



THE LAND HAS MEMORY

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE,
NATIVE LANDSCAPES, *and the*
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE
AMERICAN INDIAN

Edited by

DUANE BLUE SPRUCE

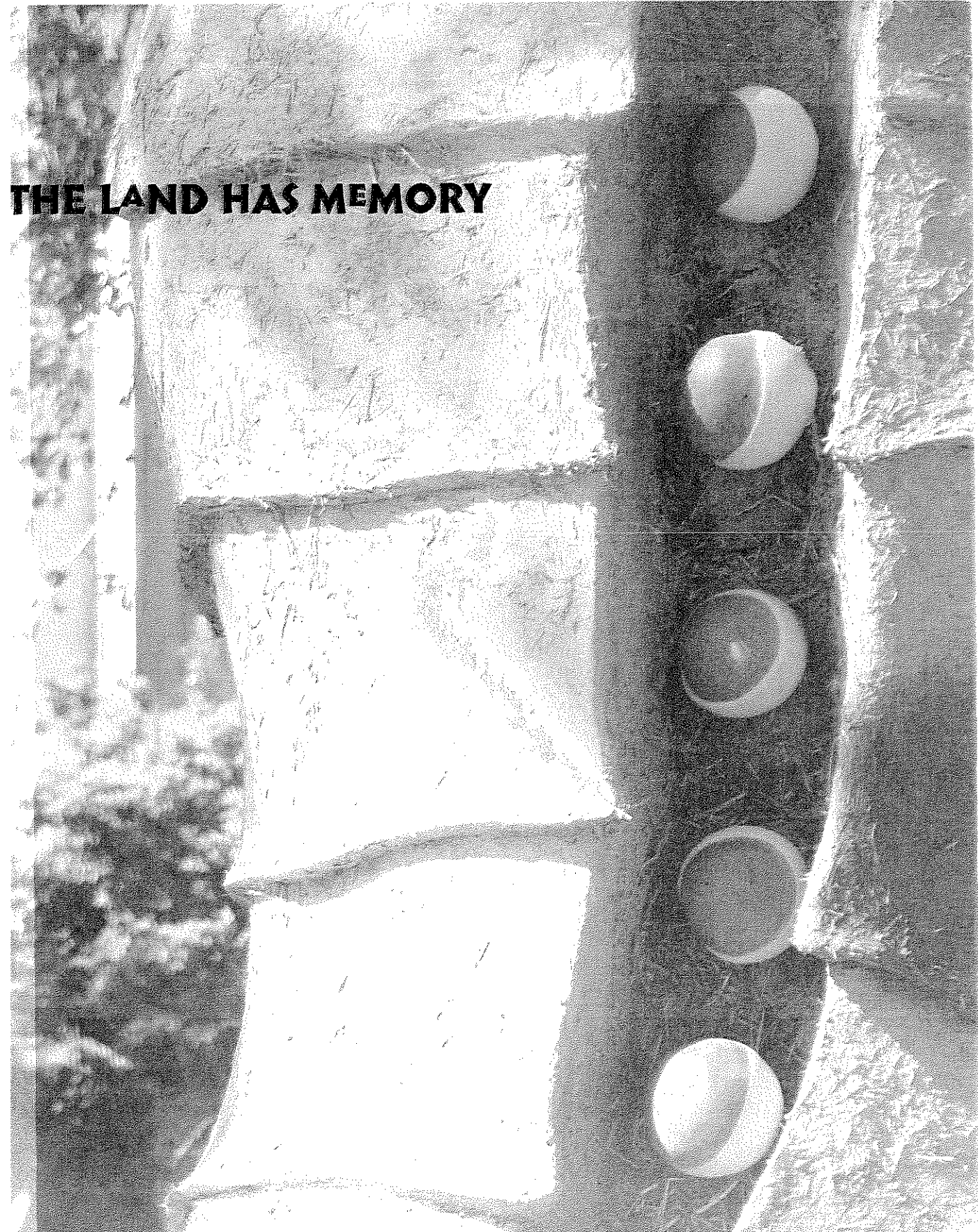
and

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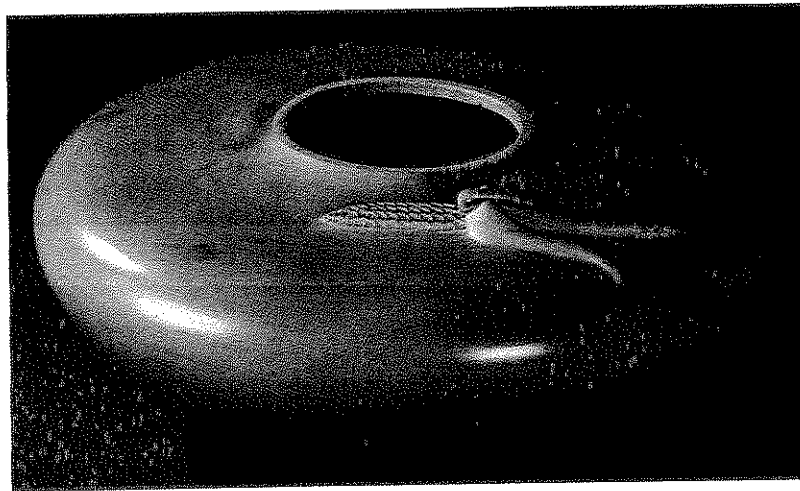


Foreword

Like all mothers, Mother Earth is the ultimate giver. She reveals her beauty in countless variations, from wetlands and meadows to rain forests and deserts. Like any good mother, she does many things at the same time and does them all well. She nurtures us with food crops, heals us with medicinal plants, and sustains us with other natural resources. She teaches us how we should live our lives — *don't take more than you need*, she chides. And like all parents, she shapes her children's lives and their ways of looking at the world in profound ways. When we learn that one of our brothers or sisters — Native or not — is from Texas or Alaska or rural Brazil, we then know something about who that person is and how he or she sees the world. So, just as each generation makes its mark on the land, the land inevitably makes its mark on us.

This is Indian thinking. There are many differences between traditional Native philosophies about the natural world and the Western paradigm that has dominated much of recent life in the Americas. Despite its ancient history, the American landscape has come to be seen, over the last several centuries, primarily as the object of Manifest Destiny and a mere backdrop for American civilization. Both of these ideas seem based on the assumption — completely at odds with Indian thinking — that the land is a passive commodity, a thing that gives only if we conquer it, a thing we can own and exploit to fullest advantage. More recently, though, a growing concern is being voiced about the state of our world. A global ecological movement is building that seeks to respect, honor, and preserve the

*Creamware pot with raised
corn design, ca. 1980. Made
by Iris Y. Nampeyo (Hopi,
b. 1944?), Arizona. 25/4763*



health and beauty of our planet. These progressive ideas are in response to cutting-edge scientific research, but they reflect the ancient and deeply held Indian concept that the Earth herself is a living being, sentient and self-aware. Native and non-Native peoples have come to share a concern that our Mother is growing ill and that we must now tend to her with the care and love that she has always shown for us. Through performances, films, and lectures held at the Mall Museum and the George Gustav Heye Center, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) has begun to address global warming and the environment, inaugurating our long-term commitment to participating in this crucial and complex dialogue.

