

Native Inspiration: American Indian art galleries open at museum, college



Community

Written by Linda Friedel

Wednesday, 11 November 2009 00:00



THIS MASK IS one of the many pieces at the new American Indian art galleries, which opened Nov. 7 at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 4525 Oak St., Kansas City, Mo.

Southwest, Plateau, California Great Basin, Northwest Coast and Arctic.

Navajo textiles, Woodlands and Plains quillwork, beadwork and sculpture, Pueblo pottery, Southwestern jewelry, Northwest Coast sculpture, and California Plateau basketry are among the works represented.

The museum brought **Gaylord Torrence**, one of the nations' foremost authorities in the field, to the Nelson-Atkins in 2002 as founding curator of the museum's first Department of American Indian Art.



Torrence said interest was high among American Indian art collectors and museums like the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art in St. Joseph, Mo., and Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence.

He called the developing American Indian galleries a confluence of energy that included supporters **Fred** and **Virginia Merrill, Jack Morgan**,

Two permanent American Indian art galleries open this month, one featuring contemporary works, another reflecting rare historical art.

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 4525 Oak St., Kansas City, Mo., unveiled a new suite of American Indian galleries Nov. 7, with 205 North American Indian art objects dating from 2,500 years ago to present time.

On Friday, Nov. 20, Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park, opens its 50-piece installation "Collection Focus: Contemporary American Indian Art."

Marc F. Wilson, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art chief executive officer, wants visitors to know the museum has a long history of portraying American Indian works and placing the new 6,100-square-foot suite of galleries next to the recently renovated American Gallery was no mistake.

"It is our intent to present American Indian art as an important part of America's cultural legacy," he said. "Together, the American galleries and the new American Indian galleries will provide visitors with an uninterrupted, contiguous look at the achievements of American artists from pre-European contact to the present, something rarely if ever done by a fine arts museum."

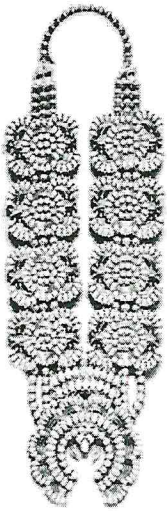
Grouped by eight main culture areas of North America, the new installation holds works from a wide spectrum of cultures from pre-European to the present, including the Woodlands, Plains,

Gaylord Torrence, Nelson-Atkins Museum American Indian art curator and **Estelle and Morton Sosland**, who contributed their 50-year collection of 34 masterworks from the Northwest Coast artistry.

“All came forward at critical times,” Torrence said. “It has become one of the largest American Indian collections in comprehensive fine arts museums. People were willing to sell things from their collections, masterworks – an extraordinary thing.”

Torrence said soft lighting illuminating the art objects was installed due to the sensitivity of the materials.

“It is our goal in this new installation to present the extraordinary vision of Native American artists, from many cultures and throughout time,” he said. “These objects communicate the creative expression of their individual maker; at the same time, they reflect the profound cultural traditions that underlie the meaning and power embodied within each work.”



Ryan Dyer, treasurer of Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation in Kansas, said he is happy to have been involved with the development of the American Indian Galleries. Dyer said he finds Torrence’s passion for Native American artwork fascinating, adding that Torrence actively engaged the Native American community in this project.

“He has wanted to make sure the Native American has a sense of ownership in the gallery,” he said. “That’s unique.”

Dyer said most American Indian galleries focus on art as a cultural artifact or historical relic of past civilizations, but Torrence emphasized the uniqueness of each piece as its own artistic importance.

“They have taken a look at art for the art’s sake,” Dyer said. “I’ve never seen a Native American collection that has focused on the individual artistic talent.”

At JCCC, initially, nearly 50 works of art spanning a diverse range of cultures and geography from Pacific Northwest to the Southwest and Plains, will be on permanent view.

“This installation celebrates the extraordinary accomplishment and vitality of contemporary American Indian artists,” said **Bruce Hartman**, executive director, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art.

The collection showcases a variety of mediums including clay, beadwork, glass, textiles, sculpture, basketry painting and photography. The contemporary American Indian exhibit joins two other recent permanent exhibits in the Regnier Center – contemporary painting and contemporary Latino art.

“This major collection of contemporary American Indian art will deepen our community’s understanding of Native (American) issues and will serve as an educational resource, especially for students in JCCC’s Native American class, as well as furthering the college’s diversity initiatives,” **Terry A. Calaway**, JCCC president, said.

Viewers can experience a range of ideas and content in the American Indian works. Self-guided tours of the collection are possible with interpretive labels that include the artists' biography and insight to each work.

"Each piece has a story, and the stories are fascinating," Hartman said. "By reading the interpretive labels, a viewer can begin to understand and appreciate contemporary American Indian art."

Ed Smith, project coordinator, American Indian Health Research Education Alliance, also is an artist.

Smith said he appreciates seeing themes in the exhibit that are not readily associated with American Indian people.

As a beader, he was drawn to a beaded bag depicting women receiving diplomas. Smith said the exhibit will make an impression on American Indian students.

"There's a place they're recognized publicly on campus," he said. "That's attractive. It's a good step as far as making potential Native students feel welcome here."

FAST FACTS

"Collection Focus: Contemporary America Indian Art" opens with a celebration from 6 to 8:30 p.m. Friday, Nov. 20, in the east wing of the second floor, Regnier Center, Johnson County Community College, 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park. The event, which includes refreshments, is free and open to the public. Regular hours are 5 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday. For information, call (913) 469-3000.

American Indian Galleries are available for viewing from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday and Friday, noon to 5 p.m. Saturday at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 4525 Oak St., Kansas City, Mo.

The museum celebrates the opening with performances featuring students from Haskell Indian Nations University, Copper Maker Dancers and Midnite Express at noon Saturday, Nov. 14, and 1 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 15. Admission is free. For information, call (816) 751-1278 or visit nelson-atkins.org.

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