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Author(s): Gerald R. McMaster
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INDIGENA

A Native Curator's Perspective

Gerald R. McMaster

The essence of the country is bound up in Indian land and African slave labour. —Paul Smith, "Lost in America"[1]

The "INDIGENA" project, which opened on April 16, 1992, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization,[2] Hull, Quebec, will close on October 12, 1992, five hundred years to the day after Christopher Columbus's landfall in the Americas.

indigene (in′di jen′), *n.* a person or thing that is indigenous or native; native; autochthon. Also, **indigen** (in′di jən). [1590–1600; < MF < L *indigena* a native. See INDIGENOUS]

colon[3] (kō lōn′; *Sp.* kô lôn′), *n.*, *pl.* **-lons, lo nes** (-lô′nes). . . . [1890–95; < AmerSp, after *(Cristobal) Colón* (Christopher) Columbus]

colonialism (kə lō′nē ə liz'əm), *n.* **1.** the control or governing influence of a nation over a dependent country, territory, or people. **2.** the system or policy by which a nation maintains or advocates such control or influence. **3.** the state or condition of being colonial. **4.** an idea, custom, or practice peculiar to a colony. [1850–55; COLONIAL + -ISM][3]

The "INDIGENA" project is a major traveling exhibition of paintings, sculptures, photographs, video, and mixed-media installations created for this occasion; it is accompanied by a major publication with six essays and portfolios by nineteen contemporary Native Canadian visual artists.[4] "INDIGENA" begins a two-year international tour of Canada and the United States in cities with high concentrations of Native Americans, after closing in Hull.[5]

The project addresses issues that range from the early extinction of the Taino people by Columbus and his followers to current questions of self-government in Canada today, including the 1990 Oka crisis,[6] and from the fragile sense of identity to the strengthening hope of cultural tenacity. The aboriginal artists and writers in "INDIGENA" question the process by which European colonists came to dominate the continent's original inhabitants.

The "INDIGENA" arts project began in 1989.[7] Its aim was to give special attention to issues of self-representation in art museums, and issues related to working with Native communities.

Traditionally, Native Canadians and Americans have experienced difficulty in submitting to one mode of representation. In the last five years, this critical issue has drawn considerable attention. Along with issues of access and interpretation, it was the concern of a national study, conducted over three years by the Task Force on Museums and the First Peoples.[8] The mandate of the Task Force was to examine and assess the institutional underrepresentation, and sometimes misrepresentation, of Native peoples, primarily in museums of ethnography, the military, and natural history. Art museums and galleries for the most part narrowly escaped scrutiny.

Native peoples—and this includes artists—have inherited a system of representation that has caused considerable tension. Lacking opportunities to represent ourselves, Native people have had, historically, to play the role of the subject/object, the observed, rather than the observer. Rarely have we been in a position of self-representation. Native peoples have always been the informant, seldom the interrogator or initiator.

Ethnography museums traditionally are repositories for "objects made by Native people"; whereas art museums are repositories of "fine-art objects" that chart the art-historical course of Western civilization. However, in the last several decades the "fine arts" of Asia and Africa have often been added to the latter. Curiously, in some art museums, certain kinds of indigenous art has begun to invade the art-historical bastions. What indigenous art forms? Generally, they are from the "civilized cultures" of Central and South America, the works of such peoples as the Mayans, Aztecans, and Incans. (The rest remain uncivilized!) I question why art museums have excluded aboriginal art from Canada and the United States. This question is answered, in varying degrees

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FIG. 1 Carl Beam (Ojibway, b. 1943), *Burying the Ruler* (center panel), 1991, mixed media on handmade paper, three panels, 24 × 48 inches overall. Collection of the artist.

