



Q&A

The Indigenous Turn in Museums

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Modern American History and the Public Roles of Indigenous Studies

This is the second in a series of Q&A installments intended to bring public history more deliberately into *Modern American History*. In a Q&A session published in the July 2023 issue of *MAH*, Teasel Muir-Harmony and Sarah B. Snyder asked five historians to reflect on the opportunities and challenges raised through their work with the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. In this session, historians Amanda Cobb-Greetham (*MAH* Executive Board member and faculty at the University of North Carolina) and Scott Manning Stevens (Syracuse University) offer their thoughts on the current state of Indigenous studies and Native American public history and art and ask three esteemed curators to reflect on their own work in this dynamic field. Here Kathleen Ash-Milby (Portland Art Museum), Jordan Poorman Cocker (Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art), and Patricia Marroquin Norby (Metropolitan Museum of Art) discuss their curatorial visions and institutional settings, their goals for reaching wider publics through the production and display of Indigenous arts, and the extent to which an “Indigenous turn” has transpired in American popular as well as academic culture, challenges and all.

Introduction by Scott Manning Stevens

Fragile Progress: The Indigenous Turn in Museums

You may have heard people refer to various “turns” in cultural history, but unless you work in the field of Indigenous studies, you likely have not heard of an Indigenous turn in American culture. Like all harbingers of social awareness or movements toward greater equity in any given society, these changes occur at a seemingly glacial pace and are never enough. And yet, change there is—while racism may be endemic to much of American society, we no longer have state-sanctified segregation or the apparatus that upheld Jim Crow in the American South. Decades-old struggles and sacrifices did in the end produce important civil rights legislation and real changes in people’s lives regarding access and opportunity. For Indigenous Americans, the fight for justice across a variety of venues in American society, including equal rights under the law, the recognition of tribal sovereignty, and a less biased account of our shared history with settlers, has been particularly fraught. The conquest and dispossession of Indigenous peoples in the western hemisphere has long been downplayed or ignored in the settler societies that developed in North and South America. Beside the host of historic and ongoing injustices we endure, our stories were not being told. In the United States, the average age at which you cease to learn about Native America in public schools is fourth grade, when children are about nine or ten years old. Meaning that what is taught about Native Americans in U.S. history is pitched toward a child’s understanding and sensibilities. The emphasis is on founding moments and founding

myths that feature figures such as Pocahontas, Squanto, and Sacagawea. Thus, Native peoples are consigned to the past and to our collective childhoods.

One of the few venues in which the broader public might hope to encounter more accurate accounts of Native cultures than those provided by Hollywood or television is in museums. But there again, we have the issue of what type of museum that might be. For much of the twentieth century, Native American cultures were not represented so often in history or art museums, but rather in natural history museums. We were the ethnic “other” to be found among halls of animals, vegetables, or minerals. In most art museums, our arts, when present at all, were marginalized to portions of the museum devoted to the “primitive arts” of the Americas, Africa, and Oceania. One could easily miss those collections, and when one did find time to visit, there was usually very little to contextualize the objects on display. Objects were selected by usually non-Native experts and connoisseurs, whose training rarely involved contact with the source communities or cultural understanding beyond traditional Western notions of ethnology.

While there existed a few notable exceptions with regard to specific exhibitions in the past, Native American curators were an anomaly in the museum world well into the 2000s. One of those early figures was the late George Horse Capture (1937–2013), an enrolled member of the A'aninin (or Gros Ventre) nation of Ft. Belknap, Montana. In 1979, he was named the first curator of the Plains Indian Museum in Cody, Wyoming. This was in fact a historic appointment; Horse Capture had earned a BA in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley after his service in the military and participating in the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969. After returning to Montana and earning a MA in history from Montana State, he turned to teaching. When hired as the inaugural curator of the new Plains Indian Museum, one of the five museums that now make up the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, he represented a new figure in the elite cultural world of museums.¹ As a Native American raised in a reservation community, politically active, and educated at a top university, he was unlike any curators of Indigenous collections before him.

He brought his cultural insights and political values as a Native person with him, and they helped shape his curatorial practice. But this did not open the floodgates; for most of the 1980s, he remained an exception to the rule. Nor did his innovative work as a curator meet with universal acclaim. The cultural critic and literary scholar Jane Tompkins would recount, in a collection of essays on the American West, her frustration at viewing the Plains Indian Museum on a 1988 visit to Cody. When faced with an Indigenous presentation of the varied cultures of Plains region, she was left cold—it did not conform to her preconceived notions of those peoples. She wrote, “What was the matter? I was interested in Indians, had read about them, taught some Indian literature, felt drawn by accounts of native religions,” and yet the exhibits “triggered no fantasies” for her.² Tompkins questioned the museum’s intentions, asking, “Wasn’t there an air of bad faith about preserving the vestiges of a culture one had effectively extinguished?” Still, this does not explain her lack of sympathy or, possibly, misprision of Native culture when she observed that the artifacts derived from animals led her to see the Indians’ mode of life as “even more dedicated to carnage than Buffalo Bill’s.”³ It would appear no amount of revisionist labeling and contextualization could make these objects more alive to Tompkins; judging from Indigenous material culture, she admits to finding Plains Indian life quite tedious and lacking glamor.

Happily, others recognized not only Horse Capture’s tremendous contributions, but also that his example pointed a way forward for museums that held significant national or regional

¹Steven Chawkins, “George P. Horse Capture dies at 75; Native American curator,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 2013, <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-george-horse-capture-20130505-story.html> (accessed Apr. 3, 2025).

