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American Indians On Display: An Observational Case Study of the American Museum of Natural History & the National Museum of the American Indian

This paper analyzes and compares the manner by which the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) display and exhibit their respective collections of American Indian artifacts and objects, including those originating in North, Central, and South America, and will address the collection history of each museum, and how each museum uses their indigenous collections and exhibits to uphold the general mission of that museum. At AMNH, I observed and analyzed five exhibits: *the Hall of Mexico and Central America, Hall of South American Peoples, Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians, Hall of Plains Indians, and Northwest Coast Hall*. At the George Gustav Heye Center branch of the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City, I toured the *Circle of Dance and Infinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the Nations Museum of the American Indian* exhibits.¹ While presenting a general overview of my personal observations arising from my exploration of these museums, my purpose is to explain my understanding of the reasons why each museum utilized certain display methods and how these exhibits enhance knowledge, perception, and empathy.

I visited each museum in April 2018. Throughout my observations, I made note of the exhibit design and space, the geographical and cultural areas that were addressed, the type and presentation of displayed objects and artifacts, and the presentation of contextual information. I

¹ The main location of NMAI is located on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

recite these observations in the same sequencing by which I encountered each exhibit in its respective museum.

Collections History of the American Museum of Natural History

The American Museum of Natural History was founded in New York City in 1869, with the mission “[t]o discover, interpret, and disseminate – through scientific research and education – knowledge about human cultures, the natural world, and the universe.”² Quickly approaching its 150th anniversary, AMNH has become one of the world’s preeminent scientific and cultural institutions.³ The museum’s Division of Anthropology was established in 1873, and for its first seventeen years was exclusively concerned with the random acquisition and display of anthropological artifacts.⁴ In 1890, Frederic W. Putnam was appointed Curator of Anthropology, and in 1895, he hired Franz Boas as the Assistant Curator of Ethnology and Somatology.⁵

At its outset, the Division of Anthropology was devoted primarily to North American ethnology and archaeology, not only because of Boas’ and other curators’ general interest of North American Indians, but for the reason that AMNH believed the material culture of these indigenous populations would soon disappear, which created a sense of urgency to collect the artifacts of and information regarding North America Indians.⁶ This resulted in early exhibition halls combining AMNH’s indigenous archeological artifacts and ethnological information until the collections gradually increased and necessitated the establishment of separate halls devoted to tribes of

² “Mission Statement,” About the Museum, AMNH, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://www.amnh.org/about-the-museum/mission-statement>;

³ “About the Museum,” About the Museum, AMNH, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://www.amnh.org/about-the-museum>

³ AMNH, “About the Museum.”

⁴ “North American Ethnographic Collection,” Anthropology: Collections History, AMNH, accessed April 26, 2018, <https://www.amnh.org/our-research/anthropology/collections/collections-history/north-american-ethnography>

⁵ Ira Jacknis, “Franz Boas and Exhibits: On the Limitations of the Museum Method of Anthropology.” *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*. ed. George W. Stocking Jr., Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988. p. 76; AMNH, “North American Ethnographic Collection.”

⁶ AMNH, “North American Ethnographic Collection.”

specific regions.⁷ In 1896, AMNH established the *Northwest Coast Hall* under Boas's leadership.⁸ Early 20th-century galleries featured the Southwest, Plains, Eastern Woodlands, Northwest Coast, and Eskimo Indians.⁹ The contemporary North American Indian exhibits, which include the *Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians* and the *Hall of Plains Indians*, were established in 1966 and 1967 respectively.¹⁰

