

For Immediate Release

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Reinstalled Indigenous Arts Gallery at Tucson Museum of Art reflects community-based approach to exhibition development

Tucson, AZ –The Indigenous Arts Gallery at Tucson Museum of Art reopened on March 11 following a complete reinstallation that represents a rethinking of curatorial practices through community-based approaches. The project pilots a new model for TMA using community curators in the exhibition development process. It is funded in part with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) (MG-50-19-0044-19), and will be on view in its current iteration through summer 2022.

Works of art were chosen that speak to thriving 21st century Indigenous peoples, the complexities of tribal communities, cultural sovereignty, creativity, resiliency and continuity of cultural practices. Most of the works come from TMA’s permanent collection, augmented by loans from individuals and the Amerind Foundation—a museum and research facility located in Dragoon, Arizona, that is dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of Indigenous cultures and their histories. This was in effort to include representations of art forms relevant to Indigenous communities outside of museum holdings.

The exhibition is a collaborative effort guided by a committee of Indigenous representatives in partnership with two curators from the museum. They are:

- Julia Arriola (Mescalero/Mayo)
- Christine Brindza, senior curator and Glasser Curator of Art of the American West
- Monica Buckle (Cherokee)
- Dr. Martina Dawley (Diné/Hualapai)
- Colleen Lucero (Hopi)
- Dr. Reuben Naranjo (Tohono O’odham)
- Dr. Marianna Pegno, curator of community engagement
- David Tenario (Tohono O’odham)

This approach to curation was rooted in shared authority where community curators contributed their knowledge and experiences to offer insights on TMA’s collection, select artworks, develop themes and author exhibit texts. Through collaborative stewardship, multivocal interpretation and creative pairings, the exhibition’s organizers collectively worked to tell some of the stories behind the works of art in TMA’s care.

“The Indigenous Arts exhibition was developed using a community-based approach to curation where stakeholders have an active role in identifying issues that relate to them,” said Dr. Marianna Pegno, TMA’s curator of community engagement. “Six community curators worked independently as well as collaboratively to conceptualize the new exhibition. We had multiple meetings with each person to co-curate the exhibition of the museum’s permanent collection of Indigenous Arts.”

Community curator Colleen Lucero (Hopi) explained why this collaborative process is necessary: “Institutions such as TMA have it in their power to help steward and heal past grievances about

museums that Native people are still trying to heal from to this day. Including awareness in this collaborative process and being respectful of Indigenous knowledge builds new procedures in museum environments that help evolve essential practices. We all shared decision making and welcomed new concepts implemented in this exhibition.”

While working with the six community curators, museum staff gained new information about the permanent collection that will become part of the museum’s knowledge base.

“In order to accomplish the goals of the project, staff needed to share authority, enter into equitable collaborations and create space to listen, said Christine Brindza, the curator who oversees the Indigenous Arts area in TMA’s collection. “Curatorial practice had to change, but by working with communities and broadening expertise beyond traditional curatorial knowledge, community-based interpretation has enhanced the understanding of works in TMA’s care.”

Dr. Reuben Naranjo (Tohono O’odham) reflected on his role, which involved making recommendations for loans: “The most exciting process for me was assisting the Tucson Museum of Art curatorial staff in picking baskets to be used in the exhibition. I could look at baskets for hours; they’re filled with individual tell-tale quirks and personal weaving styles of the artists.”

IDEA in action

The collaborative, multivocal approach to the project produced an exhibition that aligns with TMA’s community-centered mission and vision as well as its Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access (IDEA) Plan, adopted in 2020. The purpose of the IDEA plan is to position TMA as a responsive, community-centered institution that represents, activates and advocates for its communities.

The four principles of the IDEA Plan guided the planning and implementation of the Indigenous Arts reinstallation:

RELEVANCY

The project focuses on communities Indigenous to Southern Arizona and by extension communities that have deep connections to the region through trade, migration, or pilgrimage to sacred sites.

COMMUNITY

Employing community-based curation, TMA staff work with community curators to develop themes, a list of artworks to include and interpretative strategies for those artworks.

RESPECT

Through co-stewardship, participants build a shared understanding of artworks in TMA’s collection.

