

WHY WE NEED THE MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAS

by Andy Florez

Why do we need the Museum of the Americas?

We need the Museum of the Americas in order to save Native American culture(s).

Why should we want to save Native American culture (s)?

We should want to for a number of reasons:

1. Because they, as humans in the family of man deserve and have the equal right to live and prosper.
2. To know and understand ourselves, as only one society among many in the global community, better.
3. Probably the greatest reason that resonates with any right-thinking person, is the fact that without the great sacrifices of the American Indians through loss of life, land and liberty, Euro-Americans would not be enjoying the quality of life they do today, and be in control of the richest and most powerful nation in the world. And, that because of these unprecedented sacrifices, America **just plain owes it to the Indians** to help save what is left of their way of life. This is the point that will be expanded upon in this brief essay.

North Americans currently enjoy the highest living standard in the world of First World nations. As hard as this may be to accept, it happened quite by accident! It was a curse and a blessing depending on which side of the Atlantic you lived on at the end of the 15th century. There were the winners (the Europeans), who enjoyed a windfall social-economic profit previously unknown in history, and there were the losers (the Indians), who experienced a social catastrophe on an equal scale.

Of course, this isn't the way we have been taught the history of the USA and the other Americas. Stories of the dominance of Europeans through their cultural superiority are the paradigms we are most familiar with, or how great Old World civilizations: English, French, Spanish, Dutch and others, brought their cultural benefits and bestowed them upon the heathen, savage, barbarians of the Americas. Metallurgy, writing, new types of domesticated animals, ocean-going ships, and most significantly, the one, true faith, under which all others are clearly shown to be ill-conceived and false, are examples.

The matter of metallurgy needs to be more closely examined. Cultures on both sides of the Atlantic practiced metallurgy, and noted experts in the field currently think iron resulted by accident during the process of copper smelting when it mixed with other minerals.¹ Both Old and New World cultures smelted copper, along with bronze, gold and silver. It should also be remembered that even with the use of metal, lithic or stone technology: arrowheads, spearpoints, axes, etc. did not immediately disappear. They coexisted for thousands of years with metal tools. This is easily proven through recovered archaeological evidence.

¹ Rosen, Steven, Ph.D., *Personal Communication*, Department of Archaeology, UCLA, 2000.

Writing was not new to the Americas either, and it should be remembered that writing is a *Western* standard of civilization, and certainly not necessary for the development of advanced and sophisticated stratified societies. Probably the best example of this is the Inca civilization of South America. They used a system of recording known as *kipu*, or a series of colored stringed knots of differing lengths, designs and sizes. This method could account for infinitely-detailed quantities and qualities of goods, taxes, census data, and other administrative matters. It is thought that *kipu*'s utility extended even to recording writing such as poetry. However, because they were virtually all destroyed by the invading Europeans and no explanation of their use was preserved, unraveling the data of the surviving few examples is an ongoing, but painstaking effort.

The best known writing culture in the Americas is the Maya of Mexico and Central America. It was previously thought that their glyphs were only for recording astronomical phenomena, or mathematical data, but now that their writing system is 85% deciphered, it has been shown to be fully phonetic; they could write any word for a sound that the human mouth could make. Regarding mathematics, they developed the revolutionary concept of zero, and this was accomplished over a 1000 years before the Moslems and Jews would do it in Cordoba, Spain in the 14th century. The importance of the concept of zero is clearly seen in the binary system (1's and 0's) of today's computer software. It would be hard-pressed to operate without this component. Unfortunately, all the Mayan books except 3 known survivors, were destroyed by invading Europeans. In their infinite wisdom, they saw them as works of the devil whose influence needed to be extirpated, and much to the horror of the Maya, they readily burned them.

Architecture, the plastic arts, and complex political administration are better standards by which to judge the hallmarks of civilization, and the Aztec, Inca, and Maya, as well as the Mississippian and Iroquois cultures can more than satisfy that criteria. At the time of European arrival, there existed no Old World parallels for the sophistication of American cultures on the scale of the Aztec Maya or Inca empires. The Aztec of central Mexico encompassed a population of 25 million, whose capital, Tenochtitlan (present-day Mexico City) left the Europeans breathless upon seeing it for the first time; many written accounts attest to this event. Its masonry buildings, avenues, canals and market place that drew 60,000 people daily, literally astounded the Europeans to remark at its greatness and question if in fact, they were not just dreaming.² The full extent of the Inca empire, if overlain on the Old World, would stretch from Sweden to Egypt, and it had a system of roads that remained the world's standard until the advent of the automobile in the 20th century. The quality of Aztec, Maya and Incan architecture was equal to any which may have existed in the Old World at that time or in their past.³

In North America, the Mississippian cultures, best exemplified by the site of Cahokia near the Mississippi River as it passes by St. Louis, Missouri, has a pyramid,

² Diaz, Bernal, *The Conquest Of New Spain*, translated by J.M. Cohen, Penguin Books, New York, N.Y., 1963.

