The Museum and the Web: Three Case Studies

The National Museum of the American Indian

The Virtual Visit

I visited the website for the National Museum of the American Indian on November 14, 2004. (To view the page as it was then, visit http://web.archive.org/web/20041114092955/http://www.nmai.si.edu.) The home page showed a picture of the museum on a yellow background; it was visually well composed and attractive. A search function and a link to a site map on this page were handily located at the top of the page, along with a menu for the "Calendar," "Press," "Employment," and "Book Shop." The main menu was along the left and in larger print. It provided links to "Visitor Information," "Exhibitions," "Events," "Outreach," "Education," "Collections," and "Support." There was no indication on the home page of what the museum's mission is, what its exhibitions are, what its focus is—in other words, there was no content. At least there were directed links—some public history museum websites that I visited during my research had nothing but an image and a name on the front page.

The website for the National Museum of the American Indian treats many of its pages like a canvas or colorful magazine. Bright blue, russet, and yellow are used to tie the sections together visually, even though each has a slightly different banner at the top. Subheadings within sections share the same banner, which kept navigation clear. I sometimes had trouble printing pages, with images and text being cut off on the right, but that varied with the browser. The graphics on the home page would not print, however.

I found the Mission Statement under the heading "Press," which is a section I normally would not search. A primary goal of the museum is "[. . .] to protect, support, and enhance the development, maintenance, and perpetuation of Native culture and community." One way this goal is to be accomplished is by presenting all aspects of the exhibitions and programs "from the Native perspective—'in the Native voice.'" It was not evident whether the website was developed in the same manner or how one could tell if it were.

The section for "Visitor Information" seemed a logical first choice to visit. This provided information about the location, cost, and hours for the various locations of the museum—until then I had not realized that there was more than one museum under the same name. Since I intended to visit the museum in Washington, DC, I clicked on that image and got a page with practical information such as driving directions. A subheading, "Inside the Museum," took me to a section that described each of the current exhibits in detail and provided one or more colorful images pertinent to the exhibit. (Or so I assumed; the images were not labeled.)

After some exploring of the website, I discovered that the most educational section of the website was its online exhibition section. (The section entitled "Education" was directed at schools and organizing school trips.) These online exhibits varied considerably, however, in how genuinely informative they were. Overall, the text conveyed a sense of restraint and detachment, especially after the U. S. Holocaust Memorial and Museum, which was nearly brutal in its details. Some of the online exhibits were unavailable, and I encountered various navigation problems with several of
them, such as segments not working, back buttons not linking to the home page, or no link to the home page. On the other hand, many took advantage of the variety of techniques that make the Web so rich, such as video, audio, and animation.

"All Roads Are Good: A Virtual Tour of the National Museum of the American Indian Exhibition" intrigued me, since it promised both to take advantage of current technology and to give me a tour that might help before I visited in real time. This exhibit was created by students from several schools, and it brought up a screen with two primary sections. On one was a floor plan of the exhibit, and on the other was an inset of the exhibit itself, which I could virtually walk through. Some of the objects in the cases were identified. I had trouble manipulating through the space, however. Additional windows popped up and overlapped one another, blocking the view. The written descriptions provided by the students told me more about the nature of the artifacts than had the previous online exhibit ("First American Art"), which was useful. Because of technical problems, however, I soon left that site.

I entered the "Ancient Mexican Art" site, a past exhibit (as many of these were). The front page for this site gave the dates for the original exhibit, offered a choice of two languages, and warned that a Flash plug-in was necessary (and available) to view the site. The site's images shifted when I entered it, which was visually disturbing. The introductory page offered an option to increase the text size and had a small menu that indicated where I was in the site. I had to close the window to get back to the main museum pages. (In other words, a "back" button was not available.)

The content of this online exhibit was displayed in the center of an artistically framed page with crisp, contrasting colors and legible text. The introduction gave a terse but comprehensive overview of Mexican art, noting what facts the curatorial "we" were certain of and what was speculation. The text was sensitive to multicultural and multiethnic concerns. The section on the collection itself had enlargeable thumbnail images of high-resolution photographs of artifacts. It also had subheadings with brief paragraphs about the category, such as "Daily Life." The artifacts were captioned simply, noting what they were, as well as when and where they were made. The exhibit seemed to reflect the museum's mission in the way it handled the subject matter, although it was unclear whether Native Americans had been involved in curating the exhibit.

