

Presenting Indigenous History: The First Peoples Hall at the Canadian Museum of Civilization

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Most of the discussions that have taken place in recent years between archaeologists and First Peoples, have centered on questions of cultural property—the bones and artifacts in the ground, and the various rights, interests, and ethical issues involved in digging up that material and keeping it after it is dug up. But this is only one side of a complex structure of questions. Another side, and one that has been much more poorly illuminated by recent discussions, deals with the presentation of Indigenous history by non-Aboriginal archaeologists. It can be argued that the public presentation of our interpretations is the most important final goal of archaeological work: providing the public with an understanding of the origins and development of their own and other societies, and of the historical roots of contemporary problems. If this is the case, we should take very seriously our roles as both public interpreters and, especially, practitioners of a European-centered discipline interpreting other peoples' history.

There is a great deal of difference between doing archaeology and presenting archaeology. The two crafts require different domains of awareness and sensitivity. A good example is our use, as working archaeologists, of the terms *prehistory* and *prehistoric*. These are perfectly good and useful scientific terms, precisely defined, and referring simply to periods and cultures which did not leave written records. The real problem with the terms, however, comes when they are used in presenting archaeology to the public. The public also has a precise definition of *prehistory*, which is much different from that of the archaeologist, that often involves three phenomena: dinosaurs, volcanos, and primitive people with clubs living in caves. To most publics, the prehistoric world is essentially the world of the cartoon *Flintstones*. When the archaeological remains of a culture are presented to the public as “prehistoric,” the people who left these remains are added to the inhabitants of this mythical ancient world. North American First Peoples are clearly justified in objecting to seeing their recent ancestors described in books or films or exhibits as “prehistoric.” It helps to establish them in the public mind as a people of the past, as survivors of an ancient way of life that became obsolete in 1492.

Museums are seen by Indigenous peoples as being important contributors to this image. The widespread traditional displays of “golden age” ethnographic cultures has helped the public to associate contemporaneous Indians and Inuit with ancient ways of life which are assumed to be “lost”. The public has a curious tendency to think of modern Indigenous peoples as relics, as vestigial ancients of the kind seen in museum exhibits; at the same time, people of European descent see their own remote ancestors as intellectually modern humans placed in an ancient setting. In the cartoon version, our own ancestors competently handle automobiles and computers, which just happen to be chipped from stone rather than manufactured from metals and plastics; museum exhibits presenting our own ancestors are less fanciful, but they seem to convey much the same message.

When it comes to the museum presentation of archaeological interpretations, First Peoples are understandably concerned, and for a variety of reasons which go well beyond the sterile debates over “appropriation of voice” or of heritage:

1. Concerns such as those outlined above—Will the exhibit contribute to the public perception of Indians and Inuit as peoples of the past?
2. Concerns over contradictions between archaeological and traditional versions of ancient history—will archaeology lead to decreased respect for the elders and their stories: will it lead to a decrease in respect for traditional culture as a means of transmitting knowledge?; and finally
3. Concerns over the Bering Strait origins theory, which some use to portray Indigenous peoples as “just another bunch of immigrants who simply got here a little earlier than the rest” and which may decrease the legal and moral rights of First Peoples as original landholders.

At the same time, archaeologists have in recent years developed similar levels of concern regarding the place of their discipline in the academic world and in public perception. They worry that their theories, methods, and in fact their entire reason for working in the field may be denigrated, or not given the public airing that it deserves. They are concerned that claims of "appropriation of heritage" will impede their freedom to express ideas and the results of research. Like the First Peoples, archaeologists are also concerned over how they are viewed by the public: are they to be seen by the public as members of an appreciated academic discipline, or as a "rogue scientists" depicted as stealing other peoples' pasts and portraying them in a demeaning and imperialistic manner?

Can these diverse points of view be reconciled, and can we accommodate the wide range of concerns held by both archaeologists and First Peoples? This question cannot yet be answered, but we can report on the progress of one attempt to bridge the gulf: the development of a First Peoples Hall in the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

A major permanent exhibition area devoted to the histories and cultures of Canada's First Peoples, was to have been a part of the new Canadian Museum of Civilization when it opened in Hull, Quebec, in 1989. Initial plans were made for a hall that would have a floor area of 5000 square meters. However, funding problems intervened and when the museum opened in 1989 the only permanent exhibits that were in place depicted the traditional cultures of the Northwest Coast peoples, and the European history of eastern Canada.

