologist* 355, 357–358 (1948).

for a burgeoning tourism market. By the 1930s, the United States Government encouraged the production of traditional crafts for sale to perpetuate artistic expression and individual livelihoods.

Despite possible tangential benefits for tribes, museums for much of the 20th century were viewed by Native Americans, not as educational institutions, but as the storehouses for pawned heirlooms and stolen grave goods. Collecting practices of museum pioneers showed little regard for ethics or cultural sensitivity. George Gustav Heye, the obsessive collector, who founded what is now the National Museum of the American Indian, had the reputation of going into an Indian community and buying every worn-out moccasin, dish cloth, and traditional item the local residents would sell.¹⁷

Until the 1960s, the display of Native American human remains in museums was commonplace. In 1965, the Museum of New Mexico was one of the first to remove skeletal material from display. Protests against the displays of human remains intensified. As late as 1978 the American Association of Museums stated:

Although it is occasionally necessary to use skeletal and other sensitive material in interpretive exhibitions, this must be done with tact and with respect for the feelings for human dignity held by all peoples. Such an exhibit exists to convey to the visitor an understanding of the lives of those who lived or live under very different circumstances.¹⁸

In 1972, protestors chained themselves to doors of the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles demanding that the Peruvian mummy be removed from display. Such protests were common across the country.

As assistant director of the National Museum of the American Indian in the 1990s, I had to deal with museum visitors wanting to know what happened to “Ike and Mike,” two shrunken men, not shrunken heads, that George Gustav Heye acquired in South America in the 1920s which had been displayed at the museum for a half century thereafter. As director of the Southwest Museum in L.A., I had to deal with visitors wanting to see the mummies that they remembered as children.

It was not until the 1970s that Native Americans, in large numbers, began taking interest in museums as a way to tell their own stories. When I became the director of the Museum of the Cherokee Indian in 1975, the number of full-fledged tribal museums in the United States could be counted on the fingers of both hands and only one was more than 30 years old. That was the Osage Museum in Pawhuska founded in 1938. It continues to have the distinction of being the oldest and longest continuously operating tribal museum in the United States.¹⁹

The first attempt by a Native American group to establish a museum was the Cherokee Nation in 1826 at New Echota, Georgia. Major Ridge offered a calumet pipe and other family heirlooms for the museum. At that time, many Cherokee families had keepsakes and objects of historical significance, such as the 18th century wampum belts,

17. See National Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian: Office of Public Affairs, *Biography: George Gustav Heye*, http://americanindian.si.edu/press/releases/gghe_biography.html (last accessed Oct. 8, 2009).

18. Karen Coody Cooper, *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices* 39 (AltaMira Press 2008) (citation omitted) (quoting the American Association of Museums).

19. The Osage Nation Museum & Library, *Welcome*, <http://www.osagetribe.com/museum/> (last accessed Feb. 14, 2010).

that were handed down through the family of John Ross, that would have made their way to a tribal museum had it been established. The election of Andrew Jackson as President in 1828 and the quick passage of a series of anti-Indian laws by the State of Georgia made it impossible for the Cherokee Nation to focus on issues except resisting alienation of their homeland. The forced removal of 1838–1839 postponed the discussion of establishing a Cherokee Museum for more than a century.²⁰

In 1949, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian was established in Cherokee, North Carolina as a private enterprise. It was transferred to a non-profit entity, the Cherokee Historical Association in 1957, and moved under tribal control in 1975 with the construction of a new building.²¹

The development of new tribal museums began primarily in the 1960s, with significant growth in the 70s and again in the 90s. By 1981, approximately 44 had been established, most part of tribal governments with others operating as adjuncts to a parent organization (e.g. the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum) or as independent non-profit organizations like the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. Today there are nearly 200 throughout the United States and Canada, most in the western states and provinces, with more new facilities in the design phase or under construction.²²

With the exception of the Osage and Cherokee museums, all tribal museums today are less than a half century old. They vary widely in scope and scale but virtually all see their mission as preserving and perpetuating tribal culture and history. In some cases, they serve as community centers offering workshops and educational programs for tribal members. In other cases, the primary focus is on educating the general public about tribal histories and traditions.²³

