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Seeing Native America: Indianapolis' Eiteljorg Museum Reframes Its Vision

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Jim Denomie, "Blue Eyed Chief"

“There is no bright line between the past and the present or the future. It’s a continuum.”

The Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art opened in 1989. The Eiteljorg’s newly reimagined and redesigned Native American Galleries reopened this past summer. Looking at photos of the original space, it’s clear the rooms were set up as they were in many twentieth-century museums, with artifacts loaded onto shelves of dark, wooden cases in a dimly lit room. It’s likely you’ve been in museums like this.

As at many of the world’s great museums, including the Louvre and the British Museum, recent renovations at the Eiteljorg bring in more light and create open spaces for the appreciation of individual works of art, many of which are displayed in all-glass cases for 360-degree viewing.

The Eiteljorg Museum is one of only two museums east of the Mississippi that present to the public both Native American art created in the past by mostly unknown artists, contemporary art by Native Americans and the art of the American West from well-known names like Fredric Remington and Georgia O’Keeffe. The renovations reflect trends that dictate livelier spaces while avoiding the tendency of previous museum designers, influenced by then-current anthropology, to present distinct groups of Indigenous people as though they existed in a vacuum from others who were living at the same time and even sometimes in the same space.

Of course, the Indigenous people of the American plains, the inhabitants of the Pacific Northwest coast, and tribes like the Ojibwe and Ho-Chunk who lived around the present-day Chicago area all spoke different languages, told somewhat different myths and had different customs; still, an organizing principle at the Eiteljorg is to display how all North Americans, past and

present, express certain common themes in their art. The themes that govern the Eiteljorg's presentation of Native American artifacts are relation (between humans and each other as well as the universe), continuity (among tribes and across generations), and innovation (because Indigenous art is always changing and evolving). These themes are traced through the customary art of peoples long gone and the contemporary art of currently practicing artists.



New Native American Galleries

Before the renovated museum reopened, I spoke with director and CEO John Vanausdall about the way the museum's designers consulted—and collaborated—with Indigenous people on how the museum intended to display works of art. According to Vanausdall, it became apparent that "it was no longer appropriate to present native peoples from an anthropological point of view, organized geographically, where 'Here are the people of the plains, here are the people of the Great Lakes region' and so on. Rather than separate the nations, we chose to look at commonalities and themes across the cultures. So that's the way the gallery is organized, by thematic rather than geographic ideas. What's key is that we understand the diversity of native peoples as well as their commonalities. In this new gallery, you're going to see old things, new things and everything in between. The point is there is no bright line between the past and the present or the future. It's a continuum. And there's always been innovation and evolution of this art."

As we walk through the museum, Elisa Phelps, vice president and chief curatorial officer, reinforces Vanausdall's words explaining "because native

art is on a continuum, something that is older isn't any more authentic native art than something that's newer."