Although AMNH has been most active in regards to the North American Indians, the museum has also worked to acquire and develop an extensive archaeological and material collection from both Central and South America.¹¹ The museum began to take great interest in Mesoamerica as early as the 1870s with its early collections acquired by overseas donors, such as Adolphe Bandelier, an ethnohistorian who studied pre-Hispanic Mexico.¹² The first Mexico Hall was established in 1899, yet the exhibition paid little attention to excavated everyday objects, instead emphasizing large stone sculptures from archeological sites.¹³ After the turn of the century, AMNH research scholars and curators began to collect archaeological and ethnohistorical data in a more critical manner, emphasizing first-hand research to better understand pre-Hispanic society.¹⁴ The hall's display cases were initially filled with everyday archaeological items from Mesoamerica, which were housed alongside the popular plaster casts of Mayan and Aztec stone sculptures that continued to attract visitors.¹⁵ In the 1970s, the modern *Hall of Mexico and Central America* reopened to the public.¹⁶

⁷ AMNH, "North American Ethnographic Collection."

⁸ AMNH, "North American Ethnographic Collection," & "About the Museum."

⁹ "History," About the Museum, AMNH, accessed April 25, 2018, <https://www.amnh.org/about-the-museum/history>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ AMNH, "North American Ethnographic Collection."

¹² "Meso-American Archeological Collection," Anthropology: Collections History, AMNH, accessed April 26, 2018, <https://www.amnh.org/our-research/anthropology/collections/collections-history/meso-american-archaeology>; AMNH, "North American Ethnographic Collection."

¹³ AMNH, "Meso-American Archeological Collection."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ AMNH, "History."

Similar in the development of its Mesoamerican collection, AMNH's Division of Anthropology began to actively study South American archeology in 1892, using Bandelier's Peruvian and Bolivian collections.¹⁷ The museum's original South American Hall was established in 1907 and then closed in the 1960s.¹⁸ During this time period, there were many archaeological excavations carried out by Junius Bird and Wendell C. Bennett, whose research constituted the most substantial portion of the AMNH's archaeology collection of South America.¹⁹ In 1989, AMNH re-established the current *Hall of South American Peoples*.²⁰

Observational Tour of AMNH

Ascending the front entrance steps of the American Museum of Natural History, visitors are greeted by the famous bronze statue "Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt." As famed 26th President Theodore Roosevelt is depicted on horseback, two figures stand by his side: to his left, an African man, and to his right, an American Indian man. Upon entering and picking up a map of the museum, I oriented myself to the Americas-specific anthropology exhibits. Consisting of three floors, I began my examination of the AMNH exhibits on the entry-level, the second floor, which houses the *Hall of Mexico and Central America* and the *Hall of South American Peoples*.

Beginning with the *Hall of Mexico and Central America*, visitors are immediately invited by a plaster reproduction of a colossal Olmec Head before entering the long, dark hallway of Mesoamerican artifacts. In this hall, pre-Columbian cultures, including the Maya, Toltec, Olmec, and Aztec, are represented through artifacts that span from 1200 BC to the early 1500s CE.²¹ The collection of archeological objects displayed include a number of diverse art forms, such as

¹⁷ "South American Archeological Collection," Anthropology: Collections History, AMNH, accessed April 26, 2018, <https://www.amnh.org/our-research/anthropology/collections/collections-history/south-american-archaeology>

¹⁸ AMNH, "History."

¹⁹ AMNH, "South American Archeological Collection."

²⁰ AMNH, "History."

²¹ "Hall of Mexico and Central America," Exhibitions: Permanent Exhibitions, AMNH, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/human-origins-and-cultural-halls/hall-of-mexico-and-central-america>

pottery, monuments, jewelry, and figurines; replicas of stone carvings, sculptures, and a tomb; and finally, models of Mesoamerican architecture.²² As I walked through the exhibit, the most discernible issue I experienced when viewing the objects was ascertaining whether the objects were actual artifacts or museum reproductions. Labels that I would traditionally rely on to provide this information were also difficult to interpret. While the large, non-enclosed objects on display provided easily recognizable labeling, the encased objects required visitors to search carefully to find the seemingly camouflaged labels. Halfway through my observation, I made the general assumption that many larger objects were most likely artistic reproductions made by the museum, and smaller encased objects were archeological artifacts from the museum's Mesoamerican collection.