I took a closer look at the current exhibitions page for Washington. The page was long with large, blank areas; color photographs in a middle column helped reduce the sense of wasted space. The museum's philosophy to involve the peoples being studied in presenting their own histories was evident in the descriptions of one exhibit in this section, "Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes the World." On the other hand, I had no idea what I would actually see in the exhibit, other than artifacts such as the beaded, undescribed pouch beside the heading.

A second exhibit, "Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories" indicated that it was a linear narrative with a Native American perspective, and it conveyed a hopeful tone: "But the story of these last five centuries is not entirely a story of destruction. It is also about how Native people intentionally and strategically kept their cultures alive." With its bright and cheerful color scheme, the design of the American Indian museum website reflected this optimism.

A third exhibit, called "Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities," had a contemporary object (painted sneakers) beside its heading. The description reminded me
of the one for "Our Universes" because both exhibits draw from eight communities, but involved different tribes and focused more on identity.

The fourth exhibit, "Native Modernism: The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser" struck me as a standard art exhibit, albeit one deriving inspiration from Native American ideas (although that was not obvious from the accompanying photo of a sculpture).

I discovered by accident that the "National Museum of the American Indian" title in the upper left corner took me back to the home page; it did not always work, however, but knowing this was quite helpful, since some of the online exhibits had taken me out of the website and into the Smithsonian's.

I could not find a fact sheet for the museum (although I came across two for other centers).

The Physical Visit

A long line and cold wait preceded my getting into the museum. Physical discomfort and a long drive were two obvious differences between my virtual and real-time visits. Even though it was chilly, the crowd was friendly and obviously excited to be going to the museum, which had been open less than a month at the time. A "timed entry pass" was available online or by phone (via an outside server), or one could be obtained at the door. Admission is free.

The main hall of the museum opens up four floors like an atrium. The circular building is centered around a performance area. A grand staircase spirals to the top; it looks like the cutaway of a shell. The interior space created a light, freeflowing environment, and it seemed a space meant to be, if not hallowed, then certainly impressive and reminiscent of natural forms. These forms, in turn, seemed to echo the cultural values of American Indians as presented in the museum. The space also reminded me of the website, with its bright tones and visually balanced composition.

When I arrived, the steps, the copper half-wall surrounding the performance area, and the seats curving around the center were jammed with people, from babies to elderly. The museum buzzed with movement and conversation which lessened as a tribal dance group began performing. Unfortunately, the introductory explanation was perfunctory, and although the dances were interesting, it seemed as if the observers and the dancers were culturally distant from one another. It brought to mind past museum interpretations that treated the culture under study as "other," distinct from the dominant hegemony--or in this case, distinct from the audience. The dances were isolated from context and, to me, meaningless as a result. It was a Disney/Discovery channel sort of experience, and I felt disappointed not only for myself but for the dancers.

I had ended my virtual visit with the idea that the exhibits would be laid out more or less the way I had read about them, but that was a false impression. A directory displayed the location of the exhibits, and a brochure (which used many of the same images of the website) clarified that the three main exhibits (Our Universes, Our Peoples, and Our Lives) were permanent ones. Whether the use of the same images helped me remember the exhibits better or made them seem more generic was a question I could answer affirmatively both ways.

I climbed the stairs to the fourth floor (an elevator was also available) so that I could appreciate the open space and watch the crowd on my way up. The first exhibit I came to,
"Many Hands, Many Voices: Peace Medals and Tomahawks" was not one that had been listed on the website, at least not in the primary list of exhibits. It was set up in a broad, well-lit space not far from the landing. The crowds did not prevent my getting fairly close to the display case, although some of the artifacts were difficult to see because of the glass. The museum provided an interactive touch screen, however, where you could select and magnify items. The screen displayed basic information for each item: the object's name, culture that made it, place of origin, date, materials, dimensions, and catalogue number. It provided no information about the artifact's meaning or importance, however.

