Powerful Narratives: Contemporary Native American Art at the Field Museum[.]

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Introduction

In May 2022 the Field Museum, Chicago, opened the permanent exhibition *Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories* (hereafter referred to as *Native Truths*), the culmination of over five years of planning and development. In the course of its preparation, the museum staff experienced the beginning of a paradigm shift in thinking about how to better collaborate with communities whose heritage is represented in our collections. A significant factor contributing to the change was the engagement with contemporary Native American artists. Over fifty new works of art were commissioned, loaned, or, in the case of photographs, reprinted for the exhibition.

We recognized that by including a diversity of artworks we could disrupt our visitors' assumptions about Native American cultural production and practices, allowing them to more deeply appreciate the distinct worldviews and concerns of communities. Furthermore, visitors would be able to recognize individuality and see beyond stereotypes that have so dominated representation. As with all paradigm shifts, the changes influenced by making the exhibition were embedded in longer ongoing processes. In this article, we discuss the antecedents to the creation of the *Native Truths* exhibition in order to provide context for the use of contemporary art in natural history museums with Native American collections. We then discuss more specifically the role of contemporary art in the exhibition, and finally discuss the work of four of the artists displayed in the installation.

Antecedents and Context

Native North American Collections at the Field Museum

The collection of Native North American material culture has its roots in the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (World's Fair). The fair was the source of the original Field Museum collection and formed its core.[1] After the museum was established, between 1893 and World War II, curators continued to accumulate material, either leading expeditions themselves or commissioning others to travel to reservations and territories for the collection. In this time period, all of the major museums were racing to collect as much material as possible, with the belief that Native Americans were rapidly "vanishing" as a result of exposure to disease, displacement, and assimilation. As amply documented by historians of museums, collectors were often unscrupulous in their practice, resorting to grave robbing, theft, and coercion to obtain

items.[2] Even when collectors purchased items, they tried to pay a minimum amount. The sellers were experiencing immense hardship during this time as they became confined to reservations or military forts or suffered disease epidemics.[3] Additionally, museum archaeologists conducted numerous excavations at sites throughout North America. Ultimately, the Field Museum curators had built one of the largest collections of Native American cultural items, rivaled only by those of the Smithsonian Institution and the American Museum of Natural History. Currently, the Field Museum collection includes over 70,000 items from postsettler time periods (predominantly the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and over 250,000 items from archaeological excavations. Although the collections span the entire continent, the majority are from the Southwestern United States, the Northwest Coast, and the Plains.[4]

At the time these items were collected, they were largely categorized as "functional" objects, meant to document the lifeways of their makers. Natural history museums that contained cultural material distinguished themselves from art museums by using their collections to illustrate then prevailing theories of cultural evolution. Curators made analogies with theories of biological evolution and framed the collections of cultural material as scientific evidence of the hierarchy in human evolution. They classified the collections' source communities as "simple" societies characterized by lack of political organization and writing systems that were reliant on kinship to structure economic activity and contrasted these to "civilized" societies of the West.[5] If the aesthetic qualities of cultural material were discussed, it was to designate these objects as handicraft or "primitive art," distinguished from European or Western genres that were housed in art museums.

Decolonization Efforts

Native Americans, along with other Indigenous peoples, have long protested the treatment of their cultures in Western museums. Since museums were first established, Native people have attempted interventions that countered the ahistorical narratives, collaborating with anthropologists at the American Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian to provide richer portraits of Native American life. Examples of these professional Native American anthropologists include George Hunt, who worked with Franz Boas; Francis La Flesche, who collaborated with Alice Fletcher; and Ella Deloria, who was a student of

Franz Boas.[6]

Aware of past neglect of Native American contributions, earlier curators at the Field Museum attempted remedies at times. For example, at the Field Museum in the 1960s, curator and archeologist Donald Collier worked with Native Americans in Chicago to put on a festival of the arts that showcased local artisanship to highlight the vibrancy and continued presence of Native Americans and their art.[7] In the early 1970s Pawnee elders worked with the Field Museum's education and exhibitions staff to install an Earth Lodge in the style of late-nineteenth-century dwellings before the Pawnee were relocated from Nebraska to Oklahoma. They also contributed to the development of training materials used by docents who did regular talks in the Earth Lodge for school groups and visitors. The Field Museum's curator of the Pacific Collections, John Terrell, also undertook extensive collaborative work, especially with the Māori of New Zealand in the 1970s. These efforts at collaboration, however, remained sporadic, and curatorial authority was entrenched.

By the 1990s, however, responding to a wave of critical museology and continued activism from Native American, Indigenous, and non-Western communities, museums began a more concerted effort to be inclusive and collaborative with source communities.[8] The force of the critique of these practices began to take on more urgency with the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, which at the time mandated that museums that receive federal funding survey their collection and notify Tribes of any ancestors' remains, funerary objects, and objects of sacred patrimony that may be eligible for repatriation. The law, however, placed a heavy burden on American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian Tribes to prove their claims for repatriation. In late 2023, new regulations were issued with the intent of addressing some of the flaws in the law.[9]

In the thirty years since NAGPRA was enacted, museums and Tribes have entered into relationships—sometimes merely transactional ones, but sometimes something deeper that can lead to improved collaboration and inclusion of Native American perspectives in representation and methodologies for care of the collections.

At the Field Museum, the movement toward decolonizing was occurring at a time of other changes in museum practice, including a new approach to exhibitions and a

rethinking of the museum's mission. Specifically, in the mid-1990s, museum leadership decided to experiment with strategies that would extend beyond changing the representational approaches of exhibitions to directly addressing contemporary concerns. They initiated a more concerted effort to translate the museum's scientific expertise into tangible actions and initiatives for both biodiversity conservation and promotion of cultural understanding—the two broad spheres of the scientific disciplines that traditionally comprise natural history (paleontology, botany, biology, and anthropology). The experiment was located in two ad hoc centers—the Environment and Conservation Program (ECP) and the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change (CCUC). Both were loosely linked to the Science Division of the museum, but they received only minimal operating support and were expected to raise funds for any programmatic activity they initiated.

