



# **A Living Exhibition: The Smithsonian and the Transformation of the Universal Museum (Public History in Historical Perspective)**

*William Walker*

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Since its founding in 1846 "for the increase and diffusion of knowledge," the Smithsonian Institution has been an important feature of the American cultural landscape. In *A Living Exhibition*, William S. Walker examines the tangled history of cultural exhibition at the Smithsonian from its early years to the chartering of the National Museum of the American Indian in 1989. He tracks the transformation of the institution from its original ideal as a "universal museum" intended to present the totality of human experience to the variegated museum and research complex of today.

Walker pays particular attention to the half century following World War II, when the Smithsonian significantly expanded. Focusing on its exhibitions of cultural history, cultural anthropology, and folk life, he places the Smithsonian within the larger context of Cold War America and the social movements of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Organized chronologically, the book uses the lens of the Smithsonian's changing exhibitions to show how institutional decisions become intertwined with broader public debates about pluralism, multiculturalism, and decolonization.

Yet if a trend toward more culturally specific museums and exhibitions characterized the postwar history of the institution, its leaders and curators did not abandon the vision of the universal museum. Instead, Walker shows, even as the Smithsonian evolved into an extensive complex of museums, galleries, and research centers, it continued to negotiate the imperatives of cultural convergence as well as divergence, embodying both a desire to put everything together and a need to take it all apart.

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