The case display showed photographs of Native Americans wearing peace medals and provided a cohesive narrative about the medal-giving tradition. A series of maps traced peace medal activity and put them in context of Indian fighters, the westward movement, and the reservation period. It gave me a thoughtful portrait of a segment of culture during a certain period of history. The main benefit of seeing this exhibit live was that I could absorb it all at once, as opposed to scrolling through the same information on a small screen.

Nearby was another display case, also not mentioned on the website, featuring "Animals." It did not disturb me to find small exhibits that I had not been made aware of previously via the Web, but someone with a particular interest in these subjects might go to the museum just to see them, had they been alerted to the exhibit.

Four paragraphs on "animals that were, and remain, important to Native people" (as depicted three dimensionally) were signed by a curator. This case was less well lit than that of the peace medals, making the objects difficult to see, and it was packed with artifacts. Another interactive display was located in front of this case. The ability to magnify portions of each object was the chief distinction between the real-time and virtual visit, although a Web page could have been created for the artifacts that erased this minor distinction. The artifacts were not arranged and described in a way that told any sort of historical story; doing so would have made their presentation more compelling in physical or virtual space. Other than the curator's notes, no context was given, and there were so many artifacts that they were in a way meaningless--like so many pebbles on a beach. As Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims noted in "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue," when objects are "removed from the continuity in time and space and made exquisite on display, [...] objects are transformed in the meanings that they may be said to carry: they become moments of ownership, commodities."1

The next exhibit, "Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World," was accompanied by a signed curatorial statement (all the statements were signed throughout the museum). One aim of "Our Universes" was to "discover how Native People understand their place in the universe and order their daily lives." The hallway was curved, and exhibit segments spiraled off them, reinforcing the sense of walking through a Nautilus shell. The area was dark, and a simulated Milky Way twinkled above. The physical space was not at all like being outside, but it certainly made me think about being outside. Nonetheless, the effect was somewhat hokey (a Disney effect). A voiceover, spoken by elders of one of the tribes who had contributed to the exhibit, said, "Our universe is constructed by an earth-shaped bowl and a sky-shaped bowl." The space
was built to reflect that sensibility. Architecture and interior design again brought something to the physical space that could not be created in the virtual space.

Each section was designed to show some aspects of a tribe's universe. Some of these had music, films, or voiceovers in English and Native languages; some were built like a native dwelling, such as an adobe or lodge; some contained traditional clothing and artifacts; some displayed contemporary objects. Wandering with other people from section to section, sometimes unable to get close to the materials or pushed past a tableau before I could read the curatorial remarks, I often felt confused and frustrated. I had no clear sense of what the sections were supposed to be teaching me, if they were related, or whether they were supposed to be related or teaching me anything.

In "Exhibitions as (Art) Form," Barbara Fahs Charles points out that "anything goes" when it comes to getting the concept across in history museums (and, I would add, their websites). If elements are well situated, visitors move naturally from one area to the next. The challenge is to enhance the artifacts and underscore the concept, while guiding visitors through a related architectural space without fatiguing them. She suggests that ultimately, viewers and critics must ask: "[D]oes the show work as a whole? Does it have a unity not only in the artifacts, but in intellectual conception and design? Is the sum greater than the parts?" Disoriented and frazzled after this exhibit, I had to answer "No." Were it a website, I would have skimmed and skipped sections, if indeed I had spent more than my seven seconds. While it seems possible that the intent of the exhibit's design was to persuade visitors of the diversity and individuality of the various tribes, that meaning could only be guessed at, not confirmed.

Fortunately, some items made this exhibit worthwhile simply because they were singularly impressive. One case, for instance, held artifacts that were displayed in such a way that I could see details that I would have missed on a screen. Blue moccasins decorated with a pair of black hands and white nails were beautiful and meticulously crafted. A "Roach" headdress of porcupine "hair" (quills) was simply amazing, as was an eagle feather "bonnet" that was at least six feet long, placed near a heavy silver belt. Compared next to my own body, their size and weight made them meaningful. They became items that people wore, not just artifacts.