Next, I visited the *Hall of South American Peoples*, a bright and quiet exhibit that was divided into two major sections: "Ancient Andean Civilization," which features the pre-Columbian cultural traditions of the ancient Inca, Moche, Chavin, and Chancay, and "Indians of Amazonia," which exhibits the traditional culture of indigenous peoples in modern Amazonia.²³^[24] Due to the coupling of two sections into a larger exhibit, the displayed collection in this hall was respective to the time frame assigned to each section. In "Ancient Andean Civilization," archeological artifacts were the mainstay, with 5,000 years' worth of ancient Andean art, tools, and technologies displayed, including textiles, metalwork, instruments, and religious materials.²⁵ On the other hand, "Indians of Amazonia" presents a variety of post-colonial cultural objects that extend from colonial contact to recent memory. In order to provide context for the various objects used in social, religious, and artistic traditions by the indigenous people of the Amazon, this section

²² Ibid.

²³ "Hall of South American Peoples," Exhibitions: Permanent Exhibitions, AMNH, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/human-origins-and-cultural-halls/hall-of-south-american-peoples>

²⁴ There was also a small section in the beginning of this hall that displayed a handful of Caribbean artifacts.

²⁵ AMNH, "Hall of South American Peoples."

situates the museum's collection within encased displays that include dioramas, mannequins, and photographs, and presents a film, *To Survive: Indians of Amazonia*. While this is the most contemporary portion of this hall, "Indians of Amazonia" repeatedly communicates the eventual extinction of this region's indigenous cultures.

Finishing my tour of the second floor, I proceeded upstairs to the third floor where the *Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians* and the *Hall of Plains Indians* are located. Arriving at the dark, retro wood-paneled exhibit, the *Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians* presents the traditional cultural objects of American Indians in the Eastern Woodlands of North America, which includes the Iroquois, Seminole, Ojibway, and Cree, through the early 20th century.²⁶ While the left-side of the exhibit presents indigenous regalia and clothing of the Eastern Woodlands on mannequins that scarily possess the same face, the right-side of the exhibit provides miniature dioramas of various dwelling styles and the daily lives of people. Accompanying the displayed cultural objects, which included pottery, baskets, tools, boats, and instruments, were painted figures of indigenous people demonstrating the use of those specific objects.

Subsequently, I visited the *Hall of Plains Indians*, which focuses on the lives of 19th-century North American Plains people, including the Hidatsa, Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho.²⁷ Sharing the same spatial and display designs as the Eastern Woodlands (at half the size), this exhibit demonstrates the predominant role of hunting culture in nomadic tribal life and highlights military and ceremonial regalia, weapons, and tools.²⁸ The featured display of this exhibit is the Blackfeet family in a life-size, reconstructed tipi.

²⁶ "Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians," Exhibitions: Permanent Exhibitions, AMNH, accessed April 23, 2018,

<https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/human-origins-and-cultural-halls/hall-of-eastern-woodlands-indians>

²⁷ "Hall of Plains Indians," Exhibitions: Permanent Exhibitions, AMNH, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/human-origins-and-cultural-halls/hall-of-plains-indians>

²⁸ AMNH, "Hall of Plains Indians."

Finally, as I descended to the first floor to visit the *Northwest Coast Hall*, the museum's oldest gallery, I was met by "The Great Canoe"— an extraordinarily large dugout canoe made in 1878.²⁹ Although this exhibit typically displays the cultural items of the indigenous groups of the Northwestern Coast of North America, including the Coast Salish, Haida, Tlingit, and Kwakwaka'wakw, AMNH announced on September 25, 2017, that the hall would undergo a multi-year project to update, restore, and conserve the exhibit.³⁰ Despite this "closure," visitors are still able to walk through this grand hall. The architecture of the exhibit itself denotes its long history, with intricately designed totem poles lining the hall's columns, and wooden art pieces and detailed paintings of native tribes high up on the walls. The empty wooden display cases indicate similar techniques in presenting cultural objects, including mannequins and miniature dioramas. Although currently a passive hallway, the spatial design and considerable care of this hall indicates that it is a popular anthropology exhibit to visit.

