Connections to Water
An upcoming reinstall at the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis links Native American artifacts to the region and the Great Lakes.

INDIANAPOLIS, IN
A major Western and Native American institution, the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, is fast at work on a new reinstall for its Native American collection that is slated to open in 2021. While that is certainly a long time to wait to see this magnificent collection, the wait will be worth it as the museum will present the artifacts and objects in a striking new gallery and recontextualized to more prominently place the collection within the region it is based.

"It’s all about the relationship to the water," says Scott Shoemaker, the Thomas G. and Susan C. Hoheb Curator of Native American Art, History and Culture at the museum. "It’s the water that connects it all to the broader Great Lakes region. It’s the water that led to the movement of ideas and materials. Here in Indianapolis we have the White River, and it was an important space that goes into the Wabash River. We’ve taken these connections and gone with a thematic approach as we relate it the area."

In addition to the reinstall, the museum will be featuring works from the Richard Pohrt Jr. Collection, which the museum acquired after a $2.83 million grant from Lilly Endowment, an 82-year-old private philanthropic foundation that supports religion, education and community development. The collection includes more than 400 items from Native nations of the Great Lakes, including the Ho-Chunk, Menomini, Mennonite, Ojibwe, Potawatomi and many other cultures. The collection includes clothing and accessories such as shirts, blouses and vests; leggings, skirts and wearing blankets with intricate beadwork and ribbonwork; and beaded bandolier bags, sashes, garters and mocassins. It also contains significant examples of carved wooden bowls, ladles, war clubs and hand-woven bags.

"We had some awareness of the Pohrt Collection before we acquired it because we had purchased a pair of leggings from him in the past so there was a relationship there," Shoemaker, a member of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, says. "The objects represent the diversity of the people of the region, and each piece is remarkable."

Pohrt acquired much of his collection during a 40-year career as an art dealer and appraiser. Many pieces were purchased from other collectors, galleries and auctions. Pohrt’s father, Richard Pohrt Sr., was also a prominent collector of Native American art whose collections were exhibited in the National Gallery of Art, the Buffalo Bill Center of the West and the Detroit Institute of Arts. When the younger Pohrt determined it was time to part with his own collection, he was interested in seeing the items remain together, the museum writes in a release about the acquisition. "Meanwhile, the Eiteljorg was searching for additional historical Great Lakes art to enhance its collection. The Eiteljorg purchased the bulk of the items directly from Pohrt, who also donated additional objects to the museum."

Eiteljorg Museum President and CEO John Vanausdoll was ecstatic about the acquisition and its placement in the upcoming reinstall within the Native American galleries at the museum. "These objects from across the
Great Lakes region mosaically tell the stories of Indigenous peoples whose families have lived here for centuries," Vanamuli says. "The Eiteljorg Museum’s acquisition of the Richard Pohrt Jr. Collection further solidifies the museum’s national reputation as a cultural institution. The Eiteljorg plans to showcase this once-in-a-lifetime collection of Native objects in a state-of-the-art revision of its Native American galleries; and that is a testament to the many visitors, patrons, corporate partners and foundations who have believed in and supported our museum’s mission for the past 30 years of celebrating Native American art, history and cultures."

Noteworthy works that will be on exhibit in the redesigned galleries include late 1800s Ojibwe and Ho-Chunk handwoven bags, a Mohawk cradleboard from around 1875, a Great Lakes region ball head club from around 1760 and an assortment of 19th-century mocassins from Potawatomi, Otoe, Ojibwe and Wyandot artists.

Two important elements that will strike visitors will be the magnificent colors and the expert ribbon work. "The ribbon work is especially wonderful. Ribbon work blossomed in the early 19th century and continued through the mid-20th century. Wearable arts—till including mats and bags—are very exciting. We have some great objects made from basswood, bulrush, cedar bark and also cotton and wool yarn," Shoemaker says. "Ribbon came into the region early on, but the application—including geometric and abstract floral forms—were very much informed by early weaving and quillwork."

Shoemaker adds that the museum is still in the dark on many of the works from the Pohrt Collection only because they were only recently acquired, but that ongoing research with tribes all around the country would reveal new scholarship about the pieces, their history and use by tribes around the Great Lakes and beyond.

"We have a responsibility to bring awareness of these works to the general public. So we’ve reached out to people all over to start these important conversations," he says. "What's so fun about it all is that these works cross so many boundaries. Indiana's boundaries only existed since 1816 and Native peoples have been here long before that and continue to be here now. So we're thinking beyond boundaries for everything."