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Museums in African American, Native American, Jewish and Immigrant Communities in the United States. From the Melting Pot to Cultural Diversity

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Introduction. American society is frequently defined by its diversity. The population of the U.S. is an extraordinary mix of nearly every ethnic group and race found on earth. Each group has brought its own language, customs, traditions, music, dance, food, and religion. The attitude in this country over the past thirty years is that all of this enriches the social structure. Originally American society was defined primarily by the European values imported by the original immigrants in the 1600s with a little derived from the lesser indigenous Native American heritage. What can be seen as a schizophrenia of identity has been reflected in the museums of the United States since its founding. The art and history represented the mainstream majority European heritage. The artists displayed, the milestones achieved, and the individuals who drove the nation reflected this heritage; the audiences who visited these institutions were most frequently members of the majority society. Art and history museums in the United States until the latter decades of the twentieth centuries marginalized the contributions of non-white artists.

As part of the Americanization movement of the early decades of the twentieth century, several expositions of arts and artifacts, music, dance and sports found in immigrant communities were staged in cities across the United States. While raising levels of pride among participating community members, these temporary displays were meant to show the remnants of culture that would be shed as the immigrants became part of the American melting pot. Then from the mid1970s to the 1990s, the focus of many institutions was turned toward recognizing over a century of socio-cultural contributions by non-white members of society. Public funding for arts and humanities programs in these communities burgeoned. Growing affluence in these communities was recognized as a potential funding source by mainstream museums. The twenty-first century shows a growing number of single ethnic museums with concerns towards collections management, interpretation, staff training and the ever puzzling source of funding.

This paper reflectively examines the development of ethnic museums in the United States and the attitudes within the supporting communities toward their genesis. The purpose of this paper is to understand the background which led to the creation of single-ethnic group museums. Oftentimes, the formation of single-ethnic group museums was a grass roots movement seeking to solve the problems of equal representation of history, artists, and culture. Through this movement, reaching maturity at different times in different communities, not only has equity been the goal, but also community (society) involve-

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ment in some communities which had little affinity for the institution of "museum."

This paper will briefly survey some attempts and achievements of representing non-white history and cultural traditions in American museums throughout the twentieth century. The questions of what kind of museums are needed, and for what types of societies will be addressed.

1. The Melting Pot - Nostalgic Approaches

Between 1884 and 1924 the largest number of immigrants ever entered the United States seeking economic, political and religious relief. They came primarily from the European nations – east and west and the Mediterranean basin, including the failing Ottoman Empire in the Levant. Limited numbers came from Asia, Latin American and the Caribbean. They settled in communities centered on church, shops, clubs and athletic clubs in urban and rural areas; they also came as individuals. Their goal was to create a new life; the goal of their host country was to homogenize everyone into a new creation – an American. This was the great melting pot into which the greatest wave of immigration was to Americanize.

One significant, often overlooked, piece of this great movement to create a unified nation was a series of "Homelands" exhibits aimed at celebrating the differences while embracing the great assimilation process. This was a time of suspicion and misunderstanding, distrust of these different newcomers who were going to take away jobs of native-born Americans. What better way to break down these barriers than to display - through exhibits, musicales, sports events – the riches the newcomers brought with them. It was a way also to encourage the newcomers to put those riches aside while they assimilate to their new socio-cultural, economic setting. Throughout the Eastern seaboard and close-by industrial centers well into the 1930s, these displays celebrated the new diversity of the United States.[40]

There was some activity, among immigrant ethnic communities to continue this movement by establishing their own museums. The Polish Museum of America was established in 1935 as the "Museum and Archives of the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America." The establishment of this museum was an outgrowth of the World's Fair of 1939 in New York City, from which cultural displays could not be returned to Europe on the edge of war. This museum was not unique, but there were not many others.

African American Museums. The movement to create museums recognizing the contributions of African Americans seemed to coincide in several communities. This movement followed those in other communities because of the political nature of the African American community of the United States. The African American Museum of Cleveland, Ohio, and the Ebony Museum of Negro History and Art (known as the Dusable Museum since 1968) in Chicago, Illinois, two major northern, industrial cities vie for being the oldest museums of African American history in the United States.

The former was, for many years the dream of Icabod Flewellen. He established a "museum" in his home in 1953, which was incorporated in 1960. By the early 1980s, Mr. Flewellen had gained enough community support to move his not-insignificant collection to a historic neighborhood building.

