PRE-VISIT GUIDE
FOR TEACHERS
Getting Started

Whether your visit to the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) will be self-guided or led by one of the museum’s knowledgeable interpreters, there are a number of ways to prepare your students.

Use some of the following ideas before your visit.

There is so much to see at the National Museum of the American Indian! Everyday objects, articles of clothing, children’s toys, tools of cultural heritage, and contemporary artworks fill the galleries and exhibitions. As you look at this broad range of objects in the museum or discuss Native history in the classroom, please keep the following two concepts in mind.

Native Communities Are Diverse

There are thousands of Indigenous communities across the Western Hemisphere, each with its “flavored” language or way of thinking, each community in it’s own unique and distinct. While there may be similarities between Native peoples, they often are as different from each other as people from Japan and Sweden.

Native People Are Still Here

Despite the struggles through periods of population and cultural loss over the past 500 years, Native people never vanished or became extinct. The cultures of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas are alive and changeable, and many communities blend their traditional ways with contemporary lifestyles.
Visiting the National Museum of the American Indian helps students gain an understanding and appreciation of other cultures. You can start the important work in the classroom.

Talk About It!

Choose three questions with your students:

1. How accurate was the idea that there is a ‘typical’ Native dress and clothing? What details were omitted or ignored? (Questions include, but are not limited to: What is the origin of the dress? What is the reason it is worn? Was it worn often or for special occasions? What materials are used? How are the materials used?)

2. The brain is often the focus of discussion on Native peoples, what is the role of the heart? How are the two connected?

3. Why is it important to learn about Native peoples?

For students to better understand and engage with the objects in the museum, ask them to use these same skills to find out more about the objects they will see at the museum.

• What clues can help you figure out how old the object is? Think about materials, but don’t forget that sometimes new things can be made in ways that were old, newer versions of these objects may be used by Native people today.

• What might these materials tell you about the people who made it, or where they come from?

• Find and describe small details that you didn’t notice before when looking at images of objects. Can you share those details with the rest of the class?

• Are there any parts you recognize or that look familiar to you? What might this tell you about the object?

• Do you have any ideas about what you think this object might be used for? What materials might you use in your own life? What items are used by your Native community?

• How are these objects similar to and different from those that you know?

• What is a tribe, and how many tribes are there?

• Indigenous (used widely in Central and South America)

• Native American (sometimes shortened to Native)

• Alaska Native

• Native American Indian

• American Indian

• American, Indigenous?

• What is your tribe?

• What is a tribe, and how many tribes are there?

• What is the difference between tribes and communities?

• What is the difference between tribes and tribes?

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Look at Objects!

For students to better understand and engage with the objects located in NMAI galleries, they will need to practice looking closely and asking perceptive questions. To encourage this practice, we have created the object prompts below. These questions are designed to help you get your students started. Use them as a tool to encourage your students to ask questions about the objects in the exhibition and encourage them to use their own ideas to think about these objects. As you begin to discuss ancient people with your students, use the following questions to help them understand how these objects were made and what they were used for. The questions below are designed specifically to help you and your students begin to wonder and discover about the objects in the exhibition.

* What is this object?
* Who made it?
* Where did it come from?
* What do you think it’s made of? Plant or animal?
* What shapes are there?
* What color(s) do you see?
* How big is it? (This question may be easier with an object that is larger in size, such as a traditional canoe or replica of an artifact you’ve never shown them. It doesn’t have to be an object from a recent or current time.)
* How does it fit together?
* What do you think it was used for?
* What do you think it was made for?

Continue Building Skills!

Once you practice this activity using a few different objects or images, remind your students that they should use these same skills to find out more about the objects or images in their own classes. With the object prompts, you can use the same ideas for other objects or images that your students will see at the museum. Help your students really look at the images on high-resolution prints and online images in the NMAI collection database. You can download or print images from the NMAI online collection database. Click on the title or object number to download or print the image. To download or print multiple images, use the “Download Image” button. To print an image you have already downloaded, use the “Print Image” button. You can download a PDF of all the images in an exhibition, such as the Our Peoples exhibition.

www.nmai.si.edu/searchcollections

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www.nmai.si.edu/bookshop.

Questions

- How do you know that the object you are looking at is from the Northwest Coast?
- What kind of materials are these objects made of?
- What makes this object unique?
- What kind of decoration do you see?
- How did they make this object?
- What is the object for?
- What is the object’s purpose?
- How do you think this object was made?
- What kinds of objects do you see in this exhibition?
- What is the object’s function?
- What are some of the similarities and differences between the objects in this exhibition?
- What do you think this object is used for?
- What is the object’s material?
- What is the object’s size?
- What is the object’s shape?
- What is the object’s color?
- What is the object’s texture?
- What is the object’s function?
- What is the object’s purpose?
- What is the object’s significance?
- What is the object’s meaning?
- What is the object’s story?
- What is the object’s history?
- What is the object’s place?
- What is the object’s location?
- What is the object’s origin?
- What is the object’s provenance?
- What is the object’s use?
- What is the object’s size?
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National Museum of the American Indian

ca. 1890

Osage cradleboard,
Pre-Visit Guide

In the Classroom

Native communities are diverse
Discuss these statements with your students:
Oklahoma used buffalo and elk hides? Discuss differences
and marine and land animals, while Kiowa people from
play a role in what makes groups of people different from
The places we're from and the resources we have access to
and distinct, each American Indian community is unique.

Visit the National Museum of the American Indian helps students gain an understanding

www.nmai.si.edu

Information about the series is available at

Most Native kids are a lot like the students in your class—

Look at Objects!
• What clues can help you figure out how old the object
• What might these materials tell you about the people
• What do you think it’s made of? Plant or animal?
Spend a minute carefully looking
and not just offer up guesses.
For students to better understand and engage with the
objects they will see in the museum, they will need to
practice “reading” objects in meaningful ways. Go through
these steps using any object your students won’t immedi-
ately recognize as American Indian.

Look at the containers. The materials an object is made
from can help reveal the location of the tribe that made
it. For instance, Acoma people.

Using these clues, students can try to figure out:
• Do you have any ideas about what you think this
• What could the different decorations on the
• How might the differences in materials,
• What is a tribe, and how many tribes are there?

A tribe is a group of families who share a common ancestry and
work together as a whole. They may speak the same language,
travel together, and remember the same history. Some tribes
are located near the Pacific Ocean of the west coast, while
others live in the middle of the United States.

Chicano (Spanish for “Mexican”)
Spanish people originally traveled across the United States and
are often found living in areas where they have been in
California or Texas, Utah and Colorado. This may be
particularly true for the Chiricuanas, who live in the mountains
of southern Arizona.

First Nations (used widely in Canada)

Answer. All of these terms are acceptable, although Native
people may have a preference for one over the others.

What is a tribe?

What term(s) should we use—American Indian, Native American, Indigenous?

American, Indigenous?

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Other questions?

How do I address stereotypes with my students?

When you visit the museum, you can learn more about
the landscapes and resources in the Northwest Coast
that the landscapes and resources in the Northwest Coast
are from? Talk with your students about some of the ways
they could be used.

Build map skills by finding where each of the tribes lives.

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Acoma Pueblo jar, ca. 1880

Michigan Chippewa birchbark container, ca. 1930
Salish (Flathead) cradleboard, ca. 1880

Osage cradleboard, ca. 1890