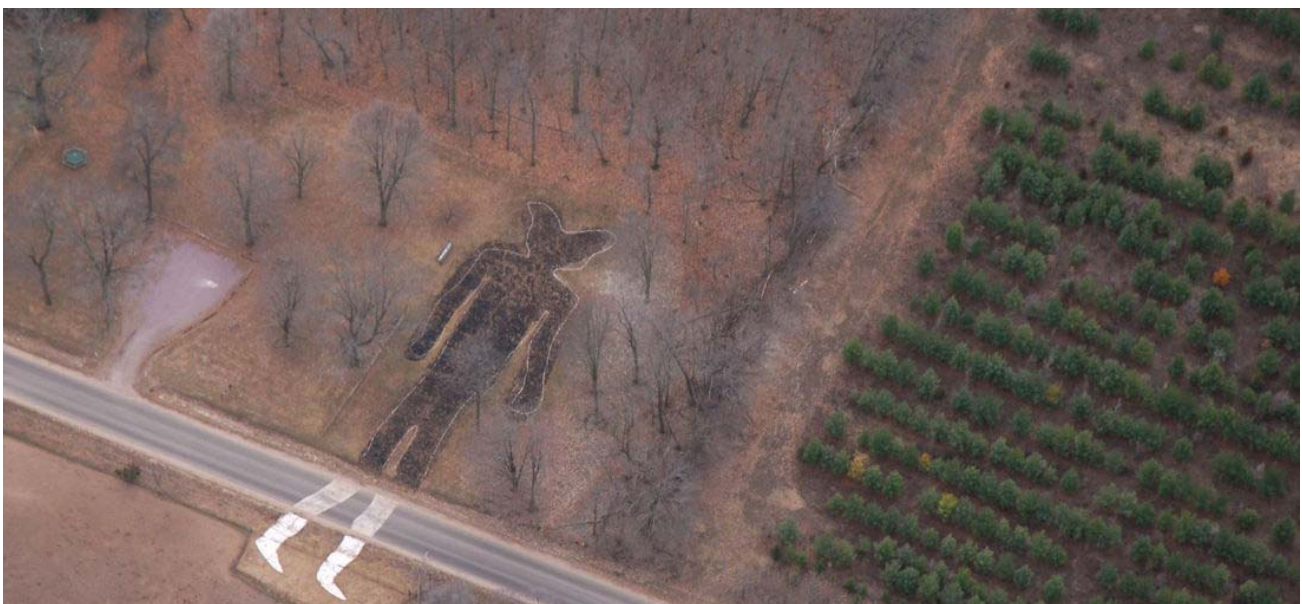
We must admit to having fallen into the fallacy of equating older native art with more *authentic* native art. This past spring, we traveled through New Mexico to visit several sites of Indigenous rock art, petroglyphs and pictographs. In Santa Fe, we walked right past the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts because we wanted to see the older stuff, the *real* stuff. That was a mistake.

Dorene Red Cloud of the Oglala Lakota and curator of Native American art at the Eiteljorg says that this perspective on Indigenous art is reverberating throughout the museum community: "Many art museums in the twenty-first century are shifting their collection strategies from acquiring mostly historical items to more current ones to reflect the changing interests of their communities. Museum communities have traditionally consisted of older generations but now also include new ones."

That continuity, the continuation of a Native American world view that extends from the past through the present day, is reflected in the works of Native art on display at the Eiteljorg. But Native art is all around us, not just in museums but perhaps even, at this very moment, under your feet. Literally.

Myth of the Vanishing Native American

St. Louis was once referred to as Mound City because it was so full of native mounds, earthworks that were bulldozed to make way for a growing city. In maps of old Chicago, mounds are indicated where there are now El tracks and tall buildings. If you look, though, here and there, you can still see the earthworks constructed by Native Americans to represent birds, turtles and other creatures, and to hold their dead.





Man Mound

Outside Baraboo, Wisconsin, the centuries-old earthen image of a human being, with horns, stretches over 200 feet on relatively flat land. No one knows for sure who built this Man Mound, and all that many will venture is that this figure is one of the last of Wisconsin's Indian effigy mounds—earth piled up to represent an animal or a human figure. This figure may be a shaman, a human, frequently horned, who communicated with the spirit world, or it might be a hybrid human and horned animal, or something else entirely. What is clear—from the legs, truncated when a highway was built over them—is that modern civilization has run roughshod over this ancient, sacred artwork, just as it has at hundreds of similar sites throughout Wisconsin and the Upper Midwest.



Cahokia, Monk's Mound/Photo: David Hammond

In Collinsville, Illinois, cars zip along the highway that cuts in front of a huge earthen pyramid, constructed by the almost 20,000 inhabitants of Cahokia, the largest and one of the most complex urban centers in North America, built over a thousand years ago. In the twentieth century, this priceless archaeological site was ravaged: a housing development and a drive-in movie theater were built over the bulldozed mounds and broad plazas of what was once a center of mighty Mississippian civilization that stretched all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico. Still, the large pyramid at Cahokia,

Monk's Mound, which is believed to have had a base as big as or bigger than that of the Great Pyramid of Giza, still stands.



Serpent Mound/Photo: David Hammond

Serpent Mound in Pebbles, Ohio, is a 1,348-foot-long and three-foot-high representation of a squiggling serpent, with its mouth open to swallow a globe that might be an egg or perhaps a planetary body, the sun, the moon? Serpent Mound would likely have been, at best, ignored if not entirely erased had it not been for the efforts of a few interested individuals. Serpent Mound is the first privately funded archeological preserve in the United States, and it presents us with an ancient earthwork that may date to centuries BCE.

