

## THE SMITHSONIAN MUSEUM THAT NEVER WAS: WERE THERE REALLY PLANNED MUSEUMS THAT THE SMITHSONIAN DID NOT BUILD?

*At times it feels as if the Smithsonian is in a perpetual state of building a new museum and has never turned down the idea of a new museum. As one building is completed, another is being planned. Although the process is usually a long one, the outcome is certain – once legislated or donated, the museum will come into existence. Or will it? The following are four case studies of museums that almost but never came to be at the Smithsonian.*

### **A MODERN MUSEUM OF ART: THE SAARINEN DESIGN**

Although the Smithsonian's enabling act provided for a gallery of art, a national art museum was not a priority in the early decades of the Smithsonian. The earliest art collections were largely destroyed in the 1865 fire in the Castle. Secretary Joseph Henry, who thought art attracted "idlers," sent the remaining art works to the Library of Congress and Corcoran Gallery of Art later that year. Some new art was acquired under the second Secretary, Spencer Baird, but the first real impetus for an art gallery did not come until 1903 when Mrs. Harriet Lane Johnston, James Buchanan's niece, bequeathed her art collection to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, with the stipulation that if a gallery of art should ever be established by the United States Govern-

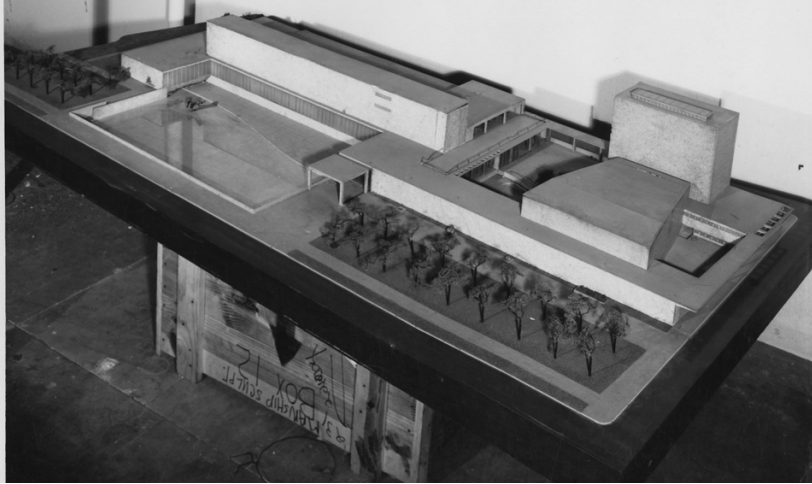


**Harriet Lane Johnson Collection on display in the U.S. National Museum (now the National Museum of Natural History) in 1952**

ment, the paintings would be turned over to it.

The Corcoran Gallery of Art declined the bequest under these terms, and the collections were subsequently designated and established as the National Gallery of Art under the Smithsonian Institution.

President Theodore Roosevelt strongly encouraged the Smithsonian Board of Regents to pursue the collection and the third Secretary, Samuel Langley, a Boston aesthete, concurred. In the 1906 case, D.K. Este Fisher, et al, vs. Harriet Lane Home for Invalid Children of Baltimore City,



**Model of Eero Saarinen's design for a National Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian, 1939**

et al, Judge Ashley M. Gould, Justice, Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, ruled that the bequest of Harriet Lane Johnston of pictures, miniatures, and other articles to a "national gallery of art," were to go to the Smithsonian Institution, which for the purposes of receiving the bequest was adjudged to be the National Gallery of Art. The Harriet Lane Johnston collection was then delivered to the Smithsonian Institution as the beginnings of a National Gallery of Art under the Institution's aegis. The collection consisted of 31 pieces comprised of several interesting historical objects as well as works of art. The collection formed the basis for what is now the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

At first the works were displayed in the Arts and Industries Building, but soon after moved to the new National Museum Building (now Natu-

ral History) when it opened in 1910. The collection was administered by the multi-talented William Henry Holmes, an artist, geologist, and anthropologist who also chaired the Museum's Department of Anthropology. Holmes longed for a building designated solely for the collection. In 1937, with Andrew Mellon's gift of his art collection to the nation

(and therefore to the Smithsonian) in the planning stages, Holmes commissioned a design for a stunning modern museum building on the Mall, designed by the noted architect Eero Saarinen. However, at the 12th hour and to the dismay of Secretary Charles Abbot and Dr. Holmes, Mellon changed his mind and insisted that his collection go in a separate museum in a classical building that was not part of the Smithsonian. Construction of Mellon's museum building, which opened in 1941, consumed all available funds as the nation struggled through the Great Depression and Saarinen's dream museum never became a reality.

