A New Cultural Agenda for the National Museum of the American Indian

Judith A. Brundin

An aggressive cultural and political agenda can erode even those institutions with a history of distinguished scholarship and committed public service. The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), with its stellar collection of more than 800,000 native artifacts from every part of the New World, is a case in point. In an age of fierce identity politics, differing perspectives on the mission of such a museum are predictable. But the systematic silencing of voices that do not square with particular cultural agendas is another matter—especially when those voices decry the decline in traditional standards of scholarship and integrity.

The NMAI is hardly an isolated case. Many museums draw criticism for specific exhibitions, publications, or perspectives on their collections. Sometimes they must defend the rationales for their existence. For these reasons, the case of the NMAI bears recounting, both because this museum represents the crisis writ large and because it is a fascinating story in its own right.[1]

Background

In 1989, a Congressional mandate merged the private Heye Foundation collection with the Smithsonian Institution to form the NMAI. Through the 1980s and during the prior Heye Foundation period, the museum had a reputation for producing historically accurate programs. Its location in a deteriorating Manhattan neighborhood did nothing to stimulate attendance, so, to promote the museum's name beyond the small number of visitors, the NMAI staff developed and widely circulated a variety of high quality published materials and generated off-site programs, including major exhibitions.

The 1989 merger, however, brought change. In Washington, D.C., the newly appointed Cheyenne-Arapaho director, W. Richard West, Jr., and the program administrator, Rick Hill of Tuscarora-Mohawk descent, indicated publicly that the NMAI would thenceforth be run for and by native people. Assorted staff memos and position papers drummed the message home.

Judith A. Brundin was an administrator and editor at the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, for thirteen years until the end of 1994. She is currently editing and writing in the fields of history and museology. Please address correspondence to *Academic Questions*/NAS, 575 Ewing Street, Princeton, NJ 08540–2741.

New Directions

The 1989 Congressional act establishing the NMAI specified the museum's purposes as follows: "1) advance the study of Native Americans, including the study of language, literature, history, art, anthropology, and life; 2) collect, preserve, and exhibit Native American objects of artistic, historical, literary, anthropological, and scientific interest; 3) provide for Native American research and study programs; and 4) provide a means for carrying out paragraphs (1), (2), and (3) in the District of Columbia, the State of New York, and other appropriate locations."[2] As late as April 1993, Smithsonian Institution director Robert McC. Adams urged that "research" or the increase of knowledge as "the original mandate of the Smithsonian Institution . . . must be respected and not casually ignored."[3]

Such stipulations carried little weight with the new senior administrators, whose revised educational mission for the NMAI, aptly designated the "Cultural Agenda," set the museum on a course that diverged sharply from the primary purpose of other national museums within the Smithsonian complex. It departed from the original charter of the Heye Foundation. It slighted the interests of the non-Indian public, which historically had and would continue to constitute the bulk of its audience. Most important, however, the agenda virtually ignored the traditional mandate for scholarship and historical accuracy in developing what the new leadership saw as "a museum different."[4]

The administrators in Washington, including West and Hill, made it clear that only Native Americans or those firmly committed to a nativist agenda could properly understand or teach Native American culture. This message from top management permeated all aspects of work for the New York staff. With racial animosity Hill wrote:

> if we do not take responsibility for the work, the white people will win the day. They know that Indians will quit and are doing their best to drive us all away. It is a real test of courage and resolve, individually and collectively to make sure that those things that mean the most to Indians get the respect they deserve, we cannot let some arrogant, racist, or stupid people defeat us.[5]

Hill referred to whites as "cowboys" and insisted their perspectives were "racist." He stated publicly that the appointment of a Caucasian to head NMAI would be tantamount to a "German direct[ing] the U.S. Holocaust Museum."[6] Not surprisingly, such racial overtones from the leadership translated into policies that raised the museum's new-found objectives above its traditional but now secondary purpose. As one mid-level management memorandum explained:

