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**WOVEN BY THE GRANDMOTHERS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL  
MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN THROUGHOUT THE 1990s**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR MICHELLE BERENFELD  
PROFESSOR JULIA LUM**

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## Introduction

In a 2005 interview, Richard West (Southern Cheyenne), the director of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) from 1990 to 2004, said, “One has to remember again that museums, as a concept, are utterly foreign to Native people [...] We have never in that way objectified our culture as a piece of anthropology or even as a piece of art [...] All of the things that we create have always been part of a daily mix of life—they are not hung on walls to be seen by crowds of people [...]”<sup>1</sup> Indigenous relations with museums have been fraught since the mid- to late-1800s, when anthropologists first began to donate their collections of indigenous material culture to museums like the Smithsonian—which was a single entity at the time—the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and the Field Museum in Chicago. Simultaneous to the founding of these museums and the beginning of the widespread collection of indigenous objects, the United States government passed laws that infringed on indigenous rights to land and cultural possession.<sup>2</sup> The concurrent creation of anthropology museums with the passing of assimilationist laws creates a direct relation between the moments when indigenous material culture was being valued and when indigenous lives and rights were not. When indigenous objects were being collected to “salvage” them and indigenous traditions were at risk of being eliminated through destructive laws.

This history of indigenous discomfort with museums set the stage for the creation of the NMAI in 1989 through the NMAI Act. The NMAI sought to not only be the first national museum in the United States of indigenous objects and culture, but also to exist as a progressive standard in challenging traditional museum display practices, conservation strategies, and

<sup>1</sup> W. Richard West and Amanda J. Cobb, “Interview with W. Richard West, Director, National Museum of the American Indian,” *American Indian Quarterly* 29, No. 3/4 (2005): 519.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 10.

conceptions about the purpose of museums. In the same 2005 interview, Richard West said, “the National Museum of the American Indian will never be [...] simply a palace of objects.”<sup>3</sup> Rather, the NMAI aimed to function as a public space that brought indigenous formations about living objects to the forefront, and where exhibitions and policies in place directly connected those objects with the indigenous communities who created them. In creating such a space, the museum sought to embody the spirits and traditions of indigenous communities and remove some of the barriers those communities associated with museums. At the same time, the NMAI wanted to engage with the non-indigenous visitors to educate them about indigenous communities and their stories of oppression and survivance.

The NMAI Act laid the groundwork for this creation through the establishment of the George Gustav Heye Center in New York, the NMAI on the Mall in Washington, D.C., and the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland. The Heye Center and the D.C. NMAI aim to produce exhibitions informed, created, and developed by indigenous community members, while using imaginative multi-media displays to engage with non-indigenous visitors. In 1994, the George Gustav Heye Center opened in lower Manhattan and existed as the only campus of the NMAI until 1998 when the Cultural Resources Center opened. Throughout the 1990s, the Heye Center created eleven exhibitions, experimenting with exhibition design, figuring out how consultation with indigenous communities would work, and developing and revising conservation protocols. These ongoing actions and projects, which resulted in pages and pages of comments and suggestions from indigenous communities, lay the foundation for a comprehensive policy document titled *The Way of Our People*, to guide the creation of the NMAI in D.C.

<sup>3</sup> West and Cobb, ““Interview with W. Richard West, Director, National Museum of the American Indian,” 520.

The Cultural Resources Center houses the collections and research programs, providing facilities for the conservation, handling, cataloging, research, and study of the collection. The collection is stored in a way that is in line with both tribal and museum requirements for access and preservation, including indoor and outdoor spaces for indigenous traditional care practices and cultural use of the collection.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the NMAI Act created guidelines for the repatriation of human remains, funerary, sacred, and illegally acquired objects. This ensured that objects that were necessary for indigenous traditions of burial and religion were returned, as well as human remains that had been extensively collected throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> These guidelines set the stage for the creation of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in 1990 which extended the guidelines created in the NMAI Act to apply to all federally funded institutions and federal agencies in the United States, as well as cultural items and human remains discovered on federal or tribal lands after the date of passing.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of NAGPRA and the formation of the NMAI were spurred on by a larger movement of indigenous artists and activists. These artists and activists worked to hold museums accountable for the collection practices, exhibitions, and representation of contemporary indigenous artists. To this end, at the celebration of the Columbus Quincentennial in 1992, indigenous artists commemorated five centuries of colonization, loss, and survivance, while putting pressure on museums and galleries to grapple with this difficult history and include more

<sup>4</sup> Smithsonian Institution, "Collections: Cultural Resources Center," *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/collections/crc>. (accessed April 16, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *National Museum of the American Indian Act*, S 978, Pub. L 101-185, 101<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., introduced in Senate May 11, 1989, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/978>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Congress, House, *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act*, H.R.5237, Pub. L. 101-601, 25 U.S.C. 3001 et seq., 104 Stat. 3048, 101<sup>st</sup> Cong, 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., introduced in House July 10, 1990, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/house-bill/5237/text>.

contemporary indigenous artists in their collections.<sup>7</sup> These events and acts combined created a decade of substantial change for indigenous representation, museum policy and exhibition design, and larger understandings about how to represent marginalized cultures and groups within the museum world.

This thesis focuses on the 1990s, the path that the NMAI took to create the museum in D.C., and the progressive policies that are associated with the NMAI. Rather than focus on the NMAI's final manifestation, which I would argue is the campus in D.C., I have chosen to examine the George Gustav Heye Center as an experimental site for exhibition and policy development. Furthermore, these early years proved instrumental to the success of the NMAI in the long run and allowed them to perfect and hone their policies and exhibition strategies.

My path to this thesis started my sophomore year, during a class taught by Professor Francis Pohl at Pomona College, titled "Art, Conquest, and Colonization." We read an article that discussed the challenges of preserving and displaying indigenous objects, briefly exploring how museum conservation and display policies tended to be incompatible with indigenous conceptions of object life and death. The discussion encouraged me to rethink the binaries of "right" and "wrong" that I had always associated with conservation decisions and brought me to the realization that all decisions concerning an object are connected and complicated by the object itself, its location, its original purpose, the maker's intentions, and the person making the treatment decisions. Furthermore, I grew to understand that conservation decisions have moral, ethical, and spiritual implications that must be taken into account when deciding on a treatment proposal.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Ash-Milby and Ruth B. Phillips, "Inclusivity or Sovereignty? Native American Arts in the Gallery and the Museum Since 1992," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (2017): 12.



After the class, I continued to dwell on the complexities of conserving indigenous objects. When the time came to choose a thesis topic, my passive thoughts formed into a thesis topic dedicated to learning more about how these factors are implemented in tangible museum conservation policy. I began to research about museums that had publicly and successfully integrated collaborative conservation methods into their conservation departments. I landed on the NMAI, a museum that was already quite well-known and well-written about. Although the museum already has a wide breath of scholarly research exploring its exhibits and policies, the NMAI continues to be placed at the forefront of large institutional change in regard to their centering and elevation of indigenous voices in all aspects of the museum, from leadership to conservation to exhibition display. With the opening of their D.C. branch in 2004, the NMAI implemented an impressive conservation program that involved extensive consultation with indigenous leaders and community members from across the United States, established effective repatriation policies that returned funerary, sacred, or illegally acquired items to indigenous communities, and created exhibitions that directly involved indigenous input in their development and execution. They had seemingly figured out a way to overcome and work with those complexities and had created substantial museum policy that welcomed indigenous conceptions of museums, objects, and care.

To get a better understanding of how these specific policies and protocols manifested themselves within the NMAI, I decided to focus on one exhibition: *Woven by the Grandmothers: Nineteenth-Century Navajo Textiles from the National Museum of the American Indian*, exhibited in 1996 at the George Gustav Heye Center. The exhibition focused on the NMAI's collection of Navajo textiles and contemporary Navajo conceptions of and relationships to the process of weaving and the textiles in the show. *Woven by the Grandmothers* particularly stuck

out to me because it developed in conjunction with a workshop in Tsaille, Arizona, on the Navajo reservation, which temporarily brought some of the textiles to Arizona from the NMAI. The workshop in Tsaille presented conservation dilemmas for transporting the textiles to Arizona and gave an example of how the NMAI conducted their community outreach and information-gathering for their exhibitions, making it a good case study for the development of NMAI policies. The exhibition had also happened in 1996, prior to the opening of the D.C. NMAI, which meant that it took place in the early stages of the NMAI's development, a period of time not widely explored in contemporary or past scholarship.

Before I delve into the structure and content of my thesis, I need to make a few notes about the language I use. The first one surrounds my choice to use "indigenous" throughout, as opposed to "Native American" or "American Indian." As pointed out by both Richard West and my second reader, Professor Julia Lum, both terms, "Native American" and "American Indian" are U.S. tribal recognitions that are not used in Canada or South of the United States border. Contemporary nation-states do not reflect indigenous cultural boundaries which means that it would be misguided to refer to the objects in this thesis as belonging only to Native Americans, rather than indigenous communities. There are specific instances where people or groups refer to themselves as "Native American," in which case I also employ the term. The second note surrounds my differentiation between the George Gustav Heye Center and the D.C. campus of the NMAI. When speaking of the branch of the NMAI in lower Manhattan, I will refer to it using either "the George Gustav Heye Center" or "the Heye Center." When referring to the campus in D.C., I will specify by writing "the D.C. NMAI." Finally, when I refer to the institution as a whole, encompassing all three campuses and its staff and administration, I will use "NMAI."

The first chapter of my thesis examines the origins of the NMAI, leading up to and through the opening of the Heye Center. I argue that the Heye Center, although less studied, implemented many early versions of the policies that the D.C. NMAI would become known for. The historical context I establish in this chapter surrounding the history of the MAI and the creation of the NMAI situates the 1990s as an experimental period in the NMAI's development and integral to the opening of the D.C. NMAI. The second chapter of my thesis explores *Woven by the Grandmothers* as a case study to examine how the Heye Center's policies and exhibition strategies evolved within two years of its opening. I argue that the implementation of the 1995 workshop and the resulting information collected were integral to the success of the exhibition and were indicative of the strategies that the NMAI would continue to use in exhibition development. Furthermore, *Woven by the Grandmothers* was revealing of the NMAI's continuing effort to ground their exhibitions in contemporary indigenous voices, while balancing historical context. The third chapter of my thesis examines the 2004 inaugural exhibits of the D.C. NMAI and the critical response to them. This chapter establishes how the NMAI used the information that was gathered throughout the 1990s and implemented it in its exhibitions, both successfully and unsuccessfully. By examining the Heye Center and the exhibitions it produced, we can get an idea of the trajectory of the NMAI at the opening of the Heye Center, and how that trajectory was reevaluated throughout the 1990s through policy change and consultation with indigenous communities.

The exhibitions that the Heye Center produced showed that the NMAI's actions reflected their philosophy and mission. These initial programs indicated that the NMAI was authentically dedicated to making their museum representative of indigenous voices and conceptions about life, objects, and the finiteness of history through progressive display and collection policies. The

first ten years of the NMAI's existence, within the Heye Center, were integral for setting a public trajectory of how far the NMAI was willing to go to create a cultural, living space within the institutional framework of a museum. As I will explore in this thesis, the NMAI proved deeply committed to this mission, although they did not achieve it without their own missteps and stumbles. My thesis seeks to analyze, and in doing so emphasize, the purposeful work that must be done by museums to not only include indigenous voices, but to welcome and empower indigenous peoples and their culture to create policies and exhibitions that authentically represent their lived and historical experience.

## Chapter One

### **From the MAI to the NMAI: The History of the National Museum of the American Indian**

The George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) sits in a stately, neoclassical building in Lower Manhattan, near the Hudson River. The center holds one of the most comprehensive collections of indigenous objects in the world, belied by the European-style architecture. Both the collection and the establishment of the NMAI are a culmination of a history that began with one private collector, evolved through an indigenous activist movement, and resulted in a museum that advocates for progressive collections-management policies, creates exhibitions that represent their mission to amplify indigenous voices, and facilitates outreach and collaboration with indigenous communities, while attempting to grapple with the oppressive history of indigenous relations with the United States government.

The origins of the NMAI, from the first object acquired to its eventual merger with the Smithsonian, are part of a longer history that began a century before the opening of the George Gustav Heye Center in New York in 1994 and after that the NMAI in Washington, D.C. in 2004. Themes of oppression, cultural sovereignty, and historical ownership are reoccurring in the story of the NMAI and the development of *Woven by the Grandmothers*, which means that the history of the NMAI is part of the endpoint of the museum. The development of the NMAI and its policies as an institution are closely linked to the histories of the objects in its collection—from their creation through their acquisitions—as well as those of the original Museum of the American Indian (MAI) and the George Gustav Heye Center.

## **The Museum of the American Indian**

In 1897 George Gustav Heye, an electrical engineer turned full-time collector in New York, acquired a Navajo hide shirt. This was the start of a collection that would grow to include over 800,000 objects.<sup>8</sup> Heye collected objects from indigenous groups across continental North America, not focusing on any particular type of object, but rather anything with indigenous heritage. He focused more attention on the eastern United States, but also acquired objects from the rest of continental U.S., Canada, and South America. He obtained the items through archaeological expeditions he both participated in and sponsored, and his collection grew rapidly. By 1916, Heye had collected so many objects that he decided to open a museum, which he called the Museum of the American Indian (MAI).<sup>9</sup>

The MAI was conceived as a combination of an anthropology museum and a natural history museum. By the late 1800s, natural history museums had become the primary venue for indigenous collections, coinciding with the development of anthropology as a profession, which led to the creation of anthropology museums. Natural history museums were based on a notion of survey that stemmed from colonial exploration and supposedly objective studies of “exotic groups” meaning that exhibitions and displays would treat indigenous peoples and their objects as a scientific study rather than a cultural one.<sup>10</sup> This approach situated indigenous peoples exclusively in the past and often ignored the cultural and historical context of the items as being in use and not part of a dead culture. Although the exhibitions and method of collection matched that of a natural history museum, Heye staffed his museum’s leadership—including curators and

<sup>8</sup> Ira Jacknis, “A New Thing? The National Museum of the American Indian in Historical and Institutional Perspective,” in *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, eds. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

trustees—with influential anthropologists, including Marshall Saville and George Pepper, which ensured that the vision guiding the museum was anthropologically centered.<sup>11</sup>

Beginning with the founding of the Harvard Peabody Museum in 1866, anthropological museums served as “archives of ‘material culture,’”<sup>12</sup> of people whose similarities or differences were perceived substantial enough to display, cataloguing, preserving, and displaying specimens. Anthropology museums were also responsible for the funding of major anthropological research to further understand and expand their collections.<sup>13</sup> Natural history and anthropology museums in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century lumped indigenous objects together using categories of geography or chronology.<sup>14</sup> This approach was considered empirical, which displayed a “maximum of specimens and a minimum of interpretations” with monographic labels, allowed viewers to draw their own conclusions from the assortment of objects.<sup>15</sup> By exhibiting the objects as such, anthropological and natural history museums emphasized the data and empirical-based approaches of their studies, leaving the more humanistic aspects to art and archaeology museums. Natural history and anthropology museums claimed to objectively examine and compare different human cultures, across many different time periods, ignoring the colonialist power dynamics that allowed the museum to acquire the objects in the first place.<sup>16</sup> These styles and the museums tended to exoticize indigenous peoples, framing them in comparison to

<sup>11</sup> Jacknis, *A New Thing? The National Museum of the American Indian in Historical and Institutional Perspective*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> George Stocking, “Essays on Museums and Material Culture,” in *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, ed. George Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Collier and Harry Tschopik Jr. “The Role of Museums in American Anthropology,” *American Anthropologist* 56, no. 5 (1954): 770.

