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Power and Beauty

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In June 2003, with its inaugural exhibition, *Power and Beauty*, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts celebrated the opening of a new gallery devoted to its Native American collections. The exhibition and gallery are part of an institutional transformation, expressed both physically — through a 100,000-square-foot expansion — and intellectually — through a complete reformulation of the museum's mission and interpretive philosophy.

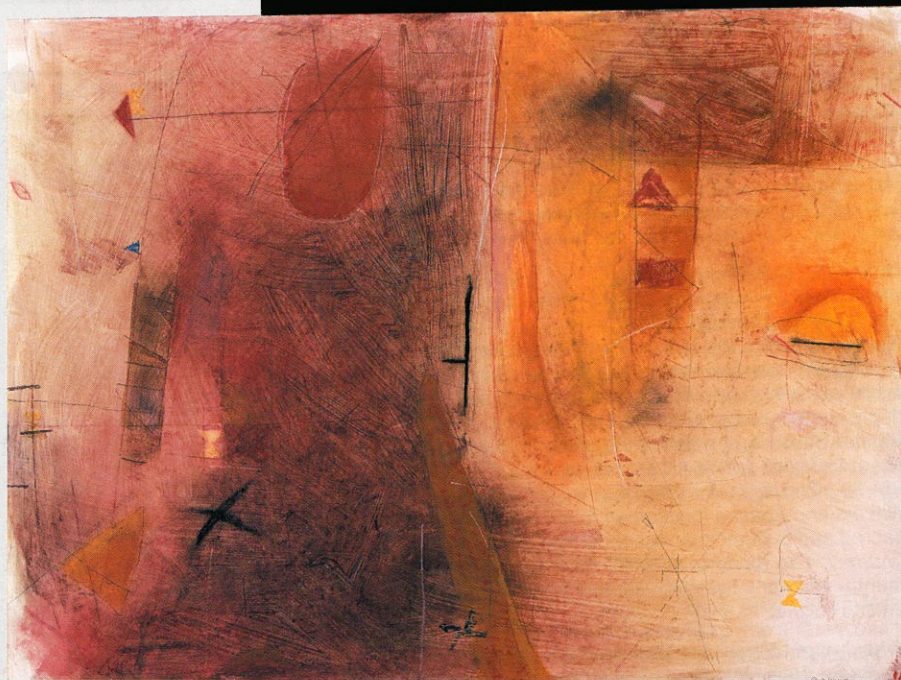
As caretaker of one of the oldest ongoing collections of Native American art in the hemisphere, and one of America's oldest museums, the Peabody Essex Museum occupies a unique position from which to reflect on past and current approaches to displaying Native American art objects. The museum opened in 1799 as the East India Marine Society, founded by sea captains involved in early American maritime commerce; since that time, the museum has collected, displayed and interpreted Native American art in a variety of ways.

In the earliest years, through the 1830s, Native American objects were shown as part of an eclectic cabinet of curiosities reflecting enlightenment sensibilities, emerging American nationalism and related attitudes toward the exoticness of Native Americans, Asians, Africans, Pacific Islanders and others represented in the society's diverse collections. By the 1840s, as Salem's former maritime commerce was increasingly diverted to the deeper harbors of Boston, New York and Baltimore, the museum's displays became imbued with a nostalgic sense of the past, reflecting Salem's attitude toward itself, but also influencing the manner in which objects from other cultures were presented. In 1867 this institutional melancholia was replaced by the optimism of modernity, as the museum was transformed into the Peabody Academy of Science through the philanthropy of George Peabody.

As a result of Peabody's gift, extensive renovations to the museum's galleries produced exhibitions that

followed the latest classifications of biology, geology and ethnology. In this incarnation, through the efforts of individuals such as Frederick Ward Putnam, Edward S. Morse and others, the institution briefly enjoyed a position at the forefront of American science and museology.¹ However, by the 1880s, this status dissolved; for just as the earlier maritime trade passed Salem by in favor of deeper commercial ports, serious academic discourse moved beyond the museum in favor of the Smithsonian Institution or universities such as Harvard, and

¹ Putnam became famous nationally as the "father of American archaeology," and Morse was of seminal importance for his scholarly promotion, in the West, of the pre-industrial art and culture of Japan.



