



When the glamorous, ultramodern Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino complex in Hollywood opened almost three years ago, there was no question that a special place would be reserved for a celebration of the Tribe's history and culture.

The site of the resort, on the Seminole Tribe of Florida's reservation in Hollywood, had been home to a small museum and Indian village for more than four decades. "This was one of the first enterprises the Tribe participated in," notes Anne McCudden, director of the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, which operates its flagship facility on the Big Cypress Reservation in the Everglades and now proudly welcomes visitors to the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum at Okalee.

The two facilities are doubly meaningful, explains Tina M. Osceola, executive director of the Tribal Historic Resources Department. "The significance of the museum to the Seminole Tribe of Florida is summed up in the translation of its name – Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki, 'A Place to Learn.' The museum is a place for Tribal members as well as the non-tribal public to come and learn about the people, history, culture and art of the Seminole Tribe of Florida," Osceola says.

"The most important significance of the museum to non-tribal visitors is that they can come to the museum to learn our story from us," she continues. "Why is this important? Because so much of the American Indian/Alaska Native culture and history has been documented and written by people from outside of the culture. When people come to the museum, they are learning from us – the Seminole."

When Seminole Hard Rock visitors take time out from the gaming tables and other activities to venture inside the museum at Okalee, they encounter a carefully planned combination of permanent and changing exhibitions

Lucky Find

*Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum at Okalee
Brings Seminole Culture to Hard Rock*

BY LEON M. RUBIN



A recent exhibit depicted the history of the Seminole Tribe as shown through colorful postcards.

designed to shed light on the storied Native American Tribe. According to McCudden, approximately one-third of the 4,000-square-foot facility is devoted to a permanent exhibit that depicts the six tribal reservations within Florida as well as a re-creation of an archeological excavation. Also featured is the largest known indoor mural painted by Native American artist Fred Beaver.

The remaining two-thirds of the gallery space are used for temporary exhibitions, such as the just-completed “Seminoles Look Back: Our People in Postcards.” Opening October 19 is the appropriately named “Jackpot! Seminole Gaming from Then Until Now.” The exhibit will focus on the concepts of Tribal sovereignty and the institution of gaming as an economic force in today’s American Indian tribes. Special attention will be given to the economic and cultural benefits of gaming as well as the Seminole Tribe of Florida’s recent acquisition of Hard Rock International.

Additionally, the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum at Okalee encompasses an art gallery, where works by renowned contemporary Native American artists are shown and sold, and a large museum store that specializes in authentic Seminole and other Native American arts, crafts, books, CDs, DVDs and other merchandise.



This work by Fred Beaver is the largest known indoor mural painted by the Native American artist.

Meanwhile, the museum’s dedicated curatorial team is striving hard to ensure that their work is rewarded with the museum world’s equivalent of a standing ovation – accreditation by the American Association of Museums (AAM). During the summer, Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki submitted an exhaustive self-study questionnaire with a staggering 47 attachments to AAM in Washington, D.C.

Visits by the AAM accreditation team to the Okalee and Big Cypress locations will follow within the next several months as part of a process that could take another year and a half, McCudden explains. If all goes well, Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki would be the first tribal museum in the country to be accredited, she says.

“The Tribe has allocated funds to us to build the best museum we can and preserve the culture and history in the best way possible,” McCudden notes. Accreditation would confirm the value of this investment. “It’s been a tremendous amount of work; very humbling but very worthwhile,” she adds. “This was truly a team effort and one that has pushed us even closer to having the type of world-class facility that the Tribe can be proud of.”

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The Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum at Big Cypress offers an even more extensive view of Seminole history and culture.

Whether they explore the Okalee museum or the more expansive facility at Big Cypress, the majority of visitors to Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki have much the same reaction, Tina Osceola points out. “Most visitors describe their experience as eye-opening,” she says. “We have had some people cry when they learn about the Indian Removal and Termination policies of the United States. We have children laugh when they see the gar fish and turtles hidden amongst the exhibits.

“To sum it up, I believe visitors are absolutely overwhelmed and awestruck. The museum is a hidden treasure of the Seminole,” Osceola concludes.

A treasure in a Seminole paradise. ★

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Dana Gioia

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bit trades off the challenging pleasures of art for the easy comforts of entertainment. And that is exactly what is happening – not just in the media, but in our schools and civic life.

Entertainment promises us a predictable pleasure – humor, thrills, emotional titillation or even the odd delight of being vicariously terrified. It exploits and manipulates who we are rather than challenges us with a vision of who we might become. A child who spends a month mastering Halo or NBA Live on Xbox has not been awakened and transformed the way that child would be spending the time rehearsing a play or learning to draw.

Dividing into groups

If you don't believe me, you should read the statistical studies that are now coming out about American

civic participation. Our country is dividing into two distinct behavioral groups. One group spends most of its free time sitting at home as passive consumers of electronic entertainment. Even family communication is breaking down as members increasingly spend their time alone, staring at their individual screens.

The other group also uses and enjoys the new technology, but these individuals balance it with a broader range of activities. They go out – to exercise, play sports, volunteer and do charity work at about three times the level of the first group. By every measure they are vastly more active and socially engaged than the first group.

What is the defining difference between passive and active citizens? Curiously, it isn't income, geography or even education. It depends on whether or not they read for pleasure and participate in the arts. These cultural activities seem to awaken a heightened sense of individual awareness and social responsibility.

Distinguished graduates, your support system is about to end. And you now face the choice of whether you want to be a passive consumer or an active citizen. Do you want to watch the world on a screen or live in it so meaningfully that you change it? That's no easy task, so don't forget what the arts provide.

Art is an irreplaceable way of understanding and expressing the world – equal to but distinct from scientific and conceptual methods. Art addresses us in the fullness of our being – simultaneously speaking to our intellect, emotions, intuition, imagination, memory and physical senses. There are some truths about life that can be expressed only as stories, or songs or images.

Art delights, instructs, consoles. It educates our emotions. Art awakens, enlarges, refines and restores our humanity. And it remembers. As Robert Frost once said about poetry, “It is a way of remembering that which it would impoverish us to forget.” ★