The size and scope of tribal museums vary greatly from the \$191 million tribal museum built in the 1990s by the Mashantucket Pequots in Connecticut²⁴ to more modest museums such as the Oneida Nation Museum that cost \$105,000 in 1976.²⁵

Recently the Southern Ute Tribal Council appropriated \$38 million for a new museum in Ignacio, Colorado.²⁶ The Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians is now considering plans for a \$110 million dollar museum facility in Temecula, California.²⁷

20. See *Worcester v. Ga.*, 31 U.S. 515 (1832); see also *Cherokee Nation v. Ga.*, 30 U.S. 1 (1831).

21. See generally The Museum of the Cherokee Indian, <http://www.cherokeemuseum.org> (last accessed Oct. 8, 2009).

22. See generally Karen M. Strom, *Index of Native American Museum Resources on the Internet*, <http://www.hanksville.org/NAresources/indices/NAmuseums.html> (last accessed Oct. 7, 2009) (indexing and providing hyperlinks to the Native American museums in the United States and Canada).

23. See generally Tribal Museums & Cultural Centers, <http://www.tribalmuseums.org> (last assessed Oct. 9, 2009).

24. Mike Allen, *Casino Riches Build an Indian Museum with 'Everything'*, N.Y. Times A1 (Aug. 10, 1998) (available at 1998 WLNR 3053144) (explaining that the museum was built using profits from the tribe's Foxwoods Resort Casino).

25. See MuseumsUSA, *Museum Info: Oneida Nation Museum, Oneida, Wisconsin*, <http://www.museumsusa.org/museums/info/1159370> (last accessed Oct. 8, 2009) (stating that the museum was funded with a Bicentennial Grant in 1976 and it opened to the public in June 1979).

26. Patricia Miller, *Cultural Groundbreaking: Southern Utes to Begin Building Center, Museum*, Durango Herald (Durango, Colo.) (Aug. 22, 2008) (available at http://www.jonesandjones.com/news/publications_pdf/Durango_Herald_22aug08.pdf).

27. See generally Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians, *Tribal Home Page*, <http://www.pechanga-nsn.gov/page?pageId=1> (last accessed Oct. 8, 2009) (information on the Luiseno Indians' cultural center, traditional programs, and community events).

Some would argue that Tribal museums have their roots in antiquity.²⁸ In pre-European North America, sacred and patrimonial objects of great community significance were kept by specialists under special conditions for the community's benefit. In the Southwest, Kivas housed collections whose use was vital to the members of the Pueblo and to their sense of place in the world. The Iroquois of the Northeast, the Great Plains societies, and communities of the Pacific Northwest all followed similar practices.

The disruption of cultures during this historic period resulted in the loss of cultural patrimony through intentional destruction or misappropriation. Objects of cultural value were alienated through theft, sale, or gift. Although many tribal communities never abandoned their institutions that served a "museum" function, the creation of recognizable museums has been on the upsurge in the last half century. The establishment of tribal museums that derive meaning from the past and exemplify new opportunities for community enrichment and preservation is a trend that continues to gain momentum.

Tribal cultural centers and museums have not replaced traditional institutions, but have instead enhanced preservation. From the start, they have not only collected, preserved, and interpreted objects for their communities, but have also carried out other functions such as language maintenance and historical research. They have also established living history programs, cultural festivals, and special events.

The diversity and strength of tribal museums reflects a growth in economic and political power and a collective determination to maintain Native American identity in the face of pressures from the dominant society. Tribal museums are researching new methods for culturally appropriate storage, handling, and access consistent with the principals of best museum practices. They have long exemplified community-based approaches to interpretation and new ideas about presenting Native American cultural constructs.

Tribal museums evolved, in part, as a reaction to alien institutions imperialistically collecting and interpreting Native American culture and as a focal point of resurgence of tribal communities. They are, collectively, an important element in the preservation of Native American heritage. Many have engaged in successful partnerships with other museums and educational institutions to reach broader audiences and enhance scholarly achievements. Alyce Sadongei commented:

Tribal museums are educating their communities on traditional ways of life, serving as a point of pride and destination for visitors and community members alike, managing and interpreting tribal culture from tribal perspectives, encouraging the revitalization of traditional craft, language and cultural performance.²⁹

Tribal museums for decades have operated as very insular institutions. Today they

28. See James D. Nason, *Beyond Repatriation: Cultural Policy and Practice for the Twenty-first Century*, in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* 291, 299 (Bruce Ziff & Pratima V. Rao eds., Rutgers U. Press 1997).