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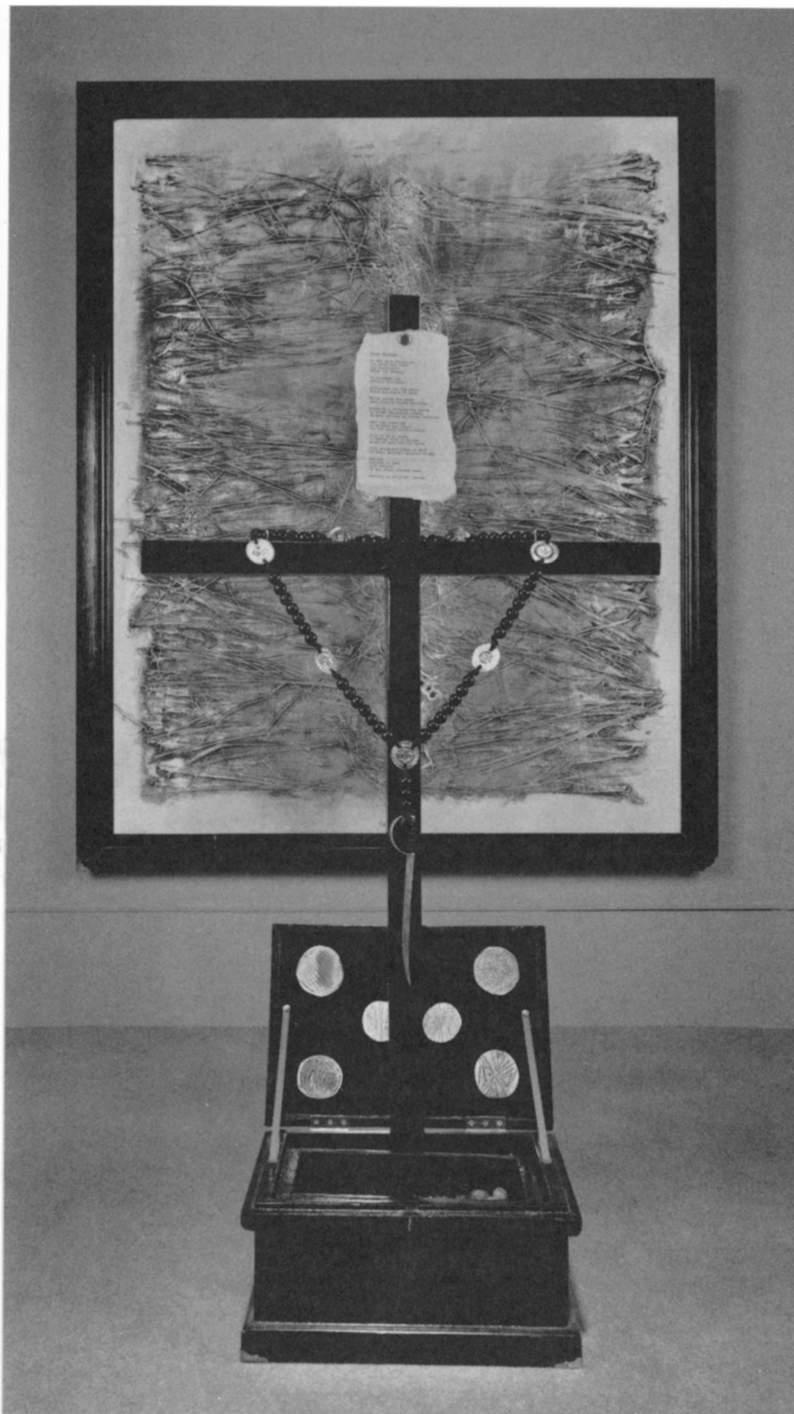

FIG. 2 Lance Belanger (Maliseet, b. 1956), *Taino Memorial*, 1989, mixed-media installation, 65 × 53¾ × 48 inches. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull.

of articulation, by artists, art historians, critics, and curators. Infrequently has the Native perspective been accepted or acknowledged. Yet one may ask, what is the Native perspective? This question parallels that posed by federal governments, who ask, what is Native self-government? They are quick to warn, "If you can define it, then maybe we'll consider granting it; but if you fail to do so, and in our terms, tough luck!" Art museums tend to function the same way. The Cree art historian Alfred Young Man points out that a Native perspective can be frightfully assertive:

To an American Indian artist, Native perspective texts may seem all too true and an absolute vindication. However, a Euro-Canadian who reads them may feel uneasy and ultimately culpable in a very nasty historical drama. In the struggle to define Native art, some readers may suffer twinges of guilt and some may even lapse into throes of despair if they persevere through what can at times be excruciatingly insulting and accusatory material. . . . The Native perspective may not be easy to accept, particularly by those who feel adversely implicated by its conclusions."[9]

