

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

BY THE PEOPLE

The first new museum on the National Mall in 17 years was created in close collaboration with Native American communities throughout the hemisphere

BY THOMAS HAYDEN - PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT LAUTMAN

THE MÉTIS OF WESTERN CANADA know a thing or two about traveling. Descended from Europeans and the Native people they encountered while trading furs in the 18th century, the Métis and their culture were literally born on the move. So it was in keeping with tradition that Jacinte Lambert, a Métis woman from the Saint-Laurent community on Lake Manitoba, climbed behind the wheel of a flatbed truck in the fall of 2003 and headed south with a most unusual cargo: a vintage 1950s Bombardier snow bus.

The ungainly “Bomber”—it looks something like a school bus on tank tracks—is the workhorse of commercial ice fishing in Manitoba, used by the Métis to ferry their catch of pickerel, perch and sauger from frozen lakes back to town. So when curators from the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) visited Saint-Laurent looking for objects to represent the Métis, the community decided to send a Bombardier. On her 1,600-mile drive south with her husband to Washington, D.C., Lambert says, “Wherever we stopped, people kept coming up to us to look. I guess they didn’t know what it was.”

The Métis’ snow bus is one of some 8,000 artifacts and artworks that will be on display when the NMAI, 15 years in the making, opens on the National Mall September 21. It’s a good example of the lengths to which the new museum has gone to make it inclusive of groups large and small from all over the Americas. The \$199 million home of one of the most important collections of Native American art and artifacts in the world will display plenty of arrowheads, beadwork and pre-Columbian gold objects. But the museum—established by Congress in 1989 as a “living memorial” to Native cultures, and conceived, designed and curated in large part by Native Americans—will also exhibit items that speak in other ways to contemporary Indian experience. Thus the Bomber, the centerpiece of the Saint-Laurent Métis exhibit (which also includes a small stage where visitors can practice the Red River Jig to video instruction). “Hardly anyone knows what it means to be Métis,” says Lambert. “Fishing is a big part of our life, and we wanted to show people who we are now.”

Museum curators and officials spent years consulting with representatives of Indian tribes from throughout the Western Hemisphere, from the Arctic Circle to the tip of South America, and among the key recurring opinions, NMAI director W. Richard West Jr. says, “was the notion, a directive really, ‘Don’t you dare indicate that we are a historical relic.’” The museum’s opening comes at a time of a Native American renaissance, says West, as a new generation fights to achieve what he calls “a happy post-colonial hereafter” of increasing optimism and self-determination. West, 61, a prominent Albuquerque lawyer and a member of the Cheyenne and Ara-

paho tribes of Oklahoma, was tapped in 1990 to run the museum. Thirty percent of the staff he’s hired are Native American. West says “We are still here” was the message Native political leaders, elders and communities most wanted the NMAI to get across to non-Native visitors; the museum’s success or failure in the eyes of Native Americans may hinge on how well it conveys that idea.

It’s a tall order: Native people have long had a testy relationship with museums. “We love them because they have our stuff, but we also hate them because they have our stuff,” West says. Much of the NMAI’s stuff was acquired in ways today’s curators would never countenance.

Most of the 800,000 artifacts and 125,000 historical photographs in the museum’s collection are from a vast personal hoard assembled in the first half of the 20th century by New York engineer and investment banker George Gustav Heye. Heye cuts an improbable figure as the NMAI’s patron saint. A beefy man standing 6 feet 4 inches and reputed to smoke 18 cigars a day, he was the very picture of Euro-American entitlement, satisfying his collecting urge with family money and contributions from wealthy associates. Heye’s original Museum of the American Indian opened to the public in upper Manhattan in 1922, but had fallen into disrepair by the time Congress passed the Smithsonian’s NMAI charter in 1989. Heye’s founding role is recognized at the George Gustav Heye Center, located in the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Customs House at the opposite end of Manhattan, in New York’s financial district. The first of the NMAI’s three facilities, the Heye Center opened in 1994 and will continue to host exhibitions after the Mall museum opens. But starting in 1999, the bulk of Heye’s collection was moved from his original museum and a Bronx warehouse to the NMAI’s main curatorial facility, the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland. Most of the objects will remain there, with a tiny portion shown in the Mall museum or lent to tribal museums throughout the hemisphere.

Heye was a voracious collector, accumulating nearly a million Native artifacts in his lifetime. (The first was a deerskin

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shirt purchased from an Indian foreman on a railway engineering job Heye oversaw in Arizona in 1897.) Heye was described as “a boxcar collector” by an unnamed anthropologist quoted in a *New Yorker* article three years after Heye’s death in 1957. “George would be fretful and hard to live with until he’d bought every last dirty dishcloth and discarded shoe and shipped them back to New York,” the anthropologist said. But he added that Heye “didn’t give a hang about Indians individually, and he never seemed to have heard about their problems in present-day society.”

