



'Bring Out the Masterpieces'

Museums across the country are rethinking their displays of Native American art, reducing the emphasis on ethnology and turning the spotlight on esthetics **BY KYLE MAGMILLAN**

When visitors step off the elevator into the newly reopened American Indian galleries of the Denver Art Museum, the message they get is immediate and unmistakable: it's the artists that count. The generic photomurals of Indian life that previously graced the walls have been replaced by portraits of past and present potters and painters at work. A video plays, introducing the artists and the worlds that inspired them, from the late Maria Martinez and the San Ildefonso Pueblo to contemporary painter Jeffrey Gibson and the New York nightclub scene.

These multimedia aids supplement about 700 objects in the 23,000-square-foot space, one of the largest devoted to Native Americans in a general art museum in the United States. The works, arranged largely by artist and object type, range from 35 to 40 examples by the great Hopi potter Nampeyo (ca. 1860–1942) and her descendants to

a group of stylistically varied Plains war shirts, including a newly commissioned one by Northern Cheyenne artist Bentley Spang of Billings, Montana.

"I want our visitors to look at this with new eyes," says Nancy Blomberg, curator of native arts. "I want them to realize that individual artists created these objects—that they didn't bubble up out of immutable cultures, as most people think."

Denver is not alone. Art museums across the country are enlarging, upgrading, and rethinking their displays of Native American art. The Art Institute of Chicago is tripling the number of objects it will display in a gallery opening next month devoted to Indian art of the Americas. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, established an independent department devoted to Indian art in 2002, and in 2009 unveiled a 6,100-square-foot space with more than 200 objects on view, including art from the

Pacific Northwest and a rare mid-19th-century Arikara shield adorned with a visionary painting of a buffalo bull.

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston showcases the highlights of its still-nascent collection of 600 Indian objects in the new Art of the Americas Wing. Selections range from ancient pottery by the Mimbres and Anasazi to works by such contemporary artists as Nathan Begaye, Mateo Romero, and Preston Singletary.

Native American objects have typically been presented from an ethnographic or anthropological point of view, stressing how objects functioned within their respective cultures. But today, more than ever, art museums are stressing the esthetic aspects of their Native American holdings.

"Our emphasis here is rather to bring out the masterpieces, to show that this kind of genius exists among all peoples, no matter how simple their life may be," says Richard Townsend,

◀ Late classic Maya figure from Campeche or Yucatán, 650–800, Art Institute of Chicago; Mateo Romero, *Bank Job (Bonnie and Clyde Series, #2)*, 1992, Denver Art Museum; Arikara buffalo-hide shield, ca. 1850, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

A man's shirt, ca. 1865 ▶ (left), from the Nez Perce or Crow peoples and a Northern Cheyenne eagle-feather headdress, ca. 1875, at the Nelson-Atkins.



chairman of the Art Institute of Chicago's department of African art and Indian art of the Americas. "And to display these in a way that they can speak for themselves in terms of their formal qualities—form, color, and shape." The Art Institute's new gallery will place a strong emphasis on Southwestern ceramics from the ancient past to the latter half of the 20th century, as well as basketry from the Southwest and West and works from the Cheyenne, Lakota, and other Missouri River tribes.

As late as the 1960s and '70s, most encyclopedic art museums were devoted almost entirely to Western art, with less attention paid to Asia. But institutions are attuned to changing social demographics and are trying to broaden their audiences. "What you have to remember, from our perspective," says Kevin Gover, a member of the Pawnee and Comanche tribes and director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, "is that it has been a long slog to get native art recognized, appreciated, and dealt with respectfully in the manner of all art."

Part of the challenge is how to situate Native American art in a broader historical tradition. The Boston museum recently acquired mid-20th-century abstractions by Steve Wheeler and

Peter Busa specifically to show how non-Indian artists have been influenced by native art and iconography. In Chicago, Townsend wants viewers to understand the ancient underpinnings of Indian work and to see how objects made in North America often echo those made in South America.

One common theme, for example, is the renewal of nature, which can be seen in works as distant from each other as a Teotihuacan mural depicting a cyclical 52-year ritual of world regeneration and an Acoma vessel from New Mexico decorated with images of a macaw, a rainbow, and flowering plants. "The great advantage is not just looking at the Indians in terms of Hollywood movies," Townsend says, "but in understanding that the tradition is very ancient. It goes back many thousands of years, and there is, from the very beginning to today, a certain continuity in the native worldview."

At the same time, art museums are turning to Native American experts for help in developing exhibitions. "I think that is a really powerful move, to bring the native perspective into it in a meaningful way, and I think it's going to fill in some of the gaps about not just what is happening today in native arts but also in the past," says Spang, who has

taught at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and worked with the Denver Art Museum.

As museums expand their Native American offerings, most are finding new ways to put the esthetic aspects front and center. No institution has gone further in this direction than the Nelson-Atkins, where Gaylord Torrence, senior curator of American Indian art, speaks of his "extreme" approach. He has kept contextual aids to an absolute minimum, opting instead for low-key galleries that appear little different from those elsewhere in the museum. "This is about art," Torrence says. "We're displaying this just like you would great Chinese art, great Egyptian art, great any kind of art. I guess that's what I mean when I say it's extreme."

Blomberg is unwilling to go so far. She believes that there are imaginative ways to give visitors background information by using vanguard technology. But in the end, she agrees that what matters most is the artworks themselves.

"We are the Denver Art Museum," she says, emphasizing the word "art." "I want people to see that. That's what is unique about our mission. That seems to me where we ought to be going with this." ■

Kyle MacMillan is the art critic of the Denver Post.