A new Yale exhibition takes a closer look at Indigenous peoples in art history

Andrea Valluzzo  Oct 24, 2019


Courtesy Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History
Collecting the art of Indigenous peoples is not without controversy. Yale University’s own history has been complicated since its earliest acquisitions through the then-common practice of “salvage anthropology,” or the gathering of artifacts to preserve remnants of what was believed to be the vanishing of Indigenous culture.

A new exhibition at Yale University Art Gallery of more than 75 objects and artworks presents a more inclusive study through a collaboration with many Indigenous peoples, scholars and artists. Place, Nations, Generations, Beings: 200 Years of Indigenous North American Art will be on view at the gallery from Nov. 1 to June 21.

Featuring basketry, beadwork, textiles, pottery, drawings, photography and wood carvings from the early 1800s to the present, the exhibition firmly places Indigenous works into the sweeping narrative of American art. Many of the highlights were previously housed in display or storage cases separately across Yale’s campus but are united here. This is the first exhibition to bring together Indigenous art from the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, and the Yale University Art Gallery.

Three student curators, two of whom are Indigenous, organized the exhibition. Katherine Nova McCleary, of the Little Shell Chippewa-Cree; Leah Tamar Shrestinian; and Joseph Zordan, of the Bad River Ojibwe, worked over the course of three years on the show along with several institution staffers.
“This exhibition arose from generations of Indigenous students and affiliates calling on Yale University to accurately represent Indigenous art and peoples on campus,” McCleary says. “We were drawn to the project because of the opportunities to collaborate with Indigenous artists and scholars, grapple with Yale University’s settler colonial history, and more accurately represent Indigenous art in the Yale University Art Gallery space.”

The four elements in the exhibition title explore “the connections that Indigenous peoples have to their lands; the power of objects as expressions of sovereignty; the passing on of artistic practices and traditions; and the relationships that artists and nations have to animals, plants, and cosmological beings,” according to the gallery.

More than 40 different Indigenous nations are represented and each one of them has a different way of thinking and talking about objects, Zordan says. “Something we hope to accomplish in this show is cultivating the space to explore this diversity of thought.”

Shrestinian hopes non-Indigenous people like her will be challenged by the exhibition to challenge assumptions about Indigenous peoples and their art. “I hope the language we use throughout the exhibit and our emphasis on individual artists will help disrupt settler understandings of Indigenous art and nations.”

For example, a person of European descent might look at a Mohegan basket and see a fine example of artwork or an object to be studied and admired. Indigenous peoples, however, saw these objects not as art or artifacts but as having a spirit, according to the exhibition catalogue. “They are beings, ancestors, and relations, as well as objects to be both cared for and used.”

**Five pieces that reveal Indigenous art’s diversity**
Familial ties still unite Indigenous nations today. An unidentified Lakota woman, likely an expectant mother, crafted this cradleboard. Designed with two wooden slats in the back, this heavily beaded cradle could be propped up, allowing the mother to work and the child to look around.

Indigenous pottery married form with function and perhaps none more so in this exhibition than this pot by Laguna Pueblo potter Arroh-a-och. Although designs including abstracted birds’ heads having unusually long feathers are not rare, the geometric crosshatching details make this pot a standout and shows off the artist’s craftsmanship.
An unidentified Anishinaabe artist made this Aazhooningwa’on (bandolier bag), which is an iconic and highly personal object in the Ojibwe and other Indigenous nations. Their beaded floral designs represent the wearer's important relationship to their community, which includes people but also plants, animals and spiritual beings. This bag depicts the wild blueberries, roses and other plants that would grow in around the Great Lakes woodlands.
4 Kwakwaka’wakw sea monster mask

By Canadian First Nations artist Richard Hunt, of the Kwakwaka’wakw, this is one of co-curator Joseph Zordan’s favorite pieces. Hailing from a long line of artists, Hunt began carving with his father at age 12 or 13 and continues a tradition of carving items that are not just decorative but have ceremonial importance. This mask likely references the Kwakwaka’wakw origin story and details the being’s key role in the nation’s histories and worldviews.
5 Ponca portrait

Navajo artist Will Wilson launched a photography project in 2012 in contrast to Edward Curtis’ famed portraits of Indigenous peoples in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Wilson allows his sitters to choose their own poses, clothing and to write their own captions, empowering them to take control of their narrative and how they are represented. This photo is titled Casey Camp Horinek, Citizen Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma, “Zhutni,” Tribal Councilwoman, Leader of Scalp Dance Society, Sundancer, Delegate to UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Matriarch of Wonderful Family (Grandmother, Companion, Mother, Sister), Defender of Mother Earth.