

Guiding Spirit

American Indian Museum Curators Look beyond the Objects to the Power Within

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To interpret the objects in the National Museum of the American Indian, you need to know their language: the history of a tribe, the meaning of its ceremonies, the names of the ancestors. Or you need a translator, someone like George Horse Capture, one of the museum's senior curators, to tell you what things mean—how colors and designs and bear claws can carry energy; how the inspiration for what to put in sacred medicine bundles comes to people in dreams.

If you believe in the power of objects, you see a war shirt in terms that are decidedly unshirtlike. It is a poem of sorts that tells of “pain, massacres, diseases, hope,” Horse Capture says. It is a living object, as those at the museum like to say. It tells the story of an ancestor.

“He wore that shirt and then, through all of his activities, he sweated and he transferred some of his body onto that shirt,” Horse Capture says, standing in the museum, which he's been working to make real for 11 years. Imagine touching that shirt, Horse Capture says, as he reaches over and tugs your sleeve. “The connection is made, a direct and physical connection. A bridge is formed between our ancestors and us.”

Throughout the new museum, which opens Tuesday, is the explicit message that its displays have layers of meaning, that many objects here have spiritual dimensions greater than their aesthetic value. In a collection known as “Our Universes,” a beaded pouch in the shape of a turtle turns out to be a navel amulet. A Lakota object that holds a child's umbilical cord acts as spiritual protection. In the Lelawi Theater there are several red stone pipes on display. The stems are separated from the bowls because many Indians believe it is only during ceremonies that they should be connected, and their full power realized.

Horse Capture, 66, a member of the Montana tribe known as the A'aninin (or Gros Ventre), draws his hands toward his belly when he talks about power, as if it's a force he can feel in his gut. He says that when he curated the Plains Indian Museum in Cody, Wyo., he put together a show that included a cane that had belonged to Sitting Bull. “When no one was looking, I took off my glove—it was lunch time—and I held that cane like this and *bzzz!* You could feel the power.”

But how do you quantify a feeling? What if not everyone feels it? The challenge of the new museum is the scope and

diversity of the stories it must tell, on behalf of millions of people with different notions of what is beautiful and meaningful and holy. In its collections are brightly colored Hopi kachina dolls, whimsical-looking figures carved from cottonwood root that are traditionally given to children to teach them about kachinas—beneficent spirit messengers. Some Hopis believe these dolls need to breathe, so their heads should never be covered. Some call the dolls “sacred” and “living,” and say they should never be sold.

Other Hopis sell them to tourists as souvenirs.

What's sacred? Words get slippery here. You start talking about the museum's objects and an Osage scholar corrects you. He doesn't like that word, *object*. It is too utilitarian, perhaps, too stripped of power. As if a war shirt could be just a shirt.

‘Life in All of Nature’

The way many American Indians see it, an object can carry the energy of a person who once owned it. An item decorated with an eagle feather can carry the spirit of that eagle. A rock can be seen as having power because it belongs to the natural world. Because of their histories and their associations, objects tell stories.

“There is a very important respect in which Native American people see objects as being living, as animate instead of inanimate,” says W. Richard West Jr., director of the museum. There is “life in all of nature,” West says, and therefore life in things people craft out of nature. West, a Southern Cheyenne chief, says the buckskin shirt he wears to powwows has a connection to the animal it came from.

Objects used in ceremonies also have power. When West was recovering this winter from prostate cancer surgery, he kept close a shawl his brother had used in a Cheyenne sun dance, an annual summer ceremony of renewal. “It was a comfort to me, and it was strengthening,” he says. “It was an object that had been prayed over, if you will, by the leaders of the sun dance, and it had been around the sun dance fire.”

Suzan Shown Harjo, a former museum trustee who is Cheyenne and Muscogee and heads an Indian-rights advocacy

group in Washington, expresses reverence for the connection between people and their objects.

“I would never walk into any place, any home and touch a doll or a mask or anything where I didn’t know what it was,” she says. “There is about the reality of a doll for a child that is about as spiritual as you can get. I mean, that’s a real being. And you don’t know what happened to that child. . . . You don’t know what that doll represents.”

In other words, you don’t know its power.