²Jane Tompkins, “At the Buffalo Bill Museum, June 1988,” *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York, 1992), 188.

³Tompkins, “At the Buffalo Bill Museum, June 1988,” 191.

collections. As the Smithsonian began to envision the founding of a National Museum of the American Indian in New York City, based on the acquisition of the vast George Gustave Heye collection that had previously been operated as the Museum of the American Indian, organizers began to envision a very different Indigenous Museum—one organized, curated, and administered by Native peoples. Horse Capture would indeed be part of this movement, moving to Washington to work with the Smithsonian on this undertaking. This period in the 1990s would see the rise of other Native curatorial and administrative voices now prominent in the worlds of museum curation and Indigenous material cultural studies and the arts; figures such as W. Richard West (Cheyenne), Suzan Harjo (Cheyenne/Muscogee), Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), and Dr. Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora). Also, during this period, Congress would pass the hugely important Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act or NAGPRA.

That act required museums to review the materials that they had held for decades without tribal permission or oversight. Such a massive undertaking meant that Native experts and community collaboration were suddenly necessary aspects of best practice for museums holding Native material culture. This, in turn, led to a surge of activity in Native cultural studies and museum studies. Native intellectuals, such as Rickard, articulated notions such as visual sovereignty and Native communities regularly appointed Tribal Historic Preservation Officers. The sum of these actions came to represent a sea change in the Native American museum world. That change did not come instantaneously, nor did it reach far enough in many cases, but it was a very different world in the dioramas and declension narratives showcased throughout the first three quarters of the twentieth century.

While one might have hoped that the way forward was becoming clearer, we are beginning to see just how fragile those advances were. The current political backlash against the necessary correctives that came with the Indigenous turn in museums and in cultural studies may have profound and lasting effects on the field of Indigenous studies across many public venues, be they museums, historic sites, national parks, or public history programs. It is now up to these institutions to preserve as best they can the lessons learned over thirty-some years. Old habits of thought, which sought to obscure or deny the facts of the past and the conquest and settling of North America, are back and attempting to regain ascendance with a sense of aggrievement and vengeance. It is up to cultural practitioners and informed members of the public to retain the gains we have made.

Some scholars have noted what they call an “Indigenous Turn” in both academia and the larger society—from the expansion of Indigenous Studies, greater representation in film and the media, to land acknowledgments—there has been a greater awareness of Native American history and presence than there had been in past generations. How does the institution at which you are employed reflect this increased awareness? In what ways has it followed such trends or possibly led them? How does this square with its practices in the past?

Kathleen Ash-Milby: The Portland Art Museum is a mid-sized museum with strengths in modern and contemporary photography, graphic art, and American and European art. The representation of the Native American art collection within this museum is a good example of how the focus on this type of work has shifted over the past three decades. The museum was founded in 1892; the first handful of Native-made objects were acquired in 1918. A huge acquisition of Northwest Coast material in 1948 should have led to the hiring of specialists in this work, but the first Curator of Native American Art was not hired until 1991, and he was a cultural anthropologist who specialized in Polynesian rock art. In the late-twentieth century, there were some collections-focused exhibitions of historical material, and the museum hosted a handful of significant traveling group exhibitions, including *Women of Sweetgrass, Cedar, and Sage* (1986) and *Shared Visions: Contemporary Native American Painting and Sculpture* (1992).

Major permanent exhibition galleries were created in 2000, but the organization reflected an uncomfortable meshing of anthropological organization by culture area with the slightly modified aesthetics of an art museum. Instead of a white box approach, for example, the galleries were all painted a grayish beige, which worked well for the Northwest Coast material but was a disaster for the basketry and Southwest ceramics. While the collections rotated and some regions moved around, the original exhibition organization and interpretation was still in place when I joined the museum in 2019.

Mirroring the larger shifts in the art world, the most significant changes to the representation and prominence of Native art within the museum happened over the past ten years, starting with the work of my predecessor, Deana Dartt. She spearheaded the focus on contemporary art with purchases for the collection and the creation of a small gallery for temporary exhibitions referred to as the Center for Native American Art, which opened in 2015. Native artists who live in the region, such as Wendy Red Star and Marie Watt, had other opportunities for their work to be collected and exhibited under the Northwest Art curator's purview.

I have since worked to further break down the silos that exist in our collections and programs, just as I feel these same silos are beginning to break down in the wider art world. I have embraced opportunities to collaborate with my colleagues in graphic arts, photography, modern and contemporary art, American art, and Northwest art where our collections areas and interests overlap. The Center for Contemporary Native Art is no longer an isolated gallery, but now a museum-wide program. When our current museum campus expansion is complete, you will find Native art through the museum, not just in the Native American art permanent collections galleries. This is a far cry from the practice at the museum only fifteen or twenty years ago, but I think the museum leadership today recognizes that our audiences benefit from this richer experience.

Jordan Poorman Cocker: I wouldn't agree there has been an "Indigenous turn" in academia or in American society. I would say, instead, that Indigenous scholars, artists, and creatives within the United States are attempting to make progress similar to the progressive shifts we've seen within the global Indigenous centers of the world including New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and other countries. The United States government continues to fail Tribal Nations through actively denying historical and ongoing colonialism while simultaneously defunding programmatic attempts made by communities to collectively heal from the historical and ongoing negative impacts of settler colonialism. These Nationwide failures directly impact institutional funding and support for Indigenous art across creative and artistic sectors negatively. Over the last forty years, we have witnessed the progress of other countries with settler colonial contexts around the world including New Zealand, Australia, Canada, etc. advancing the field through progressive, historic shifts in acknowledging and understanding their histories as settler colonial states.

