

Inside Eiteljorg's Native American Galleries



Media members look at work, including a canoe by Patrick Maranda Barriere Lake First Nation, in a new exhibit at The Eiteljorg Museum, on Thursday during a preview event. PHOTOS BY ROBERT SCHEER/INDYSTAR

Renovation part of museum's effort to reimagine the ways art is shown

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The goal of the Eiteljorg Museum's redesigned Native American Galleries is to lead visitors into a new state of mind.

Each entrance acknowledges the Native peoples whose ancestral lands are where the museum is now. Large installations — including Hannah Claus' (Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte) embodiment of the Miami origin story and Anita Fields' (Osage/Muscogee) expression of her native Osage culture — are immediately eye-catching. Miami, Potawatomi, Delaware and Shawnee peoples use their own languages to greet visitors, and more are on the way, according to Dorene Red Cloud (Oglala Lakota), associate curator of Native American art.

The \$6 million renovation is rooted in Native peoples' narratives — how they define themselves instead of how they have been portrayed. Some space at the beginning highlights the latter through romanticized ideas about living in tipis, which is often misspelled as teepees, and the



"Considering the Earth and Above," from Anita Fields (Osage Muscogee) is shown at The Eiteljorg Museum on Thursday.

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current cultural discussion of sports mascots.

Most of the reinstallation focuses on the former, and it's divided into three themes: Relation, Continuation and Innovation. The installation includes artworks acquired by the museum in 2019 that were created by Great Lakes Native peoples in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. And plenty of areas throughout are devoted to hands-on activities.

After eight months of construction, the galleries — called “Expressions of Life: Native Art in North America” — will open Saturday. Here are some key areas and works not to miss.

A freshly designed space

Only a glimpse at the new galleries is necessary to see that they look completely different. The previous floor-plan, which organized the art according to geography, was largely the same since 1989 — when the Eiteljorg opened. Stocky cases and heavy furniture outlined visitors’ paths.

If the former felt cramped, the redesign feels anything but. Natural wood flooring and light charcoal walls are unobtrusive. Soft light illuminates artworks inside glass cases rather than the reflection of the visitor viewing them. Along with work on the walls, many pieces sit in cases that are easily accessible for those using wheelchairs. For the particularly intricate jewelry, magnifying glasses slide along tracks to bring out details.

None of that, of course, was by accident. Canada-based Origin Studios helped design the gallery space, pulling colors and textures from the artwork that are reflected in the walls and panels, lead designer Michael Plamondon said. Because of the pandemic, the Origin team relied on a scan of the space and computer model — Thursday was the first time Plamondon said he saw it in person.

“We’re always looking at what’s the next view? So you draw somebody to something you really want them to see and spend some time with, and while they’re standing there, they’ll look and



Hannah Claus’ “Water Song: Peemitanaahkwahki sakaahkweelo,” is shown at The Eiteljorg Museum on Thursday. PHOTOS BY ROBERT SCHEER/INDYSTAR

they’ll see the next thing (that’ll) draw them through.”

Throughout the installation, a series of touchscreens house labels that identify the art instead of placing them on the wall. Nearby larger screens provide additional stories and media that relate to the works.

Relation to land, family, plants and more

The glossy figure created from raised beadwork sits atop a footrest that’s too beautiful for that utilitarian job. Instead, part of its service is to point to another important story. The figure is the same as the one at an effigy mound — piles of earth that builders shaped between about 350 and 1300 — called Man Mound in Wisconsin. After thousands of years intact, part of his legs were cut off by the construction of a county road.

And so Karen Ann Hoffman’s (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin) “Man Mound Footstool” replaces them, said Elisa Phelps, the Eiteljorg’s vice president and chief curatorial officer.

The work is one of many that shows



Avis Charley’s “Hope,” is shown at The Eiteljorg Museum on Thursday.

Native peoples’ relation to place. The theme threads through the stories behind sacred sites, including Cahokia Mounds near St. Louis, Etowah in Georgia and Spiro in Oklahoma, which were built by ancestors of the Caddo, Chickasaw, Choctaw and Muscogee (Creek),

among others.

Origin stories of different peoples are shown in new ways through artwork like Harry Fonseca’s (Nisenan Maidu/Portuguese/Hawaiian) 1979 “Coyote and Snow,” an acrylic on canvas that shows Coyote taking a walk during his beloved season. He is the Creator in many Native cultures and also can be considered a Trickster, and Fonseca explores his identity via a series of works.

Reflections on relation continue through the lenses of spirit, plants, animals and families. Among the striking examples are two house posts on carved and painted cedar by Nathan Jackson (Tlingit). Posts like these can be found in Alaska and British Columbia, Red Cloud said.

“It’s a matter of family pride, showing your roots,” she said.

Continuation with art on a continuum

The Eiteljorg has carved a selfie spot directly in front of an enlarged copy of a stunning work: a woman with black braids in an ornate red dress holding an American flag umbrella. Through her image, viewers can see columns of numbers and names because the artist drew it on the Treasurer’s Register of Taxes.

The original 2020 work by Avis Charley (Spirit Lake Dakota/Diné [Navajo]) is a piece of ledger art, and it has old origins. Native peoples of the northern plains recorded their histories on buffalo hides — a material that became limited by the 1830s as the animals’ numbers grew sparse. So they began using paper from ledger books.

The work is part of the continuation theme that shows how Native peoples continue to thrive, are diverse, and that their stories, lives and culture are not just of the past, Red Cloud said.

“Native art is on a continuum. What’s old is new and what’s new is old,” she said.

The section explains Native peoples’ membership in sovereign nations, their fight to make cultural practices legal, forced removals and how they turned their art-making into a business when necessary, among other topics.

Innovation that fuses past, present and future

In the oil painting “Our Days of Opulence,” artist Charley shows her friend Kaa Folwell (Santa Clara Pueblo) holding one of her own ceramic works. She’s relaxed behind sunglasses, sitting on a bench and leaning on one hand while the other props the vase on the knee of her flared pants.

On the nearby panel, a quote by Charley explains that she wanted to show Indigenous women in modern settings. “I aim to give voice and representation to contemporary Native people and how we continue to survive and thrive while maintaining cultural ties through our persistence and existence,” she wrote.

The work pulls together many of the threads that form the theme of innovation. In their own long history of creating cutting-edge works, Native artists have always fused traditional and contemporary. When they came into contact with European art forms, they incorporated those customs into their work. Artwork on a skateboard, intricate textiles and jewelry are just a few of the mediums that show multiple facets.

Native art is “based on a lot of tradition but in many ways it’s evolved and still evolving,” Red Cloud said.

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