1. *Early Untitled #1* by Emmi Whitehorse (b.1958), Navajo, c.1985. Oil on paper. 27½" x 35" (70 cm x 89 cm). Whitehorse says that her work "deals with re-creating worlds remembered...I am constantly...rebuilding it with personal images and concepts, always trying to bridge the future with the old...Each family member contributes to my imagery...My color usage often comes from colors my grandmother uses in her weavings...[It is] a way of paying homage to her" (2002). Museum purchase, 2000. Cat. No. E300524. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.

A New Native American Art Gallery at the Peabody Essex Museum



2. Moccasins, Sioux, nineteenth century. Recycled and painted buffalo hide, glass beads, sinew. 3½" high, 4½" wide, 10" long (9 cm x 11.5 cm x 25.4 cm).

These colorful moccasins in lane-stitched beadwork follow a typical Plains quartered layout, executed in contrasting colors. Gift of the Emhart Corporation, 1977. Cat. No. E66606. Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes.

3. Pair of story masks, Central Yup'ik, Cape Vancouver, Nelson Island, Alaska, late nineteenth century. Wood, paint. 5½" wide, 6½" long (14 cm x 16.5 cm). Although Yup'ik masks are typically produced in pairs, early collectors often overlooked the significance of the set by acquiring only one; this pair is therefore unusual. A fringe of feathers would have adorned each of these masks. Gift of Israel Albert Lee, 1910. Cat. Nos. E13081, E13082. Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes.

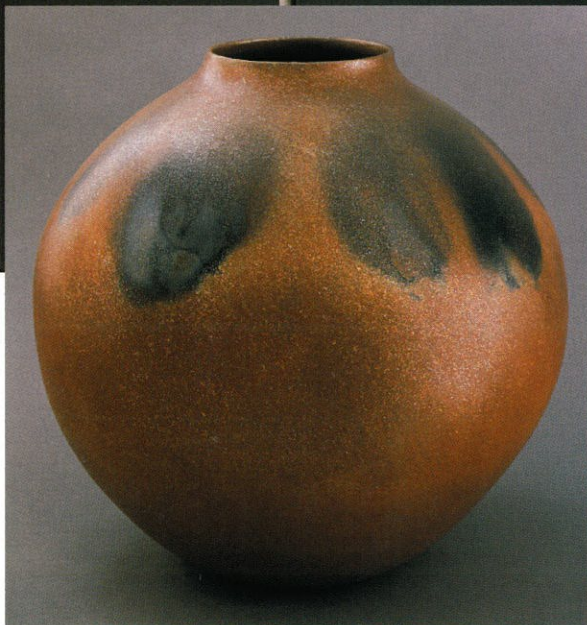


other larger and more urban entities. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the museum had relinquished its earlier active role in the scientific mainstream; its collections resumed their former nostalgic function as illustrative components in a historical narrative highlighting Salem's sea captains and their entrepreneurial spirit, heroism and exploits among exotic people.² This perspective, with little variation, came to characterize the museum and its exhibitions through virtually all of the twentieth century.³

In 1992, with the merger of the Peabody Museum and adjacent Essex Institute (composed of regional architectural, historical and archival collections), a new institutional mission was required in order to encompass the extraordinary depth and quality of the newly consolidated collections. Reconceived as a museum of art and culture, the collections have been freed from the conceptual constraints of prior historical orientation. Instead, the museum's exhibitions have increasingly focused on creativity, cultural context and the complex intellectual connections that exist within and between the world's communities.