Efforts to create a museum of African American history in Chicago, unlike those in Cleveland, were undertaken by a group of artists and educators in 1961. The goal was to ensure the inclusion of black history and culture in the educational process. The museum's first location was a home that later served as a boarding house for railroad workers. The present day namesake of the museum was Jean Baptist Pointe DuSable, a Haitian fur trader who was the first permanent settler in Chicago. The DuSable Museum is a community institution dedicated to serving cultural and educational needs. It is the only

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major independent institution in Chicago established to preserve and interpret the historical experiences and achievements of African-Americans.

Not long afterward, the movement emerged in Detroit with the founding of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in 1965. Their claim is that they are the world's largest institution dedicated to the African American experience.

Jewish Museums New York City's Jewish Museum, connected with the venerable Jewish Theological Seminary, was founded in 1904. Not only has the Jewish Museum taken on the role of leader of similar institutions, it also considers itself a major cultural institution for New York City and the world. Unlike most other American Jewish museums, it also considers itself an art museum exploring Jewish culture with a considerable collection of more than 28,000 objects including paintings, sculptures, works on paper, photographs, archaeological artifacts, and ceremonial objects which demonstrate Jewish identity and its evolution through visual art. It has one of the largest, most extensive collections of its kind in the Western Hemisphere.

In 1954, the American Jewish community celebrated the 300th anniversary of the arrival of the first Jews in North America. A major component of this celebration included the creation of several traveling and temporary exhibits. These exhibits focused on the national narratives of the American Jewish experience. They were staged in Jewish community centers and local history museums.

Native American Museums. For centuries, American and European museums have collected material culture from Native American communities. Native American cultural history has been shown in Natural History museums, along with the material culture of other so-called nonwestern societies. Anthropology, the study of humankind, past and present, from both cultural and biological perspectives, was felt to be best presented in this setting.

Since the late 19th century, Native American cultural life was presented in museum dioramas that created frozen anonymous scenes of life. Dioramas of this type were still wide used for the interpretation of Native American life and arts through the 1970s. As Richard Hill has written, "Since the first American museums were developed, many anthropologists have defined Indians as ethnographic beings who produce cultural artifacts rather than fine art" (Hill, 2000: 40).

The Osage Tribal Museum in Northeastern Oklahoma is the oldest continually operated tribal museum in the United States and features an extensive collection of archival photographs dating as far back as 1871, as well as documents and maps. The Museum also proudly displays a number of oil paintings of various tribal chiefs and dignitaries. Visitors can watch videos on Native American Indian arts and crafts such as Osage ribbon work, shawl-making, and beadwork. Audio tapes of the Osage language are also available.

2. Mid to late twentieth century – Emerging Identities

By the late 1970s, three impetuses influenced the emergence of interest in ethnic heritages and their contributions to the United States. First, the children and grandchildren of immigrants now secure in their identity as Americans experienced a renewed interest in their heritage. They sought to identify and revitalize some of the heritage their parents, grand and great grandparents had brought to this country. As Dorothy Weyer Creigh wrote, "This generation ... discovered ethnic culture." (Creigh 1978: 108 n.p.) Second, at this time, the United States was preparing to celebrate its Bicentennial. Immigrant groups wanted their contributions to the nation to be recognized. Exhibitions that led to the permanent establishment of museums were thought of as a way to achieve that goal over a

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long term. Finally, among some groups, especially African-American and Native American, strong political movements demanding parity were emerging at that time.

Museum associations and public funding agencies were aware of this resurgence of interest and sought to financially support quality projects. The former produced a number of publications to assist historical societies in incorporating ethnic materials into their exhibits. In 1978, The American Association of State and Local History published two Technical Leaflets providing historical societies guidelines for researching local ethnic groups and for developing activities incorporating these groups.[41] The latter made available grants which funded folk art documentation projects and ethnic history-oriented exhibits.

Institutions whose primary mission was to document and present to the public the cultural history of many American ethnic groups emerged from this movement. The Balch Institute of Ethnic Studies in Philadelphia[42] exemplified a number of research and exhibiting institutions whose focus was exclusively the contributions of hyphenated Americans to the society at large. From their documentation projected in ethnic groups in Philadelphia, the staff of the Balch produced a number of exhibits and publications.

