

Visit of Dr Richard Kurin, Director National Programs, Smithsonian ACT Lecture, November 2004

New roles for museums in light of new international cultural law specifically, in the last two years the passage of UNESCO level of the international convention on safe guarding intangible heritage. Currently on the table there is perhaps an even more far reaching international treaty being debated on cultural diversity.

These conventions are not necessarily driving work in museums and other cultural organisations, but are expressing what is happening in museums and the cultural world and animating people across the globe to act and that is primarily because culture is a becoming an important matter both politically and economically and museums and cultural organisations can either retreat or they can be thrust into an expanded new roles. These treaties, the intangible cultural heritage and cultural diversity one really challenge the roles of institutions and organisations as brokers that mediate relationships of cultural representation between various cultural groups and the larger society.

About a year ago, at the meeting of the General Assembly of the UNESCO Conference nations voted overwhelmingly for this new convention, something like 185 to 0, on the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. A handful of nations voted against Australia, United States, Canada, United Kingdom and New Zealand – maybe a pattern here!

The convention has as its role – ‘The encouragement of the survival, and vitality of the world’s living local, national and regional cultural heritage in the context of increasingly multicultural states.’ What is intangible cultural heritage? If anyone here has used the term, intangible cultural heritage in natural conversation, let me know! It’s a terrible term... who knows what it means! It’s broadly defined in terms of the social practices, aesthetic traditions and forms of knowledge carried within cultural communities. And in terms of the treaties those have to be consistent with human rights. The terminology comes out of Japanese practice post WWII.

The Japanese faced with American occupation after WWII were very worried about the continuity of their culture and traditions, so started defining laws in the 1950s on cultural property and intangible cultural heritage, which basically looked at protecting them, so the Japanese people can have sense of themselves in the face of rapid changes.

It used to be called expressive culture, oral heritage, folklore, some places peoples’ culture, now its intangible cultural heritage. I should clarify from the outset, and given its roots, it’s not just about the culture of the indigenous group. Its not just about the culture of ethnic or tribal people, its not just about minorities, but its about linguistic roots, its about religious groups, nations, national groups, certainly mainstream culture and even elite culture. So if you think about the Japanese striving to encourage the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, they were not talking about the Ainu, not Koreans in Japan, but about courtly traditions in Japanese culture.



Dr Richard Kurin at the National Gallery of Victoria.
Photo: Hwa Goh.

It has spread out from there, so do not think of this as marginal and indeed I think countries around the world supporting this in the face of globalisation are basically saying all of our culture is minority culture, all of our culture is in danger of being marginalised. So, this treaty calls upon national governments to designate and empower organisations not only to document intangible cultural heritage but to engage in its presentation, preservation, legal protection and its social transmission by working closely and cooperatively with the relevant communities.

The convention's areas of concern, ethnography, art, history, science and technology certainly overlap with the subject matter of museums and cultural organisations and the means of safeguarding envisioned research, presentation and legal protection are certainly how museums address material culture, whether they art museums with art works or history museums dealing with artefacts, whether they are natural science museums dealing with specimens.

That is you conduct research on the stuff, you present it in some way whether for publication, audio visually, on the web or in exhibitions and you legally protect it in some way, by not destroying it, but setting thermostat right and in some cases having laws with regard to repatriation and cultural property. But intangible cultural heritage is by definition living and vital and in bedded in on-going social relations.

The question is; should governments around the world designate museums as the primary agencies for implementing the new convention? Can museums really safeguard intangible cultural heritage? Do they want to? And if so, must they be reconceived to do so? I suspect whether Australia or the United States eventually accepts and ratifies the convention or not, the question will be asked among museum professionals as it is being asked around the world.

Right now I think there are five countries have ratified this treaty, and Japan and China will do so. In the end there will be scores of countries operating according to these conventions, so it starts becoming an ethical norm, if you will, in museum practice, so I think it warrants serious consideration.

