The past year has been pivotal for one of the Great Lakes region’s premier cultural institutions, the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, in downtown Indianapolis. An anniversary and momentous new acquisition marked 2019 for the museum, which has been collecting, conserving, and exhibiting Western and Native American art and cultural objects since 1989. That year, it was established by the Indianapolis businessman and philanthropist Harrison Eiteljorg and other civic leaders who sought to inspire an appreciation and understanding of the art, history, and cultures of the American West and the Indigenous people of North America.

Since then, the Eiteljorg has grown into a unique keystone of cultural and historical record, with many high-profile artists appearing throughout its collections, such as Georgia O’Keeffe, Kay WalkingStick, Ansel Adams, and Andy Warhol. Its educational programs, engaging exhibitions, and programming such as the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship, the annual Indian Market and Festival, and the Quest for the West Art Show and Sale, make the museum a singular national resource, along with its impressive collections of Native American art, which are among the best in the world. Despite this, the museum’s number of Native American items with contemporary and cultural institutions, the museum’s number of Native American items with contemporary and historic ties to the Great Lakes region itself was disproportionately small in comparison to its overall art collection of more than 5,000 items.

In 2019, after a reimagining of the museum’s Western Art Galleries, and on the cusp of its 30th anniversary, the museum serendipitously acquired a new collection of more than 400 Native American artifacts from the Great Lakes region that will fill a significant gap in its previous regional collections, and inform a dramatic renovation of its Native American art galleries as part of a five-year strategic plan called Project 2021.

"Three years ago, the Eiteljorg board and inner staff created a strategic plan for the museum and the primary, most fundamental goal, was to be a resource for the Great Lakes region," said John Vanausdall, who has been President and CEO of the Eiteljorg Museum for 23 of its 30 years as an establishment.

"I think one of the really strong aspects of this collection is that it really showcases the diversity, the innovation, and the adaptations, but then also the continuity of several Native Nation communities from the Great Lakes region," Vanausdall said. Though the items will not solely comprise those representing the Great Lakes region in the newly installed galleries—many others are collections from living artists or others in development—they serve as part of a basis for understanding and informing future adaptations and interpretations of various art and design forms.

"A lot of those contemporary artists draw from these more customary forms so it provides a way for the visitor to see that Native people are still here, making art, and continuing threads from the past and then going in new directions too. I think it provides a lot of opportunities to lead people to unexpected places," Vanausdall added.

One of the strongest elements of the collection is the regional representation of Bandolier bags, which appeared in the Great Lakes region in the mid-18th century and were used by tribes whose historic homelands encompass the Great Lakes region; or roughly Michigan, Wisconsin, northern Indiana, and Ontario. The collection comprises works from Ho-Chunk, Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Menominee, and other Nations and includes exceptional examples of beadwork, ribbon work, applique, carvings, and weavings. Unique and individualized forms of craft and technique create an inherent diversity in artistic and design themes throughout the collection, which includes items such as clothing and moccasins, blankets, wooden boards and bowls, bandolier bags, war clubs, and cradle boards.

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Lakes region primarily in the 18th and 19th centuries. They are characterized in part by thousands of intricately placed tiny glass seed beads, and were custom made for families and people within a community who were held in high regard, according to Scott Shoemaker, Ph.D., Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, who is the Thomas G. and Susan C. Hoback curator of Native American art, history, and culture at the Eiteljorg Museum.

Shoemaker, who holds a personal interest in weaving, also explained how different forms of the technique appear—somewhat unexpectedly—throughout the collection.

“I think of one of the other strong aspects of this collection—different forms of art that the general public probably do not associate with the region—are types of weaving, and it’s really strong with different forms of weaving techniques that stem from free contact practices and motifs, but then [show] how that has changed and adapted over time as well,” Shoemaker said.

Shoemaker also noted that the vast majority of items in the new collection were crafted by women artists from different communities for specific relatives or purposes, yielding a broad array of design adaptations within singular items.

Selections of the collected items and their stories will be featured in the remodeled, approximately 14,000-square-foot Native American gallery space, which has remained similar to when the Eiteljorg first opened three decades ago. Historically, the galleries—which currently feature a mix of historic items and contemporary Native American art—had been organized geographically, with Indiana highlighted among other regions comprising the Woodlands, Plains, Plateaus, Southwest Desert, Great Basin, California, Northwest Coast, Arctic, and Sub-Arctic, according to the museum.

As opposed to state or national boundaries, the thematic approach to the new installation will be determined by waterways such as the White River nearby or the Wabash Watershed, which leads into the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, and also conducts into the Great Lakes by way of Lake Erie and a short portage, according to Shoemaker.

“[We’re] not defining it by the boundaries that have only been in place a couple hundred years—which is really the blink-of-an-eye in terms of Indigenous histories,” Shoemaker said.

“In the southern Great Lakes region, removal had a huge impact. The vast majority of tribes from the southern part was removed and is now in Kansas and Oklahoma, Texas and Mexico, and even in Canada, too. Then, acknowledging that there were also other tribes removed into the Great Lakes, and it is looking at it in terms of all of those communities who have contemporary connections to the region,” Shoemaker added.

An educational component will also accompany the renovated galleries, and will take shape in a curriculum Shoemaker hopes will fill an educational niche for schools in the region. In general, opportunities for learning abound for the new gallery installation and its influential new collection, which underscores centuries of Native American art and design. For all visitors—and especially those connected to the collection—Shoemaker hopes the experience will be informative, inspiring, and powerful.

“Every time I go to those museums and visit those items, I learn something new and it provides inspiration; it provides a re-establishment of those relationships and those connections to the people associated with those items,” Shoemaker said.

“That’s my hope: that we can provide those types of opportunities for artists and community members and we’re already starting to do that. We have some groups from tribes who have contacted us and are interested in coming down to look at the collection specifically for those purposes,” Shoemaker added.

The museum’s second-floor Native American galleries are tentatively scheduled to close for renovations in early 2021 and supporters of the museum have generously supported the ongoing Project 2021 capital campaign to physically renovate them. Though the project is in progress, its impact is already lasting, according to Vanausdall, who also said the Pohrt Jr. collection acquisition may be the most important development since the establishment of the Eiteljorg Museum 30 years ago.

“It’s a fundamental change and part of it is, like all museums, we want to be relevant to the communities we live in,” Vanausdall said.

“We’re certainly a national institution and we’ve done a lot in the last five or six years to become even more relevant to people who live in these Indianapolis communities, but then there’s this region that needs an institution like the Eiteljorg to take up the charge to present to everyone here the cultures that existed before Euro-Americans arrived. I think it’s a major turning point in the life of the museum and I think someday when and if I ever retire it’ll be one of the things I’m most proud of,” Vanausdall added.
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creative, talented, and innovative professionals leaving their signature mark in the Great Lakes region.