<sup>14</sup> Amanda J. Cobb, “The National Museum of the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 495.

<sup>15</sup> Collier and Tschopik, “The Role of Museums in American Anthropology,” 772.

<sup>16</sup> Stocking, “Essays on Museums and Material Culture,” 4.

Europeans and Americans, rather than representing their objects through their cultural significance and according to indigenous preferences of representation.

In the early years of the MAI, the museum was funded by its board of trustees, who were friends of Heye. The MAI opened its exhibition spaces in uptown Manhattan and kept a storage facility in the Bronx. The MAI flourished throughout the 1920s due to ongoing support from Heye's very wealthy friends and board members, adding to its collection and number of exhibitions. These friends, who considered themselves "amateur scientists," included Archer M. Huntington, the son of railroad magnate Collis Potter Huntington, not only donated money and objects, but also "Audubon Terrace," the building that housed the MAI.<sup>17</sup> However, in 1928, James B. Ford and Harmon W. Hendricks, two of the MAI's most important trustees, died. The instant lack of donated funds, coupled with the stock market crash in 1929 which decimated Heye's personal wealth, forced Heye to lay off almost all of his curatorial staff and end field research and publications.<sup>18</sup> With his remaining money and that of his benefactors, he chose to prioritize collecting, acquiring from collectors who had been hit harder by the Great Depression and would easily and cheaply sell their collections.<sup>19</sup> The MAI departed from its original intent to have rotating exhibitions and scientific study and became a museum that existed to expand its collection. Post-World War II, museums began to modernize, focusing on conservation of objects, changing the frequency and topic of exhibitions to create "blockbuster exhibitions," producing publications, and increasing salaries for their staff members. For private institutions like the MAI, it was difficult to keep up with this due to a lack of money. Some private

<sup>17</sup> Roland W. Force, *Politics and the Museum of the American Indian: The Heye & the Mighty* (Honolulu: Mechas Press, 1999), 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Jacknis, *A New Thing? The National Museum of the American Indian in Historical and Institutional Perspective*, 15.



institutions, such as the Field Museum, changed designation to receive city or federal funding, but Heye refused to do so in fear of giving up any control over his museum. Heye was also resistant to any of the modernization changes in museums, resulting in a stagnant MAI.<sup>20</sup>

After Heye left the director position in 1956, due to ailing health, the MAI struggled to evolve beyond Heye's original vision.<sup>21</sup> Edwin K. Burnett, a faithful employee, took over the role of director, but had difficulty enacting any new changes due to his lack of academic credentials and reliance upon Heye's vision for informing his actions.<sup>22</sup> In 1960, the MAI trustees appointed a new director, Frederick J. Dockstader, who had been Assistant Director since 1955. In Dockstader's first ten years of directorship, he oversaw renovations, a reordering of the collections, a modernization of exhibition cases and lighting, and an increased participation in international exhibitions. Even with these changes, visitation decreased, the MAI remained in desperate need of private and public funding, and Dockstader was unwilling to apply for federal grants. Simultaneously, Dockstader was looking to fill in gaps in the collection. Since there were no funds to purchase items, he began to first exchange pieces and then outright sell items from the collection. Although exchanging was common during the 1970s, the deaccession of items often fell under the purview of curators, not directors. The items that Dockstader was deaccessioning often were not approved by curators and the Board of Trustees nor by the donors of the item. Checks and balances were completely removed when Dockstader was elected by the trustees to the MAI Board in 1972.<sup>23</sup> Within Dockstader's first fifteen years as Director, chunks of Heye's wide-ranging collection were sold or exchanged, with very little record. Dockstader's

<sup>20</sup> Force, *Politics and the Museum of the American Indian: The Heye & the Mighty*, 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> Jacknis, *A New Thing? The National Museum of the American Indian in Historical and Institutional Perspective*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Force, *Politics and the Museum of the American Indian: The Hey & the Mighty*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-34.

actions coincided with a broader crackdown on museum deaccessioning policies by the Attorney General of New York. After a complaint was brought up by trustee Edmund S. Carpenter about the mismanagement of the collection, the Attorney General launched an investigation into the practices of the MAI. The result was the removal of Dockstader, the dissolving of the current Board of Trustees, and the complete inventory of the collection.<sup>24</sup>

The MAI, even after the Attorney General appointed a new board, was hugely unstable. Their reputation as a museum was destroyed due to the Dockstader scandal and their financial problems continued to grow. Concurrently, museums with indigenous collections were being scrutinized through the Red Power Movement. The Red Power Movement in the United States began in 1969 when a group of Native Americans, calling themselves Indians of All Tribes, took over Alcatraz for nineteen months. This protest, and the many that followed, demanded greater self-determination and the establishment of colleges, museums, and programs that preserved indigenous culture.<sup>25</sup> While the larger part of the movement was aimed at U.S. assimilationist policies and the abject poverty that Native Americans were experiencing, activists also focused on museums and their tendency to represent indigenous communities with very little community input and with little regard to the colonial history that allowed for the collection of indigenous objects in the first place.<sup>26</sup> This particular sect of the Red Power Movement, referred to as the Native American museum movement, protested collections holding human remains and exclusionary exhibition development, pressured for the repatriation of grave material and cultural patrimony that were illegally removed from the indigenous community, called for greater

<sup>24</sup> Force, *Politics and the Museum of the American Indian: The Hey & the Mighty*, 37-39.

<sup>25</sup> Kelly Rios, "The Efficacy of the Red Power Movement," *Perspectives: A Journal of Historical Inquiry* 35 (2008): 44.

<sup>26</sup> Jacknis, *A New Thing? The National Museum of the American Indian in Historical and Institutional Perspective*, 21.

representation of indigenous peoples in museum professions and the establishment of community museums, and emphasized the need for greater public awareness about the history of museums and indigenous peoples.<sup>27</sup> These complaints and protests, particularly regarding indigenous control over collections and repatriation, set the stage for the creation of the NMAI. A national museum focused solely on representing indigenous culture with indigenous input had the potential to create further change and educate the general public about indigenous culture and contemporary struggles.

### **The National Museum of the American Indian Act**

The combination of the MAI's financial struggles and the increasing call by activists for the creation of national indigenous museum led to the establishment of the NMAI. The Heye Foundation, which had been set up after Heye's death, realized that Heye's money would soon run out and that they needed to take action to protect the collection. Trustees of the foundation contacted the Smithsonian, Senator Robert McAdams—the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution—and Senator Pat Moynihan—the then-chairman of the Select Committee on Indian Affairs—to see if the Smithsonian would be interested in accepting the entire Heye collection and creating a new museum. Senator Moynihan was replaced as chairman of the Select Committee on Indian Affairs by Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawai'i in 1987. Before the senators' trip to see the Heye collection, Senator Inouye asked Alan Parker (Chippewa Cree), an attorney, to join so that Parker could look at the collection and then provide consultation on the details of the merger.<sup>28</sup> The terms of this merger had the potential to be difficult because the Smithsonian

<sup>27</sup> Patricia P. Erikson, et al., *Voices of a Thousand People: The Makah Cultural and Research Center* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 33.

<sup>28</sup> Alan R. Parker, *Pathways to Indigenous Nation Sovereignty: A Chronicle of Federal Policy Developments* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 91-92.

already had a significant collection of indigenous art in their National Museum of American History (NMAH). Parker would work with the senators to navigate these difficulties. Similar to earlier iterations of the MAI, the NMAH used scientific approaches to their display and contained funerary objects and human remains in their collections.<sup>29</sup> After experiencing the NMAH's outdated display and collections, Parker pushed Congress to ensure that the Heye Collection would end up in its own museum with its own separate board of trustees.<sup>30</sup>

The NMAI was created through the National Museum of the American Indian Act, which was introduced in Congress by Senator Inouye and Representative Ben Nighthorse (Northern Cheyenne) of Colorado and passed on November 28, 1989. Upon the passing, Senator Inouye said that the act would, “begin a new chapter in the history of the relationship between the United States and the Indians – a chapter that will begin, we hope, to reverse the centuries of treatment that the Indian people have suffered [...]”<sup>31</sup> The act not only designated the creation of the NMAI in D.C. and the adjoining centers in New York and Maryland but also created a precedent for the return of human remains and sacred objects by the Smithsonian.<sup>32</sup> To both the indigenous community, who was consulted by Parker throughout the process, and Congress, the NMAI Act was symbolic of the changing relations between the United States and indigenous communities. This placed the NMAI at the forefront of efforts to cultivate an interest in and respect for the cultural sovereignty of indigenous peoples, as well as to establish a mandate to publicize past, present, and future indigenous history.

<sup>29</sup> Parker, *Pathways to Indigenous Nation Sovereignty*, 93-94.

<sup>30</sup> Jacknis, *A New Thing? The National Museum of the American Indian in Historical and Institutional Perspective*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, *National Museum of the American Indian Act*, S 978, Pub. L 101-185, 101<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., introduced in Senate May 11, 1989, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/978>. Since NAGPRA was passed in 1990, there was not yet a federal act that mandated the return of sacred objects and human remains. As the NMAI Act was already in effect in 1990, the NMAI was exempt from NAGPRA.

The NMAI Act was a turning point for indigenous representation in museums in the U.S., setting in motion a plan that would, if executed well, serve as a model for marginalized representation and historical, institutional reckoning. By creating a specific museum for indigenous peoples, the U.S. and the Smithsonian showed a commitment to greatly increasing indigenous representation in the presentation of their cultural heritage. The potential in the museum lay in its ability to rethink museum practices as a whole, from curatorial decisions to exhibition design to conservation practices, to expose uncomfortable and overlooked parts of U.S. history, and to implement these changes on a larger scale than had ever been seen. Specifically, these practices looked like hiring more indigenous curators, involving and valuing indigenous collaboration, using community consultation for sensitive conservation projects, and centering exhibition and object display around specific indigenous stories and beliefs.<sup>33</sup>

In order to fulfil the expectations of the NMAI, the Smithsonian had to hire a director who held the same convictions about indigenous representation and determination in museums. The director would lead the instrumental first phase of the museum, crafting and molding the NMAI to live up to its greatest potential. Congress, with the help of Alan Parker, hired Richard West (South Cheyenne), showing that the NMAI was steadfast in its commitment to increase indigenous representation, starting with its director. West, a recently retired lawyer, served as director from 1990 to 2007 and was familiar with indigenous art and related affairs due to his father, Dick West, who was a well-known mid-to-late-nineteenth-century South Cheyenne painter and sculptor.<sup>34</sup> In a 2005 interview with Amanda J. Cobb, a historian, West thought back to his conception of the NMAI's original commitments. This interview happened after the NMAI

<sup>33</sup> Patricia P. Erikson, "Decolonizing the Nation's Attic: The National Museum of the American Indian and the Politics of Knowledge-Making in a National Space," in *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, eds. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 68-69.

<sup>34</sup> Parker, *Pathways to Indigenous Nation Sovereignty*, 97.

in D.C. opened but West referred often to the goals that he had beginning in 1990: to celebrate, protect, and support the living indigenous cultures of the Americas; recognize that contemporary nation-states do not reflect indigenous cultural boundaries; expand upon the representation of pre-European indigenous history to dispel of the notion that indigenous history starts with European contact; use indigenous input in every facet of the museum; and bring exhibitions to Indian country, establishing what he called the “fourth museum”—the first three being the NMAI in Washington, D.C., the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, and the Heye Center in New York.<sup>35</sup> These commitments aimed to redefine how museums identify indigenous cultural groups and discuss indigenous history, specifically by privileging indigenous conceptions of territory and history rather than boundaries made by the U.S. or histories marked by the “founding” of the United States. The commitment of establishing a “fourth museum” was especially revolutionary because it acknowledged the inaccessibility of the NMAI, either in New York or D.C., for indigenous communities, by necessitating that traveling exhibitions expand the museum’s mission beyond its physical location.

The mission and vision of the NMAI, as of 2020, encapsulate the commitments West expressed beginning in 1990. The vision of the NMAI is “Equity and social justice for the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere through education, inspiration, and empowerment,”<sup>36</sup> addressing the commitment to support living indigenous cultures, as well as recognizing indigenous cultural boundaries through the language of “Western Hemisphere” as opposed to the “United States” or “Americas” to remove contemporary conceptions of political boundaries. The mission is, “In partnership with Native peoples and their allies, the National Museum of the

<sup>35</sup> Interview with W. Richard West, Director, National Museum of the American Indian, 518.

<sup>36</sup> Smithsonian Institution, “About the Museum: Vision & Mission,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/about/vision-mission> (accessed April 24, 2020).

American Indian fosters a richer shared human experience through a more informed understanding of Native peoples”<sup>37</sup> which directly connects to the commitments of indigenous collaboration and accessibility by emphasizing collaboration and close partnership with indigenous peoples. In the commitments, vision, and mission, as well as the larger NMAI Act, Congress and the leadership at the NMAI recognized that museum practices are underpinned by Western conceptions of display and history that function to silence and objectify indigenous peoples. These privilege academic voices over indigenous ones when planning exhibitions and ignore the fact that indigenous people do not always operate within conceptions of museums and finite history. The cultural items in museums were not made to be anthropological specimens or pieces of art, but rather to exist within daily life.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Early Years of the NMAI in the George Gustav Heye Center**

Integral to the NMAI Act was the creation of a new NMAI campus in Washington, D.C.. The museum would be located in the last available spot on the National Mall, directly across from the Capitol. At the time of the NMAI’s creation, Senator Inouye had realized that there were no indigenous veteran memorials in Washington, D.C., and proposed the National Mall site, which was reserved for a Smithsonian Institution, as a combination museum and memorial.<sup>39</sup> The NMAI, if it were to be true to its mission, would require years of community outreach and planning to be realized. With this in mind, the Smithsonian decided to move the MAI collections to a new building in lower Manhattan, the Alexander Hamilton Customs House.

<sup>37</sup> Smithsonian Institution, “About the Museum: Vision & Mission,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/about/vision-mission> (accessed April 24, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> West and Cobb, “Interview with W. Richard West, Director, National Museum of the American Indian,” 519.

<sup>39</sup> Erikson, “Decolonizing the Nation’s Attic: The National Museum of the American Indian and the Politics of Knowledge-Making in a National Space,” 57.

