



George Gustav Heye **Founder of the Museum of the American Indian (1916) in New York City**

George Gustav Heye (1874-1957) was the founder of the Museum of the American Indian (1916) in New York City and served as its director until 1956. His personal collection of Native American materials, gathered during a 45-year period, became the basis of the museum's collection and is considered one of the most comprehensive in the world. It includes one million objects from indigenous peoples throughout the Western Hemisphere.

The Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, collection was transferred to the Smithsonian in 1989, when President Bush signed legislation to establish the National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian Institution.

Heye was the son of Carl Friederich Gustav Heye, a German immigrant who accumulated his wealth in the petroleum industry, and Marie Antoinette Lawrence Heye of Hudson, N.Y. George Gustav graduated from Columbia College in 1896 with a degree in electrical engineering. While on an engineering assignment on a railroad construction job in Arizona in 1897, he acquired a Navajo deerskin shirt, marking the beginning of his passion for collecting. Initially, it was a hobby.

Heye acquired single pieces until 1903, when he began collecting material in huge numbers. In 1901, he began a career in investment banking that would last until 1909. By then his passion for acquiring Indian cultural materials had become more important to him than banking. Throughout the remainder of his life, his energy and fortune were spent accumulating the largest private collection of Native American objects in the world.

Heye enjoyed his visits to American Indian communities, buying everything in sight. While other collectors focused on what was considered to be the highly significant object, Heye often bought every object he could find, shipping the items back to New York.

The collection was initially stored in Heye's Madison Avenue apartment in New York City, and later, in a rented room. Eventually, the collection was moved to the Heye Foundation's Museum of the American Indian at 155th Street and Broadway. The museum opened to the public in 1922, and closed in 1994, when the Smithsonian opened the Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian in lower Manhattan.

A life member of the American Anthropological Association and the American Museum of Natural History, Heye was also a life fellow of the American Geographical Society, a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and an honorary fellow of the

Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain. He received an honorary doctorate (1929) of philosophy from the University of Hamburg.

Heye's life and character is often defined by his passion for collecting. But the way he handled the collection indicates how complex and relatively unique Heye was as a museum director. In addition to collecting throughout North and South America, Heye, on annual trips to Europe through the 1920s, made large purchases of collections from dealers and auctions in Paris and London. Several important collections or pre-contact pieces from Latin America, which had been taken to Europe in the 1870s and 1880s, were thus brought back to the museum.

On one of Heye's frequent visits with the Seneca people in upstate New York, he was given the Seneca name O'owah (Screech Owl). The Hidatsa of North Dakota gave him the name Isatsigibis (Slim Shin) in 1938, in the midst of a great drought in Hidatsa country. The Hidatsa believed that the drought was caused by the loss of a sacred medicine bundle, which had been acquired by a missionary many years before he sold it to Heye in 1907. The Hidatsa sought its return. Although it was one of the museum's prized objects, Heye agreed to the return. In January 1938, Heye placed the bundle in the hands of Hidatsa elders Foolish Bear, 84, and Drags Wolf, 75. The elders presented Heye with a "buffalo medicine horn" and conferred on Heye the name Isatsigibis. Shortly after the bundle arrived at the Hidatsa reservation, it rained.

The return of this object served as an unknown predicator of the repatriation section of the legislation establishing the National Museum of the American Indian 51 year later. Today, although a small percentage of the one million object collection is subject to repatriation, the collection will remain a valuable material record of many indigenous cultures and peoples of the Americas as the result of Heye's efforts. As Linda Poolaw (Delaware/Kiowa), Delaware Grand Chief, says, "If Gustav Heye hadn't collected those things back then, we would not have them today to look at. Now, over 100 years later, my people can see what we had, and it is not lost."

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