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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 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.

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 space called the Potomac Atrium—were designed in consultation with many Native Americans during a four-year period.

As you enter the museum there are several cases of objects that convey 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.

Exhibitions

Approximately 6,500 objects from the museum's permanent collection are on display in the exhibitions, "Our Universes" and "Our Lives."

"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 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 hundreds of objects arranged in two categories including animal-themed figurines and beadwork.

“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) and a bronze sculpture by Roxanne Swentzell (Santa Clara Pueblo).

Additional Exhibitions

On 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 will be 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.

Mitsitam Native Foods Cafe and Espresso Coffee Bar

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 (mitt-see-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 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 members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee of

North Carolina. The coffee bar's menu will include Cherokee translations for each drink as part of the Western Carolina University Cherokee Language Program, which began in 2006 to boost the dwindling number of Cherokee speakers.

The Roanoke Museum Store

The Roanoke Museum Store on the second floor offers a wide variety of crafts, books, music recordings, souvenirs and toys. Store merchandise includes items such as Navajo alabaster sculptures, Peruvian pottery, original Pendleton items (blankets and tote bags), Inuit sculptures, textile weavings made by the Mapuche of Chile and Zuni fetishes. The store also features Yup'ik ivory carvings from Alaska, Navajo rugs, Northwest Coast carvings and textiles, Lakota dolls, Cheyenne beaded necklaces, and silver and turquoise jewelry and operates 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

Admission is free. Join the general entry line at the museum's main entrance from 10 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. 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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