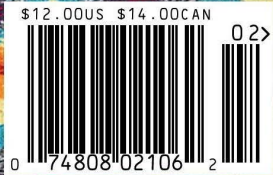
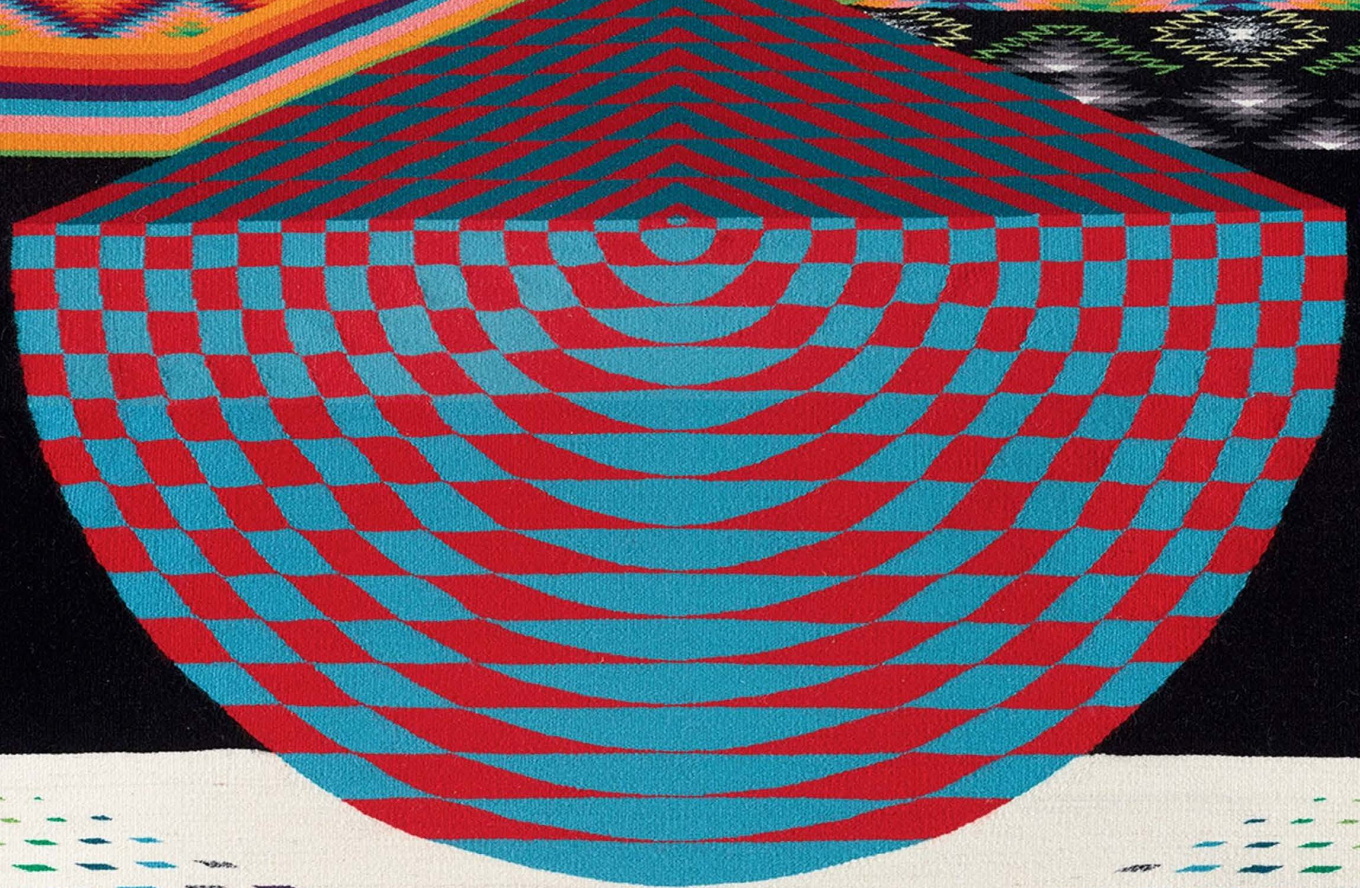


Art in America



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BEYOND INCLUSION

Several museums are now displaying Indigenous artifacts in galleries of American art, but this gesture doesn't always honor the values of the cultures that created these works.

by Christopher Green

Tlingit dagger, ca. 1780–1840, wood, steel, and vegetal fiber, 18½ by 4¼ by 1 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
“Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950s to Now,” at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, through July 19, and at the Nasher Museum of Art, Durham, N.C., Aug. 29, 2019–Jan. 12, 2020. “Art of Native America: The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, through Oct. 6.

