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In Their Own Voices: A Comparison of Three Native-Run Museums

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In Their Own Voices: A Comparison of Three Native-Run Museums

by Bianca Buccitelli
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"... the only truth is the artificiality of our perspectives because, to one degree or another, all views of the human past are created by those telling the story" – David Hurst Thomas (West 1994: 55).
Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

This past winter and spring, I visited three very different Native-run museums in an attempt to understand the diversity of ways in which Native American peoples are choosing to represent themselves both within their own community and to cultural outsiders. I did not know when commencing this project what I would find at these three museums because before this time, my experience with native-run museums had been very limited. I chose the three museums discussed below based on their differences with one another because I wanted to represent a spectrum of the Native museum experience. The Tantaquidgeon Museum in Uncasville, CT is a museum of humble origins with modest facilities and a very strong personal presence. The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center in Mashantucket, CT is a very large, state-of-the-art facility created with the profits of the tribe’s successful Foxwood’s Casino. The National Museum of the American Indian is a federally funded museum under the direction of the Smithsonian Institution and is a result of the multi-tribal collaboration of a diverse museum administration.

What I did find was that a blending of traditional museum philosophy and a native perspective is possible and that all three of these museums have accomplished this feat to a greater or lesser degree. However, what stands out with these museums, and what would entice me to visit them again is the inclusion of the individual Native voice. It is the addition of this individual Native voice that humanizes the museum experience and allows me to relate to Native Americans as people rather than as some abstract cultural stereotype.
CHAPTER TWO: Background/Literature Review

"... it is a matter of bringing these diverse elements of American cultural life into museums and allowing them to speak for themselves through these institutions that have such a definitive role in describing, shaping, and defining their place in American culture..." (West 1994: 57).

Historically, representations of the Native American have been controlled by cultural outsiders rather than by Native Americans themselves. This is because institutions such as public art, anthropology, natural history, and science museums originated in Europe before being re-created for use in America (Maurer 2000: 15). The first representations of Native Americans in museums in Europe date back to the 17th century when "cabinets of curiosities" became popular (Maurer 2002: 19). The collection of objects at this time was guided by the concept of the 'curiosity,' an exotic object that created excitement among European audiences because of its craftsmanship, unfamiliar materials, and perceived strange or grotesque form (Berlo and Phillips 1998:13). These collections of natural and man-made objects were privately amassed by rich merchants or nobleman and then displayed as "natural curiosities" and "artificial curiosities" (Maurer 2000: 20). Natural curiosity collections consisted of exotic or unusual things from nature, while artificial curiosity collections consisted of objects made by exotic people from far away lands (Maurer 2000: 20). An example of this "cabinet of curiosities" phenomenon was Ole Worm, a Danish naturalist who collected objects when he traveled and also purchased objects from sailors and travelers (Maurer 2000: 19). In his museum, Worm displayed stuffed animals, animal skeletons, horns, and shells as well as man-made objects including Native American costumes, a kayak, bows, arrows, and spears (Maurer 2000: 19-20). An interesting development that came out of Worm's museum is the use of
museum labels; a physical manifestation of Worm’s Linnaean need to classify his collections (Maurer 2000: 20). Problems with the collections amassed during this early contact period, however, include the lack of documentation accompanying the objects in these ‘cabinets of curiosities.’ Collectors did not, because of lack of interest, or could not, because of incomprehension of Native American political systems, document with certainty where the objects that they were collecting originated (Berlo and Phillips 1998:13).

By the 19th century, Native American material culture had shifted in the minds of collectors from curiosities to scientific specimens that could reveal information about the beliefs, the practices, and the stages of technical development of their Native American makers (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 13). This shift in philosophy was a direct result of the establishment of anthropology as an academic discipline and the association of Native American material culture with the field of natural history (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 13). At this time, representations of Native Americans were displayed in a different kind of “museum,” the world fairs (Maurer 2000: 20). The first world fair was held in London in 1851 (Maurer 2000: 21). Thousands of displays from all over the world were housed in multiple exhibit halls including the iron/ glass Crystal Palace that was constructed specifically for this event (Maurer 2000:21). Native American representations were housed in the world fair’s Canadian section and a clear cultural inferiority was implied through these exhibits by contrasting the products of Native Americans with their European counterparts, and by referring to Native Americans as “Canadian savages” (Maurer 2000:21).
In 1893 another important world fair was held in Chicago, the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition, which featured exhibits from each state in the union at that time as well as approximately seventeen countries (Maurer 2000: 21-22). It is obvious from this 1893 exposition that Native Americans were the object of intense international interest, because they received more representation than any other cultural group (Maurer 2000:22). Multiple displays of Native American life were present at this exhibition including the re-created American Indian village, Haida village (Alaska), Eskimo village, and cliff-dwelling villages of the Anasazi (Arizona, New Mexico) (Maurer 2000: 22).

However, these displays were dwarfed in comparison to the exhibit on contemporary Native American life from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In this display, a life-size replica of a government run boarding school with schoolrooms, workshops, and dormitories was constructed (Maurer 2000: 22). Photographs of traditional Native American life and culture were used to decorate the walls and Native American students were actually solicited to live at the exhibitions and to re-create daily life at these government institutions for the exposition visitor (Maurer 2000:22).

Another important set of exhibits at this 1893 Columbian Exposition was housed in the anthropology building (Maurer 2000: 23). Native American groups were classified according to region, and their cultures were illustrated with maps, models, photographs, and actual Native American artifacts (Maurer 2000: 23). Like in the Bureau of Indian Affairs exhibit, Native American men, women, and children were dressed in traditional clothing and used as guides in the exhibition areas (Maurer 2000: 23). Interestingly, many of the artifacts presented in these exhibits were later given to public ethnographic institutions and helped to form the basis of many of the great Native American
collections today such as the Field Museum of National History in Chicago (Maurer 2000: 23).