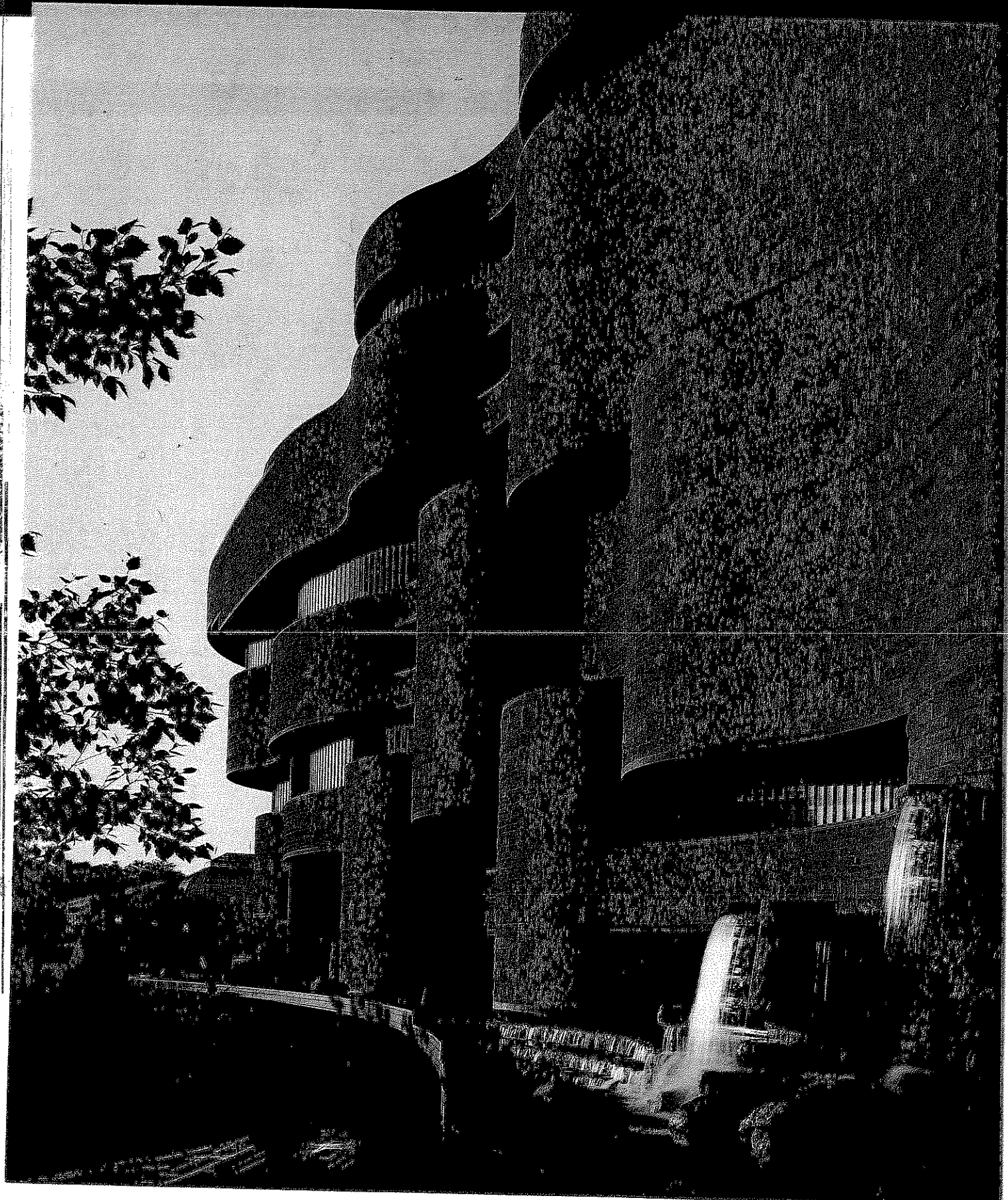
As a window into contemporary Native thinking about the land in general, and the Mall Museum landscape in particular, this book offers a wealth of insights. It also rights a number of misconceptions. Like many things about Indian peoples, our relationships with the natural world have often been oversimplified and romanticized. While we certainly experience very deep connections to our homelands, the image of the innocent primitive frolicking in an unblemished landscape is truly at odds with the reality of countless generations of people who developed sophisticated land-management and agricultural techniques, from the controlled burnings of the North American prairies to ensure better grazing for the herds



Navajo family harvesting crops, New Mexico, ca. 1952. P32981

of buffalo, to the careful way we harvest sassafras, to the interplanting of corn, beans, and squash. Any Hopi farmer will tell you that corn doesn't just spring from the dry red earth of Arizona, even though it has grown there for thousands of years. It is the result of Native ingenuity, experimentation, and learning about how we should treat the Earth to best experience her bounty.