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INDIGENOUS ART DOES not rest easily in the category of “American art,” that is, art of the United States. First Nations predate the country’s conception. They transgress its borders and assert sovereignty over the land that lies within them. Nonetheless, recognizing that many peoples make claims to the territory that now comprises the US, art institutions have intensified their efforts to incorporate Indigenous work into their exhibitions and collections of American art. They have sought to expand the geographic and cultural scope of “American art” on the one hand and, on the other, to rethink and disrupt the nationalist narratives associated with it by decolonizing their display practices—two complementary but not interchangeable approaches.

The Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, is one of the institutions engaging these issues. In March 2018, the museum reorganized its Early American galleries, expanding the former “Colonial America” framework through the incorporation of Indigenous art, Spanish colonial art, and folk art by settlers of European descent, as well as a few contemporary paintings and sculptures. In the new display, a Charles Willson Peale portrait of George Washington (1780–82) hangs alongside Luiseño artist Fritz Scholder’s vivid *Monster Indian* (1968) and Alice Neel’s 1964 portrait of Civil Rights activist Hugh Hurd. Neel and Scholder’s vibrant bodies of color, juxtaposed with Washington’s powder-white complexion and the dark sky around it in Peale’s canvas, suggest that other peoples belong in a history that previously privileged British American Colonial and Federal art. Elsewhere, a pair of beaded bandolier bags made by unidentified Delaware, Shawnee, or Cherokee women in the 1820s appear

beside Thomas Sully’s portrait *Colonel Samuel Boyer Davis* (1819). The works are contemporaneous, but formally and culturally distinct, representations of political power and diplomatic relations.

“Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950s to Now,” a traveling exhibition that debuted last fall at Crystal Bridges, enhanced the effect of the rehang by spotlighting art that challenges the foundational myths and ongoing colonization of the United States. Curated by Candice Hopkins, Mindy Besaw, and Manuela Well-Off-Man, the show features works by forty Indigenous artists living in the US and Canada. It is the most comprehensive survey of postwar and contemporary Indigenous American art since 1992, when Margaret Archuleta and Rennard Strickland organized “Shared Visions: Native American Painters and Sculptors in the Twentieth Century” at the Heard Museum in Phoenix. While more recent exhibitions (for example, “Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art,” which Hopkins curated with Greg Hill at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in 2013) have included a global breadth of contemporary artists, “Art for a New Understanding” recounts sixty years of Indigenous art in North America, highlighting major turning points and connections to histories of settler-colonialism and modernist art, without trying to define it as American.

Artists such as Oscar Howe, Lloyd Kiva New, and Daphne Odjig took up modernist styles and practices—abstraction, bold lines, and broad color planes—from the 1950s to ’70s, upsetting the stereotypical definitions of “Indian art” as masks and wooden carvings, beadwork, and figurative watercolors of Indigenous dancers. A brilliant pairing of Norval Morrisseau’s *The Story Teller—The Artist and his Grandfather* (1978) and T.C. Cannon’s *Collector #5 (Man in*



Indigenous artists and scholars tend to emphasize aspects of objects that are beautifully expressed in visual form yet exist beyond the aesthetic.



Norval Morrisseau:
*The Story Teller—
The Artist and
His Grandfather*,
1978, acrylic on
canvas, two panels,
69% by 38 inches
each. Courtesy
Indigenous and
Northern Affairs
Canada. © Estate of
Norval Morrisseau.