In exploring and understanding the Native perspective, a number of complex frameworks must be acknowledged. First, given the continuing existence of the Indian and Inuit (Eskimo) people in the Americas, by default we should be recognized as the "two founding nations."[10] Second, we must acknowledge our mutually exclusive history, or histories, Native North American and European. Third, we must recognize the variety of social, cultural, and historical perspectives within an indigenous North America. Fourth, Native languages, both written and oral, must be seen as keys to understanding differing aesthetic perspectives. Fifth, we must accept that our histories, Native and non-Native, have often crisscrossed over five hundred years, and in many cases influenced one another (for example, new materials for Natives; new visual ideas for non-Native artists). Sixth, we must admit that notions of "quality" must be broadened to include Native sensibilities and points of view. Seventh, we must understand that Native art history to date is as distinct as mainstream Western art history. Will our futures continue to operate in a "separate-but-equal" practice?

I recall a conversation I had a few years ago with a Native artist, who surprised me by saying, "Here [at the Canadian Museum of Civilization], I feel at home with my ancestors." He was referring to the presence of his art in the museum's collection, as opposed to that of the National Gallery of Canada, knowing full well that to state such a position could bring immediate protests from many contemporary Native artists. I assumed that he took this position for two reasons: first, he knew his work had yet to be collected by the National Gallery; and second, he had accepted that his work was almost totally inspired by his Native ancestry. He thought his works would not relate to the National Gallery's historical affinity to Europe, saying that his work would "look out of place" there. Instead, he believed that the Canadian Museum, which contains some of the best pre-twentieth-century Native Canadian collections in the world (many of which are now gaining the status of "art"), was the most appropriate place for his works. This perspective, he thought, must be respected and understood.

This statement by Edward Poitras (Metis), a Native artist whose competence is nationally recognized, was a tremendous leap from a clichéd past; its boldness is having an impact as other Native artists consider its implications. Poi-

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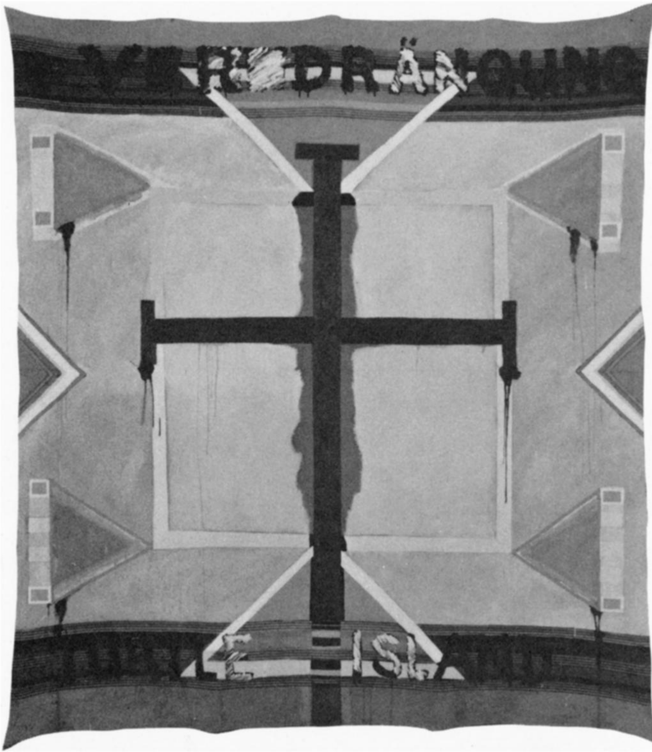

FIG. 3 Bob Boyer (Metis, b. 1948), *Trains-n-Boats-n-Plains: The Nina, the Santa Maria, and a Pinto* (center blanket), 1991, installation, oil on wood with mixed media, on three painted blankets, ca. 120 × 216⅛ inches overall. Collection of the artist.

tras did not object to the notion that his work might be categorized or thought of as "ethnographic" because it was in the CMC; instead, he dismissed the arbitrariness of such categorizations in the first place. He saw new meaning in the inclusion of his art in a human-history museum such as the CMC, rather than in a major international art museum, even though human or natural-history museums are frequently attacked for containing "remnants of salvaged cultures."[11] Poitras obviously saw other connections. In a way he was rejecting the hegemonic embrace of the mainstream art world and its colonialist inclusion and exclusion of non-Western artists. This strategy is, it seems, being exercised more openly.[12] Ironically, he was selected by the National Gallery in 1989 to contribute to its first-ever biennial exhibition.