³ Brady, James, Ph. D., *Personal Communication*, Department of Archaeology, UCLA, 2001.

known as Monk's Mound, whose base is larger than those of the pyramids at Giza. It is fully man-made, and reflects a society that practiced: intensive agriculture capable of sustaining an enormous population, metallurgy, a complex religious-political system of administration, and was in contact with other groups as far away as central Mexico.⁴ There is no question that although Native Americans were finally given official recognition in 1987 by the U. S. government for their contribution to the development of the Constitution of the United States⁵, this fact remains unknown to most Americans. The Constitution of the United States comes from the Articles of Confederation, the Articles of Confederation comes from the Albany Plan, and the Albany Plan comes from the Iroquois Confederacy of the five, later six tribes, that occupied the present-day Northeastern part of the USA.⁶

The fact that Columbus had ships that could traverse the high seas should not be overstated as proof that European maritime capabilities were far and away beyond those of American coastal cultures. The Maya also had very large, high-bowed boats with sails that could ply the waters of the open ocean, and there is some evidence that pre-Columbian Americans did reach Europe. It should be remembered that on that morning in August, 1492 when the crowd on the dock waved goodbye as those 3, relatively small, Spanish ships pulling out of port, they never expected to see them again. Not only was Columbus extremely lucky that he had actually made it to land, but until his dying day, he was convinced that he had reached Asia. So, he didn't know where he was going, and when he got there, he didn't know where he was. If he had not reached land and never returned to Europe, would others there be as eager to try also. Or would they have waited long enough to possibly be paid a visit by Native Americans sailing east?

During the period of colonization, the greed for gold, land and resources, Christianity, along with the truly big cause - Old World diseases, can be credited as the greatest destructive forces affecting Native Americans and their continued presence on the planet. Shortly after the "discovery" of the New World by Europeans (remember it was a very ancient world to Native Americans), by the Treaty of Tordesillas, the Pope divinely ordered the division of the Americas between the Spanish and the Portuguese; never mind that they were fully occupied and not his to give. This was acceptable to the early modern mind because Europeans believed that anyone not adhering to the Christian faith (even though the Bible made no mention of these people) was outside the knowledge of the true meaning of life on earth, and therefore, lost. It then became the moral obligation of real Christians to instill in those savage heathens, knowledge of the one true faith. And, any who resisted could be forced by any means necessary, including death, to conform. Their possessions could be seized as well for they would have no further use of them without the true knowledge of how best to use them.

The Church and the monarchies worked hand in hand to dispossess Native Americans; church intervention into exploration and colonization sealed the fate of

⁴ Stewart, Tamara, ed., *In The News*, American Archaeology, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer, 2002.

⁵ Calloway, Colin, Ph. D., *New Worlds For All*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, 1998.

⁶ Mertes, Tom, Ph. D., *Personal Communication*, UCLA, Department of History, 2003.

Indians. They were regarded as not having ownership of their lands, but were merely existing on them at the pleasure of the Christian God who had now given them to the nations of Europe.⁷ The atrocities committed against native peoples in the furtherance of accumulating material wealth, common to all European groups whatever country of origin, gained legitimacy through ecclesiastic law. And, racial stereotypes, depicting Indians as inferiors, facilitate the theft of their lands and private property to the present.

The main reason that so much of Native American culture was lost, however, which is also the main reason that present-day Euro-Americans owe everything they have to them, is that they brought the diseases that wiped-out 97% of the pre-Columbian indigenous cultures. It is true, of course, that this was done for the most part, unintentionally. But, does that really matter? Because of the unprecedented loss of life resulting in the inheritance by Euro-Americans of Native lands with their prodigious resources, without which America as we know it, could not have been born, it is incumbent upon all right-thinking citizens to give something back to those who gave all (see attached graphic).

For the past five centuries, Europeans and Euro-Americans have profited because of this horrific event. They have become, in the words of historian, John Murrin, "The Beneficiaries Of Catastrophe." You've got to ask yourself how a tiny minority of Europeans could possibly take control over lands that by many accounts were fully inhabited by populations of people living here for thousands of years. Historian, William McNeil, says that aside from foreign diseases, there is simply "no other way to explain it."⁸

In other countries where European colonization has occurred such as: China, India, and South Africa, de-colonization ultimately followed. You must ask yourself, "why there and not here?" As many researchers have concluded, the inhabitants of the Americas died in such great numbers because they were what has come to be known as a "Virgin Population." In other words, they had never been exposed to, and developed no resistances to Old World diseases such as: smallpox, measles, typhus, mumps, chickenpox, influenza, etc. As science has come to show, these sicknesses are derived by humans from domesticated animals: pigs, cattle, chickens, horses, sheep, goats, etc. The Americas had none of these.

