

# DESIGNING THE FIRST AMERICANS MUSEUM

## First American Tribes and Oklahoma

Native Americans have lived in Oklahoma for thousands of years. The Caddo, Osage, Kiowa, Comanche, and Wichita tribes are native to the land that is now Oklahoma. In 1830, the US government forced thirty-nine Native American tribes to move to Oklahoma, then Indian Territory. In the late 1800s, the US government opened land in Oklahoma to settlers and pushed Native Americans onto smaller pieces of land. Today, many Native American tribes are active in Oklahoma and are working to preserve their culture. In 1994, the Oklahoma State Legislature formed a group to establish a Native American cultural center in Oklahoma City. The purpose was to educate the public about tribal stories, showcase artifacts and art, and highlight the diverse cultures of each tribe. The museum's construction cost was estimated at \$171 million. Funding came from the federal government, state government, and private donations. In 2019, the Chickasaw Nation tribe generously donated \$65 million to complete the construction.

## Cultural Considerations

When the museum was being designed, the architects wanted to show respect for the different cultures it would represent. They asked a Native American history professor for advice to make sure they got it right. Native American traditions influenced how the building looked, where things were placed, and other important details. Included is a Remembrance Wall to recognize the tribes who originally lived in Oklahoma and those who were forced there. Architects designed a 90-foot-tall glass wall that looks like the grass lodges used by the Caddo and Wichita tribes. Ten columns inside the museum symbolize the ten miles that native people walked daily during the Trail of Tears. The builders used red steel to remind people of Oklahoma's red dirt. They added a mound that people can climb, like the mounds built by the Spiro tribe in eastern Oklahoma and used by Muskogean tribes such as the Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Muscogee. A tunnel runs through the mound and lines up with the setting sun on each year of the winter solstice. On the summer solstice, the sun sets in alignment with the top of the mound. The museum also has an outdoor area where people can gather for events, and its design was inspired by the circle of nature that is important to many tribes. A landscape architect was hired to include grasses and plants that are native to Oklahoma. The museum honors not only the legacy of the First Americans but also the continuation of their culture.

*Jenna McKnight | 13 February 2023 Leave a comment. (2023, February 16). Johnson Fain designs curvilinear First Americans Museum in Oklahoma. Dezeen. <https://www.dezeen.com/2023/02/13/johnson-fain-curvilinear-first-americans-museum-oklahoma/>*

*Awasthi, D. (2021, September 6). First Americans Museum brings dignity to Indigenous Art and history. Oklahoma City Free Press. <https://freepressokc.com/first-americans-museum-brings-dignity-to-indigenous-art-and-history/>*