Heye leaves a mixed legacy. Perhaps his wealth would have been better spent helping Indians rather than accumulating their worldly goods. Yet if he had not combed reservations, sponsored archaeological expeditions and bought up other private collections in America and Europe, the NMAI might have much less to show. And while he was once charged with grave robbing for excavating a Munsee-Delaware cemetery in New Jersey (he was acquitted), Heye also on at least one occasion returned an artifact he had acquired. The Hidatsa people of North Dakota, facing severe drought in 1938, requested a ceremonial bundle Heye had purchased from a missionary in 1907. The bundle, which included the skulls of Hidatsa holy men, had been on display at the Manhattan museum, yet Heye agreed to return it, receiving a buffalo medicine horn and an Indian name, *Isatsigibis*, or “Slim Shin,” in return.

Such respectful cooperation has long been in short supply. Museums, including the Smithsonian, have typically treated Native Americans as exotic curiosities. “The museums personified Western civilization, and Native Americans were outside of that, and often portrayed as quite subhuman,” West says. The NMAI has worked to correct that regrettable legacy by returning thousands of objects to their home communities, consulting Native groups on how they would like to be portrayed and involving them in creating exhibits.

In practice, that approach has made for some surprising exhibitions, like the Métis snow bus and a display from the American Indian Center of Chicago—both part of an exhibition called “Our Lives”—that opens not with a tepee but a mock-up of the brick-and-steel doorway of its headquarters in the heart of the city. A community center serving the Chicago area’s 30,000 Indians, the Indian Center’s display includes the kitchen table-size “Chi-Town drum,” an elk hide powwow drum that the center uses to teach traditional songs and dances; keeping the heritage alive is especially important now that 64 percent of Native Americans live in urban areas. Indian Center director Joe Podlasek, whose ancestry is part Ojibwa and part Polish, says most Americans “just don’t get who we are. I believe it’s not that they don’t want to get it, but they don’t have exposure. So rather than complaining about it, we’re taking action in a positive way.”

On opening day, the NMAI will feature three major exhibitions curated in collaboration with 24 Native groups from throughout the Western Hemisphere. “Our Universes” explores Native views of the world, both physical and spiritual,

including the traditions of Natives from South and Central America, the Great Plains and the far north. “Our Peoples” traces Native histories from the perspective of tribal groups themselves and presents, says NMAI facilities planning coordinator Duane Blue Spruce, a Laguna and San Juan Pueblo, “a side of history that most people don’t know and probably would prefer not to know.” Among the displayed artifacts are tribal shields, guns and treaties from the Indian Wars and forced relocations. Still, West says, “This is not just a museum about the Native holocaust—that’s important, but it’s not the totality. We were here before, we’re here after, and we’ll be here into the future far beyond.”

Of course, social problems, like poverty and substance abuse, are still a reality for many American Indians, but at the same time an increasing number of Native doctors, lawyers and businesspeople are flourishing. The museum will address the modern face of Native Americans in the “Our Lives” exhibition, which Podlasek says will show “Indian people walking the professional and the traditional lives together.” Artifacts will include the 1984 Olympic gold medals won by Canadian Mohawk kayaker Alwyn Morris. For the beleaguered Canadian Métis, who for generations faced discrimination from both whites and full-blooded Indians, involvement in the museum is helping the community rediscover pride in its heritage. “Now people from all over the world will know we exist,” Lambert says. “It seems like people are finally accepting us.”

The “Window on Collections” exhibit, on the third and fourth floors, will offer a glimpse of the artworks and objects, such as projectile points, dolls, beaded objects and animal figures, usually stored at the Suitland facility, where even the NMAI’s preservation efforts have been influenced by the collaborative philosophy of the museum. Since 1998, the NMAI and other Smithsonian museums have returned thousands of sacred objects and human remains in compliance with federal repatriation laws. Many of the ceremonial artifacts still in the collection, says museum spokesman Thomas Sweeney, a member of the Potawatomi tribe, are considered to be “living objects” by Native communities, requiring light and air; so, unlike most museum storage facilities, the storage and archival areas have windows. And because, according to tradition, some Pueblo pots need to be “fed” now and then, they will be offered a pinch of cornmeal (put on a dish and set before the pots for a few hours), to the dismay of some conservators worried about rodents and insects.

The facility also serves as a place where people can use artifacts not created for display in traditional rituals. “They can come out from under the glass,” West says. “We’re trying to promote the original cultural context through interactions between the originators and the objects under our care.”

The NMAI has also collected materials important to the daily lives of modern Natives as well as work by contemporary Native artists. Indeed, two of the opening exhibitions highlight the work of two of the most important 20th-century Na-

tive artists, Allan Houser and George Morrison. The exhibition, some 200 paintings, drawings and sculptures, most on loan from other museums and collections, will be presented in the Mall museum's rotating temporary exhibit hall on the fourth floor. Other "landmark object" artworks on display will include a contemporary bronze sculpture by Pueblo artist Roxanne Swentzell of Santa Clara, New Mexico, and a new, 20-foot totem pole carved by Tlingit Nathan Jackson of Ketchikan, Alaska.