These newly built museums, including our own University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, were intended to house the scientific record of the vanishing Native American cultures, for it was commonly believed at this time that Native Americans could not survive in the modern world without complete cultural assimilation (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 13-14). An example of the large quantities of Native American objects being accumulated at this time was the Smithsonian Institution, which, between the years of 1879 and 1885, collected 6,500 pottery vessels from the Southwestern pueblos of Acoma and Zuni alone (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 14).

Native American representation in these “museum” contexts did not undergo significant change until the mid-20th century with exhibits in Canada and the United States in 1927, 1931, 1939, and 1941 that displayed objects such as pueblo pottery and masks from the northwest coast for the first time in large urban art museums (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 16). One of these landmark exhibits occurred in 1941, when the MoMA in New York devoted three floors to the exhibit ‘Indian Art of the United States.’ (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 218). This exhibit re-introduced Native American work as an artistic accomplishment rather than merely a cultural curiosity (Berlo and Phillips 1998: 218). Native American artwork ranging from ancient to contemporary times was displayed in the same type of museum environment used previously for modern European and American art; namely white rooms and simple, clean-lined display cases (Maurer 2000: 25). The exhibit was significant because it represented a departure from the 19th century museum philosophy which did not recognize the aesthetic value or spiritual importance
of Native American artwork and because it established the cultural authenticity of modern Native American artwork by displaying this work next to previously accepted ‘authentic’ Native American artwork such as pottery, beadwork, and silversmithing (Maurer 2000: 23, Berlo and Phillips 1998: 219).

Despite this advancement in Native American representation presented by the MoMA, many institutions continued to portray Native American life in more “primitive” ways well into the 20th century. An example of this stagnation in museum philosophy is the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History whose galleries were originally designed in the 1950’s and 1960’s and were not updated until forty years later (Maurer 2000: 25). Accordingly, Native American artifacts were displayed in a more traditional manner, as visual aids to accompany dioramas, etc. rather than as objects of inherent aesthetic value or deeper cultural meaning (Maurer 2000: 25). Additionally, little effort was made to differentiate between different tribal styles or to highlight the role of the individual artist within the Native American community (Maurer 2000: 25). The result of these persistent modes of Native American representation in museum contexts was the reinforcement of the popular perception of Native American cultures as “frozen in time” (Maurer 2000: 25).

It was not until after the passing of the NAGPRA legislation in the 1990’s that museums such as the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History began to modify their longstanding exhibits to incorporate authentic Native American narrative as an educational tool for the museum visitor. The incorporation of this narrative voice serves as a mechanism to help the museum visitor understand more fully the cultural and spiritual significance of the Native American artifacts on display. For essentially the first
time, Native Americans have control over the way that their culture is represented to
others (Maurer 2000: 26-27).

With the heightened cultural sensitivity of many museum officials to their
methods of representing Native American culture to visitors, museums have become a
more complex political environment. For example, in the past when exhibits were created
there were only two elements to consider- the museum and its objects (Penney 2000: 47).
Now, however, an additional element has been added and each decision must be made
with consideration of two different political agents (the museum and the people being
represented) as well as the object itself (Penney 2000: 47).

The struggle now becomes who will control the means of representing cultural
truths to the public (Karp 1991: 15). Will a museum exhibition be a mechanism only for
viewing objects, or will it be a mechanism for relating a story (Karp 1991: 12).
Ultimately, the issue is one of control- control over objects, the way that they are
displayed, what information that is presented, and how it is presented. This control can
have important consequences including, as Ivan Karp points out, the articulation of
identity (Karp 1991:14). Karp elaborates that museums are “arenas” for constructing
identity (on both a community and a national level) through the presentation of images of
the self and the cultural other (Karp 1991: 15). Whether the museum visitor knows it or
not, exhibits provide a reference point, directly or indirectly, for understanding their own
culture as well as other cultures. Karp emphasizes that museum exhibits can “... tell us
who we are and, perhaps most significant, who we are not” (Karp 1991: 15). It is
understandable, therefore, that Native Americans might want to take an active role in the
way that they are presented in museum contexts; the ramifications of such representations
can extend far beyond the walls of the museum. Furthermore, as W. Richard West Jr., the current director of the National Museum of the American Indian highlights, the participation of Native voices in the interpretive process “... empowers those who, culturally, heretofore have been largely powerless...” (West 1994: 57).

Despite this increase in political complexity and the host of issues that come with it, many museums have encouraged the participation of Native Americans in the museum environment through professional appointments and consultant positions (Maurer 2000: 15). The result is a shift in museum philosophy toward the recognition of multiple narratives and multiple cultural truths that are taken into account when planning an exhibition. An example of this idea of multiple cultural truths is in the way that objects are interpreted in a museum display. Objects can never have a fixed meaning, rather, they will have different meanings for people with different personal backgrounds (social, ethnic, economic, etc.) (Handler 1993: 34). Therefore, non-Natives and Natives might have a very different opinion about the same object; a discrepancy that W. Richard West Jr. explains: “... the intellectual and spiritual realities Native peoples bring to the cultural materials in our collection differ, often profoundly, from the ways others may see the very same objects...” (West 1994: 54).

Maybe as a result of the limitations of working in a traditional museum environment, Native Americans have also turned to the establishment of Native-run museums (such as the three museums that are the subject of this paper). This relatively new institution, the tribal museum, gives Native Americans more curatorial control over the way that they are represented.
CHAPTER THREE: Tantaquidgeon Museum, Uncasville, CT

Tantaquidgeon Museum: A History

Mohegan material culture is preserved and displayed today in Uncasville, CT entirely because of the efforts of the Tantaquidgeon family. This small tribal museum, the oldest Native American operated museum in the country, was founded in 1931 by siblings Gladys and Harold, and their father John (Fawcett 2000: 89). Despite using a cane, and being blind in one eye, Gladys relates how her father, "... handled every one of the granite fieldstones used in the construction of that building. If one seemed to be just a little bit out of place, he had to see that it was taken care of. It was a family affair..." (Fawcett 2000: 90). Harold carved a blue stone medicine diamond into the chimney and placed arrowheads in the mortar by the woodstove pipe as a blessing (Fawcett 2000: 138-139). The result of this labor, a small stone building (Figure 3.1), housed the personal collections of the Tantaquidgeon family as well as later contributions from other Mohegan tribal members (Fawcett 2000: 91).