Alaka Wali (coauthor of this article) joined the museum in late 1994 as the first director of the CCUC and had success raising funds for a series of initiatives to apply the museum's anthropological expertise to issues of concern for Chicago community-based organizations. The CCUC team developed a methodology for participatory action research that used museum-based communication strategies.[10]

The team also started working with neighborhood-based cultural organizations to develop a public program series that highlighted common concerns across cultures and the different responses to these concerns. The organizations worked with the CCUC staff to develop and cohost these public events (these included, for example, programs on the themes "rites of passage," "sports," and "youth socialization"). Each of these was a joint offering of two or three of the organizations, which resulted in interesting pairings. For example, the Chicago Japanese American Historical Society worked with the National Museum of Mexican Art on a program around death rituals, and the Chicagoland Czech-American Community Center and the American Indian Center collaborated on one about musical instruments. Over the ten years that the CCUC administered the program series, the number of participating organizations grew, and so did audiences. Ultimately, we realized that the CCUC could not sustain this programming for the long term, and we worked with our partners to create the Chicago Cultural Alliance, which is now in its

fifteenth year.[11]

At the same time that the CCUC was growing, the Field Museum's direct action efforts for biodiversity conservation also grew under the auspices of Dr. Debra Moskovits, who founded the Environment and Conservation Program. Eventually, the CCUC and ECP joined forces for greater impact, working together in the Andes/Amazon region of South America and in the greater Chicagoland region to integrate efforts to protect biodiversity and improve the quality of life of the regions' residents. Currently, this work is housed in the Keller Science Action Center, which now has an endowment and is a permanent unit within the Field Museum's Science Division with a staff of social scientists, ecologists, and educators.

Taking two ad hoc units to full incorporation within the institutional structure required persistence, creativity, and teamwork. All these qualities stood us in good stead as we approached the creation of the *Native Truths* exhibition.

Representation

The former Native North America Hall, which *Native Truths* replaced, was the only cultural exhibition at the Field Museum that had not been renovated since its installation in the 1950s. It retained the approach to representation of that time—displaying Native American lifeways as frozen in a timeless past, with few attempts to contextualize the items on display beyond small labels identifying Tribal names. The cases were loosely organized, and some appeared to be an ad hoc mix of random items from the collections.

In effect, it was symbolic of how museums of natural history treated and represented Native American belongings and lifeways until very recently. The displays reinforced the evolutionary theories that guided curators and focused on depicting what were presumed to be the vanishing cultures of these peoples as they were assimilated into European societies. The exhibitions were organized as static representations of life in either the prehistoric past or as Europeans had encountered them when they colonized North America. It was necessary, therefore, to change those representational practices. The Field Museum had already made significant renovations to the other cultural halls (Africa, the Pacific), so these could provide lessons on how to address the renovation of the Native North America Hall.

It was in the context of Wali's experiences with ongoing change, successful impact on the ground with direct action approaches, and

the continued need to decolonize, that she undertook efforts to change the direction of how the museum represented Native American cultures when she became curator of North American Anthropology in 2010. Her first opportunity was in 2012 with a small gallery space located at the front of the former Native North America Hall, the Webber Gallery. This five-hundred-square-foot space was intended to showcase contemporary Native American life but had largely been curated in the traditional manner with the authoritative voice of the curator, albeit with the inclusion of contemporary artworks at times.

Wali decided to experiment with a new approach: engaging contemporary artists to create installations by selecting objects from the museum's collection to display alongside their own work. The first foray was a collaboration with Chicago-based artist and fashion designer Maria Pinto. While Pinto is not Native American, she represented a pathway to radically changing the way we used collections to tell stories that went beyond mere object-driven approaches. The success of the Maria Pinto exhibition gave Wali the confidence to begin working with Native American contemporary artists, the first of whom was Bunky Echo-Hawk (Pawnee and Yakima). The Field Museum has a large collection of Pawnee cultural material and had repatriated sacred ceremonial bundles; therefore it was appropriate to work with a Tribal Nation with whom we had an existing relationship.

The next iteration of this approach was the installation of a retrospective of works by Rhonda Holy Bear, a Lakota artist who had lived in Chicago for many years as a young adult. Holy Bear is self-taught and makes exquisite soft sculptures that capture in meticulous detail the regalia of Plains Tribes, such as the Lakota and the Crow (Apsáalooke). She had visited the Field Museum many times to study the collections on display in the former Native North America Hall as well as pieces in storage.[12] For her display in the Webber Gallery, she selected a few objects from the collections that had inspired her and placed them with her works loaned by various private collections. Simultaneous to the Holy Bear installation, we invited Chicago-based artist Chris Pappan (Kanza/Osage) to also create an installation (fig. 1). Pappan refers to himself as a "twenty-first-century ledger artist," following in the traditions of Great Plains ledger artists such as Silver Horn.[13] His work was installed as an intervention in the then Native North America Hall. In some instances

Fig. 1. Installation view of *Drawing on Tradition: Kanza Artist Chris Pappan*.
This photo provides a sense of what the old hall looked like and the impact of Pappan's exhibition.
Photo by John Weinstein for the Field Museum.

Pappan's reprinted ledger art, which ranged from geometric designs to portraits, was reprinted on translucent paper that was adhered to the old cases. The result was a powerful transformation of the hall. Pappan's work shone a light on problematic aspects of the hall's previous installation—everything from the egregious way the objects had been mounted, which caused them to sustain damage due to long-term exposure, to the racist overtones that permeated the nature of the displays.

