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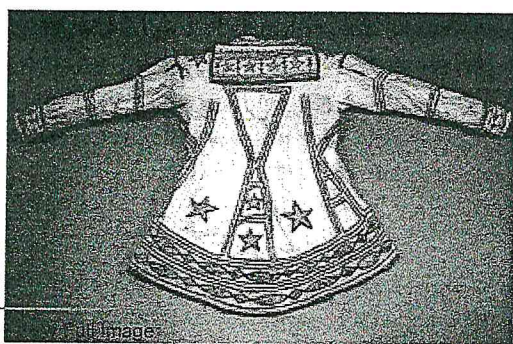
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MUSEUMS

Shows That Defy Stereotypes

By LEE ROSENBAUM

Everyone who visits a museum display about American Indians "wants to see feathers, tepees and horses," Kevin Gover, director of the National Museum of the American Indian, lamented recently in his Washington office. But new installations at NMAI's New York facility, as well as at the Denver Art Museum and Brooklyn Museum, are out to prove, in Mr. Gover's words, that "Indians are not what you think they are."



Denver Art Museum

An undated Naskapi caribou-skin coat.

The effect of these stereotype-busting displays is sometimes jarring, especially because the canon now includes contemporary art. Today's curators want visitors to view Indian artworks not as quaint ethnographic artifacts, but as vital expressions of a living culture, spanning prehistory to the present.

Nowhere is this impulse stronger than at the Denver Art Museum. Its completely reconceived 23,000-square-foot installation features about 90 works created since 1950, part of an entirely new display of 700 highlights from one of the finest, deepest collections of such material in the country—some 18,000 pieces, collected over the past 85 years. Organized into nine geographic areas, it jumbles old and new in provocative, sometimes exasperating ways.

One of the great masterpieces of Denver's display is a 1720s Eastern Sioux deerskin shirt embellished with painted abstract designs, possibly representing birds. The curators invite its comparison to a nearby 2010 fringed "war shirt" commissioned from Bently Spang, the suddenly ubiquitous Northern Cheyenne artist whose designs, which are meant to be seen, not worn, are also on view in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Composed from memory cards, plastic and hemp cord, Mr. Spang's boxy creations stitch together photographs of images from his Montana homeland, such as flowers and rocks.

Even more unexpected is the elevation to museum status of a brown paper grocery bag bearing the image of the late rock star Jimi Hendrix. Seneca artist G. Peter Jemison improbably likens his perfunctorily painted "Summertime Blues" (2001) to the elegant, intricately decorated rawhide pouches and beaded bags of his ancestors.

"Everything in this gallery was new when it was made. . . . I didn't want to separate prehistoric from historic from contemporary," explained Nancy Blomberg, Denver's curator of native arts, whose mission is to attach artists' names to as many historic pieces as possible. And the contemporary focus includes some seductive objects that resonate with earlier pieces, such as a voluptuously curved jar of glistening micaceous clay by Lonnie Vigil of the Nambe Pueblo, displayed near a superb

statement of more traditional Pueblo pottery.

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Close connections with current tribe members have not only beefed up contemporary holdings but greatly enriched curators' understanding of historic pieces. Perhaps nowhere is that more evident than at the NMAI, which owes the preponderance of its vast collection to the voracious collecting habits of founder George Gustav Heye (1874-1957), whose acquisitiveness was not always matched by his understanding. Consulting with relevant tribes, the museum's staff is still correcting Heye's misidentifications of some of his holdings.

Denver Art Museum/William Sr. and Dorothy Harmsen Collection

A war shirt from Bently Spang's Modern Warrior series (2010).

Ms. Blomberg's consultations with tribal experts included posing this question to Susie Silook, a Yup'ik/Inupiaq sculptor from Alaska: "Why would someone go to all the trouble to decorate a utilitarian tool like a harpoon head?" The beguiling answer found its way onto a label for Denver's finely engraved

ancient Inupiaq and Yup'ik ivory hunting tools: "Highly skilled artists created these elegant tools to please the spirits of the animals being hunted."