Gladys (Figure 3.2), who as a young women was taken under the wing of Frank Speck, an anthropologist who played a large role in studying and recording the Mohegan language, attended the University of Pennsylvania and served as Speck’s assistant there (Fawcett 2000: 64, 70) During this time, she did field work with certain eastern Native American tribes such as the Wampanoags and the Naskapis and later, she traveled out West to serve as a community worker and a Native arts promoter (Fawcett 200: 70, 81, 138). From these travels, Gladys accumulated objects that she collected or that were given to her, and these objects were later displayed in the Tantaquidgeon Museum (Fawcett 2000: 89, 138).
Harold, after a stint in the armed forces, displayed his war helmets and medals and devoted himself to producing traditional Mohegan material culture, including objects made from wood, stone, and bone. Additionally, Harold also constructed a Native American longhouse and wigwam behind the museum where he instructed locals in outdoor survival skills (Figure 3.3) (Fawcett 2000: 138-139). A second room was added to the Tantaquidgeon Museum in 1957, followed shortly thereafter by a third room in 1964. By the early 1960’s this tiny museum hosted an average of 10,000 visitors per year (Fawcett 2000: 132). With this large an audience, Gladys must have been able to fulfill the dual role of the museum- to tell the true stories of Native American life, and to train “... the next generation [of Mohegans] to think positively about the future” (Figure 3.4) (Fawcett 2000: 89, 132).

Tantaquidgeon Museum: A Visit

When I visited the Tantaquidgeon Museum in March, 2004, I knew very little about history of the Tantaquidgeon family, or their involvement in the foundation of the museum. This was a purposeful ignorance because I wanted to view the museum through the lens of an uniformed viewer rather than through the lens of a researcher. My first reaction to the museum was frustration because I drove at least five times back and forth on the Norwich New London-Turnpike, up and down Church Lane (where the museum is actually located) and asked about three different people directions before finally locating the museum. The enigmatic location of this museum is due to the fact that it is actually located behind the Tantaquidgeon family house and is reached through a small trail that extends from the family’s driveway. There is no sign on either street to indicate the
museum’s presence and it is overshadowed by the newly renovated church at the end of the same street. The close proximity of the Tantaquidgeon Museum to the family house sets the stage for a sense of intimacy that is evoked again and again throughout the museum visitor’s experience through such elements as the museum’s architecture, the attitude of the museum guide, as well as the choice of objects to be displayed and the way that these objects are presented. It is this intimacy created by the multiple elements mentioned above that in my opinion is both the museum’s greatest attribute and its greatest weakness. An intimate atmosphere on the one hand provides a privileged glimpse into a culture, but on the other hand has a slightly voyeuristic quality that made me a little uncomfortable and highlighted the fact that I was a cultural outsider. I kept expecting someone to lean out of one of the house windows and yell at me to get off their property.

The Tantaquidgeon Museum as it exists today consists of three small rooms that clearly show its evolutionary history (Figure 3.5). Different building materials are used in the museum’s earlier and later building sections, and there are uneven thresholds between the entryways leading from one room to another that have been supplemented with both steps and ramps. Additionally, there is an open fronted shed next to the museum that appears to house equipment owned by the present day Tantaquidgeon family. A final atmospheric detail that I noticed (all too well because March in Connecticut is cold) is that the museum has no heat; a problem that is avoided by only opening the museum to the public in the summer months. These humble architectural details highlight the fact that this museum comes from modest origins and was undertaken as a labor of love by the Tantaquidgeon family.
The central room in the museum houses a collection of artifacts from tribes located in the Northeast (the Woodland region) including the Mohegans themselves. Much of the material came from the Tantaquidgeon family or was collected by Gladys in her travels, but some of the artifacts were also donated by other Mohegan families. Objects in this room include books, photographs, hand-made dioramas, basketry, wooden tools, costumes, beadwork, and quillwork that date from the 1700’s to the present (Figure 3.6). Old and new objects are divided roughly according to type and are displayed together in cases, on shelves, on tables, hanging from the rafters, or pinned to pegboard and are accented with a mixture of handwritten and typed labels. Melissa Tantaquidgeon, great granddaughter to John Tantaquidgeon remembers how she and Gladys used to make exhibit labels from Lipton Tea boxes (Battista 2002: 2). Although there are a couple of display cases present, they are more like the curio cabinets found in living rooms to display family treasures than they are like anything found in a museum. And most importantly, they all remain unlocked. The museum guide, Sandy, who works in the tribal office, explained to our group that all the objects on display are accessible to the visitor for a reason. The Tantaquidgeon family believes that all objects have a natural lifespan and that they are meant to be handled; that freely handling these objects makes an important contribution to the museum visitor’s education. Melissa Tantaquidgeon summarizes this idea nicely when she describes how the young people in the Mohegan community have “... learned form intimate experience with the objects. Now they can say ‘I touched something that my grandfather made’” (Battista 2002: 2).

My tour group consisting of about five people, the majority of whom are Native American, is introduced to this central room with a brief history of the museum and a
brief introduction to the tribal members who played a role in its foundation and
maintenance. Portraits and snapshots of each relevant tribal member are pinned to
pegboard, amounting to a veritable tribal family album, and each is spoken of like a
relative rather than like an historical figure. Nicknames are used, personal anecdotes are
related, and the guide always traces the lineage from one tribal member that she discusses
to the next. She even tells us how she traces her lineage back to these key figures in the
history of the tribe and the Tantaquidgeon Museum.