Some emphasis was also placed on African American, Jewish American and Native American heritage and culture, in part because of the responses coming from these communities in general. Again, through the leadership of the American Association of State and Local History, several technical leaflets focused on these particular groups. In 1981, one such leaflet addressed the issue of establishing tribal museums, "a relatively new concept which developed out of a necessity of the times" (Horse Capture, 1981: n.p.). According the George F. Horse Capture, "Traditionally Indian groups had no need of museums because the culture was self-perpetuating ... they lived with their material culture and preserved knowledge of it by the oral tradition" (ibid). These three specific cultural or ethnic groups after great efforts created distinct professional organizations to serve museum professionals in ethnically oriented museums.

African American Museums. Some activity to create museums telling the story of African Americans already had begun in the 1950s and 60s. Continued strong interest, both academic and popular, in black history and culture grew at this time. Africans and people of African descent had been given short shrift in American history texts even though they had been in North America in great numbers as early as the 16th century. Following the wild success of Alex Haley's book *Roots*, interest arose not only in African American history, but also genealogy. The American Association of State and Local History published a technical leaflet guiding historical society staff on research tools useful in conducting Black genealogy.

The African American museum movement emerged during the 1950s and 1960s. The overall goal was to preserve the heritage of the Black experience and to ensure its proper interpretation in American history. Black museums instilled a sense of achievement within Black communities, while encouraging collaborations between Black communities and the broader public. Most importantly, the African American museums movement inspired new contributions to society and advanced cultural awareness.

In the late 1960s, Dr. Margaret Burroughs, founder of the DuSable Museum in Chicago, and Dr. Charles H. Wright, founder of the Museum of African American History in Detroit, initiated a series of conferences for Black museums. The National Association of Museums and Cultural Organizations and the Black Museums Conference, the first informal Black museum association, evolved from these conferences.

In 1978, a consortium of six Black museums, with funding from the National Museum Act (administered by the Smithsonian Institution), pre-

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sented a series of conferences at participating institutions. These conferences provided the opportunity for an ad hoc committee to lay the groundwork for still another organization. The Association of African American Museums (AAAM) was created to foster, protect, promote, and celebrate African and African American cultural heritage through supporting the needs of Black museums and cultural institutions. Established as the voice of the African American museums movement, the Association of African American Museums serves the needs of Black museums and cultural institutions nationwide.

Jewish Museums. Approximately forty years ago there was one noteworthy Jewish museum in the United States - the Jewish Museum in New York. Twenty years ago, seven museums gathered in Chicago to form the Council of American Jewish Museums (CAJM) under the auspices of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. They represented Jewish communities in major American cities – The Jewish Museum of New York; Yeshiva University Museum, New York; B'nai B'rith Museum, Washington, D.C.; National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia; the Spertus Museum, Chicago; the Judah L. Magnes Museum, Berkeley; the Skirball Museum, Los Angeles. Over the past thirty to forty years, museums have become central places where American Jews constitute their identity and publicly display themselves to broad audiences.

Jewish museums are a relatively new phenomenon, born at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe. In general, they were founded by acculturated Jews looking to root themselves in their landscapes as both Jews and as cosmopolitan citizens of the place in which they lived, and to display for their acculturated communities a celebratory and triumphant interpretation of the Jewish past, present, and future (see Shneer n.d.).

Native American Museums. The tribal museum movement took off in the 1960s and '70s during the time of American Indian activism which called attention to issues of tribal people and especially the need to honor tribal treaties. The question of mainstream museums as the purveyors of tribal culture, rather than the tribes themselves, arose.

Tribal museums found throughout the United States are actually based upon ancient Native American communal practices. Both sacred and patrimonial objects traditionally held great community significance. These items were kept by specialists, under special conditions, for the community's benefit. For example, in the Southwest, kivas housed collections whose use was vital to the members of the pueblo and to their sense of place in the world. The Iroquois of the Northeast, the Great Plains societies, and communities of the Pacific Northwest all followed similar practices. These "collections," however, were rarely, if ever, thought of as "museums," as the items were used at regular intervals in rituals and ceremonies.

Many Native American communities never abandoned their "museum" institutions. According to Nason, (Nason 1999: n.p.) the modern institutions that have been proliferating both derive meaning from the past and exemplify new opportunities for community enrichment and preservation.