The simple fact of the matter was that without the opportunities that became available in the Americas because of this catastrophic event, descendants of European immigrants could not have prospered here as they have. They could not have taken and maintained political, economic, and social control as they have.. It happened there and not here because those countries shared commonly-domesticated animals with Europeans and therefore had had the opportunity to develop resistances to the diseases one could catch from them. Their populations remained in tact and therefore able to resist the colonizers, finally driving them out and back from where they had come.

⁷ Deloria, Jr., Vine, *God Is Red*, Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, Colorado, 1994.

⁸ McNeil, William, *Plagues And Peoples*, Doubleday, New York, N.Y., 1998.

Along with receiving this unimaginable boon, Euro-Americans also inherited a legacy of privilege which for over 500 years and continuing, has helped them maintain control over access to essential resources. This regulates who gets what is available in terms of social-economic opportunities. The Euro-American tradition of racism projected onto indigenous people, as well as other non-white citizens, is a social mechanism utilized to direct resources to some and to keep them from other non-preferred members of society. Recent figures indicate that 74% of the American public is opposed to Affirmative Action, which was conceived to remedy those social wrongs of the past. How can a society that prides itself on being right-thinking, fair-minded, and politically-correct, reconcile this figure with their ideal self-image? This is the question; apparently, they simply are two different phenomena.

In view of all of the above, I believe it is clear that in the interest of preserving Native American cultures, the Museum of the Americas is a necessary step in the right direction. It will help provide access to information of people that occupied these lands for millennia before the arrival of Europeans. It will serve to preserve their lifeways, which commands preservation, and which demands full respect, as that shown to all groups of the global family. Today throughout the Americas, Indians occupy the lowest rung of the social-economic ladder. Treatment accorded them by leaders of the current nations occupying lands they formerly controlled, continues to be abysmal.

It should not be thought that with the recent wealth derived from casino gambling, the plight of Native Americans is over. They continue to struggle: epidemic diseases thrive on reservations, lost moneys totaling in the billions of dollars, held by government agencies and due them as lease payments for mineral wealth extracted from their lands, cannot be found. Teenage drunkenness and suicide is rampant, inadequate housing such as no indoor plumbing, and myriad other problems still exist. Let's help turn it around for Indians and for all of us; because we all profit. There is much to learn from them, this knowledge must be dispensed. Let's build the Museum of the Americas; let's do something right, something that truly conforms to the high opinion we have of ourselves as Americans.

These Americans take great pride in their European heritage, as being some great place to have come from. Undisputedly, there are many cultural traits of European civilization to celebrate: masterworks of literature, music, and science (just as there were here in the Americas). But, it must be remembered that the world which the immigrants left was one that held only misery and a short life span for most. One native chief of the eastern U.S. responded to them by asking, "If your country is so wonderful, why are you coming here"? Native Americans, in the main, didn't view Europeans as the superior beings they considered themselves to be.

During the period of exploration and immigration, if one were a royal or member of the aristocracy, then life in Europe might be alright. But, at least half of that population was destitute. If you had anything to eat, it was probably about 2 pounds of bread per day. The towns were overcrowded, filthy and dangerous. You could tell when you were nearing a town because of the smell. There were ditches on the outskirts containing corpses of animals and people; when they filled, they were covered over and more were dug. Sickness and pestilence filled the cities, raw sewage lined the streets, the countryside was patrolled by marauding bands of thieves, and roadways were littered with the abandoned bodies of the very young and elderly who could no longer be cared for.⁹

Diseases brought to the Americas from Europe caused the event that has come to be termed by anthropologists as, "The Great Dying."¹⁰ It was unprecedented in the history of mankind. There are many tribes we can still appreciate, but as historian, Roger Kennedy has said, many others have "disappeared without a trace...The Great Dying underlies everything we say and everything we do. No other continent, no other people lives in recollection of such an event at the threshold of its modern experience...The Great Dying is recorded by ossuaries (boneyards) covering several acres [across the country]."¹¹

As research continues, the number of dead continues to rise, but responsible numbers now hover at about 97% dead out of a calculated population of 100,000,000 at the time of Columbus' arrival. Imagine if things had turned out in reverse. Suppose that Indians with unknown diseases sailed east instead, landing on the shores of England, France and Spain wiping out the indigenous populations of Europe. Today in places like London, Paris, Madrid, and Berlin, instead of seeing blue-eyed, blond-haired people, the majority of the people would be dark-skinned with dark hair, and whites would be in the minority. This is what present-day Indians see in the Americas; Euro-Americans who act like they have been here forever and are fully entitled to all the benefits of life here as if it is their traditionally inherited birthright. Overabundance of this kind breeds the type of arrogance that is well-known throughout the world.

⁹ Rowlands, Alison, *The Conditions of Life for the Masses*, in *Early Modern Europe*, Euan Cameron, ed., Oxford University Press, New York, N.Y., 2001

¹⁰ Wolf, Eric, *Europe and the The People Without History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1997.

¹¹ Kennedy, Roger, *Hidden Cities*, Penguin Books, New York, N.Y., 1996.