Having completed my objective tour of AMNH's Americas-specific anthropology exhibits, I began to make my way to the museum's first-floor exit. Before leaving the building, I came across one of the many AMNH life-size dioramas titled, "Old New York." This diorama, which depicts an exchange between two colonial men and two indigenous men, is accompanied by a label which describes the stationary event as a mediated and peaceful exchange in 1660 between Oratam, a Hackensack Lenape leader of the Munsee confederacy, and New Netherland's governor Pieter Stuyvesant. The description contextualizes the event by stating the figures stand in modern-day Bowling Green Park in lower Manhattan.

²⁹ "Northwest Coast Hall," Exhibitions: Permanent Exhibitions, AMNH, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent-exhibitions/human-origins-and-cultural-halls/northwest-coast-hall>

³⁰ Ibid.

Reflecting on my overall visit to AMNH's American Indian based exhibits, my personally-defined hierarchy of exhibits is clear. Despite being both the oldest AMNH exhibit and the only anthropology hall receiving a restoration update, the *Northwest Coast Hall* is definitely a museum and visitor favorite. Following this hall would be the second floor exhibits, the *Hall of Mexico and Central America* and *Hall of South American Peoples*, based on the large amount of objects, space, and contemporary layout of both spaces. Sadly, the third floor exhibits, the *Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians* and the *Hall of Plains Indians*, bear the most outdated presentations.³¹ This hierarchy suggests that AMNH's desire to maintain and respect its nearly 100-year old history of certain exhibits, like the *Northwest Coast Hall*, comes at the cost of neglecting the others.

In myriad ways, these exhibits demonstrate AMNH's wide range of collections by incorporating archaeological artifacts, traditional cultural objects, and even artistic renderings of geographic locations and the peoples that have inhabited, and do inhabit them. Additionally, each exhibit stated a clear contextual time frame of the objects and artifacts displayed. Unfortunately, the pre-established disconnect between collection and exhibit on each separate floor is heightened by the dissimilar contextual time frames and limited cultural temporalities, which do not serve to enlighten those groups whose contextual time frame may be erroneously fixated in romanticized notions of the American West, i.e. the Eastern Woodlands and Plains Indians. Nevertheless, AMNH utilizes a multitude of mixed methods to provide contextual information for visitors, including dioramas (both miniature and life-size), mannequins, paintings, maps, timelines, photos, and videos, and creatively displays objects and artifacts to encourage viewers to engage with objects in both open and closed displays.

Collections History of the National Museum of the American Indian

³¹ The entrance sign for the *Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians* and the *Hall of Plains Indians* listed old numbers that used to corresponded to songs that would play over loud speakers throughout the exhibits, which unfortunately were no longer played.

The National Museum of the American Indian arose from the largest personal collection of American Indian artifacts ever to be assembled by the passionate collector, George Gustav Heye.³² Based in New York, Heye began assembling his large collection of American material culture and archaeological objects in 1897.³³ At a time when many New York cultural institutions moved from strict scientific research towards public education through exhibition, Heye established the Museum of the American Indian (MAI) at 155th and Broadway in 1916, with a collection totaling 58,000 objects, backed with the support of his wealthy friends, and with the sole aim of gathering and preserving “everything useful in illustrating and elucidating the anthropology of the aborigines of the Western Hemisphere, and to disseminate by means of its publications the knowledge thereby gained.”³⁴ Continually expanding his collection, at the time of his death in 1957, Heye had amassed a collection of 700,000 individual items, which represents approximately 85 percent of the National Museum of the American Indian’s current object holdings.³⁵ While the MAI continued to function after Heye’s death, the museum was eventually transferred to the Smithsonian Institution in 1989, and was renamed the National Museum of the American Indian.³⁶ Under the wing of the Smithsonian, NMAI not only updated collections management and operations, but attitudes towards the collection as well.³⁷ Rather than serving Heye’s mission of “the preservation of everything pertaining to our American tribes,” NMAI emphasizes “advancing knowledge and understanding of the Native cultures of the Western Hemisphere—past, present, and future—through partnership with Native people and others. The museum works to support the continuance of culture, traditional values, and transitions in