In each of the Webber Gallery exhibitions, we used a similar methodology. The artist was the cocurator, combining pieces from the Field Museum's collection with their own creations and working closely with the exhibition staff to design the installation layout. This approach offered powerful new perspectives on both the relevance of the historical collections and contemporary artists' unique relationships to their artistic heritage, their communities, and their own practice. Representing Native American artists' viewpoints on such themes as identity, artistic

continuities, craft, and harmful museum practices was a radical departure from previous exhibitions. For the curatorial and exhibitions staff, collaborating with contemporary artists marked a positive shift toward changing practices and adopting decolonization methodologies.

To summarize, the approach to the complete renovation of the old hall was informed by the decolonizing methodologies (collaboration and cocuration) that we had used in both establishing the Keller Science Action Center and developing the Webber Gallery installations.[14]

Applying What We Learned

In 2018 we began the renovation of the Native North America Hall, starting with the deinstallation process. Given our commitment to collaboration, we knew that the first step in the project was to establish an advisory committee. We extended invitations to eleven Native American museum professionals, Tribal leaders, scholars, and artists (see the appendix for the list of advisory committee members). Some were people who had relationships with the museum's repatriation director, Dr. Helen Robbins; others were brought in by Wali and Chicago-based artist Debra Yepa-Pappan (Jemez Pueblo/Korean), who was the first person hired for the project as the community engagement coordinator. Yepa-Pappan had been volunteering with the Native North America collections for close to two years and had been instrumental in connecting us to contemporary artists, some of whose work we purchased for the collection.

The hall contained over 1,500 items, some contaminated with arsenic, placed on damaged mounts, and bearing outdated labels. It took close to a year and a half to deinstall the items and return them to storage, where they are now properly housed in protective containers.[15] The hall remained open the entire time, as it connects Stanley Field Hall to the Northwest Coast Hall and could not be closed. We took this as an opportunity to provide our visitors a peek at the behind-the-scenes work of caring for the deinstalled objects, including how to treat them for conservation purposes and for making new mounts.

The advisory committee (see fig. 2) met quarterly, engaging in dialogue with the Field Museum team to develop the conceptual structure of the exhibition. During the pandemic shutdown in 2020, the committee continued to meet via Zoom. It took close to two years to settle on the reinstallation's

Fig. 2. Members of the advisory committee are seated in the front row; behind are some of the Field Museum staff who worked on the exhibition. Photo by John Weinstein for the Field Museum.

main messages. The committee worked well together—most had known each other and worked together on other projects. Discussions were lively and intense but never polemical or strident. Field Museum staff listened to counsel from the committee and shared their insights on visitor expectations, museum budget constraints, and the feasibility of executing some of the ideas for exhibition design.

One of the challenges the Field Museum team faced was how to honor the advisory committee's strong consensus that the exhibition should not emphasize the victimization of Native Americans throughout centuries of settler colonialism. The committee asked us to focus instead on illuminating the popular phrase "We are still here" and showcase that Native peoples haven't just survived genocide and oppression, they have thrived and forged new paths while sustaining their cultural practices, knowledge, and sense of identity. Honoring this guidance

meant going against the grain of how exhibitions had been done at the Field Museum since the 1990s, reinforcing visitors' mistaken stereotypes about Native Americans. The former hall had been popular *because* it reinforced those stereotypes—that Native peoples were in the past, that their ways of life had vanished, that they were to be gawked at and pitied. Visitor surveys and conversations with donors showed an expectation that the exhibition would focus on a chronological history of the dispossession and trauma that Native Americans had suffered in the course of European settlement in the Americas. The advisory committee strongly advised against reinforcing stereotypes or attempting a comprehensive history of the encounters between Native Americans and European colonists. Although aspects of these experiences (and countering stereotypes) could be included, they should not drive the storytelling.

Another challenge arose when the committee informed us they could not speak for all Native peoples. They could guide the installation's main messages but not tell the stories that would illustrate those messages. We had to reach out to individuals and communities across North America and tell the diverse stories that characterize Native life today. This led us to a diverse network of storytellers who would share their perspectives. In each instance, the storytellers used the same method employed in the Webber Gallery installations—choosing objects from the Field Museum's historical collections and incorporating contemporary pieces they made themselves or selected from their Tribe. At this point, the curatorial team included two Native American scholars: Dr. Eli Suzukovich (Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa/ Cree, coauthor of this article) and Dr. Meranda Roberts (Paiute). Together with Debra Yepa-Pappan, they were instrumental in selecting storytellers. Exhibition department staff assigned to develop content labels also identified some of the storytellers. At the Field Museum, curators are responsible for conceptualizing and guiding content but actual label copy is written by exhibition developers—an eclectic group with diverse educational backgrounds. In the case of this exhibition, the developers and curators met regularly with the storytellers to determine the content and the story they wanted to tell. The storytellers edited and reviewed all label copy, as did the advisory committee. Almost all labels are therefore written in the first-person voice of the storyteller.

Many stories spoke directly to

fundamental concepts that characterize Native American experiences and worldviews, which we came to call "Native Truths." These concepts formed the backbone of the exhibition and were designed to remain a permanent feature of the hall. The advisory committee chose five "Native Truths":

- Our Ancestors connect us to our past, present, and future
- Native people are everywhere
- The land shapes who we are
- We have the right to govern ourselves
- Museum collecting and exhibition practices have deeply harmed Native communities

Each Truth was illustrated with four to six displays by individuals or collectives (see fig. 3).

In addition to the Native Truths displays, the team created immersive displays delving into specific stories that illustrated or amplified the Truths (see fig. 4). These in-depth stories were located in the center of the hall, each set apart in

Fig. 3. Installation view of one of the "Native Truths," "Our Ancestors connect us to the past, present, and future," with four displays, each told by a different storyteller. Karen Ann Hoffman's display is at far right. Photo by John Weinstein for the Field Museum.

