A MUSEUM ODYSSEY
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Prolog:
An upside down Medusa head submerged in water at the bottom of a Roman column. A
garden of the ‘three sisters’ of corn, squash and beans. The brightest of blues between
sea and sky. A living bridge. Glittering gold of antiquity. Rooms full of petrified
corpses. A beloved president’s family outhouse. An unforgettable painting. These are
sights I have beheld in a four-year journey through museums around the world. The
journey was challenging and exciting, perplexing and thought provoking. Allow me to
share it with you.

PART I
Introduction
The subject of this essay is the museum. First, I will describe my experiences with actual
museums. Along the way, I will attempt to critically examine various features of
particular museums and then museums in general. I shall not attempt to precisely define
‘museum’ in all its variations and types. Some scholars may wish to distinguish among
museum, collection and exhibit, placing the latter two phenomena under the roof of the
museum building. Any avid museumgoer knows well enough that not all collections are
housed and that not all museums are physical buildings. Thus, I will describe some
exhibits without regard for the larger museum or other context in which they were held.
To be sure, exhibit is a slippery concept that can slide in many directions especially into
the world of merchandise.

Scope
I will mainly limit my critical discussion to the museums I visited from September, 2004,
through January, 2008, (although there may be references to other times and places). The
rationale for this time period is that it was my attendance at the opening of the National
Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC, in September, 2004, that inspired
me to enroll in a course on the subject of museology immediately thereafter. The series
of lectures and readings that comprised that course offered a critical perspective on
museums. It suggested ways of looking beyond the content of the collection to evaluate
features of museums such as their presentation, information devices, physical facility,
provenance and accessibility. The new National Museum of the American Indian
(NMAI) was the subject of some discussion in that museology course and I thus had
ample opportunity to retrospectively re-examine the NMAI through its filters. This
museum will be one major focus of my essay. First though, I wish to provide a personal
historical context of museum-going in order to establish any claim I might have as a museum connoisseur.

**Personal history, early days: Embracing the Museum Experience**
The chronicle of my journey through museums is a long one, the beginning of which is lost in the early days of my childhood in the company of my parents. I can recall at the age of eight that we ‘toured’ the insides of a tiny submarine, permanently moored in Groton, Connecticut. Although I retain only a few visual images from that visit—of net sleeping hammocks and of gunmetal colors, I can feel the claustrophobic crowdedness to this day. Other family sallies into museum rooms and halls of less dramatic proportions have become so integrated into my being that I can summon up only fragments of things behind glass and in frames on walls. Clearer museum memories date from my college years on the East Coast during which I often visited the great art museums of New York City. A college friend who dabbled in art introduced me to the world of Happenings and the “modern art” that was taking place in NY in the 1960s. That’s when and where I saw and heard about Robert Rauschenberg and other ‘modern’ artists of the time.

It was during my five-year sojourn in Europe and Turkey when in my mid-twenties that I began to truly devour museums. In Paris, London, Rome, Venice, Florence, Naples, Munich, Moscow, Athens, various Greek islands, Istanbul and Turkey I visited hundreds of museums in all their fabulous settings: grand halls, palaces, towers, cathedrals, castles and ruins. I was amused to find art work exhibited even on beaches as, for example, during the 1964 Venice Biennale. There, I saw that my earlier NY ‘discovery,’ Robert Rauschenberg, had won the top prize in painting— the first American to do so. (I will return to those beaches of Venice later in my discussion.) In my travels through Turkey and Greece, I was able to visit ongoing archaeological excavations and watch as artifacts were dug up and dragged out of thousand-year slumbers before they found their way into anyone’s collection.