The following essays work together to provide a most extraordinary map. They decode physical space, bringing to the printed page significant details that otherwise lie hidden in the water, trees, rocks, and plants sur-



rounding NMAI's Mall Museum. In a larger sense, they are also an atlas to the hearts and minds of a number of contemporary Native people as they construct and deconstruct ideas about their personal relationships to the physical world and to the lands that sustained their ancestors for generations before them. They offer an invitation to see the Mall Museum grounds through the distinctly Indian perspectives from which they were born. To view the landscape through Indian eyes can mean many things. The plantings surrounding the Mall Museum might be seen as a source of medicine and food or as a backdrop for meditation and respite from the city. They could offer a colorful palette that becomes an abstract painting or a piece of beadwork art, or they could provide a setting for remembering the ancestors who came before us.

In the context of the formal geometry of the National Mall, with its carefully tended gardens and uniform rows of trees, we have designed a very different museum site — one that reflects Indian sensibilities. After creating this space in the most culturally careful way we could, we are allowing the landscape, designed to *look* natural, to *become* natural once again. Several years into this process, ducks and foxes are our regular visitors. Hearty indigenous plants, happy to be home again, spread and thrive. To our delight, a barren cypress trunk placed in the middle of the museum's wetlands area has sprouted a new sapling, a magical and humbling example not only of Mother Earth's mysterious generative powers but also of her delightful sense of humor. On lands that have been home to the Chesapeake Bay peoples for thousands of years, a new generation of Native Americans has made its mark on a small corner of our nation's capital. And, true to form, this remarkable site makes its mark on us as well.

— KEVIN GOVER (Pawnee/Comanche)

Director, National Museum of the American Indian

opposite: NMAI's northwest entrance and water feature.

Introduction

REMEMBERING THE EXPERIENCE OF PAST GENERATIONS

JOHNPAUL JONES

There is no place without a story. Every plant, every animal, every rock and flowing spring carries a message. Native peoples of the Americas learned over thousands of years to listen to the messages, and we know every habitat. We know the earth; we know the sky; we know the wind; we know the rain; we know the smells. We know the spirit of each living place. The spirit of place is embedded deeply within us; we are connected to something larger than ourselves.

In 1993, I joined forces with Donna House (Diné/Oneida), Ramona Sakiestewa (Hopi), and Douglas Cardinal (Blackfoot) to assist in the design phase of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). Through consultations with hundreds of Native elders, artists, educators, and other professionals spanning the entire Western Hemisphere, we attempted to create a building and surrounding habitat that would be imbued with the messages of past generations and the essential spirit of place. We wanted to convey among other things the deep history of Native people here in the area now known as Washington, D.C., and throughout North and South America. We wanted to announce our continued presence: we are still here, even though governments have tried repeatedly to eliminate us. We still practice what our ancestors passed on to us, and our beliefs and traditions live.

It was our firm conviction that we should not simply come and build

The museum should address environments. How many people know there are mountains where you can look without seeing a house, or see the ocean and the horizon? If you don't experience this, you've missed what life is about.

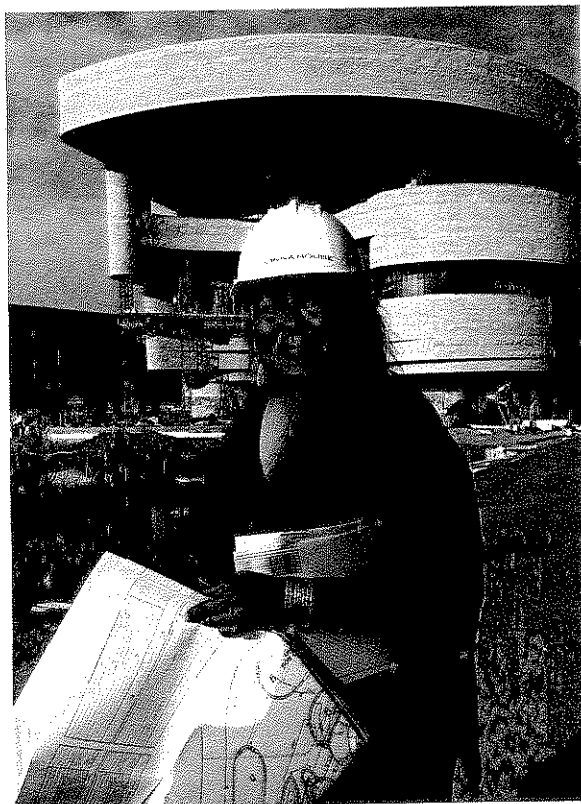
Frank LaPena (Wintu/
Nomtipom), artist,
from consultations with
Native artists, 1991