Consider the challenge of dealing with intangible cultural heritage. Museums are usually used to working with tangible objects, we know that our objects are numbered and measured and catalogued, stored, preserved, conserved and exhibited. Museum curators are certainly aware that their objects tell a larger story but it is the object itself which is fetishised by our museum work.

Conveniently objects stay where they are put, they do not complain about their treatment. The difference when dealing with intangibles, its not a thing, we are dealing with a social practice. It's not a material object, it's not a recording of a social practice, it's not a transcription, it's not a videotape it is the actual singing of songs in the community, it is the actual spiritual beliefs of the people, it is the knowledge of navigating by the stars, it's the knowledge of weaving meaningful patterns into cloth, it's the knowledge of what goes into a composition of an art work.

Counting measuring, counting and inventorying such intangible traditions is not an easy task and fraught with mythological difficulties. I think one of the reasons there was an objection with the treaty from English speaking countries, was on technical grounds the treaty the convention does call for all nations to take an inventory of intangible cultural heritage. That's tough to do! How do you count stuff you can not touch? It is a massive effort. If you do such an inventory, it could take up thousands and thousands of volumes and once you have completed the last volume have you really safeguarded the tradition and kept it alive? Or, have you paid hundreds of graduate students, and low paid museum help to fill out countless of forms of traditions. I think that museum workers are not trained to do such inventories and many scholars have questions about having an adequate methodology to conduct such a task and their ultimate efficacy.

For many of countries that supported the idea of an inventory, it was a claim that somehow just like you catalogue statues and monuments, you end up with a list of things you have – it's a kind of management issue. You know you have those monuments, you count them down and then you have them. By specifying that you have them after they have been put down on a list, it's a claim of cultural ownership.

And indeed that was the big debate over this, and this convention sidelined that debate and shuffled it over to the new treaty on cultural diversity which does establish levels of intellectual property rights and cultural ownership and traditions.

Think about the rhythms of Africa used by word musicians, think about Paul Simon he would have to repatriate large amounts for money to South Africa, and so on. Of course, that can get quite extensive if you keep going at it – glass now we own Syrians money, and anyone who uses paper need to get the permission of the Chinese and so on... we can unravel there, but the idea is about cultural ownership and cultural rights because the people feel they are being ripped off. We know museum objects reside under the roof and authority of the museum. With intangible cultural heritage, the traditions exist outside the museum in the community. They reside under the authority of people which practice them. And people unlike objects do talk back, they do complain about how they are placed and treated. According to the new convention people in the community who practice those traditions have a major role in defining not only their own intangible cultural heritage but how it is documented, preserved, recognised, presented and legally protected.



Dr Richard Kurin at the National Gallery of Victoria.
Photo: Hwa Goh.

In order to lead with intangible cultural heritage lead agencies and organisations, and museums must have a fully engaged, intellectually substantive dialogue and partnership with the people who hold the heritage, something I have referred to as cultural brokerage. With such brokerage the social distance between the people that make the heritage and the audience who participate in it has to be reduced.

A broker, if a good one, has to examine cultural differences and make those differences understandable if not necessarily illuminate them. A cultural broker needs to be a valuable conduit for translation and representation of cultural groups and communities, and larger society. This does not mean that just representing some 'exotic' folk from the other side of the world to mainstream audiences in the west is what this about.

Often you are brokering representations of your own history, to a contemporary audience to larger society. For museums and cultural institutions the partnership envisaged by the convention entails shared authority for defining traditions and shared curation for their representation. Museum scholars need to engage the expertise of the very people they used to study and whose knowledge and culture they represented. Cultural experts have to recognise that knowledge exists, in homes, villages, fields, factories, workplaces, social halls as well as the halls of academia and museums. I use the terms engaged and intellectually substantive and dialogue quite purposefully for it's not a matter for a museum or cultural institution to opening up a gallery and saying 'you folks come here and do what you like'. That's a flea market and its not matter of using an extractive model to find culturally wise people and then use the raw data of what they have to say to then represent their culture in public settings. Rather we have to find meeting grounds in museums and other organisations where brokering can occur, where disciplinary and community generated facts, interpretations, insights and understandings can be discussed, debated and to divergent and convergent degrees displayed and presented.