Eventually, in 1967, the "National Collection of Fine Arts" moved to the old Patent Office Building, which it shares with the National Portrait Gallery today.



**The Smithsonian American Art Museum, along with the National Portrait Gallery, now resides in the Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture**



## THE HILLWOOD MUSEUM AND GARDENS



Hillwood Museum, front view

In the 1950s, Marjorie Merriweather Post, then the wealthiest woman in the world, maintained a correspondence with Frank Setzler of the Department of Anthropology in the U.S. National Museum. Mrs. Post was a collector of Americana, including Native American materials, many of which could be seen in her Camp Topridge on Upper St. Regis Lake in the Adirondacks. Operated as a “rustic retreat,” it eventually consisted of over 70 buildings on 300 acres, with a fully staffed main lodge and private guest cabins. Mrs. Post also donated a number of items from her gem collection to the National Museum’s mineral collection, including the Napoleon Necklace and the Marie Louise Diadem (a

275 ct. [55g] diamond-and-turquoise necklace and tiara set that Napoleon I gave to his second wife, Empress Marie Louise); a pair of diamond earrings set with pear shapes, weighing 14 ct.(2.8g) and 20 ct. (4g), once belonging to Marie Antoinette; a 30.82 ct. (6.164g) blue-heart diamond ring known as the Blue Heart Diamond; and an emerald-and-diamond necklace and ring, once belonging to Mexican emperor Maximilian.

Secretary Leonard Carmichael (1952–1964) opened discussions with Mrs. Post about the disposition of her estate Hillwood, located in northwest Washington, D.C., and its unique collections. During her marriage to Joseph Davies from 1935 to 1955, they spent

two years (1837–1938) in the Soviet Union while he served as U.S. Ambassador. Mrs. Post collected a great deal of 18th and 19th century Imperial Russian art, as well as Sevres porcelain, and numerous items created by Faberge, the jeweler for the Czars. In May of 1961, Mrs. Post hosted the Board of Regents so they could view the estate and collections that she was considering donating to the Smithsonian. The Regents had mixed reactions—some seeing it as the jewel in the Smithsonian’s crown, others concerned about an institution dedicated to the broader public overstepping its mission by administering so opulent an estate. In 1962, Mrs. Post and the Smithsonian agreed in principle and announced that she would donate Hillwood to the Smithsonian to be operated as a separate museum, with a \$10 million endowment. In



Amethyst Easter Rabbit



**Portrait of Catherine the Great**

1967, she presented terms of her eventual bequest to the new Secretary S. Dillon Ripley (1964–1984) and in January of 1969, after two years of negotiation, Hillwood was decided to the stewardship of the Smithsonian Institution.

From the outset, however, Secretary Ripley shared some of the Regents' concerns about the terms of the bequest—terms that echoed the Freer and Isabella Stewart Gardner museums in their restrictions, with provisions that limited what artworks could be added or disposed of and how objects were to be displayed, among others. Mrs. Post stipulated that the house be maintained substantially as she had kept it during her lifetime, for example, with fresh flowers changed daily throughout the estate. Ripley contested such terms as a prohibition against loaning items to other museums or displaying items other than Mrs. Post's at Hillwood. He

was concerned over the balance of power between the Regents and the Marjorie Merriweather Post Foundation of D.C. on such issues as appointing the Hillwood director and managing the bequest for museum maintenance.

Thus the Smithsonian was concerned about 1) who had control over decision-making about the collections and management of the museum; 2) who had control over decision-making about the monetary bequest; and 3) devoting the Smithsonian's resources to a museum that memorialized a single wealthy individual. By the time Mrs. Post died in 1973, the United States was in the midst of great social and cultural change, as well as inflation and an economic downturn. The value of Mrs. Post endowment had dropped

significantly and estimated costs for operating the museum had increased substantially. Secretary Ripley was more interested in his new Festival of American Folklife and Anacostia Neighborhood Museum than a restrictive memorial to Mrs. Post. The Post Foundation would not provide additional funding for Hillwood, despite Mrs. Post's strictures that it should have first call on the foundation.