*Johnpaul Jones
(Cherokee/Choctaw)
(right) and Founding
Director W. Richard West
Jr. (Southern Cheyenne)
at the outdoor sculpture
dedication, 2007.*



on the land. We needed to speak to the land first and explain our intentions, promise to use it wisely, and not deviate from that promise. We had to make a pact with the living site, giving it new purpose. We had to ask the earth not to be angry if we dug or removed the soil, and we had to thank it for its sacrifice. In keeping with these convictions, a group of elders walked the site before construction began. They prayed and talked among themselves and found the land's center. Without taking measurements or knowing anything about setbacks or building restrictions, they chose a spot that allowed the maximum use of the ground. The spot also marks the intersection of the site's north-south and east-west access lines. Today, the stone at the heart of the circular floor in the Potomac, the museum's beautiful rotunda, sits at that uniquely identified center point.

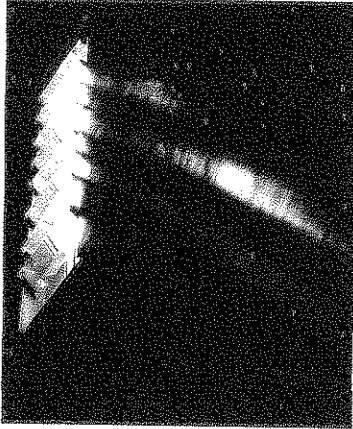
Native peoples have an extraordinary relationship with the land and the world around them that stems from the broadest sense of kinship with all life. They possess systems of beliefs that are complex yet straightforward, passed down for generations. My personal beliefs are a gift given to me by my grandmother, taught to her by our Choctaw and Cherokee ancestors,



*Donna House (Diné/
Oneida) in NMAI's
wetlands area during
landscape construction,
2003.*

a way of life revolving around the four worlds of my heritage. An understanding of these four worlds — the natural world, the animal world, the spirit world, and the human world — connects and inspires indigenous people across the Americas while allowing them to have distinct cultures with diverse customs and perspectives. As the NMAI design team contemplated our goals for the museum, we sought to ensure that these four worlds were represented in a very pronounced way, so that from the moment visitors step onto the site, they feel they are in a different place, an American Indian place.

To American Indians, the natural world is distinguished by its cycles, with the seasons of the earth governing all living things. Native communities hold ceremonies to mark each season and give thanks for what the earth has provided. From ancient times, indigenous people have rec-



Prisms in the south-facing wall of the museum. This design feature, created by New York artist Charles Ross, reminds visitors of the location and path of the sun.

ognized connections between the celestial world and the cycles of the earth, erecting structures that refer to seasonal solstices and equinoxes and using the moon as a guide for planting and for performing rituals. This sophisticated knowledge of the heavens and how things happen in the universe was something we wanted to make evident in the design of the museum and its landscape.

