

Celebrated art story

Text: R.J. Weick

Museums are often regarded as rich repositories of cultural tradition, historic items, and vibrant artwork. They are centers where the voices of those who came long before tell their stories of the shared human experience, heard as echoes within the halls and as whispers in the very fabric, brush stroke, and carving of a sculpture. Museums, as physical expression of material and traditional walls, are also often perceived as places of preservation where art, history, and original authors of story are finite, where past is separate from present and future. Yet, museums have the powerful potential to represent more. They can serve as centers of conversation and of connection, of engagement and of empowerment, and of education and of exploration.

The Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis is the only museum in the Midwest to focus on the art of both Native America and the American West.

Located in White River State Park on the historic lands of the Miami and Lenape peoples, the Eiteljorg Museum features dolomite and sandstone architecture inspired by Southwest adobe dwellings. Founded in 1989, the Eiteljorg Museum seeks to tell the stories of the peoples of the West in all their diversity and complexity, through art exhibitions and cultural programming. Its collections of Native American art represent cultures from across the North American continent. Although the Eiteljorg Museum is located in the region historically inhabited by the Native peoples of the Great Lakes, its collection of Native art from the Great Lakes region had been the smallest part of its collection until recently, compared to art from Southwest, Plains, Northwest Coast, and Arctic regions. In 2019, that began to change with the Eiteljorg Museum's acquisition of approximately 400 Great Lakes Native objects, part of a larger effort for 2021 and 2022 to present Native art-

works to visitors in newly reconstructed spaces that will feature an innovative design.

The Eiteljorg Museum's ongoing transformational \$55 million capital and endowment campaign, Project 2021, since 2016 has sought to completely reimagine permanent galleries, focus more on the art of the Native peoples of the Great Lakes region, expand and renovate popular areas that serve as larger community gathering spaces, and triple the museum's endowment to continue supporting a rich and dynamic storytelling of the West and Native America. The campaign's efforts, which are intended to provide interactive, enriching, and engaging cultural experiences, have not only led to the complete renovation and reinstallation of the Eiteljorg Museum's Western Art Galleries in 2018 and a large acquisition of artwork representing tribes of the Great Lakes, but also comprise the re-envisioning of its Nina Mason Pulliam Education Center, the expansion of its





PHOTOGRAPHY: INNOVATION EXHIBITS, NATIVE AMERICAN GALLERIES, ORIGIN STUDIOS PROJECT RENDERING, COURTESY EITELJORG MUSEUM



PHOTOGRAPHY: CONNECTED BY WATER EXHIBITS, NATIVE AMERICAN GALLERIES, ORIGIN STUDIOS PROJECT RENDERING, COURTESY EITELJORG MUSEUM

Allen Whitehill Clowes Sculpture Court, and a reconstruction of its Native American Galleries. The fundraising campaign, which targeted \$40 million for the endowment and an additional \$15 million for capital projects, has also entered its final public phase and to-date has reached more than 90 percent of its goal.

“We started this plan in 2016 and it is part of a five-year strategic plan the museum created,” said John Vanausdall, president and chief executive officer at the Eiteljorg Museum. “The key goals were to revise our permanent galleries to increase our focus on the Great Lakes culture and then to become more of a regional tourism destination being the only museum of our kind in this area.”

As the Eiteljorg Museum moves into its capstone phase of the capital and endowment campaign, major work has gone into the complete reimagining of how it presents Native art in its Native American Galleries that had largely remained the same since the museum’s initial completion in 1989. The old galleries closed for reconstruction in September 2021. The new, roughly 13,200-square-foot, Native American Galleries, designed and built in a more accessible and open footprint, will present exhibit artwork in a contextualized manner prioritizing three overarching themes rather than geographic regions. Through themes of Relation, Continuation, and Innovation, the redesigned galleries are intended to leave guests with the knowledge that Native peoples are still living, are diverse, and that Native art is on a continuum, where customary and contemporary expressions are connected and inform the other.

“Many people have the impression that Native peoples are no longer living or they are living elsewhere—they are living off in a reservation or a reserve—when actually a majority of Native peoples are living in cities and more urban areas. I think people in the U.S. and Canada want to learn more about Native peoples and I think people in the world really want to know more about Native Americans and First Nations,” said Dorene Red Cloud, Oglala Lakota, associate curator of Native American Art at Eiteljorg Museum.

“I think there has been this long fascination with Native peoples. I’m hoping people can make a connection and become interested and want to learn more. The Eiteljorg is an art museum, we are not necessarily a natural history museum; we don’t want to say we are experts on Native cultures, but we sure want to celebrate the art and teach people about the art,” Red Cloud added.