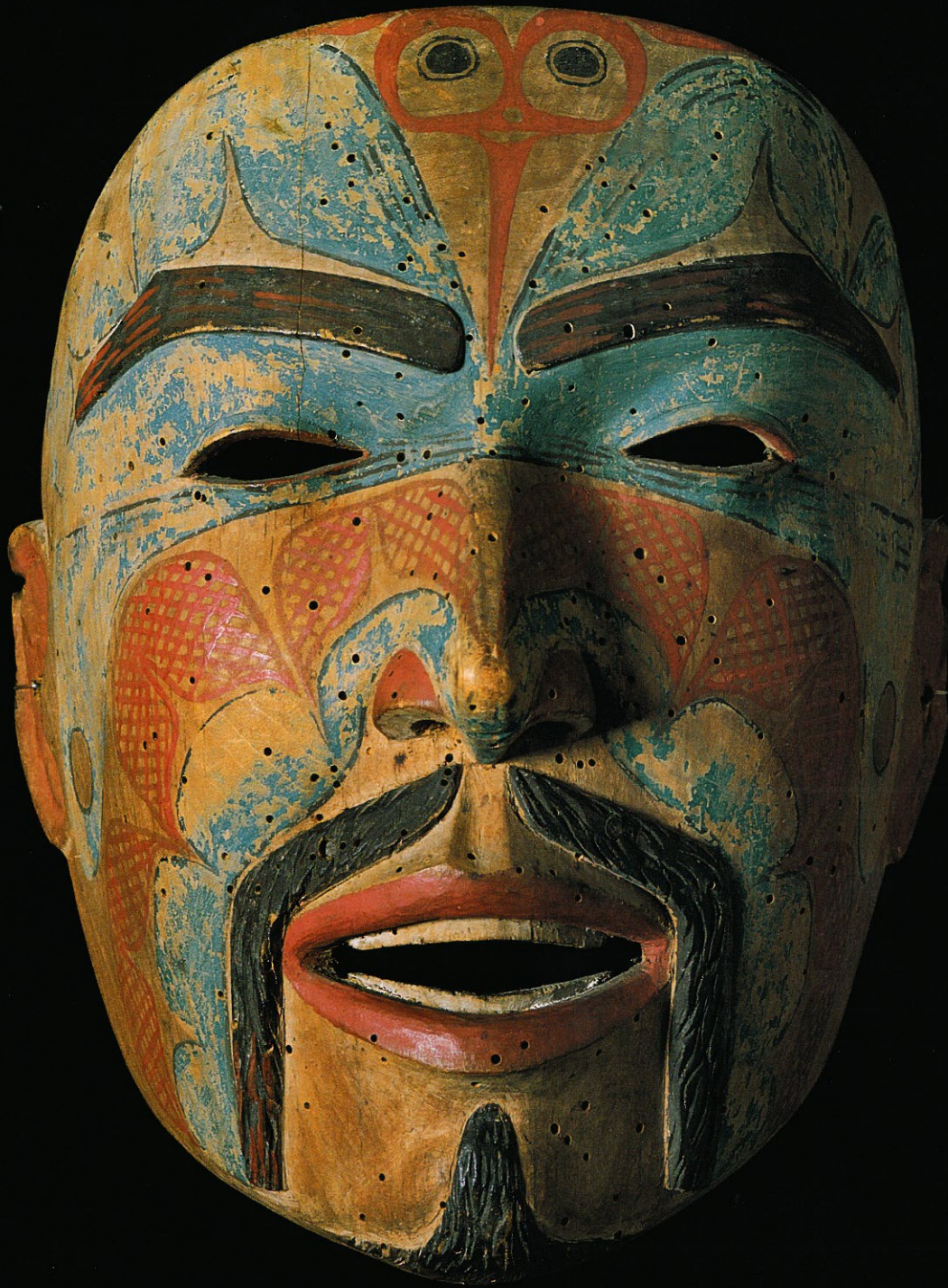
² Although Morse continued as a noted elder scholar until his death in 1925, the institution he headed was by then academically overshadowed by others.

³ There are some notable exceptions to this historical perspective; during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly, there were increasing efforts to include cultural context and aesthetic considerations in exhibitions. However, the overwhelming thrust of the institution, and its public perception, was as an institution by and about Salem sea captains.