³² “History of the Collections,” Explore: Collections, NMAI, accessed April 24, 2018, <http://www.nmai.si.edu/explore/collections/history/>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ NMAI, “History of the Collections.”

contemporary Native life.”³⁸ Today, the National Museum of the American Indian operates three facilities: the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City (1994), the NMAI on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (2004), and the Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland (1999).³⁹

Observational Tour of NMAI-NY

When entering on the second floor of the National Museum of the American Indian at the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City, which is housed within the historic Alexander Hamilton U.S. Customs House, visitors are greeted by a grandiose rotunda with beautifully preserved ceiling murals depicting European explorers such as Columbus, Vespucci, Hudson, and Cabot. Upon my arrival in the rotunda, I descended to the ground floor to explore *Circle of Dance*, the first of the two exhibits I would be touring.⁴⁰

Featuring ten social and ceremonial dances from throughout the Americas, *Circle of Dance* presents Native dance as a diverse, meaningful, and vibrant form of cultural expression.⁴¹ Opened in October 2012, this exhibit space is a large, inviting auditorium-esque room with a back-wall projection that illustrates the dynamic dances and movement styles of Native people expressing their individual tribal identities.⁴² As visitors enter this slightly dim room, the side walls house grey mannequins that display the ceremonial regalia of the ten chosen indigenous communities from the Americas. The left-hand wall exhibited the regalia of the Seminole Stomp Dance (Florida), Cubeo Óyne Dance (Brazil/Columbia), Yup’ik Yurapiaq and Quayana (Thank You) Song

³⁸ “Mission Statement,” About the Museum, NMAI, accessed April 24, 2018, <http://www.nmai.si.edu/about/mission/>; NMAI, “History of the Collection.”

³⁹ NMAI, “History of the Collections.”

⁴⁰ Both *Circle of Dance* and *Infinity of Nations* exhibits were curated by Cécile R. Ganteaume. (“Circle of Dance,” Exhibitions: Circle of Dance, NMAI, accessed April 25, 2018, <http://nmai.si.edu/static/exhibitions/circleofdance/index.html>)

⁴¹ “Circle of Dance,” Explore: Exhibitions, NMAI, accessed April 25, 2018, <http://nmai.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item/?id=652>

⁴² “Circle of Dance,” Explore: Exhibitions in NY, NMAI, accessed April 25, 2018, <http://www.nmai.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/newyork/>; NMAI, “Circle of Dance,” Explore: Exhibitions.

Dance (Alaska), Yoreme Pajko'ora Dance (Mexico/Arizona), and Hopi Butterfly Dance (Arizona).⁴³ On the right-hand wall, the Quechua Danza de Tizeras (Scissor Dance) (Peru), Yakama Girl's Fancy Shawl Dance (Washington), Tlingit *Ku'éex'* Entrance Dance (Alaska/Canada), Mapuche Mütrüm Purun (Chile), Lakota Men's Northern Traditional Dance (North & South Dakota/Canada) regalia were displayed.⁴⁴ With the exception of the Cubeo and Quechua communities, all of the labels accompanying the regalia are described by Native community members.⁴⁵ Although there are only ten individual displays of completed dance regalia from the museum's collection, the exhibit allows these traditional objects to independently illuminate their use and significance in Native dance. The complementary projection of the music and dance, which seems to employ both archived and contemporary footage, provides contextual information of these cultural pieces and connects the various dance traditions within an active temporality.

