

Seeing Native Americans Nowhere, and Everywhere

As Washington's professional football team retires a team name, a curator at the National Museum of the American Indian talks about our attachment to Native American imagery.



By Jennifer Schuessler

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On Monday, the N.F.L. team in Washington announced that it would be retiring the name “Redskins” and its feather-topped Indian head logo, abruptly reversing its staunch defense of a name long considered as a racial slur.

But there's one unexpected place where the team's logo will be preserved, at least through 2027: in the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington.

A baby blanket with the logo hangs near the entrance of “Americans,” an exhibition that opened in 2018. It's installed in a soaring hall, along with ads, toys, film clips, toys, weapons and hundreds of other Indian-themed objects which range, depending on the beholder, from the kitschy to the charming to the offensive.

The point? To illuminate the paradox that Native American names, symbols and stories are ubiquitous in American life, even if actual Indians are largely invisible. And they aren't just ubiquitous, the show argues, but central to American identity.

“It's spooky, weird and subversive,” Paul Chaat Smith, a curator who created the exhibition with Cécile R. Ganteaume, said of the profusion of Native imagery.

“We wanted to make the point that this is part of American life, going back 300 years, since before the founding,” he said. “From Paul Revere to Kanye West, why does this never get out of style?”

The museum is closed because of the coronavirus, but much of the exhibition can be seen online. We talked with Mr. Smith, who is Comanche, about the exhibition, the name change and how to think about our attachment to Native American imagery. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.



Paul Chaat Smith is a curator of the exhibition, which aims to illuminate the paradox that Native American names, symbols and stories are ubiquitous in American life, even if actual Indians are largely invisible to most Americans. Paul Morigi/Associated Press, via National Museum of the American Indian

The museum issued a statement earlier this month calling for an end to the use of racist mascots and images. What do you think about the Washington team's decision?

When you follow something like that for years, for decades, it's stunning when it changes on a dime. We're very pleased with the decision. We want to get out of the mascot business.

Some say these names honor the warriors, and provide a way to introduce Native culture. But an N.F.L. team is not the ideal venue to educate the public about Native issues. And if it's such a good idea, show me the equivalent honoring of Chicanos, Asian-Americans or any other group. It only happens to us.

When the exhibition opened, the focus on pop-culture appropriation, rather than on authentic native culture, was seen as something of a departure for the museum. What was the idea behind it?

Since the museum opened more than 10 years ago, we've found that people are very sympathetic to Native Americans. They are inclined to think Native culture is valuable and important. But people were becoming culture tourists. They go and learn some things, but it has nothing to do with them. They weren't going to leave and be reminded of Indians, the way they are with African-Americans, who are just present in the culture in a much different way.

You realize, "Wow, it's kind of interesting how our whole lives we are surrounded by Indian imagery." So we can make the argument that Indians are central to U.S. national identity. You have Indians on brake fluid, weapons systems, sports teams, all sorts of other things that have nothing to do with Indians or each other. But it's meant to say something about authenticity, about Americanness.

Did it seem risky to put some of this stuff on view?

With the sports material, that's what the activists said: This stuff should be in a museum. We're pleased we could put it in a museum.

The Washington's team name is gone. The Land O' Lakes Maiden is also gone. Should all this stuff just go away?

We wanted to avoid being prescriptive, to say, "This team name is bad. It's a slur. But this other one is not." Some things are obnoxious. We should get rid of some things. But we are not trying to be the police force to shame people. It doesn't help us to eliminate everything. The problem with Native Americans is the invisibility in American life.

Some of these images are at least meant to be flattering, right?

You don't have an Aunt Jemima thing. A lot of it is meant to be very favorable. But it's still really singular — nobody else gets plastered on every product.



"You have Indians on brake fluid, weapons systems, sports teams, all sorts of other things that have nothing to do with Indians or each other," Mr. Smith said. National Museum of the American Indian

The show also re-examines four stories involving Indians that circulate widely in American culture, including Thanksgiving (the subject of a very funny video) and the Battle of Little Bighorn. The show calls Custer's defeat a national shock akin to the Kennedy assassination. But a few years later, some of the warriors are celebrities. And pretty soon the Plains Indians, who numbered only 30,000, came to symbolize all Indians, and even America itself. How did that happen?

It's one of the craziest things. There was a sense of national tragedy after Custer's defeat. But pretty soon, Sitting Bull goes on lecture tour in the East. There was a range of opinion, but a lot of people saw these Sioux folks, these Cheyenne folks, as wonderful Americans.

After Little Bighorn, people said "Hey, we kind of like Indians. It's what makes us different, this special sauce of American Indians." But there were still acts of dispossession happening. All these things are coexisting.

Historians have long written about the connections between the U.S. Army victory in the Civil War and conquest of Native American territory in the West. But now the general public has become more aware of it, in part thanks to recent debates over Confederate and other Civil War monuments. Does that surprise you?

Ten years ago, you would see discussion of all these famous generals in the Civil War. Then you'd see them involved the Plains Indian warfare, but it would never be connected. They were treated as completely discrete political developments.

It's amazing to see how fast people are making these connections, like the recent incident with the statue of Ulysses S. Grant. He was a brilliant general in the Civil War, then a president. But he was also behind some of the campaigns that resulted in the Black Hills being dispossessed. For me, that's always eventually what you want to get to: a kind of complexity. It's not helpful to see history in black and white.

People can have a strong reaction to their team name, or their Boy Scout rituals, being challenged. Are there Indian-themed objects you have an emotional connection to?

I'm from the 20th century, born in the '50s. People of that time, when you see nothing really positive in your regular life about Native people, then you see some Indian object, and it can be very positive. We know it's corny, it's a fantasy and it's not really about us. But it is some kind of visibility.

I like the fact that Elvis Presley made two bad movies ["Stay Away Joe" and "Flaming Star"] in which he played Native Americans. The biggest star in the world thought Indians were interesting. Of course, we want realistic movies and better movies.

We've had people who came into our museum, including dignitaries from reservations, wearing caps for the Braves or other teams. Maybe it's ironic. Maybe they think it should be changed, but they still support the teams. For people of a certain generation, that's powerful. It's saying, "Hey man, we're still here."

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