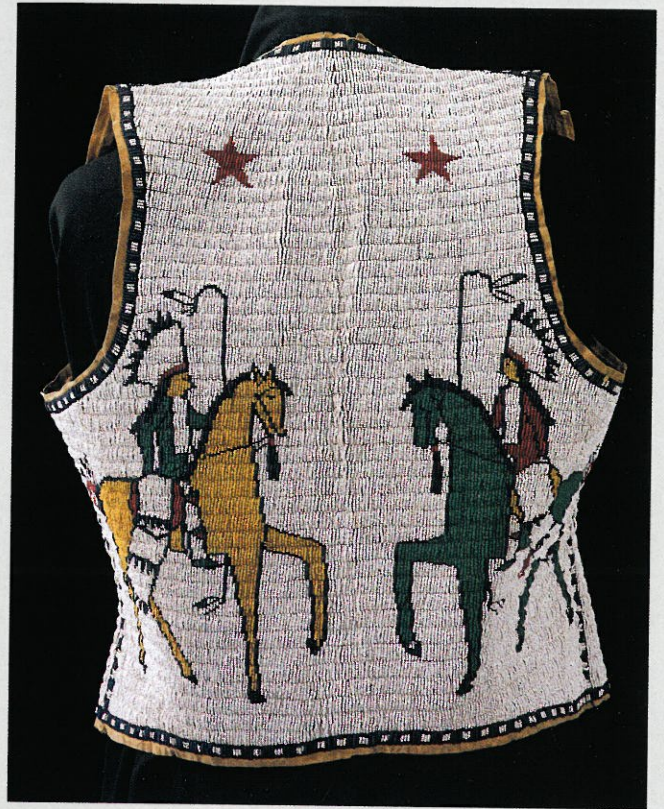


4. Storage jar by Lonnie Vigil (b.1949), Nambe, 2000. Mica-ceous clay. 17" high, 18" diameter (43.2 cm x 45.7 cm). Working exclusively with micaceous clay, Vigil maintains the functionality of historic Nambe pottery, while adding a personalized and distinctly contemporary character. The mica tempering material appears as a subdued gold in the reddish clay body and as gunmetal silver in the blackened fire clouds. Museum purchase, 2000. Cat. No. E300527. Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes.

With this reformulation of mission also comes a renewed commitment to collecting and presenting artworks from the present day — an essential interest of the museum's founders that was almost entirely neglected for more than one hundred years. In recent years the Native American art department, in particular, has made significant inroads in the acquisition of artworks by contemporary artists, while it has also overseen the investment of more than \$1 million toward



5. Ancestor mask, Heiltsuk or Coast Tsimshian, Central Coast, British Columbia, c.1850. Wood, paint. 9" high, 6¾" wide (22.9 cm x 17.2 cm). This is one of several male image masks, all carved in a distinctive substyle, found in museum collections dating from the mid-nineteenth century. Although frequently referred to as portrait masks, which implies that they were modeled after actual people, they should more properly be considered iconic representations of ancestral beings. Gift of Edward S. Moseley, 1979. Cat. No. E28573. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.



6. Vest, Plains, late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Leather, glass beads, sinew. 19" wide, 23½" high (48.3 cm x 59.7 cm). This beaded vest depicts actual or dream events in the life of a Plains man. The front shows a pair of rams, admired for their power and prowess; the mounted warriors on the back suggest courage and prestige. Gift of Harry Damon Jr., 1942. Cat. No. E23973. Photographs by Jeffrey Dykes.



7. Parfleche, Comanche, early to mid-nineteenth century. Buffalo hide, pigment. 12" high, 40½" wide with fringe (30.5 cm x 103 cm). The bold patterns of this fringed container represent a highly legible marker of individual and tribal identity. This example was most likely collected by French/Swiss ethnologist and botanist J. L. Berlandier, c.1828. Gift of the Smithsonian Institution, 1884. Cat. No. E3780. Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes.

making the collection more accessible, through inventory, storage improvements and digitization.⁴ Highlighting these efforts is the creation of gallery space designed to house changing exhibitions of the museum's collection, as well as borrowed exhibitions of historic and contemporary Native American art.