Out of Harm’s Way

Consider the dangers of ignorance.

Rosita Worl, a Tlingit and museum trustee who teaches anthropology at the University of Alaska Southeast in Juneau, recalls curating an exhibit that included shamanic objects from other Tlingit clans. She asked her clan leader how to deal with these, and he advised her not to touch them at all. Handling them, he said, could put her at the mercy of potentially harmful spirits.

In 1994, Jim Volkert was curating the inaugural exhibition for the Indian Museum’s New York branch, the George Gustav Heye Center. He had three Crow shields that he wanted to show, and he asked a Crow elder if there was any reason they couldn’t be displayed in public.

“He said, ‘Not a problem,’” remembers Volkert, now an associate NMAI director. Then the elder paused and added, “But the shields really can’t see each other.” The shields’ powers had to be kept from “colliding,” as Volkert understood it. He built dividers between them.

The Indian Museum is filled with artifacts whose power is not known. Most of its more than 800,000 objects were collected by a wealthy eccentric named George Gustav Heye during the first half of the 20th century. So now there are items that have been separated from their original owners for decades. There are medicine bundles—collections of objects of deep personal importance to individuals and tribes—whose stories and associations are mysterious. Some objects in the collection have been repatriated to the tribes. For the rest, the museum consults with tribes on how best to care for them, how best to respect their power.

Most of the museum’s objects, including its most sensitive ones, are housed at its Cultural Resources Center in Suitland. It has artifacts that cannot be handled by men because they were created for women alone, and artifacts that cannot be handled by women. There are artifacts that shouldn’t be near water, so they are housed away from pipes. Artifacts that shouldn’t be stepped on or walked over are housed in open areas instead of under a ceiling, to avoid the footfalls of people one floor above.

There are sacred kachina masks, worn in ceremonies. These are vastly more potent than kachina dolls, which some consider child’s play. Hopis believe the masks are living spirits. They are stored behind muslin screens so they can breathe, and are ritually “fed” corn pollen. They are not displayed in the museum, and indeed, few Hopis wish to discuss them for publication. They are considered sacrosanct.

Most objects in the Suitland facility have a mount of some sort that they rest upon, because being handled too much could affect not only their physical integrity but their metaphysical integrity, says Jim Pepper Henry, who as assistant director for community services helps oversee the Suitland facility’s more sensitive collections.

“They’re dormant, they’re asleep, and what we don’t want to do is wake them up inadvertently,” he says.

That’s why many of Suitland’s sacred medicine bundles are kept high up, out of the way of anyone passing by, because “there’s still a life force with those bundles, and there may be spirits” that shouldn’t be meddled with, Pepper Henry says. There is a bundle in the collection that belonged to his great-grandfather, but he’s never opened it to find out what items are inside.

“I don’t have all the knowledge it would take,” he says, “to open it properly or close it properly.”

The Power of Symbols

Those who work for the new museum, many of whom are American Indian, use language that reflects the conviction that they are temporary caretakers of artifacts with lives of their own.

“We try to make the objects as comfortable as possible while they’re in our possession,” says Pepper Henry, a Kaw and Muscogee. He says museum staffers don’t consider themselves owners of the collection, but its “stewards.”

“We consider the Cultural Resources Center to be the home for our collections,” West says. “It is not a warehouse. We don’t even like that term, because that sort of connotes dead storage.”

Terminology is important at the museum because those who run it are interpreting their collection for two audiences. They need to be sensitive to the concerns of the Native Americans whose heritage they house, and they must also cater to the many non-native people who come through, who may have a hard time understanding how—from a Native American perspective—cultural and spiritual interests are interwoven.

The Smithsonian’s acquisition of the Heye collection was authorized in 1989. During the more than four years it took to ship those artifacts from a storehouse in the Bronx to the museum’s Suitland facility, each truck was blessed upon its departure and arrival. There have been blessings marking major moments in the museum’s life: upon its groundbreaking, upon the placement of the final steel beam in its dome. The Cultural Resources Center has a fire pit where visiting tribes can perform smudging ceremonies.

But Pepper Henry says he worries that the museum might be perceived as “New Agey.” Referring to a specific blessing ceremony, Thomas Sweeney, the museum’s spokesman, labels it a “cultural, not a religious rite.” For some American Indians, that distinction may be a false one, but it underlines the thorny path their museum must navigate.

