National Museum of American Indian on the National Mall Fact Sheet

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian opened its doors to the public on Sept. 21, 2004. The museum, which was 15 years in the making, is the first national museum in the country dedicated exclusively to Native Americans, the first to present all exhibitions from a Native viewpoint and the first constructed on the National Mall since 1987.

“Visitors will leave this museum experience knowing that Indians are not just a part of history. We are still here and are making vital contributions to contemporary American culture and art,” museum founding director W. Richard West Jr. (Southern Cheyenne) said.

The five-story, 250,000-square foot, curvilinear building was built on the last open space available on the National Mall, located between the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum and the U.S. Capitol. The textured golden-colored limestone exterior evokes natural rock formations formed by wind and water through time. Set in a 4.25-acre landscaped site with wetlands and 40 boulders known as “grandfather rocks,” the museum is a sharp contrast to neighboring Washington buildings. Its special features—an entrance facing east toward the rising sun, a prism window and a 120-foot-high atrium called the Potomac—were designed in consultation with many Native Americans during a four-year period.

A welcome wall of video screens at the museum’s entrance greets visitors in 150 Native languages, conveying the significant presence and diversity of Native peoples throughout the Americas. This message is again reinforced in the Lelawi (leh-LAH-wee) Theater, a 120-seat circular theater located on the fourth floor which presents a 13-minute multimedia experience titled “Who We Are” to prepare museum-goers for their visit.

The museum’s signature film, “A Thousand Roads,” has daily screenings in the Rasmuson Theater on the first floor. The 43-minute film, directed by award-winning independent filmmaker
Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapaho), is a fictional work that follows the lives of four contemporary Native Americans as they confront the crises that arise in a single day. With epic-sized settings that include the crest of the Andes, the ice floes of Alaska, the mesas of New Mexico and the concrete canyons of Manhattan, “A Thousand Roads” takes viewers on a memorable Native journey. Recommended for children ages 12 and older.

“The Smithsonian is honored to present this vital museum, created by Native peoples from this hemisphere, to the American public and visitors from around the world,” Smithsonian Institution Acting Secretary Cristián Samper said. “Its importance can’t be over estimated; it’s a must-see for anyone visiting the nation’s capital.”

**Exhibitions**

Approximately 8,000 objects from the museum’s permanent collection are on display in the exhibitions, “Our Universes,” “Our Peoples” and “Our Lives.” These exhibitions are complemented by “Window on Collections” and “Return to a Native Place” exhibits. Landmark works of art—historic and contemporary—also are placed throughout the building.

“Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World” focuses on Native cosmologies and the spiritual relationship between mankind and the natural world. It explores annual ceremonies of Native peoples as windows into ancestral Native teachings, featuring the annual Denver March Powwow, the North American Indigenous Games in Canada and the Day of the Dead in Mexico, as seasonal celebrations that unite different Native peoples.

“Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories” highlights historical events told from a Native point of view. The exhibition presents Native Americans’ struggles to maintain traditions in the face of adversity. It includes a spectacular “wall of gold” featuring more than 400 figurines and gold objects dating back before 1491, European swords, coins and crosses made from melted gold, and a central area called “The Storm,” with glass walls that change with shifting colors and video screens that present a narration of a vastly changed Native world.

“Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities” 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. Videos, wall labels, photographs and 300 objects work together to bring important Indian issues to the forefront. The exhibition also deals with the turbulent times of the 1960s and 1970s when the “Red Power” movement was born.

The “Window on the Collections: Many Hands, Many Voices” exhibition offers a view into the vast collections of the museum by showcasing 3,500 objects arranged in seven categories. Objects
include animal-themed figurines and objects, beadwork, containers, dolls, peace medals, projectile points and qeros (cups for ritual drinking).

“Return to a Native Place: Algonquian Peoples of the Chesapeake” educates visitors on 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 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.

Throughout the museum, the works of Native artists are on display as “landmark objects” in the public areas, including a 20-foot totem pole by carver Nathan Jackson (Tlingit), a 22-foot totem pole by David A. Boxley (Tsimshian) and a bronze sculpture by Roxanne Swentzell (Santa Clara Pueblo), as well as a carving of a Kwakiutl speaker and Navajo weavings from the museum’s collection.

**Mitsitam Cafe, Mitsitam Espresso and Museum Store**

The museum includes the Mitsitam Native Foods Cafe, which offers authentic entrees, snacks, desserts and beverages based on Native culinary traditions of the Americas. The name Mitsitam (mit-seh-TOM), meaning, “let’s eat,” is taken from the native Piscataway and Delaware languages. The Mitsitam Cafe features menus from five geographic regions covering the entire Western Hemisphere: Northern Woodlands, South America, Northwest Coast, Meso America and Great Plains. The Zagat-rated Mitsitam Cafe is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and the full menu is available from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

The Mitsitam Cafe recently expanded with the addition of the Mitsitam Espresso Coffee Bar, which serves pastries and casual fare from the cafe’s repertoire along with Tribal Grounds Coffee—organic, fair-trade coffee grown by indigenous farmers and imported, roasted, and provided to the museum by the Eastern Band of Cherokee of North Carolina. Tables in the coffee bar are adjacent to the Potomac Atrium, the heart of the museum and the site of many cultural presentations and festivals. A lending rack of tribal newspapers is available for visitors who want to catch up on news from Indian Country.

The Roanoke Museum Store offers Native arts and crafts, souvenirs, books, recordings and other merchandise. It is open from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.
Cultural Arts Programs

The National Museum of the American Indian hosts a variety of free cultural arts programs, including Native music and dance performances, theater, films, arts and crafts demonstrations, symposia and more. For a schedule of upcoming programs, visit www.AmericanIndian.si.edu and select “Events” or stop by the Welcome Desk.

Admission

Advance timed entry passes are no longer required for admission. Join the general entry line at the museum’s main entrance from 10 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. If there is a line for admission, the wait time for entry may range from as little as 10 minutes to one hour. Groups of 10 or more may schedule an entry time for admission through the reservations office via the education office: (202) 633-6644 or (888) 618-0572 or e-mail NMAI-GroupReservations@si.edu.

Background

Established in 1989, through an Act of Congress, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian is an institution of living cultures dedicated to advancing knowledge and understanding of the life, languages, literature, history and arts of the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere. The museum includes the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall; the George Gustav Heye Center, a permanent museum in lower Manhattan; and the Cultural Resources Center, a research and collections facility in Suitland, Md.

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