Fig. 4. Installation view of rotating gallery "The Pueblo peoples' relationship to Chaco Canyon." The blue lattice sets off the gallery, which is about 500 square feet. Photo by John Weinstein for the Field Museum.

their own small gallery space. In contrast to the more permanent Truths displays, these small-gallery stories will change on a regular basis, keeping the content fresh and allowing us to tell more stories. The inaugural rotating stories were:

- Frank Waln's journey home
- The revitalization of California basket making
- The Pueblo peoples' relationship to Chaco Canyon (fig. 4)
- Food sovereignty of the Meskwakie Nation of Tama, Iowa
- The Chicago Urban Native Community Gallery

Each story gallery includes ambient photographs at the top of the display, as well as cases and interactive features around the walls and in the center. Their design, look, and feel (including the case layouts) were determined with the advisory committee and the cocurators.

This is the first time that a permanent exhibition at the Field Museum has had a built-in rotation feature, complete with a dedicated endowment that will enable the continuous display of fresh material. The advisory committee's counsel was instrumental in enabling us to represent the diversity of Native American lifeways, cultural practices, and perspectives on contemporary concerns. The use of multiple storytellers (for the inaugural exhibition, we ultimately engaged over 150 artists, community members, Tribal historic preservation officers, and Tribal authorities from forty Tribes and First Nations in the United States and Canada) also moved us away from the object-centered approach of the older exhibitions toward a people-centered or story-centered approach.

The Role of Contemporary Art

As discussed above, engaging with contemporary artists for recent exhibitions was an experimental strategy that attempted to address problematic aspects of representation that are faced by natural history museums in general. Bringing contemporary art into a natural history museum is actually not a new innovation. The Field Museum has a long history of incorporating art—in the form of murals for dioramas, wall hangings, and scientific illustrations—into exhibition displays of the natural world. However, these works were generally considered background for the specimens, and the artists were often not credited on the label copy. In the cultural halls, the displays were replete with cultural items that were considered ethnographic rather than pieces of art. In these instances as well, the names of the makers were not included in the labels and little attempt was made to educate the public about the aesthetic undergirding of the items. Indeed, non-Western art has always had a problematic relationship with museums.[16] Art museums have usually placed non-Western artworks in their own gallery space, lumping all cultures together (for example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Michael C. Rockefeller Wing). Native American art historians, such as Nancy Marie Mithlo, have questioned reductionist categories and argued for an Indigenous perspective on what constitutes art.[17] Anthropologists have also been rethinking categories, shifting their focus from comparative studies of non-Western art toward more theoretical explorations of the role of material culture in social life. One influential thinker in this regard was Alfred Gell, who wrote about the ways in which material culture exerts

agency in social relationships, independent of the makers.[18]

In this context, museum staff are continuing critical work that can advance decolonization in representation and privilege Indigenous artists' perspectives. The efforts are facilitated by the increased recognition that Indigenous artists have begun to receive in the last ten years with major shows and invitations to major art events. Jeffrey Gibson (Choctaw/Cherokee), for example, became the first Native artist to have a solo show in the US Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2024. *Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories* demonstrates how including contemporary art can be part of the process of decolonization.

Changes in museum display practices of Indigenous work and cultural materials have come in part as a result of activism on the part of Indigenous artists and communities themselves, as well as from museums confronting their legacies of exclusionary practices. Just as important as these considerations is the creative force of Indigenous artists who are working in multidisciplinary modes and genres and upending the standard categorization of their art. As we worked on the installation of *Native Truths*, we experienced the power of contemporary Native American art and saw how it could illuminate the messages that the advisory committee wanted to convey in a way that other representational strategies could not. In order to illustrate how this unfolded in the exhibition, we discuss four artists who were included in the exhibition: Karen Ann Hoffman (Oneida), Diego Romero (Cochiti Pueblo), Monica Rickert-Bolter (Potawatomi and Black), and Julie Buffalohead (Ponca).

Karen Ann Hoffman

In the exhibition, Karen Ann Hoffman (fig. 5) describes herself in this way:

> I'm Karen Ann Hoffman, a Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Raised Bead worker from the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. I'm the student of the late Samuel Thomas and the late Lorna Hill. When I'm sewing, I hear whispers, old beaders from long ago, encouraging me, "Keep this up, do this well." This work stands not for me, but for all those who came before us and all whose faces we have yet to see.[19]

Fig. 5. Karen Ann Hoffman (Oneida).

Hoffman grew up in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and settled in Stevens Point. She first started learning Haudenosaunee raised beadwork from Samuel Thomas and Lorna Hill, Cayuga artists who traveled to Wisconsin from Ontario in the 1990s to teach. She traveled with them and learned from them for many years. She has gained widespread recognition, including a prestigious National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship. Her work is included in the New York State Museum and the Eiteljorg Museum as well as the Field Museum. She also teaches raised beadwork techniques to young people at her home. Her display in *Native Truths* illustrates the Truth "Our Ancestors connect us to our past, present, and future." Three of her works are featured: *SkyWoman* (fig. 6), raised beadwork on an antique wood chair; *Thunderbird Whimsy* (fig. 7), a beaded cushion; and *Great Bear Hunt Mat* (fig. 8), a beaded mat.

Fig. 6. Karen Ann Hoffman (Oneida, b. 1957). *SkyWoman (she/her)*, 2018. Wood, glass beads. Adopted from the artist and living at the Field Museum since 2018, 360821. Photo by Michelle Kuo for the Field Museum.

Fig. 7. Karen Ann Hoffman (Oneida, b. 1957). *Thunderbird Whimsy*, 2011. Cloth, glass beads. Adopted from the artist and living at the Field Museum since 2021, 361601. Photo by Michelle Kuo for the Field Museum.