A second and third room, with objects laid out in a similar informal style, flank
this central room. One of these rooms houses a collection of stone artifacts, and the other
houses the collection of objects accumulated by Gladys when she visited tribes in the
western United States after the construction of the Tantaquidgeon Museum. There are
katsina dolls, figurines, pots, costumes, jewelry, moccasins, hide bags, and examples of
beadwork and quillwork. What is interesting about this group of artifacts is that they may
have been accumulated much in the same way that any tourist might accumulate
souvenirs. Even though Gladys is a Native American, she was a culture outsider when
visiting these western tribes; she could not have fully understood the cultural significance
of the objects that she chose to bring back. Like any tourist, she might have chosen
objects based on their physical appeal. Interestingly, when I visited the Southwest this
past summer, I saw many similar objects for sale by Native Americans craftsmen. The
problem with this collection then becomes how accurate a representation can this room
provide of the lifeways of a cultural other? Is the museum visitor’s experience being
skewed by the lens of a tourist? Although, these are valid questions, I think that the
Tantaquidgeon Museum avoids these issues by making no presumptions about the
lifeways of other Native American tribes. The objects are informally displayed with sporadic labels explaining their places of origin, but no attempt is made to elaborate on the worldview of these tribes, or explain the cultural significance of these objects.

Furthermore, because these objects were probably collected for the express purpose of putting in the Tantaquidgeon Museum, Gladys may have had more complicated reasons for choosing these particular display objects than merely their physical beauty and craftsmanship. For example, maybe these objects were collected to illustrate to the museum visitor some of the similarities and differences between eastern and western Native American tribes. If this is the case, then Gladys, although still a tourist in some respects, would be choosing objects for display in a much more systematic and purposeful way.

A final important part of the museum to note is the strong presence of both Gladys and Harold Tantaquidgeon through the personal objects that are displayed in these small rooms. In the central room, Gladys’s full regalia, including an 18th century belt, is modeled on a mannequin (Figure 3.7). In the back room, along with Gladys’ collection of western tribal objects are Harold’s war helmets and medals juxtaposed with his more traditional regalia, as well as a wall of postcards sent to Harold by tribal members documenting their various travels. This strong presence is fitting because it reminds the visitor how instrumental the Tantaquidgeon family was in the foundation of this museum, and how this museum is in essence, an extension of the Tantaquidgeon household. And today, despite the success of the recently established Mohegan Sun Casino, Melissa Tantaquidgeon is determined that the museum will not be changed. She explains, “If we
transformed [the museum] into something extravagant, we'd lose the message” (Battista 2002: 2).
Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center: A History

The establishment of the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center was directly tied to the economic success of the once struggling Mashantucket Pequot tribe. By the late eighteenth century there were only 151 tribal members left on the reservation lands, and by the mid-twentieth century, this number had dwindled to only a handful. Most notably present on the reservation at this time was Elizabeth George (Figure 4.1) whose strong beliefs about holding on to reservation lands and reuniting the tribe contributed to the gradual return of tribal members beginning in the 1970’s. Two goals were then established by the returning tribal members at that time: (1) to seek federal recognition of their tribe and to settle their land claims with the state and federal governments, and (2) to secure economic self-sufficiency for the tribe. The first goal was addressed by bringing suit against the federal government for the land that the Mashantucket Pequots had lost in the nineteenth century when their reservation was forcibly reduced in size from 1,000 acres to 213 acres. In 1983, after 5 years of legal negotiations, President Ronald Reagan signed legislation that officially recognized the Mashantucket Pequot tribe and settled the tribe’s land grievances. The second goal addressed by the Mashantucket Pequots was to rebuild the tribal infrastructure, to build new homes and to secure economic stability for tribal members. A number of economic ventures were explored for this purpose. Some of these diverse economic ventures included selling cordwood, maple syrup (Figure 4.2), and vegetables (Figure 4.3), establishing a sand and gravel business, opening a hydroponic greenhouse, raising pigs for slaughter, opening a restaurant, and ultimately opening the bingo games that led to the
establishment of their most successful economic enterprise yet- Foxwood’s Resort Casino (Figure 4.4) (Museum Website, Museum Guide Book 2000: 12-13). The success from this casino venture provided the funding for the opening of the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center in 1998; a facility consisting of 308,000 square feet and with a price tag of $193 million dollars (Figure 4.5). The foundation of this museum is an important step taken by the Pequots to educate the public and to refute the common public perception that they are an extinct tribe that lacks the cultural authenticity of other Native American groups (Erickson 1999: 46, 48).

**Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center: A Visit**

The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center is by far the largest tribal museum that I visited in the course of this project. Unlike the Tantaquidgeon Museum which was built long before the construction of the Mohegan Sun Casino, the Mashantucket Museum was a direct result of the success of Foxwoods Casino and was built and is maintained by profits from this economic endeavor (Museum Website). Although the museum is not directly attached to the casino’s main building, it is located in a satellite building on the same road and these two locations are linked by a shuttle that runs back and forth between them.

Another difference between the Mashantucket museum and the other museums that I visited is the hefty entrance fee of fifteen dollars. I did not pay a fee at either the Tantaquidgeon Museum or the National Museum of the American Indian, the former, I believe, because of its primary role as a teaching tool, and the latter because of its association with the Smithsonian. In contrast, although the Mashantucket museum is
certainly a teaching tool, I think that one of its primary functions is also to earn additional income for the tribe.

The Mashantucket museum is certainly spectacular, and does achieve its goal of being “... a complete immersion experience” for the visitor (Museum Website). This goal is initially executed with the spiral organization of the museum galleries (Figure 4.6, Figure 4.7), a shape that has symbolic significance in the tribe’s cultural history, as well as the emphasis on re-creating the natural environment with the materials used in the construction of the galleries including stone, wood, and bark facade (Museum Guide Book 2000: 14). Additionally, the museum relies heavily on technology to play a large part in the creation of this immersion experience. For example, many of the galleries convey information to the visitor via sophisticated dioramas, interactive computer programs, movies, and audio tours. The most impressive example of this reliance on technology is the Pequot village, a 22,000 square foot gallery that portrays a 16th century Pequot village both before and after European contact (Erikson 1999: 50).