T.C. Cannon:
*Collector #5 (Man
in a Wicker Chair)*,
1975, oil and acrylic
on canvas, 72 by 60
inches. Collection
Nancy Bloch,
Santa Fe. Courtesy
Joyce Cannon Yi/
Estate of T.C.
Cannon.



a Wicker Chair), 1975, demonstrates how modernist painting unites these artists across borders. As young artists working in Canada and the US, respectively, Morrisseau and Cannon departed from the natural earth tones and “traditional” subject matter expected of Native painters. The subjects of the two portraits displayed at Crystal Bridges are depicted in swaths of bright orange, lilac, and sky blue.

Works in the section on the 1980s and '90s explicitly express international solidarity as they take on the politics of land and representation. This is particularly true of art previously included in exhibitions responding to the 1992 quincentennial of Columbus’s voyage. Carl Beam’s video *Burying the Ruler* (1989) records a performance in which the Ojibwe artist buried a twelve-inch ruler (a punning stand-in for European colonization) in the Dominican Republic near the site of Columbus’s “discovery” of the New World. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun’s monumental painting *Scorched Earth, Clear-cut Logging on Native Sovereign Land. Shaman Coming to Fix* (1991) depicts a surreal Northwest Coast landscape ruined by deforestation. Hills are draped in psychedelically pigmented ovoids, derived from the formlines that distinguish Native art of the region. Masked faces weep for the devastated forest. At the left edge of the painting, a shaman with the power and vision to heal the land and a blue wolf-faced companion gesture toward the mountains and trees. Indigenous forms are visible even in the stumps, serving as markers of Native presence and land claims in the face of the colonial attempts at extraction and erasure.

Political statements like this one are expressed through diverse mediums in the exhibition’s final section, featuring art produced since 2000. Words are integrated into textiles and fiber works to represent a complex and multifarious Indigenous experience. Paper Cherokee-pattern baskets by Shan Goshorn (1957–2018) are woven from maps and texts describing geographic features, as well as facsimiles of the treaty documents that led to the displacement of Indigenous people from those territories. Melissa Cody turns Navajo weaving motifs into flashing optic patterns, as in her textile *Dopamine Regression* (2010). New commissions engaged the local context. For *Ozark (Shelter in Place)*, Athena LaTocha took impressions in lead of the natural rock face in a nearby national park, land rich with Indigenous history from one-time habitation to its position on the Trail of Tears. She attached these molded lead sheets to her wall-size painting of ink and earth on paper. In the center of Bentonville, a mural by Yatika Starr Fields features Lady Justice amid a swirl of colors and geometries based on Osage dance and dress. Her blindfold slips down to reveal one eye staring disapprovingly at a Confederate monument in the town square a block over. These works speak to Indigenous artists’ concern with present politics and local histories that contest the centrality of white settlers in the Americas.

SOME CURATORS GO so far as to put the Indigenous at the center of American art. Paul Chaat Smith and Cécile R. Ganteaume point out that the original definition



of “American” in the Oxford English Dictionary is “an indigenous inhabitant of (any part of) the Americas; an American Indian.” This reminder appears in the catalogue for “Americans,” a long-term display they organized at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. Opened in January 2018, their installation highlights the importance of Indigeneity to the formation of US national identity, demonstrated most profoundly through “Indians Everywhere,” a massive display of product designs and advertisements featuring stereotypical Indian imagery. The curators argue that, even though myths like Thanksgiving and Pocahontas have subsumed and erased violent histories, the US is unimaginable without the Indigenous.

In his writings and lectures, Smith is fond of saying: “The most American thing ever is in fact American Indians.” The lexical ambiguity of “American” operates as a sleight of hand through which art museums have begun to incorporate Indigenous works in galleries of American art. Sylvia Yount, curator-in-charge of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, uses Smith’s line as an epigraph for her essay in the catalogue of the exhibition “Art of Native America: The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection,” on view at the Met through October 6. The yearlong show has been heralded for its historic inclusion of Indigenous culture otherwise missing from the wing. The Met is the latest in a line of encyclopedic institutions that have expanded the geographic and regional scope of “American art”; others include the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Newark Museum, the Brooklyn

Museum, and the Saint Louis Art Museum. These institutions have begun to call attention to complex artistic entanglements and exchanges in a history of shifting borders and colonial encounters. In doing so, they are holding onto the name “American art” in an attempt to remake a category formerly based on a fixed notion of the US into one without nationalist baggage.

