

Every object has a story...

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Aaron Glass, Bard Graduate Center and American Museum of Natural History

When the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) was created, it boldly announced that it would not be an institution devoted to objects, but to people. Its new building on the national mall in Washington DC bears this out—the museum is filled with “voices” in the form of audio and video snippets, multiple (and always attributed) curatorial statements by both indigenous and non-indigenous people, and photographic and filmic faces. It is not filled with objects, at least not to the degree that the massive collection and ample architectural spaces would allow. Indeed, one of the initial and most lasting criticisms of the new building is the dearth of actual things to look at amidst the swirling discursive offerings. [Although not difficult, one has to make an appointment to view the collections at their storehouse in suburban Maryland.]

Perhaps this move away from objects should not be surprising at an institution founded in order to revise the presentation of Native Americans, to enforce new paradigms of cultural sovereignty, and to critique the legacy of anthropological and art historical “objectification” that for too long limited the presentation of Native peoples through objects alone.

Now the museum—perhaps in partial response to complaints about the lack of direct access to collections—has created a website to facilitate visual access to objects and the museum’s original (if often minimal) collection records. The key tagline for the site is: “Every object has a story,” which maintains the museum’s larger discursive emphasis on narrative as a means of understanding or encountering objects. We are promised a “deeper level of information that can truly reveal an item’s ‘histories and mysteries.’” Many museums are expanding their internet presence by using such searchable—“explorable” in the familiar adventure-travel lingo—databases as a resource for remote researchers as well as members of source communities. What is most striking in the NMAI announcement is the claim that the website is “helping us capture the lost, forgotten, and incomplete histories of our collection before they disappear forever” (original emphasis). Notice: it’s not the objects that will disappear (they’re already safely in the museum); it’s the “histories” that are endangered, if not already forgotten. Such shades of the long outmoded—and thoroughly critiqued—“salvage paradigm” routinely show up in contemporary Native discourse about museum collections, reinforcing NMAI’s self-characterization as a place for knowledge, presumably knowledge that comes (ideally, at least) first-hand from the old (read: authentic) culture-bearers that are constantly, with every passing day, on the verge of passing from this world. It is not entirely clear from the website itself how its structure and format will encourage the “capturing” of such vital histories, although one can certainly imagine families surfing the web in their longhouse, big house, pueblo or condo, examining these virtual objects while focusing various voices in their general direction.

From the press release (bold as in the release):

This vast new online archive, Collections Search, is **one of the most exciting and significant undertakings in the Museum’s history** and we have already uncovered a

wealth of new information in the course of building this critical resource.

It's almost as if the Museum was being created all over again, as objects that have been known and labeled as simply as "beaded saddle, Chippewa" take on rich and fascinating new meaning.

Our mission - to preserve the cultural richness of Native American heritage and make it accessible to the widest possible audience - demands we take this next logical step.

Collections Search will open our collection to millions who have never had the opportunity to see it in person.

Every object has a story. And beyond the rudimentary facts about material, tribal origin, and age is the deeper level of information that can truly reveal an item's "histories and mysteries." The hard work and resources we're investing in Collections Search is helping us capture the lost, forgotten, and incomplete histories of our collection **before they disappear forever.**

Because of the unlimited access of the Internet, Collections Search has virtually no limitations. Eventually, **Collections Search will contain nearly all 800,000 of the Museum's objects** and 65,000 historic photographs, including those that are too fragile to display."

Explore and share the collection today at www.americanindian.si.edu/searchcollections.