Upon entering the Pequot village, the visitor is inundated with the smells and sounds of woodland village life as well as a series of life-size, anatomically accurate dioramas, set in an artificial woodland environment of maple, chestnut, and oak trees, that portray Pequots tribal members engaged in various activities such as building a wigwam, fishing (Figure 4.8), planting, harvesting crops (Figure 4.9), gathering and cooking food, as well as building a post-contact defensive palisade structure (Figure 4.10). Each of these human figures was cast from real-life Native American models and is clothed in traditional costumes created by modern day Native crafts people (Museum Website). In addition to the stimulus created for the visitor through these visual, audio,
and olfactory sources, an audio tour is available to the visitor that explains the various activities and provides additional insight into Pequot life with information from various experts including Native American craftspeople and archaeologists.

The Pequot village described above is just one example of many in which technology is employed to convey information to the visitor. Almost every gallery has some manifestation of this emphasis on the use of technology. There is an escalator that leads the visitor into a simulated glacial environment, a diorama of an ice-age caribou hunt (Figure 4.11) and associated megafauna, a reconstruction of the woodland environment in all four seasons, a simulated 18th century Pequot farmstead, as well as a mobile home from the 1970s. Computer programs and video presentations are added liberally to these displays to elaborate on a variety of topics including, Native origin stories, hunting strategies, tool and basket making techniques, the use of wampum, and the Algonquin languages, etc.

The extensive incorporation of these technologies into museum display is definitely an impressive feat, and there is no doubt that this presentation philosophy adds to the entertainment of the museum visitors (especially children), but in my opinion it is this emphasis on technology that hinders actually learning anything about Pequot culture and history. The actual information presented, archaeological or otherwise, is greatly overshadowed by the elaborateness of the displays. It is very likely that visitors would gloss over the text panels or other sources of information in favor of the more glitzy installations. A good example of this is in the gallery that depicts life of the Pequots in the ice-age. A large diorama illustrating caribou hunting techniques is flanked by multiple computer monitors which elaborate on the topic, while the archaeological data to
support the creation of this diorama is relegated to an inconspicuous side panel that is overshadowed by the diorama and easily overlooked by the museum visitor. Although the Mashantucket museum readily creates an entertainment experience, the museum visitor must look harder for an educational one.

In addition, the extensive use of dioramas in museum display can be problematic. For example, Richard West, Director of the National Museum of American Indian states: “Notwithstanding the winds of change, most exhibitions of Native American art and culture continue to rely on past models—such as the use of dioramas—for presenting materials, thereby influencing visitors to view Native Americans as “frozen in the past” (West 2000:8). Richard Hill takes a more extreme view of this problem: “...dioramas tend to keep Indians in the natural history arena, next to stuffed animals and frozen specimens...” (Hill 2000: 40). Furthermore, the use of dioramas can contribute to the use of cultural stereotypes rather than an understanding of Native American individuality. As Richard Hill elaborates: “…one or two anonymous mannequins are meant to represent a whole nation of people” (Hill 2000: 40).

These issues are certainly relevant when considering the heavy use of diorama displays at the Mashantucket museum. In some cases, such as the caribou hunt or Pequot village dioramas, the above criticisms are completely warranted. What is presented is only a specific action, or set of actions frozen in time. However, the Pequots have taken steps to counterbalance the negatives of diorama displays in a couple of ways. First, they provide some glimpse into the lives of specific individual Pequot tribal members with the dioramas present in the Life of the Reservation gallery. In this gallery, individual dioramas are presented with names and brief personal histories, thereby allowing the
visitor to learn about and identify with specific Pequot tribal members rather than just a cultural stereotype. For example, Austin George, a Civil War veteran, is depicted with a wound that he received during the Battle of the Crater in 1864 (Figure 4.12). The inclusion of dioramas such as this provides an important modification of more tradition diorama display, however, it is a little worrisome that information is not presented in this manner until almost the end of the museum visitor’s experience (the Life in the Reservation Gallery is the second to last gallery in the museum).

Secondly, the Pequots counterbalance the image, created by diorama display, of Native Americans frozen in time with the incorporation of other materials that show how the tribe has evolved into what it is today. A good example of this the final gallery in the museum which has black and white portraits of a number of current tribal members and which features the personal narratives of those pictured on speakers in the gallery (Figure 4.13).

Another important issue that I noticed at the Mashantucket museum involves the choice of material to be presented to museum visitors. First, I noticed a trend of pan-Indian, rather than specifically Pequot representation in a number of the galleries. A good example of this issue is in one of the museum’s initial galleries called The Arrival of the People. In this gallery, representations of different Native American origin stories are rendered in artistic forms such as paint, textile, and woodwork, etc. However, what was conspicuously missing was a Pequot origin story and artistic representation. Rather, Native American tribes completely unrelated to the Pequots and from vastly different geographical regions where included such as the Miccosukee, Navajo, Kiowa, Mojave,
Lakota, Mowhawk, Ojibway, Inupiat, and Kwakiulth. This same omission of Pequot oral history is present in the associated video presentation that features various Native Americans of the above-mentioned tribes telling their own origin stories. I can only speculate as to the reason for this omission—maybe the Pequot origin story is sacred or maybe the curators are just trying to broaden the museum visitor’s experience with the inclusion of other tribal narratives, but whatever the reason it would have been nice to include some sort of Pequot presence in this gallery.