MULTIVOCALITY

The result acknowledges multiple perspectives and ways of knowing. Interpretation is authored by multiple community members and reflects the diverse Indigenous communities throughout Arizona.

TMA’s commitment to expanding Indigenous Arts

TMA’s increased commitment to the Indigenous communities of Southern Arizona began with the adoption of a land acknowledgement statement: “As an institution built upon the original territories of

the O’odham, the Tucson Museum of Art and Historic Block acknowledges the Indigenous Sonoran Desert communities, past and present, who have stewarded this region throughout generations.”

TMA has had a permanent collection gallery dedicated to the exhibition of Indigenous arts. However, the reinstalled gallery that opened on March 11 has a larger footprint within the museum than past exhibitions, concentrating on tribes of local, Arizona, Southwest, and border regions. Distinct areas in the space focus on O’odham, Yoeme (Yaqui), Hopi, Diné (Navajo), and Pueblos of New Mexico, along with representation of works from Plains Indian and California coastal tribal affiliations.

Concurrent with these visible changes are revisions to TMA’s collections policy, refining a focus on collecting works that are most relevant to surrounding communities, including the Indigenous communities of the Southwest.

Toward a culturally responsive institution

In 2019 TMA was awarded a \$220,000 National Leadership Grant for Museums by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) for *Expanding Narratives*, an interdisciplinary project to support the development of culturally responsive approaches to gallery-based instruction, curatorial practices and programming. The three-year project began on November 1, 2019.

Despite some delays resulting from the COVID-19-related closure of the museum for nearly five months, the first year of planned project activities was completed successfully with the reinstallation and reopening of the Indigenous Arts Gallery. This part of the project will act as a focused case study that will enable TMA to scale up the process in years two and three.

The primary objectives of *Expanding Narratives* are:

- Cultivate collaborations with local communities and engage in critical conversations to explore the intersections between works of art in TMA’s permanent collection and the cultures from which those works originate and represent.
- Examine how TMA cares for and interprets the collection and how the museum reflects the diverse demographics and culture of the region.
- Critically investigate and review how the museum presents information and knowledge and who constructs these narratives.

The IMLS National Leadership Grant for Museums program supports projects that address critical needs of the museum field and have the potential to advance practice in the profession, improving services for the American public. The grants address evolving needs and trends for museums, contributing best practices, tested tools and innovative partnership models for the entire sector.

Now that TMA has opened its first exhibition created within the new curatorial model, project staff will share tools developed and insights gained with other museums around the country. The institution will continue to develop culturally-responsive approaches to gallery-based instruction and programming as such activities can be safely introduced. Relationships with Indigenous partners will continue as TMA strengthens relationships of shared authority with other target communities such as Latinx and immigrant/refugee audiences.



About the Tucson Museum of Art and Historic Block

As an institution built upon the original territories of the O’odham, the Tucson Museum of Art and Historic Block (TMA) acknowledges the Indigenous Sonoran Desert communities, past and present, who have stewarded this region throughout generations.

TMA connects art to life through meaningful and engaging experiences that inspire discovery, spark creativity and promote cultural understanding. Founded in 1924, TMA encompasses an entire city block in historic downtown Tucson and is committed to developing quality exhibitions, expanding and diversifying its collection and presenting relevant and innovative programs while broadening public access to the arts.

The museum features exhibitions of Modern and Contemporary art, Latin American art from ancient to today, Indigenous arts and Art of the American West. A permanent collection of over 12,000 works of art spans continents, centuries and media. TMA’s campus includes five properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places, an art education center and research library, the Museum Store and the highly acclaimed museum restaurant Café a la C’Art.

TMA is a private 501(c)(3) charitable arts and education organization. For additional information visit TucsonMuseumofArt.org or call (520) 624-2333.

The 2020-2021 Exhibition Season at TMA is presented by James and Louise Glasser.

With support from the following season sponsors: Fran and Jim Allen, Alice and Paul Baker, Mary Jo Brown, Connie Hillman Family Foundation, I. Michael and Beth Kasser, Anne and Ed Lyman, Jeanne Pickering and Mike Andrew, TMA League, Contemporary Art Society, Latin American Art Patrons and Western Art Patrons.

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