Red Cloud, who has been with the museum for five years, said there had been a discus-



PHOTOGRAPHY: FAMILY, COMMUNITY, NATION EXHIBITS, NATIVE AMERICAN GALLERIES, ORIGIN STUDIOS PROJECT RENDERING, COURTESY EITELJORG MUSEUM



PHOTOGRAPHY: POTAWATOMI, OJIBWE, WYANDOT ARTISTS, MOCCASINS CA. 1800 - CA. 1890, TANNED AND SMOKED DEERSKIN, GLASS SEED BEADS, RIBBON APPLIQUE, SILK RIBBON, MOOSE HAIR, COURTESY EITELJORG MUSEUM

sion of redoing the galleries since she joined and was involved in the re-envisioning of the Mihtohseenionki section of the galleries, also known as The People's Place, along with Scott Shoemaker, Ph.D., Miami Tribe of Oklahoma. Previously, Shoemaker served at the museum as Thomas G. and Susan C. Hoback Curator of Native American Art, History and Culture, and is now on the museum's national Native American Advisory Council. They collaborated with local community members of Potawatomi, Delaware, and Miami tribes to bring a balance of historical and contemporary issues to the space.

Historically, fourth grade students in Indiana schools are taught about Native Americans in a regional "general sweep," which as Red Cloud noted, has become outmoded as an ethnographic approach that many museums are shedding today—especially since the larger Indiana region alone is also home to Kickapoo, Shawnee, Peoria, Potawatomi, Miami, and Lenape peoples.

"When brainstorming the big ideas of the reinstatement, we wanted to have some commonalities expressed and so we came across these themes of Relation, which is about Native

peoples' relation to spirit, animal, plants, and to one another as a community, as a nation, as a family. Continuation is about how Native arts is connected to peoples' cultures and spiritual beliefs," Red Cloud said.

"Continuation is an acknowledgement that despite the efforts to assimilate and acculturate Native peoples, we still have our artistic practices, our spiritual beliefs, our religious practices—some things were interrupted or paused, but people are picking them. Native languages are still living," Red Cloud added.

Red Cloud also noted the third theme, Innovation, is a celebration of Native art and the unique inventions introduced to the art world that often represent or reflect much more than one might think upon first glance, such as in pottery, weaving, jewelry, and textiles.

"There are Native artists who are making art for art's sake, because they are artists and they are being true to their vision and so in Innovation, we will be talking about the initial stages of how artists would sell their work to tourists who would come on the trains to the Southwest, to Indian Markets. And we will discuss a little bit how it is important to buy art from Native peoples, because there are fakes out there," Red Cloud said.

To help realize a more open, accessible, and thematic experience in the Native American Galleries, the Eiteljorg Museum looked to the collaborative team of Origin Studios of Ottawa, Canada; kubik maltbie of Boston; F.A. Wilhelm Construction Co. Inc. of Indianapolis; and its

Native American Advisory Council. kubik maltbie is a leader in delivering award-winning, high-profile museums, visitor centers, and specialty environments, such as The Statue of Liberty Museum, Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton, International Spy Museum in Washington D.C., and The Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba, among others.

Origin Studios, an award-winning, experienced, and innovative exhibit design firm, also has a long history of crafting interpretive and engaging spaces, working on projects such as The Bata Shoe Museum, The Canadian War Museum, Royal Ontario Museum, and the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, to name a few.

"We interviewed several exhibit-design firms and what attracted us to Origin Studios is the fact that they have a consultant on their team, Jeff Thomas—he is Onondaga, he is an artist and a curator—and a lot of the projects Origin Studios has done has been working with various First Nations communities in Canada," Red Cloud said. "They seemed to have the most experience, or the most sensitivity, about Native issues and they just impressed us the most."

When it opens to the public in June 2022, the new, expanded experience will begin with a Land Acknowledgement on both the wall and projected on the ground, informing visitors that the museum and its galleries stand upon the lands of the Miami, Potawatomi, Delaware, Shawnee, Peoria, and Kickapoo peoples. It then leads visitors past a hanging installation that is an artistic interpretation of the Miami creation story, "water song: peemitanaahkwahki sakaahkweelo."

The art piece, created by Hannah Claus, 2019 Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellow and member of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte First Nation, is based on a water song shared with her by Shoemaker and by George Ironstrack, assistant director at the Myaamia Center at the Miami University of Ohio and citizen of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, after visiting the the Seven Pillars site in Peru, Indiana. Through the use of subtle, layered colors representing the sky, the earth, the river, and the ground, the installation is a visual representation of the "water song" using acetate film. Surrounding the installation, embedded speakers featuring recorded greetings of Miami, Potawatomi, Shawnee, Delaware, Kickapoo, and Peoria peoples in their spoken languages to welcome guests to the Native American Galleries.