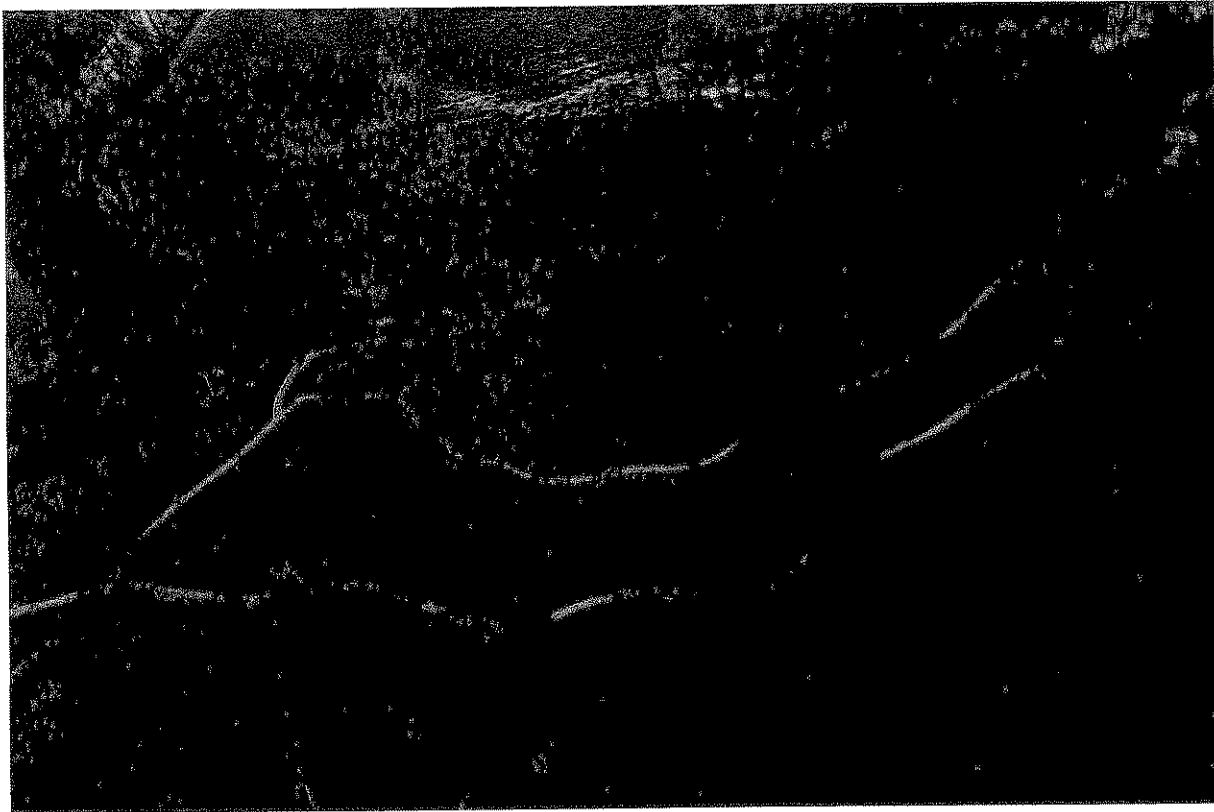
One day as we met to discuss the building's progress, Donna House asked me to stand with her next to a window. As sunlight poured in through the glass, she placed her closed hand in the light and then opened it so that the crystals she was holding made a rainbow pattern on the ceiling and walls beside us. It was her inspired design concept that led to the magnificent prism window mounted in the south wall of the Potomac. Eight large prisms, each turned to the sun for a particular time of day and season, cast a brilliant solar spectrum onto the floor and walls, blessing all those who pass.

At the center of the Potomac floor, the four cardinal directions and the axes of the solstices and equinoxes are mapped out in rings of red and black granite. The cardinal directions also appear repeatedly outside the museum, notably in the four flat paving stones at the center of the Welcome Plaza and at the edges of the museum site in four stones from Canada, Chile, Maryland, and Hawai'i. Forty additional boulders known as Grandfather Rocks, the elders of the landscape, surround the building. They hold the memories of those who came before us and give welcome to visitors.

Fire and water, also fundamental elements of the natural world, are represented in the museum habitat. On the north side of the building, nestled between the wetlands and hardwood forest, a fire pit was constructed for use in honoring and blessing ceremonies. It would not be a Native place without fire and smoke! At the Northwest Plaza, a waterfall grows out of the building's face, seeping between layers of stone. It is a reminder of Tiber Creek, which flowed through this place at another time in history. The land has memory.