At the January 22, 1976, meeting of the Board of Regents, they voted to transfer the Hillwood estate and collections to the Marjorie Merriweather Post Foundation, in accordance with Article 9A of her last will and testament. On July 1, 1976, the Smithsonian Institution formally returned the Hillwood gift to the Post Foundation.



**Hillwood Museum, rear view of Lunar Lawn**



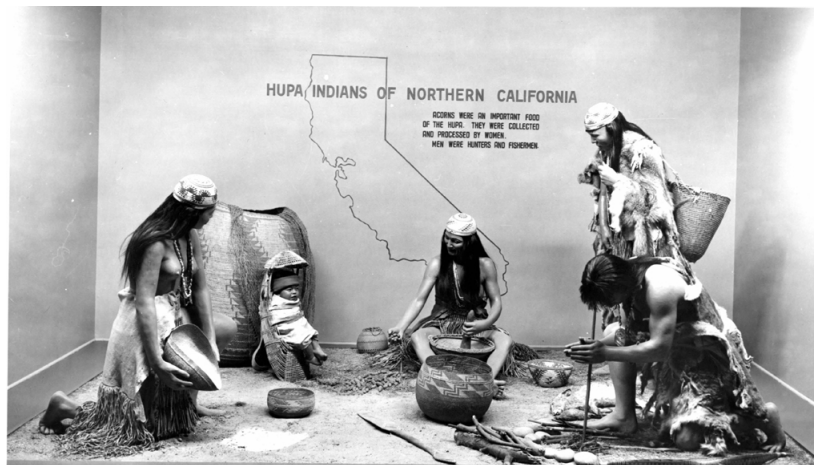
## THE MUSEUM OF MAN



National Museum of Natural History, 1965

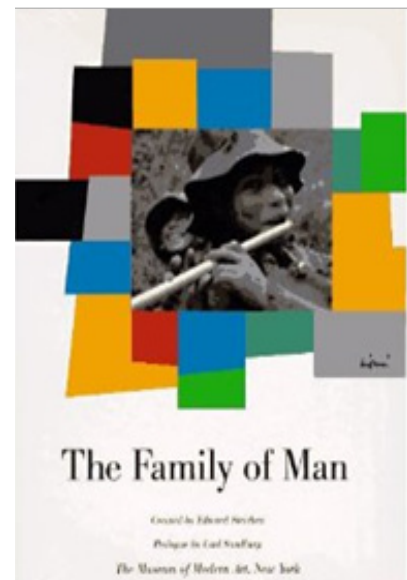
During the 1960s and 1970s, a significant effort was made to build a National Museum of Man at the Smithsonian, to present the world's varied cultures together in one building. Led by Secretary Ripley and anthropologists at the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology and Department of Anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History, the new museum had several goals.

The first was to remove the study and display of non-western cultures from a natural history museum and place their study on par with the study of western cultures. In a post-colonial world, the presentation of Native Americans, Africans, Asians, and other non-western cultures alongside animals and plants seemed to reflect a value judgment about their role in the world.



Hupa Indians of California exhibit, c. 1958

There was also concern about the rapid disappearance of cultures in the face of industrialization and globalization. The new museum would capture the universalist view of the human race found in Edward Steichen's 1955 exhibit and book, *The Family of Man*.



The French had opened the Musée de l'Homme in 1937 and it had served as a model for the recently opened Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, built in 1964. The Canadians were also planning a central Museum of Civilization that opened in Quebec in 1989. The Smithsonian's exhibits of non-western cultures looked outmoded and anachronistic



Canadian Museum of Civilization, Quebec

in comparison to other nations. Ripley tried to galvanize interest within and outside the Institution for the creation of a great Museum of Man for the United States that would present the full panoply of human cultures, comparing and contrasting them. The Smithsonian was also focusing more energy on “urgent anthropology” to document rapidly vanishing cultures, responding to concerns of the American Anthropological Association and the effects of industrialization and globalization. The Bureau of American Ethnology was disbanded in 1964 and merged into the Museum’s Department of Anthropology, creating the Center for the

Study of Man. Ripley hired noted anthropologist Sol Tax of the University of Chicago to lead this effort. Enthusiasm for the idea was mixed within the Institution, with many of the anthropologists preferring the status quo and believing that they had greater status as scientists when they were located within a natural history museum, rather than a cultural history museum.