At that time in my life, my visits to art exhibitions and museums were motivated by an eager curiosity to soak up Culture, the Classics and the Ancient Past. I often spent hours in a given museum, sketching, noting new discoveries and pleasing images. I was focused entirely on their contents, giving little thought to issues of presentation, setting or provenance. The museum was tutor, revealer of world treasures, of the exotic, the beautiful. I embraced, in other words, the traditional mission of museums (similar to libraries) of educating the populace about the Great Works of Mankind. Nevertheless, it should be said in passing that a small seed of discontent was sown while I was in Athens, standing atop the Acropolis in all its crumbling glory. While there I learned about (from a guide? in a nearby museum?) the “Elgin marbles” issue that involved the theft in the 19th century of parts of the Parthenon by Lord Elgin of Britain. It was said that if one wanted to see the Parthenon’s treasures, one needed to go to the British Museum in London. I vaguely recall vowing never to do so.

**Personal History, later days: Questioning the Museum Experience**
After my return from Europe to attend graduate school in central Illinois, my days spent in museums were fewer and further between. And, the kind and quality of museums I
visited in my travels throughout the United States differed drastically from the European variety, especially when in the company of youthful family members. In America the states with warm climates feature open-air and nature-related collections aimed at children. These and other ‘educational’ museums may be integrated into theme parks. In general, many tourist attractions—ranging from Death Valley in California to the Hoover Dam in Nevada to the Indiana Dunes have some kind of museum or small exhibit featuring local flora, fauna, found artifacts, etc. So the average tourist can pop in and out of museums just about everywhere. Abundant in the states west of the Mississippi River are quirky, ragtag assemblages of things ranging from petrified dinosaur tracks to critters made out of corncobs. Signs advertise them as museums although many of them have a ‘side show, two-headed calf’ feel to them. They are all aimed at encouraging travelers to stop, look and possibly to buy. In the West as well as in the Southeast, there are many roadside collections of American Indian crafted materials, some in exhibits and some for sale. Many of these collections contain what Indians call “Hong Kong” jewelry— that is, goods manufactured abroad to resemble American Indian crafts. Evidently road travelers find them attractive enough to buy, however dissimilar they may be to genuine Indian-crafted goods.

How is it that I might be able to discern the genuine in American Indian materials? Through my graduate degree program in Anthropology, I became a scholar of American Indian cultures and concerns, living among three different Indian communities and visiting dozens more in the 1970s and 80s. As a participant member of these communities, I learned how many things were made and I was taught to bead and sew leather clothing. More importantly, I was guided in the aspects of non-material culture—the values and philosophies by which people live—that are difficult to capture in concrete terms or to display for the non-Indian. I appreciated this difficulty when I was asked (after completing a degree in Library and Information Science) in 1997 to create an exhibit in the main display areas of the Library of the University of Illinois. The purpose of this exhibit was to showcase the library’s collection of books on American Indians. My aim became more ambitious. I hoped to reveal some elements of the thinking and cosmologies of Indian peoples by displaying not what others had written about them but, rather, what they had written and enacted about themselves. I filled massive backboards and nine display cases with the creations of Indian people: their words, their artwork, their music, their performances in theater and film. It was a cogent introduction to the challenges entailed in adequately depicting culture outside of its lived state.

And, it was because of my involvement in the lives of American Indians that I began, in the 1980s, to follow the issue of repatriation and reburial as it unfolded in various Indian organizations and communities. This issue was introduced to the University of Illinois community in the mid-1980s by Jan Hammil, an Indian legal advocate. An early spokesperson for the repatriation movement, she argued for the removal of Indian bones from the archaeology lab at this University and from museums that exhibited the contents of burial mounds such as at Cahokia and at the former Dickson farm in Lewiston, Illinois. In order to see an example for myself, I made the four-hour drive to the Dickson Mound Museum at the edge of the Illinois River. In the 1920s, a member of the Dickson family starting digging into a large complex of burial chambers under a mound of earth on their
farmland. Eventually, a protective building was erected over the opened graves and it was labeled ‘museum.’ As I recall, at the time of my visit it was comprised of a large space in which visitors moved along an elevated walkway to view in the soil below many scores of recumbent skeletons and their attendant artifacts. The trenched-out furrows of dirt were crowded with the skeletal remains of people of all ages in what looked like family units. Even in the presence of detailed cultural information (the presence of which I don’t recall) the display was too unsavory to be a positive educational experience. Eventually, I was an eyewitness to the beginning of the end of this museum. It subsequently reopened, however.