In an interview with the *Art Newspaper*, the Dikers said that they made the promised gift of their undeniably stunning collection of masks, baskets, beaded clothing, feast implements, and ceremonial objects with the stipulation that the Met must present the works “as American art rather than tribal art.”¹ Max Hollein, the Met’s director, affirmed the donors’ wishes in a press release, saying the gift would enable the museum “to more fully display the development of American art.” But it is unclear how the parties understand the terms they are using. Does the purported migration signal an expansion of the “American” category, or an inclusion of Indigenous art in a nationalist history? The emphasis on Euro-American aesthetic values in “Art of Native America” unfortunately suggests the latter.

When speaking and writing on their material culture, Indigenous artists and scholars tend to emphasize aspects of objects that are beautifully expressed in visual form yet exist beyond the aesthetic. These include intangible hereditary properties—the expression of ancestral, cosmological, and ceremonial relations—as well as ontologies that do not center on the human subject. The Diker show deemphasizes such values in favor of aesthetic appreciation. On the first floor of the wing, a dimly lit gray corridor cuts through

View of the exhibition “Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950s to Now,” 2018–19, showing work by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. Left, untitled acrylic-on-cedar sculptures, 2016, and right, *Scorched Earth, Clear-cut Logging on Native Sovereign Land. Shaman Coming to Fix*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 77 by 108¼ inches. Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Ark. Photo Stephen Ironside.



View of the exhibition “Art of Native America: The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection,” 2018–19, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo Bruce Schwarz.

the bright period rooms with white walls and gleaming silver. The austere setting offsets dazzling arrays of colored beadwork, painted hides, and Arctic ceremonial masks.

The works are arranged in glass cases according to regional affiliation and displayed in stiff isolation as individual masterpieces. The overall effect is cold. The object labels attribute authorship to individual artists even when the original creators’ names are unknown, which is preferable to describing objects as products of broad cultural groups. But Indigenous languages and names are largely absent. Land, environment, and the movement of bodies are alluded to in the text panels, but with no visual reference to these contextual elements, the works on display feel sanitized save for their visual splendor. The labels focus almost exclusively on formal qualities. The text for a girl’s robe (ca. 1875) made of buffalo hide by an Arapaho artist, for example, highlights the box and border design of the garment, noting that it represents the anatomy of the buffalo and that the artist’s choice of a soft green background color “counterbalances the vivid red, black, and white forms and the wash of red ochre covering the outer edges.” Reference to the historical and living relationship between the Plains peoples and the buffalo is left to a nearby wall text by Oglala Lakota historian Jeffrey D. Means, who writes how the systematic destruction of the

buffalo by the US military in the late 1870s was part of an attempt to eliminate Native culture, religion, and social structures.

Such statements from Indigenous contributors appear on the somber walls disconnected from any particular works in the gallery. The museum provides the artifact descriptions and historical facts, while Indigenous voices are called upon to contribute their social and cultural concerns. This dichotomy is extended in the “Native Perspectives” initiative, which invited Native artists and scholars to respond to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Euro-American representations of Indigenous subjects in the permanent galleries of the American Wing. The purple-colored, Native-authored labels raise political concerns with self-representation, colonization, and land rights, while the standard white museum labels describe the works in an objectively formal fashion that avoids problematizing the artists or their choice of subjects.