Since the majority of museums are privately funded in the United States, much of the recent progress made by curators in Indigenous museums has been supported by foundations and other funders who have updated their missions, developed relationships with Indigenous advisors or advisory councils, and integrated Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives and policies. These same policies are currently under direct attack from the United States government, which has resulted in intellectually and socially regressive shifts within the museum field. Many institutions and projects that rely on national funding are now in jeopardy.

Despite these challenges, Tribal Nations have continued to make significant progress through the development or in some cases expansion of existing Tribal museums and cultural centers

across the country such as Sea Alaska Heritage Institute, the Choctaw Cultural Center, and the Poeh Cultural Center and Museum to name a few. Cherokee Nation Film Commission has embarked on monumental projects in recent years. Cherokee Nation and Prime Video have collaborated to help bring the Cherokee language to viewers across the globe. As part of an ongoing collaboration, one of the leading entertainment companies is now exploring opportunities for the largest tribal nation in the United States to dub and subtitle select titles within Prime Video's full library of originals into the Cherokee language. I am glad to share Crystal Bridges held a screening and panel in collaboration with Cherokee Nation Film Commission bringing these episodes to audiences March 23, 2023, as part of the closing programming for the closing of the first exhibit featuring Native American and Indigenous art curated internally by an Indigenous curator.

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art has taken steps since opening in 2011 to include art made by Indigenous artists within the collection. When I started, I began by doing the work of illuminating the museum's responsibilities to honoring place-based lenses, which include as a first step, collecting artwork by Osage Nation, Quapaw Nation, and Caddo Nation artists. Historically, Crystal Bridges has looked to Indigenous art to *diversify* the museum's exhibits, often relying on external Indigenous co-curators to provide expertise in Native American Art during periods in which the curator of Indigenous art position was not filled. In 2023, I accepted my position as curator of Indigenous art. At that time, Crystal Bridges only had about eighty-five works in the Indigenous art collection, most of which were purchased from a Kansas-based collector, Bruce Hartman. Today, the collection of Indigenous art includes over 120 artworks, which represent roughly 2.8% of the museum's entire collection of over 3,900 artworks. The recent exhibition, *American Sunrise: Indigenous Art at Crystal Bridges*, is Crystal Bridges' first exhibit comprised entirely of Indigenous art curated internally by an Indigenous curator and co-curated by Ashley Holland (Cherokee Nation), Curator and Director of Curatorial initiatives with Art Bridges Foundation (figure 1). *American Sunrise* puts Indigenous curatorial practices into action by collaborating with Indigenous artists, scholars, and Tribal Nations to model museum best practice through Indigenous lenses. *American Sunrise* engaged in best practice in several ways, perhaps the most significant of which was to foreground Indigenous languages within in-gallery didactics which included implementing Cherokee Language for labels of new commissions by Cherokee National Treasures, Roy Boney and Jane Osti, and Osage language labels translated into the orthography by Christopher Cote (Osage Nation) for new acquisitions by artists Ryan Redcorn and Yatika Fields. Integrating Indigenous language revitalization efforts was one of the many ways Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies were implemented into the in-gallery experience, which was framed by oral history interviews with the artists. While the museum has taken some positive steps toward meaningfully engaging Indigenous art and expanding the collection area, Crystal Bridges has a long way to go toward *sustainably* making space for Indigenous art, artists, and Tribal Nations (Figure 2).

Patricia Marroquin Norby: The "Indigenous turn" as a recent theoretical and scholarly approach in academia chronologically follows museum practices that sought to be more inclusive of Native American and Indigenous creative expressions during the early-twentieth century. As a curatorial method, this is not new to the museum world, specifically regarding acquisitions and exhibitions.

Today, within U.S. national borders, there is stronger Indigenous representation in museum leadership than ever before. However, engaging with Native American and Indigenous communities to develop exhibitions and programming has been ongoing for decades. Consider, for instance, that one of the first exhibitions in New York City to feature Pueblo watercolor

sponsored by the College Art Association and the U.S. Department of the Interior, led to the inclusion of American Indian art at the Venice Biennale (Italy) in 1932. In 1941, the *Indian Art of the United States* exhibition—held at the Museum of Modern Art and organized by Rene d'Harnoncourt and Frederic H. Douglas and sponsored by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board (IACB)—featured approximately one thousand works by Native American artists from nations north of the U.S.-Mexico border. These earlier exhibitions were curated with the goal of highlighting the aesthetic importance of Native American art, and the artworks were exhibited along with the works of non-Native artists. Although well-intended, the approach of these earlier museum practitioners was problematic for multiple reasons. First, they imposed settler concepts of cultural identities and political borders onto Indigenous communities thereby dismissing seasonal migrations, aesthetic exchanges, and cross-cultural relationships. They did not include Native American curators or community members as equal and collaborative partners. Also, exhibition content and language was consistently laden with anthropological and racial stereotypes, white supremacist views, and U.S. nationalist agendas. These categorizations ignored the intercultural relationships that had always been integral to Indigenous lifeways throughout this hemisphere.