I returned to the second floor where I proceeded to walk across the rotunda and visit my second and final NMAI exhibit, *Infinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indians*. Established in October 2010 as the only permanent exhibit at NMAI's New York location, this quiet and inviting hall displays some of the 700 works of Native art from the museum's collection and highlights the historic importance of many of these objects throughout North, Central, and South America.⁴⁶ Entering through the center of the hall, visitors are met by a flat, individual display case housing an Apsáalooke warrior's robe. The exhibit's middle and interactive displays provide introductory information and context to their

⁴³ NMAI, "Circle of Dance," Exhibitions: Circle of Dance.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "Infinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indian," Explore: Exhibitions, NMAI, accessed April 26, 2018, <http://nmai.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item/?id=901>; "Infinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indian," Explore: Exhibitions: Exhibitions in NY, NMAI, accessed April 26, 2018, <http://www.nmai.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/newyork/>

corresponding wall displays, which house the objects and artifacts of the 10 highlighted geographical regions: Patagonia, Andes, Amazon, Mesoamerica/Caribbean, Southwest, Plains/Plateau, Woodlands, California/Great Basin, Northwest Coast, and Arctic/Subarctic.

Since this exhibit is a shared space which attempts to represent the art and traditions of the entire Americas in equal fashion, rather than focusing on each specific region individually, I believe a collective description would be more comprehensive. There are seven foundational elements of each regional display: a pre- and post-colonization historical description of the region, a smaller description discussing the museum's collection in relation to George Gustav Heye, an enlarged map of the geographic area, a video slideshow of the displayed objects, color-coordinated backdrops in various pale colors, multiple Native translations on the wall describing each region, and object labels that are accompanied by illustrations that correspond to each object. A mixture of objects and artifacts are presented, depending on the museum's collection for each region. While some regions display more regalia (Plains/Plateau, Woodlands, Arctic/Subarctic), others exhibit wooden objects (Northwest Coast, Patagonia) or pottery (Andes, Southwest). Regional displays located in today's political boundaries of the U.S. and Canada utilize contextual photos and quotes from indigenous leaders and figures of the area, while the Central and South American displays lack this element.

NMAI's *Circle of Dance* and *Infinity of Nations* exhibits set forth the task of remediating indigenous representational problems by attempting to include within the museum's collection most, if not all, indigenous groups throughout the Americas. While this is both an ambitious and well-meaning endeavor, it is nonetheless a difficult feat to achieve. For example, while making my observations concerning the Southwest region of *Infinity of Nations*, I overheard two men discussing the absence of Navajo (Diné) objects in this section. Because the George Gustav Heye

branch of NMAI is not situated near the majority of the museum's collections, it is extremely difficult to represent every nation and tribe when the number of objects is already limited. Nevertheless, both exhibits attempted to display their individual objects and artifacts in a way that allowed the items to represent the nation or tribe while simultaneously emphasizing the Native voice related to the objects. By utilizing different contextual mediums to relay information about the displayed items, such as projected videos and supplementary illustrations, the exhibit demonstrates what the museum curator(s) thought would be most useful information to relay to visitors. Finally, this combination of display elements alleviates indigenous communities from a stagnated Western temporality by expanding the history of indigenous nations, tribes, cultures, and traditions through museum objects and artifacts.

Overall Reflections & Conclusion

Overall, this observational case study between the American Museum of Natural History and Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian has aided my understanding of how each display and exhibit of both museums' collections of indigenous artifacts and objects brings forth not only the history of the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere, but how these exhibits translate to the overall goals and precedents that each museum attempts to establish. The presentation of the indigenous collections from both museums and the explanations of how they came into modern existence, demonstrate how museums prepare and interpret their exhibits to fit within the goals of their mission statements.

For nearly one and one-half centuries, AMNH has advanced its general mission to "discover, interpret, and disseminate information about human cultures, the natural world, and the universe through a wide-ranging program of scientific research, education, and exhibition."⁴⁷

⁴⁷ AMNH, "About the Museum."