During the later decades of the 20th century, four pilot projects were approved and constructed with federal funds to create jobs and diversify tribal economies: Yakama National Cultural Center, Makah Cultural and Research Center, both in Washington state; Seneca-Iroquois National Museum in New York, and the now-closed Native American Center for the Living Arts in Niagara Falls. The next surge came in the 1990s, particularly from 1993-95 when tribal museums were constructed in Idaho, Oregon, California, Montana, Alaska, Oklahoma and Arizona.

In 1980, The North American Indian Museum Association was organized by over 30 tribal groups nationwide. The role of tribal museums

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at that time, according to Horse Capture was to "recognize and preserve the traditional while at the same time contending with the changing social environment of the contemporary world ... the museum will ... merge into the continuing culture and become part of it" (Horse Capture, 1981: n.p.)

The emergence in interest in multiculturalism persisted through the late 1980s. As Steven D. Levine put it, because of a "...heightened worldwide interest in multicultural and intercultural issues... Groups attempting to establish and maintain a sense of community and to asset their claims in the larger world challenge the right of established institutions to control the presentation of their culture..." (Levine, 1989: 37). According to Garfield, "During the past two decades, ethnic pride has led to the establishment of many museums closely linked to their immediate communities" (Garfield, 1989: 45). In many of these communities, these museums were a direct response to the need for representational authority.

3. Twenty-first century – What is in the Future?

Single ethnic museums exist in communities other than the African-American, Jewish-American and Native American. Other programs placing emphasis on ethnic museums in the United States includes the 1999 proclamation of November 19, as Ethnic Museum Day by Illinois Governor George H. Ryan. Museums that Ryan mentioned in his proclamation recognizing "commitment in preserving ethnic history and promoting ethnic heritage, tradition and culture" were the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, the DuSable Museum of African-American History, both in Chicago, the Norwegian Norsk Museum, the Polish Museum of America, established in 1935, and other museums including the Czechoslovak Heritage Museum, Swedish American Museum, Ukrainian National Museum, Scottish American Museum, Latvian Folk Art Museum, Mesopotamia Museum, Greek Museum and Cultural Center, Italian Culture Center, Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, Danube Swabian Museum, African American Hall of Fame Museum.

As of 2003, there were at least 25 single ethnic museums in New York City, "most springing up in the surge of ethnic self-consciousness of recent decades ..." (Berger 2003, n.p.). According to Berger, as in the past these museums are grass-roots in origin, driven by community activism. Institutions he cited in New York include the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, Yeshiva University Museum, one of the founding members of the Council of American Jewish Museums, National Museum of Catholic Art and History, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, famous for its library collections as well as exhibits, Scandinavia House and the Ukrainian Museum.

Furthermore, as at the opening of the 20th century, at this historic juncture vast numbers of immigrants are again seeking new homes in the United States. They are still coming from European nations. But larger numbers are coming from Asia – India, China, Japan, Korea, Viet Nam and other nations – Latin America and Africa. These immigrants, too, are establishing neighborhoods and institutions through which they can continue to express their cultural heritage. As elsewhere in the world, the face of the United States continues to change.

African American Museums. Today there are over 260 museums across the United States that address issues related to African American culture and history. Many African American museums and libraries are in cities where last century's economic migrants are growing old and their children are scattering. Often individuals or small groups gather materials because they have a local story to tell. The challenge taken up by many of these institutions is whether or not African American history has been interpreted at its best. How effectively have recent exhibi-

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tions managed to combine new and existing historical research with an ever-changing technology, while maintaining the integrity of the individual and the story?

African American museums in the United States have been catalysts that deepen appreciation and understanding of the African American experience in art, history, and culture. They play an essential role in the creation of scholarship and serve as trusted stewards of collections.

Jewish Museums In the early twenty-first century, CAJM has a membership of about 75 professionally staffed museums and more than 100 Holocaust centers. Far from being cabinets of curiosities or warehouses of a dead civilization, Jewish museums in America are a vibrant part of contemporary culture. Along with evocative exhibits, they are filled with history, literature, and dance, rhetoric, music, film, and theater–not to speak of Torah and current affairs. Indeed, American Jewish museums are cultural centers, public forums, studios, workshops, discovery places, and sites of serious scholarship. Not only are they venues of public events, but Jewish museums across the country are also commissioning and hosting extraordinary artworks, installations, and performances. Furthermore, Jewish museums are increasingly becoming venues for non-Jews to encounter Judaism, and are exploring many aspects of inter-group relations. However, according to anecdotal evidence, most visitors to Jewish museums nationwide are Jews, except in areas with concentrations of evangelical Christians, such as Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Jewish museums, according to Shneer, "... have been the site of social positioning" (Shneer, n.d.: n.p). Through exhibits that extol the distinctiveness of Jewish culture and history, these museums show how Jews have maintained a distinct identity in America. Other exhibits emphasize the differences between Jews and other groups as a means to show the success of the American Dream and the immigrant story. Thus, contemporary American Jewish museums wrestle with questions of identity, sameness, and difference.