The project called "INDIGENA: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on Five Hundred Years" was the Native Canadian artistic community's counterpoint to the Quincentennial hoopla that has permeated various levels of discussion during 1992. When my associate, Lee-Ann Martin (Mohawk), and I began thinking about this impending date, we were also very much excited at the prospect of engaging the issue of self-representation. How would we do this? Could we engage the Native arts community? What would our peers in the art and museum world think? Could we get support for such an idea?

The timing for such a project seemed perfect, not only because 1992 was looming large in the near future, but because certain exhibitions in which Native people were represented had been creating controversies; among these was "The Spirit Sings," mounted in Calgary during the 1988 winter Olympics.[13] Our idea was simple: to initiate a gathering of the Native artistic community in response to the Columbian Quincentenary. In preparation for this we first polled several colleagues, who eventually confirmed our proposal that the Native voice should be paramount in our planning.

Our challenge, then, was to organize the Native arts community—including visual, literary, and performing artists—in a response to the current issues. We were also quite aware that more dynamic responses to the Columbian Quincentenary would come from the United States. We investigated some of the American projects then underway, and learned of mixed representations of Native and non-Native artists. However, we were convinced that our determining principle of control (ownership) must come from the Native community, if the project was to have significance. Our guiding principle was, in the words of the artist Harry Fonseca (California Maidu), "Native people doing it for themselves." We were also challenged by the former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Georges Erasmus, who had commented to the Task Force assembly in the fall of 1988:

> *The* Spirit Sings *exhibition sparked a fair amount of controversy in Canada. It raised questions that museums had to deal with and a lot of questions that Native people had to address. . . . What kind of role should Native people play in the presentation of their own past, their own history? . . . When the exhibition came to Ottawa we had to ask the indigenous community what we were going to do. We could have continued with the boycott. But we needed to get beyond that. What we are embarking on now is the beginning of a different kind of relationship between two potentially strong allies.*[14]

A year later he repeated these ideas in a speech titled "What Do We Have to Celebrate?" which he gave to a large group of government-invited guests, gathered in Ottawa to discuss how Canadians were going to celebrate 1992. The basis for the "INDIGENA" project was thus established.

The proposal we submitted to the CMC indicated that we would organize "INDIGENA" on three basic principles: Native voice, Native representation, and Native community support. We sensed that if "INDIGENA" were to have validity, timeliness, and success, we had to assert to these principles.

Our first task was therefore to get the Native arts community to participate, and in so doing to challenge the implications of 1992. "What," we asked Native visual artists, "do the five hundred years of colonization in the Americas mean to you?" We presented them with some of the themes in the current debates on Columbus—"celebration," "discovery," "the meeting of two worlds"—and to our surprise received a broad range of interpretations in response. Obviously, Native artists had been considering similar issues. The writers commissioned for the catalogue, on the other hand, were asked to work within an established framework in

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FIG. 4 **Joane Cardinal-Schubert (Metis, b. 1942),** ***Preservation of a Species: DECONSTRUCTIVISTS (This is the house that Joe built),*** **1990, mixed-media installation. Collection of the artist.**

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responding to key issues. We wanted all the participants to reflect on them on a personal and/or tribal level. In order for them to articulate their positions, a national venue was essential, and they have responded with enduring eloquence.

To engage the public in a dialogue—to go beyond the monologue format of catalogue, artwork, and performance—we invited all twenty-five participants to a two-day public colloquium during the opening, providing them with an additional opportunity to elaborate their views and to hear from the public as well. The audience, surprisingly, comprised the non-Native arts community, thus creating a new climate and perhaps stimulating work in a new direction. Proceedings of the colloquium will be published in 1993.