In 1994, this museum was named the George Gustav Heye Center, commonly referred to as the Heye Center, and served as a campus of the NMAI that continued to operate after the opening of the D.C. NMAI.<sup>40</sup> Instrumental to the ultimate goal of opening the D.C. museum, the Heye Center would function as an experimental museum of sorts, testing out policies, exhibition designs, and visitor techniques, of which the most successful would be replicated in the NMAI in D.C..

As mentioned above, the contrast between the architecture of the building and the collections inside is stark. The customs house building and decoration represented the United States' emergence as an international trade power and its exclusion of indigenous peoples. The four statues representing Asia, Europe, Africa, and America in front of the building bring this point home: a seated female figure with corn and cacti represents America and directly behind it is a smaller figure that represents Native Americans. Inside, murals depict early explorers such as Hernán Cortés and Christopher Columbus, who are known for their violent interactions with indigenous peoples. The contrast between the history illustrated in the architecture and decoration of the Heye Center and the lived experiences of indigenous communities highlighted the necessity for the D.C. museum to be designed by and for indigenous communities.<sup>41</sup> How could a museum purporting to be radical through its representation and rethinking of indigenous history exist in a building that was the epitome of the narrative the museum of working against? While important for a new construction to fully incorporate indigenous conceptions of building and land, the existence of the NMAI in the Customs House functioned as a signifier of the work

<sup>40</sup> Smithsonian Institution, "Collections: History of the Collections," *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/collections/history> (accessed April 24, 2020).

<sup>41</sup> Sarah Zurier, "Collections Same, Museum Different: Object Lessons at the George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian," *The Public Historian* 18, no. 4 (1996): 186.



indigenous activists did to turn a symbol of colonial history into one of indigenous self-definition and cultural sovereignty.

The NMAI was founded on the idea that ‘nontraditional’ methods of care, display, and classification value indigenous conceptualizations of history and truth, rather than European ideals that dominated in most American art, anthropology, and natural history museums.<sup>42</sup> The majority of nontraditional methods of care were based on the indigenous rationale that objects are alive and that they need to “breathe” rather than suffocate in closed boxes. This directly departed from the practical, closed-box storage of European art museums. Indigenous communities also had a preference for organizing objects by their spiritual and cultural significance rather than by their chronology, given indigenous understandings about the continuation of stories, rather than European conceptions of finite history.<sup>43</sup> The NMAI built a substantial policy document, based on consultations with indigenous communities, which they titled *The Way of the People*.<sup>44</sup> This document lay the groundwork for these ‘nontraditional’ policies that were tested at the Heye Center and implemented at the D.C. NMAI. To examine continuity and changes in exhibition decisions and conservation practices from the 1994 opening of the Heye Center to the 2004 opening of the D.C. NMAI, I will compare the findings of scholarly articles, reviews and visitor studies about the Heye Center to those about the D.C. NMAI. I will also examine the 1996 exhibition *Woven by the Grandmothers* to get a better idea of the specific policies that had been put into place by the mid-1990s.

<sup>42</sup> Cobb, “The National Museum of the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty,” 493.

<sup>43</sup> Miriam Clavir, “Reflections on Changes in Museums and the Conservation of Collections from Indigenous Peoples,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 35, no. 2 (1996): 101.

<sup>44</sup> Duane Blue Spruce, “Honoring Our Hosts,” in *The Land Has Memory: Indigenous Knowledge, Native Landscapes, and the National Museum of the American Indian*, eds. Duane Blue Spruce and Tanya Thrasher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 12.

The Heye Center in New York City opened in 1994 with three simultaneous exhibitions: (1) *Creation's Journey: Masterworks of Native American Identity and Belief*; (2) *All Roads Are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture*; and (3) *This Path We Travel: Celebrations of Contemporary Native American Creativity*. *Creation's Journey* ran until 1997, *All Roads Are Good* until 1996, and *This Path We Travel* until 1995.<sup>45</sup> The staggered closing dates allowed the NMAI to have sufficient time to develop each subsequent show, while also ensuring that a new show would open up each year in the future.

*Creation's Journey* focused on the concept of a masterwork, a term employed by fine art museums to mean something of aesthetic beauty, exceptional craftwork, or of universal expression, with the intention of providing an alternative definition for indigenous masterworks. The exhibition included objects that “represent the diversity, aesthetic quality, rarity, and historical and cultural significance of the collection of the National Museum of the American Indian.”<sup>46</sup> The objects hailed from North and South America, including Lakota (lands in North and South Dakota), Mi'kmaq (Quebec and Maine), and Inka (Ecuador to Chile) peoples, harkening back to West's commitment to transcend current political borders and promote tribal borders. Two of the objects considered masterworks were a painted buckskin shield owned by a Crow chief and two Inka jaguar goblets.<sup>47</sup> The show also served to illuminate shortcomings of traditional museum practices in exhibitions including indigenous objects. These practices included object labels, which typically identify the object, date of manufacture, artist, artist's life span, and their geographical location. Many of the objects in this exhibition were part of a

<sup>45</sup> Smithsonian Institution, “Past Exhibitions: 1994,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/past?year=1994> (Accessed May 3, 2020).

<sup>46</sup> Author unknown, panel in *Creation's Journey* exhibit, 1994.

<sup>47</sup> Zurier, “Collections Same, Museum Different: Object Lessons at the George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian,” 188.

collection that was assembled with little attention to the individual creator. Other museums housing antiquities, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, include information specifying culture and time period, but lack any acknowledgement of the creator, physically erasing the humanistic element of the object. Rather than just omitting the line for the artist, the NMAI chose to label each item with “Artist unknown” to bring attention to the lack of individual attribution.<sup>48</sup> Throughout all of the exhibitions, the NMAI also employed a labeling policy in which label authors were identified, whether curator or indigenous community contributor, to spotlight the indigenous voices included in the exhibit. In addition, the exhibition explored how object presentation can affect a viewer’s perception of the object. For example, a display of six ca. 200 A.D. duck decoys placed them within three different settings: two ducks were presented in a reconstructed pit covered with basket fragments and stones to represent Lovelock Cave,<sup>49</sup> where they were excavated from; the second two ducks were placed on plexiglass mounts bathed in warm light; and the final two ducks were placed among rushes on the bank of a pond.<sup>50</sup> These duck decoys were made from tule rush, duck skin, feathers, cordage, and paint to closely resemble live ducks. Duck decoys were and continue to be used by indigenous hunters, especially the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe of Stillwater in Nevada, to attract ducks.<sup>51</sup> These different settings aimed to question how the viewer was interpreting the objects based on their surrounding display, which brought into discussion past usages of dioramas and contrasted traditional museum usage of plain plexiglass displays for fine art. Over the past thirty years,

<sup>48</sup> Zurier, “Collections Same, Museum Different: Object Lessons at the George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian,” 188.

<sup>49</sup> Angela M. H. Schuster, “Inspired Curation,” *Archaeology* 47, no. 6 (1994): 81.

<sup>50</sup> Zurier, “Collections Same, Museum Different: Object Lessons at the George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian,” 189.

<sup>51</sup> Lois George-Kane and Vicki Kane, “Infinity of Nations,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/exhibitions/infinityofnations/california-greatbasin/134512.html> (accessed May 1, 2020).

dioramas have been under increasing fire for freezing indigenous culture and peoples in a particular time period.<sup>52</sup> The use of one in the duck installation reinforced this idea by situating them in the place where they were excavated, which implied that they were only used around 200 A.D., excluding the narrative of their current day function.

*All Roads Are Good* consisted of over 260 objects chosen by 23 indigenous artists, writers, educators, and tribal members, from tribes including the Crow, Cherokee, and Ojibwe. The objects were chosen by the indigenous selectors due to the objects importance as a reflection and definition of their cultural realities.<sup>53</sup> The NMAI worked with the individual indigenous collaborators to present their chosen objects in groups, providing additional commentary on the cultural background and process of choosing through visitor-activated media and object labels.<sup>54</sup> The show aimed to use these objects and statements as expressions of the distinct worldviews that each indigenous community member held.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, *This Path We Travel* included art by fifteen contemporary indigenous artists to express their concerns and thoughts about the indigenous world, the changes it has undergone, and the existence of future generations as the destruction of the ecosystem continues. The artists collaboratively created works and installations that represented their attempts to grapple with these concerns, articulating both traditions and contemporary beliefs of indigenous peoples.<sup>56</sup> The exhibit focused on four themes: “Creation,” “the Sacred,” “Profane Intrusion,” and “World View.” The first theme combined the creation of the earth with the creation of art, bringing

<sup>52</sup> Amy Lonetree, “Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI,” *American Indian Quarterly* 30, No. 3/4 (2006): 633.

<sup>53</sup> W. Richard West, Jr., “Foreword,” in *All Roads Are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 9.

<sup>54</sup> Douglas E. Evelyn, “History, Inclusivity, and Responsibility,” *History News* 50, no. 1 (1995): 27.

<sup>55</sup> Clara Sue Kidwell, “Preface,” in *All Roads Are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>56</sup> Frank Lapena, “This Path We Travel: Celebrations of Contemporary Native American Creativity,” *Native Peoples* 8, no. 1 (1994): 52-58.

together indigenous myths and legends about beginnings. The artists incorporated earth, fire, air, and water symbols into their art to convey the relationship of land to people and also represented specific creation myths using animal symbols. The “Sacred” section addressed areas that the artists regarded as sacred or to make social commentary on a particular issue. “Profane Intrusion” used built models such as an Indian boarding school room or a house built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development to represent forced assimilation of the education system and the difficult life that indigenous communities have on the reservation. Lastly, “World View” looked at the current circumstances that indigenous communities faced in the world and the actions that indigenous communities were taking to continue their traditions and accomplishments. One display represented this by suspending a sculpture of a child from a burial scaffold, symbolizing the world’s current circumstances and its effect on future generations.<sup>57</sup> The artists had substantial control over the design of the *This Path We Travel* exhibition, with minimal oversight from curators. The focus from artifacts on contemporary indigenous art and artists was also unusual at the time. This showed the NMAI’s interest in shows curated by indigenous people as well as its support of contemporary indigenous artists.

Each exhibition illustrated the NMAI’s commitment to its mission and vision and offered a glimpse of their vision for implementing it. There was clearly a large emphasis on collaboration with indigenous community members and artists, but some of the other strategies were less immediately noticeable. This was illustrated by a panel in the *Creation’s Journey* exhibit that stated that “each object in this exhibit has at least two histories – one before it left native hands and one since it has been in the hands of collectors.”<sup>58</sup> While this is especially

<sup>57</sup> Lapena, “This Path We Travel: Celebrations of Contemporary Native American Creativity,” 52-58.

<sup>58</sup> Zurier, “Collections Same, Museum Different: Object Lessons at the George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian,” 190.

significant for the *Creation's Journey* exhibition, with its goal of challenging traditional museum conceptions of display and narrative, this statement also applied to the other exhibitions on display, present and future. In addition, reminding visitors of the history of the objects, pre- and post-collection, has the potential to make them question how they got to the museum, be reminded of the oppressive history of indigenous communities, and understand how the objects continue to hold cultural and emotional value to contemporary indigenous communities.

The scholarly response to these shows focused on the tendency of the inaugural exhibits to downplay the tragic history of indigenous experiences. The balance between reminding viewers that indigenous peoples still exist in the United States while not softening the massive obstacles and hardships that indigenous peoples had to overcome to survive is a tricky one to navigate. Although the NMAI had shown progress in even mentioning tragedy, indigenous scholars Amy Lonetree (Ho-Chunk) and Sonya Atalay (Ojibwe), and Sarah Zurier, a graduate student, viewed historical narratives in NMAI exhibitions as an area of improvement.<sup>59</sup> Zurier argued that *Creation's Journey* and *All Roads Are Good* minimized the hardships endured by indigenous communities throughout history. This highlighted that *This Path We Travel*, which was almost entirely curated by indigenous peoples, was the one that grappled the most with the tragic history of indigenous experiences, while the two that were led by NMAI curators tended to downplay this history. This adds legitimacy to Zurier's argument, while pointing to a desire on the part of indigenous communities and artists to speak of this history and an institutional avoidance of the topic. A common critique with an exclusive practice of collaboration is that the

<sup>59</sup> Zurier, "Collections Same, Museum Different: Object Lessons at the George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian," 192.

Lonetree, "Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI," 636-637.

Sonya Atalay, "No Sense of the Struggle: Creating a Context for Survivance at the NMAI," *American Indian Quarterly* 30, nos. 3-4 (2006): 601.

marginalized group ends up doing a substantial amount of the emotional and mental labor, only for the museum to be lauded as progressive and forward-thinking. As the early history of the NMAI suggests, institutional accountability for the labor performed by community members involves establishing indigenous leadership positions in museums, making a substantial effort to learn from past mistakes, and a constant reexamination of museum practices.

The majority of visitor responses spoke to the effectiveness of the new display tactics. According to a visitor study published by the Smithsonian in 1996, visitors tended to be most impacted by exhibits and displays that made use of video and interactive displays. For example, a display of moccasins in *All Roads Are Good* by artist and curator Gerald McMaster (Plains Cree, Siksika Nation) was identified as an effective display because it invited visitors to interact with the art and provided a video of McMaster explaining the design project.<sup>60</sup> The display includes 120 pairs of Indian footwear in a series of concentric circles around a single drum, with some of the shoes raised as if in dance. The display placed the objects in their original context and forced visitors to imagine who had lived in the shoes, reminding them of their original use and indigenous history. According to visitor testimonies upon exiting the museum, visitors were also affected by the specific indigenous voices and creators that were featured or mentioned throughout each exhibit and were able to recall specific individuals at the end of their visit.<sup>61</sup> The visitor study showed the effectiveness of more “avant-garde,” multi-media exhibition displays and the understanding on the part of visitors that these types of displays were new and specific to the Heye Center. Furthermore, the visitor study spoke to the visitor impact of outwardly having indigenous collaboration, with most visitors recognizing that indigenous peoples had also played

<sup>60</sup> Andrew J. Pekarik et al., *Connecting with Native Voices: Visitor Impressions of the George Gustav Heye Center, National Museum of the American Indian* (Washington, D.C.: Institutional Studies Office, Smithsonian Institution, 1996), 20.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

a role in the exhibition design. As will be seen in *Woven by the Grandmothers*, it's clear that the NMAI took this finding into account when designing other shows at the Heye Center and the NMAI in D.C..

While the critiques from scholars pointed at shortcomings of the exhibitions in terms of their ability to accurately represent indigenous history, art critics from newspapers and magazines— though still commending the display innovation—critiqued the museum's departure from these Eurocentric exhibition strategies. Holland Cotter, a co-chief art critic from *The New York Times*, reviewed the inaugural exhibitions and his main critique surrounded the perceived lack of “scholarship” used in the museum and that “political grandstanding” overtook the shows.<sup>62</sup> The critique pointed at a larger problem in how the reviewer and potential visitors perceived the value of indigenous voices in analyzing their own cultural objects and how recounting traumatic topics could be viewed as overly political. Instead of focusing on the courageous stories of survivance and the difficult histories of indigenous peoples that were conveyed in the exhibition, Cotter focused on the lack of traditional scholarship. While it is valid to seek a balance of scholarship and indigenous input, the emphasis that Cotter placed on scholarship implied that he was privileging traditional forms of academic scholarship over less traditional methods of record keeping or oral histories from indigenous community members.

