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Museum Review: First Americans Museum

By Michael Chavez

In October 2021, I had the opportunity to visit the newly opened First Americans Museum (FAM) in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Opened in September 2021, and situated along the Oklahoma River, the FAM was designed to serve as a museum that tells Native American history with Native people at the center. The museum focuses on the thirty-nine tribes that call Oklahoma home either because it was their native homeland or because it was where the United States government displaced their ancestors. Cultural Affairs Director, Heather Ahtone, member of the Choctaw/Chickasaw Nation, provided an eye-opening comparison in a recent interview to put that in perspective, stating “We have more languages spoken in Oklahoma than Europe and our placement in this specific landscape is comparable to moving the forty-four nations in Europe to the island of Great Britain—not even the entire United Kingdom.”¹ Working to educate visitors while telling their stories through their own voices by providing interactive, informative, and intuitive exhibit construction, the FAM serves as a pivotal establishment of Native American representation while simultaneously utilizing innovative exhibit designs.

From the exterior, the glass and metal structures that make up the main focus of the interior hall immediately catch guests’ attention; they are a reflection of long grasses woven into vessels or baskets. Inspired by the woven grass lodges of the Wichita peoples, this landmark is visible from Interstate 40 and downtown Oklahoma City as one views the museum from further upriver. Less visible from upriver, but no less important to the mission of the museum, is the giant earthen mound built to pay homage to the

¹ Heather Ahtone (Choctaw/Chickasaw Nation), email interview with author, March 24, 2022.

Mound Builder civilizations of eastern Oklahoma like the Caddo or Wichita. Facing East to the rising sun, a prevalent theme among Native American traditions, this mound functions as a massive solar clock where the summer equinox rests at the peak of the mound; six months later, during the winter solstice, the sun can be viewed through a concrete tunnel towards the base of the mound. The tunnel is so large a semi-truck can drive straight through it. Harkening back to ancient traditions and materials while mixing in modern construction techniques, the designers of the museum firmly stamped their position upon the landscape. Walking up to the main entrance, visitors are greeted by the statue *To Touch Above* which hangs roughly thirty feet atop stone supports. In 2010, a father and son team, Demos Glass (Cherokee Nation) and Bill Glass Jr. (Cherokee Nation), with assistance from Dakota Coatney and DJ Bolin (Cherokee Nation), assembled the thirteen-foot, open palm sculpture. The artists explained that the open palm, also a universal sign of peace among Native Americans, symbolized prayer, not to the sun in the East but to the creator responsible for flora, fauna, and humanity. Visitors that walk through the front door enter the Hall of the People and can soak in the ambient light let through by the glass and steel windows. Now that guests are facing West through the panes, the large tunnel at the base of the mound becomes visible. The flood of light washes over visitors, forcing their eyes to adjust, metaphorically representing the adjustment to the flood of new knowledge guests will have to contend with during their visit.

***OKLA HOMMA* Gallery**

The museum is broken up into two main galleries. The downstairs gallery, *OKLA HOMMA*, chronicles the Native history of the tribes that call Oklahoma home from pre-European contact to the violent removal of Natives by encroaching Europeans and the United States. The gallery concludes with modern stories of perseverance among Native peoples. The second gallery, the mezzanine gallery *WINIKO: Life of an Object*, examines the weight that culturally

sensitive items carry among Native peoples such as rattles used for ceremonies around death and well-worn moccasins of a medicine man.

According to Ahtone, every member of the curatorial staff descends from an Oklahoma tribe coming through very clearly in the presentation of the exhibits. Ahtone stated, “our curatorial team, an all-Native team of eleven, worked through the difficult process of identifying priorities in our collective stories and then building the relationships with the communities to ensure the accuracy and tone of how we presented them.”²

