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EXHIBITION REVIEW

Pain and Perseverance on Display at the First Americans Museum

The new museum is the first to put indigenous voices completely in control of telling their story.



An exhibition at the First Americans Museum

PHOTO: JAMES PEPPER HENRY

By Judith H. Dobrzynski

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Oklahoma City

Oklahoma occupies a unique place in American history. It is home to more Native American nations than any other state, but that didn't happen naturally. In the 1800s, the federal government drove 67 tribes from their ancestral homelands into the area then known as the Oklahoma and Indian territories—from the Ottawa in the North and the Delaware in the East to the Seminole in the South and the Modoc in the West. By Oklahoma statehood in 1907, 39 remained—and 39 remain today. Only four (the Caddo, Plains Apache, Tonkawa and Wichita) originally lived on this land; four others came seasonally or to hunt.

Slices of their story, which is by no means monolithic, have been told by other museums. But, until the opening in September of the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City,

never have indigenous voices completely controlled the narrative. Led by director James Pepper Henry, a member of the Kaw nation, senior curator heather ahtone, of the Chickasaw nation, and a Native American curatorial team, the museum presents a rich, even-keeled version of this complicated, contested history, one that they say was intended neither to romanticize nor to antagonize.

One core exhibition, “Okla Homma,” which means “red people” in Choctaw, begins at the very beginning. In a small theater, a 15-minute video loop illustrates the origin stories of the Pawnee, Euchee, Caddo and Otoe-Missouria tribes. These animated tales, projected on a surround screen, resemble other creation narratives. The Pawnees, for example, believe in a creator-god named “Tirawa,” who pierced the darkness by making stars, then went on to create the sun, the earth and its creatures. Told with engaging stylized drawings, the videos come enchantingly alive.

In subsequent spaces, visitors wend their way through a historical chronicle that reaches back to about 10,000 B.C., when Clovis and Folsom peoples hunted buffalo in Oklahoma, and moves forward to modern times, when Native American “warriors” have served in the armed forces and starred in various sports. With event milestones and explanatory displays, important moments unfold on one side of the elongated galleries. On the opposite side, historical tales and traditions are humanized, sometimes related verbally by descendants and sometimes in pictures, artworks, flipbooks and displays.

The 1830 Indian Removal Act, which forced the relocation of tribes located east of the Mississippi River, and the Dawes Act, which broke up reservations and coerced cultural assimilation into white society, are the painful nadirs. They are brought to life by heart-rending first-person video stories: One Apache man describes the dehumanizing fate of his grandfather, who was held by American forces as a prisoner of war for 27 years.

A lot is packed into these galleries, too much to be taken in at once. But there’s a plus to the density. The varied kinds of display (videos, audio recordings, placards, artifacts, artworks, interactives) that repeat a tale or provide parallel stories offer multiple paths to learning about this history.

Moreover, here and there, the museum has inserted thoughtful grace notes. The origins-story theater fits into a space that, on the outside, resembles a curved black Caddo pot, decorated with a swirling rust-colored design symbolizing the sky, water and the earth, by Jeri Redcorn, a Caddo/Potawatomi. Inside, some seats look like boulders—natural resting places. Elsewhere, visitors can step into three “moving fire” circles—which honor

the way glowing embers were transported during removal—to hear stories, as if they were gathered around a campfire.



Edward Red Eagle Jr. next to his great grandfather's traditional Osage coat

PHOTO: JAMES PEPPER HENRY

A floor above, the other core exhibition, called “Winiko: Life of an Object,” displays about 140 items, most on long-term loan from the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian. But not just any objects. Each of the 39 tribes was invited to select at least three to represent them—many had been taken from them (or sold by them) and were now returning home. In nine cases, following research, the objects were “reunited” with descendants of the original owner—families were allowed to spend time with the items. An embroidered black coat, used on ceremonial occasions by Edward Red Eagle, an Osage chief, has been seen by his great grandson, for example, and a beaded breechcloth with symbols representing man, buffalo and an eagle, which had been sold by its Iowa owner for \$8 in 1910, was reunited with 12 descendants.

While they are emblems of cultural loss, many are beautiful. A hide calendar painted by a Kiowa named Silver Horn portrays men and their horses engaged in a historical event. A hooded baby’s coat, trimmed in lynx and incorporating ears, eyes and a tail, illustrates Comanche dress. Moccasins, vests, drums, bags, baskets, vessels and more—examples are all here. And in one corner, behind cabinet doors, pictures of skulls on shelves, showing the “bone rooms” that housed human remains for study by anthropologists and doctors, often intended to help them assert white superiority.

The First Americans Museum has a few faults. For one, visitors would likely appreciate more information about the objects in “Winiko.” For another, in the desire to convey the

common experience of indigenous Americans, the distinctions among the nations are largely lost. Yet this museum does a great service: Visitors may depart with sorrow, but also with gratitude for learning a history lesson that should be better known.

—*Ms. Dobrzynski writes about art for the Journal and other publications.*



Exhibition at the museum

PHOTO: JAMES PEPPER HENRY