> NMAI's first responsibility in terms of its educational programs is to its *constituency*—Native people. Other groups such as the general public, scholars, school groups, etc. are our *audiences* and we plan to serve these groups as we first meet the needs of our constituency.[7]

The tension in the working environment was exacerbated by an increasingly critical reception to the museum's exhibitions from the media and from the diverse urban public that had formerly been considered the primary audience. The proponents of the Cultural Agenda simply assumed that in satisfying what they deemed to be native concerns, other audiences would somehow be naturally accommodated. What this overlooked, however, was the well-documented fact that the non-Indian audience is generally unfamiliar with native culture. Serving its needs is an important part of institutional success. Consequently, the New York staff urged statistical sampling, surveys, and market research studies to support a more inclusive mission—but to little avail.

Notwithstanding the obvious importance and desirability of reaching out to native communities for an ethnic museum such as NMAI, the advocates of the Cultural Agenda failed to consider other constituencies that are vital to all museums. Certain members of the Heye Foundation board who had displeased the regime were encouraged not to join the new politically motivated NMAI board of trustees. This was only one indication of a general policy to exclude many of those anthropologists and historians upon whom the Institution had previously relied for advice and counsel. The new contingent at the top alienated potential funding sources. Former administrations had encouraged inclusive collaborative projects, affording balanced access to all interested parties: native and non-native museum professionals, educators, scholars, and visitors. The new NMAI leadership, however, relied on a more exclusionary method of decision making, repudiating the notion of collaborative projects and giving separatist policies an ever greater ascendancy.

Perhaps no episode better describes the new atmosphere than the efforts to revise *The Native People of the Northeast Woodlands* curriculum prepared by the NMAI's Education Department, out of print since 1993. Efforts to update it were continuously complicated by Rick Hill's insistence that it be revised to promote a politically suitable message. Objections from some museum staff members that the result would be historically inaccurate were met with everything from eyebrows raised in shock to censure, scapegoating, and diminished official authority.

Consultations

From 1991 through 1993, while the NMAI planned for its relocation from Manhattan's upper West Side to the more centrally located U.S. Custom

House in Battery Park, a small core of Washington administration staff—always the same coterie—promoted the new Cultural Agenda in expensive meetings throughout the Western Hemisphere. They met with hundreds of newly hired consultants. These extensive "consultations" sought to define the new museum philosophy with regard to facilities, exhibits, programs, publications, collecting, repatriation, and research. Ill-organized and costly, they drew criticism from within the Smithsonian system, to which the administration countered that it was under the gun to spend start-up monies quickly and in whatever manner they could. In fact, the NMAI financial staff had advised that administrators were under no such pressure.

For the purpose of these trips, the significant, long-standing ties that New York staff had established with Indian communities were generally ignored. On one occasion, however, this member of the New York contingent was invited along. I attended the first consultation in Oklahoma, which involved closed-door sessions primarily with the leadership of "the Five Civilized Tribes." Consultation with tribal leaders does not provide the optimum sounding of the needs and desires of an Indian community. Based on my own lengthy experience, most Indian people do not necessarily harbor ill feeling toward anthropologists or museums. On the whole, they support and are appreciative of the role of museums in preserving their culture and history. This, however, is hardly the picture that the new NMAI leadership wished to perpetuate.

Open forums or town meetings did take place, but they were the exception rather than the rule. Instead, the museum's administrators restricted the input of local opinion and chose to exclude members of the Indian public drawn from many walks of life. Having lived eight years in Indian communities, I found that the population at large often did not agree with tribal leaders. The communities are home to widely differing views, and members do not always support, and indeed often mistrust, their leaders. Open debates could have been intellectually beneficial, generating original ideas, and invigorating all who attended. But, clearly, this was not the intent. The consultations were mainly meant to provide a staging ground for the new line of policy.