The full expression of the museum's new Native American program is still being realized, and reaches far beyond acquisitions and new galleries toward multiple ways of developing and sharing new perspectives on Native American art. This initiative is premised on the idea that no museum is merely an assemblage of things — it is also a microcosm of human interaction, engagement and inquiry. We seek to foster an atmosphere of respectful inquiry between native and nonnative artists, scholars, tradition bearers and museum visitors. It is a process that starts and continues in discussion: in the development of exhibits, staff exchanges, internships and collections sharing; through the implementation of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA); and through the development and presentation of publications, lectures, demonstrations, films, online resources and other digital media.⁵ The museum's Native American gallery will feature exhibitions that guide and facilitate conversations, where understanding is an ongoing process of respectful inquiry, of sharing perspectives and knowledge. It is a process that involves multiple voices, especially those of native people, for whom art is the most direct legacy.

At the core of these collaborations are efforts to develop new concepts for interpreting Native American art in museum settings, seeking approaches that move beyond the biased historical narratives of the past. What can art mean to museum visitors, given the frequently vast differences in culture, language and worldview between artist and viewer? When many Native American objects are overtly functional, how do museums overcome the common bias that true art is effete, produced by self-conscious intellectual effort? In responding to these questions, we are challenged with a significant theoretical void, which cannot be filled by recourse to traditional anthropology or aesthetics; the former inevitably creates a disquieting imbalance between the observer

⁴ In 1996 these fundamental changes in the department's emphasis were visibly announced by the traveling exhibition and catalogue *Gifts of the Spirit* (Monroe et al. 1996), showcasing the museum's historic collections alongside contemporary works from across the country. Subsequent exhibitions based on the museum's holdings have included *Indian Market: New Directions in Southwestern Native American Pottery* (2001) and *Uncommon Legacies* (Grimes et al. 2002).

⁵ As an important example of new technology, visitors to the museum now have the capability of "bookmarking" objects during their gallery visit for later online reference — either in the museum or at home — via the constantly expanding ARTscape™ resource library (see www.pem.org).



8. Eagle and Salmon blanket by Don Yeomans (b.1957), métis/Haida and Trace Yeomans (b.1964), Haida, 2000. Wool, Ultrasuede®, mother-of-pearl, abalons. 60½" long, 51½" wide (153.7 cm x 130.8 cm). Don Yeomans works in many media, extending Northwest Coast art within classical parameters. Produced collaboratively by Yeomans and his wife, this button blanket features a Haida clan crest executed in a most contemporary medium, Ultrasuede®. Museum purchase, 2000. Cat. No. E301710. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.

and the observed, while the latter is often hopelessly mired in Eurocentric experience (Grimes 2002).

Instead, in our efforts to build updated aesthetic concepts and vocabularies we rely on three fundamental assumptions: 1) that art is an activity that traces the creative mind in a dynamic world; 2) that humans are inherently creative, both in expression and perception; and 3) that any aesthetic understanding of creativity and art requires relational and contextual knowledge. In most non-Western societies, including the traditional societies of the Americas, art has no name; instead, creativity — in all its forms — is enmeshed in the fabric of human existence. For the maker, each artwork is an intersection of the warp and weft of physical and psychological worlds; each has implications for social cohesion and historical continuity relating to the maker and the maker's community. Thus, like a motif in a tapestry, each work of art is part of a pattern of personal, cultural, natural and spiritual knowledge, feelings and associations — a pattern the threads of which can be traced, horizontally and vertically, as they appear, disappear and reappear again in the fabric of a culture.

Power and Beauty

Power and Beauty, the inaugural exhibition presented in the museum's new Native American gallery, uses this conceptual framework to explore alternative ways of discussing the aesthetic qualities of Native American art. The forty-six pieces included in the exhibition were selected from the Peabody Essex Museum's collection by Thomas Haukaas, a Sicangu Lakota independent curator, artist and physician working with the museum's staff curators.⁶ The objects are deliberately diverse, in order to broadly embody the exhibit's key concepts. They span three centuries (1700–2003), and originate in cultures throughout the Americas: the Northeast, Plains, California, Pacific Northwest, Mexico and South America. In part, these works were also chosen to demonstrate the broad range of collection strengths beyond those currently associated with the museum (i.e., items collected by Salem sea captains, with a long-standing institutional pedigree). Finally, although some of the objects were made for sale, all are regarded as authentic expressions of Native American culture.