Svetlana Alpers argues in "The Museum as a Way of Seeing" about "the museum effect—the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus to transform it into art like our own [. . .]." Certainly that occurs, but it can also be argued that in some sections of the National Museum of the American Indian, it is only in isolation that we can truly see certain items. Some of these, such as the eagle feather bonnet, had transformative powers for their original owners, and the museum setting conveys that. As Greenberg notes, "[. . .] artifacts [. . .] have an amazing emotive power of their own because they are real." And Houlihan elaborates further:

[. . .] not all parts of every exhibit of Native American art, culture, or history should 'possess' the viewer, but a part of them should. And the secret to doing this may lie in the use of Native American people—artists (or 'poets') from the culture involved—to force us to rethink how we create exhibits or portions of exhibits that both resonate and reverberate in our viewers, bringing forth some of the essential meanings in Native American cultures.
The museum's approach in both the virtual and physical space reflects this ideology, although the success of its implementation was inconsistent. According to Houlihan, that is acceptable.

As I walked through the exhibits at the National Museum of the American Indian, I realized that "resonance," as it reveals essential meanings in cultures and history, is what truly distinguishes the virtual from the physical museum visit. Although some sections made more of an impact than others, throughout the museum I experienced moments of essential, poetic meaning.

The exhibit "Our Peoples" is the only one that attempts to tell a linear story covering a broad expanse of time–five centuries. It addresses the story, according to the curator's notes, "from the vantage point of the original Americans. The introductory areas reveal how Indians have struggled to survive and explain why so little of this history is familiar." As indicated on the website, the emphasis is not on laying blame, but rather on providing facts that have been overlooked. The curving walls display different aspects of the story, such as "Contact," "Invasions," "Making History" and "God's Work." The artifacts are arranged thoughtfully and artistically; they work together to convey a stronger impression than they would if viewed in isolated cases. The display of gold objects, for instance, looks like water currents flowing through the cases; they reminded me of the natural forms used throughout the museum. The positioning of artifacts throughout the display was elegant; the text was compelling, poignant, and factual without seeming too authoritative. The effect met the criterion laid out by Crews and Sims: "the best use of artifacts is when their history precisely matches their use within an exhibition; it gives added force to the argument." It was an exhibit that could not be recreated in virtual space with any semblance of the true impact.

For purely personal reasons, one moment in the whole visit stands out. In the exhibit, "Our Lives: Contemporary Life and Identities," there was a wall of life-sized portraits. "What we look like" was the theme. The portraits were hung at eye level, so the experience was that of looking into many individual faces. I came stock still at one woman's face--"Marty, Southern Ute." She looked exactly like my mother, whose parents were both part Native American. I had just read about conflicting earlier government policies that had discriminated against Native Americans for a host of reasons, using the "one-drop-of-blood" rule on the one hand (which would have affected my life and my son's), but on the other hand made it difficult to be acknowledged as a Native American without sufficient "proof." Here was an unexplored facet of my family's history; I never would have felt the same emotion or sense of recognition had I been viewing a small version on a monitor or come across the information in disparate sections of a website. Juxtaposition of images, texts, and artifacts, as well as scale and physicality, can make the difference between a detached understanding and a deep connection. On a purely intellectual level, however, a virtual exhibit of the same material could have effectively connected the contrary government policies.

The exhibit's notes on the wall said that it was created "In memory of our ancestors and in honor of our children." The wall of photographs ended with one composite, larger-than-life (perhaps three feet by five feet) face–or rather, series of faces, as it was constantly changing. The obvious message was, "We are still here." It was the thematic tie-in that I needed to make sense of all the exhibits, and it provided a moment of resonance in a museum that hovered between a public and a sacred space. I did not glean
that message from the website—although it is implied—nor did I really have a sense of what it would mean to have the exhibits shaped by Native Americans, although it was explicitly stated on the website that they were part of the advisory and curatorial process. A more precise explanation of how this worked in the physical space, and of the thematic link among the exhibits, would have prepared me better for what was at times a chaotic presentation. On the website, an animated version of the photographic montage plus explanatory text would work well, for example, as a supplement to the exhibit that would not in any way diminish the impact of the larger-than-life version.

The Follow-up Web Visit

I could not obtain data about how many visitors the museum and its website get per month, perhaps because the museum is so new.