Museum professionals really have to be ready and equipped with the language skills, field experience and historical knowledge that is up to the challenge of actually dealing and being adept in dealing with the sophistication of people that are from the culture, or occupational group, or from the community that is being represented.

This intellectual power sharing has immense sociological consequences because museums can not resort to controlled recreation or idealised representation of cultures by scripted actors, but must deal with culture and history of real people being represented. Museums can not hide behind a history of elitism, ethnic or class bias. Charged with the twin duties of cooperation and respect museums will have to cross all sorts of boundaries that have somehow kept them above and beyond the broader populace.

They have to overcome prejudice, or class difference and taste, recognising a diversity of values and they have to deal with the communities and the people within them. You have to be a cultural broker specialising in diplomacy, local history and psychology. All museums are constrained by the fact that they can only represent larger wholes by small abstracted pieces. Aesthetic movements can be represented by one painting or an assemblage of paintings, but it's very hard to recreate the kind of aesthetic movement and interactions which led to the paintings. Similar with culture, you have a costume, a piece of pottery, things that hardly that represent that culture – it's very hard to pull the existential reality of the larger whole into museums. The true skill of a great curator is that a great curator is able to take a skilful ensemble of those little pieces and put them together to they do give us a sense of the larger whole.

When it comes to intangible cultural heritage the task is more challenging. If you are interested in the songs of a community, you can find instruments and you can have a public program or even have performance and you represent a little sample of what it's like. Sometimes you have artists showing how you do certain things, painting in the galleries, or in public program you get a glimpse of how to do stuff and what is done in many technology museums is you bring in people that used to work for the railroad or fixed farming machines, and they tinker around with the machines and you get a sense of what that dynamic is and there is some level of curation involved in the choice of people and what they are demonstrating in the museum. But the charge of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is much larger than the effective or even the inspired techniques of display and presentation. It goes to the moral purpose of museum activity itself.

With tangible products if you want to preserve and transmit the tangible cultural heritage of what is in this museum [Australian National Gallery] you can take everything in it, lock the doors, set the thermostat at the right level, close the doors and open up in two generations from now and people will get most of the stuff in there.

How can museums really protect, preserve and transmit the intangible cultural heritage of community? No amount of work in the museum alone can accomplish that goal living culture is preserved and transmitted through its continued social practice. If museums are going to do it then they are going to have to assume a much larger role where museum and cultural workers have to operate in a multi-sectoral world outside the walls of the museum to broker political power, social relationships financial support and public opinion. Let me provide a simple example, lets take the intangible cultural heritage of the so called Marsh Arabs of Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of people for thousands of years have occupied the wetlands of Mesopotamia, between Tigris and Euphrates rivers people have built reed house and boats, they have exploited the natural resources of the area and developed a way of life in a very tough environment and the wetlands are home not only to people but migratory birds and rare species.

Traditionally that region has been a place of refuge for people fleeing from elsewhere, particularly under Saddam Hussein's regime, particularly after the first Gulf War the marsh was a region of refuge for a lot of people who opposed Saddam. Saddam in order to deal with that ended up damming the rivers, which ended up draining the wetlands and then eliminated the ecological basis of Marsh Arab culture, so people began migrating to towns, cities and even neighbouring Iran, becoming impoverished not only economically but also culturally.

Now, here is the example, you run the museum of Iraqi marshland culture you can acquire the region's traditional reed housing and long canoes, you can record the memories of those who fled the area and remember its ways, you can collect and exhibit historical photographs of life in the wetlands, you can develop charts illustrating the complex ecology and the region – we can all imagine such things pretty easily, but we all also know such actions will not by themselves restore or safeguard the culture as a way of life, the only real way to do that would be to restore the marsh environment, to repopulate the region and work with cultural exemplars and practitioners to see that the community's traditions re-assert themselves. Now this is a new role for a cultural professional because you'd probably have to end up consulting with the hydrologist, agronomist, an economist, engineers, to start with; you would have to quickly begin to deal with the political realities, negotiate with various factions, financiers, and a host of other people, in order to make that project work.