We have also tested other forms of communication. We have produced a gallery guide, contracted a performance artist, and created a marketing and public-relations strategy for the exhibition. The gallery guide encourages visitors to respond to the artworks. It serves a purpose different from that of the catalogue texts. Its purpose is to assist viewers in the interpretative process by asking them to respond to questions. Frequently, art museums leave artworks to "speak for themselves." Our experience is that unguided viewers either misunderstand Native artists' intentions, or don't try to listen to them. We felt that the issues underlying the art were too important to gloss over, so we had somehow to help the "culturally challenged." Without a doubt, there were those who required little assistance, preferring instead the more traditional experience of direct observation in the museum. Critics may have seen the guide as a nuisance, one that undermined their perspectives. Nevertheless, Native artists have often suffered from the perceived inaccessability of their work, and it was an issue we wanted to solve.

The performance artist Floyd Favel (Plains Cree) is a living, though aloof, gallery guide, in that he uses the exhibition installations as his stage. This is similar to the Trickster program used at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, in 1989. The audience shares in the interpretation by moving with the artist through the exhibition. The performance narrative draws its content from the artworks, with the artist acting as the mediating form.

Our most important resource has been the Native community. They are who we represent; they enable us to be employed, and keep us in line by raising matters of personal, tribal, or global concern. The importance of their responsiveness has been a significant factor to us. They are important not only for their contributions, but for their full support. For these reasons, we approached the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA) for their support and collaboration.[15]

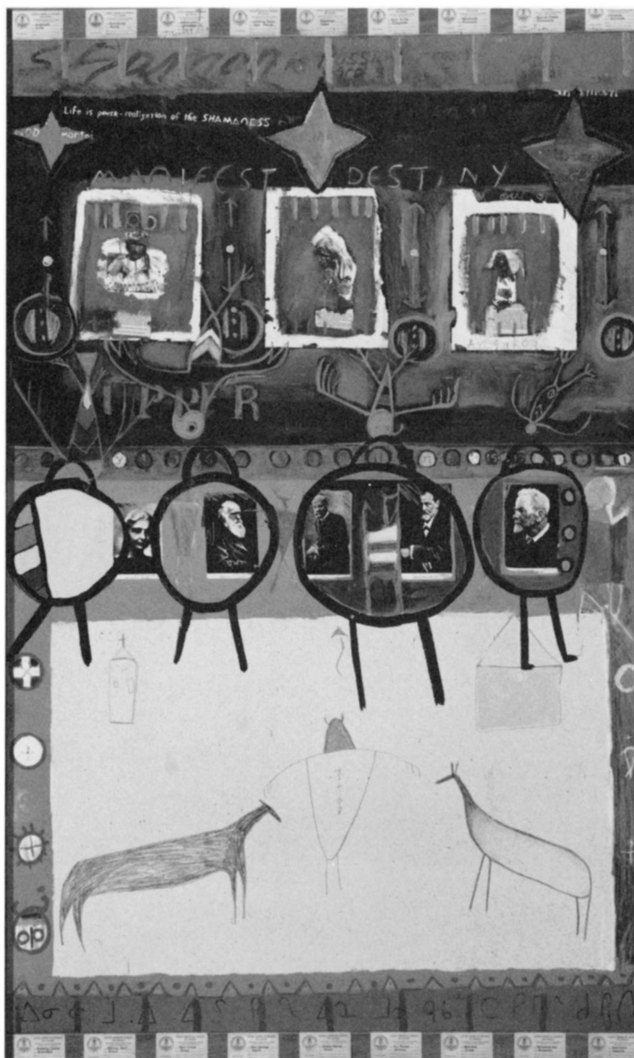

FIG. 5 **Jane Ash Poitras (Chipewyan, b. 1951),** ***A Sacred Prayer for a Sacred Island*** **(left panel), 1991, mixed media on canvas, three panels, each 78 × 50 inches. Collection of the artist.**

SCANA is a body of artists representing every major region across Canada. It is a diverse, extremely talented, and powerfully vocal association. The personal histories of its members are complex, yet their organization is closely knit. They have been kept together by common historical and contemporary issues that target the Western definitions of art which rob them of opportunities to define their own perspectives—whether personal, tribal, reservation, or urban. SCANA was our access to the community; we were its access to prospects of publication and exhibition venues for the Native arts community. Its support for "INDIGENA" has been indispensable. In turn, we assured them of regular communication, through our *INDIGENA Newsletter,* until the end of the project. This newsletter contains news and information on participating artists and writers, new venues, publishers, the colloquium, and so forth.