Another critique from Cotter centered around the “distracting” displays including, but not limited to, video presentations, dioramas, soundtracks, and wall texts that “play down hard information.”<sup>63</sup> Each of these display attributes were qualities that indigenous scholars and collaborators pushed in the rethinking of a museum and that visitors labeled as being the most

<sup>62</sup> Holland Cotter, “Art Review; New Museum celebrating American Indian Voices,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 1994, section C, 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.



interesting and moving aspects of the exhibitions. However, since each went against traditional European and American ways of presenting objects, which is through isolating an object on a wall or in a case, they were viewed as removing from the value of the objects themselves. This shows a distinct disconnect between the art critic, which albeit is one person's perspective, visitors, and museum staff. These critiques existed in a context that assumed the histories of indigenous objects and how they should exist within a museum setting. While Cotter understood that rethinking museological practices was necessary, he seemed reluctant to depart fully from traditional practices that had been critiqued by others for marginalizing indigenous voices.

On the collections management side, the NMAI implemented policies of repatriation that worked to acknowledge the often traumatic and illegal ways that objects in prominent indigenous collections were acquired and showed a commitment to return objects that were necessary to the sacred life of indigenous communities. Since the NMAI Act was passed one year prior to the 1990 passing of NAGPRA, which legislates the repatriation of objects, the NMAI is exempt from NAGPRA. Under NAGPRA, museums are mandated to return cultural objects that were obtained illegally and provides indigenous communities legal pathways to obtain cultural items from the museums.<sup>64</sup> Since NAGPRA was based upon the original repatriation policies stipulated in the NMAI Act, the NMAI holds a similar policy, which has been updated throughout the past twenty years as they see fit. The NMAI repatriation policy goes beyond illegally acquired

<sup>64</sup> U.S. Congress, House, *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act*, H.R.5237, Pub. L. 101-601, 25 U.S.C. 3001 et seq., 104 Stat. 3048, 101st Cong, 2nd sess., introduced in House July 10, 1990, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/house-bill/5237/text>.

objects,<sup>65</sup> returning objects such as human remains,<sup>66</sup> funerary objects,<sup>67</sup> sacred objects,<sup>68</sup> and objects of cultural patrimony.<sup>69</sup> By returning remains and sacred objects, the NMAI acknowledges that the removal of these objects from indigenous communities detrimentally affected the community and culture of that group. Furthermore, it recognizes that systems of oppression that caused abject poverty and unbalanced power dynamics provided the opportunity for collectors to acquire many indigenous cultural items.

The NMAI policy of conservation is centered on the concept of traditional care. Traditional care, the name given to this practice,<sup>70</sup> is the conservation of indigenous objects through direct input from indigenous community members and an awareness of indigenous conceptions of objects and their lifespan. It is concerned with maintaining an object's spiritual integrity, meaning, and function within its community.<sup>71</sup> The NMAI describes its practices of traditional care as employing "a collaborative and integrated approach to conservation, working closely with indigenous community members on the documentation, care, treatment and display of the collection."<sup>72</sup> The implementation of traditional care has prompted a restructuring and new understanding of how conservators function in relation to indigenous objects and the larger

<sup>65</sup> Objects acquired illegally are any materials acquired by or transferred to the NMAI illegally or under circumstances that render invalid the Museum's claim to them. National Museum of the American Indian. *NMAI Repatriation Policy*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> According to the NMAI Repatriation policy, human remains are the physical remains of a human body of a person of Native American ancestry. These do not include culturally modified human remains.

<sup>67</sup> Funerary objects are objects that, as part of the death rite or ceremony of a culture, are reasonably believed to have been placed with individual human remains either at the time of death or later.

<sup>68</sup> Sacred objects are objects need by traditional Native American religious leaders for the practice of Native American religions, including objects needed for the renewal of a religious practice.

<sup>69</sup> Objects of cultural patrimony are objects having ongoing historical, traditional, or cultural importance central to the Indian Tribe or Native Hawaiian Organization or culture.

<sup>70</sup> The term traditional care was broadly used throughout the sources I consulted but its implementation was rarely explained specifically, which I think speaks to the variety of practices traditional care must encompass to perform preservation work on indigenous objects.

<sup>71</sup> Cobb, "The National Museum of the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty," 494.

<sup>72</sup> Smithsonian Institution, "Collections: Conservation Outreach," *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/collections/conservation/outreach> (accessed April 24, 2020).

ethical issues surrounding their care and preservation. The primary philosophical change has been in who conservators understand their client to be. Often the indigenous object is seen as the fundamental client, and so, “facilitating the preservation of indigenous cultures by supporting their living expression,” as opposed to their material culture, represents a huge difference in how conservators approach their work.<sup>73</sup> Since a conservator’s job is to preserve an object and traditional care often preserves its conceptual integrity rather than its material form, this upends the standard education of conservators. Ultimately, traditional care creates greater understanding between museums and indigenous communities and invites communication about the purpose of the objects, breaking down conventional western standards and generally questioning the purpose and functions of museums as places that store and display objects.

In the early 1990s, the NMAI sponsored formal community consultations primarily for the purpose of developing architectural programs for the Cultural Resource Center in Suitland, Maryland, and the D.C. NMAI. In 1991, NMAI staff traveled to indigenous communities in places such as Albuquerque, New Mexico; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Anchorage, Alaska to hold consultations about the building, landscape, and overall tone of the NMAI.<sup>74</sup> In March 1992, the NMAI invited several indigenous museum professionals to the research center in the Bronx for a conference on traditional care and handling. These indigenous museum professionals offered insights into the care and storage of specific objects in the NMAI’s collection. For example, Ed Ladd, a Zuni tribal member from the Museum of New Mexico, stated that Zuni masks must be fed once or twice a year by Zuni people, male and female, and that letting the museum’s staff to do so would bring harm to the masks. In another instance, Bob Smith, an

<sup>73</sup> Clavir, “Reflections on Changes in Museums and the Conservation of Collections from Indigenous Peoples,” 101.

<sup>74</sup> Jessica S. Johnson, et al., “Practical Aspects of Consultation with Communities,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 44, no.3 (2005): 204.

Oneida tribal member from the NMAI, stated that Iroquois Medicine or False Face masks must be stored face down or hung facing towards the wall and covered. He justified this by saying that if a mask is stored face up then it connotes something that is dead or dying.<sup>75</sup>

The NMAI continued these types of consultations in 2001 with representatives of nineteen indigenous communities, including members of the Lakota, Kiowa, and Hupa communities. These meetings, along with the earlier ones, were the basis for the traditional care conservation policy that the NMAI adopted upon the opening of the D.C. museum. The overall premise of the consultations was to develop comfort and trust between the NMAI and the indigenous communities to facilitate information transfer. They allowed them to develop guidelines that included picking up visitors at the airport and having meals with them so as to foster a long-term collaborative relationship. In an effort to show that the power for making conservation decisions lay with the consultant, the NMAI conservators took a step back during handling and early conversations about the object. Through this the conservators were able to learn what the consultant prioritized about the object and how the consultant would preserve the object.<sup>76</sup> As one of the few departments that directly handles the objects, it was necessary that the conservators were purposeful with how they conserved and interacted with objects because it was the basis of the longevity and cultural continuity of the collection.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the Heye Center and the NMAI leaders and staff worked with indigenous communities to reckon with complicity of museums and collectors in larger historical circumstances of the oppression of indigenous peoples. The NMAI used lessons of the Heye Center and its early years to develop a successful plan for the 2004 opening of the

<sup>75</sup> Nancy B. Rosoff, "Integrating Native Views Into Museum Procedures: Hope and Practice at the National Museum of the American Indian," in *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, eds. Alison K. Brown and Laura Peers (London: Routledge, 2003), 77.

<sup>76</sup> Jessica S. Johnson, et al., "Practical Aspects of Consultation with Communities," 208.

D.C. NMAI. The NMAI looked at challenges they encountered to understand the effectiveness of their policy and exhibition strategies. The questions and answers that developed from these first ten years resulted in a rethinking of how museums and visitors conceptualize objects, culture, accepted forms of display, and even how museum staff touch or view an object. The critiques the Heye Center faced both by indigenous communities and more traditional art historians are indicative of the gulf that had to be bridged through policy and conscious community outreach. These lessons were put to the test in the exhibit, *Woven by the Grandmothers*, which opened in 1996.

## Chapter Two

### *Woven by the Grandmothers*

“These old rugs were woven by our great-great-great-grandmothers—the grandmothers. We never knew them, but they did all this work. I hope that our kids and our grandkids will continue to weave and pass it on.”<sup>77</sup> These are among the first words encountered by a visitor to *Woven by the Grandmothers: Nineteenth-Century Navajo Textiles from the National Museum of the American Indian*. It is a quote from Irene Clark, a Navajo weaver, which explains the inspiration for the title of the exhibition and established the importance of indigenous voices in the show. These words also reminded viewers that the rugs and blankets were parts of contemporary culture and traditions that were directly connected to those older objects that formed the foundation of the NMAI collection of Navajo textiles.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the George Gustav Heye Center in New York functioned as an experimental site for exhibitions and policies that would eventually be put into place at the NMAI in Washington, D.C. The NMAI was a culmination of years of history and interaction between indigenous communities, museums, and the U.S. government. From its evolution as a private collection to a public museum that existed throughout the Red Power movement to the NMAI as part of the Smithsonian, which holds its own history in relation to the development of the United States. The 1996 exhibition, *Woven by the Grandmothers*, together with the 1995 workshop in Tsaile, Arizona, illustrate the results of these experimental first few years and the efforts of the NMAI. The 1995 workshop was the main community consultation of the exhibition which involved the installation of twenty-four Navajo textiles and a subsequent information gathering session led by the NMAI. *Woven by the Grandmothers* also demonstrates

<sup>77</sup> Eulalie H. Bonar, “Exhibition Script: Panel Text 1.1, Statement of Intent,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 3.

how the NMAI curators paid heed to the commitments Richard West laid out when it was founded.

*Woven by the Grandmothers* opened on October 6, 1996 in New York City, the fifth exhibition to be shown at the George Gustav Heye Center under the umbrella of the NMAI. Organized by D. Y. Begay (Navajo, born into Tó'tsohnii Clan, born from Táchii'nii Clan), Kalley Keams (Navajo), and Wesley Thomas (Navajo), it aimed to show the NMAI's collection of Navajo textiles, while also utilizing conservation and collections management information gleaned from the workshop.<sup>78</sup>

The history of the blankets is closely linked to the history of collecting and the strategies of the NMAI to reconcile its practices with that history. Exhibition materials grappled with this difficult history, including how the blankets got to the NMAI, who the original collectors were, and how *Woven by the Grandmothers* chose to represent it.

### **History of the Navajo Blanket**

Navajo textiles have served as commodities since their earliest years of production, generally accepted by scholars to have begun in the late 1600s with the arrival of Spanish sheep to the Americas.<sup>79</sup> An introductory text for *Woven by the Grandmothers* explains: “[the] Navajo tradition of weaving is embodied in the weaving process” and directly connected to Navajo religion, oral history, language, and *k'é*, or family structure.<sup>80</sup> The Navajo adapted their weaving to suit changing markets, as more European influence came into play, incorporating new

<sup>78</sup> Eulalie Bonar, *Woven by the Grandmothers: Nineteenth-Century Navajo Textiles from the National Museum of the American Indian* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>79</sup> The date of the first Navajo weavings is mostly unknown and widely debated. Some anthropologists argue that they started as early as 1400 A.D., learning from the Pueblo upon their arrival in the Southwest, while others point to Spanish colonial records dating back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>80</sup> “Exhibition Script,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 2.

patterns, colors, and even materials.<sup>81</sup> Such changes are seen in the exhibition, in blankets made throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Blankets made in the “Classic Period” (ca. 1650-1863), are some of the Navajo’s best known and valued blankets. This was a period of relative harmony for the Navajo, and intertribal and non-indigenous trade was lucrative. The products ranged from thick utility blankets (*diyugis*) to wearing blankets. Wearing blankets are blankets made to be worn and are manufactured for daily use, whether that be indigenous or non-indigenous. These wearing blankets are the focus of the exhibit.<sup>82</sup> The majority of Classic Period-blankets had simple banded patterns, or stripes in plain weave and twill weave. Chief blankets featured prominently in the exhibit and are the best-known type of Classic Period blankets. Chief blankets were, as the name suggests, worn across the shoulders of a Chief, clan leader, or other person of high social or financial status, and thus were of very high quality. They can be identified through their horizontal stripes of reds, blues, and blacks, as well as their use of expensive wools and yarns.<sup>83</sup>

The “Transition Period” (1863-1900) began as the Navajo’s relationship with the U.S. broke down. In 1863, in an effort to limit violent Navajo conflicts with settlers, the U.S. government incarcerated more than eight thousand Navajo at Hwééldi (Bosque Redondo, New Mexico), where they were held captive for four years.<sup>84</sup> This was the beginning of a U.S. operation to control and force the Navajo to “assimilate.” The U.S. government wanted to open Navajo land to settlement and agriculture, and so sought the removal of the Navajo from that land. During their imprisonment at Bosque Redondo, the Navajo weavers had to use recycled

<sup>81</sup> Kathy M’Closkey, *Swept Under the Rug: A Hidden History of Navajo Weaving* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 21.

<sup>82</sup> Bonar, *Woven by the Grandmothers*, 1.

<sup>83</sup> M’Closkey, *Swept Under the Rug*, 259.

<sup>84</sup> Roseann Sandoval and Paul G. Zolbrod, *Weaving a World: Textiles and the Navajo Way of Seeing* (Santa Fe: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 17.



and commercial yarns provided by the U.S. government, rather than the handmade yarns they had traditionally produced from their sheep.<sup>85</sup> The new materials caused a distinct shift in the style and appearance of the textiles they created; the new styles persisted after their release four years later. By then, thirty percent of Navajo prisoners had died and the U.S. had taken over the majority of Navajo land, allowing settlers to destroy Navajo homes, pastures, and livestock.

