Still Pequot After All These Years

In 1992, the Mashantucket Pequot Indians generated headlines with the success of their casino, Foxwoods, in the once quiet town of Ledyard, Connecticut. Few Americans understood exactly who the Pequots were, or where they came from. The tribe's answer came six years later, with the opening of the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center (MPMRC), an extraordinary, tribally owned-and-operated museum of New England Indian history and culture, built at a cost of $193.4 million. An antidote to museums featuring Native artifacts removed from all cultural context, or older-style dioramas depicting primitive, generic Indians, the MPMRC delivers an impassioned message: "We are Pequot. This is our land. We are still here." What's more, the museum raises provocative questions about the historical process—what we know about Indians and how we know it.

Building a history museum was the vision of former Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Chair Richard Hayward. Through five years of discussion and planning, which brought tribal members together with both Native and non-Native experts—archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, educators, museum professionals, and artists—Hayward and his sister, Theresa Hayward Bell, Director of the Museum, were determined to engage visitors and educate them about Pequot history. They also sought to help Pequots and other Indians

recover from a lifetime of negative stereotypes about “savages” in classrooms, museums, and popular culture. In doing so, they have confronted formidable obstacles.

Unlike the elites whose cultures lend themselves to object-driven museums, the Mashantucket Pequots are, as Research Director Kevin McBride puts it, “story rich and artifact poor.” To address this challenge, the museum’s creators used a combination of technologically enhanced displays and recreated three-dimensional objects to bring the past to life. The designers of the MPMRC, Design Division, Inc., took the ubiquitous diorama—a static form that, for better or worse, has captured the imagination of generations of children and adults alike—and reinterpreted it with life-sized figures and cutting-edge technology, including computer interactives, sound sculpture, aroma technology, and an infrared communications system. But they also engage visitors with no-tech exhibits such as *Enduring Innovations: Prehistoric and Modern Tools,* which juxtaposes old and new forms such as spears and sinkers for fishing lines (which remain virtually unchanged) and drills (which change dramatically from bone drill bits worked by hand to an electric drill).

As they work their way through such exhibits, visitors take in a wealth of information. But the MPMRC aims to offer more than that. Like a science museum, it seeks to teach new concepts as well as new facts. One concept sure to provoke debate among scholars is the notion that a tribal understanding of the past may incorporate ways of knowing that are different from western epistemologies, yet more sophisticated than mere wishful thinking. In documenting Pequot history for the museum, researchers included stories and oral tradition as a major source of information, given equal consideration with manuscript and print texts, archaeological evidence, or material culture. The “how-do-we-know-this?” thread of inquiry running throughout the museum encourages visitors to question what they see instead of passively accepting or rejecting information.

The reproductions of everyday objects used in the museum’s dioramas offer a concrete illustration of how the MPMRC reconciles written documentation and indigenous ways of knowing. Tapping into an existing crafts base, museum staff located artisans who could translate raw materials into what Kevin McBride calls “objects described but never seen.” These are not simply works of imagination, although they are certainly works of art: each reproduction is the result of extensive research, all of which is available on file in the museum’s library. Where no physical objects survived to serve as models, researchers located written descriptions and contemporary illustrations. Consider the extraordinary turkey feather mantle made by Nanticoke artist Courtney Anderson, on display in the gallery on *Daily Life.* Early English writers frequently remarked on the mantles worn by high-status Native men in southern New England, and described them as having been woven so tightly that no light would seep through if they were held up. The feathers, they wrote, were recognizable as turkey feathers. A textile expert found archaeological fragments and a crafts tradition of using turkey feathers to make clothing in the southeast, but the

southeastern technique—stripping the veins from turkey feathers, wrapping them around a twine base, and making a kind of feather yarn from which textiles could be woven—made it unlikely that the turkey feathers would have been recognizable as such. Instead, Anderson, drawing on his skill, imagination, and experience, along with his own reading of the documents, determined how he believed the mantles must have been made: he used plant fibers to weave a backing, then attached overlapping rows of feathers. Is this an exact reproduction of the turkey feather mantles worn in southern New England in the early contact period? Maybe not, but it feels right, and it adds much to our understanding.

The MPMRC is organized chronologically, and prospective visitors should note that it takes at least four hours to go through the exhibits. The public enters Pequot history by traveling back in time, descending through a giant glacier complete with blue walls, a noticeable drop in temperature, and the sounds of rushing water and cracking ice. This journey through time, however, is interrupted by a gallery on modern-day Mashantucket Pequot life, where visitors learn what the tribe has built over the past eight years, while listening to the voices of tribal members reflect on what it means to be Pequot. This gallery and the use of audio technology here and throughout the museum represent a conscious, persistent effort to remind visitors that they are learning about a living people.