The year of the Columbian Quincentenary, 1992, is a strategic one for the aboriginal voices of the Americas. As

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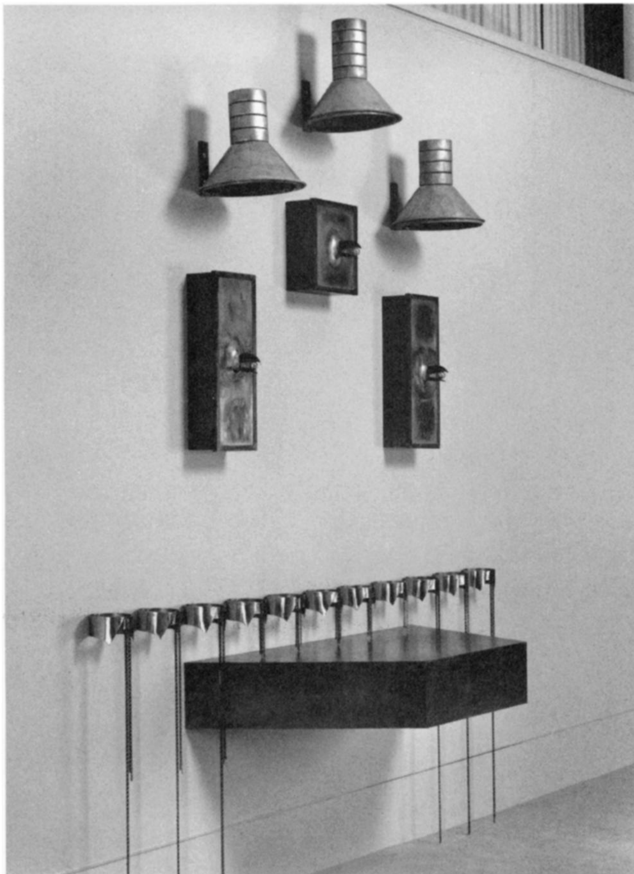
FIG. 6 Rick Rivet (Metis, b. 1949), *Legacy*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 66⅜ × 48 inches. Collection of the artist.



part of the process of change, Native artists are demanding a critique of the history of colonization and of its contemporary celebrations, which embody a language of dominance and conquest. Such an understanding and reworking of the beliefs and attitudes that underlie the celebrations can lead to a dynamic process of change. Native people have the history and vision to move effectively in the world events that so profoundly affect their lives, and especially their drive for self-determination. It is above all artists who participate in these dynamics of change, for they have always understood the vital importance of being responsive to community needs: socially, culturally, economically, and politically.

The events of this year have drawn significant international attention. The themes of discovery, exploration, and encounter proposed by the Quincentenary have demanded that Native peoples establish themselves within the history of the meeting of cultures. As the dubious beneficiaries of five hundred years of Western intervention, Native people have assumed a reflective (if not reflexive) posture, while the rest of the world has reveled in its accomplishments. The present milestone has prompted Native people to address numerous issues of historicity, cultural conquest, aboriginal title, identity, and sovereignty.

"INDIGENA," therefore, should not be viewed as only battling with the past, for we are equally interested in seizing the future. As we have repeatedly suggested to all the participants, the arguments leveled against colonization are only as good as one's determination to maintain one's own cultural autonomy with tenacity. The future is built upon the past and we must begin working together right now, if we are to achieve similar goals. Our children will be only too glad this good work started with us.

History shows that Native peoples have demonstrated remarkable resistance to the centuries of forced change, and continue to do so, even though our governments still feel the need to use legislation against us. The renewed discussions of a proposed Canadian constitution that includes Native peoples may be a sign of hope, but cultural institutions such as museums and art galleries must also do their share in maintaining a mutual accord with their communities, including Natives. Five hundred years has been a long time, and the next five hundred may be even harder; therefore, the more committed we are to change, rather than token gestures, the greater our chances of a positive future.

