

The Revival of Indian Culture through Museums: The Case of the Mille Lacs Indian Museum

Caroline Laurent
University of Minnesota-Duluth
Sorbonne University, Paris

Introduction

The Mille Lacs Indian Museum opened in May 1996. The building's arching window wall reflects the shoreline of Lake Mille Lacs (in French, "thousand lakes"). Fashioned in cedar, the exterior is highlighted with a copper dome, corrugated copper columns and an inset tile belt of blue oak leaves designed by Mille Lacs artist Batiste Sam.

The new museum was the product of a partnership between the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. They worked together and selected a location on tribal land, right next to the tribal government center, where the old trading post was. The MNHS and the Band chose an architectural firm and agreed on the content of the exhibits. The tribe invested in the new building and contributed to the capital campaign project for the museum. The agreement is that after 50 years, in 2046, the museum shall be turned over to the tribe. The band's and the MNHS' expectations successfully merged in a museum designed to preserve precious artifacts and incorporate the beauty of its setting to tell the Band's history.

The budget of the museum and Trading Post comes from a combination of monies for an annual budget of \$400,000. There is no funding coming from the tribe at this time. The site employs ten people, welcomes 10,000 people a year, and makes over \$250,000 in annual revenue.

There are multiple ways in which the museum has been actively promoting Indian culture and creating connections between visitors and the Mille Lacs Band. First, the museum itself is all about the Band, its history and culture. Second, the Trading Post attached to the museum has been an essential tool to share culture with the public beyond the occasional visit. And third, the events and activities offered by the museum have built a very strong bond between the Mille Lacs community members and the Ojibwe culture.

The Museum Itself

The museum is open for 6 months, from April to October. Its center is a round-shaped area called "The Four-Season Room," which features life-size dioramas. The life-cast mannequins, molded after actual Mille Lacs Band members in 1972, were incorporated into the new museum. Throughout the years, the display has been praised by visitors and has become a source of pride for many Ojibwe people who helped

to build and equip the room and who posed for the life-size figures. The dioramas illustrate traditional activities of Mille Lacs Band members in spring, summer, fall and winter.



There are 6 different exhibit areas around “The Four-Season Room,” which draw heavily on the personal stories and oral histories of the Band members:

- “Timeline” tells about history from the 1700s to 1999, about clans, and the Anishinabe people.
- “Our Living Culture” focuses on traditions that are still alive today, shows powwow outfits, and documents language and traditional games such as the moccasin game.
- “Veterans’ Honor Wall” shows photographs of veterans from the Mille Lacs Band.
- “A Nation within a Nation” focuses on sovereignty, treaties, the history of the key leaders of the Band, and self-governance.
- “Making a Living” explores the many ways Ojibwe people have endured economically through the past century, as well as the modern careers current band members pursue.
- “Laura Jane Musser Crafts Studio” is a spacious area which serves as a learning area for traditional cooking demonstrations, monthly workshop instruction and kids craft activities. People can study the traditional plants used as medicine by tribes in the kitchen area.

There is also a round-shaped library with more than 4,000 books and magazines. It is not open to the public but can be accessed on request by students, researchers or any adult interested in consulting books or articles about Indian history and life.

Finally, the collection area is key to the conservation of culture. It is temperature- and humidity-controlled, monitored by a data sensor. It contains about half of the museum's entire collection (1,000 pieces out of the 2,000 total). There is no rotation of the items on display because there is no curator and no exhibit staff. The last rotation took place in 2006. The museum also assists the Band in the preservation of valuable traditional artifacts when needed. For example, the room houses the Holbert's collection, which used to be stored in a barn. It was professionally cleaned and then taken to the museum.



For the most part, what is at the museum remains there. A few loans go to the St. Paul Museum, or to the National Museum of the American Indian, when they want to show the history of Indians in the Great Lakes area. But the Mille Lacs Museum does not have loans made to it.

Many items produced on the Mille Lacs reservation are in the St. Paul History Museum in the Twin Cities, which has been accumulating 50 years of Mille Lacs items, even since the opening of the Mille Lacs museum in 1960. Some items were also given as gifts to dignitaries (presidents, princes, the Pope). However, the Ayers collection is mainly in the Mille Lacs museum. The outstanding assemblage of artifacts which Harry and Jeannette Ayer obtained from Ojibwe and other Indian artisans during the years they operated a trading post at Mille Lacs Lake forms the basis of the present Mille Lacs Indian Museum exhibits.

