

# Cultural Diversity and Dialogue: The Role of Museums

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An important challenge before museums today is to find ways to address themselves to the increasing diversity, and at the same time the growing interdependence and vulnerability, of social life everywhere. Museums need to be publicly recognized as important institutional means by which groups in our very pluralistic society can define themselves and find places within the changing dynamics of contemporary life.

All museum visitors benefit from carefully researched and innovatively presented exhibitions in which individual social groups define and represent themselves through dialogue with scholars, curators and the public. Broad educational goals are served by directing public attention to constituent groups of this culturally diverse society and to the complex variety of ways they combine to create social life. Successful exhibitions of this sort should enable us to review, revise and broaden public discourse.

The Festival of American Folklife has always been guided by this set of concerns and, indeed, has pioneered the type of dialogue now recognized as basic not only to the health of our museums but also to the health of our society as a whole. And it is in this perspective that I find the constellation of groups assembled at this Festival quite remarkable.

The Columbus Quincentenary we mark this year gives us pause to reflect on the forces that over the past 500 years have shaped today's social

life in the Americas. The programs on New Mexico, Maroons in the Americas and the Changing Soundscape in Indian Country illustrate important historical and ongoing processes through which communities establish cultural identities in complex and dynamic social circumstances.

The Spanish Conquest established the Western Hemisphere's European presence and its most widely spoken language. While the original conquerors' culture did not value the Native cultures it encountered, over the centuries segments of Hispanic and Native American and later English-speaking and other populations have, of necessity, engaged one another in ways that have given rise to today's rich array of cultural identities. New Mexico's distinctive cultural landscape has taken shape in this way, and today is composed of some peoples who sustain cultural identities through centuries-old combinations of Indian and European forms of thought and action, and of others whose basis of identity lies in reaffirming the wisdom and relevance of ancestral ways. But in all New Mexicans, as in people everywhere, cultural identity reflects the changes that continue to be wrought from the varieties of their social encounters.

Nowhere is the connection between creativity and self-definition more clear than in the cultural identities of contemporary Maroon peoples, whose ancestors escaped plantation slavery in the Americas and founded independent societies.

Faced with the task of constructing and defending their positions, Maroons creatively defined themselves from a variety of sources. While their political institutions, expressive arts, religions and other social forms were predominantly African in origin, they drew from a broad range of African cultures, and from European and Native American cultures as well. Much of the aesthetic component of Maroon cultures — their vibrant traditions of verbal and visual arts — encourages the cohesiveness of their society and voices themes that embody common experience and interest.

“The Changing Soundscape in Indian Country,” produced jointly with the National Museum of the American Indian, explores ways that Indian musicians and their communities have creatively adapted elements from the musical traditions brought to this continent from Europe, Africa and elsewhere. Although many of the forms of this Indian music are non-Indian in origin, the themes and performance styles clearly address Indian experience and aesthetic expectations. In their creative hands, external musical influences become part of the self-definition of Indian identity and trenchant commentary of what has been happening in “Indian Country” over the past 500 years.

This year also marks the 200th anniversary of the White House, it too a legacy of our complex past. The White House is not a king’s palace but rather “the people’s house,” at once national

symbol, executive office and conference center, ceremonial setting, museum, tourist attraction and family residence. At the Festival we recognize the culture of White House workers, who have supported this broad array of functions over a span of history shaped by remarkable events, people and social change. White House workers have been part of this history, and with their labor and dedication have made the White House work. We honor White House workers and their venerable workplace with a living exhibition that presents some of the skills, experiences and values through which they give shape to their occupational identities and call our attention to an important human component of the 200 year institutional history.

Pausing to mark these anniversaries, museums should consider self-representations of culture such as these for what they tell their audiences about our changing social life, for what they can teach us about creative adaptation and self-definition, and especially for what they contribute to the role of museums as forums for cultural dialogues. If museums, like the Festival, can provide models for public discourse, raise cultural issues to national and international consciousness, and enable cross-cultural communication and understanding, if not respect, they will then have helped in guiding all of us forward to the next century.