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Minneapolis Institute of Art showcases Native American women's art

By Dan Holtmeyer dholtmeyer@swpub.com Jun 11, 2019



"The Wisdom of the Universe," a painting by indigenous artist Christi Belcourt, depicts threatened and extinct Canadian species in a style that mimics beading, another common indigenous art style. Works by Belcourt and other Native American women explore their history and families in the Minneapolis Institute of Art's exhibit "Hearts of People: Native Women Artists."

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Photos by Dan Holtmeyer

MINNEAPOLIS — A new Minneapolis Institute of Art exhibit gives an unprecedented glimpse of Native American women's history and present: their skills, their loss, their ties to one another and the rest of the world.

"Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists" showcases more than 100 works from members of dozens of tribes and runs until Aug. 18. Organizers said it's the first show of its kind in scope, purpose and scale of collaboration among multiple indigenous artists and scholars.

"The story of 'Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists' begins with the mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters from across Canada and the United States who have been at the forefront of Native art from the beginning of remembered time," Teri Greeves, co-curator and member of the Kiowa Tribe from New Mexico, wrote in the introduction of the exhibit's catalog.

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"From the hands of these women, Native visual languages, which articulate identities and illuminate histories, were born and shall continue into the future."

The exhibit stretches across media to include paintings and drawings, textiles, photography, weaving and pottery and sculpture.

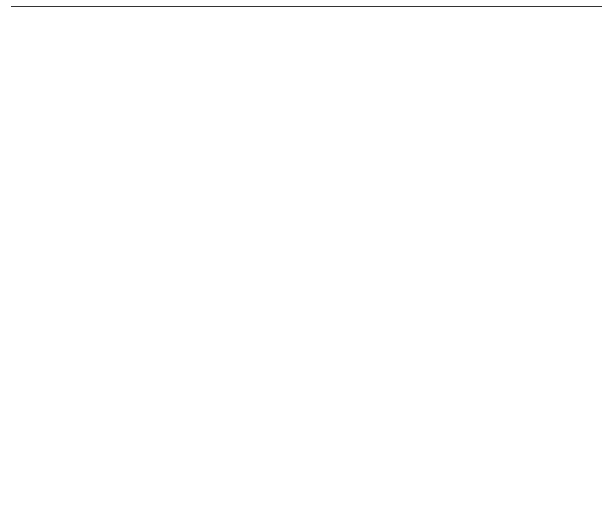
This isn't an archaeological display of ancient artifacts made by unnamed hands, though some objects are indeed centuries old. It instead conveys the makers' complex, deep, living traditions.

The collection shows there are no clear lines between artistry and everyday craftsmanship or between ancient and contemporary styles, its curators said. Works give physical form to family ties and centuries of shared knowledge and design.

Dakota/Nakoda artists Joyce Growing Thunder Fogarty, daughter Juanita Growing Thunder Fogarty and granddaughter Jessa Rae Growing Thunder, for example, together created the colorful hide dress and accessories titled "Give Away Horses," an outfit encrusted in tiny glass beads and other materials.

Clay sculptor Roxanne Swentzell of the Santa Clara Pueblo Tribe in New Mexico said in an exhibit recording that her mother and grandmother were pottery experts as well.

Swentzell would make little clay figures as a child to communicate with her mother in spite of a speech impediment. Her partly autobiographical piece in the exhibit, "Nap," shows a woman trying to rest as several sleepy, small children pile onto her.



"The Earth is our mother," Swentzell said, so even the very clay she uses must be treated with respect and care.

Many pieces explore loss and reclamation, an inescapable theme for peoples whose homelands, livelihoods and children were seized or destroyed over centuries by white settlers.

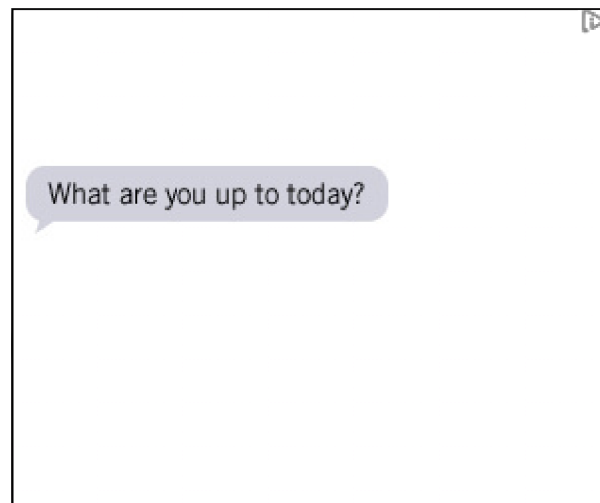
Some artists reference suicide on reservations; others focus on the disappearances and murders of thousands of Native women and girls in recent decades, which advocates have blamed on indifferent justice systems and other problems.

Such themes extend to environmental loss as well. Dana Claxton, a Canadian Lakota, shattered china cups and plates made with bison bones and piled the shards for one installation. The U.S. slaughtered tens of millions of the animals to pressure tribes onto reservations, according to the museum.

Christi Belcourt's imposing, vivid acrylic painting "The Wisdom of the Universe" depicts threatened and extinct Canadian plants and animals as interwoven figures of clustered dots, which mimic beads from a distance. She called on humanity to choose sustainable paths instead of destructive ones.

"Human beings are the weakest in creation because we need everything else to survive," she said, according to the exhibit catalog.

"Hearts of Our People" debuted at the Minneapolis museum and will go on to three more after its local run: the Frist Art Museum in Nashville, the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa.



The Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community in and around Prior Lake is the show's presenting sponsor. In a written statement, SMSC said it was "glad to sponsor this extraordinary and important exhibit."

Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists

Ticket price: \$20 general admission, \$16 for Minneapolis Institute of Art members, free for Native American tribe members and youth under 17; guided tours available

Exhibit run: June 2 to Aug. 18, 2019

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Saturdays; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays, closed Mondays

Location: 2400 3rd Ave. S., Minneapolis

Source: Minneapolis Institute of Art

Dan Holtmeyer

Community editor

Dan Holtmeyer is the community editor for the Prior Lake and Savage papers. He grew up in Nebraska and worked as a journalist in Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas before coming to Minnesota in 2018.