Your venue is not a museum, a stage or a forum, but a large and distressed country and your constituency is not the museum patrons, the donors, or the audiences, but the community represented. In safeguarding intangible cultural heritage the larger whole is the object of attention and the measure of accomplishment. In that regard the role of brokering that relationship and seeing that happen does depend on a multi-sectoral involvement with mediation by which your role enables that culture to survive and hopefully flourish.

That's not an easy task you are dealing with people's lives in the way other brokers do, your dealing in value the way other brokers do. When you think of brokering, some people in the cultural world may think of it as unseemly but we should recognise that power brokers do this in terms of the relationships between countries whether they are friends or enemies, brokering the political relationships; stock brokers do it in terms of brokering the relationship between the value of corporation and the value held by their owners; real-estate people do it when you buy a house, a real-estate broker plays an important role in making sure you get that house; in traditional societies there are marriage brokers; so what cultural brokers do is very important.

Indeed some museums do like their culture dead and stuffed and it is hard to bring life into museums. But there are many signs world-wide where many museums have come forward to take on this responsibility of preserving intangible cultural heritage. If this becomes a law museums will have to do it. Community based museums in Central and South America, have come up with good examples, many of these museums are local, run by local people and local cultural centres and serve a very important role in the life of local communities in helping represent those people to national authorities, to regional authorities, to the world bank officials as well as local youth. We have seen them train local researchers to document themselves and build local archives, this is very empowering.

Museums in Japan and Korea have built programs upon the basis of long established prestigious living cultural treasures. While I may have all sorts of bones to pick with those kind of programs, what they have done is identified exemplary artists and practitioners in various communities and given them national recognition, given them stipends, tax breaks and various things to assure that they pass on those traditions to the next generation.

In South Africa there is District 6 Museum in Cape Town. District 6 was an area in Cape Town which was a multicultural neighbourhood and when the Apartheid Regime came into power in the late 1940s they saw this neighbourhood as a threat and an anathema to its segregationist policies, so they bulldozed the whole neighbourhood to get rid of it. Whereas you had different people living together in this neighbourhood they were totally dispersed city streets were totally destroyed, levelled! The idea behind District 6 Museum where you had nothing tangible left is to try to have a museum wholly dedicated to the intangible. A whole museum built on the memory of these people and bringing them together now to try to at least in narrative recreate and explain what that community was about.

At the Smithsonian where there are about 140million tangible objects in our collection (inaudible) the margins to promote intangible culture through out museums, about four decades ago we established the Folklife Festival, when our then Secretary of the Smithsonian S. Dillon Ripley, said 'the Smithsonian is a place you go to after a heavy Sunday roast dinner', which was not a ringing endorsement of the largest museum complex in the world. He looked over on the national mall of the United States and this was before the Civil Right marches and public use of the mall, and he said, he said 'this lawn looks like Forest Lawn on the Potomac' this was a name of a cemetery, Forest Lawn on the Potomac, a very sleepy place.

What Dillon Ripley did was admonish his staff and this as a time of great turmoil in the United States, people trying to figure out how to live with each other, and cope with each other and he told the museum curators, 'we have all these musical instruments in cases and if you walk through the museum you'll never know what they sounded like'. Who made them? What did they sound like? He said to his curators 'you take these instruments out of their cases and make them sing!' that was his admonishment. The idea was to show that everything in the museum was either made or used by human beings, or was the object of human meaning making.

He started the Smithsonian Folklife Festival which is an annual exhibition of cultures held outdoor on the National Mall of the United States in between the national monuments and museums. It highlights the knowledge, artistry, skill, and wisdom of culture bearers, and conspirers with them to conduct self-research, production and presentation. We term it the 'living museum', but the festival is not an ends in itself, and while it can be a form of public education, it's a means to engage in joint collaborative cultural research, public presentation, and institutional legitimation, or cultural exemplars, so as to continue their practice and creativity. The festival brings in about one and a half million visitors in the awful humidity of Washington summer. It does give people a powerful platform on which to engage in a cultural conversation with their fellow citizens and human beings.