Importantly, the increase of Native American representations in museums and art exhibitions was greatly influenced by Mexican cultural institutions that had already been highlighting Mexican Indigenous collections as part of their exhibitions during the early-twentieth century. One source for this international shift was Rene d' Harnoncourt, who became head of the IACB in 1936. D' Harnoncourt had spent years in Mexico organizing exhibitions of Mexican modern, colonial, and Indigenous art. His connections with both the Mexican and U.S. governments helped propel his museum career and raise awareness of Indigenous art in the United States. Understanding this historical trajectory is valuable when considering the origins of recent changes in the museum world—they did not come out of nowhere.

In 2020, I became the first Assistant Curator of Native American Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Met). The position followed my long-term work with Native American art and historical collections at academic and cultural institutions. I am professionally trained as a practicing fine artist, art history scholar, and museum leader. My diverse background in the arts gave me insight into balancing the needs of Indigenous communities, individual artists, institutional capacity, and museum policy development. In 2021, I wrote *The Met's Native American Art Initiative* (NAAI), which addresses institutional needs specific to the appropriate care and presentation of Native American collections, including collaborative work with source communities. Met leadership immediately greenlighted the NAAI. It is the first initiative of its kind in the history of The Met.

Every museum has its own culture, values, and mission. These are qualities that can grow and change over time while a museum also maintains what is healthy about their institutional identity and practices. This means honestly assessing both institutional strengths and challenges. What are we getting right? What distinguishes our museum that we want to sustain or amplify? What changes do we need to make to better address the needs and interests of our visitors, while also supporting internal needs such as staff capacity? These are just a few examples of the types of questions that could be asked.

Throughout my career, I have witnessed many museums trying to be something they are not. I have watched smaller institutions attempt to do too much with limited staff and inadequate funding. I have also observed big museums with leadership that “thinks small” and holds back talented staff or innovative ideas. I have seen natural history and history museums try to become art museums. As someone who has worked in both museum leadership and curation, I believe it

is important to embrace the qualities that make an institution unique. I think The Met maintains a strong sense of institutional identity and values that are integral to its mission while also remaining open to necessary changes.

There seems to be a current trend in museums attempting to be like one another. As a curator of Native American art, being like every other museum is not of interest. Viewing the same ten Indigenous artists represented in museum exhibitions across the United States is disappointing.

How would you describe your own practice as an Indigenous curator of Indigenous arts? Could you describe this in terms of your greater vision and goals?

Ash-Milby: As an Indigenous curator of Native arts, my goal has always been to shine a light on this magnificent work in our field, whether that be nineteenth-century Navajo wearing blankets, a midcentury painting, or twenty-first-century work in new media. How I have approached achieving this goal has changed over the last thirty years as I have continued to learn from artists, elders, and colleagues.

When I started my career in 1993, I was frustrated that the work of Native artists was relegated to anthropology museums and contemporary art was almost entirely disregarded in academia and the contemporary art field. I was passionately interested in contemporary Native art, but even at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), my first employer, there was little interest or regard for it. We were still in the era of massive group shows coupled with the idea that one opportunity for an artist could transform their career and jolt them into mainstream visibility and success. There are always exceptions to the rule, but that was really largely a fantasy. The reality was that it would take years (decades, really) of consistent, persistent work by many artists and arts workers to keep expanding our networks and relationships in the wider arts community. But waiting for people outside of our field to catch up was demoralizing, and I felt like people were missing out.

In 2005, the NMAI held a symposium in Venice, Italy, titled “Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity” that explored questions about how Native art fit within this larger art world. In recently re-reading the symposium proceedings, I am struck by two things. First, so many of these artists and curators felt their work was still not being seen, even when that work was part of the extended programming of the Venice Biennale. And second, that many of these presenters were also determined to not let this get in the way of continuing to do our important work. James Luna, who was featured in a solo exhibition, *Emendatio*, sponsored by NMAI as a collateral Biennale project, was disappointed that there was little to no notice of his work after the exhibition, but said, “I have come to the conclusion that we should make our own space and let them catch up for once. I have heard words about inclusion and exclusion, but let’s lead rather than be led.”⁴ Jolene Rickard went even further, challenging us to “reimagine an Indigenous space,” rather than seeking outside validation. She stated that, “we need to make art for each other. We need to write for each other, and we need to do it on a global scale.”⁵

For me, I decided that my priority would be to resist zero-sum thinking and plan my exhibitions as if the opportunities for Native art would continue to expand. There was no need to keep sweeping as many artists as possible into massive group shows. Our artists were more than one-hit wonders. Their work had breadth and depth that needed to be explored and experienced, so

⁴James Luna in *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity* (Washington and New York, 2006), 146.

⁵Jolene Rickard in *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity*, 64.

I concentrated on showing more work by fewer artists in thematic exhibitions, as well as organizing solo exhibitions. I also revisited artists from earlier generations and gave them their due with major retrospectives and publications. I stopped worrying as much about breaking out of our pretty amazing Indigenous arts communities and buckled down, doing the hard work of building collections and expanding the scholarship with my colleagues, none of which was quick or easy. I am proud of our work and glad that the rest of the art world is starting to catch up. They have been missing out.