Moving inside the entrance to *OKLA HOMMA*, the lighting softens, guiding visitors into what feels like a subterranean space complete with a large Caddo style pottery edifice serving to drive home the point that guests are about to fully immerse themselves into a native environment. Soft lighting and the sounds of narration pull visitors towards *Origins*, a 320-degree projection screen where Native voices detail the origin stories of their respective tribes of Oklahoma. Thus, the Hall of the People symbolically cleansed visitors and finished that cleansing by creating a fresh canvas with the immersion into a darker environment, allowing *Origins* to present Native histories with both greater context and enlightenment. Continuing further along the main hall, guests are provided with bright displays of regalia and artifacts in conjunction with large text panels detailing the Native experience in the United States in a linear timeline. Among the text panels are color variants in red and black. Red panels indicate events in the timeline of Native history: the rise of corn, the formation of powerful Native coalitions, or treaties of sovereignty signed with the United States. The black panels, however, carry a negative connotation and are often filled with violent transgressions against Native peoples to remove them from the land. The third type of panel incorporates both colors with the red fading into black. These blended panels are indicative of the mindset many Native peoples hold for these

² Heather Ahtone (Choctaw/Chickasaw Nation), email interview with author, March 24, 2022.

events. Events that are weighed with both trauma and triumph find their balance within the blended panels.

This paneled section of *OKLA HOMMA* functions much like a bridge between *Origins* and more contemporary displays. The panels are divided into three distinct eras. The first section is devoted to the pre-contact era prior to 1492 to the 1830s. The second set is concerned with 1830 to 1907 during which Oklahoma became a state and the United States government moved Native Americans en masse to what is known today as the reservation system. The final section, which spans from 1907 to the present, mixes in more and more blended panels creating a sense of positive momentum as visitors move forward. What some might argue is an intentional sensory overload accomplishes the goal of folding guests into this narrative. Instead of a multitude of degrees of separation from the historical material, visitors suddenly find themselves invested in the Native experience. Lending to this immersive environment are the small alcoves where the light source emanates from a central fire-like base which flickers to the voices of those giving oral histories passed down to them by their ancestors who learned from those before them.

While the principal focus of the FAM is to tell the story of the Native peoples of Oklahoma, there are numerous examples—such as the interactive trade exhibit—that allow visitors to see the transcontinental trade that took place among Native peoples across the northern continent during the pre-contact era. The museum does not just tell the story of Oklahoma tribal nations; it tells the story of Native peoples across the continent and, as a result, visitors come from all over the country and the world. Being a descendant of the Tongva of the Los Angeles River basin here in Southern California, it was a cathartic moment seeing the name of my people and the vast trade routes that connected them to the tribes of what is now Oklahoma.

Tri-colored panels and grim reminders of a dark past in the form of voiceovers by Native storytellers give way to the brevity of resurgence. As the timeline moves closer to the present day, the black panels give way to displays of popular stereotypes about

Native peoples as well as clear examples of counteraction by Native peoples against harmful caricatures. That proud re-claiming and proclaiming of Native American heritage took off with the Red Power Movement of the 1970s. It only gained more momentum as many Native American tribes pushed forth legislation to regain sovereignty where they could.

The final leg of *OKLA HOMMA* is dedicated to showcasing Native pride by highlighting local Oklahoma Pow Wows, contemporary celebrities and historical figures of Native ancestry, and celebrating the warrior spirit that exists among Native Americans. Visitors can sit inside of a halved touring van to watch a first-person point of view documentary that takes the audience on a journey all over the state to observe pow wows. Each stop places visitors on a different tribe's land, providing a nuanced and detailed view of a common activity among Native peoples. Guests are not just viewing these activities either. With interactive projection technology, visitors can take part in traditional Native American games such as *Hand Games*, which is a guessing game, and *Chunkey*, which is a disc rolling and spear throwing game popular in mound building cultures.

The OKLA HOMMA section serves a greater role than simply educating visitors about games and pow wows though. Beyond the tall temporary walls, erected like multiple mini-billboards paying tribute to the warrior spirit of Native American peoples, there are also walls with the familiar faces of famous athletes with Native ancestry. Here, the contributions of Native Americans to the United States military are also immortalized on these larger than life depictions. It completes the efforts of museum staff which were to demonstrate that Native Americans are not a people of the past who have disappeared altogether. They are proud, resurgent, and very much alive in the spaces allotted to them, with greater aspirations to break free of those limits. In an email interview with the author in March 2022, Ahtone remarked, "It was my intent to listen to the voices and wisdom of our