Nearly a century later, in 1968, the government set aside a 3.5-million-acre reservation which included a portion of the Navajos' previous land and provided sheep so they could support themselves through weaving.<sup>86</sup> Even with the sheep, the wool was insufficient. Textiles made during this time therefore continued to incorporate commercial materials that had been introduced during their imprisonment.<sup>87</sup>

Transition Period-textiles were distinguished by zig zag and diamond patterns and the use of synthetic dyes and commercially spun yarns. Textile production increased by over 800 percent from 1870 to 1920 and the majority of textiles were sold to non-tribal members; intertribal trade had predominated in the Classic Period.<sup>88</sup> The Navajo also had less autonomy in the textile trade after the introduction of government-licensed traders, who functioned as the only legal connection between the Navajo and the national and global textile market. The traders would trade tools, saddles, and other utilitarian items to the Navajo in exchange for a textile, and then sell the textiles at a profit to non-indigenous men.<sup>89</sup> This led to a diminishing of bargaining power on the part of the Navajo, and, combined with government regulations that limited wool

<sup>85</sup> Sandoval and Zolbrod, *Weaving a World: Textiles and the Navajo Way of Seeing*, 17.

<sup>86</sup> M'Closeky, *Swept Under the Rug*, 122.

<sup>87</sup> Laurie D. Webster, "Changing Markets for Navajo Weaving" in *Navajo Textiles: The Crane Collection at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science*, eds. Laurie D. Webster, Louise Stiver, D.Y. Begay, and Lynda Teller Pete (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2017), 57.

<sup>88</sup> M'Closeky, *Swept Under the Rug*, 122.

<sup>89</sup> Webster, "Changing Markets for Navajo Weaving," 59.

buyers on reservations, resulted in an economic system of weaving that greatly benefitted the white, settler traders, and cheated the Navajo out of money that was necessary for their survival.

Transition Period blankets are directly linked to the oppression of the Navajo and seizure of Navajo funds, land, and livestock by the federal government and this history was an important part of the *Woven by the Grandmothers* exhibit. Although most pieces in *Woven by the Grandmothers* were acquired legally, it was through a system that was designed to prevent the Navajo from profiting from work that historically had allowed them to thrive.

Blankets made their way to the NMAI collection through a variety of routes. Each collector had a different role in the history of Navajo weaving. They ranged from military personnel to doctors to journalists who accompanied archaeological expeditions.

One collector, Douglas D. Graham, collected eight of the forty-two blankets in *Woven by the Grandmothers*. He was a U.S. Indian Agent in 1903, and responsible for implementing federal policy aimed at assimilating indigenous communities.<sup>90</sup> Indian Agents worked closely with the Navajo and while some did their jobs honorably, others would take money from the Navajo's annuities or collude with settlers to steal Navajo land.<sup>91</sup> U.S. Agents to exercised significant control over the indigenous communities, affecting their wellbeing and economy through the enforcement of U.S. policies, including those that affected the weaving industry. Although there is not a ton of information on how Graham acquired his collection, it is likely that he bought or traded for them through outposts in Zuni or directly from Navajos.<sup>92</sup>

The conflicting interests of the U.S. Government and Navajo textile trade were even more apparent with collectors who acquired blankets while serving as generals or lieutenants in

<sup>90</sup> Bonar, *Woven by the Grandmothers*, 174.

<sup>91</sup> David J. Wishart, "Indian Agents," *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*. University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2011, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.pg.032>. (Accessed April 25, 2020).

<sup>92</sup> Bonar, *Woven by the Grandmothers*, 174.

the U.S. military. While some military personnel acquired the objects through legal trade, a few obtained blankets through coercion or force. According to the *Woven by the Grandmothers* catalogue, Eugene Beauharnais Beaumont, a colonel who was first placed in command in Texas, “collected the blanket at the surrender of Naiche.”<sup>93</sup> This phrasing glosses over the violent circumstances involved in his obtaining the blanket. The word “collect” does not invoke images of war, which was a key factor in the historical context of the transfer of the blanket. Beaumont obtained the blanket when Naiche, a chief of the Chiricahua band of Apache, surrendered to him and his troops at Fort Bowie in Arizona.<sup>94</sup> This followed after his years in Texas, fighting against multiple indigenous groups including the Kickapoo and Comanches. Based on Colonel Beaumont’s involvement in the Indian Wars during the time of the “collection” and the history of U.S. brutality against the indigenous peoples, it is an obfuscation that the NMAI would use a docile word like “collected.” Collection implies that a simple, non-violent transaction took place, and obscures the complicated historical context that surrounded the exchange. Even if the blanket was surrendered peacefully, the changing of hands only happened because of the U.S. creation of reservations. In this case, the NMAI chose to ignore that aspect of the object’s collection history.

Within the publication there were mixed results in the recounting of the Navajo’s textile history and the role of specific collectors in that history. I will go on to demonstrate how the exhibition *Woven by the Grandmothers* situated this difficult history within the wall text and display decisions using community consultations and narratives from contemporary Navajo weavers. The exhibition shows how curators interpreted the NMAI’s mission and the Heye

<sup>93</sup> Bonar, *Woven by the Grandmothers*, 174.

<sup>94</sup> It is likely that Naiche obtained it through intertribal trading with the Navajo. The Chiricahua band of Apache live in the southwest corner of New Mexico and are culturally related to the Navajo.

Center's policies in the formation of display and conservation decisions made specifically for the show.

### **Examination of *Woven by the Grandmothers***

*Woven by the Grandmothers* officially opened in the Heye Center on October 6, 1996 after years of research and outreach. After three months in New York, the exhibit traveled to the Navajo Nation Museum, Library, and Visitors Center in Window Rock, Arizona; the National Museum of Women in the Arts in D.C.; and the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona.<sup>95</sup> These venues were intended to fulfill the NMAI's commitment to a "fourth museum."

Eulalie H. Bonar, the in-house NMAI curator who oversaw the exhibition, described the goals of the exhibition and the catalogue as:

[...] to share with the public the aesthetics of historic Navajo weaving [...] and—most critically—the cultural significance of the weavings in contemporary Navajo life, as voiced by Navajo participants in the project. Most of all, we hope that this volume will succeed in bringing images of these masterpieces of weaving, together with information about the collection, into the homes of Navajo weavers, their families, and the Navajo community.<sup>96</sup>

The first half of the statement situates the information that the NMAI and its curators wanted to come across to the visitors of the show—bringing the contemporary cultural significance of the art to the forefront. The exhibition was able to refer back to the difficult history of the blankets and their creators by offering it in relation to present Navajo voices. The second half of the statement indirectly speaks to the creation and purpose of the exhibition publication and the 1995 workshop in Arizona. Bonar emphasizes the importance of making this material accessible to the Navajo community so that they can continue to feel connected to the blankets in the collection.

<sup>95</sup> Smithsonian Institution, "Exhibitions: Woven by the Grandmothers: Nineteenth-Century Navajo Textiles from the National Museum of the American Indian," *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=303>. (Accessed May 2, 2020).

<sup>96</sup> Bonar, *Woven by the Grandmothers*, 1.

Furthermore, Bonar identifies that the show itself, situated in New York, is inaccessible to the Navajo living in Arizona, and that the publication might be the only way that continuing generations can experience these blankets.

### **The 1995 Workshop and Installation in Tsaile, Arizona**

The June 1995 workshop was organized by the NMAI in collaboration with Navajo Community College (NCC) and was held at the Hatathli Museum on NCC's campus in Tsaile, Arizona. The NMAI transported twenty-four blankets from the NMAI collection to the Hatathli museum for a temporary installation, open to the public, and workshop, open to invited Navajo weavers. During the workshop, the Navajo weavers discussed the blankets and the role of weaving in their lives and advised the museum on conservation and storage. The majority of pre-reservation Navajo blankets had been collected and removed from the reservation by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by traders and dealers, which meant that while this collection had preserved the blankets, it had also taken them out of the hands of the Navajo. For many Navajo weavers and community members, this workshop marked the first time they had seen or interacted with the Classic Period, pre-reservation blankets.<sup>97</sup> The workshop functioned not only as a way to temporarily bring some of the blankets back to Navajo land, but also as an opportunity for the NMAI to gather information on the history, display, and preservation of the blankets according to the Navajo, making it part of the larger effort by the NMAI to increase collaboration and establish relationships with indigenous communities throughout the United States.

The workshop lasted for two weeks: three days for installation, three days for the display to be open to the public, two days for a workshop that was for Navajo weavers, and then a final

<sup>97</sup> Heald and Ash-Milby, *Woven by the Grandmothers: Twenty-Four Blankets Travel to the Navajo Nation*, 335.

few days for installation. Although the workshop had originally been planned for two days following the display, late local press coverage caused community interest to gain momentum just as the show was about close. Due to this, the NMAI and NCC decided to extend the installation to run concurrently with the workshop. This brought up issues of keeping the second day of the workshop exclusive to Navajo weavers especially as some weavers arrived with their entire families. Ultimately, the NMAI decided to remain flexible, allowing blankets to be moved back and forth between the workshop and installation spaces and extending their workshop invitations to the weavers' families.<sup>98</sup>

Each workshop day began with a Navajo blessing for the blankets and participants, and an introduction by Harry Walters. This introduction, as well as other talks, was given in both English and Diné, the Navajo language. An NMAI conservator presented on standard museum-handling practices, but the weavers were given the option of wearing white cotton gloves or just cleaning their hands before handling. This showed a willingness on the part of the NMAI to assist the weavers' stated desires to physical touch the blankets. Throughout the workshop, weavers selected blankets they wanted to examine and then staff members would bring them over. They were never removed from their mounts, but corners and sides were turned over to allow for examination. The NMAI also provided information to the Navajo weavers about yarn and fabric structure, dye analyses, and estimated dates of fabrication, compiled by Joe Ben Wheat, a Southwest textile specialist. These findings were the focus of discussion and debate. The weavers argued against some of the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century dates, which were determined using fiber and dye analysis, expecting the blankets to have aged more since their creation than they had.<sup>99</sup> This, perhaps, showed how the Navajo weavers were used to interacting with textiles that

<sup>98</sup> Heald and Ash-Milby, *Woven by the Grandmothers: Twenty-Four Blankets Travel to the Navajo Nation*, 340.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

were used on a frequent basis, rather than ones that had been conserved in collections. This represented the expectation of the Navajo that these blankets should be continually in use, in direct contrast from their carefully maintained existence in the NMAI's collection.

Eight staff from the NMAI and a group of eight advisers who were Navajo and non-indigenous scholars and weavers were in charge of inspecting the facilities and shipping the blankets. This varied group ensured that different perspectives were represented while formulating the methods of shipping, both from museum standpoints and from people who were familiar with the indigenous history and creation of the blankets. While there were a variety of less than ideal conditions surrounding the buildings and conditions of the blankets, problems such as warp instability and minor insect damage were deemed by NMAI conservators to be slight in comparison to the importance of lending the textiles. The NMAI conservators also worked diligently to reduce the risk of damage to the blankets while they were in Tsaiile. While conservators were apprehensive about placing collection objects at risk, their priority was to provide safe access to the objects for the Navajo, not impede the hands-on contact that was necessary to the success of the workshop.<sup>100</sup> This showed a significant departure from the ethics taught in conservation graduate and training programs, which taught that the wellbeing and preservation of the object was valued above all else.<sup>101</sup> Generally, however, the blankets were in good condition for travel because they had recently been treated and stabilized by outside contract conservators.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Heald, Ash-Milby, *Woven by the Grandmothers: Twenty-Four Blankets Travel to the Navajo Nation*, 336-337.

<sup>101</sup> Clavir, "Reflections on Changes in Museums and the Conservation of Collections from Indigenous Peoples," 100.

<sup>102</sup> Heald, Ash-Milby, *Woven by the Grandmothers: Twenty-Four Blankets Travel to the Navajo Nation*, 337.

As was seen in the conservation practices that allowed for fragile items to travel and be handled by non-conservators, information gleaned from this workshop challenged traditionally accepted museum standards about collections care, as well as understandings about display and signage in the exhibition space. The blankets were mounted on slant boards and elevated, placing the textiles at eye level, also acting as forms for transportation when moving the textiles between the installation and the workshop.<sup>103</sup> This was different from the stagnant wall mounts that were common for textiles in museums. This display system was simple, but effective. It allowed Navajo community members to look closely at the textiles, with very few barriers between, while ensuring quick and easy movement of the blankets with minimal handling of the blankets by NMAI staff.

Navajo interactions with signage during the public viewing upended museum notions about “touching” and interpretations about the intentions of verbal and written directions for object interaction. Originally the NMAI had decided that public display would be completely hands-off while the workshop would be hands-on. To announce this in a way that was not intrusive to Navajo viewers and did not alienate and distance Navajo viewers from their cultural heritage, the NMAI placed staff and student volunteers around the gallery to ask people not to touch the textiles. However, many visitors felt inclined to touch the textiles and verbal directions were seen as insulting which further emphasized the double standard of touching between workshop participants and other visitors. After the first day of the installation, the ten most stable textiles were designated as “touchable” and anyone interested could ask staff members to lead them to the “touchable” blankets, as indicated by signs throughout the exhibition.<sup>104</sup> This situation emphasized the necessity for community outreach in the implementation of new

<sup>103</sup> Heald and Ash-Milby, *Woven by the Grandmothers: Twenty-Four Blankets Travel to the Navajo Nation*, 339.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.



policies. For some museum staff, signage seemed to be accepted as objective, yet it was clear that when interacting with cultural heritage there needed to be purposeful discussions about what proper etiquette and respectfulness would look like in all aspects of the exhibition design. Interactions like these made clear the importance of community consultations in gathering information, establishing relationships between the NMAI and the Navajo, and providing access to the NMAI's collection for Navajo who were unable to travel to D.C..

### **The Exhibition at the George Gustav Heye Center**

Forty-four Navajo blankets were exhibited in *Woven by the Grandmothers*. They included *biil*, traditional two-piece dresses; chief blankets; sarapes; mantas, women's striped shoulder blankets; and *diyogí*, thick, everyday blankets.<sup>105</sup> Navajo input given at the time of the workshop created a purposeful display strategy. Based on Navajo commentary, the NMAI was instructed to exhibit the blankets in a three-dimensional context, as they would have been worn, rather than the two-dimensional boards of the workshop, without displaying them on human-like forms. This resulted in abstract forms that evoked common postures and represented different ages and gender. These forms did not look like mannequins yet invoked an understanding of humanness. The displays were placed in a variety of stances, such as standing, kneeling, and sitting, both alone and in family groups (Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9).<sup>106</sup> As with the moccasin display in *All Roads Are Good*, the display of the blankets allowed visitors to imagine the blankets serving their original use. The combination of the display of the blankets in this manner and the surrounding quotes from Navajo people would have forced visitors to reckon with the living

<sup>105</sup> Bonar, "Exhibition Script: Panel Text 1.1, Statement of Intent," 3.

<sup>106</sup> Gwen Spicer and Susan Heald, "Singular Solutions: Navajo Blanket Form," in *Museum Mannequins: A Guide for Creating the Perfect Fit*, eds. Margot Brunn and Joanne White (Edmonton: Alberta Regional Group of Conservators, 2002), 29.

nature of the blankets and the clear ancestral and emotional ties that the Navajo have to the blankets.

