

New exhibit reflects the changing perception of Indigenous art

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Image 1. "The Grand Canyon," by Tony Abeyta (Navajo), 2015. Image courtesy of National Museum of the American Indian

The story of American art is being rewritten at museums. This time, they're including the original Americans.

Paul Chaat Smith is a curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). He says that, traditionally, Indigenous American art and artifacts have been exhibited alongside African and Pacific Islands art. They also might be in an anthropology department, or even in a natural history wing "next to the mammoths and the dinosaurs."

However, that has changed in recent years, Smith said, with "everyone understanding that this doesn't really make sense."

"Part Of The Fabric Of American Art"

Smith is one of the curators of "Stretching the Canvas: Eight Decades of Native Painting," a new exhibition at the NMAI's George Gustav Heye Center in New York City. The show highlights questions of where Indigenous American art and artists truly belong.

The paintings are all from the museum's own collection. They range from the illustrative works of Stephen Mopope and Woody Crumbo in the 1920s and 1930s to Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's "Trade Canoe: Adrift" from 2015. Her work shows a canoe overloaded with Syrian refugees. Some paintings include clear Indigenous imagery while others don't. Almost all show their artists as deeply engaged with non-Native art, past and present. The artists reflect their knowledge of American and European art movements, from Renaissance painting to Modernist abstract work and Pop art.

"American Indian artists, American Indians generally speaking, were sort of positioned in the United States as a separate, segregated area of activity," said the museum's David Penney. He is another of the show's curators. The goal of "Stretching the Canvas" is to show how these artists are "part of the fabric of American art since the mid-20th century," he said.

The show opens with a room of blockbusters, a group of paintings the curators believe belong on the walls of any major museum. They include powerful works by Fritz Scholder, Kay WalkingStick, James Lavadour and others.



Restrictions Placed On Indigenous Art

For decades, Indigenous American art wasn't just overlooked, it was intentionally isolated from the rest of the art world. In the first half of the 20th century, government-run schools, philanthropists and others who supported Indigenous American art often saw it as a path to economic self-sufficiency for the artists. That meant preserving a traditional style, at least as defined by non-Indigenous people. At one school, for example, Indigenous American art students were forbidden to look at non-Native art or even mingle with non-Indigenous students.

In painting in particular, Indigenous American artists of the 1920s, 1930s and beyond were often confined to illustrations of Indigenous people in a flat, two-dimensional style that was easy to print and sell. Indigenous artists were also restricted in where they could exhibit their work. Only a few museums and shows were open to them, which presented almost exclusively Indigenous art.

The doors began to crack open in the 1960s and 1970s. Art education for Indigenous Americans broadened. Mario Martinez, who has two large paintings in the exhibition, cites artists Wassily Kandinsky and Willem de Kooning among his major influences. He was introduced to European art history by his high school art teacher in the late 1960s and never looked back.

Yet even now, another artist in the show, America Meredith, senses a divide between Indigenous Americans' art and the art world as a whole. She talks about the challenge of overcoming "resistance" from non-Indigenous viewers. She said when they see Indigenous images, they think, "Oh, this isn't for me. I'm not going to look at this." Indigenous American artists have to draw a viewer in, as if saying, "Come on, come on, hold my hand, look at this imagery," she said.

Meredith's work in the show, "Benediction: John Fire Lame Deer," a portrait of a Lakota holy man, combines references to old European icons, the children's book illustrator Richard Scarry,

Indigenous American Woodland style art and the Muppets. "I definitely use cartoons to entice people," she said. "People feel safe, comfortable."

More Museums Featuring Indigenous Art

Penney said the exhibition comes at a moment when "major museums are beginning to think about how Indigenous American art fits" into the story of American art history. Nine years ago, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts opened a new Art of the Americas wing. It integrated Indigenous American work with the rest of its American collections.

In New York City, the Whitney Museum of American Art has a show by Mohawk artist Alan Michelson. Also in New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2018 for the first time displayed Indigenous art in its American wing, instead of with African and Oceanic arts. Later in December, the Metropolitan will show two paintings by Cree artist Kent Monkman.

Kathleen Ash-Milby, curator of Indigenous American art at the Portland Art Museum in Oregon, also worked on "Stretching the Canvas." She said the art world is reconsidering what American art is.

As an example, Paul Chaat Smith points to Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. She has been working for decades but is getting new attention at age 79. "Not because her work is different," he said. "Because people are now able to be interested in Native artists."

Quiz

1 Read the list of sentences from the article.

1. *He says that, traditionally, Indigenous American art and artifacts have been exhibited alongside African and Pacific Islands art.*
2. *Nine years ago, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts opened a new Art of the Americas wing.*
3. *In New York City, the Whitney Museum of American Art has a show by Mohawk artist Alan Michelson.*
4. *Also in New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2018 for the first time displayed Indigenous art in its American wing, instead of with African and Oceanic arts.*

Which two sentences taken together provide the BEST evidence to support the idea that the way people think about and display Indigenous art has changed from the past?

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 3 and 4
- (D) 1 and 4

2 Read the statement below.

The Indigenous art in the new exhibits illustrates the influences of diverse forms and ideas on the artists.

Which sentence from the article provides the BEST support for the above statement?

- (A) They range from the illustrative works of Stephen Mopope and Woody Crumbo in the 1920s and 1930s to Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's "Trade Canoe: Adrift" from 2015.
- (B) The artists reflect their knowledge of American and European art movements, from Renaissance painting to Modernist abstract work and Pop art.
- (C) The show opens with a room of blockbusters, a group of paintings the curators believe belong on the walls of any major museum.
- (D) Mario Martinez, who has two large paintings in the exhibition, cites artists Wassily Kandinsky and Willem de Kooning among his major influences.

3 According to the article, why were Indigenous American artists often isolated from other artists in the 1920s?

- (A) Indigenous artists chose to intentionally separate themselves from other artists so they could develop their own style.
- (B) Non-Indigenous students were often accused of copying the traditional style of art used by Indigenous artists.
- (C) High school art teachers had at one time tried to get Indigenous artists to replace their personal styles with European art styles.
- (D) Schools believed Indigenous artists could sell only art that was a traditional style, and museums were often closed to them.

4

Why does America Meredith choose to use cartoon images in her art?

- (A) Meredith says they make people feel comfortable and interested.
- (B) Meredith says she grew up reading the books of Richard Scarry.
- (C) Meredith says the shapes mimic the traditional style people expect.
- (D) Meredith says some remind her of old European iconic images.