ancestors and to create a space for the Indigenous children of the future.”³

WINIKO: Life of an Object

On the mezzanine level, the exhibit style changes dramatically. Here, in the WINIKO: Life of an Object gallery, the timeline takes a backseat to the objects themselves. Composed of commissioned pieces and pieces on loan from the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), *WINIKO* works instead to tell a story with each piece. Where the pieces on display in the lower exhibit (*OKLA HOMMA*) work to accent and punctuate, here, they are the main draw. Displayed over multiple sections, these pieces, while demonstrating exquisite craftsmanship, were never intended to represent peak moments in the civilizations they came from. Rather, they are personal items. Children’s shoes, baby carriers, and ceremonial belts are reminders of the lives they once belonged to. In the WINIKO gallery, the experience transcends time. It is easy to visualize a small baby on the carrying board, a man holding the intricately carved staff, and a young woman wearing a hand-sewn skirt.

Interactive exhibits are not just limited to the first floor either. WINIKO punctuates each section of the exhibit with an archway with hidden panels that visitors must literally uncover to take in all the information. Of course, like on the first level, not everything in this exhibit inspires happiness. More than a few of the panels display gut-wrenching photos of human remains, a reminder of the dark origins of Native Americans in museums. In years past, Native Americans were relegated to the subject of anthropology, not necessarily history. It was this distinction that facilitated an environment where Native Americans were studied and displayed as an animal would be, with some exhibits including skeletal remains. It is the same past that the exhibit curators

³ Heather Ahtone (Choctaw/Chickasaw Nation), email interview with author, March 24, 2022.

intended to move away from. Respect and collaboration with Native American peoples in regard to the items on display represent an overdue revolution in the world of museum curation. In some cases, where curation staff and tribal authorities determined it necessary, there are empty display stands with item descriptions. In compliance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, which prohibits holdings or collections which may include Native American remains or culturally sensitive pieces, some items in the Smithsonian collection were curated for this exhibit but kept from display in a show of respect. This small but significant step is a complete turnaround from museum practices common even fifty years ago.

The exhibit takes visitors on a circular path symbolizing the familiar circular patterns of Native life and the life of the objects on display. Where below visitors rode a wave of Native American history presented in a vibrant and immersive fashion, here the exhibit style is more subdued making for a quieter viewing which suits its intentions well. Those intentions are to, first and foremost, celebrate Native American peoples and culture while demonstrating respect by seeking permission first instead of displaying sacred items as though Native American cultures are from a bygone era. Treating these items with respect and not as relics lends itself to the education of visitors in a more comprehensive manner rather than merely imparting neutral or objective facts.

Final Review

As a whole, the FAM functions as an immersive and educational “living” museum. I use “living” here as an acknowledgment of the intentions of the museum’s creators as conveyed by Cultural Affairs Director Ahtone, who stated,

Our story is not disconnected from our relationships across the continent. So telling ‘our’ story was both complex and emotional for every one of us because

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of the scope and the personal responsibility we each carried on behalf of our families and communities.⁴

⁴ Heather Ahtone (Choctaw/Chickasaw Nation), email interview with author, March 24, 2022.

Author Bio

Michael Chavez is a recent graduate of California State University, San Bernardino where he earned his master's degree in history in 2022. He previously earned his bachelor's degree from California State University, San Bernardino in 2019 and also holds a Museum Studies Certification from California State University, San Bernardino due to his concentration on the museum profession. Specializing in collections management and curation, Michael has had professional internships with the March Field Air Museum and Dorothy Ramon Learning Center, to name a few. He is not only a student of Native American history; he also proudly traces his ancestry back to the Tongva of the Los Angeles Basin who were among the tribes in servitude at Mission San Gabriel and are commonly referred to as "Gabrielinos."

Michael currently resides in the city of Pomona, ancestral lands of the Tongva, with his wife Sasha who earned her bachelor of arts degree in communications from the University of La Verne in 2019. Michael and his wife are expecting their newborn son in May 2022. It is his hope that this project will open the doors of curiosity for many readers, encouraging them to learn more about the history of California and raise awareness about the current struggle of many tribes who lack federal recognition, like the Tongva, currently residing on their ancestral homelands in the California.



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