The delays brought about by funding problems brought other factors into play. The reaction to the *Spirit Sings* exhibit produced by the Glenbow Museum as part of the 1988 winter Olympics brought the representation of First Peoples by Museums into sharp and public focus.¹ In an attempt to bridge the adversarial positions developed during this dispute, the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association established a joint task force to investigate the problems encountered by First Peoples and the Museum community, and to recommend various paths of action.

Meanwhile, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, it was obvious that our original plans for a First Peoples Hall were no longer of any use; the construction of 5000 square metres of permanent exhibition was well beyond the budget that could be foreseen as the depression of the 1990s deepened. We were also bound by agreement to abide by the recommendations of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, which included mandatory consultation as an initial step before any project such as the First Peoples Hall could be undertaken. We were faced with the question of whether or not it was any longer feasible to construct a "First Peoples Hall." Were such exhibits as politically and culturally obsolete as Wild West Shows?

SETTING A NEW DIRECTION

Beginning in 1992 we have pursued a process of consultation that has had rather surprising results. There will be a new First Peoples Hall in the Museum, but it will be much different than that which we had originally planned, and should be considerably stronger and of greater public interest. We also expect that it will be more effective than any exhibit which we could have developed using traditional modes of museum planning.

The approach that we chose grew out of the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples that was formed in 1990, and the recommendation of that group's final report were followed closely. A Joint Consultation Committee was established, comprising both First Peoples representatives chosen on the basis of ethnic representation and expertise in the fields of culture and culture history, and museum professionals from the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The fact that some members of the committee had been on the previous Task Force allowed the momentum developed by that group to be carried on in the exhibition planning process.

The initial approach of the committee favoured a model of two separate presentations: one a view of ancient history as seen by Euro-Canadian archaeologists; the other as seen by traditional Native scholars. But with the passage of time, and long training in the art of consensual decision-

¹ The strengthening voice of Aboriginal concerns (or the increasing sensitivity of our hearing regarding such concerns) was not limited to North America at that time, but indeed was a widespread trend, as witnessed by the One World Archaeology conference and subsequent publications.

making, the group eventually arrived at a basis from which a much different, and we feel a much more interesting, project can be undertaken.

The Committee began to approach the question of representation by establishing a set of 13 principles that summarize many of the concerns and solutions developed during the discussion. The preamble sets out the overall model for development of the exhibit:

We are a group of people of diverse backgrounds, both Native and non-Native, working toward a common goal. We contribute to the discussion on an equivalent footing, always recognizing the particular expertise, knowledge, and insights of each particular member.

Most of the principles deal directly with the presentation of traditional cultures and current situations, reflecting the primary interests of the committee in portraying First Peoples as living peoples in the modern world. This overriding concern is voiced in Principle 8, which also bears on the presentation of ancient history:

The Hall will present to the public an opportunity to hear and understand the voice of the First Peoples, proclaiming that "We are still here, still contributing, and still playing our own distinctive part in the modern world, as we always have." In exhibits, care will be taken to explore the relationship between the present and the past.

Finding a Place for Archaeology

How can ancient history be presented in such a way as to reinforce the view of First Peoples as a modern and contributing segment of world society? How can it be presented so that it does not leave the public with impressions that First Peoples are "nothing but another bunch of immigrants from northern Asia," or that their way of life is mired in the stone-age hunting and farming cultures of the ancient past? How can the ancient history constructed by archaeologists be reconciled with the traditional histories of distinct origin and special development?

These and other questions remained in the committee's mind throughout our discussions, during which archaeology and ancient history tended to be ignored until consensual solutions could be found for less controversial matters. It became obvious that the committee was much more comfortable discussing matters of language, traditional culture, and recent social and political history than with discussing archaeology. In order to reflect the desired emphasis on current issues, it was decided that a significant portion of the Hall would be devoted to changing exhibits, through which communities, cultural centres, and other agencies could present contemporary views on traditional culture and current realities. Long-term exhibits would be restricted to topics that were less subject to changing interpretation, examples of which are the importance of Indigenous languages as a means of understanding, transmitting and perpetuating culture; the history of relationships between Indigenous and European cultures through the various phases of containment, acculturation, and revitalization; and ancient history, which was initially conceived in terms of legendary history and oral tradition. Finally, an approach was found that brought archaeology into the discussions, and provided a place for it in the Hall.

This approach takes the form of a critique of "The Myth of the Virgin Land," a phrase used recently by Ronald Wright in his book *Stolen Continents*, to describe the chartering myth that has been used to explain and justify European occupation of the American continents. The myth, recounted in numerous history books, tells that Europeans found an underpopulated and underutilized continent that they took over as a sort of natural right. It can be argued that this view of post-Columbian American history, as an encounter between a technologically and socially sophisticated civilization and a "sparse population of wandering primitives" lies at the root of the negative stereotyping that continues to be a plague to the Aboriginal peoples of the hemisphere.