The curatorial decisions in “Art of Native America” seem like a step backward for guest curators Gaylord Torrence and Marjorie Alexander, whose exhibition “The Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky” at the Met in 2015 was far richer in its visual references to the living histories of the objects on display, from reproductions of landscapes to images of the works being worn and used, albeit that show was also criticized for its overemphasis on aesthetic values.²

Yount says in a press release that representing the “entangled histories of contact and colonization” was a priority for the Diker show, yet the display contradicts such claims. Why are works made for the market and now isolated, such as the woven *degikup* baskets (1907) of Washoe artist Louisa Keyser and black-on-black stoneware (1919–20) of San Ildefonso ceramicists Maria and Julián Martínez, not put into conversation with contemporaneous works of the Arts and Crafts movement? Many objects in the exhibition have complex biographies. An Anishinaabe shoulder bag (ca. 1800), with a quillwork thunderbird and turtle clan *dodem* (emblems) amid beaded zigzagging power lines, was carried to Britain by the Anishinaabe man Kahkewāquonāby, later known as Reverend Peter Jones, who was photographed wearing it there in 1845. Items of clothing and ceremonial wear—like a fringed Lakota dress (ca. 1870), with beaded rainbow bands marching around its sky-blue shoulders like a dancing horizon, and a Yup’ik *tuunraaq* mask (ca. 1900), in which an Arctic helper spirit’s fingers clutch its zoomorphic face—were worn, sung, and danced. Behind glass, these beings are made mute and inert. The Indigenous knowledge of land and place they embody cannot be fully communicated in this way.

In “Art for a New Understanding,” Indigenous artists asserted political claims to land and representation through modern and contemporary styles that are clearly legible to audiences familiar with those idioms. The same messages are present in the art of the Diker collection, but the primarily aesthetic display obfuscates and fails to translate such understanding of those objects. In a public program at the Met on October 8, 2018, Tlingit artist Jackson Polys translated some of these claims. While discussing an eighteenth-century Tlingit dagger with a shamanic visage on its pommel, he invoked its status as the *at.ooow*, or hereditary crest, of his father’s Lukaax.ádi clan. “This knife is a marker of territory, a red flag,” Polys said, noting that the proprietary story of the knife represents a territorial relationship. Between the knife and contemporary work such as Yuxweluptun’s painting of the Northwest Coast landscape there exists a two-century continuum of sovereign land claims thrashing against colonial boundaries.

Artifact Piece, a 1987 performance by James Luna (1950–2018), showed how the presence of living Indigenous bodies in the gallery can disrupt the technology of museum display. The artist put himself in a vitrine at the Museum of Man in San Diego, so that viewers would have to confront a real Indigenous person rather than the frozen-in-time stereotype reinforced by ethnographic displays. *Artifact Piece* was included in “Art for a New Understanding” at Crystal Bridges via documentation and placards from the original performance, along with a newly discovered ink-on-paper study by the artist dating the work’s conception to 1980. The live body can likewise defetishize collected objects by demonstrating their role in living culture. Polys and other Native artists rejected the aesthetic categories of the Met’s displays, refusing to discuss works like the dagger *at.ooow* as passive recipients of the visitor’s gaze.

The Met has made progress in its presentation of Indigenous art. Land acknowledgments included on the walls of the exhibition’s entrances and the aforementioned wall labels written by Indigenous scholars and artists to accompany standard wall texts are evidence of that. But the Association on American Indian Affairs recently criticized the Met for failing to engage with living communities.³

The presentation of objects from the Diker collection as “singular masterworks in aesthetic terms,” as the catalogue states, seems to support that report’s findings. Inclusion alone is not decolonization. Expanding the scope of “American art” must also mean changing its methodologies and display practices in ways that respect and maintain Indigenous values. If these values are suppressed, then the Americanizing of Indigenous art will remain a colonizing project—one that redraws the borders of “American art” to contain, rather than honor, claims to sovereignty. ○

1. Gabriella Angeleti, “Metropolitan Museum of Art reclassifies status of Native American art for new exhibition,” *Art Newspaper*, Oct. 2, 2018, theartnewspaper.com.
2. See Joe Horse Capture, “Native People Have a Story to Tell—Their Own,” *Indian Country Today*, Apr. 26, 2015, indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com; and Ellen Pearlman, “In Plains Indians Exhibition, Met Museum Favors Beauty Over Context,” *Hyperallergic*, Apr. 14, 2015, hyperallergic.com.
3. “The Metropolitan Museum of Art Ignores Responsibilities to Indian Tribes,” Association of American Indian Affairs, press release, Oct. 29, 2018.

Dress made by a Lakota artist, ca. 1870, tanned leather and leather beads, 48 by 35 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

