

## Indigenous Motivations

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### **Indigenous Motivations: Recent Acquisitions from the National Museum of the American Indian**

Native Guatemalan, Juanita Velasco's request that, "We must always remember our culture, language, and clothing so they will continue," is explored through works in the current exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian, which is dedicated to revealing the traditions, innovations and contemporary art practices of Native peoples. "Indigenous Motivations" acts out the Museum's mission as a living museum by exhibiting a series of works that they've acquired since 1990, including pieces made after the 1950s, in an effort to focus on the ways Native artists continue to build and define their cultures and identities through the practice of art in contemporary society.

The curators faced the challenge of fitting a large amount of works from a variety of places and cultures into common themes that Native people's around the America's share. The result is a layout of three main wall installations presenting the topics of tradition, innovation, and art. These succeed in pulling the individual works displayed throughout the room back into context by including photographs and quotes of and by the different communities and artists, revealing how the works fit into their everyday lifestyles.

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Each of the three separate wall installations display an actual work within the surrounding text and photographs that serve as a symbol for the whole theme to be discussed. The first piece that faces the viewer upon entry is a beautiful example of Mayan woman's clothing appearing under the title of "Tradition." It was brought to my attention that the actual huipil, chiq, faja and tzute of the Ixil Maya culture belonged to Juana Velasco, a staff member of the museum who continues to teach weaving classes and offers tours in the traditional dress of her native village. The combination of the weavings with the accompanying quotes resonated strongly with me as I realized that while the artistic objects were presented behind glass, they were by no means static, and rather actively participating in a dialogue between the creators, users, collectors and the viewers.

Under the theme of tradition, there is clearly care and concern in creating a framework for the clothing that goes beyond an inscription of the location, materials, and date of the pieces. Often lost throughout an exhibition of art or artifacts is the voice of the artist and the insight into their background. Here it appears imperative that the true story behind these objects is told through a culmination of the Native artists from the different cultural regions in order to make the necessary distinctions behind their individual practices. They also come together to support the claim in their right to participate in present times by continuing to change and adapt while still preserving their customary values. Therefore this section of the exhibit works to explore the ways in which Natives keep their traditions alive through the practice of making and wearing the clothing, weaving the baskets, or playing the drums, in order to connect to past ancestors, relate to their community, establish a sense of home, and pass on beliefs and concepts into the future.

The Andean Quechua and Aymara men's hats are displayed separately from the Andean women's hats, which are shown apart from the moccasins and other footwear of Alaskan natives, allowing for an understanding into the unique roles of clothing as being culturally and gender specific. When expressed through Velasco's example of her design and pattern specific huipil, "Sometimes when I travel, Indian people from Guatemala see me and know exactly where I am from. They instantly recognize it by my clothes," it becomes clearer that different cultures use clothing and personal items as a means of self-expression, and are each capable of their own distinctly complex articulations of their cultural identity.

Other displays juxtapose different versions of the same item such as on the wall of masks where a Mexican styled jaguar mask is shown alongside a Raven mask from Alaska, Cherokee Bear mask and others. While this creates a visually stimulating experience that challenges the eye to make stylistic distinctions among the grouping, it feels like there is more of a role in the hand of the exhibition designer to create an appealing overall design than to reveal distinctions and background on the individual artists and uses of the masks.

In addition to supporting the idea that Indigenous cultures participate in the ever-changing world by presenting how they carry on their past traditions, this exhibit also works to defend Natives rights in partaking in the tourist market under the second wall installation entitled, "Innovation." A large collection of small souvenir-sized totem poles, an art form that has become synonymous with Native Americans is contained within the installation acting as the Guatemalan huipil did to symbolize a common theme. This time the works pertain to the question of production and craft as an art form. Under headline questions such as, "weaving lives," "appropriating the personal," "new media and new markets," and "American designs" the pieces in this section explore the ways in which Indigenous peoples have advanced in passing on their culture to non-natives through the selling of their native products.

The display of basketry reveals the long-standing traditional practice of basket weaving. The

intricate designs expose how time-consuming the practice must be and that as times changed and it became harder to sustain oneself for economic reasons, Natives had to become more creative in generating income through the sale of their native artistic objects. Kuna Artist Carlos Lopez explains, "Our grandmothers did not need to sell their molas because the land, the animals living there, and the sea provided everything they needed to sustain life." How then is native art defined under these new terms of commodity and how can one be sure the item is authentic? What this exhibit succeeds in teaching is that there is not but one form of true genuine native art, and rather it continues to change and adapt to new circumstances while still holding onto tradition.

One way the native artists were able to create works that could be more successfully sold to tourists was by working in a smaller scale. As works became smaller, such as shown by the miniature Navajo pictorial rugs, or miniature Alaskan woven baskets, they were better fit for the collection of non-natives. Smaller scaled objects allowed for greater production, yet while they were geared to fit the desires of others, you can see how the works still maintain the traditional practices and have the power to transcend their form, style and meaning onto the buyer. It is hard to ignore the patience, skill and dedication required in the making of Delia Poma's engraved gourds from Peru that reveal entire intricate cosmologies within such a small area.

The flow of the objects within the display cases and on the walls makes it possible to draw the connections between changes in form and materials among the different works within the exhibit. With the influence of Western and American art forms, it is possible first-hand to see how Natives transitioned their more commonly used 3-D works into the traditional fine-art form of 2-D paintings and drawings. However as the Natives adjust to the growing markets and develop designs of a different modern tradition in order to attract buyers of non-native cultures, their unique Indigenous standards and ideas still hold true within these commercial products. A distinct example of this is revealed in the Kuna Panamanian and Mexican yarn paintings in which the traditional practice of brightly used colors and natural materials like bees-wax and dyed yarn are still incorporated into the non-traditional picture plane.

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Installation entitled "Art" is surrounded by the most contemporary work in the Museum's new collection, and introduces Native Artists who participate in the field of the contemporary fine arts. These works appear far more critical, introspective, and personal towards Native history, politics, and traditions. Roxanna Swentzell of Taos New Mexico created the sculpture, "Hands Up!" which works to cover many of the general ideas that contemporary Native American artists appear concerned with. Here she uses a traditional material of ceramics and paint, yet is creating her own symbol based off of a traditional sacred Kossa figure, that is now retelling a story that she's formulated based on her own observations and assumptions. By re-thinking, re-working traditional themes through a different scale, media, position, and context these artists show the power art has in perpetuating the continual growth of culture so that it cannot die out.

The exhibition is laid out so that you begin at the center of the room, and while the accompanying text guides your viewing experience, there is no clear direction or linear path to follow when viewing the works. See for yourself how traditional and contemporary art practices can co-exist and work to inform one another. The overall design and layout of works relates well to the concept behind the collection as working within a cyclical story of past, present and future in an informative and inspiring way.