The exhibition's title refers to a two-part concept for understanding and describing the aesthetics of Native American — or other — works of art. Power refers to the functionality of the artwork; beauty refers to an individual's sensory experience of the object. Metaphorically, in this construct each piece is a kind of existential "tool," the beauty of which resides in the way it feels in the hand, and the power of which resides in its capacity to do work of some kind.

While power and beauty together constitute the aesthetic of an artwork, that aesthetic can be measured along multiple axes. The exhibition explores the aesthetic qualities of the objects as they relate to cohesion and continuity. Cohesion is described as aesthetic effects that tend to tie individuals to their inner and outer worlds, to connect individuals and bind people in groups as families, communities and nations. Continuity refers to aesthetic effects on the duration of identity and ideas, both for individuals and groups. Obviously, even this simple conceptual framework poses massive challenges; despite ideal circumstances, knowledge of an artwork's aesthetic potential and corresponding expression can only be fragmentary. Thus, any discussion, here and elsewhere, of Native American art is merely one segment of an ongoing dialogue.

Even a limited survey of the artworks in the exhibition shows that they vary widely in their power and beauty, and in their implications for cohesion and continuity. Some of the objects relate to very private worlds. Perhaps the most private is the untitled work by Emmi Whitehorse, which was inspired by intimate feelings and memories derived from life in a Navajo family (Fig. 1). The colors of the yarns on her grandmother's loom, a

9. Saddlebags, Apache, nineteenth century. Rawhide, cotton, paint. 17" wide, 50" long (43.2 cm x 127 cm). The geometric leather cutout designs on this pair of saddlebags are set against a backdrop of red cloth, a striking use of color and negative space. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Willard C. Cousins, 1954. Cat. No. E31633. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.

⁶The exhibit also includes one work borrowed from a private collection. The total number of works shown will vary over time, as additional selections are rotated through the space.



10. Miniature baby carrier, Southern Plains (Kiowa or Comanche), nineteenth century. Wood, brass tacks, leather, glass beads, cotton, paint. 5½" high, 8½" wide, 23" long (14 cm x 21.6 cm x 58.4 cm). Miniature baby carriers were often made for and given as gifts to girls. The combination of peyote and brick stitches suggests a Comanche origin, while other features indicate a possible Kiowa origin. Gift of the estate of Lawrence W. Jenkins, 1962. Cat. No. E38858. Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes.

child's world of small natural treasures — dried husks and seeds — and the swirling personal symbols and abstractions of life all pause momentarily on the painting's surface. This is a painting about both personal continuity and history, and about the connections and cohesions of an individual with the world beneath her feet, and within grasp, in the bosom of a family. It is also a painting that expresses some of the most elemental components of a Navajo individual's worldview.

For Lonnie Vigil, each instance of making a pot is an encounter with the Earth Mother and with his Nambe Pueblo ancestors who worked the clay before him (Fig. 4). Thus, each pot speaks to continuity in the identity of



11. Basketry tray, Chumash, early nineteenth century. Sumac, black-dyed juncus, golden juncus. 5" high, 16½" diameter (12.7 cm x 41.9 cm). This basket was collected by Captain John Bradshaw, a commander of the Boston ship *Sachem* that traded on the California coast in the 1820s. Although based on a native form, the artist has embellished the basket with a woven foot, possibly inspired by European or Chinese ceramics. Reverse of tray on front cover. Museum purchase, 2003. Cat. No. E302065. Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes.



12. Burlwood bowl, Northeast, nineteenth century. Wood. 6½" high, 15" wide, 17½" long (16.5 cm x 38 cm x 44.5 cm). Although carving burlwood is an arduous process, it presents a visually pleasing finished surface; moreover, its interlocking grain is especially resistant to splitting and damage by insects. For both these reasons, burlwood carvings often survive as heirlooms. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Willard C. Cousins, 1960. Cat. No. E36435. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.

family and community. But it is simultaneously an act of connection, of a potter to the Earth Mother and ancestral spirits that guide him. The example here is characteristic of Vigil's work: thin walled, precisely sculpted and with a lustrous micaceous clay body.