The exhibit began with introductory panels by Eulalie H. Bonar, D. Y. Begay, Kalley Keams, and Wesley Thomas. Bonar provided historical commentary based on her experience as an anthropologist and museum professional and acknowledged the work of those who participated in the workshop at NCC.<sup>107</sup> Begay, Keams, and Thomas's panels emphasized the idea that the contemporary practice of weaving to the Navajo is directly related to the practice of weaving when the blankets were created, and that weaving, in particular, is evidence of the Navajo's tenacity and will to survive throughout many hardships. In a joint panel, Begay, Keams, and Thomas spoke of the tradition of Navajo weaving, accentuating themes of family and community, and centering the idea that the weaving process is more important than the finished product. This concept of weaving, they said, is how the Navajo can still weave like their great-great-grandmothers did even though materials and designs have changed, a concept that continues to guide Navajo weavers during the present day. They hinted briefly at the troubled past of Navajo weavers by writing, "Our mothers and fathers encourage us to continue to weave as they have and as our grandmothers have; they say it is a way of survival. It is the Navajo way."<sup>108</sup>

These introductory panels set the tone for the exhibit, marking its focus as one of exploring contemporary Navajo culture through century-old blankets, interpreted and presented through Navajo voices. The exhibition was divided into four sections: "Entering the Grandmothers' Circle," "Designs," "Stories," and "*K'É* (Relations)." The first section focused on

<sup>107</sup> Bonar, "Exhibition Script: Panel Text 1.1, Statement of Intent," 3.

<sup>108</sup> D.Y. Begay, Kalley Keams, and Wesley Thomas, "Exhibition Script: Panel Text 1.0, Introductory Area," Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 2.

the role of the family in weaving, focusing on Navajo grandmothers as maintainers of culture, and the family effort that it takes, especially on the matrilineal side, to weave. This section particularly emphasized the continuity of weaving and the presence of it in contemporary Navajo lives. It also highlighted the ancestral connections that contemporary Navajo weavers hold to the blankets and the process of weaving. Next to some object labels, which had the type of blanket, approximate year created, materials, and collection, there were statements or stories from a Navajo weaver or one of the co-curators. On one label, next to a blanket made of handspun wool and raveled yarn (Figure 1), Laura Cleveland, one of the weavers who participated in the workshop, says, “My mother, my grandmother, and my aunts were weavers...It was a family effort...My mother and aunt would weave the designs, and I would fill in the spaces.”<sup>109</sup> Not only did this harken back to the title of the exhibition, but it underscored how weaving followed familial lines, allowing Cleveland to associate these blankets with memories of her family and her own experience weaving.

The next section was “Stories,” which focused on the ongoing history of the blankets in the exhibition, and the conditions under which they were woven. By devoting an entire section to the historical context, the curators ensured that the history of oppression surrounding the creation of the blankets was addressed, as were Navajo reactions and thoughts on this history. “Stories” began with a longer panel text written by Bonar that focused on the Navajo internment at Bosque Redondo and the period following their release. It highlighted the changes that the Navajo and their weaving underwent as a result of this imprisonment and the expansion of the railway. Bonar also mentioned some of the army officers who collected the textiles in the exhibition, illustrating

<sup>109</sup> Laura Cleveland, “Exhibition Script: Object Label 19/3022,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 6.

that the acquisition of pieces in the collection was directly tied to U.S. military intervention.<sup>110</sup> This entire text served as a reminder to visitors that, although the hardships brought upon the Navajo were great, they continued to adapt to the changing circumstances. In the following panel texts, Thomas, Begay, and Keams added emotional and cultural significance to these historical events. Thomas first established that in the Navajo language there is no word for “history” because in Navajo, stories are ongoing and are told and retold. He writes, “The stories told here teach us about the hardships and losses suffered by the Navajo people in the last century. They also tell of the will to survive.”<sup>111</sup> This not only adds to the significance of the ability of the Navajo to create blankets during the Bosque Redondo period, but also, by using the phrase “in the last century,” emphasizes that the injustices and hardships done to the Navajo were not contained to the nineteenth century. Rather, they have continued up into the present and the input by Navajo weavers is a testament to their survival. Begay and Keams echo these sentiments, with Begay recalling her great-great-grandmother who was imprisoned at Bosque Redondo,<sup>112</sup> and Keams speaking about her emotional attachment to the blankets and appreciation to the weavers who made them.<sup>113</sup>

The individual object labels add to and solidify the messages Bonar, Begay, Keams, and Thomas gave about history and the familial and emotional ties to those stories. A set of these labels emphasize how textiles were seen as both methods of survival and reminders of hardship. In the last object label of the section, for a *biil* (woven dress) (Figures 2 and 3), Thomas brings

<sup>110</sup> Eulalie H. Bonar, “Exhibition Script: Panel Text 3.0,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Wesley Thomas, “Exhibition Script: Panel Text 3.1,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 8.

<sup>112</sup> D.Y. Begay, “Exhibition Script: Panel Text 3.2,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 9.

<sup>113</sup> Kalley Keams, “Exhibition Script: Panel Text 3.3,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 9.

his original message about survival and hardship home. He writes, “*Biil* were probably considered immune to bullets and arrows at a time when the people were on the run from the U.S. soldiers[...]they shielded and protected Navajo women, the bearers of human life.”<sup>114</sup> This statement is significant for a couple of reasons, the first being that these textiles were seen to have physical and spiritual powers, specifically against the U.S. soldiers, which brings a whole different context to how the Navajo interacted with weaving and the U.S. forces and government at the time. Second, the major role of Navajo women in the creation of these blankets is emphasized throughout the exhibition, and the fact that Thomas mentions that a *biil* would protect Navajo women, the creators of human life and of these blankets, adds to the necessity of their role in culture and in the survival of Navajo life. On another label, Glenabah Hardy, a participant in the workshop, is quoted about the sadness she feels when she looks at the blankets, although it is not apparent whether or not she is sad because of the reminder of her childhood or because of the association of hardship the blanket brings.<sup>115</sup>

The object labels also identify the ability of the Navajo to adapt and repurpose materials in a way that is in line with Navajo weaving traditions. Next to a blanket made from raveled yarn, which is created from cloth that has been taken apart, and commercial yarn (Figure 4), Thomas writes, “This is a blanket made from raveled weft, probably from commercial cloth acquired at Fort Union and vicinity—material once used by European-Americans, undone and re-created in another world, the world of the Dine’é.”<sup>116</sup> With this observation, Thomas is pointing out that the Navajo repurposed and recreated European-American materials into

<sup>114</sup> Wesley Thomas, “Exhibition Script: Object Label 20/7822; 20/7823,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 11.

<sup>115</sup> Glenabah Hardy, “Exhibition Script: Object Label 15/7719,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 10.

<sup>116</sup> Wesley Thomas, “Exhibition Script: Object Label 23/2814,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 10.

blankets that hold significance and meaning to the Navajo. This expands upon the point that the Navajo adapted to material changes, taking it one step further by emphasizing that the material was made the Navajo's own by being part of the weaving process. Kathleen Ash-Milby, a Navajo researcher for the exhibition, further stresses the layer of influence in Navajo textiles by writing on an object label, "The cross-cultural exchange in this weaving is three-fold. The blanket is Navajo woven. The Brulé Sioux decorated it with quillwork and added two buttons—one of German silver and the other of brass."<sup>117</sup>

The third section of the exhibition, "Designs," focused on materials, patterns, and colors that were used in the blankets. The section highlighted the changes in materials and designs throughout the 1800s and significance of particular ones. As in the other sections, Bonar introduced "Designs" by giving some historical background from early Navajo garments and their development of a unique weaving style to design changes in the early 1800s and after the Navajo's release from Bosque Redondo.<sup>118</sup> In conjunction with the object labels and panel texts, this identified Navajo ideologies that centered the process of weaving, rather than the final product. These ideologies included the need for weavers to always leave room for improvement, the use of design as a medium for the process, and the ability to adapt to changing materials and environments. Next to a blanket made from handspun wool (Figure 5), Harry Walters was quoted as saying, "In this weaving, one of the black stripes is wider than the others. It was probably not a mistake but done on purpose so that the weaving would not be perfect. If a weaver makes a perfect rug, it means there is no room for improvement."<sup>119</sup> By pointing out this design choice,

<sup>117</sup> Kathleen E. Ash-Milby, "Exhibition Script: Object Label 20/1339," Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 11.

<sup>118</sup> Eulalie H. Bonar, "Exhibition Script: Panel Text 4.0," Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 12.

<sup>119</sup> Harry Walters, "Exhibition Script: Object Label 22/9191," Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 14.

Walters emphasizing that the design in the specific textile is a medium for the process of weaving. While the design is indicative of some significance and displays the individuality of the weaver, having this extra line, what Walters and Navajo weavers call a “spirit line,” is a way to continually improve on the process of weaving. This point connects to the larger exhibition theme of survival in Keams’s panel text at the beginning of the section, writing, “Weavers will use new materials, designs, and colors just to get a kick out of it, to feel how it would be to use something new. This one cultural trait has helped us to survive, and to thrive.”<sup>120</sup> This entire section works to solidify the point that throughout periods of major change, the process remained ongoing and the weavers evolved to adapt to their changing materials and surroundings, allowing for the survival of the Navajo and of their weaving.

The final section, “*K’É* (Relations),” explored the emotional and spiritual resonance of Navajo weaving. The opening panel focused on relationships and memories between Navajo community members: “*K’é* is a relationship that is carried on from one generation to the next [...] *K’é* determines your identity. It is the heart of the relationships that people have, not just within families, but within the tribe itself.”<sup>121</sup> This brought the exhibition back to its title by focusing on familial associations and specific instances of the broader survival that the show emphasized so greatly. While not speaking of the oppression as directly as “Stories” did, this section allowed the curators to express the importance of the blankets for remembering Navajo ancestors and for creating a sense of belonging within the Navajo people, even while the U.S. worked to break that belonging apart. Keams wrote, “For many weavers they are a way to connect with our great-great-grandmothers. They can also give our children a sense of pride in

<sup>120</sup> Kalley Keams, “Exhibition Script: Panel Text 4.2,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 13.

<sup>121</sup> Wesley Thomas, “Exhibition Script: Panel Text 5.1,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 16.

who they are. They can give our children the kind of self-respect they need to face the two worlds that they must live in.”<sup>122</sup> Keams implied that the blankets allow younger generations to feel connected to their past and Navajo heritage, even as they were forced to straddle an existence as both a partially assimilated citizen of the United States and a member of the Navajo Nation. Inez Yazzie, a Navajo weaver, echoed this, saying, “When I was twelve years old, I set up a loom, strung the warp, and started weaving. But it was time to go back to school, and I didn’t finish the rug. In boarding school, they told us to forget our language, forget our traditions.”<sup>123</sup> The exhibit itself existed at an interesting crossroads by being part of a federally funded institution which had the ability to highlight contemporary injustices done to indigenous communities by the U.S. government. By including these two quotes, the curators highlighted the hypocrisy of the displaying the blankets with these quotes in a U.S.-owned building and institution.

Through *Woven by the Grandmothers*, the NMAI indicated its commitment to rethinking traditional museum practice, both in terms of object display and the source of authority of the objects. There were few additional treatments to the textiles since the majority of them had already been treated prior to the workshop. The soft forms used for display caused some conservation concerns about deformity, but those were considered less important than presenting the blankets in a manner in line with the preferences of the Navajo. These concerns ended up being well-founded because deformations prevented a few of the textiles from being able to be installed at Window Rock.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Kalley Keams, “Exhibition Script: Panel Text 5.2,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 16.

<sup>123</sup> Inez Yazzie, “Exhibition Script: Object Label 19/3039,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B11\_F25, 17.

<sup>124</sup> “Email between Susan Heald and Allan Kaneshiro,” Smithsonian Institution Archives. Accession 08-030, SIA\_08-030\_B07\_F02.



From the starting point of critiques of the first three shows at the Heye Center, *Woven by the Grandmothers* showed improvements in terms of its inclusion of difficult historical events, clear inclusion of scholarship at the effort of Bonar, and effective community consultation practices. From its exhibition decisions to its status as a traveling exhibition, the NMAI displayed a clear commitment to fulfilling the mission and vision of the NMAI and engaging with the goals set forward by director Richard West. *Woven by the Grandmothers* was the inaugural exhibition for the Navajo Nation Museum and was the first attempt at Richard West's idea for a "fourth museum." While the workshop had accomplished the museum's stated goals of bring indigenous objects to their ancestral land, the full installation of the exhibit in Navajo territory was even more powerful. The workshop had allowed the limited numbers of Navajo to look at the textiles but the exhibition offered explanations and interpretation by Navajo voices and demonstrated how input from the workshop was incorporated. The continued commitment to creating a "fourth museum" by exhibiting the show at locations all over the country showed the value the NMAI placed on accessibility of their collections and the necessity for indigenous communities to see their collaborations come to fruition.

An argument that Sarah Zurier, a graduate student and reviewer of the 1994 inaugural Heye Center exhibitions, was one of labor distribution of indigenous collaborators as seen through the institutional avoidance of the history of indigenous communities.<sup>125</sup> While it is unclear whether the Navajo community members were compensated for their time, they were provided credit throughout the exhibition for specific quotes on objects labels and for their effort in both the introductory panel and the credits panel at the end. *Woven by the Grandmothers* seems to have circumnavigated the second part of the problem, involving labor, by making sure

<sup>125</sup> Zurier, "Collections Same, Museum Different," 192.

that all of leadership on the project was Navajo, meaning that there were fewer opportunities of power imbalance and more instances of indigenous representation within the institution. This did not automatically fix the problem of avoiding tragic history but *Woven by the Grandmothers* did include information about Navajo imprisonment at Bosque Redondo and demonstrated its direct effects on weaving. Quotations of Navajo contributors connected these historic events to ongoing oppression today. In a review of the exhibition at The Heard Museum, Laurie Webster of Arizona State Museum states, “Ostensibly a project about weaving, this is really an exploration of contemporary Navajo culture interpreted largely through Navajo eyes.”<sup>126</sup> While this is a simplification of the exhibition’s engagement with the historical context of the textiles, it gets at the heart of the exhibition’s purpose to represent Navajo culture and history through the Navajo and the NMAI’s overall purpose to allow indigenous communities to control their representation in museums.

According to press attention and visitor numbers, *Woven by the Grandmothers* was a blockbuster show. It received rave reviews from a variety of publications. But perhaps the one that best illustrates the show’s significance is from *Sunny Side*, a local Window Rock, Arizona newspaper: “These creations of the Navajo ancestors were displayed the way they intended—as clothing. And as you walk through the softly lit exhibit you cannot help but see how magnificently beautiful and fiercely proud our people, the Navajo, looked.”<sup>127</sup>

<sup>126</sup> Laurie D. Webster, “Exhibit Review Essays: Woven by the Grandmothers,” *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 4 (1998): 999.

<sup>127</sup> Sunny Side, “Ancestors,” *Sunny Side: Navajo Times* 5 (August 1997): 12-13.