We don't know too much—sometimes next to nothing—about the people who built these ancient earthen structures. Their names are lost to history. The monumental and many times spectacular remnants of their material culture would have been lost, too, were it not for efforts to preserve these artifacts of our North American past.

Many traces of peoples long gone are invisible, as are many of the four-to-five million or so Indigenous peoples who still live in the United States. The fact that Native Americans and their works are not more visible could lead some to conclude that Native Americans are mostly extinct. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz wrote in “All the Real Indians Died Off” (Beacon Press, 2016), the myth of the “vanishing Indian” served to “advance the dubious—even nefarious—political agendas aimed at the continual seizure of Indian lands

and resources. It was used by both the ‘friends’ and foes of Indians to justify policies of forced assimilation, which would mean the final solution to the ‘Indian problem,’ the ultimate disappearance of Indians to facilitate the transfer of Indian treaty lands to settler ownership.”

The tragic policy of “forced assimilation” is what Pope Francis was apologizing for when he visited Native American communities in July of this year, saying, “I humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians against the Indigenous peoples.”

The Eiteljorg presents reminders of the vibrant civilizations that have thrived for thousands of years in this part of the world and it celebrates how members of these nations are living and breathing and creating works of art that carry on the themes and traditions of those who came before.

Four Key Pieces

The renovated Native American Galleries at the Eiteljorg—with all-around glass cases, improved lighting and generous spacing between objects—encourage the appreciation of individual pieces. Here are a few exceptionally powerful artworks on display at the Eiteljorg’s new Native American Galleries.