In 1991, after years of unheeded requests to have the Dickson Museum closed, a group of Indians decided on more dramatic action. Armed with shovels and a video camera, they caravanned from Champaign to the museum. Inside the museum, amidst the commotion of exhortations and weeping, an Indian young man leapt over the walkway railing with shovel in hand and began to throw loose soil over the exposed skeletons. The museum closed. Subsequently, after months of debate up to the level of the state legislature, the incumbent governor of Illinois could not reach a decision on whether or not to close the museum. It was left to the succeeding governor to do so in 1992 but with the understanding that it could eventually reopen sans skeletons. The patience with which our nation’s First Peoples have struggled for change should amaze us all. For more than three decades I have observed their painstaking efforts to write their own history, to speak for themselves, to define and shape their identities.

**Personal History, Contemporary Days: Embracing One Museum**

Approximately eight years after the closing of the Dickson Mounds Museum, I learned that a major museum dedicated to American Indian culture was being built in the nation’s capitol. Once I was persuaded that Indian people would have a strong impact and influence on the content of this facility, I became a ‘charter member’ of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) by donating a modest sum of money to the building fund. I was thereby periodically updated on the progress of the NMAI through several newsletters and magazines. Further, my son and I, inspired by the promise of this museum to further the understanding of Indian culture, purchased a tiny space on an ‘honor wall’ where our names would be inscribed. In the fall of 2004, I was able to attend the weeklong festivities of the grand opening of this museum. On the first day of the Opening Week, there was a long procession of thousands of tribal peoples from throughout the Americas. In their finest regalia, they danced-marched along the Mall (a wide, grassy area stretching for more than a mile between the Lincoln Memorial and the Capitol Building) to the dedication platform across from the museum. I joined in this procession, alongside of the delegates from the tribe into which I had been ritually adopted many years before.

Throughout the following week I delighted in the unforgettable sight of thousands of people in native attire strolling through the streets, subways and stores of Washington, DC. For that week, the Mall was filled with massive tents and open-air circles ringed with bleachers and hay bale seats for the continual performances of dance, song and storytelling by native peoples. At night, famous Indian performers entertained large
audiences on a stage at the end of the Mall. These venues were interlaced with food stands selling favorite Indian fare such as fry bread. And, of course, there was a market for the sale of Indian crafts from many American countries. Washington, DC was turned into --or, had at last been returned to-- ‘Indian Country.’ Even without the museum, those warm and sunny days filled with such events would have been profoundly moving and important for this city. However, without the museum, native peoples from three continents would not have assembled there. Further, I would have to say, without the intense participation by native peoples in the design and curation of the museum, these peoples would not have made the long journey from the tip of South America up to the far reaches of Canada, Alaska and Hawaii to share in its dedication.

Fortunately, my scheduled date for admission to the museum wasn’t until the middle of Opening Week. Had it been otherwise, I might not have spent so much time exploring the exterior aspects of the museum. Without even entering the building or viewing “the collection,” many elements of Indian cosmology are abundantly evident on its outer sides. Briefly stated, it is the idea now familiar to many Americans, of being in harmony with the natural forces with which we co-exist. The design and ochre color of the building is compelling. Its jutting, curving ledges resemble the sandstone cliffs of southwestern canyons and like them appear golden when struck by the sun. The building does not stand in stony silence and isolation. Rather, on all sides its exterior surface is caressed by water cascading over rocks into pools, by trees and plants representing diverse ecological areas, by a “three sisters” crop garden of corn, beans and squash and by “grandfather rocks” imported from the outer reaches of the Americas’ cardinal points. Carved out of one side of the museum, there is a small theater niche for story telling. Just outside the entrance to the museum, there is an astral configuration carved into the granite floor that marks the date on which the congressional legislation authorizing the museum was passed. Had I never gone inside the building, I would have been content with just the experience of this outside space, which was designed by a Navajo landscape artist. For me, it was---however exterior---the heart of the museum and I believe that any evaluation of this museum should start and end within its gardens and waters.