(Slides)

Nobody is an actor; these are actually cowboy poets from New Mexico, drum bands from the Caribbean, immigrant groups, and so on, singers from the American South, totem pole carvers from Alaska, weavers from Bangladesh, adornment and hair styles from Somalia and West Africa, that you will see also carried out in hair salons in the United States; and we do a lot of food and cooking demonstrations, looking at the culture of food use and the sociology of food; we also do other things that illustrate other aspects of culture...meet Moogolai and Gobi (points to slide of two camels) in 2002 we did a programme on the Silk Road, after 9/11, we wanted to look at the culture of exchange and commerce along the Silk Road which meant so much in the context of East and West and of course camels carried a lot of goods, luxury goods back then, between China in the east and Europe in the west, and people decorated their camels and since we were bringing nomads from Kazakhstan, how can you demonstrate those Kazakh skills and artistry without bringing the camels they use? So I went to FedEx to see if they could FedEx two camels from Kazakhstan, of course the camels would have had to go into quarantine in Poland first and that would have taken too long, so we had to look at other parts of the US for Bactrim camels so we found this crazy guy in Texas who bred them, of course they spoke Texan not Kazakh. So as people who broker representation, we had to tell the Kazakhs that these camels only understand Texan, and the Kazakhs said that's not good enough and they would not cooperate with us, so the anthropologist involved in the field work, from Berkley who is Kazakh and worked with us, recorded commands from Kazakhstan and ended up sending them to Texas for the camels to learn. You can imagine the camels in Texas with ear phones over their head listening to Kazakh commands. It didn't work, but we did not want to only look at traditional ways in which people move goods in the east, but also the (points to slide) truck from Pakistan which we brought in, they are decorated by artists which are truckers. So once they decorated camels now they decorate trucks. Now this is not a tribal skill that goes back eons, this is a contemporary tradition done by Pakistani truckers.

We deal with occupational culture in various ways, a few years ago when we did New York we had everything from bagel makers, to people who work on Broadway, we did a whole section on people who work backstage on Broadway and their traditions. We even did it on a bunch of very exotic people, people from the New York Stock Exchange. We had stock brokers in their costumes doing their hand signals, telling people about their culture. One year we did a program on trial lawyers, the best lawyers in the country. Do you know what campfire they sit around and tell stories? Well its bars after court, people tell stories, we had them tell stories as narrative, the lawyers have to take bits of reality and put together as narrative as story tellers do – we had the best trial lawyers in the country on the mall demonstrating their skills!

That is looking at cultural communities not as something static, ethnic, or existing in the past, but as contemporary and existing as part of us. In fact we even did the White House one year. We had to get the approval of two presidents to send our anthropologists and folklorists into the White House to do field work. We had a program on White House workers which have their own culture, and interestingly enough many of those workers have an intergenerational approach to work so they worked there, then their kids and their kids after, and they were largely African American domestic staff. This was incredibly interesting. If you wanted to take a snapshot of cultural history in America here you have a whole culture of African Americans in the White House some would say in subservient positions, yet having to train presidents and first ladies on conducting themselves in a presidential way. From Herbert Hoover to Reagan, Alonso Fields was known as the Chief among the staff, and would say 'I am servant of no man; I am the servant of my country just as the president is.'

When Scotland was on the Mall a few years ago we had presentations on how to make scotch so I had lots of people from the public with their noses in the barrels, and lot of people from the US Senate with their noses in the barrel. We have done a lot of vernacular architecture to show the skills – (slide) this was a church from the Transylvania region with out a nail in it which is about 85 feet tall. They ran out of churches to build in Romania, so you can see a tradition dying not because there is no audience for it, but because it was so successful and it reached a saturation point, so in the US after the presentation on the Mall they got a bunch of orders in for churches by the American Romanian communities form Chicago, Ohio, and other places, and thus we encouraged these carpenters to keep up with their skills and preserves a tradition.