Contact with Indian advisers, while enhancing displays, can also sometimes diminish them. Because tribal authorities consulted by Brooklyn Museum curators Nancy Rosoff and Susan Kennedy Zeller strongly objected to public exposure of artifacts imbued with a warrior's power, you won't find any historic shields displayed in that museum's deeply informative, child-friendly temporary exhibition, "Tipi: Heritage of the Great Plains" (to May 15). By contrast, one of the stars in the permanent collection at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo. (reviewed here last year), is a rawhide Arikara shield from North Dakota (c. 1850) bearing the image of a buffalo bull.

Brooklyn had to settle for a contemporary "shield"—a brightly colored glass circle by Marcus Amerman, Choctaw, decorated with images inspired by Lakota warrior Rain-in-the-Face's magisterial buffalo-hide shield, shown in the large photomural on the opposite wall.

The show's three full-size tepees—two newly commissioned—are promotional hooks for a much broader display of intricately adorned apparel, tools, implements, horse trappings, containers, children's objects and, of course, tepee furnishings, half of which were drawn from Brooklyn's usually underutilized collection.

Unlike the offerings in Brooklyn and Denver, the permanent-collection displays at the NMAI, part of the Smithsonian Institution, don't indulge the public's appetite for fully assembled painted tepees. The introductory gallery in the definitive "Infinity of Nations," a 10-year permanent-collection installation that recently opened at the NMAI's New York outpost, also defies public expectations about headgear: It omits the resplendently feathered, full-length warrior bonnet in favor of an array of 10 fanciful examples of headgear—everything from a conical wooden Yu'pik (Alaska) hunting hat decorated with carved-ivory sea mammals to a Yoeme (Mexico) dance headdress topped by a realistically rendered deer's head with antlers.

Curated by Cécile Ganteaume, with multimedia commentary by tribe members and scholars, "Infinity of Nations" takes visitors on an in-depth journey from South America to the Arctic, with engagingly presented information about objects, cultures, individual artists and historical figures. It ends with a contemporary section featuring 18 artists. Washington's NMAI also accords prominence to contemporary art in curator Rebecca Head Trautmann's wide-ranging, thematically organized "Vantage Point" show (to Aug. 7), displaying 31 works it acquired over the past seven years.

Unlike other museums that are ramping up their consultations with tribal communities, the NMAI plans to rely more strongly on its own expertise. (It is already largely staffed by American Indians, including its director, a member of the Pawnee and Comanche tribes.) The objective is to make its presentations "more consistent in voice and more cogent in narrative," Mr. Gover explained.

For the first time, he disclosed plans for a complete reinstallation of the Washington museum, beginning in 2014. The new

approach he described may deflect the harshest attack directed at the inaugural displays by some American Indians—that the depredations and atrocities suffered by indigenous people at the hands of white invaders were soft-pedaled. New displays will likely focus on several provocative themes, according to Mr. Gover, a lawyer with scant background in art or museums. Among them: the devastation of the indigenous population "on the order of 90% to 95%"; the role of contact with Europeans as "the definitional event that shaped the modern world."

References to "massacre" and "genocide" may be included, if deemed appropriate by the curators, said Mr. Gover, who succeeded director W. Richard West Jr. three years ago. "You don't have an American Indian museum without discussion of dispossession and death on a scale unknown in human history," he declared.

This approach may put the Washington museum even more at odds with those art lovers who found the inaugural installation too political and polemical. And it would move the museum even further from its origins as a showcase for the trove assembled by Heye.

Perhaps more critically, it is not certain how a heightened focus on injustice and grievances will be viewed by the amateur art critics who meet just down the road—members of Congress who oversee the Smithsonian and currently appropriate some 60% of the NMAI's operating budget.

"I don't think it is controversial," Mr. Gover said of his new approach. "Two years ago, Congress passed an apology resolution. . . I think the country has never been more ready for this."

Ms. Rosenbaum writes for the Journal on art and museums and blogs as CultureGrrl at www.artsjournal.com/culturegrrl.

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