The highlight of the museum is the sequence that runs from a life-sized diorama of an ice age caribou hunt, to a recreated sixteenth-century Pequot village, to the same village after European contact (now with a palisade, trade goods, and epidemic disease), to the Pequot War of 1637. An original film, too intense for younger viewers, depicts the Pequot Massacre in graphic detail. Visitors also use computers and other interactive technology to learn more about what they see, an experience that keeps even small children engaged. Instead of viewing a bygone culture under glass, visitors learn about sixteenth-century Pequot lifeways by walking through the village, sitting in a wigwam, or eavesdropping on a conversation in an unfamiliar language (which is actually Passamaquoddy, since Pequot is no longer spoken). Using a hand-held device with prerecorded information keyed to specific sites, visitors move through the village learning about agriculture, medicine and healing, plants, animals, basket making, hunting, family and gender relations, and other aspects of Pequot lifeways. At strategic points, huge windows bring the external landscape into the museum and remind us that the people we are learning about actually lived here.

The MPMRC's Pequot village is both like and unlike nearby Plimoth Plantation's Hobbamock's Homesite. There, Native interpreters in seventeenth-century dress interact with visitors and answer questions about both past and contemporary Wampanoag lifeways. At Plimoth, the public walks through an outdoor Wampanoag village staffed by actual men and women; at the Mashantucket Pequots' museum, the public walks through an indoor Pequot village staffed, more or less, by

prerecorded voices. Although both sites wrestle with the problem of reminding visitors that Indians do not exist only in the past, neither wholly succeeds. Plimoth Plantation gives visitors a chance to learn through conversations with real people, but these exchanges are not always comfortable for either the visitors or the interpreters. The Pequot village allows visitors to experience a virtual immersion in seventeenth-century Native life without ever speaking to a human being—a safer, more sanitized encounter in which technology overshadows face-to-face exchange.

The MPMRC's planners rejected the idea of having costumed interpreters because they wanted to make a clear distinction between past and present Indians. While they succeed in making this distinction, they could do more to help visitors understand the connections between the Indians seen in the sixteenth-century Pequot village diorama and the diverse faces that characterize the Mashantucket Pequots of today. Many exhausted and overwhelmed visitors skip or hurry through the last parts of the museum, where compelling exhibits explain what happened to the Pequots after 1637: how they were forbidden to call themselves Pequot; how they intermarried with other Indians, free blacks, and Euro-Americans; how they fought in the American Revolution, the Civil War, and all the wars of the twentieth century; how they survived economically and culturally; and how and why they won the federal recognition that made it possible for them to build the casino. Part of the problem is that more research is needed on the later period. Another obstacle is that isolated figures, an old trailer (no matter how important in historical terms), and lots of connecting text cannot compete with the tragically romantic history of the seventeenth century, although the museum has plans to expand the outdoor farmstead exhibit on nineteenth-century life.

But the larger problem is that the museum does not fully confront complex issues of racial and tribal identity: questions about who is or is not Indian, who gets to decide, and how. Most Native communities in southern New England today are multiracial, as that term is understood by the dominant society. There is a specific history to these intermarriages, one connected to the larger history of Euro-American colonization and to changing ideas about race from the seventeenth century to the present day. In one of the museum's first galleries, a massive color photograph of contemporary tribal members in all their diversity of hair, eye, and skin color—features many viewers would use to classify the subjects as "white" or "black" rather than "Indian"—begs a question left unanswered: How have the Mashantucket Pequots themselves, as a people, grappled with their racial heritage?

In their museum, the Pequots offer a public affirmation of their identity as Pequots, one in which the 1637 massacre figures as the defining event, and subsequent migration, intermarriage, and racial divergence are irrelevant. If the tribe chooses to emphasize what they have in common in their exhibits, that choice, in my view, should be respected. Yet while planners made a reasonable choice to use faces that jibe with a popular sense of what "Indians" would have looked look like for the pre-1637 displays (lifecasts for the later period were

made from Pequot tribal members), the overall impact is unfortunate. Visitors are never asked to think critically about the hazards of linking ethnicity or tribal membership to a particular phenotype. This omission is regrettable, particularly because the MPMRC is capable of more. While no museum can single-handedly change the way Americans think about race, the Mashantucket Pequots have put together a resource of sufficient depth and seriousness to address these difficult questions.

Early plans for the MPMRC apparently included a section grappling with the issue of race, but it was taken out after much debate. Putting these materials back would require visitors to spend even more time in the museum. But the high rate of first-time visitors who become members suggests that the public would like to learn more. The Mashantucket Pequots' museum has already succeeded in generating tremendous interest in the Indian peoples of southern New England. Now it remains to confront the complexities of their rich history, and challenge visitors to think harder about what it means to be Indian in a world in which race matters.

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