It must be evident then, that I went to the National Museum of the American Indian full of opinions, biases and a fair degree of knowledge. And, I was equally filled with hope and joyful anticipation. Not only was I a seasoned museumgoer at this stage of my life, I was well versed in many aspects of Indian history and contemporary culture. What I was not full of were the opinions of museum critics and prognosticators of whose existence I was completely unaware in that week in September. Indeed, having been out of the country in the six weeks immediately preceding the Opening, I had little opportunity to hear any American news, let alone newspaper articles about museum openings. Thus, my impressions of the museum’s interior space and its exhibits were uninfluenced by anyone or anything other than my own analytical nature. Before describing these impressions, however, I would like to take a rather lengthy detour in this essay-- out of DC and eventually out of the country-- before I circle back to Washington and the National American Indian Museum.

**Understanding museums with new eyes: instruction and criticism.**
My audible enthusiasm for the NMAI was somewhat dampened once I began attending a University museology course in the months following its opening. Only then did I learn that there are professional museum critics and that said critics had written negative evaluations of the NMAI in the major east coast newspapers. Additionally, I learned that some guest lecturers of the course felt that the museum had significant failures (notwithstanding the fact that none of them had yet been to it). Before singing the praises of the NMAI then, I decided to review my impressions of it in the light of our course readings and discussions. As the course continued, it became clear to me that any evaluation I might make of museums could benefit from the insight of the professionals who curate collections, mount exhibits, manage the physical facility and theorize about the concept of ‘museum’. I had to entertain the possibility that the positive biases I carried with me to the opening of the NMAI had clouded my judgment as to the ‘success’ of the museum. I also had to try to view this museum through the eyes of the visitor who did not have the wealth of information and knowledge about native peoples that I had been privileged to acquire.

The way to accomplish these goals became apparent to me during the semester I was taking the museology course and evolved naturally in the months succeeding its completion. This began in the Semester Break week when I was invited to visit old friends in Paris. Going to museums when in Paris is akin to breathing and in one week I was fortunate enough to be able to visit four museums—two in Paris and also two in Brussels. In only a matter of weeks after my return from France, there was a major museum opening close at hand in Springfield, Illinois—the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum. Before I knew it, I was off and running down the Museum Trail once again. Now, however, my sallies into museums were less about collections content and more about the hows, whys and wherefores of everything surrounding that content. No longer a naïve museum visitor, I began to apply some of the criteria I had been reading about in our course articles. These are the principles of museology that I tried to keep in mind. They are mutually interdependent:

- presentation: how the collection is organized and laid out; lighting, spacing, seating
- information provision: size, lighting, placement of signs, plaques, titles; augmentation devices such as headsets, etc.
- physical access: ease of movement through spaces, space for equipment for special needs, including wheelchairs, walkers, canes, baby strollers; provisions for those with impaired hearing and vision.
- provenance: the history of acquisition and origins of items in the collection: often difficult to ascertain, may be reliant on deep scholarly knowledge and obscured. Although it is at the heart of the museum’s being and critically important, I have the least to offer on provenance since I did not research any of the collections.

My investigative style does not entail starting with this or any other checklist. Rather, I like to allow myself to be enveloped by an experience and then retrospectively critique it. Another guilty secret is that I rarely read the visitor guides/brochures before or even during my museum going. I find it to be distracting, distancing and influencing. I very much enjoy reading them after the fact, to see how well they reflect the collection and
how they augment my appreciation of it. Some of the limitations of this approach are revealed in the accounts below. Furthermore, I hasten to point out that I have not been a genuinely systematic researcher of museums during the past four years nor did I anticipate writing about these experiences. These largely casual museum visits were undertaken in part to provide me with a comparative framework with which to further my understanding of the National Museum of the American Indian as museum. They were also made because my dormant love of museums had been reawakened during my visit to DC. While I found this contrasting and comparing of museums enlightening, I was not finding apt points of comparison between any particular one and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). Until, that is, once again in Paris I encountered the newly opened Branly Museum. Then I knew that that was the one. But let me not get ahead of my story.