Fig. 8. Karen Ann Hoffman (Oneida, b. 1957). *Great Bear Hunt Mat (he/him)*, 2009.
Cloth, glass beads. Adopted from the artist and living at the Field Museum since 2021, 36102.
Photo by Michelle Kuo for the Field Museum.

Each of these three pieces are examples of how Hoffman perceives her connection to the past and how she carries forward her message to future generations. As historian and advisory committee member Doug Kiel (Oneida) writes about Hoffman's display:

Both the Seventh Generation Philosophy and Hoffman's art highlight the cyclical nature of time, intergenerational stewardship, and profound respect for the natural world. The Seventh Generation Philosophy emanates from an Indigenous worldview that regards time as cyclical rather than linear. It weaves together past, present, and future generations in an unending continuum. This philosophy steers the governance of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, rooted in the Great Law of Peace. This law fosters communal stewardship and harmony among the nations. Decisions are made by consensus within the Council, with a focus on the long-term effects on both community and environment.[20]

With *SkyWoman*, Hoffman tells the creation story prevalent among the Haudenosaunee and other Northeast peoples. She states:

> As I was walking through an antique store, I saw this child's rocking chair. There were three panels on it, the perfect platform to tell the story of SkyWoman—how we Haudenosaunee, one of the original peoples of the Eastern Great Lakes, came to be. The chair (she) said, "SkyWoman's story needs to be on me," so she's my way to tell our creation story to people I'll never meet.[21]

Hoffman told the exhibition team that SkyWoman is a living being, and so the label copy offers her pronouns (she/her) and states that she is "adopted from the artist and living with the Field Museum since 2018."

Thunderbird Whimsy is in the style of nineteenth-century Haudenosaunee works created for the burgeoning tourist industry around Niagara Falls. Hoffman states about this piece:

> Popularized in the late 1800s, whimsies are small items made for non-Native tourists to buy "on a whim." Scholars and collectors for too long overlooked them. To me, whimsies are powerful. I decorated this larger pincushion whimsy with a stanza from the Haudenosaunee prayer "Thanksgiving Address" (The Words Before All the Other Words), which calls for us to be thankful for the Thunderbirds, who come from the West to clear our minds.[22]

The display label included audio of Hoffman reciting the Thanksgiving Prayer. The *Great Bear Hunt Mat* is an intricate piece that tells another story—one that relates the story of the constellation of the Great Bear (Ursa Major) and how it was hunted into the sky. Hoffman explains in the label copy:

> Once I heard an archaeologist say, "civilization didn't begin until the written word." That struck me as incomplete. Our Native arts, our oral traditions, have passed our worldview from generation to generation for a very long time. So I began to bead our traditions to show there's more than one way to transmit "civilization"—our culture. Great Bear Hunt—a very old tradition written in the Stars—is the first story I beaded.

For Hoffman, as she described in interviews with staff during the process of creating the display, time is experienced as a three-dimensional sphere or orb that allows us to "remember the future and predict the past." Her philosophy of art teaching centers on "learning by hanging around." In other words, one learns the craft as one lives one's life, or as one sits at the kitchen table, conversing, practicing, and observing. She spoke about how elders would insist that one must "wash the dishes before you can lead the ceremony."[23]

In the exhibition, Hoffman's

works sit alongside the pieces she selected from the collection—a mortar and pestle, an intricately carved spoon, a beaded pair of moccasins, and a beaded purse. She chose each of these to illustrate the connections across time to both the artistic traditions and the persistence of foundational beliefs that she continues to address through her art.

Diego Romero

Diego Romero is a Cochiti Pueblo artist whose works are included in several major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum, and the Heard Museum. He attended the Institute of American Indian Arts and earned degrees from the Otis College of Art and Design and the University of California, Los Angeles. We commissioned Romero to create a piece for the introduction to the rotating gallery "The Pueblo peoples' relationship to Chaco Canyon." This gallery, which was cocreated by three advisory committee members, features displays that incorporate items from the collection with new works by contemporary artists, photographs, and videos to illuminate the significance of Chaco Canyon as a sacred site that the Pueblos have cared for and protected over the centuries.[24] The site is still used for ceremonies to honor the ancestral peoples who lived there and is cared for by both the Pueblo and Diné/Navajo. It has been threatened by looting and more recently by fracking and oil exploration. In June 2023 Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) issued a ban on drilling and fracking within a ten-mile radius of the site. The exhibition team (including cocurators) discussed the intent of the gallery with Romero, and he created a powerful ceramic piece that depicts Haaland as protector of the site (fig. 9).

In the label, Romero describes *The Crying Indian* this way:

> In this piece I highlight the urgency of environmental issues at Chaco. US Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland is at the center, recalling 1970s "Crying Indian" antipollution ads. The landscape hangs in fragile balance: Chacoan buildings to her right mirror the fracking station to her left, like the dualities of our Pueblo worldview. I borrow the checkerboard border from Mimbres pottery—it represents corn kernels, a metaphor for the people.

Romero's art draws on the traditions of Cochiti storyteller pottery, bringing to these his own style that plays with the influence of comic book illustrations he was steeped in as a youth growing up in Berkeley, California. At once humorous, tragic, and poignant, this piece

Fig. 9. Diego Romero (Cochiti Pueblo, b. 1964). *The Crying Indian* (exterior and interior), 2021. Ceramic. Commissioned by the Field Museum in 2021, 361786. Photo by Michelle Kuo for the Field Museum.

grounds the gallery in the overlapping themes of resilience, continuity, and significance of place.