29. Alyce Sadongei, Natl. Conf. Project Dir., Speech, *The Value of Tribal Archives, Libraries and Museums* (Tribal Archives, Libraries and Museums: Preserving Our Lang., Memory and Lifeways Natl. Conf. II, May 24–27, 2005) (copy of transcript is available at http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/aip/leadershipgrant/natlconf/the_value_tribal_archives.shtml).

are more likely to reach out to other institutions to form partnerships and collaborations for mutual benefit. The first exhibit developed by a tribal museum to be displayed at the Smithsonian Institution was seen by more than 3.9 million people at the National Museum of Natural History in 2006.³⁰ This exhibit, which was inspired in part by art and archival records in the Gilcrease Museum, was displayed at the Gilcrease from July 4, 2009 until January 10, 2010.

The Museum of the Cherokee Indian has recently constructed a research center to house and provide access to documents collected through partnerships with the National Archives, the National Park Service, the National Anthropological Archives, and other institutions to bring together Cherokee material from a wide variety of sources and disseminate these through electronic means to institutions and individuals around the world.

In stark contrast to the native activists who chained themselves to museum doors in the early 1970s to protest the public display of human remains, American Indians today are increasingly likely to be found on museum boards of trustees or as administrators or curators making decisions about exhibits and programs. Increased deference to native sensitivities, fostered by a heightened sense of inclusion by many museums, coupled with a more favorable political climate as evidenced by legislation such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)³¹ in 1989, has brought about welcomed changes.

NAGPRA has enabled tribes to make claims for certain categories of objects held by museums that receive federal funding. Although the legislation has not resulted in the mass of claims that many predicted, it has given rise to constructive dialogue among tribes and museums concerning the most appropriate care and treatment of art and artifacts. This increased communication has facilitated a mutual realization by non-tribal museums and tribal officials that they are important to each other.

Museums, for the most part, insist that information about Native American cultures be presented from the first person perspective and that Native American curators and consultants be hired to help develop exhibits and educational programs. At the same time, tribal leaders have recognized that museums can be powerful tools in educating the general public and have frequently recruited non-Indian scholars and museum professionals to enhance academic credibility for tribal programs.

Many tribal leaders view public education as essential to the survival of Indian tribes as sovereign nations. “The fate of Indian Tribes in this country will be determined by the voting public,” says Anthony Pico, former Chairman of the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians.³² Tribal leaders agree that constant vigilance is required to defend tribal sovereignty against frequent and repeated challenges by the federal, state and local governments “The greatest threat to tribal sovereignty is public perception,” believes Wilma Mankiller, former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation.³³ “Museums

30. Cherokee, N.C., Press Release, *Emissaries of Peace Exhibit Ends Successful Stay at the Smithsonian; Reopens in Cherokee for 2008*, http://www.cherokee-nc.com/pressroom_prdetail.php?page=127&pr=8 (Dec. 3, 2007).

31. 25 U.S.C. §§ 3001–3013 (2006).

32. Interview with Anthony Pico, former Chairman, Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians (May 18, 2007).

33. Interview with Wilma Mankiller, former Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation. (May 18, 2007).

have a responsibility in helping to shape for the public a balanced and accurate image of Native Americans,” according to Marshall McKay, Chairman of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, who believes that elected officials do not influence public opinion as much as they are influenced by it.³⁴ As a result, many tribal leaders are more concerned about sharing their messages with the general public than with members of Congress.

As tribal resources increase through successful business ventures, so too does the risk of loss of traditional culture and political sovereignty. Today, many tribes are taking extraordinary measures to preserve native languages, cultural traditions, and promote accurate public images. The future role of museums in support of tribal efforts will depend upon the willingness of both museums and tribes to share educational responsibilities by embracing new partnerships and strategies to achieve common goals.

34. Interview with Marshall McKay, Chairman, Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation (formerly known as the Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians) (May 18, 2007).