In Native American societies, as everywhere, gifts are given to commemorate accomplishments, affirm relationships and mark important life events — moments when communities come together to measure and attest to an individual's personal, civic and spiritual growth and status. For Native Americans, especially, the ceremonies marking transitions often involve whole communities, and help to reinforce ideal behaviors and

13. Installation by Truman Lowe (b.1944), Ho-Chunk, 2003. Willow, monofilament, metal. 120" high, 223¼" wide (304.8 cm x 567 cm). Composed of willow branches suspended in an arc, this installation is intended to evoke the shoreline environments throughout the Eastern Woodlands region. Within the *Power and Beauty* exhibition, the sculpture creates both a tenuous boundary and a unifying central element. Museum commission, 2003. Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes.



14. *Shopping* by Judith Lowry (b.1948), Hamawi Pit River/Mountain Maidu/Washo, 1996. Acrylic on canvas. 69½" x 83" (176.5 cm x 210.8 cm). Lowry's paintings represent updated and stylish icons based on historical events. In *Shopping*, two pre-Columbian women contemplate purchasing the robe of the Virgin of Guadalupe, alluding to the impact of Spanish religion on native spirituality. Museum purchase, 2000. Cat. No. E300526. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.

values. Special objects may be created to mark these events, and to validate the changing roles and responsibilities of the individuals involved.

Some artworks in *Power and Beauty* represent simple, loving exchanges between individuals, or within a family. A young Plains woman honors her family when she has a child, and might in turn be honored by the presentation of an heirloom baby carrier, or by the gift of a new one, specially made. The finely crafted Southern Plains (Kiowa or Comanche) miniature baby carrier included in the exhibit was a precious toy for a girl, but more than that, a gesture of affection that anticipated the girl's future as a mother, a treasured member of a

family and valued part of a community (Fig. 10). The beadwork and construction of the baby carrier demonstrates, even to an outsider, an attitude of careful, loving attention to detail. A burlwood bowl, simple in its design but luxurious in its choice of material, might likewise have been a gift, painstakingly carved by a man for his wife, or for another family (Fig. 12). As an heirloom, through generations of use and handling, such an object could have kindled a deep sense of family cohesion and continuity.

Powwows have also long played an important role in bringing Native American communities together, creating special settings for individuals to wear accoutrement befitting their individual status. A pair of fancy brightly colored moccasins (Fig. 2), probably worn as part of an ensemble, was undoubtedly intended to attract attention at such a public event, and served to strengthen the connection and status of the wearer with respect to the group. However, in any close-knit community, individual pride and showmanship are always balanced against the weight of social convention and propriety. Unlike the strictly stylish moccasins, the lavishly beaded vest implied military standing and prestige (Fig. 6); without community concurrence of such position, rank or deeds, the vest would have no meaning, and would not be rightfully or comfortably worn.

Clans and communities, as well as individuals and families, have histories and seasons marked by ceremony and special objects. Heraldic devices were of vital importance in the Pacific Northwest, as an assertion of lineage and heritage, and the rightful legacy of properties and privileges. Even within the strict stylistic grammars of these symbols, regional artists have always found ways to pursue innovations; the Eagle and Salmon blanket by Don and Trace Yeomans is an example of such exploration (Fig. 8).

Songs, dances, oral histories and ritual enshrine those aspects of collective identity and knowledge that transcend individual memories, and form a collective heritage of spiritual, social and ecological experience. By definition, such performances are invariably part of an annual cycle of events, or carried out periodically over longer time frames. Each repetition fosters the continuity of shared memory and identity. Most art used in dramatic performance appears together with other works, usually in motion, with oratory and song. Thus, performance artworks now in museum cases suggest little of their original aesthetic potential. Absent, for example, are the songs and dances that animated a pair of Central Yup'ik masks (Fig. 3), and helped them bring convergence to the seen and unseen worlds of Yup'ik cosmology. Likewise, a naturalistic mask, perhaps carved by a Heiltsuk or Coast Tsimshian artist, was but a part of a dynamic and complex drama (Fig. 5). In both cases, however, the lifelike qualities of the carvings are strongly evident.