After 9/11 during the Silk Road program, we brought about five hundred artists to the mall, musicians, painters and others, from across the Silk Road representing over twenty eight countries and a number of other Asian Americans and to show the continuity of these traditions. Here was a place in the world which up to and after 9/11 was very mysterious for many Americans.

Some people were worried about doing this, saying 'My god you are going to bring Muslims to the Mall!' One of the great things that happened after 9/11 is that people bought a lot of books on the region and on Islam and other traditions of the region to try to understand it. We saw that very dramatically on the Mall, we worked Yo Yo Ma and in terms of putting this together, it was that people wanted to have direct conversations with people from the region. Of course here was a region which seemed so distant, with lives that seemed so distant, yet on the Mall we did a recreation of a (Islamic) dome, the Blue Dome from Uzbekistan. You see that blue dome and you may think 'how strange' why do they build domes, of course you are looking at the US Capitol dome, and you begin to realise that something that may at a glance appear so distant and so different may actually be imbedded in part of our heritage.

To facilitate cultural conversation, we use specialists and artists, researchers, scholars and artists and cultural bearers can have a conversation. You are in the audience you can ask what ever question you want, you get the person's perspective, so people can talk back and people can figure out how to represent themselves. Now we do signs, with photos and explanations and a catalogue. For the Silk Road we had passports and a kids' trail so kids can go around and get medallion for doing the trek we had over forty thousand kids participate in that.

For example one year we had a guy (inaudible) who builds Native American traditional birch wood canoes, very fine work, next to a guy from Hawaii who builds koa canoes, basically people share technical information and culture. We try to put people in the festival as teachers, instructors so people see their skills and their artistry as valuable encouraging knowledge and discovery.

We did a program on Tibetan culture, the Dalai Lama came and spoke, and you can imagine the kind of negotiation with the Chinese over that. I had a great line for the Chinese Ambassador; the National Mall is not Tiananmen Square, people have the right to speak and speak culturally to each other, and this is the equivalent of democracy. Of course at that time the Smithsonian was negotiating with the Chinese government over the Pandas for the national zoo, which we were renting at ten million dollars, and so the issue was how to handle that politically so you do not get into a negotiation of 'do you want the Dalai Lama or the pandas?' Hard choice, of course our friends at the White House helped us broker that agreement.

That idea of cultural democracy, of having your say over how you are represented in national fora holds for everyone, whether you are talking about Tibetan community, or people from Kentucky. We hold the festival around the 4th of July, so it adds in space and in time, it says that this is important, because it is happening on our independence day, in a central space. We try to shroud it a lot of legitimacy, (points to slide) the guy who is doing Mongolian throat singing, and sitting there learning how to do Mongolian throat singing in 2002 are, Collin Powell, Ted Kennedy, Agha Khan and a very distinguished audience. We get a lot of media, national and international in 2002 we had Al Jazeera. People go back home and ask; 'Are these traditions worth keeping? Do I want to keep them? If we can show people that their traditions are prestigious, honourable, and respected, it provides impetus for cultural traditions to be transmitted to new generations.

We also do things that can help economically that can encourage cultural transmission and vitality. We do food concessions we use home grown food concessions, we can do it easy we could contract out with Marriot or McDonalds, but that won't help any culture survive. But, if we do it this way, we are encouraging regional businesses and regional cuisines to survive. Anyone who has served thousands of people on the Mall may consider creating a unique traditional food restaurant. We have encouraged many cultural businesses. Same again with the market place we do about \$2mil in income to encourage traditional weavers, potters, and so on, to maintain their practice.

We had five ceramicists from Turkey, the five master ceramicists, visual poetry absolutely beautiful. It was a five hundred year old tradition. These Turkish ceramicists walked away with \$500,000 in their pockets. Five or six times their annual income each. They go back and they say 'These crazy Americans love this stuff, come son, daughter, niece, learn this trade and express yourself artistically or you can go and change sheets in a hotel.' The idea of opening up markets and providing financial benefits to people who create culture I think is a good one.