Native American Museums. Today, over 170 tribal museums and cultural research centers exist nationwide and many non-Native institutions have developed comprehensive consultation practices in an effort to represent a more accurate and relevant Indian history. These institutions have increased in number in recent years due, in part, to tribal concerns associated with and addressed in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). There also has been a significant increase in tribal activity related to heritage programs.

They are clustered in southern California, Alaska, Arizona, New Mexico and a steady line of them in the northern border states from Washington all the way to Maine. Tribal museums are all along the Missouri River and are at southern points in Florida, Louisiana and Texas. From coast to coast tribal libraries, archives and museums are a testament to the greater presence of Native people in this country.

Tribal museums are engaged in a whole variety of cultural programs and activities. They are educating their communities on traditional ways of life, serving as a point of pride and destination for visitors and community members alike, managing and interpreting tribal culture from tribal perspectives, encouraging the revitalization of traditional craft, language and cultural performance. Many are doing this work with limited staff and budgets and still continue to produce and to grow and many need more space, staff and resources.

Alyce Sadongei believes that "Tribal museums and cultural centers are unique in that they provide heritage education for tribes and employ Native Americans in presenting and caring for their own culture history" (Sadongei, 2005: n.p.). Tribal museums obtain their collections from a variety of sources, including some objects and collections repatriated under NAGPRA. These repositories have a wide variety of goals

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and programs, but all allow tribes to determine how they would like to use the objects, documents, and oral histories from the recent and distant past to present their culture history now and into the future.

These museums are frequently the only place to learn about history of a particular tribe and they tell the story from a tribal perspective. They perpetuate tribal culture and tradition and instill an upbeat tribal identity. They help reinforce treaty rights, exert tribal sovereignty and help hold what little some tribes still have left of their culture (McNeel, 2005: n.p.).

Conclusion

Community (ethnic) museums "demonstrate the richness of people's lives to the broader museum audiences while at the same time serving to attract museum visitors to unfamiliar cultural institutions" (Garfield 1989: 46-47). Furthermore, with the addition of responsibilities and programs, these new institutions serve to "carve out new territory in what a museum can do and be" (Garfield 1989: 45). They are no longer simply collecting institutions that then interpret their collections through exhibitions and educational programs. The nature of outreach and the definition of audience are also changing as museum programs expand.

David Fleming, Director of the National Museums of Liverpool at the International Conference on Museums and Change in late 2005, stated that "a massive change in our attitude towards audiences, which might best be described as one of total inclusion, that is of all the public, not just a narrow sector. It is this change in attitude that has given rise to a new approach to our work, most especially in collecting, exhibiting, promotion, advocacy and partnership, learning and helping effect social change" (Fleming, 2005: n.p.).

Self-preservation through two parallel and unconnected forces is the goal of this fundamental change in museums. The first force, according to Fleming is the ongoing democratization of our profession. What was formerly a group dominated by a socio-economic elite and primarily male in character now has opened to individuals from a variety of socio-cultural groups and women. The second force in action is a new focus on broadening audiences and outreach to a wider membership base.

Note

[40] See Eaton, *Immigrant Gifts to American Life*.
[41] See attached bibliography for a sampling of these publications.
[42] The Balch Institute of Ethnic Studies merged with the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 2002.

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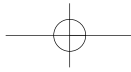
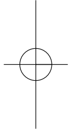
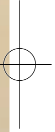
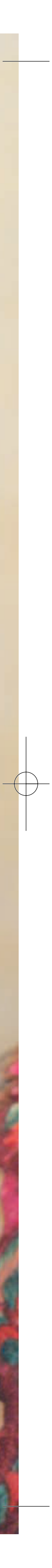
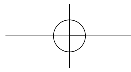

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