Fundraising Efforts

Financial goals called for the NMAI to raise $36.5 million dollars in addition to the $73 million promised by Congress for new facilities and staff in Washington. But it did not take long for the private campaign to falter. By 1994, NMAI had not yet reached $20 million. As of early 1996, it had only generated $23 million, with an additional long-term delayed commitment of $10 million from the Mashatucket-Pequot tribe. This failure by NMAI's director, the aforementioned W. Richard West, Jr., to meet funding goals set by

Congress[8] was disconcerting in light of the hundreds of thousands of dollars devoted to raising money. Similarly, as ever-mounting construction estimates for the D.C. facilities caused cutbacks, the lavish allowance for West to travel with his senior advisors began to seem especially inappropriate.

It had become obvious at this time that the NMAI's leadership had underestimated the costs of alienating some significant benefactors.

Reburial of Native Artifacts

"Repatriation" is the term used in anthropology to describe the return of native artifacts to the descendants of their original owners. Some activists feel that collecting and displaying native remains and some artifacts violate religious customs. The national policy, codified into law in 1990 by Congress as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA),[9] has had a significant effect on museums and more generally on all anthropological and historical study of native peoples in this country.

The restoration policy was so comprehensive that, when it was announced in 1991, many museologists complained of the NMAI's new "give-it-all-back" policy. Most of the drafters were new employees, outside consultants, or recently appointed members of the board of trustees. Few had experience with museology, repatriation, and American Indian history or were familiar with the prehistoric and pre-Columbian pieces in the NMAI collection that constituted the bulk of what could be repatriated. "Duplicate" items, among other things, were slated for return. The collection includes some 300 ancient Indian buffalo robes. Each is unique, but are 299 of the robes to be considered duplicates? Problems with the policy clearly reflected the drafters' general lack of expertise.

Anthropologist Clement W. Meighan characterized repatriation as:

> museums usually house a great variety of collections and their directors are rarely trained in any of the natural sciences or have any special interest in physical anthropology. Being, for the most part, public institutions, museums are dependent on good public relations, which can be destroyed by the activists. Like state legislatures, museum directors may be willing to satisfy activists by dissatisfying scientists.[10]

The liberal NMAI policy does not stress scholarly input about the return of objects, and it should be noted that the collection contains very few items considered "human remains," which are the primary focus of NAGPRA. What NMAI has, instead, are objects *related* to human remains, the so-called "burial" objects (pottery, textiles, baskets, jewelry, and the like). For many of these items, provenance and dates are difficult, even impossible, to discern. Responsible repatriation calls for decisions based on scientific and historical expertise. NMAI's policy makes little provision for this.

The NMAI collection first came under scrutiny in 1975 by the New York State Attorney General, Louis J. Lefkowitz, when many de-accessioned objects began turning up on the open market. At the time, Lefkowitz stopped just short of establishing legal precedents supporting the public's interest in privately owned collections throughout the state, but his demands for an investigation obviously supported larger audience interests.

Considering these constraints, anthropologist William Sturtevant wrote, in 1991, that the most remarkable part of the new NMAI policy was that the museum "decided that it does not have a valid title to the things in the collections 'that are communally-owned property of an American Indian tribe' and these will be 'repatriated' upon request."[11] No sooner had the repatriation policy been publicized than there were reports that members of the Iroquois Confederacy were coming down from upstate New York to pick up collection artifacts in trucks. The Iroquois continue to be among the more vocal advocates for repatriation.

This climate of uncertainty spread to the usually vibrant and lucrative market for Indian art, where the risk of confiscation of valuable pieces dampened enthusiasm among collectors. By extension, the NMAI's unqualified adoption of repatriation flew in the face of its benefactors. Potential contributors in Colorado Springs, New York, and probably elsewhere questioned the prudence of making donations.

