



Smithsonian
National Museum of the American Indian

Office of Public Affairs

News

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Opening Exhibitions at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian

When the National Museum of the American Indian opens the doors to its new Mall museum on Sept. 21, three new, permanent exhibitions will introduce visitors to the history and culture of American Indians. These exhibits—"Our Universes," "Our Peoples" and "Our Lives"—offer visitors a unique perspective on lives of Native peoples.

"Exhibition curators collaborated with 24 tribes and Native communities from across the Western Hemisphere, whose stories best illustrate the ideas of each of these themes," says Gerald McMaster (Plains Cree/Siksika Nation), the museum's deputy assistant director for cultural resources. "Native voices shape the content, look and feel of every exhibition. As a result, visitors encounter a plethora of perspectives—even conflicting voices from the same tribe. The museum tried to provide a forum for all Native peoples."

In addition to these permanent exhibits, visitors can see more than 3,500 objects from the museum's permanent collection on display in the "Window on Collections" exhibition. The museum's Changing Exhibitions gallery will offer a retrospective of the works of contemporary Native artists George Morrison and Allan Houser as its inaugural exhibition. Also, detailed, hand-crafted jewelry will be featured in a traveling exhibition from Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., titled "The Jewelry of Ben Nighthorse," which will be displayed in the museum's conference center.

"Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World"

Native cosmology and the spiritual relationship between mankind and the natural world are the focus of "Our Universes." The exhibition, which is organized around one solar year, explores the annual ceremonies of Native peoples as windows into ancestral Native teachings.

While under the exhibit's star-filled "night sky," visitors can discover how celestial bodies shape the daily lives of Native peoples, as well as establish calendars of ceremonies and celebrations.

The exhibition features the annual Denver March Powwow, the North American Indigenous Games in Canada and the Day of the Dead in Mexico as seasonal celebrations that bring together different Native peoples.

Emil Her Many Horses (Oglala) served as curator and worked with spiritual leaders and elders from eight tribes and Native communities—Pueblo of Santa Clara (New Mexico), Anishinaabe (Great Lakes region and Canada), Lakota (South Dakota), Quechua (Peru), Hupa (California), Q'eq'chi' Maya (Guatemala), Mapuche (Chile) and Yup'ik (Alaska)—to develop this exhibition.

"Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories"

Native peoples are often portrayed in textbooks in narrow or inaccurate ways. In "Our Peoples," American Indians share their own histories—in their own voices—with visitors. The exhibition tells of Native Americans and looks at their struggles to maintain traditions in the face of adversity. The exhibition's curator is Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche).

Eight tribes and Native communities—Seminole Tribe of Florida, Tapirapé (Brazil), Kiowa Nation (Oklahoma), Tohono O'odham Nation (Arizona), Eastern Band of Cherokee (North Carolina) Nahua of the Rio Balsas (Mexico), Ka'apor (Brazil) and Wixarika from Bancos de Calítique, Mexico—worked with curator Ann McMullen to create exhibits that share the stories that have shaped them as distinctive peoples.

"Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities"

"Our Lives" examines the identities of Native peoples in the 21st century and how those identities, both individual and communal, are shaped by deliberate choices made in challenging circumstances. People are influenced by the world around them, their families and communities, the language they speak, the places they live and identify with and by self-determination. This exhibition, which explores these forces in modern Native life, was created by curator Gabrielle Tayac (Piscataway) and guest curator Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora).

Curator Cynthia Chavez worked with eight tribes and Native communities—Campo Band of Kumeyaay Indians (California), Urban Indian Community of Chicago (Illinois), Yakama Nation (Washington State), Igloolik (Canada), Kahnawake (Canada), Saint-Laurent (Canada), Kalinago (Dominica) and Pamunkey Tribe (Virginia)—to illustrate how Native Americans, despite many challenges, continue to exist as distinct communities.

“Window on Collections: Many Hands, Many Voices”

“Window on Collections” celebrates the remarkable breadth and diversity of Native American objects in the collection. More than 3,500 objects are presented in mini-displays. The objects are arranged by categories that include beadwork, peace medals, arrowheads and other projectile points, containers, dolls and animal-themed objects.

“Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser”

The inaugural exhibition in the museum’s Changing Exhibitions Gallery will be shown through fall 2005. “Native Modernism” is a retrospective of the works of well-known Native American artists George Morrison (1919-2000) and Allan Houser (1914-1994). Morrison (Grand Portage Band of Chippewa) and Houser (Warm Springs Chiricahua Apache) laid the foundation for contemporary Native American art and influenced future generations of artists.

Morrison, best known for his paintings, wood collages and sculptures, created works rooted in Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism that drew on the memories of the horizon over Lake Superior. Houser, often referred to as the “father of contemporary Native American sculpture,” blended Native subject matter with sleek Modernist design. Curator Truman Lowe (Ho-Chunk) organized this exhibition.

“The Jewelry of Ben Nighthorse”

This traveling exhibition, which is organized by the Center for Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College, features jewelry designed by Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell (Northern Cheyenne, R-Colo.). A leading artist working in contemporary Native American jewelry, Campbell has developed an exquisite and unique collection that covers various periods and facets of his work, including the Painted Mesa style he originated, a buffalo skull inlaid with semi-precious stones and a presidential bollo. The exhibition will be at the National Museum of the American Indian from Sept. 21 through April 3, 2005.