As Elaine Heumann Gurian of the Smithsonian Institution has said, "Visitors are inevitably creators of meaning." What meanings will our visitors take home after viewing "INDIGENA"? This quite literally is the $64,000 question. Will they know any more about our mutually unfortunate and often difficult histories? Will they be more cognizant of the complexity of such issues as colonization, Native rights, self-

FIG. 7 Eric Robertson (Metis), *Bearings and Demeanours*, 1990, copper, brass, and mixed-media installation, 96 × 96 × 48 inches. Indian Art Centre, Indian and Northern Affairs, Ottawa.

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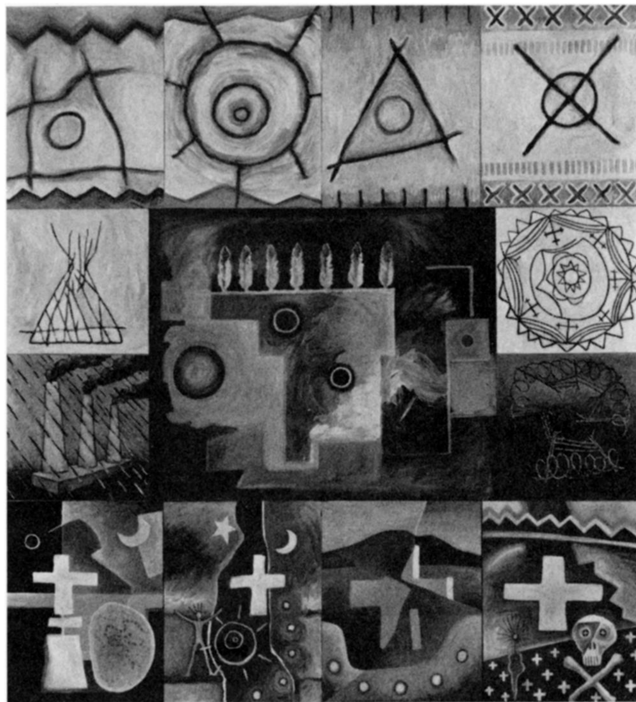

FIG. 8 Luke Simon (Micmac, b. 1953), *Columbus Decelebration Series: Past, Present, and Future,* 1990, oil on Masonite, 44 × 48 inches. Collection of the artist.

determination, land claims? Will Canadians (or others) know more about the one-sided views of history (the Master Narrative) they have been taught, and will they try to change perpetually negative values and beliefs about one another? Can exhibitions like "INDIGENA" be a beacon for future projects? Will other institutions out there work with Native communities to realize their mutual goals and aspirations?

"INDIGENA" to date has confirmed several expectations: that Native people have the talent to realize large projects; that Native people can take leading roles with great articulation; that Native people can come together in polyphonic eloquence; and that Native people have an exceptional history, for which they should never, ever apologize. This is what "INDIGENA" is about.

Notes

Special thanks to Lee-Ann Martin (Mohawk), associate curator of "INDIGENA."

1. In *Border/Lines* 23 (Winter 1991–92): 17.

2. I must acknowledge the Canadian Museum of Civilization to some extent for accepting this bold initiative and believing it can make a difference. Its representations of Native art and culture are historically extensive, but its integrity lies in its support of curatorial responsibility. The museum is in a dynamic position these days, challenged by the communities it serves. The multicultural approach it promotes makes good sense in tackling fresh issues of culture and in exploring the effects they have on all Canadians. There is much work to be done.

3. Stuart Berg Flexner and Leonore Crary Hauck, *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 2d ed., unabridged (New York: Random House, 1987).

4. Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, eds., *INDIGENA: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1992).

5. P.S. 1, Institute for Contemporary Art, Long Island City, New York, was the first scheduled venue. Following three years of negotiations, "INDIGENA" was abruptly canceled. Stating that financial difficulties prevented it from scheduling two contemporary Spanish art exhibitions to act as counterpoints to it, the administration rejected the exhibition, despite having received NEA funding for it.

During the negotiations with P.S. 1, the New York Native American community had been consulted to facilitate public programming, since community outreach has been a major principle of "INDIGENA." With this principle in mind, and given P.S. 1's previous successful projects with other ethnic communities, a major opportunity to work with the Native American community seems to have been skirted, particularly sad in 1992, when interest in Native issues is at a peak. We hope P.S. 1 will still find it possible to bring this important and timely exhibition to New York.