## Chapter Three

### The NMAI in Washington, D.C.

On the National Mall, directly across from the imposing U.S. Capitol Building, sits a curvilinear structure made out of a light-colored stone, reminiscent of a wind-eroded rock formation in the southwest United States. This building, distinct amongst the many national museums in this area of Washington, D.C., is home to the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). Designed by and for indigenous peoples, the architecture of the building represents indigenous conceptions of life and nature. The building is aligned perfectly to the cardinal directions, with directional markers from Hawai'i, Northwest Territories in Canada, Monocacy Valley, MD, and Puerto Williams, Chile. The curated landscape around the museum invokes a return to the natural landscape of the Potomac region prior to European settlement and speaks to the indigenous relationship to land. Groupings of trees, plants, and shrubs reflect the hardwood forests common in the Blue Ridge Mountains, which gave indigenous communities materials for shelter, food, and medicine. The “wetlands” area represents the original Chesapeake Bay environment before European settlement, alongside a meadow holding grasses, wildflowers, and shrubs used by traditional healers, and traditional croplands. Surrounding the museum are Grandfather Rocks to welcome visitors and emphasize the long relationship between indigenous peoples and the environment.<sup>128</sup>

The building itself, which opened on September 21, 2004, is an outward representation of the information gathered during the prior fourteen years; NMAI efforts, led by community collaborations between NMAI staff and indigenous communities, resulted in *The Way of Our*

<sup>128</sup> Smithsonian Institution, “Washington, DC: Architecture & Landscape,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/visit/washington/architecture-landscape>. (Accessed April 25, 2020).

*People*, a volume providing guidance for the design of the building. This volume was aided by the indigenous design team of Johnpaul Jones (Cherokee/Choctaw), Donna House (Diné/Oneida), Ramona Sakiestewa (Hopi), and the architecture firms Jones & Jones, SmithGroup, and the Native American Design Collective.<sup>129</sup> *The Way of Our People* was also instrumental in the exhibition development for the inaugural D.C. exhibitions. In order for the NMAI to truly fulfill its commitment to being a place for indigenous community to exist and thrive, it determined that the building had to represent indigenous relations to land and indigenous conceptions about man-made structures. When juxtaposed to the Alexander Hamilton Customs House, the thought that went into the D.C. NMAI building and the final product were indicative of the symbolic power that the exterior of a museum could hold. Furthermore, its placement next to the Capitol symbolized that the United States as a country was ready to grapple with the hardships that were to be represented within the museum's walls.

### **The Inaugural Exhibitions**

The D.C. NMAI opened with one rotating and three semi-permanent exhibitions: *Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser*; *Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities*; *Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories*; and *Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World*. *Native Modernism* stayed up for a year, closing in 2005, *Our Lives* closed in 2015, *Our Peoples* in 2014, and *Our Universes* will remain up until 2021. *Native Modernism* explored themes of contemporary indigenous identity in juxtaposition to expectations of indigenous art, examining the work of two prominent indigenous artists, George Morrison

<sup>129</sup> Smithsonian Institution, "Washington, DC: Architecture & Landscape," *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/visit/washington/architecture-landscape>. (Accessed April 25, 2020).

(Chippewa, 1919-2000) and Allan Houser (Apache, 1914-1994).<sup>130</sup> The exhibition, curated by Truman Lowe, a Ho-Chunk artist and curator of contemporary art at the NMAI, surveyed Morrison's abstract expressionist paintings from the 1950s and 60s and wood collages of the 1970s and 80s and Houser's naturalistic drawings of nudes and sculptural works that changed these naturalistic forms into semi-abstract ones.<sup>131</sup> By exhibiting contemporary indigenous art that could have been found in a modern art museum, this show subverted expectations for the NMAI as a purely historical archive. Instead, *Native Modernism* stated that the experience of indigenous modern art was just as much a part of the pedagogy of the NMAI as the permanent collections of historical objects were. Lowe purposefully decided to display the artworks in the exhibition in the style of a traditional art show, with the objects placed at a distance from each other and minimal object labels. The gallery was divided into two sections—one for Morrison and one for Houser, with a center area that housed pieces from both artists. Within each section, the art was arranged by themes such as works on paper, mother and child figures, and maquettes for Morrison, and wood collages, surrealism, and horizon paintings for Houser.<sup>132</sup> While the thematic arrangement was in line with how the NMAI chose to categorize objects in its exhibitions, the other display choices directly contrasted the more crowded and complicated displays of the permanent exhibitions.

Lowe had chosen Morrison and Houser because he believed that the two of them marked the beginning of contemporary indigenous art history. In choosing to exhibit these two artists, the

<sup>130</sup> Smithsonian Institution, "Exhibitions: Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser," *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=926>. (Accessed April 25, 2020).

<sup>131</sup> Aldona Jonaitis and Janet Catherine Berlo, "'Indian Country?' on the National Mall: The Mainstream Press Versus the National Museum of the American Indian," in *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, eds. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 228.

<sup>132</sup> Anya Montiel, "The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser: The Development and Impact of Native Modernism," *American Indian Quarterly* 29, no. 3/4 (2005): 485.

NMAI made a statement not only about the importance of contemporary indigenous art in an indigenous museum, but also about the caliber of the two artists' work. By exhibiting the artwork in the context of an indigenous museum but in the display style of a traditional art museum, Lowe made the point that indigenous art could also be fine art with the potential to be acquired by contemporary art museums like the Hirshhorn or the National Gallery of Art.<sup>133</sup> This point was remarkable at the time and seemed to be something that critics could not get their head around. Paul Richard, of the *Washington Post*, wrote, "This really isn't a show about Indianness. It's a show about 20<sup>th</sup> century art."<sup>134</sup> In writing this, Richard stated that a show about contemporary indigenous art somehow had no place in a museum of indigenous art, which showed that he had an expectation for certain "native" content in the presentation of the Morrison and Houser's artwork. Furthermore, as seen in the *Washington Post* review and others, there was a perception that the NMAI was somehow an inferior place to display fine art, as compared to the National Gallery of Art, ignoring that fact that there had been a historical exclusion of indigenous contemporary art from fine art museums.

The NMAI used the permanent exhibitions, *Our Universes*, *Our Lives*, and *Our Peoples* to focus on different aspects of indigenous history,—spiritual relationships, traditions—contemporary indigenous lives, and their dependency upon each other. The exhibitions were a result of collaboration with 24 indigenous communities throughout the Western Hemisphere, chosen based on geographic diversity and relevance to the exhibit themes. As stipulated in *The Way of the People*, these exhibitions did not focus on specific objects, but rather on the ideas,

<sup>133</sup> Montiel, "The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser: The Development and Impact of Native Modernism," 486.

<sup>134</sup> Jonaitis and Berlo, "'Indian Country?' on the National Mall: The Mainstream Press Versus the National Museum of the American Indian," 229.

implementing a holistic approach that used multi-media to avoid focusing on the art objects.<sup>135</sup> *Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World*, curated by Emil Her Many Horses (Oglala), focused on indigenous philosophies related to the creation and existence of the universe and the resulting spiritual relationship between humans and the natural world. *Our Universes* showed the NMAI's distinct commitment to listening to how communities wanted to be portrayed, allowing them to take the lead on the curation. The exhibition had a central introductory area that presented art objects with cosmological imagery alongside indigenous stories of creation and cosmology. Surrounding that introductory area were eight small community-curated galleries which presented artifacts and distinct ideologies of eight indigenous groups: Santa Clara Pueblo (currently Espanola, New Mexico, USA), Anishinaabe (Hollow Water and Sagkeeng Bands, Manitoba, Canada), Lakota (Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, USA), Quechua (Comunidad de Phaqaqchanta, Cusco, Peru), Hupa (Hoopa Valley, California, USA), Q'eq'chi' Maya (Cobán, Guatemala), Mapuche (Temuco, Chile), and Yup'ik (Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, Alaska, USA).<sup>136</sup> Each gallery entrance displayed photographs and biographies of community curators, which effectively personalized each gallery and gave visitors faces and contemporary people to associate with each worldview. In some galleries, mannequins dressed in traditional clothing, taken from antique dioramas, stood next to television monitors where living elders told their stories about cultural change. For example, in the Lakota section, the painted Lone Dog Winter Count (ca. 1870, which was a tool used to record history and keep

<sup>135</sup> Judith Ostrowitz, "Concourse and Periphery: Planning the National Museum of the American Indian," in *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, eds. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 113.

<sup>136</sup> Smithsonian Institution, "Exhibitions: Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World," *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=530>. (Accessed April 25, 2020).

track of passing years) hung next to contemporary items of clothing and a handmade quilt to show the perpetuating conceptions of time and cosmology in the Lakota community.<sup>137</sup>

*Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories*, curated by Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), examines how indigenous communities survived and maintained traditions throughout years of destruction and oppression. The show aimed to allow indigenous peoples the opportunity to tell their own stories and provide different perspectives into the history of the indigenous people of the western hemisphere. In addition, Smith argued that contact between the western and eastern hemisphere was the most profound event in human history. Smith describes the exhibition as really being nine exhibits: eight of them were collaborations between NMAI curators and people from indigenous communities, and the ninth, which constituted roughly half of the total gallery space, was a NMAI-curated space, titled “Evidence.” The NMAI-curated space aimed to tell the story of indigenous peoples in the western hemisphere, pre-contact, or as Smith called it, “the Big Story.”<sup>138</sup> In this exhibit, the NMAI collaborated with the Seminole Tribe of Florida, Tapirapé (Mato Grosso, Brazil), Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma (USA), Tohono O’odham Nation (Arizona, USA), Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation (North Carolina, USA), Nahua (Guerrero, Mexico), Ka’apor (Maranhão, Brazil), and Wixaritari (Durango, Mexico). Each tribe was represented through their own physical space, after the NMAI-curated gallery, where they were able to display their understandings of their community’s history through central events and oral histories.

By having both a specific community-curated section and an NMAI-curated section, the intention of the exhibition came through as an effort to challenge conceptions about history,

<sup>137</sup> Ostrowitz, “Concourse and Periphery: Planning the National Museum of the American Indian,” 114.

<sup>138</sup> Paul Chaat Smith, “Critical Reflections on the Our Peoples Exhibit: A Curator’s Perspective,” in *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, eds. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 132.



itself, rather than learning about specific details of indigenous history. The display choices of the exhibit also blurred the line between installation art and museum display. The NMAI-curated part of the exhibition began with a large frosted glass wall, with objects placed underneath, that had the word “Evidence” on it. Smith states that this was intended to identify the exhibit as a “beautiful excavation site, where history is buried, lost, and found.”<sup>139</sup> Following the wall visitors could see an installation titled “1491,” which featured a case filled with figurines, made by indigenous groups all over. This installation aimed to call attention to the complexity of the indigenous experience, especially before contact with European nations. The next installation comprised of display cases filled with gold, intending to emphasize the abundance of wealth in precontact America, and maintaining that the colonial search for wealth and resources resulted in the death and dispossession of indigenous peoples.<sup>140</sup> The exhibit paired the cases of gold with unlabeled displays of guns and a case filled with bibles, symbolizing the overwhelming amount of power that was used to obtain the aforementioned wealth. The next installation documented two invasions—Columbus’s and a second that Smith labels as the “biological invasion.” This second invasion took place simultaneous to Columbus’s conquest, and resulted in the deaths of up to 90 percent of the indigenous population. The show continued with a room full of George Catlin reproductions, whose portraits have preserved the identities of indigenous peoples since the 1830s, a portrait of George Gustav Heye, and the creation story of the NMAI. This part of the exhibition reverses the gaze of the viewer onto the history of the museum and how that fit into indigenous history. The exhibition ended with a display on the back wall titled, “All My Relations,” featuring a projection with the names of indigenous groups, some surviving and

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>140</sup> Smith, “Critical Reflections on the Our Peoples Exhibit: A Curator’s Perspective,” 139.

some not, as well as a video that told visitors that “although the past never changes, the way we understand it changes all the time. We say that all histories have agendas, including ours.”<sup>141</sup>

*Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities*, curated by Gabrielle Tayac (Piscataway) Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora), and Cynthia Chavez Lamar (San Felipe), focused on contemporary indigenous lives and specific identities of indigenous peoples in the Western hemisphere, locally and globally. Through stories of the Campo Band of Kumeyaay Indians (California, USA), urban Indian community of Chicago (Illinois, USA), Yakama Nation (Washington State, USA), Igloolik (Nunavut, Canada), Kahnawake (Quebec, Canada), Saint-Laurent Metis (Manitoba, Canada), Kalinago (Carib Territory, Dominica), and Pamunkey Tribe (Virginia, USA), the exhibition aimed to examine the enduring struggles indigenous people encountered to survive economically, preserve their traditions, and remain true to their cultural integrity.<sup>142</sup> The exhibition asked, “Who is Indian?” and “What does it mean to be Indian?” by questioning notions of authenticity, racial purity, and destructive stereotypes.

*Our Lives* opened with a work designed by Rickard consisting of two large screens on either side of the entrance onto which were projected life-size images of people. The people were of all ages, skin tones, sizes, and wearing suits, uniforms, traditional regalia, and sports clothes. They all belonged to contemporary indigenous communities and the caption next to the screen read, “anywhere in the Americas you could be walking with a 21<sup>st</sup> century Native American.”<sup>143</sup> This piece served to guide visitors towards understanding their own narratives and ones they had read about indigenous peoples and how this conflicted with indigenous conceptions of and

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>142</sup> Smithsonian Institution, “Exhibitions: Our Lives: Contemporary Life and identities,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=528>. (Accessed April 25, 2020).

<sup>143</sup> John Bloom, “Exhibition Review: The National Museum of the American Indian,” *American Studies* 46, no. 3/4 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006): 335.

performative aspects of identity. The concept of identity continued to be challenged in an installation titled, “Body and Soul,” which asked four questions: “Is my identity in my appearance?” “Is my identity in my blood?” “Who is Native?” and “Who decides?” The “appearance” and “blood sections” examined the ways the U.S. government identified indigenous people through their skin color and blood quantum<sup>144</sup>, while the “Defining Native” section explored the variety of contemporary indigenous conceptions of self.<sup>145</sup> Throughout the show, the curators and exhibition designers made a deliberate effort to challenge the reliance on Indigenous material culture by using photographs and text panels to present past events of indigenous performance.<sup>146</sup> The inclusion of pieces such as James Luna’s (Luiseño) *The Artifact Piece* commented on the museological historicizing of indigenous activism, death, and hardships, while indicating the NMAI’s conscious effort to remove themselves from this traditional, objectifying approach through a contemporary exhibition and inventive display techniques.

### **Critiques of the Three Permanent Exhibitions**

Unlike *Native Modernism*, which was relatively well-received by indigenous and non-indigenous critics alike, the three permanent exhibitions received more negative reviews from critics, scholars, and community members. Due to their permanence, the curators of *Our Peoples* and *Our Lives* have written essays about the challenges that arose during each exhibition’s development process and the perceived failures. The main critique by non-indigenous reviews

<sup>144</sup> Blood quantum is the amount of Native blood that one possesses, as determined by the number of generations of Native people they descend from. It is the process the federal government uses to determine whether they consider someone Native American. It was initially a system used by the federal government to limit indigenous citizenship but continues to be used as part of many Native nations’ citizenship requirements.