Poorman Cocker: As an Indigenous scholar, curator, and artist, I am reflective of my positionality as a Kiowa woman and enrolled member of the Kiowa Tribe raised in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and as a Tongan woman educated in New Zealand. My academic genealogy includes mentorship by Māori and Indigenous scholars in the disciplines of design, museum studies, Indigenous studies, anthropology, and art. The complexity of my identity provides me with a frame of reference that is connected to the land, the community, and the kinship systems in which I was raised, and it allows me to provide intergenerational insights and perspectives beyond formal academic and artistic training. The Indigenous arts research methodologies I utilize are steeped in the ontological frameworks of my own Kiowa protocols, which uphold and honor ancestral values of reciprocity, kinship, and tribal sovereignty through intentional collaborative oral history interviews with artists, generations of makers, and broader communities. Everything connects back to my Toyebo and Paddlety Grandmothers. My ethics committee includes my grandmother and her cousins, and our ancestors Atah, whose allotment encompasses Rainy Mountain and Keintaddle, whose descendants' allotments are sited at Redstone on the Washita River. I do not accept a position or make a major decision without the input of my Kiowa grandmothers and mothers; that's how I was raised, that's our way.

The intergenerational teachings I inherited, including Boñ:k'òp: (roughly translates, "to lay down beads" or Kiowa beadwork), are foregrounded in my scholarship, curatorial work, and artistic practice. Boñ:k'òp: informs my work as it comprises and visualizes epistemological Kiowa values, which includes combining Indigenous research methodologies, material practices, and Indigenous concepts of time. As a curator of Indigenous art, my goals are rooted within approaches that intentionally deepen expressions of Tribal sovereignty within the museum field and the broader arts and cultural sector. My approach is born out of the movement of Indigenizing the broader arts sector, which began before I was born and will continue long after I walk home, toward the recontextualization of historical works and the accurate contextualization of contemporary Indigenous art through the integration Indigenous methodologies and epistemologies into curatorial practice. I integrate my familial and cultural knowledge as a Kiowa woman raised in Oklahoma by my Toyebo family from Rainy Mountain and Paddlety family from Redstone, Oklahoma, and informed by widely celebrated Indigenous research methodologies and models from Moanan communities in Aotearoa (New Zealand), such as Talanoa.

Marroquin Norby: In my curatorial and scholarly work, I strive to balance the needs and priorities of source communities, the ever-growing interests of diverse audiences, and the significance of aesthetics and aesthetic practices. This is no easy task.

Foregrounding the voices and perspectives of source communities is a top priority. This is how I was trained as a scholar and museum professional. As a woman of Indigenous descent, building respectful relationships with Indigenous communities that are grounded in trust is important to me both personally and professionally. In order to achieve this at The Met, since my arrival in 2020, I have diligently emphasized collaborative partnerships that include ongoing conversations and consultations with source communities about the appropriate care and

presentation of their art and cultural items. One positive and recent outcome of this was, in 2024, when the National NAGPRA regulations were amended, The Met's work with communities was already well under way. Our NAGPRA working group often says "NAGPRA is Forever." Meaning, our relationships with source communities are ongoing. They are reciprocal and do not just end when a project is completed.

I began my museum training at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, D.C., where I served as a curatorial research assistant for the museum's inaugural exhibitions. I was part of a cohort of young Indigenous museum professionals. Several of my colleagues with whom I trained are now museum and academic leaders throughout the United States and Canada. At NMAI, foregrounding community voices and perspectives was underscored. For a federal and colonial institution like the Smithsonian, this approach seemed radical and was highly criticized during the museum's opening in 2004. Two decades later, it is now the preferred approach.

It is important to acknowledge that, when developing its exhibition style, NMAI looked to local U.S. tribal museums, museums in Mexico, and other institutions at the hemispheric level. Community visits and consultations were foundational to developing collections care methods and presentations of culturally significant items—a number of these methods are now key to my own curatorial and collections care practices.

As a trained fine artist, it is also important to me not to lose sight of the aesthetic and technological significance and cultural meaning of a creative work. Aesthetic practices and materials say much about intergenerational knowledge and innovation—all of this is integral to the cultural and historical values of sovereign nations. Materials alone can say much about connections to homelands and sustaining communities. We lose something when we disregard aesthetics for the sake of current political messages that can marginalize specific audiences.

You were recently a co-curator of the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Could you outline how you brought your own curatorial vision to this project and also some of the unexpected challenges you met with this particular type of exhibition—having an Indigenous artist “represent” the United States?

Ash-Milby: Becoming a curator and commissioner for the U.S. Pavilion was an aspiration I had put aside many years ago. Australia and Canada had shown the work of Indigenous artists many times in their pavilions, starting in the 1990s, but I knew of several applications for Native artists to represent the United States over the years that never made it past the gate. There was a group of Native artists from the Southwest whose work was included in the 1932 exhibition in the U.S. Pavilion, but this exhibition is little-known and Native art occupied only one gallery out of four in the building at that time (Figure 3).

When NMAI was considering an application for the U.S. Pavilion for 2007, I was asked to create a shortlist of artists for consideration. Jeffrey Gibson was at the top of my list, but my recommendation was set aside for another artist, who was deemed more likely to be taken seriously by the selection committee composed of scholars and leaders in contemporary art. I was not at the helm of that project, but for various reasons, the application eventually fell apart. There is incredible scrutiny and pressure when you propose an artist for such a highly visible award and the museum was not fully prepared, even internally. Instead, the NMAI quickly decided to sponsor a second collateral project for the Biennale. We selected Edgar Heap of Birds for a public art exhibition, which I co-curated with Truman Lowe, who was then the museum's first Curator of Contemporary Art.