Revisiting the website after my real-time visit, I was not able to learn any more about the exhibits I had already seen, which was disappointing. I had especially hoped to learn more about "Our Universes," which had not left me with any real understanding of the cultures represented (even though I enjoyed some elements). In addition, I would have appreciated learning more about the innovative artists who were featured in the exhibit, "Our Lives." The works of art that used contemporary materials with traditional forms—such as a basket of woven film strips—were so striking that I wanted to see and know more

Since I could not find anything that would deepen my understanding of the museum exhibits or related history, I spent more time looking at the online exhibits. This time I had more trouble getting exhibits to display; "Agayuliyararput" and "To Honor and Comfort" are two examples. I discovered that two exhibits were actually the same but with different names ("Creation's Journey" and "All Roads are Good"). How much I learned varied according to the presentation of each, which differed greatly. Some, such as "Great Masters of Mexican Folk Art," contained a lot of text, while others, such as "Indian Humor," contained little. In general the hierarchy of the online exhibits and the entire site was somewhat shallow. On the other hand, it was never overwhelming.

Recommendations

The website, the exhibit on animal-related artifacts, and the one entitled "Our Universes," brought to mind an article by Lonnie G. Bunch, "Fighting the Good Fight," in which he discusses how museums can best handle "culture wars" and who has the right to shape museum interpretations.

We must struggle to ensure that museums never return to a time when significant intellectual inquiry, the examination of difficult yet fundamental issues, is ignored. We must not allow our cultural institutions to become places where scholars and curators fail to wrestle with certain questions, not because of the lack of evidence, expertise, or collections, but because of the lack of institutional resolve. 8

The controversies over interpretation that the Smithsonian Institution has faced in the past decade have understandably left curators cautious. That caution is evident in the website for the National Museum of the American Indian, which studiously avoids any controversy, but at the same time sidesteps much history.
A brief statement on the home page or in an introduction that clarified both the museum's mission and the way it acts on it would be helpful. So would a page on understanding and navigating the exhibits in real-time, with follow-up discussions to further comprehension and to provide a deeper context. A more direct discussion about the "Our Universes" exhibit regarding the way it was set up and why, and particularly how to get the most out of it, would add greatly to the total museum experience. I did not poll other museum-goers to determine objectively what responses were to the exhibit, but I heard many comments from people who were confused about what they were seeing and what they were supposed to get out of the exhibit.

Being able to "collect" items for later study, and being able to look up those items later, would be inordinately useful. I wrote down the names of several items that I wanted more information about—such as how they were made, when they were made, differences in styles by tribe, ritual meaning, historical context, and so forth. I tried the search engine on the site to look up the "eagle feather bonnet" I had seen and got no response. "Headresses" also got nothing. "Bonnet" took me to the "Collections" page, where bonnet was just one of the words mentioned in the text. I may have been able to find more information by going to the website for the Smithsonian. Trying that, however, made it difficult to return to American Indian Museum; not all the pages I went to had links to the other Smithsonian museums. I was also frustrated by not being able to find any reference at all to the "Animals" exhibit, let alone any information about the specific artifacts in it.

The website contains a lot of graphics that are not doing any work for the site besides decorating it. It misses a lot of opportunity for education; brief pop-ups that provided not only cataloguing information but contextual details would enrich the experience and likely increase the desire to see the artifacts in person. Combining a floor map (to pre-orient the visitor) with details about the exhibits and their history would prepare the visitor to navigate in the physical space, as well as to sharpen the desire to do so.

Various linking and loading problems need to be fixed. A link to a search engine within each subsection would be helpful, as would links to the rest of the museum once inside an online exhibition.

An introductory page could point out that the online and past exhibits (two sections with overlapping exhibits) are informational. Judging from the material about current exhibits, a viewer does not have any reason to believe that the online exhibits will be educational. In addition, the "Education" section misses a great opportunity to educate. Explaining how to arrange tours is useful information, but it is not education. Links from the education site to discussion/chat rooms, interactive learning programs such as creative play, role-playing stories, interactive mysteries, writing exercises, and so forth would push the website into a genuinely relevant component of the museum experience. The museum is still young, however, so perhaps these elements are in the works.

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1 Charles, Barbara Fahs Charles. "Exhibition as (Art) Form." Past Meets Present. (Student Packet, assembled by Phyllis Leffler, University of Virginia) p. 97-102.
3 Charles, Barbara Fahs Charles. "Exhibition as (Art) Form." Past Meets Present. (Student Packet, assembled by Phyllis Leffler, University of Virginia) p. 104.


