Exhibitions at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian

Two permanent exhibitions at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall share the histories and cultures of American Indians. These exhibitions—“Our Universes” and “Our Lives”—offer visitors a unique perspective on the lives of Native peoples.

“Exhibition curators collaborated with 24 tribes and Native communities from across the Western Hemisphere and asked the tribes to select topics from their own histories to illustrate each of the exhibition themes,” said Tim Johnson (Mohawk), the museum’s associate director for museum programs.

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian and the Smithsonian Latino Center in Washington, D.C., present “Cerámica de los Ancestros: Central America’s Past Revealed,” a new major bilingual exhibition. This exhibition illuminates Central America’s vibrant ancestral heritage. For thousands of years, Central America has been home to complex civilizations, each with unique, sophisticated ways of life, value systems and arts. The ceramics these diverse communities left behind, combined with recent archaeological discoveries, help tell the stories of these cultures and their achievements. The exhibition examines seven regions representing distinct Central American cultural areas that are today part of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. The exhibition will be open through Feb. 1, 2015, in the third level W. Richard West Jr. Contemporary Arts Gallery.

“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 exhibition’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 Lakota) served as curator and worked with spiritual leaders and elders from eight tribes and Native communities—Santa Clara Pueblo (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 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 customs and beliefs. 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 (San Felipe Pueblo) 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 animal-themed objects and beadwork. The exhibition includes interactive touch-screen computers through which visitors can learn more about the objects on display.

“Return to a Native Place: Algonquian Peoples of the Chesapeake”

Learn about the Native peoples of the Chesapeake Bay region—what is now Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia and Delaware—through photographs, maps, ceremonial and everyday objects, and touch screens. This compact exhibition educates visitors on the continued Native presence in the region and provides an overview of the history and events from the 1600s to the present, which have had an impact on the lives of the Nanticoke, Powhatan and Piscataway tribes.
Additional Exhibitions

On Sunday, Sept. 25, 2011 the “ImagiNATIONS Activity Center” opened to the public. This family-friendly space is geared to younger visitors, 12 and under, and filled with interactive and hands-on learning experiences such as vertical spin puzzles, a 4-foot basket to weave, collecting stamps for a Native passport, practice balancing a kayak or trying out snowshoes. There is an 18-foot high Comanche tipi that serves as storytelling area and a foam iglu that kids can build. A music room and other types of Native housing such as an adobe pueblo home or an Amazonian stilt house that can be entered will allow children full immersion and help understand the use of building materials and environmental conditions.

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