Few native communities have appropriate conservation facilities or trained staff to maintain repatriated artifacts. Some staff questioned whether tribal museums actually wanted pieces sent back to them. And, it is not known if activists who push the policy accurately represent their tribal constituencies. As Clement Meighan speculated: "It would be an interesting question—and it is one that no one seems as yet to have explored—whether a majority of living persons of Indian descent favor reburial or, alternatively, favor the continued preservation, display, and study of Indian remains."[12] At the consultations, tribal officials were provided with complete lists of the artifacts in the NMAI collection that were affiliated with their descendants or cultural region. By implication, it was as if the NMAI were actually offering the artifacts for repatriation. A senior native staff member described the repatriation activities as "the shopping cart phenomena."

What its blind devotion to repatriation in fact embodied was NMAI's challenge to well-established museological guidelines for collecting, research, and preservation. In essence its top administrators were redefining the concept of a museum. No longer should its educational mission be founded on a collection of authentic artifacts assembled according to the tenets of scholarship. Under the new definition, it remains questionable whether Indian artifacts of religious and historical significance would be collected at all.

Once denied remnants of the past as illustrations, the audience is left with interpretive materials—exhibits dependent on hi-tech electronics and audio-

visual imagery. This lends an aura of Disneyland. Of course, Disneyland and other entertainment parks have their place, but they do not command the educational authority and respect that Native American antiquity warrants. What's more, as media critiques of their exhibits made clear, NMAI administrators were not as adept at entertainment as those at Disneyland.

Exhibitions

Initial indications of problems with exhibits at the museum came in reviews of a small temporary exposition at the Custom House titled "Pathways of Tradition." To Amy Gamerman, writing in late 1992 in the *Wall Street Journal*, the affair was "a muddle" with a "whiff of political correctitude [that] hits you at one of the first objects on view." Gamerman quotes Rick Hill, the exhibition curator, as stating, "Indians are going to come in here and find it gratifying, how objects are presented, that's going to help our Indian people feel better." She then adds, noting the minimal labeling and trite titling, "But will they really feel better for having seen their cultural artifacts thrown together higgledy-piggledy, or their history summed up in a few anodyne phrases?" Her description of the show concluded that it resembled "nothing so much as a curatorial therapy session performed by an institution in the throes of white guilt."[13]

Responses grew increasingly hostile as major exhibits opened in October 1994. *New York Newsday* described one as "what you'd expect from art by committee."[14] Critic Holland Cotter of the *New York Times* found the NMAI presentations little more than a "smorgasbord of display devices . . . that play down hard information in favor of interpretive glosses drawn largely from myths and oral traditions." Furthermore, he wrote, "the work is undermined by ungainly displays and by the museum's decision to lump disparate cultures together. The effect is the indiscriminate overabundance usually associated with gift shops. . . . The confusion is not greatly helped by the audiovisual supplements."[15]

In the national native newspaper, *Indian Country Today*, Elaine Lacroix-Hopson exposed the "ignorance and the political deceit behind the 'national' museum of the American Indian, including this 'opening' in New York City" and concluded that the NMAI had become "a sad joke on Mr. Heye's memory and on New Yorkers dedicated to respecting American Indian people and culture."[16] And, art critic Mark Stevens in *New York Magazine* lamented that in Western culture, "where art often seems alienated from both nature and the larger society, and the spiritual life is hard to come by, there is obviously an intense (and sometimes sentimental) longing for the values of tribal art." But having seen the exhibit, he confessed that "I have rarely seen a jumpier show; the objects seem belabored by well-meaning explanations and the noise of modern multimedia."[17] In another *Wall Street*

Journal article, Ms. Gamerman commented that because the new exhibits repeatedly mentioned the return of artifacts, they seemed "staged as a pretense for exhibiting the museum's repatriation policy."[18]

The new exhibits were curated by visiting Native American "selectors," some of whom were included quite arbitrarily after having scheduled visits to the collection facility for wholly independent reasons. Others were invited. The exhibit labels and audio supplements to the visual displays often reflected comments by selectors from their initial tours. Suffice it to say that there was no planning, much less systematic organization, about what objects were to be included. At the onset, selectors were simply told to choose as many items as they wished, even from tribes or regions that were beyond their expertise, and to comment on them. Bedlam resulted when some of them chose fifty objects or more, all of which they fully expected to be included in the show.