There were two other interesting trends involving the choice of information presented in the Mashantucket museum that I would like to highlight here. First, is the emphasis placed on the practical rather than the ideological or ritual aspects of Pequot life. There was plenty of information on hunting, agriculture, tool making, etc., but there was very little insight given into the Pequot worldview, social organization, religion, or ritual practices. A prime example of this is the previously mentioned omission of a Pequot origin story. The only other gallery that specifically focused on any of these topics was a small gallery, adjacent to the Pequot village that is completely overshadowed by the elaborateness of the surrounding diorama and is probably often overlooked by the museum visitor. In fact, when I was talking to the guide who was handing out audio tours for this exhibit, she mentioned to me how these small adjacent galleries are often missed. I certainly think that if they hadn’t been brought to my attention before I actually entered the exhibit, I may have missed them myself. The omission of this type of information is detrimental to the museum visitor’s experience because an entire section of Pequot life is being neglected and the museum visitor is getting a very incomplete view of the Native American experience.
A final interesting trend to examine is the way that the issues of European colonialism and the spread of post-contact diseases are handled in the Mashantucket museum. Unlike the virtual omission of ideological and religious information mentioned previously, there are two galleries, as well as a portion of the Pequot village diorama that address the topic of colonialism and its impact on Native Americans. However, the way that this information is presented I found to be problematic. First, the bulk of the information presented that was associated with colonialism and would answer such questions as why the Europeans came, what the nature of European-Native American contact was, what European settlements were established, etc. was featured only in one of the small galleries adjacent to the Pequot village. This location, for reasons mentioned previously, is an ineffective use of gallery space. Secondly, the topic of the spread of post-contact diseases is literally only mentioned in passing. And by passing, I mean that as you are passing from the Pequot village into the next large gallery space there are nine quotes on the wall describing this post-contact disease experience. Finally, the one gallery that does justice to the topic of colonialism by featuring it prominently is focused only on the Pequot War. Interestingly, as you enter the gallery space devoted to the Pequot War there is a complete shift in museum display philosophy. This gallery is spartan with a dark wood facade, dim lighting, and none of the elaborate display that pervades the rest of the museum.
CHAPTER FIVE: National Museum of the American Indian, New York, NY

National Museum of the American Indian: A History

The National Museum of the American Indian originated with the personal collections of George Gustav Heye, a banker from New York who possessed one of the largest collections of Native American objects in the world. This collection, amassed over a period of fifty-four years, was displayed in Upper Manhattan under the name of the Museum of the American Indian. Heye Foundation. George Gustav Heye acted as director of this institution from its conception until his death in 1957. There was uncertainty regarding the fate of the museum after his death. Both the American Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian Institution entered into negotiations with the Trustees of the Museum of the American Indian, but in 1987 an affiliation was formalized with the latter. Then in 1989, the President at the time, George H.W. Bush, signed legislation that officiated the establishment of the National Museum of the American Indian and a subsequent move was planned to relocate Heye's collection from New York to Washington D.C. where they would occupy one of the last available spaces on the Mall. A temporary home for the collections was maintained in New York at the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Customs House in lower Manhattan, a location which remains one of the museum's branch locations today (Figure 5.1) (Arieff 1995: 79). In addition, legislation was passed to ensure Native American involvement on the Board of Trustees and in other aspects of the museum administration (West 1993: 6). Accordingly, in 1990 Richard West, an attorney and member of the Southern Cheyenne, was selected for the position of Director of the National Museum of the American Indian and a mission was established to “recognize and affirm to Native communities and the non-Native public the
historical and contemporary culture and cultural achievements of the Natives of the Western Hemisphere” (Ariefff 1995: 80, Jonaitis 1993: 76).

Significant progress has been made to carry out the planned move of the National Museum of the American Indian to Washington D.C. since the time of President Bush’s legislation. Scheduled to open in the fall of 2004, this $199 million museum facility (Figure 5.2) will attempt to incorporate the sensibilities of multiple Native American tribes. Accordingly, some aspects of this incorporation include treating the museum as a living museum, using Native stories as a means of representation, locating the museum in close proximity to nature, and having the architecture of the building reflect the importance of the solar calendar and the equinoxes, with both the orientation of the building, and the building’s entrance facing East. A team of Native design consultants were brought together to execute these goals including Douglas Cardinal Ltd. (Blackfoot) and GBQC (Johnpaul Jones, Cherokee/Choctaw; Ramona Sakiestewa, Hopi; and Donna House, Navajo/Oneida) (Museum Website).

National Museum of the American Indian: A Visit

I visited the National Museum of the American Indian in January, 2004. The Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House in Battery Park is a beautiful building, but there seems to be a certain amount of irony in housing a Native American museum not only in an institutional building that plainly represents past colonial endeavors, but also in the same building as a federal bankruptcy court. Compared to the modern skyscrapers around it, the Custom House seems diminutive in stature, but still maintains an aura of institutional grandeur with its forty-four exterior columns and multiple exterior sculptures
including female representations of America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, as well as the decorated heads of the Roman god of commerce. This exterior grandeur is mirrored on the interior of the building with an ornate lobby, the ample use of arches and columns, and a 140-ton rotunda skylight that has no visible exterior supports (Figure 5.3) (Museum Website).

The National Museum of the American Indian is housed on the Custom House’s second floor and with the exception of a small banner on the exterior of the building, there was very little to denote the museum’s presence. In fact, I had to inquire with the security guard on the ground floor because I could not find any signs to direct me to the museum. The museum itself occupies three galleries on the second floor that flank the central rotunda. This arrangement, although adequate for display purposes, makes very obvious the intentions of the museum administration for this to be a temporary home for the Heye collection; very few changes have been made to make the museum feel like a unified space. Instead of being the focus of this building, the museum feels like an afterthought; like a way to fill empty space in the Customs House. The museum is swallowed up by its institutional surroundings. Although I do not share this extreme a view about the National Museum’s environment, I can understand how Henry Urbach claims that “...the Heye Center has been developed as a parasite; the Customs House its host...” (Arieff 1995: 79-80).

Despite the limitations of the National Museum of the American Indian’s present location, the individual exhibits, two of which I will discuss here, were very interesting. Unlike the other two museums discussed previously, the Heye Center has no permanent exhibitions but rather rotates exhibits on a consistent basis in and out of its three gallery
spaces. This is an important distinction, because unlike the Tantaquidgeon and Mashantucket Pequot Museums, the National Museum can easily adjust its exhibit space to accommodate the changing views of Native Americans, new developments in Native American artwork or other cultural expression, and any changes in current museum exhibition philosophy.