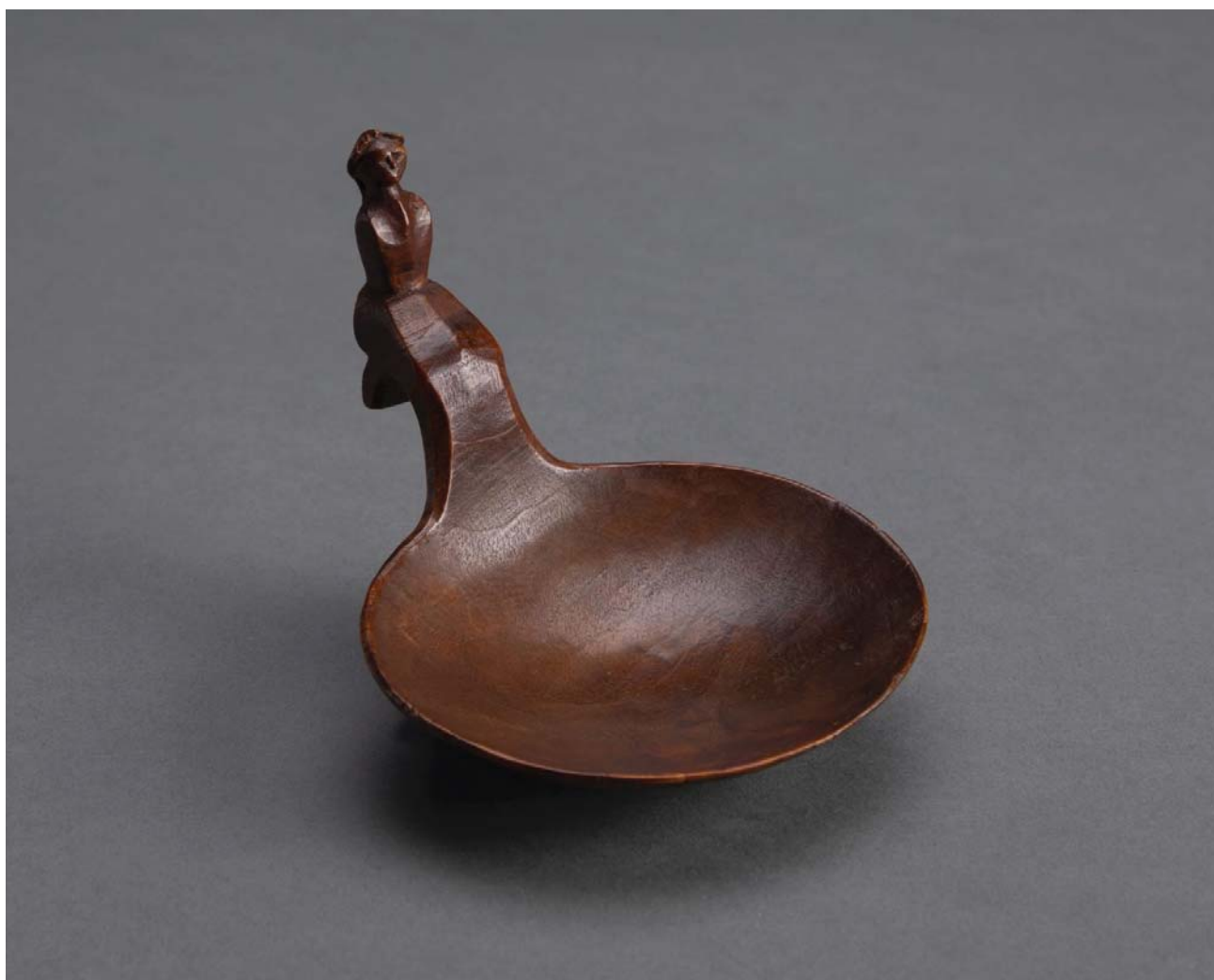


Hannah Claus, “water song [sakaakweehko]”/Photo Eiteljorg Museum

“Water song” by Hannah Claus, a striking piece that welcomes visitors into the renovated galleries, is a waterfall of shimmering acetate disks reminiscent of

translucent mica, a mineral of great value and significance to Indigenous peoples (mica shaped into the form of birds and human hands has been found at the Hopewell Mounds in Ohio, and this mineral was used as a medium of exchange by the Cherokee). Mica was commonly used by Native groups separated by considerable time and space. “Water song” pays homage to the Miami creation myth of humans pulling themselves up from the primordial waters by grabbing the branches of trees above them. Around the installation, wall-mounted speakers play back words of greeting in traditional languages from Indiana’s first residents, including Miami, Potawatomi and Shawnee.

‘The Eiteljorg Museum commissioned 2019 Eiteljorg Contemporary Fellow Hannah Claus (Bay of Quinte Mohawks) to create an installation piece based on a version of the Miami peoples’ emergence story,” Red Cloud told us. “Claus worked with Miami scholars Scott Shoemaker, Ph.D. and George Ironstrack (both from Miami Tribe of Oklahoma), traveling to Peru, Indiana, in May 2019 to view the Seven Pillars Nature Preserve (which is at the heart of Miami country). Claus absorbed her new knowledge and created ‘water song.’ Each strand consists of acetate film discs that mirror a water song created by George Ironstrack (Miami Tribe of Oklahoma). The top portion alludes to the sky, the mid-section to the earth, and the lower section to the water. Each strand’s threads extend above and below the work to denote the relation between the physical and metaphysical.”



Unrecorded Wyandot Artist, “Untitled Spoon”/Photo: Hadley Fruits Photography

“Spoon,” by an unrecorded Wyandot artist, is a beautiful example of how humble everyday objects are elevated through the addition of small details. The spoon is, of course, a domestic tool, and it’s gracefully shaped, showing off the skills of a Native craftsperson. What sets it apart from more strictly functional utensils is the small figure at the top, unnecessary to the functionality of the spoon, but rather an expressive element added by the artist to provide another dimension of enjoyment to this everyday object. “If you’re a Native woman, how would you show the love and care for your family? You would make sure they had beautiful things,” Phelps said as we toured these artifacts. So, even just basic simple things sometimes have a beautiful extra touch because that’s how you show your devotion to your family.”

This piece merges utilitarian craft with expressive artistry. The utilitarian impulse to create objects of use and value, coupled with the artistic impulse to express emotion through one’s craft, are found in many Indigenous artifacts.

“This circular-shaped spoon or ladle,” says Red Cloud, “features a sculpted woman kneeling at the top of the handle; her lower legs form the spoon’s hook. The backward curving hook of the spoon prevents it from slipping into a food container. The artist utilized a crooked knife or woodworking knife with a curved end, which enabled him/her/they to hollow out and shape the wood into a ladle or spoon. To complete the work, the artist rubbed roots of the bloodroot into the wood’s grain to create the darker color.”