6. For many Canadians the summer of 1990 will long be remembered, when Elijah Harper (Ojibway-Cree), a member of the Manitoba legislature, effectively put the country on hold when his lone abstention prevented the passing of the Meech Lake Constitutional Accord, and plunged Canada into political confusion. The accord was designed in part to recognize Quebec as a "distinct" society, and thus to make official the province's inclusion in the national constitution. Harper's resistance called attention to the exclusion of aboriginal peoples from the accord, an obvious omission that drew immediate notice to aboriginal issues.

As well, 1990 was the summer when Mohawk warriors confronted the Canadian armed forces at Oka, Quebec, protesting a disputed land transaction. Almost immediately, aboriginal peoples across North America gave massive support to the action by blockading roads and railroads, diverting dams, and organizing marches. Around the world Canadian embassies were bombarded with protestors. Additional support for aboriginal issues came from many segments of Canadian society, giving firm evidence that aboriginal peoples are capable of applying various kinds of pressure to get government to respond.

7. Almost four years ago I initiated the idea of creating a position for a Native curator-in-residence at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, where I am the curator of contemporary Indian art. I proposed this, first, to get a sense of the community's interest in Native programs; and second, to encourage Native participation in museum programs at a national level. The residency was jointly funded by the CMC, the Canada Council, and the Indian Art Section of the Department of Indian Affairs. The Council also paid the expenses for a peer jury to interview candidates. The response from the community exceeded our expectations. Eventually, Lee-Ann Martin was chosen to fill the post. Her one-year residency had a twofold mandate. First, she traveled across the country, conducting interviews with curators and museum directors about their policies of collecting and exhibiting Native art. The result of this study is contained in a report, *The Politics of Inclusion/Exclusion: Contemporary Native Art and Museums*, released in March 1991 by the Canada Council. Second, she aided me in the development of the exhibition project titled "INDIGENA."

8. A major report, *TURNING THE PAGE: Forging New Partnerships between Museums and First Peoples*, was released in February 1992, jointly sponsored by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association.

9. Alfred Young Man, "The Metaphysics of North American Indian Art," in McMaster and Martin, *INDIGENA*, 83.

10. The phrase "two founding nations" originally referred to the English and the French, and the concept gave rise to Canada as a country with "official" bilingual status. The conservative policies of the government have made this concept not unlike the United States's "melting pot," and about as successful.

11. In Canada the term "museum" is associated with cultural institutions other than art galleries, e.g., anthropology museum, natural-history museum, aviation museum, etc. The term "art museum" is never used as it is in the U.S.A., where "gallery" is associated with the commercial sector.

12. In an artists' session at the 1992 College Art Association conference, the artist Jaune Quick-to-See-Smith loudly criticized curators who have gotten on the Columbian Quincentenary bandwagon by asking Native American artists to participate in their shows: "Where will you be next year and the following year, when we're no longer in fashion?" Arguing against the notion of Native art as a theme-of-the-week, she suggested that many Native American artists would simply not participate in such exhibitions.

13. See the exhibition catalogue, Julia Harrison, *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, Glenbow Museum, 1987). "The Spirit Sings" was exhibited at the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, in 1988. While it was in Calgary, during the fifteenth winter Olympic Games, the Lubicon Cree of northern Alberta boycotted the exhibition because its major sponsor, Shell Oil, was displacing them from their homes as part of an industrial policy. This action drew immediate international attention.

The recent *Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples* (Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association, 1992), chapter 4, "Creating Partnerships," states: "If museums are to achieve their goal of 'interpreting the past, explaining the present and thereby illuminating choices for the future,' they must express accurately and in context the cultural heritage and spirit of the civilizations that they portray. In this regard, *The Spirit Sings* exhibition was a watershed in Canadian museology."

14. *Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples.*

15. An important liaison in maintaining contact with SCANA and other arts organizations has been Lee-Ann Martin, who was contracted by SCANA to guarantee continued collaboration.

GERALD R. McMASTER *(Plains Cree), curator of contemporary Indian art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, grew up on the Red Pheasant Reserve, near North Battleford, Saskatchewan, and is an artist.*

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