A public critique of this myth serves not only the aims of the First Peoples to oppose denigration of their history and culture, but also provides an opportunity for the practitioners of archaeology to present their findings on the ancient history of the continent. This critique is organized around three themes:

Theme 1. The ancestors of the First Peoples have occupied this land since Time Immemorial.

In fact, the First Peoples of Canada have been here since before most of the land that is now Canada existed at all in its present form. Archaeology's stories dealing with the Paleoindian occupation of an Ice Age continent—a land of immense moving glaciers, giant animals, sinking land-bridges, and huge ice-dammed lakes that suddenly appeared and disappeared in a single season—have much the same quality as many traditional origin stories. The two modes of dealing with ancient history are natural allies, and beg for comparison rather than contention.

The second, and very important aspect of this theme, requires that the original Indian occupation of the Americas not be presented as an early episode of immigration. Rather, it is clearly a part of the same process of land-taking by which all other early human groups established their ancestral homelands—in Europe, Asia and elsewhere—at the time of the last Ice Age.

There is clearly nothing in this version of history which serves to reduce Indigenous title to the lands of the American hemisphere. Rather, it invokes a quite remarkable meaning to the quasi-legal phrase “time immemorial,” and establishes occupation at a far earlier date than the few centuries implied in the legal interpretation of the phrase.

Theme 2. Canadian history is as long and complex as that of any other part of the world, and as filled with intriguing events.

Canada is not a “Young Country,” a “country with more geography than history,” that our politicians are so fond of telling us. Canadian First Peoples were part of an American civilization that produced ways of life as different as Mayan astronomers and Inuit whalers, both of whom, in their times, led the world in developing their unique skills and knowledge. An investigation of the variety, complexity, accomplishments, and time-depth of indigenous American societies provides a framework for presenting a great variety of findings and interpretations: the early metal working and complex ceremonialism of the eastern Archaic cultures; the artistic accomplishments of the Paleo-Eskimos; the remarkable time depth of a sustainable economy demonstrated at buffalo jump sites in the Plains; the development of some of the world's most important agricultural products; the political innovations of the Iroquois; the trade networks which crossed the continent, and which linked the Indigenous peoples of Canada with those of the more densely populated regions to the south.

Indigenous history is presented as something worthwhile and valuable in itself—as something that has made significant contributions to world history and which is valuable for the world to know. It is not presented as a curiosity, as something outside the mainstream of world cultural development, or solely as examples demonstrating the principles and techniques of archaeology. This theme leads naturally to the third and most important, of the thematic statements made by the exhibit.

Theme 3. At the time of the first sustained contact between Eurasia and America, was there really much technological or economic superiority on either side of the Ocean?

The exhibit will investigate the proposition that in the fifteenth century A.D., the two hemispheres were on a much more similar level—demographically, technologically, economically, and culturally—than has been assumed by proponents of the Virgin Land myth. A tableau of American civilizations as they existed at the time of effective contact with Eurasia, reconstructed from archaeological, historical, and traditional sources, serves to present a picture of a continent that was quite different from the Virgin Land of historical mythology. This approach obviously grows out of recent reassessments, on the part of Indigenous peoples, of the significance of their own history. It also coincides with a rethinking of the effects of European diseases on the sixteenth century aboriginal populations of the Americas, and the suspicion that the Virgin Land was not an indigenous condition but was caused by massive depopulation and cultural disruption during the early years of European contact.

The major aim of this theme is to refocus the public's attention on the comparison of fifteenth century cultures, rather than comparing indigenous American cultures of the fifteenth century with European cultures of the twentieth century. The public should leave this exhibit with the realization that fifteenth century populations of American and Europe had much more in common with each other than with any of their twentieth century descendants. In A.D. 1500, the Indige-

nous peoples of Canada will be shown as playing their distinctive part in the modern world of the time, just as they do today.

In sum, archaeology seems to have found a valued place in presenting the ancient history of Canada's Indigenous peoples in the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The value of its contribution lies not only in the information that it can present as evidence of past cultures, but in providing a basic shift in the perspective through which Indigenous history is generally viewed by the Canadian public. In undertaking this shift in perspective, it also provides itself with an opportunity to develop a much stronger, more interesting, and more challenging set of exhibits than would have been developed using traditional patterns of interpretation. Perhaps this is an indication of what lies ahead for archaeology in North America: by forging links with the perspectives and interests of First Peoples, we may be discovering opportunities to develop a revitalized and much more interesting discipline.

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