We also do a lot of recordings that come out from the festival, be it Mali, Porto Rico, and so on, this is not going to compete with Britney Spears, but these are attempts that come with notes for teachers and the royalties go to the musicians. We sell a few million dollars worth of records and a few hundred thousand go directly back to the cultural producers/musicians and their communities.

We also try to be clever about how we do our stuff so our own commercial activity needs to be self-sustaining. There is an album we did a few years ago when we acquired Folkways the archival basis of our music operation, we got people like Bob Dylan, John Mellencamp, Bruce Springsteen, U2, to do recording from our archives and it earned a million dollars and assisted us in our operations.

We also do exhibits that come out of the festival and educational kits for kids, using lesson plans, videos, music etc... to encourage cultural preservation and development. We publish books like other institutions do we conduct cultural evaluation and so on. Right now one of our big projects is Smithsonian Global Sound. Basically what we are looking at is the cultural non-commercial alternative to Apple iTunes. What we are doing is to unite museum archives, holding, to put stuff on the web. Think of the voices and the knowledge, the artistry which bottles up in archives around the world which can tell so much about the human experience. Our hope is to have hundreds of thousands if not millions of tracks on the web. You can click on an area or instruments, you get history and genres and style you can listen to samples and buy tracks. We take the money you give us and give a portion to the museum and as part of our contract part goes to the musicians.

We're looking at giving prestige, recognition and respect to people as a way of safeguarding their cultures, helping them in terms of capacity building to do research and presentation on self-preservation, and making sure that there are some benefits, financial or other kind of benefits, which can provide incentives to their cultural continuity.

I think the apotheosis of this impulse within the Smithsonian was dramatically evident with the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian which opened a few weeks ago. The National Museum of the American Indian seeks to represent the oldest people of the Americas as it is a hemispheric museum. It makes a powerful statement that the diversity of native peoples are alive and here today, possessed of wisdom and arts and knowledge. The museum takes the Smithsonian away from the older extractive model of museum with its vast collections. This new museum is one where native peoples have taken the lead in the conceptualising, design, supporting and directing the museum to represent them is different from the extractive model. The director is a Native American the staff are Native American so they are part of a community.

The opening was quite an event which started off with a procession of twenty five thousand Native American people representing six hundred and sixty tribes. People marching from Inuit from Alaska marching together with people from the Amazon rain forest, native Hawaiians marching together with Hopi and Navaho, it was joyous! The museum has an interesting philosophy, there is an annex in New York and there is a third annex in Washington, and people can come and do cultural acts as appropriate. Perhaps the strongest illustration of the new museum's attention to intangible cultural heritage, and safeguarding it and working with the community to do so, is the defined as what they call the fourth museum.

The fourth museum is not a building at all but is a massive outreach and community services program which has as its goal the encouragement and support of continuity and creativity of native cultural communities. The museum takes this role very seriously it has staff working with people with tribal museums, native cultural associations, do training back and forth. Their very mission depends on the continued vitality of the Native American communities. It does not mean doing the same thing the same old way, but it does mean giving people power and the ability to change or alter their traditions, be influenced by others, I mean we had Native American rap artists doing rap in Navaho – nothing wrong in that!

Cultural heritage for this museum is not something dead, it's not something frozen, or put away for the voyeuristic amusement of tourists, or the idiosyncratic interests of scholars but rather something living, vital and connected to the identity and spirit of a contemporary people, who are doing exactly what we are all doing, trying to make their way in a complicated world. Museums that see others better off dead might find themselves consigned to the same fate by the people they are supposed to represent and serve. Museums that see life around them maybe better poised to account for it and react to it, and seek it as a cause for attention maybe as a source of inspiration. Museums such as these laden with purposes and envisioned in the new convention provide a source of optimism for an old institution, that the museum may not be dead and find a new life in the twenty first century.

END DR KURIN LECTURE NOVEMBER 2004, ACT