The Crying Indian sits in conversation with other contemporary art in the gallery, including the works of Al Qöyawayma (Hopi), Les Namingha (Zuni/Tewa/Hopi), Aric Chopito (Zuni), Louie García (Tiwa/Piro Pueblo), and Loren Aragon (Acoma Pueblo). Altogether, the gallery brings to life the sacred place that is Chaco Canyon and why its protection matters. The seamless integration of the contemporary artworks with the collection pieces selected by the collaborating curators creates a powerful story of why place is such a significant concern for Native Americans, a manifestation of the Truth "The land shapes who we are."

Monica Rickert-Bolter

Monica Rickert-Bolter, who is Potawatomi and Black, grew up on Potawatomi ancestral lands and currently lives in Chicago, where she is a founding member of the Center for Native Futures, an artists' collective and gallery space. She first became involved with the Field Museum as a volunteer, working with Debra Yepa-Pappan to assist Wali in the curation of the Native North America collection. She is also a journalist who has written about Native American art and current affairs. We commissioned Rickert-Bolter to create three pieces for the exhibition. First, *Mshiké Mnisé (Turtle Island)*

(fig. 10) is a large mural that hangs on the wall in the Northwest Coast and Arctic Peoples hall, leading into the entrance to the *Native Truths* exhibition. The second commission, *The Great Lakes Mural* (fig. 11), consists of three large panels that hang above the "We speak for ourselves" gallery, which is a transition space from the *Native Truths* exhibition into the Northwest Coast Hall. It depicts the story of the Great Lakes Spirits discussing the "human problem." And finally, *Ralph Kerwineo* (fig. 12) is a painting depicting Ralph Kerwineo, an African American and Potawatomi/Cherokee trans man who lived from 1876 to 1932.

Fig. 10. Installation view of *Mshiké Mnisé (Turtle Island)* mural by Monica Rickert-Bolter (Potawatomi and Black). Photo by John Weinstein for the Field Museum.

Fig. 11. Installation view of *The Great Lakes* Mural by Monica Rickert-Bolter (Potawatomi and Black) in the "We speak for ourselves" gallery. Photo by John Weinstein for the Field Museum.

Fig. 12. Monica Rickert-Bolter (Potawatomi and Black). *Ralph Kerwineo*, 2022. Dry pastels on foam board; 81.3 × 81.3 cm (32 ×32 in.). Permanent installation at the Field Museum.

Doug Kiel describes the Turtle Island and Great Lakes murals in this way:

> In "We speak for ourselves," [Rickert-Bolter] unveils a series of murals depicting the Great Lakes Spirits as personifications of the five Great Lakes: Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario. These murals are rooted in Rickert-Bolter's own original narrative, wherein the Spirits express concerns over the "human problem" and humanity's indifference to their welfare. She weaves elements of Potawatomi culture and cosmology into her murals, employing colors, symbols, and animals to impart deeper meanings. For instance, she depicts the Spirits with varied skin tones to represent the range of Indigenous people. Another mural features a representation of Turtle Island, a term for the continent embraced by numerous Indigenous groups in eastern North America. Serving a dual purpose, Rickert-Bolter's murals not only showcase her artistic prowess but also educate viewers on Indigenous environmental stewardship. Through her art, Monica Rickert-Bolter engages and challenges audiences to forge a connection with the natural world.[25]

The portrait of Ralph Kerwineo juxtaposes images of him as a man and as a woman. Kirwineo lived in Milwaukee and was arrested in 1914 for "disorderly conduct" after his former wife revealed that he was assigned female at birth. Kirwineo's story is told by Rickert-Bolter in the label in collaboration with Two Spirit poet and scholar Kai Minosh Pyle (Métis/Sault Ste. Marie Nishnaabe).

In addition to contributing these commissioned pieces to the Field Museum exhibition, Rickert-Bolter has participated in exhibitions on Afro-Indigenous identities at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and curated at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her work incorporates floral motifs drawn from Anishinaabe traditions and is also influenced by her experiments in dry pastels and digital art. Rickert-Bolter represents a new generation of Native American artists who are exploring the complexities of mixed identity within the context of personal experience. Her work's inclusion in the exhibition also highlights the experience of Indigenous people living in major cities, which has been underrepresented in museums.

Julie Buffalohead

Born in 1972, Julie Buffalohead is an enrolled member of the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Minneapolis College of Art and Design in 1995 and her Master of Fine Arts from Cornell University in 2001. Buffalohead lives and

works in St. Paul, Minnesota. She was awarded a prestigious Contemporary Art Fellowship in 2013 by the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, Indiana, which showed her work in an acclaimed exhibition that same year. She has subsequently shown works in major exhibitions, including a solo show at the Denver Art Museum that opened in 2018.

Buffalohead's painting (fig. 13), which is untitled, is also in the "We speak for ourselves" transition gallery. We chose to include her work in this space to reflect on the diversity of art forms, the complexities of identity, and the entanglement of cultural and individual experience. The painting depicts Coyote and Loon. In an interview with Field Museum staff about the painting and her work in general, she said:

> In this piece I am tapping into "the animal within" to address the sometimes seemingly impossible nature of daily life. Situated in a stark horizonless picture plane, these two creatures achieve an eerie cooperation. This echoed my postpartum feelings about childbirth while referencing traditional narratives—as a mythic space constructed around the internal world.[26]

Fig. 13. Julie Buffalohead (Ponca, b. 1974). *Untitled*, 2008. Watercolor on canvas. The Field Museum, 359216. Photo: Alaka Wali.