Poorly trained native gallery guides, stationed throughout the exhibits, offered a bemused public little help. Additionally, the displays had a certain commercial gloss that reflected the trade fair experience of the Boston firm that designed them. Museums generally prefer to use their own in-house staff for exhibition design because they are trained in handling artifacts, are familiar with the subject matter of the exhibition, are aware of conservation standards regarding the use of exhibit materials, and appreciate audience needs and comfort levels regarding traffic flow, educational devices, label design, lighting, the size of exhibition areas, and so on.

Summary

If a tribal museum were to hire a primarily native staff, if it were to present programs designed solely for native audiences, and if it were to follow narrow ideological or even racist agendas (e.g., specifying who can or cannot touch artifacts on the basis of race), that would be its choice. The ensuing drops in attendance by outsiders and diminished curatorial inspiration as it closed itself off might be acceptable to its parochial audience.

But, given that the Smithsonian Institution and NMAI are nationally owned and federally sponsored, they have a responsibility toward the entire public. The NMAI has reached out to native people. However, the administration has gone its own way in subordinating a scholarly mandate to promote victim-group politics. The response has been predictably disappointing, but the administration remains unchastened. We who have a stake in the wider national heritage and who are denied an accurate view of our nation's past are the ultimate losers.

Notes

1. The author initiated legal action concerning matters related to those discussed in this essay. Parts of the article are taken from her complaint: *Brundin v. United States of America, I. Michael Heyman, Secretary, Smithsonian Institution,* filed in the Southern District of New York, 95 Civ. 2689 (WK). Jeffrey M. Duban co-authored the complaint with Ms. Brundin.
2. Public Law 101–185; 103 Stat. 1337; 20 U.S.C. §80q, 1989: *National Museum of the American Indian.*
3. *Brundin v. The United States of America,* 9.
4. Judith Weintraub, "In N.Y., Indian'Traditions,' With a Twist," *Washington Post,* 23 November 1992.
5. *Brundin v. The United States of America,* 12, Exhibit B (from a 1 December 1994 NMAI memorandum by Rick Hill).
6. Ibid., 12, (taken from Hill's Spring 1989 statement in Senate hearings held in New York City concerning the Smithsonian's merger with the Heye Foundation).
7. Ibid., 13, 14, Exhibit C. Emphasis in original.
8. Tracey A. Reeves, "Bronx American Indian Museum in Decay," *Indian Country Today,* 19 October 1995, A3.
9. Public Law 101–601; Stat. 3048; 25 U.S.C. §3001–13, 1990: *The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.*
10. Clement W. Meighan, "The Burial of American Archaeology," *Academic Questions* (Summer 1993): 14.
11. William C. Sturtevant, "New National Museum of the American Indian Collections Policy Statement," *Museum Anthropology* (May 1991), 29.
12. Meighan, "The Burial of American Archaeology," 18.
13. Amy Gamerman, "Indian Museum Takes Shelter in Beaux-Arts Wickiup," *Wall Street Journal,* 17 November 1992, A16.
14. Amei Wallach, "Through Indian's Eyes," New York, *Newsday,* 28 October 1994, B5, B6.
15. Holland Cotter, "New Museum Celebrating American Indian Voices," *New York Times,* 28 October 1994, C1, C14.
16. Elaine Lacroix-Hopson, "New York Museum Just a 'Sad Joke,'" *Indian Country Today,* 30 November 1994, 23.
17. Mark Stevens, "High Anxiety," *New York Magazine,* 7 November 1994, 99–100.
18. Amy Gamerman, "New Indian Museum Opens with Preachy Show," *Wall Street Journal,* 3 November 1994, A16.