"We are working with Richard Lewis Media Group and we have given them contacts to six members of these tribes who are active with their language and they are working on giving a greeting," Red Cloud said. "We didn't give any parameters, per se, because I didn't feel like I could tell someone how they should give their greeting, but it is going to be very exciting for



people to hear the languages, because unfortunately many people have the impression Native languages are dead, but so many are living."

The museum is also working with Richard Lewis Media Group Inc., or RLMG, of Watertown, Massachusetts, a digital design studio, in the creation of an interactive map of North America as a way to tell the art story of Native North America. Specifically, how Native lands have changed throughout the centuries, statistics on Native peoples, and examples of art. Throughout the Native American Galleries, there are also additional accessible interactive and hands-on activity areas, digital information hubs, new space for public programming, and most notably, the hundreds of Native American art, including those representing the Great Lakes region through a \$2.83 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. Former, bulky wooden fixtures that previously exhibited the artwork will be replaced with all-glass display cases to allow sightlines from all angles beneath inviting, directional lighting, and the galleries' more open footprint allows for exploration in wayfinding throughout the thematic experience when they open to the public in 2022.

Though there will be a lot of gray and white within the galleries' spaces to serve as a backdrop for the vibrant, colorful, patterned works themselves, there are special treatments throughout, such as the use of birch to evoke movement and to reflect natural materials.

At the beginning of Relation, exhibited

works will consider Native peoples' origins to place to sites such as Monk's Mound at Cahokia in Illinois and Mesa Verde in Colorado. There will also be artwork that speaks to the beliefs of Native peoples in the Great Lakes region about spiritual beings such as Thunder Birds and Underwater Panthers, as well as their relationships with animals and plants. One room in the galleries will highlight the significance of waterways in the Great Lakes with associated ecological impacts. Examples of clothing, Tlingit house posts, and Northwest Coast imagery will also be exhibited in discussion of family and what makes a nation.

Continuation begins with telling the story of sovereignty and the relationship each Native tribe, nation, pueblo, or village has with the government, such as tribal license plates and flags. This area will also touch on boarding and residential schools, relocation and removal of Native peoples, and how practices and beliefs that may have been interrupted are being continued today as members of tribes renew old religions. One such work is a model of a Delaware Big House, a building significant to the Delaware religious custom of the Big House.

"We are going to be interviewing members of the Delaware Tribe of Oklahoma for them to tell their story about how this religion has been on pause, but they've been renewing it," Red Cloud said. "The Big House model is a really neat piece, because they are lending it to us for



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an indefinite amount of time until they have their own cultural center.”

In Innovation, pottery, basketry, jewelry, and Navajo textiles join snow-shoes, Seminole patchwork, and parfleche examples in an exhibition about artistic invention. This thematic experience will also feature a large donated collection from philanthropist and collector Helen Cox Kersting featuring Katsina carvings, baskets, paintings, weavings, pottery, and jewelry, among other items.

“I’m really excited to just turn things on its head, and for people to look at the art and instead of saying: ‘Well, this is older, so it is more authentic,’ for people to consider, ‘I can see these connections, I can see how all of this is Native art,’” Red Cloud said. “I’m really hoping people will be able to make this connection and see some art they haven’t seen before and hopefully leave with a bigger admiration for Native art, because we make these distinctions of contemporary, modern, cutting-edge, old, historical, traditional, and customary, and if you ask Native peoples, Native artists themselves, they say: ‘It is all art.’”

Vanausdall also noted there is a need for the entire globe to pay attention to its Indigenous cultures and arts since colonization has touched almost every region across the world, and hopes the Eiteljorg Museum and its work can be part of a larger system focusing on Indigenous peoples.

“Design is such an important part of the content of this exhibit, but the goal of the exhibit designers is more of the meta level: How do you organize, how do you show things, how do you provide interpretation so that the public can understand and appreciate art?” Vanausdall said. “There is the design of the object, and there is the design of the space that gives a novice person access to it.”

The Eiteljorg Museums’ Native American Galleries will reopen to the public in June 2022, coinciding with the museum’s 30th anniversary of its Indian Market and Festival. While construction continues through the spring, the rest of the Eiteljorg Museum is planned to remain open.

For Red Cloud, who noted design is like carving out a space in the world for expression and is a way to communicate with people, she is hopeful the combination of interpretation, interactives, and programming will encourage people to keep coming back to visit the museum.

“I think the world is ready to look at some tough, hard truths; sometimes with the word ‘colonial’ or ‘colonizer,’ people shrink at that. Another thing I’d like people to take away from this reinstatement is that Native American peoples have a future,” Red Cloud said. “They are not stuck in the past and they have dreams like everybody else.”

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