Buffalohead also writes on her website:

My work has focused thematically upon describing Indian cultural experience through personal metaphor and narrative, drawing from the substance of traditional stories while contextualizing motifs of cultural identity. In pictorial terms, the works tend to evoke animals or anthropomorphism within a horizonless field, who are caught within the human condition, often tragic and comedic. Using an eclectic palette, my painting juxtaposes evolving representations of animal spirit, deer, and coyote forms, and speaks to issues of commercialization of Native culture.[27]

In the interview, she described herself as an introverted child who was drawn to art as a refuge from rough treatment in high school. Her work draws on narrative traditions of the Ponca Nation, but also incorporates her own reflections on her personal experiences. In the case of this painting, she is reflecting on the feeling of loss of self she experienced after the birth of her child. She stated in the interview:

I had pretty bad postpartum depression after I had my daughter, and I was thinking about a lot of things about depression. . . . As a mom you're sort of expected for this to be the most joyous moment of your life. But there is this side of you that feels like something is missing, that part of yourself is no longer yourself. And I don't often think that women have time to grieve that part.[28]

She also described her perspective on Coyote, the trickster figure found in the narratives of multiple Native Tribes:

I was exploring a lot of thoughts about how, in Native storytelling, I was very attracted to trickster characters, and one of the main ones is Coyote, and he's one of my favorites. And I think it's because he's a character that does all these things in contradiction. He's gluttonous, and selfish, but at the same time he creates worlds and makes things happen. And I think what they were really trying to say is that is what it means to be a human being. You don't live in these opposites of black and white, but life is very much in the gray. I put him in a lot of my paintings as a sort of self-portrait.[29]

Julie Buffalohead's narrative work encapsulates the essence of what the "We speak for ourselves" gallery represents. It is adjacent to works by Preston Singletary (Tlingit), Jason Wesaw (Potawatomi), Monica Rickert-Bolter (Potawatomi and Black), Storme Webber (Choctaw/Black/Sgupiak descent), and Max Early (Laguna Pueblo), as well as a poetry interactive by various poets writing and speaking in their Native languages. Also included in the gallery is a brief clip from the first season of

Reservation Dogs, the first television show to feature exclusively Indigenous directors, writers, and lead cast members. Pieces from the museum collection that the artists selected are also woven into the display. As such, "We speak for ourselves" disrupts the very notion of stereotype and the idea that the museum curator is the only authoritative voice. It provides visitors with an insight into the deeply personal experiences that inform contemporary Native American art today.

Conclusion

The inclusion of artists throughout the exhibition *Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories* at the Field Museum provides visitors insights into the strength of Native American creativity and the diversity of perspectives that characterizes these communities today. Contemporary art is flourishing in Native America and fast gaining visibility within the natural history museum community. Museum curators are recognizing that they must include Native Americans in the representation of their own heritage and contemporary concerns. *Native Truths* demonstrates that collaboration with contemporary artists is a powerful strategy to disrupt colonizer narratives and begin a path forward toward remedy of the harm that historical practices have caused. This is especially true in the case of natural history museums, in which Native American and Indigenous cultural items were collected while Native voice and agency were denied (or included only in limited capacity). When contemporary art is integrated with historical and archaeological materials and stories of Indigenous science, governance, and tradition, visitors simultaneously encounter Native American voices from the past and present, as well as voices that will continue into the future.

Appendix: Biographies of Advisory Committee Members (2018–22)

Tony Chavarria, Santa Clara Pueblo, is the Curator of Ethnology at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Robert Collins, PhD, African-Choctaw descent, is Associate Professor of American Indian Studies at San Francisco State University. Using a person-centered ethnographic approach, his research explores American Indian cultural changes and African and Native American interactions in North, Central, and South America.

Bibiane Courtois, Innu Nation, was born in Mashteuiatsh, Province de Québec. In 2003, She became the director of the community museum and renewed their permanent exhibit, a living exhibit that showed their traditional ways of life. From 2012 to 2017, she was the coordinator for a research project with the University of Montreal on repatriation.

***Elizabeth Hoover**, PhD, is Associate Professor at University of California, Berkeley, in environmental science and policy management. Formerly, she was Assistant Professor of American Studies at Brown University, where she taught courses on environmental health and justice in Native communities, Indigenous food movements, and community-engaged research.

Joe Horse Capture, A'aninin, Vice President of Native Collections and the Ahmanson Curator of Native American History and Culture at the Autry Museum of the American West, has over twenty years of museum experience and has served in a curatorial role at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and at the National Museum of the American Indian. He is widely published in the field of Native American art and culture.

Doug Kiel, Oneida Nation, is Associate Professor in the Department of History and the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities at Northwestern University. He is an affiliate of the Center for Native American and Indigenous Research, with particular interests in the Great Lakes region and twentieth-century Indigenous nation rebuilding.

Stewart Bruce Koyiyumptewa is a member of the Hopi Tribe and is from the village of Hotevilla located on Third Mesa and belongs to the grey badger and butterfly clans. He works in the Hopi Tribe's Cultural Preservation Office as an archivist and now as the manager.

Patty Loew, PhD, Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, is Director Emerita of Native American and Indigenous Research at Northwestern University and a professor in the Medill School of Journalism. She has written extensively about Ojibwe treaty rights, sovereignty, and the role of Native media in communicating Indigenous worldviews.

Scott Shoemaker, PhD, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, is the Program Officer, Native Arts and Cultures at the Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies. He was formerly the Thomas G. and Susan C. Hoback Curator of Native American Art, History and Culture at the Eiteljorg Museum. He has taught American Studies, American Indian Studies, and Museum Studies courses at the University of Minnesota and Macalester College. He is involved in the study and recovery of the art of Miami ribbonwork and language.

Blaire Topash-Caldwell, PhD, is a citizen of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians and Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Michigan State University. She was at the University of Massachusetts, Boston from 2021 to 2023. Dr. Topash-Caldwell was also the Public Humanities Fellow at the D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies. Her research interests are in Indigenous science fiction and futurisms, traditional ecological knowledge, and digital heritage.

Brian D. Vallo served three terms as Governor of Acoma Pueblo. Previously, Governor Vallo was Director of the Indian Arts Research Center at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the Founding Director of the Sky City Cultural Center & Haakú Museum in Acoma Pueblo. He is currently on the board and consultant to major museums in the United States.