<sup>145</sup> Dean Rader, *Engaged Resistance: American Indian Art, Literature, and Film From Alcatraz to the NMAI* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 220.

<sup>146</sup> Pauline Wakeham, “Performing Reconciliation at the National Museum of the American Indian: Postcolonial Rapprochement and the Politics of Historical Closure,” in *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, eds. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 361.

was the perceived lack of scholarship used and presented in the exhibitions. Edward Rothstein, for *The New York Times*, wrote, “Moreover, since American Indians largely had no detailed written languages and since so much trauma had decimated the tribes, the need for scholarship and analysis of secondary sources is all the more crucial.”<sup>147</sup> Rothstein’s critique both ignores the collaboration with indigenous communities that drove the content of the exhibitions and the importance of oral histories in indigenous communities. Furthermore, the history that indigenous peoples provided worked as a counter-narrative to Eurocentric representations of conquest and colonialization, something that “scholarship” did not necessarily have the ability to offer. In *Our Peoples*, for example, Smith aimed to tell the stories of multiple indigenous communities, arguing that the immutable history of textbooks is misrepresentative of the differing histories that indigenous people have. This exhibition directly argued against the notion of a general “native” history, choosing to forgo traditional scholarship in favor of direct representation of indigenous experiences.

While these critiques rely on Eurocentric and non-indigenous conceptions of history, comments came from both indigenous and non-indigenous viewers regarding the presentation of indigenous history and the lack of traumatic, U.S.-instigated historical events in the exhibitions. These critiques echoed earlier criticisms from reviews of the inaugural exhibitions at the Heye Center, which revealed either a curatorial difficulty in grappling with the history or a purposeful decision to focus on survivance and the concept of history over specific traumatic events. *Our Peoples* bore the brunt of this critique due to its focus on historical narratives of pre-contact indigenous history. In Amy Lonetree’s essay on the NMAI, she argues that *Our Peoples* did not

<sup>147</sup> Edward Rothstein, “Museum With an American Indian Voice,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/21/arts/design/museum-with-an-american-indian-voice.html>.

present specific stories of the atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples alongside the stories of survivance.<sup>148</sup> Elizabeth Castle, a historian, writes, “without recognition of the intergenerational impact of genocide, we cannot understand the unique historical positioning of contemporary Indigenous survival.”<sup>149</sup> While *Our Peoples* did address histories of indigenous peoples before and after contact with European countries, many felt that the curators presented this storyline in a way that was too abstract and not grounded enough in specific historical events and stories. Ultimately, the NMAI-curated section of *Our Peoples*, while ambitious in its goal to tell the “big story,” grounded its message so fully in objects that it forgot to situate those objects in moments in time. Reviews of the exhibition echoed these sentiments in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, with reviewers expressing confusion about the lack of labels and historical events to ground the objects. In addition, the confusion surrounding the NMAI-curated gallery detracted from the eight community-curated sections that focused on pivotal events in the histories of each tribal community.

The critiques of *Our Peoples* highlighted a difficulty that the NMAI faced in 1994 and continued to face upon the opening of the D.C. NMAI in 2004 about how to present history in a way that both challenged Eurocentric notions about time and display and involved indigenous conceptions about history. This presentation of history was made more difficult because the museum also had to remain accessible to its majority non-indigenous visitors. Universally, critics and scholars, including Lonetree, suggested that an effective way for the NMAI to solve some of its issues with portraying a cohesive historical timeline was through sections or installations that focused on specific indigenous people and events and that were grounded in quotes by

<sup>148</sup> Amy Lonetree, “Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI,” 634.

<sup>149</sup> Elizabeth Castle, “Intergenerational Indigenous Women’s Activism from the Local to the Global (and Back Again),” *American Indian Quarterly* 27, nos. 3 & 4 (2003): 842.

collaborators or indigenous curators. This could have been aided by signs that explicitly discussed the NMAI's policy of community collaboration and the community contributions of each show when not immediately apparent. More importantly, signs like these would indicate which area of the exhibitions were curated by NMAI staff only, with little to no input from the co-curators. However, *Our Lives* did include descriptions of the collaboration at the end of the exhibition, which perhaps indicates that the NMAI was already aware of this problem and was working to fix it.

Numerous essays written by NMAI curators and community collaborators shed light onto the successes and challenges that the NMAI encountered during the exhibition development process. The museum faced the overarching challenge of navigating the relationships between community collaborators and NMAI staffers. Cynthia Chavez Lamar wrote about her experience as a curator and direct community contact for *Our Lives*, mentioning difficulties in building trust, incorporating the ideas of community curators, and the role of NMAI staffers in the project. Furthermore, difficult power dynamics arose between NMAI curators and community members. Some NMAI curators felt that the term "community curators" was too gratuitous and implied the lessened authority of the NMAI curator's position and ignored the day-to-day developmental work that NMAI staffers were putting into the show. Since the NMAI relied so heavily upon community input and allowed community curators to make so many important decisions, Chavez Lamar states that some staffers began to feel as if they were facilitators, which took away their agency in decision-making. In reality, while the community curators were making the majority

of the thematic and display decisions, they could only exercise this authority when the NMAI allowed them to, which placed the majority of the power in the hands of the NMAI curators.<sup>150</sup>

Furthermore, budget, time, exhibition framework, and the approval of other community members often imposed further restrictions on many community members' suggestions. This meant that community members often had to prioritize themes over specifics. For example, in *Our Lives*, during a collaboration session, Kalinago men and women of mixed heritage spoke about their identity, which led to testimonies about prejudice they had experienced within their community about not "looking" Kalinago. While powerful statements, co-curators felt the inclusion of these testimonies would be perceived as "airing dirty laundry," while NMAI curators thought that the issues did not fit contextually with the rest of the exhibit.<sup>151</sup> The co-curators also found that their positionality as representatives of their communities made them less likely to include harsher, more specific truths about their existence because their communities would see and eventually judge the exhibition.<sup>152</sup> Budget and time also prevented *Our Lives* from incorporating unconventional approaches to display. Co-curators often suggested ideas that challenged traditional approaches to museology, but were either brought down by time, money, museum professionals who wanted to stick with what they knew, or a combination of the three.<sup>153</sup> Ultimately, the collaborations encountered multiple limitations that impeded the potential radical nature of the design and the impact of the exhibitions' content.

Chavez Lamar also emphasized the difficulties in and importance of building trust between the communities and the NMAI, especially as an indigenous curator. This was also

<sup>150</sup> Cynthia Chavez Lamar, "Collaborative Exhibit Development at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian," in *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations*, eds. Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 153.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>152</sup> Lamar, "Collaborative Exhibit Development at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian," 148.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

something Susan Heald, the NMAI's textile conservator, stressed during conservation collaborations. All of the communities that Chavez Lamar approached agreed to work with the NMAI but some community members expressed wariness towards the invitation, while others simply expected to be disappointed. She realized that many communities gave her greater benefit of the doubt because she identified as Native American, but that she had to be careful about what she said and promised to the communities because the end result of the exhibition was not immediately discernable during early conversations. She found that the best way to establish and maintain trust was to be straightforward about everything she did and did not know about the exhibition development.<sup>154</sup>

While Chavez Lamar did not break the trust she built during the developmental process of *Our Lives, Our Peoples* encountered ethical concerns about their involvement with community collaboration. In 1999, the NMAI hired Harvey Markowitz, a professor and historian of indigenous histories, cultures, and religions, as a community liaison and fieldworker for the indigenous communities participating in the *Our Peoples* exhibition. He wrote an essay on this experience that highlighted his concerns about the nature of the collaborations, as well as critiques similar to those mentioned earlier. Since the exhibition depended so deeply on specific tribal histories, Markowitz engaged in substantial fieldwork to gather this information for the NMAI and facilitate discussions between the NMAI and the indigenous communities. He recalls that early on in the process he encountered conflicting attitudes from different participants: some were proud that they had been selected to participate, others were astonished that a museum was finally allowing indigenous communities to tell their own histories, while others were skeptical due to prior painful experiences with museums and the federal government (both of which the

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 146.



NMAI is part of). When multiple community collaborators asked whether the NMAI would actually follow through on their commitments, Markowitz responded by stating that the exhibit and process had been endorsed by the NMAI and thus was committed to working with the communities if they so desired. However, Markowitz stipulated that if the museum were to renege on their commitments, he would resign. Over time, the communities began to take growing ownership of their exhibits, reflecting their confidence in the NMAI, which had been fostered by the NMAI curators, Markowitz, and other staff members. However, in 2002, after Markowitz had been on personal leave for a few months, the NMAI introduced major changes to the exhibition that would have shrunk the significance and space allotted to the indigenous communities. Instead of focusing on the specific stories, the show decided to center on the “Big Story,” which Markowitz and community members believed was too entrenched in the Eurocentric narrative of colonization. The NMAI accepted all of these changes without approval or even consultation with the community collaborators. Markowitz, as promised, resigned, which prompted the NMAI to switch back to the original floorplan, but still center on the “Big Story.”<sup>155</sup>

The experience Markowitz detailed highlights the potentially problematic dynamics that can arise out of community collaboration, on the part of the NMAI. Community collaborators initial wariness should have indicated to NMAI staffers the instrumental importance of maintaining contact and open communication throughout the entire process, especially when making major design changes. This particular essay illuminates the necessity for a community liaison like Markowitz, but also reveals the need for NMAI curators to periodically take part in

<sup>155</sup> Harvey Markowitz, “From Oral History to Exhibition: The National Museum of the American Indian’s Our Peoples Gallery,” *The Shifting Borders of Race and Identity*. Haskell Indian Nations University, <http://www.shiftingborders.ku.edu/presentations/markowitz.html>. (Accessed April 25, 2020).

direct discussions with their collaborators. Perhaps NMAI staff would have second guessed their design change if they had heard community members' trepidation, hesitant hope for, and stake in the exhibition.

Even though the inaugural 2004 exhibitions were not well-received, the opening of the D.C. NMAI itself was a major milestone for the NMAI as an institution. While the exhibitions illustrated that the NMAI was not in its final form, the D.C. museum marked the first time that a national museum had been built by and for indigenous communities. In addition, while some of the NMAI's strategies for centering indigenous voices had missed the mark, their actions to constantly reevaluate their policies and their positionality within the museum world indicated that the NMAI would keep working to inform themselves and others on the importance of indigenous art and voices within the United States.

## Conclusion

After exploring the successes and challenges of the D.C. NMAI exhibitions, it is clear that Heye Center's 1996 exhibition *Woven by the Grandmothers* used techniques that could have provided a useful precedent for the 2004 inaugural exhibitions. The principal differences between *Woven by the Grandmothers* and the 2004 exhibitions are their beginnings and scope. *Woven by the Grandmothers* started small, with a particular type of object within one community, and extrapolated larger themes from the intersection of historical context, contemporary Navajo views of the textiles, and the textiles themselves. The inaugural exhibitions, on the other hand, started large, with conceptions about the universe and history, and then aimed to communicate those ideas through the collection and indigenous collaboration. I argue that it was *Woven by the Grandmothers*' ability to start small and ground their exhibition in the 1995 workshop that led them to a much more collaborative, cohesive exhibition than those that the inaugural teams were able to create. *Woven by the Grandmothers* employed understated display methods that developed from direct collaboration with the Navajo people. The textiles were displayed alongside panel and object texts that provided specific historical context, such as the imprisonment at Bosque Redondo, and included quotes that situated the blankets in contemporary Navajo lives, emphasizing the survivance of the Navajo people. While the display techniques did not announce themselves as groundbreaking, the amount of conscious decision-making that went into them was clear in the numerous revisions made to the exhibition script and the time curators, conservators, researchers, and community members spent going back and forth about the exhibition. While this is not to discredit the work done by the curators of the 2004 inaugural exhibitions and not to imply that there is a single method for producing a show at the NMAI, those involved with *Woven by the Grandmothers* produced an effective example for how

a successful indigenous exhibition can be created. By comparing *Woven by the Grandmothers* to the inaugural exhibitions, it seems that going forward, a more effective use of the NMAI's time would be to break down conceptions of history and display through smaller, less overarching, more community-focused exhibitions. In doing so, the NMAI, as an institution, could focus on their collaboration with the communities, to promote longer lasting partnerships, while allowing NMAI curators to produce shows that are both in line with the curators' visions and supportive of the communities that they are representing.

It is possible to track the development of the NMAI from its inception through to the opening of the D.C. NMAI by examining the history of the museum from the first acquisition of George Gustav Heye to its earliest approaches to exhibition design and collections management policy in the 1990s. The journey to hold the museum world accountable to indigenous communities started with the Red Power movement and tribal museums and led to the foundation of the NMAI in the 1990s with the Heye Center. One cannot effectively contextualize the successes and failures of the D.C. NMAI opening without exploring its early history in the 1990s and the work that the Heye Center did to prepare for the eventual opening of the main NMAI campus. Within their first ten years of operation, from 1994 to 2004, the NMAI made tremendous strides in their commitments to collaboration, representation, and the production of exhibitions and policies that truly center indigenous voices. The NMAI is an institution that will continually change and evolve as the country becomes more willing to grapple with indigenous histories and as museums become more open to nonconventional display and collections management policies. The policies and changes that the NMAI are continuously making have the potential to effect change by disrupting how museums present and view works in their collections created by historically marginalized communities.

**Appendix: List of Figures**

Figure 1: Artist Unknown (Navajo), *Beeldléí* (Blanket), 1865-75, National Museum of the American Indian.



Photo by NMAI Photo Services (19/3022)

Figures 2 and 3: Artist Unknown (Navajo), *Bill* (Woven Dress), 1850-60, National Museum of the American Indian.



Photo by NMAI Photo Services (20/7822)



Photo by NMAI Photo Services (20/7823)

Figure 4: Artist Unknown (Navajo), *Beeldléí* (Blanket), 1860-70, National Museum of the American Indian.



Photo by NMAI Photo Services (23/2814)

Figure 5: Artist Unknown (Navajo), *Beeldléí* (Blanket), 1880, National Museum of the American Indian.



Photo by NMAI Photo Services (22/9191)



Figure 6: Smithsonian Institution, “Stills of Navajo Textile Exhibit: 11:04,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Accession 09-242, Tape SIA09-242\_V0017OM.



Figure 7: Smithsonian Institution, “Stills of Navajo Textile Exhibit: 11:47,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Accession 09-242, Tape SIA09-242\_V0017OM.



Figure 8: Smithsonian Institution, “Stills of Navajo Textile Exhibit: 12:13,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Accession 09-242, Tape SIA09-242\_V0017OM.



Figure 9: Smithsonian Institution, “Stills of Navajo Textile Exhibit: 12:45,” *National Museum of the American Indian*, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Accession 09-242, Tape SIA09-242\_V0017OM.



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