Significant efforts were devoted to planning a Museum of Man on the National Mall, but the U.S. Congress consistently rejected the idea. The Institution had grown too rapidly under Secretary Ripley —opening NASM, the Anacos-

tia, Cooper-Hewitt, Hirshhorn, Museum of African Art, Renwick, and Sackler Galleries, among others. The Congress responded that the Institution could not expand any further. Ripley countered that the Institution needed to build a museum of man to avoid the creation of a wide array of museums devoted to various cultural groups. The Museum of the American Indian in New York was in crisis, and it had been suggested that the Smithsonian take it over.

Ripley resisted, holding out for a single museum to represent all cultures comparatively, rather than to begin a series of specialized museums. But the Congress was never convinced. In frustration, Ripley renamed the National Museum of Natural History as the National Museum of Natural History/National Museum of Man, to assure visitors that the museum did not consider only some parts of human culture to be part of the natural world. For years the signs in front of the museum contained both titles. Looking back, Secretary Ripley considered the lack of a Museum of Man to be his greatest failure, and his prediction of a series of smaller, specialized museums has, indeed, come to pass.

## NATIONAL ARMED FORCES MUSEUM

In January of 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower appointed a committee of citizens and public servants to explore the possibility of establishing a U.S. Armed Forces Museum. Such a museum had been suggested at the Smithsonian since the 19th century, but it had never come to pass. The then-named Museum of History and Technology had a division and exhibits devoted to military history and preferred to keep the subject in the context of a broad look at American history. Its exhibits



Military Exhibit, Arts and Industries Building

of military uniforms, arms and equipment were popular destinations. But in a Cold War environment and in an era that sought to celebrate the “Greatest Generation” that had fought in World War II, the idea of a military museum moved rapidly towards reality.

In August of 1961, Public Law 87-186 established the National Armed Forces Museum Advisory Board to assist and advise the Smithsonian Institution Board of Regents on matters concerning the portrayal of the contributions that the United States Armed Forces have made to American society and culture, the investigation of lands and buildings in and near the District of Columbia suitable for the museum, and the preparation of a recommendation to Congress with respect to the acquisition of

such lands and buildings. On January 12, 1965, the National Armed Forces Museum Advisory Board (NAFMAB) recommended to the Board of Regents that a National Armed Forces Museum be created by the Smithsonian Institution. On January 28, 1965, the Board of Regents approved recommendations for the establishment of the Museum, to be situated on a 340-acre tract bordering the Potomac River in nearby Fort Washington, Maryland. A director, Colonel John H. Magruder III, was appointed; he had previously directed the Marine Corps Museum. He struggled to move plans for the museum forward until his sudden drowning off the coast of Massachusetts in 1972.

A succession of Smithsonian administrators were then given the job as a second duty, but none had their heart in it. In her dissertation on the topic, historian Joanne Gernstein London demonstrates that the museum was never a high priority for the military, so they never lobbied the Congress for its passage. In addition to the demands of the Korean War and the impending Vietnam War, plans for expensive new weapons systems, and dreams of a new stadium for the naval academy, all took precedence over the military museum. The



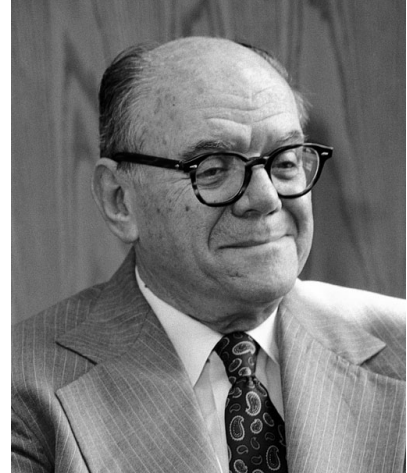
path between authorization and appropriation can be a very long one, and the military community never lobbied the Congress for funding for an actual building and museum staff.

Dr. London traced the several factors that led the effort to fail. The Smithsonian itself was never enthusiastic about building a separate military museum. Most of the military history curators preferred to maintain exhibits within the larger Museum of American History. Magruder was not able to galvanize forces in support of the museum. Administrators such as Secretaries Leonard Carmichael and S. Dillon Ripley were far more concerned with building

a new building for the American history collections and the American art collections, a National Portrait Gallery and numerous other art and cultural efforts.