The first exhibit, *The Language of Native American Baskets: From the Weaver’s View* is a clear example of how the National Museum is fulfilling its goal to “... insist that the authentic Native voice and perspective guide all our policies, including, of course, our exhibition philosophy” (West 2000: 7). On this exhibit’s introduction panel, the Curator Bruce Bernstein outlines how five Native American basket makers (Lisa Telford, Haida; Pat Courtney Gold, Wasco/ Tlingit; Julia Parker, Pomo; Terrol Johnson, Tohono O’odham; and Teresa Hoffman, Penobscot) and one Native American basketry scholar (Sherrie Smith Ferri, Dry Creek Pomo) came together to contribute to the exhibit by providing insight into the process of basket making and to aid in the choice of which baskets would be displayed (Figures 5.4-5.8). This intentional blend of museum administration and Native American consultant participation is also evident in the structure of the exhibit. For example, in the first room of the exhibit there is a long table with five individual display cases housing the basketry choices of each Native American consultant, while on the two end walls there are large display cases describing the primary basketry weaving techniques (plaining, wicker, twining, and coiling) and the importance of burden baskets.

Not only did these Native American consultants play a behind-the-scenes role in the makeup of the exhibit, but they also are prominently featured as part of the exhibit
itself in an attempt to highlight the museum’s emphasis on the incorporation of the
"...unfiltered Native American voice on the exhibition floor..." (West 1994: 54-55). Each
consultant not only has their own display case with their basketry choices presented, but
also has an individual guidebook, located in front of the display case, that has their name
embossed on the front cover, a quotation, a picture, a short biography, a weaver’s
statement, as well as photographs and commentary on each individual basket chosen.
Additionally, the walls of each exhibit room are the backdrop for multiple quotations
from the Native American consultants describing the basket making process and the
significance of basket making to Native Americans today.

Another important aspect of this exhibit, that has remained a consistent theme
throughout the three Native American museums that I have visited, is the emphasis on
illustrating the cultural continuity between contemporary Native Americans and their
ancestors with the purposeful juxtaposition of new and old artifacts. The National
Museum’s goal is to focus not only on past Native American achievements, but also
present and future ones, and in doing so illustrate that Native American culture is not
static, but rather changing and adapting over time (West 2000: 8). In this particular
exhibit, this goal is accomplished with the pairing of new and old baskets in each of the
Native American consultants’ display cases (Figures 5.9-5.12).

A second exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian entitled
Continuum: 12 Artists takes a completely different approach to displaying Native
American material culture. Whereas, The Language of Native American Baskets: From
the Weaver’s View is essentially an ethnographic look at historical and contemporary
basket making, Continuum: 12 Artists is strictly an art exhibition. In this exhibition, the
works of twelve contemporary Native American artists, from a diversity of tribal heritages, travel in pairs for display in various institutions (Museum Website). At the time of my visit, the two artists on display were Richard Ray Whitman (Figures 5.13-5.15) and Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds (Figures 5.16-5.18).

What was particularly interesting in this exhibit was the way that the works of these Native American artists were presented. The gallery displaying these works was divided roughly in two and at the beginning of each section the name of the Native American artist was prominently featured in black lettering. The entire exhibit had a white backdrop, strategic lighting, and minimal labeling. Additionally, virtually no information was given regarding the artist’s background or status as a contemporary Native American, etc. This lack of context is very important in viewing these Native Americans as artists rather than cultural commodities. It allows the visitor to see them as artists first, and Native Americans second. In this way, this exhibition is very important because it re-defines the common perception of Native Americans as only producers of cultural materials, to also producers of fine art worthy of attention independent of their personal status as Native Americans (Hill 2000: 40).

However, although the installation itself doesn’t supply the museum visitor with a lot of information about who these men are and what their work means, it did spark an interest, in me at any rate, in learning more about them and their artwork. Richard Ray Whitman was born in Oklahoma and raised by his grandmother according to Yuchi traditions. His artwork encompasses multiple media forms including video, photography, digital photography, and painting. He uses his artwork both as a tool for political activism and as a way to explore Native American life. The works that he
displays at the National Museum of the American Indian in *Continuum: 12 Artists* include a number of black and white portraits of Native Americans, images of dead and decaying animals that force the audience to contemplate issues such as death and regeneration, and pieces that juxtapose pictures of Native Americans with modern technology (Museum Website).

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds is a Cheyenne artist who was educated at London’s Royal College, the University of Kansas, and Temple University and who currently teaches at the University of Oklahoma. He is well known for his use of language and text messages in public environments. The work that is currently on display in at the National Museum of the American Indian in *Continuum: 12 Artists* is entitled *Diary of Trees* and is an adaptation of a previous installation, *Wheel*, that was located at the Denver Art Museum. In this highly political installation, Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds juxtaposes tree-like structures that highlight historical events such as the Cheyenne/Arapaho massacre in 1866 and the passage of the Indian Religious Freedom Acts with diary-like passages on flat panels (Museum Website).
CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