Native cultures have always had profound relationships with the animal world. Many Native cultures believe that animals are sacred because they have powerful souls; they carry spiritual messages and can possess healing powers. Individual tribes embrace their connection to the earth and all of its inhabitants by honoring the animal life that sustains and informs them. In their crests, the Tsimshian people of the Pacific Northwest pay homage to their animal brothers the Raven, Eagle, Wolf, and Killerwhale. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) consider the earth to be a living being, the Great Turtle, with all life riding on her back. We remembered the animal world as we approached the design of the museum, and we wanted to share with visitors our belief in the interconnectedness of all life. To create a wild home for animals on the National Mall, we fashioned wetlands at the eastern end of the site. We envisioned a place where frogs would sing in the springtime, where birds and butterflies would rest, and where trees would remind us of the four seasons of life. Wild rice plants and plentiful nesting spots have brought flocks of mallard ducks to the wetlands habitat. Herons have been seen feeding there, and even an errant fox has come to investigate a landscape that his ancestors would have recognized. In the warmer months, the large building overhang at the Welcome Plaza forms a natural sound amphitheater that resonates with the songs of the abundant animal life in residence.

In the Native worldview, everything is alive, endowed with spirit or energy. Nature has something to teach us, not only through obviously animate things like plants and animals but also through rocks, mountains, rivers, and places large and small. These are all part of our spirit world. Sacred sites, etched in tribal memory, are prized for the forces that abide there and keep things in order and in motion. Native sacred spaces include places of healing, such as springs and waterfalls; places where medicinal plants or special animals may be found; places for celestial observation; and places for dreaming, visioning, and listening to the land. These are the features we undertook to include in the museum and its landscape. The deep significance of sacred sites is present in the Northwest Plaza wa-



Aerial view of the Great Serpent Mound, an ancient North American sacred site, Ohio, ca. 1935. P18523

terfall, the sound of which echoes off the powerful exposed boulders. The organic pattern of the stone walkways, which recall the bed of a flowing stream, also reminds us of the importance of sacred lands. The nurturing gifts of our land are present in the sunflower, the witchhazel, and the sassafras — plants long recognized for their healing properties — scattered throughout the hardwood forest and croplands of the museum site.

In the early days of the design process, the team traveled across the Americas to hear suggestions from Indian people about how to infuse this new Native place with the spirit of our ancestors and the diverse spiritual traditions of our tribal communities. For example, while few Native American structures have anything close to a dome, many have an open-

ing at the top to release smoke and allow access to spirits. The dome we created soars 120 feet over the main floor and features an oculus or circular skylight — a symbolic passageway for spirits to come and go. The Potomac is the heart of the museum, a space to celebrate the rituals, songs, and dances that keep the Native spirits of the hemisphere alive.

Indian people have often seen museums as dead places that represent Native cultures as relics of some distant past. But the National Museum of the American Indian strives to be a living museum dedicated to transferring knowledge according to ancient traditions, through oral histories, storytelling, performances, and exhibits presented in distinctly Native voices. This is the human world, and it is central to the museum's mission. Grandmothers and grandfathers give us words. Community elders are our first teachers, sharing stories, guiding us, and connecting us to our ancestors and our past. Then one day it becomes our turn to have children all around us, hungering for stories. In the Outdoor Theater, encircled by a flowing waterway, presentations, dances, and musical performances celebrate the power of Native language and knowledge. In this place live the humor, hospitality, prayers, and dreams of our ancestors. We hope that in the future, the landscape will continue to provide a living "stage" for cooking displays; ceremonies involving fire, water, and plant materials; and traditional harvesting demonstrations. Without the ingenuity of Native peoples, we would not have corn chips, guacamole, tomato sauce, or French fries!

The National Museum of the American Indian is a celebration of indigenous peoples' deep appreciation and understanding of the natural, animal, spirit, and human worlds. There is no division between the building and grounds, and the museum itself is centered on that which is common to Indian communities everywhere. It is a place where our beliefs have not been left out, where our ancestors' lessons can be heard. It is a place that marks the other side of an arduous journey of survival. At long last we have an honored place in Washington, D.C., a Native place to tell our stories and celebrate our cultures.

Music group Na'rimbo performs on NMAI's Welcome Plaza during the Indian Summer Showcase, 2006.