Figure 3. Jeffrey Gibson: the space in which to place me, Venice, Italy, 2024. Photo by Timothy Schenck. Courtesy of the Portland Art Museum.

I had met Jeffrey Gibson in New York in 2002 and was so excited about his work that I made sure that he was one of the artists the museum invited to attend the 2005 symposium in Venice. We had become friends and shared an apartment during the opening week of the *Heap of Birds* exhibition. It was actually the first Venice Biennale we both attended, as the 2005 symposium had occurred after the exhibition had closed. We were both blown away by the experience and had a moment where we both looked at each other and said something along the lines of, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” as we were sitting in the little boat that we’d hitched a ride on, returning from a party across the canal for the Canadian Pavilion. And then the boat started bouncing along, we started getting splashed over and over again with freezing cold water, and we just laughed and laughed. We didn’t talk about it again until 2023 when he told me he was ready, and he could not imagine doing it without me (Figure 4).

And then the real work began. The application for the competitive grant by the U.S. State Department is a beast, and the catch is that if you are chosen, you are given very little money and very little time to both organize and raise the balance of the huge amount of money that is needed. But beyond the purely practical issues of no money, no time, and planning an exhibition on an island in a foreign country, with an exhibition team spread across four American time zones, you are under the magnifying glass the minute it becomes public. On the day that Jeffrey’s selection was announced, we immediately were criticized for not acknowledging that other Native artists had shown their work in Venice during the Biennale—and even in the U.S. Pavilion. After being largely ignored by the art world for so long, there is incredible sensitivity about rendering anyone’s work in our field invisible. Of course that was not our intent, or our message, but we made sure to hammer home with all of our public relations folks the need to be crystal clear in all of our communications that Jeffrey was the first artist selected to represent the United States in the U.S. Pavilion in a solo presentation. We also provided information about all of the previous projects by U.S.-based Native artists, but unfortunately, none of the press ever picked up that part of the story.



Figure 4. Gallery view, Jeffrey Gibson: *the space in which to place me*, Venice, Italy, 2024. Photo by Timothy Schenck. Courtesy of the Portland Art Museum.

The other challenge was tackling the idea of a Native artist representing the United States at all. The relationship between Native people and the U.S. government is complicated to say the least. For some in our field, this alone makes even an application a nonstarter. In the end, we decided that the benefit of showing the world that Native art was as worthy of recognition as any other art on the world stage outweighed any perceived negativity surrounding representation. I was a government employee when I worked for NMAI, so it was less of an issue for me. For Jeffrey, his approach was to use his art to engage directly with the fraught relationship between the U.S. government and Native people in this country throughout the exhibition. And we also agreed that this was an opportunity to use his visibility with this project to shine a light on even more Native artists. Our programming brought more than seventy Indigenous artists, poets, musicians, students, and scholars to Venice as participants, speakers, and performers. We also initiated a program to create educational resources and curriculum for K-12 students with ten art educators, more than half Native, from Oregon and New Mexico, as part of a collaboration with the National Museum of the American Indian, to have national reach. This might seem like it is too much for one exhibition program to hold, but we believe it is our responsibility as Native people and important to both of us to not just acknowledge the past but to pay it forward to future generations.

Crystal Bridges is a new type of museum in the United States, a recently founded expansive museum of American art, set in a small city in northwest Arkansas. Given that museums often have an implicit master narrative, how do Native American arts fit in your institution's larger vision of American art?

Poorman Cocker: We know Northwest Arkansas is the ancestral and treaty homelands of the Osage, Quapaw, and Caddo Nations, as well as the “end of the trail” for many tribes who were faced with forced removal. Crystal Bridges’ Indigenous art collection has historically (prior to my appointment) served as a token—a nod to larger diversity initiatives—within the larger collection of over 3,900 artworks. The museum typically centers non-Native experiences and stories with Indigenous art “peppered throughout the galleries,” as one of my colleagues put it.

I believe Crystal Bridges can do better than “pepper” Indigenous art throughout the galleries. My vision is to create more space for public education and reckon with American pasts, presents, and futures through centering Indigenous art more wholistically within the collection and the museum exhibitions and programs writ large. Crystal Bridges main collection areas are American art, Contemporary art, Craft...we know Indigenous art encompasses all of these areas.

I intend to reframe Indigenous art in dialogue *with* artists in collaboration with Tribal nations through strengthening relationships to artworks within the collection. I feel that supporting Tribal nation’s initiatives, including the work of cultural, linguistic, and artistic revitalization and sustainability, is a vital responsibility of museums. My goals include nurturing existing relationships and fostering new relationships to deepen broad understandings of the place now known as America. By foregrounding Indigenous epistemologies and research methodologies, my work seeks to raise the museum’s bar toward employing higher ethical standards through the practical applications of Indigenous museum best practices.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is an institution of national and international standing: what are some of the opportunities and the challenges that come with that level of visibility?

Marroquin Norby: The public platform of a world-class art institution provides opportunities for local and international audiences to engage with and better appreciate Native American and Indigenous art. There are museum visitors who have never viewed Indigenous artworks or aesthetic expressions in person or have limited perspectives about contemporary Indigenous peoples. For some, it is an eye- and heart-opening experience. I have received handwritten notes from audience members explaining how moving a particular exhibition or artwork has been for them. I have also received emails and cards from Native American community members, expressing gratitude and sharing how, for the first time, they feel represented in our galleries.

