

The following abstracts have been prepared for submission as part of a special issue of *Museum Anthropology* based on papers from the 2006 *Preserving Our Pasts, Telling Our Stories: Indians, Museums, and the Management of History* conference, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.

### **Rethinking Dioramas: Reconsidering the Production of Space in Tribal Museums**

Mario A. Caro, MA, Public Scholar for Civic Engagement, Museum Studies and Art History Herron School of Art and Design

*Abstract:* This essay is a re-assessment of the use of dioramas in representing Native peoples. While the diorama has a long history as a display technology within museums, it has also been the focus of intense criticism. As these displays provide the viewer with a more realistic sense of three-dimensional space, they do so at the expense of providing a realistic sense of time. This is particularly problematic in ethnographic displays that tend to portray non-Western cultures as static. In terms of dioramas that feature Indigenous cultures, Richard Hill writes that “dioramas tend to keep Indians in the natural history arena, next to the stuffed animals and frozen specimens.” Dioramas have tended to reinforce a modernist construction of the other by employing a primitivist approach to the representation of Indigenous cultures.

However, despite these critiques many tribal museums, including most that have been recently constructed, feature dioramas as important parts of their narrative. I will argue that in these instances it is important to place more emphasis on the spatial rather than the temporal aspects of the diorama. If we take into consideration the notion of “site specificity,” we can arrive at a reading of these displays as focusing on the contiguity between the space represented within the museum and the siting of the museum itself. In the case of tribal museums, the connection between the manufactured space of the diorama and the real space outside the museum is one that clearly points to a tribe’s sovereignty; it is a connection that declares a tribe’s approach to representing itself spatially.

### **The Vanished Indian: Missions and Myths on the California Frontier**

Deana Dartt-Newton, PhD Candidate, University of Oregon Department of Anthropology

*Abstract:* The California State Board of Education 4<sup>th</sup> grade history and social science curricular standards mandate an introduction to the state’s Colonial history. Public programming at Mission museums facilitate a hands-on, interactive part of that curriculum and are viewed as an authoritative voice of history. These sites portray powerful narratives which constitute, in many cases, the foundation of understanding about Indian people and their experiences. The exhibits in Missions often depict Indian life ending abruptly with the arrival Padre Serra. Historically however, scholars note when exhibiting and interpreting the history of indigenous people, museums in the US

have paid little attention to cultural sensitivity. My research to date suggests that these hegemonic processes serve to define California Indian life and culture in the public memory and though many institutions have the goal to serve multiple publics, they rarely acknowledge an California Indian “public.” This paper examines current Mission museum exhibits and programs, investigates their role in fulfilling the social science curricular standards, and makes suggestions for implementing cultural competency criteria for assessing their appropriateness as sites of authoritative knowledge utilized by schools.

### **Our Collections, Our Heritage**

Elizabeth Kallenbach, MA, University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History

*Abstract:* Anthropology museums today generally focus not on the collection of things, but on the collective thought, interpretation, and experiences related to objects. The way in which these collections, objects, or living relatives are accessed, studied, researched, and interpreted has changed in the last two decades; museums have responded to the indigenous rights movement on a national level, confronting new challenges that address issues of ethnic identity and indigenous rights and representation. A specific manifestation of this movement is the recent revitalization in indigenous basketweaving. Basketry is an invaluable component to many museum collections, while the preservation and continuation of weaving is an important issue for indigenous people today. This discussion explores the relationship between California weavers and museums and the methods adopted by both to preserve and maintain this art form. Discussed are methods for effective dialogue between museums and basketweavers, documentation efforts, and access to collections through museum visits and on-line catalogs.

### **The Currency of Consultation and Collaboration**

Ann McMullen, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution

*Abstract.* Over the last few decades, American museums have increasingly sought the assistance of Native people in developing exhibitions and other projects. While our museum colleagues often present and publish their success stories, I draw on my museum experiences with Native individuals and communities since 1990 and examine some of the difficulties inherent in such consultations. In particular, I focus on how cultural misunderstandings about the issue of money and payments can threaten consultations. Drawing on the literature of gifts, exchanges, and commodities, I suggest that better understanding of the dynamics of payments, reciprocity, and traditional knowledge, values, and exchanges can further collaborative museum projects. Simultaneously, I examine what is at stake for indigenous participants, and what instrumental purpose their involvement with museums serves.

## **Take Home Messages and Galleries of Thought**

Alice Parman, Ph.D., Independent Interpretive Planner

*Abstract:* A museum consultant must ensure that Native people are actively involved in planning any exhibit project about Native people. The planning process is designed to elicit a variety of perspectives, from elders and other community members, about key take-home messages, concepts, values, and facts to be included in the exhibit. A well-designed exhibit is organized into “galleries of thought” that are meaningful to the people it’s about, and also make sense to outside visitors, who begin to get a picture of what is unique and special about a particular Native community.

Consultants don’t tell you what to do; they listen, and come up with recommendations based on what they’ve heard. The client has ultimate control over content; this is not a dictatorial process, but based on consensus by a knowledgeable planning team. When facts or perspectives are unclear, unknown, or in dispute, it’s important to include multiple perspectives.