During the museum trekking described below, I had (except for the NMAI) slight, if any, good information about them because I rarely planned the visits ahead of time. When I did plan a visit to special exhibits (BodyWorlds, Lincoln Museum, King Tut, Cezanne), it was in response to media advertising about them, which contained only general remarks on collection contents. Therefore, I was reliant on whatever information each museum/exhibit provided onsite for visitors. At present, however, many museums are expanding their Internet presence, and some of the newest ones (NMAI, the Branly, Miniaturk) provide sophisticated glimpses into their collections. This information was not as readily available to me during the first three years of my museum sojourn as it now is. I will, therefore, supplement the information I obtained at the actual museums with that which I subsequently and recently acquired online. This entails some time travel tugging on the mind of both writer and reader since the museum experience may precede Internet/research-based insights by as much as three years.

An important note before starting our journey: there is an aspect of museum going that was little addressed in our course, that of serendipity or accidental discovery. This “ah ha!” experience is the joyful nugget of a pleasing image, a curious fact, a ‘new’ artist to which we are exposed by virtue of just being there, wandering, musing, perusing. And the serendipitous moment might carry forward into our lives as we encounter more phenomena related to the beginning event. But this is nearly impossible to study since it is incorporated into the realm of private knowledge. In the four-year trek described below, I have experienced several instances of extended serendipity that I can only now recount, in retrospect. The most remarkable example of it started in the very first museum I approached analytically, our local University’s Krannert Art Museum. That particular serendipitous moment unfolded over a year and across two continents. I shall call it for reasons soon apparent the “Blue Factor.” In the following museum descriptions, I indicate extended serendipity with “[ES]” and they are the instances when a serendipitous moment reached beyond the museum in which it began. The “Blue Factor,” is the most compelling of my several [ES] moments.

I regret that my time frame does not include museums that I visited in 2003 because they and their settings are memorable: Death Valley in California, the Liberace museum in Las Vegas, the Cahokia Mounds in East St. Louis, the Gateway to the West exhibit in the
Arch in St. Louis are examples. But a trek has to stop somewhere. Below is the list of the approximately three-dozen exhibits/museums I examined between September 2004 and January 2008.

**Fall, 2004**
National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC [opening] (To be discussed last)

**Spring, 2005**
Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois: Champaign, IL
The Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium
Fine Arts Museum: Brussels, Belgium
Picasso Museum: Paris, France
Georges Pompidou Modern Art Museum: Paris, France
Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum: Springfield, IL [opening]
Lincoln Home, National Historic Site, Springfield, IL

**Summer, 2005**
BodyWorlds Exhibit, Museum of Science & Industry: Chicago, IL

**Fall, 2005**
Dorothy Buell Memorial Visitor Center, Indiana Dunes State Park: Michigan City, Indiana
Old Lighthouse Museum: Michigan City, Indiana

**Winter, 2006**
Fine Arts Museum: St. Louis, Missouri

**Spring/Summer, 2006**
Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art: Nice, France
Maeght Foundation, Saint Paul, France
Cezanne Exhibit, Granet Museum: Aix en Provence, France
Branly Anthropological Museum: Paris, France [opening]
Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs, in The Field Museum: Chicago, IL
Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum: Special Exhibit on First Ladies: Springfield, IL [2nd visit]
Illinois State Museum: Springfield, IL
Funerary Museum: Springfield, IL
Lincoln’s Tomb: Springfield, IL

**Fall, 2006**
Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum: Springfield, IL [3rd visit]

**Summer, 2007**
Fine Arts Museum: Boston, MA
Winter, 2007-8: Istanbul, Turkey
Miniaturk; Museum of Victory, Museum of Crystals
Hagia Sofia Museum
Basilica Cistern
Istanbul Modern (Fine Arts Museum)
Dolmabağçe Palace Museum
Military Museum
Topkapi Palace Museum
Archaeology Museum
Tiled Pavilion Museum
Great Palace Mosaics Museum
Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts

PART II
The 2005 - 2008 Years: Museum Exploration
I will describe selected aspects of the museums/exhibits I evaluated in these four years, highlighting salient discoveries of each.

[End of excerpt.]