At The Met, developing a Native American Arts program that includes special exhibitions, annual installation rotations, scholarly and public programs, legal and cultural work, collections development, donor relations, fundraising, and publications has been especially meaningful. My work is grounded in steadily building an infrastructure to support Native art and communities. It is deeply affirming when tribal members and professional colleagues express how significant it is to witness the transformation of The Met’s Native American Art programming. I regularly think about the long-term and future generations of colleagues. I consistently ask myself how can I make things a little easier for them? Museum work can be challenging. Many of us, who are now in leadership positions, not only had to start from scratch with limited support, but also work against the grain of established museum practices and institutional cultures that overlook the particular needs of Indigenous communities and how to care for these important collections. Some of us have also had to face public scrutiny as we navigated these internal challenges.

Working collaboratively with source communities and individual artists during exhibitions, consultations, and repatriation efforts, has provided more opportunities for solidifying relationships with Native American Nations, as we fulfill our NAGPRA responsibilities and strive to present Native American collections in respectful and culturally appropriate ways.

In 2023, The Met presented *Grounded In Clay: The Spirit of Pueblo Pottery*. Goals of the exhibition included following the guidance of community curators in order to prioritize their perspectives and personal experiences relative to the works they selected to be on view. Rather than the standard approach of emphasizing institutional ownership and standard museum speak, community voices were prioritized throughout the exhibition. *Grounded In Clay* was the first community-curated Native American exhibition in the history of The Met. Over sixty Pueblo



Figure 5. Installation view of *Grounded In Clay: The Spirit of Pueblo Pottery*, on view July 14, 2023–June 4, 2024.

community members from twenty-one pueblos, known as The Pueblo Pottery Collective, curated one hundred historically and culturally significant works (Figure 5 and Figure 6). They also contributed to in-gallery labels and an award-winning exhibition catalog that highlighted their personal stories. The exhibition was shown in New York in cooperation with the School for Advanced Research of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the Vilcek Foundation in New York. One of the highlights for me, as a curator, was witnessing the pride the community curators expressed on opening night of the exhibition. We had installed a giant banner announcing the show on the façade of the museum. The community members gathered in front of the banner and to take a group photo. Seeing their joy was one of the proudest moments of my career.

The recent establishment of privately funded arts foundations that claim to run entirely from an Indigenous perspective is an assertion that is not altogether accurate and somewhat misleading. These newer private organizations have already “eaten at the table,” as one museum colleague puts it. Meaning, they start up using settler funds that are applied toward rapidly amassing Native art collections. The new institutions then become 501Cs (non-profits) and compete with established non-profits for funding sources. One, in particular, has even begun to critique museums while strategically avoiding transparency about the origin of their start-up funds or the requirements of the grants that have been awarded to them. It is important to understand that many grants are awarded by non-Indigenous foundations that oversee or “approve” the projects carried out by nonprofit organizations.



Figure 6. Photo by Richard Lee, courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

One very divisive issue among art, museum, and academic institutions is Indigenous-on-Indigenous identity policing and extreme acts of public marginalization. Currently, some of the tactics used to expose misrepresentation of Native American or Indigenous identity legally amount to harassment and slander. They include very public and intentional attempts to destroy professional and personal reputations. Native American and Indigenous people place each other on lists, spread unverified information and rumors on social media, and go as far as conducting research into personal family histories, that are not their own, in order to cancel one another out professionally.

Imposing our own understandings of kinship, belonging, or affiliation upon other sovereign nations or communities, who are not our own, whether aesthetically, religiously, or politically, is a breach of respectful cultural protocols. Indigenous art, literature, and oral histories are rich with examples of kinship connections between Indigenous communities across settler-imposed boundaries and international borders. If, as Indigenous peoples, we are serious about “decolonizing” the museum and academic fields, then we must take an honest look at the perpetuation of this divisiveness and how it impacts all Indigenous communities.

Throughout my career, I have watched as Native American and Indigenous colleagues here in the United States take a political stand for select Indigenous communities abroad in New Zealand, Norway, or Palestine, for instance, and then ignore the well-being of Native communities just across the southern border in Mexico and further south. If we are serious about decolonizing, then we must stand up for all Indigenous peoples. We cannot pick and choose who we will support and who we will cast aside. We must also examine our complicity with continuing to award and promote the work of non-Indigenous “allies” who, for decades, have reaped the professional benefits of curating Indigenous art and disseminating Indigenous histories and stories according to their settler viewpoints, for their own professional gains. As one of my museum colleagues once wrote, “Native people have a story to tell—their own.”⁶

⁶Joe Horse Capture (A’aninin), “Horse Capture: Native People Have a Story To Tell – Their Own,” *Indian Country Today*, Apr. 26, 2015, and Sept. 18, 2018, <https://ictnews.org/archive/horse-capture-native-people-have-a-story-to-tell-their-own> (accessed May 12, 2025).

Postscript by Amanda Cobb-Greetham

Turning Points

At this moment, reflecting on the experiences and accomplishments of our guest curators, Kathleen Ash-Milby, Jordan Poorman Cocker, and Patricia Marroquin Norby, I am deeply moved. Transforming powerful cultural institutions in the ways they have been and are doing is a testament, not just to the “Indigenous turn,” but also to their talents and expertise and to their persistence as educators, diplomats, and interlocutors for they work at the borders and boundaries—areas in which the things we make are assigned value and meaning as objects regardless of our own understanding of its relationship to our communities wherein lies its ultimate worth.