The building itself is full of symbolism. Though germinated in the U.S. Capitol, just 500 yards away, the NMAI's roots stretch far out into Indian Country, one term for the places and communities where Native Americans are most at home. From 1991 to 1995, museum representatives held meetings throughout North America, from Anchorage and Vancouver Island to Oklahoma and New Mexico. And they invited community leaders, artists and elders from throughout the hemisphere to Washington, seeking input not only on the exhibition materials but on the building's design.

Much of that was carried out by a team led first by Ottawa-based Blackfoot architect Douglas Cardinal, who left the project in 1998 over design disagreements. Cherokee and Choctaw architect Johnpaul Jones of Seattle, a member of the original design team, saw the museum to its completion. Clad in rough-cut, tawny Kasota limestone from Minnesota, the sinuous building takes on the appearance of a wind- and water-carved canyon wall. The museum's main entrance faces east, a tradition common to many Native groups. It includes space for gatherings and celebrations and plenty of ventilation, to accommodate religious ceremonies that include the burning of things like sweet grass and sage.

Construction started with a visit from a group of Indian elders who surveyed the site. "Boom! They hit the ground and said, 'This is the heart of the building,'" Jones recalls. That spot became the center of the soaring Potomac hall—"where the goods are brought in" in Algonquian, the language of many of the local Native people in what is now the greater Washington, D.C. area. A glass oculus sits in the 120-foot domed ceiling, connecting the space to the sky above and representing the smoke hole found in many traditional Native dwellings. Eight large glass prisms set into a window on the south side cast rainbow-hued light onto the hall's floor and walls.

Among the design principles that set the museum apart, perhaps the most evident is the blurring of the line between outside and inside. A stone pathway leading into the building continues inside, and large windows offer a preview of the museum's interior; from the inside, glass walls not only offer views of the Mall and the Capitol but also help maintain a connection to the environment. "In Native architecture you shouldn't see the line between the buildings and the outside environment," says Donna House, a Navajo and Oneida ethnobotanist who helped design the museum's distinctive landscaping. "The landscape flows into the building, and the environment is who we are. We are the trees, we are the rocks, we are the water. And that had to be part of the museum. The building is an ex-

tenion of the landscape."

Most visitors will enter the site from the northwest and wend their way toward the eastern entrance along a pathway that leads through a lowland forest ecosystem of Native plants and a waterway that cascades toward the windows of the first-floor cafeteria (where only Native-inspired foods are served). Along the way, visitors pass a wetlands area recalling Washington's origins as marshland. Ancient boulders represent the oldest inhabitants of the Native universe in many cultures. Forty "grandfather rocks" from Canada, weighing 13 to 28 tons, greet visitors near the entrance, and four smaller stones from Hawaii, northern Canada, Maryland and Chile's Tierra del Fuego are placed at the compass points to mark the four cardinal directions. "As you move from north to east," says House, "the stones and the plants are there to greet you. The idea is to help you shed the Mall experience and prepare you for a Native experience and point of view." At the south entrance, where school groups will arrive, the land is planted with traditional Native crops, including "the three sisters" of corn, beans and squash.

Under the dome of the Potomac hall, a 22-foot screen greets visitors with "welcome" in hundreds of Native languages. For a while after the museum debuts, Native craftspeople will demonstrate traditional boat-building skills. Elevators decorated with Native sun and bird symbols lead to the fourth floor, where visitors can see a movie that features artifacts such as peace pipes and South American pots, as well as voices and images of contemporary Native life. From there it is a few steps to major exhibition spaces, including the "Our Peoples" gallery, which explores Native history. By design, that gallery empties into a "pause area" featuring a view of the U.S. Capitol.

A broad staircase curves along the western edge of the interior space, like switchbacks on a mountain trail, to the "Our Lives" exhibit and temporary gallery on the third floor. At every step, tiny details reward the careful observer, from the wampum shells embedded in the gift shop counters to inlaid designs on the front plaza that reflect the constellations as they appeared on the museum's founding day, November 28, 1989. As for the symbolism of Native America's new home sitting on the last remaining spot on the Mall, West just chuckles. "Oh, it's beyond fun. Native people should have been here much earlier, but we're at the head of the Mall. It's absolutely poetic irony."

The history of the past 200 years or so has made Washington, D.C.—and especially the Mall—into not just the seat of national power but also the official repository of the national memory. But this was a site of power and memory long before Pierre Charles L'Enfant designed the city's stately avenues and grand architecture in the 1790s. Like all of America, this spot too is Indian Country. And while official recognition of that fact has perhaps been too long in coming, it has not come too late. "Indian people have been coming to Washington for centuries," says spokesman Sweeney. "Now we have a home of our own here in what was and still is a Native place." ●