During my research, I came across two separate general guides, one from 1933 and another from 1956, detailing AMNH information about exhibits, research, and museum financial support.⁴⁸ From both guides it is clear that AMNH's legacy has relied on the visitor and the key to continuing the museum's legacy of scientific research and public education is maintaining popular and enticing exhibitions for its visitors.

On the other hand, since its adoption into the Smithsonian Institution, NMAI's mission has evolved from desperate attempts to collect a vast multitude of American Indian objects to supporting and advancing indigenous culture, traditional values, and contemporary transitions of life from the Arctic Circle to Tierra del Fuego using the museum's expansive collection.⁴⁹ These museums' goals are apparent in their respective exhibits: AMNH utilizes its collection and exhibit space to attract visitors attention using a multitude of contextual methods, and NMAI utilizes Native voices throughout the exhibits to further the visitors' support of and respect for indigenous communities.

Two major takeaways from this comparative study are how both museums provided contextual information throughout their exhibits and the importance of temporality within exhibits. On the topic of context, both museums used various and distinctive methods to provide this information to visitors. While AMNH used everything from dioramas to mannequins and paintings to large replicas, NMAI utilized interactive media, object illustrations, and quotations. The diversity in methods demonstrates the variety of ways to provide cultural context for culturally specific objects, which allows visitors to engage and interact with the collection of objects through their own interests.

⁴⁸ Frederic A. Lucas, *General guide to the exhibition halls of the American Museum of Natural History*, ed. by Museum staff members. American Museum of Natural History. New York: The Museum, 1933.; *General guide to the American Museum of Natural History*, American Museum of Natural History, Man and Nature Publications, New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1956.

⁴⁹ "About the Museum," About the Museum, NMAI, accessed April 24, 2018, <http://www.nmai.si.edu/about/>; NMAI, "Mission Statement."

However, when dealing with cultural and archeological anthropology exhibits, it is important that exhibits emphasize information about the temporalities of objects. This practice is especially significant in communities that are associated with a pre- and post-colonial historical timeframe. Both AMNH and NMAI exhibits established contextual time frames for the history of their displayed objects. However, AMNH provided more limited historical time frames due in part by the type of collection items displayed. For example, the *Hall of Mexico and Central America* mostly consisted of pre-colonial archaeological artifacts, thus providing an assumed temporal frame of reference, while the displays of contextual information in the *Hall of Eastern Woodlands Indians* and the *Hall of Plains Indians* specifically establish a late 19th/early 20th century time frame, a period which is marked by romanticized Western stereotypes of North American Indians. Due to the fact that AMNH focuses more on displaying its collection of indigenous objects and artifacts rather than incorporating contemporary contributions of Native communities, I believe it is more difficult for viewers to expand their understanding of indigenous communities across the Americas when the contextual information presented to them is espoused with a fixed temporality.

While I was able to understand how AMNH's and NMAI's exhibits present their American Indian collections, the history of these collections, and how this collectively translates to the general goals of each museum, there were other questions that I was not able to investigate due to time constraints. My initial proposal for this paper included my additional interests in understanding both AMNH and NMAI's policies for acquisition, housing, and repatriation of indigenous artifacts and objects, and exploring how natural history museums have become authoritative institutions concerning indigenous anthropological collections. As I conclude this paper, I would like to address the strategies that I would've used to address these interests. First,

I would have contacted current curators and exhibit designers from both museums to understand why certain choices were made in designing the space and selecting items for display. Second, rather than focusing on the George Gustav Heye branch of NMAI with the expansive institution of AMNH, I would have included the DC branch of NMAI along with the Cultural Resources Center (CRC) for a more equally matched and balanced analysis of various exhibits, and the size and quality of the collections, within both museums. Finally, understanding the popularity of life-size dioramas used in AMNH, I would have researched the history of these displays and analyzed why they continue to be a popular feature of the museum.

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