*At the time that she served on the Advisory Committee (2018–2020), Dr. Hoover claimed descent from Mi'kmaq and Mohawk Nations. In 2023 she apologized for falsely claiming descent and stated that in fact she is not Native American.

[1] Paul Brinkman, "Frederic Ward Putnam, Chicago's Cultural Philanthropists, and the Founding of the Field Museum," *Museum History Journal* 2, no. 1 (July 2013): 73–100, https://doi.org/10.1179/mhj.2009.2.1.73; Warren Haskin, Stephen E. Nash, and Sarah Coleman, "A Chronicle of Field Museum Anthropology," in "Curators, Collections and Contexts: Anthropology at the Field Museum, 1893–2002," ed. Stephen E. Nash and Gary M. Feinman, special issue, *Fieldiana Anthropology*, new series, no. 36 (September 2003): 65–81; Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

[2] See, for example, Margaret M. Bruchac, *Savage Kin: Indigenous Informants and American Anthropologists* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018); Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1995); and Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius, eds., *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial* (Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2020).

[3] See, for example, Cole, *Captured Heritage*, for an account of experiences with Northwest Coast Nations.

[4] Nash and Feinman, eds. "Curators, Collections and Contexts: Anthropology at the Field Museum, 1893–2002."

[5] Michael M. Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992); Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

[6] Francis La Flesche, "The Omaha Tribe," *Science* 37, no. 965 (June 1913): 982–83; Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998). Bruchac, *Savage Kin*, chronicles their efforts and discusses the ways in which they were marginalized. See also Ira Jacknis, "No Object without Its Story: Franz Boas, George Hunt, and the Creation of a Native Material Anthropology," in *Disruptive Voices and the Singularity of Histories*, ed. Regna Darnell and Frederic W. Gleach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019): 231–52.

[7] Donald Collier, "My Life with Exhibits at the Field Museum, 1941–1976," in Nash and Feinman, "Curators, Collections and Contexts: Anthropology at the Field Museum, 1893–2002."

[8] Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1991); Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Levine, eds., *Museums and*

Communities: The Politics of Public Culture (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1992); Christina F. Kreps, *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation, and Heritage Preservation* (London: Routledge, 2003); Sharon Macdonald, *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

[9] See Julia Jacobs and Zachary Small, "Leading Museums Remove Native Displays Amid New Federal Rules," *New York Times*, January 26, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/26/arts/design/american-museum-of-natural-history-nagpra.html.

[10] Alaka Wali, "Listening with Passion: A Journey through Engagement and Exchange," in *Mutuality: Anthropology's Changing Terms of Engagement*, ed. Roger Sanjek (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 174–90.

[11] Learn more at https://www.chicagoculturalalliance.org/.

[12] Holy Bear was introduced to the museum by her teacher Louis T. Delgado (Oneida) and Father Peter Powell, who had worked closely with the Chicago Native American Community. Father Powell was a scholar of Southern Cheyenne lifeways and cultural practices and was very familiar with the Field Museum collections. The curators provided access to Holy Bear and Father Powell, enabling her to closely study designs and beadwork of the Plains collections.

[13] Ledger art flourished in the nineteenth century when Plains Indians were confined to army forts or reservations and given access to paper and colored pencils and paints. They transferred their narrative drawing methods from hide to this new medium. The ledger art became popular in the art market and also was collected by museums. See Candace S. Greene, *Silver Horn: Master Illustrator of the Kiowas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).

[14] For a review of decolonizing methodologies in museums, see Christina F. Kreps, *Museums and Anthropology in the Age of Engagement* (London: Routledge, 2020); Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012). See also Alaka Wali and Robert Keith Collins, "Decolonizing Museums: Toward a Paradigm Shift," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 52 (October 2023): 329–45, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-052721-040652.

[15] For details, see Michelle Brownlee and Katie Hillson, "Collections Reflections: Continuing Towards Collaborative, Community-Guided Collections Management," in *The Future is Indigenous: Stories from the New Native American Hall at the Field Museum*, ed. Alaka Wali and Tom Skwerski (London: BAR Publishers, forthcoming).

[16] See Nancy Marie Mithlo, "'Red Man's Burden': The Politics of Inclusion in Museum Settings," *American Indian Quarterly* 28, no. 3/4 (Summer–Autumn 2004): 743–63, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4138940.

[17] See Nancy Marie Mithlo, "No Word for Art in Our Language? Old Questions, New Paradigms," *Wicazo Sa Review* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 111–26, https://doi.org/10.5749/wicazosareview.27.1.0111.

[18] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[19] Label text, *Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories*, the Field Museum, Chicago, 2022. The label copy of each display included biographical information about the storyteller written with the help of the exhibition staff.

[20] Douglas Kiel, "In Harmony with the Ancestors: Indigenous Worldviews, Traditions, and Arts Bridge the Past, Present, and Future," in Wali and Skwerski, *The Future is Indigenous*.

[21] Interview with Karen Ann Hoffman, 2018.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Karen Ann Hoffman, interviews with Field Museum staff, 2020–21.

[24] The advisors who curated this gallery were Brian Vallo (Acoma Pueblo), Stewart B. Koyiyumptewa (Hopi), and Antonio Chavarria (Santa Clara Pueblo). They developed the content for the gallery together with Field Museum exhibition staff and curators and selected the artists whose works are featured alongside the Field Museum collections.

[25] Douglas Kiel, "We Speak for Ourselves: Challenging Stereotypes in Native Truths," in Wali and Skwerski, *The Future is Indigenous*.

[26] Interview with Julie Buffalohead, 2021.

[27] "Statement," Julie Buffalohead (artist website), https://www.juliebuffalohead.com/page/0b46da2f/statement.

[28] Interview with Julie Buffalohead, 2021.

[29] Ibid.