After visiting the Tantaquidgeon Museum in Uncasville, CT, the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center in Mashantucket, CT, and the National Museum of the American Indian in New York, I feel like I have experienced three very different and interesting methods of Native American self-representation. However, whether a Native American museum is located in someone's backyard, the backyard of a large and successful casino, or in a government building, these three institutions deal with very similar issues. For the Tantaquidgeon Museum and the Mashantucket Pequot Museum, which are institutions run by only one tribe, the Mohegans and the Mashantucket Pequots respectively, there are shared themes such as what role does family or community play in these institutions? How does the economic success of the casino fit into the life of the museum? In the case of the Tantaquidgeon Museum, although the museum is currently operated by the tribe because of Gladys' age and infirmity, it is very evident that this museum will always remain a small, family run endeavor entirely separate from the nearby Mohegan Sun Casino. In the case of the Mashantucket Pequot Museum, although Foxwood's Casino absorbed the large cost of building and maintaining the museum, there is still a museum identification with family and community rather than with a corporate enterprise. This is exemplified by the presence of a current tribal group photo when you first enter the museum galleries and a portrait gallery of individual tribal members as you leave. And although Foxwood's Casino is mentioned in a few specific places in the museum, namely, the first gallery called *Life on the Reservation*, which houses a non-functional slot machine and some description of the casino, it is no way the museum's focus.
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Finally, although this family or community involvement is conspicuously and necessarily absent from the National Museum of the American Indian in New York because of its status as a national rather than tribal museum, the exhibits at the National Museum embody other issues that pervade all the Native-run museums that I visited including the duality of Native American artwork as ethnographic specimens and as artwork in its own right. In fact it is very interesting that at the time of my visit, the National Museum had two exhibits that were clearly divided into these very categories. It is clear from this distinct separation of Native American ethnographic objects and art objects that we do not yet know how to, or do not want to successfully combine the two. Another issue shared by the National Museum and its tribal counterparts is the role of the individual Native voice in museum representation. This Native voice was seen most clearly in the Tantaquidgeon Museum with the influence of Gladys and Harold, and in the National Museum with the direct contributions of the Native consultants and artists mentioned above. Although the Mashantucket museum did not emphasize this individual Native voice as often or as obviously, there were examples, such as the video of different tribes telling their creation stories, where museum visitors could hear first hand a Native American point of view.

The upcoming opening of the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. will be a landmark event in the developmental history of Native American self-representation. For the first time, Native Americans will have a physical space and presence in Washington D.C. in a manner that addresses the sensibilities and needs of the Native American community and with a voice that will be heard by thousands of visitors each year.
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Figure 3.1 - The Tantaquidgeon Museum in the 1930's (Fawcett 2000: 93)
Figure 3.2- Gladys at the University of Pennsylvania, 1919
(Fawcett 2000: 72)
Figure 3.3- Harold Tantaquidgeon building the longhouse at the Tantaquidgeon Museum, 1931-1932 (Fawcett 2000: 131)
Figure 3.4- Gladys teaching students at the Tantaquidgeon Museum, 1975
(Fawcett 2000: 145)
Figure 3.5- The Tantaquidgeon Museum as it looks today (Battista 2002:1)
Figure 3.6- An example of how artifacts are displayed in the central room of the Tantaquidgeon Museum (Battista 2002:2)
Figure 3.7- Gladys, pictured with her regalia, at the Tantaquidgeon Museum, 1985 (Fawcett 2000:5)
Figure 4.1- Elizabeth George (Photo by Curtis Moussie)
(Museum Guide Book 2000: 10)
Figure 4.2- The Pequot maple sugar shack, 1970’s (Museum Guide Book 2000: 11)
Figure 4.3- Tribal member Martha Langevin canning vegetables, 1938
(Museum Guide Book 2000: 11)
Figure 4.4- Foxwoods Casino (Museum Guide Book 2000: 13)
Figure 4.5- The Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center (Museum Guide Book 2000: 14)
Figure 4.6- Entrance to the museum's galleries illustrating spiral architecture (Museum Guide Book 2000: 14)
Figure 4.7- The floor plan of the Mashantucket Museum (Museum brochure)
Figure 4.8- Pequot village diorama showing men fishing
(Museum Guide Book 2000: 22)
Figure 4.9- Pequot village diorama showing a woman and child harvesting corn (Museum Guide Book 2000: 29)
Figure 4.10- Pequot village diorama showing men building post-contact palisade (Museum Guide Book 2000: 40)
Figure 4.11- Caribou hunt diorama (Museum Guide Book 2000: 18)
Figure 4.12- Diorama of civil war veteran Austin George
(Museum Guide Book 2000: 46)
Figure 4.13- Pequot portrait gallery (Museum Guide Book 2000: 15)
Figure 5.1 - Alexander Hamilton U.S. Customs House  
(http://www.nysb.uscourts.gov/history/scan3.jpg)
Figure 5.2- The newly built National Museum of the American Indian on the Mall in Washington, D.C (Museum website)
Figure 5.3- Interior of Alexander Hamilton U.S. Customs House (Source unknown)
Figure 5.4- Lisa Telford (Museum Guide Book 2003: 22)
Figure 5.5- Pat Courtney Gold (Museum Guide Book 2003: 25)
Figure 5.6- Julia Parker and Sherre Smith Ferri
Figure 5.7- Terrol Johnson (Museum Guide Book 2003:29)
Figure 5.8- Theresa Hoffman (Museum Guide Book 2003: 32)
Figure 5.9- Souvenir basket featured in Lisa Telford’s selections for *The Language of Native American Baskets: From the Weaver’s View*, weaver unknown, Tsimshian (Metlakatla, Alaska) ca.1890 (Museum Guide Book 2003: 23)

Figure 5.10- Rattle-top lid basket featured in Lisa Telford’s selections for *The Language of Native American Baskets: From the Weaver’s View*, Loa Ryan, Tsimshian (Bremerton, Washington), 2003 (Museum Guide Book 2003: 24)
Figure 5.11- Covered basket featured in Theresa Hoffman's selections for *The Language of Native American Baskets: From the Weaver's View*, weaver unknown, Abenaki (Odanak, Quebec), 1910 (Museum Guide Book 2003:33).

Figure 5.12- Covered fancy basket featured in Theresa Hoffman's selections for *The Language of Native American Baskets: From the Weaver's View*, Rocky Keezer, Passamaquoddy (Perry, Maine), 2003 (Museum Guide Book 2003: 33).
Figure 5.13 - Richard Ray Whitman (Museum Website)
Figure 5.14- Example #1 of artwork displayed by Richard Ray Whitman in Continuum: 12 Artists (Museum Website)
Figure 5.15- Example #2 of artwork displayed by Richard Ray Whitman in
Continuum: 12 Artists (Museum Website)
Figure 5.16- Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds
(Museum Website)
Figure 5.17- Example #1 of artwork displayed by Hachivi Edgar
Heap of Birds in Continuum: 12 Artists (Museum Website)
Figure 5.18- Example #2 of artwork displayed by Hachivi Edgar Heap of Bird in Continuum: 12 Artists (Museum Website)