The manager's plan is to design a new exhibit that would bring the Mille Lacs items back to the museum and highlight the Mille Lacs artists that have worked on these

pieces. It would draw many more people back to the museum because the items would be recent. At the moment, people do not identify with the 1950s or prior collections. There is a disconnection that needs to be mended by putting a face and a name to items and create a link with the community.

The Indian Trading Post

Adjacent to the museum, and opened year-round, is a 1930s style Indian Trading Post that offers the area's largest selection of traditional and contemporary handcrafted, authentic American Indian art and crafts.



While the Trading Post has a special relationship with members of the Mille Lacs Band, art from tribes across North America is also represented throughout the store. In operation since the late 1910s, a small exhibit area is located in the front of the Trading Post's sales room floor that tells the history of the site and focuses on the Trading Post's original owners, Harry and Jeannette Ayer.

The Trading Post promotes Indian culture mainly through art. It sells porcupine quill baskets, traditional beadwork, birch bark products, painted gourds, black ash baskets, pottery, moccasins, dream catchers, jewelry, dance regalia, music and locally harvested wild rice and maple syrup. Contemporary paintings and sculptures, educational books by and about American Indians, traditional art and craft supplies such as beads and leather, all help provide people with the tools to perpetuate traditional Ojibwe art. The

Trading Post also carries commercial products such as Pendleton blankets, towels and pillows, as well as many different styles and sizes of Minnetonka moccasins.

The Trading Post helps sustain and encourage local artists to continue working with crafts as a part of their cultural heritage. Artist in Residence programs and Indian Art Markets give visitors an opportunity to meet local American Indian artists and learn more about the techniques and materials that they use. The Trading Post sells the artists' productions.

Therefore the Trading Post is more than a gift shop visitors can go to when they come to the museum. It works hand in hand with the museum to make the contemporary collections grow and with the Band members who can sell their work and art.

In the last couple of years, the new manager has expanded the crafts selection and changed the provenance of items. About 50% of all the items for sale are now hand-made and come from Native businesses or directly from craftsmen and women on Minnesota reservations. The level of art work has improved accordingly. Whereas they used to sell knock-offs from China, the Trading Post now sells more genuine art and production. They made a choice of finer and higher quality selling vs. fast selling and of authentic vs. unauthentic. Authentic items, although they are more expensive, support Native art by Native people. The idea is to push customers towards quality over cheap products. The Trading Post's off-season sales have been improving greatly since the change in merchandise occurred.



The shop still operates as a real trading post: people can actually trade their goods there, as long as the artists feel that they get a fair share in the bargain. It is also a place to talk

about the techniques and the material used. The supervisor and the sales assistants educate customers about the use of traditional items when they interact with them and provide the material for crafts and arts.

Activities, Teachings, and Public Events

The museum sponsors artists-in-residence programs: some artists come to the museum and are set up for the weekend where they demonstrate their arts and crafts. It brings the artists to the community and the public to the artists.

There are about two travelling exhibits a year (which last from 6 to 8 weeks). Each exhibit starts with a reception, where there can be a book signing if a book is involved, and ends with a closing reception. Travelling exhibits are a way to draw people back to the museum several times. They can be exhibits about historical events, books, pictures, or art. Recent exhibits have included:

- The AIM exhibit (now a book by Dick Bancroft)
- Edward Curtis exhibit (B&W pictures)
- Mni Sota exhibit (All My Relations: Ojibwe & Dakota Art – contemporary artists)
- Powwow photography exhibit by Ivy Vaino
- X-ray style art painting (Ojibwe artist from Canada)

The museum also routinely hosts workshops, a different one every month. Participants view examples of Ojibwe crafts, learn about traditional design, materials and techniques, and make an item to take home. The workshops last 8 hours over the weekend (4 hours on Saturday and 4 hours on Sunday) and take place in the museum craft area. Some food for both lunches and snacks is provided too. Participants are between 15 and 70 years old.