By 1973 prospects for building a National Armed Forces Museum had dimmed considerably, and the Smithsonian moved to establish the Eisenhower Institute for Historical Research within the National Museum of History and Technology (NMHT).

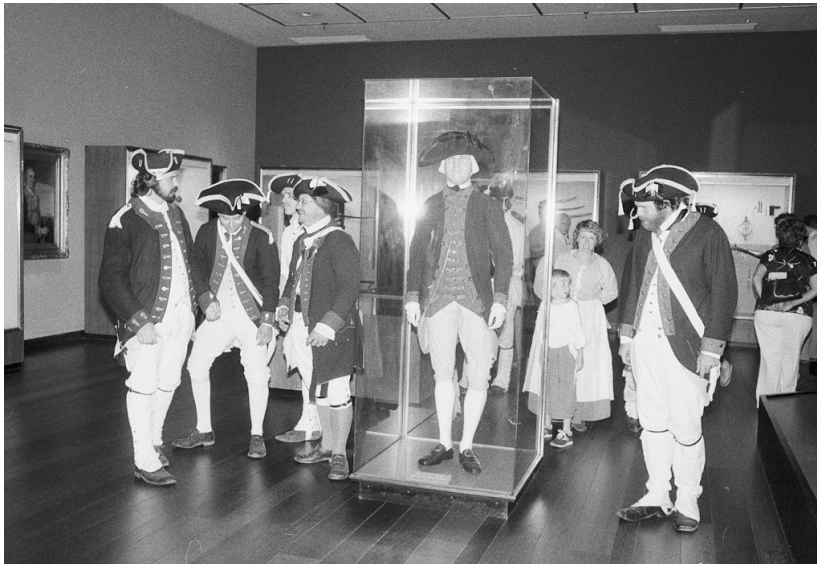
The noted military historian Forrest C. Pogue was named Director of the Institute, under the broad supervision of the NMHT Director in cooperation with NAFMAB. The activities of the Institute in-



Forrest C. Pogue

cluded research, publications, lectures, and conferences concerning the contributions of the armed forces to American society and culture. In its first full year of operation, 1975, the Eisenhower Institute reported to the Department of National and Military History, but in 1976 the Institute assumed separate status under the Director.

In 1979, James S. Hutchins, past Director of NAFMAB, joined Pogue as Historian. By 1984, Hutchins had moved to the Division of Armed Forces History, where he remained as Historian. Pogue retired at the end of 1984. The remaining staff members were reassigned; the Eisenhower Institute, never a priority of Smithsonian management, became inactive.



Costumed visitors in the National Museum of American History, 1983



## **THE MUSEUMS THAT NEVER WERE**

*As history shows us, the donation of a museum or legislation for a museum does not guarantee that it will come into existence as part of the Smithsonian. Congressional authorization does not a museum make without the will and resources for it to happen. The wings on the Natural History Building were authorized and designed in the 1930s, but not built until the 1960s. Many factors can prevent the dream from becoming a reality—restrictions on gifts, the appropriateness of the collection/museum as part of the Smithsonian, patience and strong management during the planning process, staff support for the project, sufficient Federal and private funding, and strong support in both the Congress and community for this effort. In some cases, lack of enthusiasm at the Smithsonian can sink a project—although the lack of Smithsonian enthusiasm for the National Air and Space Museum was reversed by Congressional Pressure. Sometimes Congress rejects the project—although Smithsonian administrators persisted for 25 years to get the Natural History Building. Sometimes gifts are too restrictive—experience with the Freer Gallery and changes in museum standards ensured that donors must be willing to cede control of their collection to the Smithsonian’s expertise and typical practices. The collection must be appropriate for the national museum; it must be malleable enough to attract a broad audience. Lack of funding, both Federal and private, is often the major stumbling block. Hillwood might have stayed at the Smithsonian if the Post Foundation would have underwritten all costs. The Saarinen building could have been built were the nation not in the midst of the Great Depression. The Armed Forces Museum never got the Federal funding necessary to make it a reality and Congress never supported the idea of funding a museum of man. Each Smithsonian museum’s success—or failure—is a complex interplay of these forces: funding, strong advocacy, current cultural values, flexibility, and appropriateness for a national museum.*

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