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Nonhegemonic Curating

By CHRISTOPHER SHEA

The opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian this September was a landmark event in the recognition of the history and the plight of native peoples. But the grand opening may prove to be a landmark in the history -- and perhaps the plight -- of museum curating as well.

Because Native American mythology is rooted in the idea that Indians have always inhabited this continent, scientifically informed discussion of how North America came to be populated has been banished from the museum's halls. The exhibits, moreover, reject the supposedly Eurocentric notion of historical development. "Things are looked at very cyclically, not in a linear way," one curator told The Washington Post.

Thus, spear- and arrowheads dating from 9000 B.C. to the 20th century appear together on one wall, unlabeled, in a beautiful array resembling schools of fish; to get even sketchy details about their provenance, you have to consult a separate electronic display. In another gallery, a young Indian discusses glass blowing on a video screen, alongside images of Tlingit house posts from Alaska, dating to 1830. The implicit message: Indian artists from across the ages are participants in one unified culture. Elsewhere, dozens of earthen figurines are accompanied by only this wall notation: "Their world is ancient and modern, and forever changing, with memories from the beginning of everything."

Where specific tribes are discussed, "community curators" selected by the tribes -- not anthropologists, not historians -- tell the stories.

Not everyone appreciates the new hegemony-free museum. Edward Rothstein of The New York Times complained, "The result is that monotony sets in; every tribe is equal, and so is every idea."

But judging from attendance figures -- a healthy 275,400 in October, the first full month of operation -- this new kind of museum has its fans. Certainly, the desire for a fresh start is understandable. After all, curators dismantled the archaic Indian dioramas in the National Museum of Natural History, across the mall, only this year.

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