The workshops welcome a minimum of five to cover the cost of the instructors, and a maximum of 12 to allow for individual attention. Whenever possible, workshops are taught by members of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.

Recent workshops have included the following:

- Ojibwe Moccasin Workshop
- Porcupine Quill Jewelry Workshop
- Sweetgrass Basket Workshop
- Beading 101
- Birch Bark Ornament Workshop
- Ojibwe Mitten Workshop
- Beaded Medallion Workshop
- Woodland Pottery Workshop
- Birch Bark Harvest
- Appliqué Beading Workshop

People come from all over the state of Minnesota. In 2013, the workshops have been more filled up than during previous years. It seems that more and more people are interested in learning the culture.

The information about workshops is sent to the marketing services of the MNHS who take care of the publicity. There are announcements in the media (papers for free, local papers, some websites). There is also a list of 160 regular participants who are emailed each month. These workshops welcome mostly non-Native people and a few Natives. The cost is \$65 for tuition and \$15 for supplies. The visitors leave with the product of their work.

Kids Crafts workshops are featured on select Saturdays once a month. Between 5 and 10 children learn about the tradition of the craft and the materials used. For a small kit fee (\$3-\$7) they can:

- Bead a Ring: Learn basic stringing techniques while making their own ring.
- Make a God's Eye: The name is derived from the item used to decorate ceremonial shields of Southwestern American Indians.
- Weave a Dream Catcher
- Make a Corn Husk Doll
- Make an Ojibwe Shoulder Bag: reminiscent of Ojibwe bandolier bags

Additional kits can be purchased at the Trading Post or online.

Among the occasional special events, the powwow on Memorial Day in May is a favorite, as American Indian Veterans, their families and the community, gather to dance and hear the heartbeat of their nation through singing and drumming. This event is open to the public and continues to grow each year with more dancers and more vendors who sell authentic American Indian arts and crafts. There is an open house and fun run in August, while Indian Art Markets are frequently held, where artists are paid to attend.

Sometimes demonstrations are given, rather than holding participatory workshops. “Wildricing” is a 20-minute presentation that talks about the varieties of rice, the tools needed, the regulations on ricing, the parching process, and threshing (dancing on the rice). In “Maple Syruping” the presenter talks about and shows the equipment used (old and new), explains how to identify a maple tree, and then demonstrates how the sap is boiled right there inside the museum. Both events are free.

Field trips for school groups form another common event. About 75% of the students who come are non-Native and come from surrounding communities, which builds a closer relationship with the Band. Groups are made of 10 to 20 children. During fiscal year 2013, there were 73 school groups and 38 adult groups (which come through touring companies).

The positive impact is visible particularly on the children of the Nayashing School (Mille Lacs Band’s school) where they do not teach about Native history and traditions. About 8 groups are sent every year to the museum where they dispel stereotypes (about tipis vs. wigwams, the way to dress) and let them know that all Indians are not the same.

Children learn Ojibwe words and American Indian sign language through an interactive Ojibwe language game. They learn games of skill and chance that American Indian kids played, including the bowl game, snake game, deer and hunter, the run and scream game and lacrosse. They also tour the four-season room and the historical part of the Trading Post.

Summer youth internships are available for 10th to 12th graders. Band members usually have to be convinced to come and do internships. Last summer, 3 people completed the program. Travis, the manager of the museum, thinks they are getting better results. There is a renewed interest by some of the children to learn about their culture. By the time they are finished with their internship, they are ready to give tours themselves.

Conclusion

Since July 2013, when the Band hires new staff (both Band members and nonmembers), they have to spend three to four hours at the museum as part of their orientation. They get an overview of the site, a tour of the four-season room and of the museum, where they learn about the tribe’s history and sovereignty.

It is difficult to measure the appreciation of Indian culture by visitors of the museum, but the workshops have been the most tangible evidence that people are becoming more interested in it. With the workshops, there is also an end result that people can take home with them and show their family and friends, hopefully sharing their experience and making other people aware of Indian culture, too.

Finally, I would like to thank Travis Zimmerman, the site manager, Bradley Sam, the programs supervisor, and Shelley Foster, the Trading Post supervisor, who have answered all my questions and shared all their photos with me.