The internal dynamics of communities are not the only factors relevant to cohesion and continuity, which also depend on the ways that a group interacts with its

neighbors. Many objects, intentionally or not, carry symbols that effectively communicate group identity to such outsiders. In pushing against the external world, a community also defines itself, its character and boundaries. The pre-Reservation-era Comanche parfleche was probably carried on horseback during camp movements, where it served as a kinetic display of Comanche style and identity (Fig. 7). The even bolder use of color and fringe on the Apache saddlebags suggests a strong announcement of identity, even to the point of bravado (Fig. 9).

It is in the borders and margins of identity, in the regions of active challenges and fluid change, that some of the greatest creativity is expressed in art. A Chumash basket conveys, on one level, the technical virtuosity and decorative skill that are the longstanding heritage of native California weavers. At the same time, under the yoke of oppressive missionaries, Chumash basketry periodically demonstrates surprising new syntheses. Here, a beautiful but standard dish form has had a woven foot added, probably influenced by a ceramic form (Fig. 11).⁷

In *Shopping* (Fig. 14), Judith Lowry, working in a vastly different world, and employing a completely different medium, provides an equally unusual synthesis, this time with an implied editorial. Here, a pre-Columbian mother and daughter shop for a prom dress — the robe of the Virgin of Guadalupe — proffered by a white saleswoman. Lowry seems to suggest that they are being tempted by fickle ideological fashion, at the expense of their own spirituality, identity and feminine power. Like the Chumash basket, Lowry's contemporary painting expresses creativity in the arena where power, ideas and identities — of individuals and nations — compete.

Power and Beauty, as an exhibit and installation, also occupies this boundary space, as does the museum itself. This fact is symbolized by Ho-Chunk artist Truman Lowe's untitled installation, consisting of a thin curtain of peeled willow branches suspended in an arc at the center of the gallery (Fig. 13). Like Whitehorse's painting, it evokes an alternative worldview and aesthetic — in this case, the physical and emotional rhythms associated with the lakeside vegetation of the Ho-Chunk homeland in the Great Lakes region. Unlike Whitehorse's work, it is a large-scale, more public gesture, alluding to shorelines throughout the Northeast Woodlands, zones of meeting between Native Americans and others over time.

Lowe's work is emblematic of the paired qualities of power and beauty. The work is powerful, providing a strong sense of a circle, and center of orientation, to the gallery. It engages a viewer directly, as a sculptural form, and indirectly, as a series of subtle reflections, gliding like birds across the glass bonnets of pedestals. As a circle, it speaks of cohesion within the gallery, and of the native world beyond; as a thin curtain, it posits a fragile boundary between worlds. As a rhythmic composition it implies continuity — from past, to present to future.

⁷ See cover illustration.

For a longer period than any other American museum, the Peabody Essex Museum has served as a middle space between Euro-American and Native American cultures. For almost all of that time, the relationship has been decidedly unequal — not just at the museum, but in the collision of cultures throughout the continent. Today, although most museums have worked hard to move beyond this negative legacy, they have only partially succeeded, since the underlying canons of museum interpretation, particularly regarding art and culture, are still widely imbued with Eurocentric biases. Yet there are vast new opportunities to address these issues, and revise these canons, through new collaborations involving museums and Native American artists and tradition bearers. NAGPRA dramatically expanded the number of active conversations about this issue, while the advent of shareable digital media creates myriad possibilities for partnerships that simply did not exist a few years ago. For museums, it is an opportunity to rehabilitate long-outmoded concepts, no longer suited to institutions that aspire to serve increasingly diverse and global audiences. For Native Americans, it can be an opportunity, not simply to share the power and beauty of Native American art, but to find ways to foster greater cohesion and promote increased continuity for Native American communities throughout the land.

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