Unrecorded Ojibwe Artist, "Knife Sheath"/Photo: Hadley Fruits Photography

"Sheath" by an unrecorded Ojibwe artist is another example of how a functional, everyday object with obvious utility was adorned to render expressive what could have been a simple leather sheath for a knife. The "unrecorded artist," however, was looking beyond the functionality of the knife to create a thing of beauty, something that would please over and above the value of the knife itself in a way that would honor the knife itself.

Very few of the art works from past centuries are attributed to specific individuals; these works were created anonymously. While at the Eiteljorg, we visited "Warhol's West," an exhibit of Andy Warhol's last major suite, a series of screen prints of Western icons (George Armstrong Custer, Sitting Bull and others). Warhol, though much more interested in Native art than one might think, had an approach that was in some ways antithetical to the unsigned works of Indigenous peoples; he was concerned with building a media personality; the personality of Native crafts people was, it seems, irrelevant to the creation of beautiful objects for the enjoyment of many.

"Native women artists are the inventors of loom (or woven) and applique (or sewn) beading techniques," Red Cloud says. "This beadwork artist utilized the loom to create this sheath, which requires a warp thread to string up the loom lengthwise and a weft thread to string the beads. The beaded motif of this knife sheath is based on an asymmetric pattern of triangles, parallelograms, diamonds and zigzags. By counting out the precise number and color of beads, the artist created her/their design."





Karen Ann Hoffman, "Man Mound Footstool"/Photo: Hadley Fruits Photography

"Man Mound Footstool" by Karen Ann Hoffman builds upon a found object, an antique footstool, a readily recognizable but perhaps no longer common piece of domestic Euro-American furniture. Hoffman has transformed it into a memorial to one of Wisconsin's most striking effigy mounds, and Wisconsin has the largest concentration of effigy mounds in the world. Very witty, we thought, that Hoffman has used a footstool as a platform for the image of a "man" who has lost his feet.

Red Cloud provides some historical detail: "Built around 1000 CE, Man Mound Effigy is a National Historic Landmark near Baraboo, Wisconsin. Man Mound is a human-like figure with horns and he is one of the five remaining humanoid effigy mounds located in Wisconsin. His 'legs' were cut off in the early twentieth century when a highway road was built through his shins. Hoffman has restored his legs in her found stool decorated in raised beadwork on velvet, a Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) technique."

I ask Hoffman how she interprets the fact that many of the effigy mounds in Wisconsin—including the Man Mound—are only fully legible from the air (as are the ancient mountainside pictures like the Nazca Lines in Peru or the Uffington Horse in England). Her response blew my mind: "We've been raised to want to see the whole thing. But maybe you don't have to see the whole thing all at once. Maybe that just reflects a twenty-first century perspective, thinking that you have to know everything, that you have to be able to stand on the moon to see the globe. But if you're in a vessel in the middle of Lake Michigan, you experience the wholeness of the world by deeply delving into that limited piece. That's a legitimate way to engage with something very large."

So maybe those huge earthworks and other images that are only visible from an aerial position were intended to allow us humans to see only a small portion of the larger mystery, because maybe that's all of this and other mysteries of life that we will ever be able to grasp.

Trying to see these objects of art through native eyes is not only difficult; for me and others, it's impossible. There is no way for a person of European descent—or perhaps even a twenty-first century Native American—to understand the intent of a person who lived perhaps thousands of years ago, who left no written record and whose culture has been obliterated by history

or conquest. The Eiteljorg is one of the few places where you can get a glimpse of a world you will never really know.

Hoffman will be one of the artists taking part in the Eiteljorg’s artists-in-residence program, which Madison Hincks, public programs coordinator, tells us is “a way to give selected artists from across North America an opportunity to share their work with the Indianapolis community, thereby giving our visitors a greater understanding of the artist’s work, traditions and culture. The residency includes conducting workshops with local Indianapolis Public Schools, community centers, and universities, studio sessions, and public presentations, spanning one-to-three weeks. Our last artist for the year will be Karen Ann Hoffman, a Haudenosaunee Raised Beadwork artist, who will be at the museum from November 1 to 21.”



Karen Ann Hoffman, Wisconsin Rapids, 2021/Photo: David Hammond

The Eiteljorg, 500 West Washington, Indianapolis, is open Monday through Saturday 10am-5pm and on Sunday noon-5pm.

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