It is easy, perhaps too easy, to view American Indian ideas about powerful objects as outside mainstream Western beliefs.

ANNUAL EDITIONS

The way some scholars tell it, once upon a time, Europeans assigned objects a sacred quality. Over time, various forces interceded, according to different theories. The Reformation deemphasized the power of the religious image. In art, aesthetics became more important than devotion—the actual worship of icons of the Virgin Mary declined. Modern science and faith in the scientific method put the notion of the supernatural under a microscope.

In non-native culture, there are few items considered so holy, so forbidden, that they cannot even be looked at, says David Freedberg, a professor of art history at Columbia University who wrote “The Power of Images” in 1989. “There’s certainly nothing like the kind of sacredness and inviolate aura which is attached to medicine bundles,” he says.

But there are religious symbols that maintain their power: crosses, relics, altars. There is our national flag, a secular object with such totemic power that there is substantive debate over whether it should be illegal to burn what is, in fact, a piece of cloth. The Great Pyramid has a magical quality that surpasses its bigness, its oldness, its ingenuity. Certainly, a secular object like the flag is not the same as kachina masks to the devout. But there is a common human reality here. It has to do with reverence.

Freedberg argues that images still have the power to arouse and anger us. It is human nature to “conflate the image with what it represents,” he says.

Thus, spurned lovers rip up the pictures of those who betrayed them. In 2001 the Taliban destroyed statues of Buddha in the Afghan desert. Last year Iraqis and U.S. Marines toppled that statue of Saddam Hussein. Some anthropologists argue there are hard-wired reasons we look for faces in tree bark, that we see a man in the moon. We imbue inanimate objects with an animate quality—a spirit, if you will.

We love our inanimate objects. We believe in them. Our cars make us powerful. Our clothing makes us desirable. Margaret Wiener, a professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, suggests that maybe Karl Marx had it right when he spoke of the fetishism of commodities.

“We’re enmeshed in objects,” she says. “What is consumerism but a vast set of practices that treats objects as highly significant, highly powerful to the making of ourselves?”

Defining Sacredness

Back to words again. Sticky words like *object* and *church* and *own*. This time, the word is *sacred*.

The most recent and public difference of opinion over sacredness occurred just this summer, and it concerned a substance called pipestone. Also known as catlinite, this stone is used by Plains and other Indians to carve ceremonial pipes. The pipes are considered so powerful that when they’re put on display in the museum their pieces are separated.

“The stem represents the male and the bowl represents the female,” says Arvol Looking Horse, a Lakota spiritual leader who lives on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. When “they’re put together, they’re starting life.”

A few months ago, the museum installed a small circle of the red stone in the floor by the main entrance. The idea, says Richard West, was to lend importance to a central location by using a material that is both beautiful and revered. It was meant to evoke a fire pit, the center of family and communal life.

When word got out that the stone was being used in this unorthodox fashion, West started receiving complaints. Looking Horse is one of those who objected. He says that according to legend, pipestone was formed by the blood of ancestors. It is too sacred to be sold and too sacred to be placed in the floor.

“You can’t walk over or on sacred things,” says Looking Horse. “It’s totally disrespectful.”

But Travis Erickson, a Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota stoneworker who carved the floor installation, sees sacredness in different terms. “This is how I survive and support my children,” says Erickson, who has eight kids and lives in Pipestone, Minn. The fourth generation of his family to sell or trade pipestone, he prays before he begins his quarrying work, and treats the stone with respect.

“My family, in my mind,” he says, “is a sacred thing, because God gave me these children.”

The pipestone from the floor is now in storage, and the hole in the museum’s floor has been filled with sandstone. It is the same sandstone that was used in the Smithsonian castle, West says. This seems appropriate. In some sense, it is the Smithsonian’s sacred stone.

“This is complicated business,” says West, who himself uses a pipestone pipe during ceremonies. “The National Museum of the American Indian is essentially a constituency-driven organization.” West says such disputes will happen from time to time.

“One is inevitably going to have differences of opinion,” he says. “We are only human in the end.”

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