I recognize, as well, the dogged work of my colleagues like Scott Manning Stevens and so many others, whose careers have spanned the passing of NAGPRA and the opening of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, and whose efforts have ensured that Native art and material culture are no longer classified as “primitive.” Like Scott Manning Stevens, I am anxious about the future and the fragile nature of these accomplishments—how very quickly things fall apart.

Even so, I am comforted, heartened, when I reflect on another lesser-known but significant turning point in the world of Indigenous art and culture, the accomplishments of which cannot be easily dismantled—the creation of museums and cultural centers by Tribal Nations. To illustrate, I will share my own experiences as a founding director of the Chickasaw Cultural Center (CCC), which opened in 2010 in Sulphur, Oklahoma. Although I began work on the CCC three years prior to opening, the work had begun more than twenty years earlier, when the Nation’s governor, Bill Anoatubby, asked our citizens to imagine—if we ever had the resources to create something dedicated to our history and culture—what it would be? The hundreds of responses became the core vision for something that would have to wait for the right time. But, when the time came, hundreds of Chickasaw citizens and others in the Chickasaw family participated in the CCC’s creation. The opening of the CCC, the largest tribal cultural center of its kind, became a turning point in Chickasaw history. When I joined the efforts in 2007, very few Chickasaws had expertise in museums, libraries, curation, and archival research, so we set out to learn by doing. I remember working with staff to compile a list of every Chickasaw artist and creator we could find—painters, sculptors, potters, weavers, woodworkers, jewelers, and smiths—all our makers of every kind. The list fit on just one page. And so, many of our makers become teachers at the CCC, exhibited their work at the CCC, and sold items at the CCC, and suddenly, the number of makers increased exponentially as did the number of stickball players, stomp dancers, archers, photographers, musicians, horticulturalists, filmmakers, writers, historians, curators, and learners of Chikashshanompa’, our language. The Nation began publishing books through the Chickasaw Press, making documentaries and narrative films, sharing oral histories on Chickasaw.tv, and providing dozens of camps for Chickasaw children to learn these skills.

In this moment of dismantling, I take heart in these accomplishments because cultural knowledge—whether an art, a craft, a skill, or a language—once learned, cannot be unlearned, and the establishment of a structure like Chickasaw Cultural Center safeguards against its loss. I take heart because the example I have shared is but one example among the 574 federally recognized tribal governments. Even as other museums and cultural institutions in the United States face significant cuts and closures, the number of Indigenous knowledge-keepers, artists, and curators continues to increase. Nurtured, strengthened, and valued by the cultures in which they grew, I am confident that their contributions to both Native and non-Native institutions will continue.

Amanda Cobb-Greetham (Chickasaw) serves as Distinguished Professor in Native American Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Her scholarly efforts have earned a Guggenheim Fellowship and American Book Award. Known for institution-building and leadership efforts, she has stood up university academic programs and research centers, directed the curation and launch of the Chickasaw Cultural Center in Sulphur, OK, and established the Chickasaw Press. She served on the Board of Trustees of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian for six years.

Scott Manning Stevens is a citizen of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation. He earned his PhD from Harvard University and is an Associate Professor Native American and Indigenous Studies at Syracuse University. Stevens has published broadly on Indigenous visual and literary cultures. He is also involved in museum studies as it intersects with Indigenous material culture through his teaching, consulting, and curatorial work.

Kathleen Ash-Milby is Curator of Native American Art at the Portland Art Museum, appointed in 2019. She was a commissioner and curator for Jeffrey Gibson's exhibition in the U.S. Pavilion at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia (2024). Previously, she worked for the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in New York as Associate Curator. She was curator and co-director of the American Indian Community House Gallery, New York City, 2000-2005. Ash-Milby's work has been recognized with three Secretary of the Smithsonian's Excellence in Research awards. She was a 2015 Center for Curatorial Leadership Program fellow and served on the boards of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective and Native American Art Studies Association. A member of the Navajo Nation, her Master of Arts is from the University of New Mexico.

Dr. Patricia Marroquin Norby (P' urhépecha) an award-winning art scholar and museum leader, is the first full-time curator of Native American Art at The Met, a first in the museum's 150-year history. She previously served as Senior Executive and Assistant Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian-New York and as Director of the D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies at The Newberry, in Chicago. Her curatorial vision and exhibition strategies at The Met have been celebrated by media including the New York Times, PBS, and Forbes Magazine. Her forthcoming book, *Water, Bones, and Bombs*, examines 20th-century American Indian and American art in context with environmental conflicts in northern New Mexico (University of Nebraska Press). She earned her PhD at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and her MFA at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Jordan Poorman Cocker, an Indigenous curator and artist from the Kiowa Tribe and the Kingdom of Tonga serves as Crystal Bridges Museum of Art's first full-time curator of Indigenous art. She holds a Master of Museum and Heritage Practice from Victoria University of Wellington and a Bachelor of Design from Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. Cocker's curatorial work centers Indigenous ways of knowing and doing by linking relational worldviews to Indigenous Futurisms. Raised in Oklahoma, USA Jordan is a lifelong member of Kiowa societies and cultural activities. Her cultural upbringing along with her tertiary education in New Zealand provides her with an international perspective of Indigenous Art, Design and Research.