

The New York Times

Grace And Culture Intertwined

American Indian art is some of the most beautiful ever made anywhere on earth. Some of us have loved it as long as we can remember. And with a new permanent-collection installation at the

**HOLLAND
COTTER**

ART
REVIEW

National Museum of the American Indian in Lower Manhattan, we can love it even more.

One reason is that we can see it clearly now, which hasn't been so true at that museum before. The old Museum of the American Indian, at Broadway and 155th Street in Washington Heights, which opened in 1922, had limited space. Objects were crammed into display cases, which were wedged into narrow rooms.

The art was so glorious, from ancient Mayan effigies to 1930s spruce-root baskets the size of wrens' nests, that the crunch almost didn't matter. Still, when the Smithsonian Institution took charge



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

Infinity of Nations A water vessel from Peru, about 1965, in the new permanent installation at the National Museum of the American Indian.

of the museum in the 1980s, with a promise of expanded quarters, first in the United States Custom House in Lower Manhattan, later in Washington, the plan sounded good.

But the 1993 opening of the George Gustav Heye Center in the Custom House, named for the collection's

founder, brought changes not just in location but also in institutional mission. Now using a roster of largely Native American curators, a former ethnology museum that doubled as an art museum became a center for American Indian

Continued on Page 5

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From First Arts Page

culture, old and new.

The earlier exhibition style was abandoned, replaced by multimedia displays incorporating video interviews, ambient vocal commentary and extensive interpretive texts. In general, visitors were encouraged to view works less as subjects of passive contemplation than as ideological vehicles with messages to deliver. A number of visitors who came with art museum expectations felt that the emphasis on social and political context, combined with the electronic bells and whistles, reduced the collection to a set of illustrations for this idea or that.

Time passed, a series of stimulating temporary shows came and went at the museum, and some of us began to rethink our initial take. The turning point for me was the 2002 exhibition "Spirit Capture: Native Americans and the Photographic Image." A committed connoisseur — and Western museology is built on connoisseurship — would have greeted the show with dismay. Almost all of the 200 photographs, many with images dating to the 19th century, were presented by new rather than vintage prints, often on an exaggerated scale.

Yet the cumulative effect of the images, whatever their physical form, was profoundly moving. I realized that to be moved by the show was tacitly to accept the idea that this museum was not a standard-model art institution or, put another way, that this museum's definition of art differed from the one I was used to; it located art primarily in ideas and information rather than in precious material forms.

This philosophy, which was also applied to the National Museum of the American Indian that opened on the Mall in Washington in 2004, was very much a product of the postmodern era.

Although disparaged by many art establishment insiders, it did valuable work in breaking with old givens about what modern museums were supposed to do (exhibit limited types of objects in a neutral setting), and not do (add sociological, never mind moralizing commentary).

If the Museum of the American Indian's curators had overromanticized Indian cultures, they had also put a check on a seldom-mentioned ethnological romanticism that assumed those cultures to be dead and gone. If the mu-



Above, a Mayan relief of a ballplayer from Guatemala, from A.D. 600-750. Below, moccasins from Idaho, about 1880.



various historians who closely studied specific objects in preparation for the reinstallation.

The installation itself, overseen by Cécile R. Ganteaume, an associate curator at the museum, is arranged by geographical region, beginning — to the far left as you

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Images from the National Museum of the American Indian:

nytimes.com/design

tools carved in Arctic Canada that were discovered in Vermont, and evidence that chocolate, along with tropical birds, traveled at an early date from Mesoamerica to New Mexico. Boundless multiplicity is the rule.

But the big departure, within the context of this museum, is a new emphasis on aesthetics, beauty and art with a capital A. We've all had the notion drummed into us that Indian languages have no word for art in its modern Western sense; that Indian material culture is fundamentally instrumental, that its meaning lies in function. Yet a glance around the installation reveals evidence of highly developed, pervasive and diversified concepts of beauty embodied in the 700 objects here.



history.
Now more time has passed. Ideas and tastes have changed again. The museum has revised and refined some of its own controversially revisionist thinking. And the new permanent collection at the Heye Center, called "Infinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indian," and scheduled to be in place for 10 years, is different from its predecessor.

Tracing the paths of chocolate, tropical birds and artifacts.

Inuit work from the Canadian Arctic.

For some scholars, defining American Indian cultures by region is an outmoded method, unrealistically schematic. But Ms. Ganteaume takes care to keep geographical borders loose and permeable by pointing out cross-currents of influence that constantly moved through them, propelled by long-distance trade, wars, migrations and the forced displacements of entire Indian nations after the European arrival.

She shows, for example, stone

halolike circle of macaw and heron feathers from Brazil; to a checkerboard-patterned Peruvian pillbox cap; to a Haida head-dress from British Columbia with the carved head of a cosmic beast, glinting with shell inlay, positioned like a miner's lamp.

The lamp's light spreads, symbolically, through the long gallery's serpentine path, which is flanked on both sides by tall glass cases full of drums, masks, quivers, shirts, shields and pots, and is interrupted at intervals by free-standing items deemed particularly worthy of contemplation.

On an ancient Mayan stone relief from Guatemala near the beginning of the processional route, a man encased in the protective armor of a ritual ball player bends and dips with the grace of a dancer. Farther on there's a battle scene engraved on a hollow gourd by the artist Mariano Flores Kananga. Done around 1925, it is thought to show eyewitness ac-

counts of a deadly clash between Peruvian and Chilean armies that Kananga may have fought in.

Much later on the route stands a boldly imagined potlatch dance mask made by the master carver Bob Harris, a member of the Vancouver Island Tribe, around 1900. Painted in bright greens and blues, its bulging fish eyes inlaid with light-catching beads, it depicts a mythic ruler of the marine world, and was carved at a time when the potlatch ceremony, central to tribal identity, was outlawed by the Canadian government. Some artists turned to making masks for the tourist trade just to keep the tradition alive.

The show has many prestige items and power objects linked to specific historical figures. Some of these things are tremendously charismatic. But what surfaces again and again is evidence of a peculiarly intimate kind of history

associated with ordinary personal adornment. It's there in a pair of men's dangle earrings made of toucan feathers and iridescent beetle wings from Amazonian Ecuador, and meant to attract the ladies.

It's also there in a pair of 19th-century Plains moccasins splashed with sky-blue headwork blossoms, and in a lavishly beaded Inuit woman's parka, a monument of practical outerwear that both projects a sense of majestic, extraterrestrial mystery — it looks alive — and is capacious enough to accommodate a mother and a squirming, nursing baby.

Dating from the late 19th or early 20th century, this garment seamlessly fuses ethnic tradition and self-expression, as, in a different way, does a piece by the contemporary artist Bently Spang, which concludes the installation. Titled "War Shirt #2, Modern

version of a ceremonial shirt is made entirely from stitched-together photographs of the artist Northern Cheyenne family at home on a reservation in Montana.

With this 2003 piece, conceived like most contemporary art, for museum display, we technically cross a decisive line from ethnology to art. Or do we? And if we do, which objects fall on which side? Mr. Spang's shirt is a spare but passionate visual essay on the still-tough subject of ethnic identity. The bead-encrusted parka, the flower-spattered slippers, the rainbow-colored earrings, all gathered as ethnological specimens, are exercises in unnecessary beauty.

Is there really a dividing line between any of these works of art? No.

Is there a bottom line?

"Infinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indian" remains on permanent view at the George Gustav Heye Center, 1 Bowling Green, Lower Manhattan; nmai.si.edu.

