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OVER 200 YEARS OF NATIVE AMERICAN ART AND CULTURE AT THE PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM, SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS

Karen Kramer Russell*

Founded in 1799, the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) is one of America's oldest museums. Since its inception, PEM has collected, displayed, and interpreted Native American art and cultural objects in a variety of ways, each rooted in the conscious and unconscious attitudes of their time. This paper aims to provide a brief history of PEM's collecting, exhibition, and interpretation of Native American art and culture, which spans 210 years, and also to use PEM's collection as a case-study to explore how it correlates to larger national movements of museology and, at times, federal policy.

PEM's Native American collection numbers about 20,000 works, the majority of which are from the early nineteenth-century to the present from North America, and encompasses over 10,000 years of human creativity in the Americas. The superior quality of individual works, its breadth, sheer size, and provenance ranks it among the most important collections in the world and the oldest ongoing collection in the Western hemisphere. It is from this unique perspective that affords PEM the position of reflecting on past and current approaches to displaying, interpreting, and collecting Native American art objects.

Members of the East India Marine Society (EIMS), PEM's founding institution, collected most of the museum's earliest Native American acquisitions. Established as an elite social and business organization as Salem rose in importance as a center for maritime trade, society members were global entrepreneurs—sea captains and traders—who traveled the world in search of commerce. The society's charter included a provision for the establishment of a “cabinet of natural and artificial curiosities”¹ which these sea captains and supercargoes collected from beyond the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa or Cape Horn, South America for the enrichment and delight of family and friends in Salem.²

* Sincere thanks to the University of Tulsa College of Law, Professor Judith Royster, and Dean Levit for including my presentation in the Exhibiting Culture: Museums and Indians Symposium. It was an honor to participate with such esteemed speakers. All photographs are © 2010 Peabody Essex Museum, and published courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

1. Ernest Stanley Dodge & Charles H. P. Copeland, *Handbook to the Collections of the Peabody Museum of Salem* (Peabody Museum 1949).

2. *By-Laws and Regulations of the Salem East-India Marine Society* 3 (Pool & Palfray 1808).

Each member of the EIMS recorded daily navigational observations, nautical information, and “whatever is singular in the manners, customs, dress, ornaments, &c. of any people” in a journal during voyages and turned over their completed journal to the society upon return.³ Made available for other members, and likely modeled after the Royal Society’s instructions to Captain James Cook for his first voyage, EIMS journals were not only invaluable resources to those setting sail without the benefit of lighthouses, buoys, and charts, but also, they “were, in effect, the key to empire, the way to wealth.”⁴

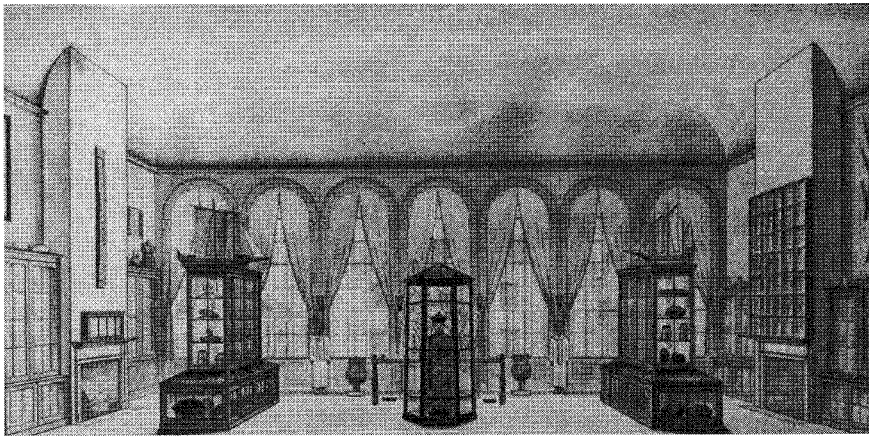


Fig. 1: East India Marine Hall, 1825-1867.

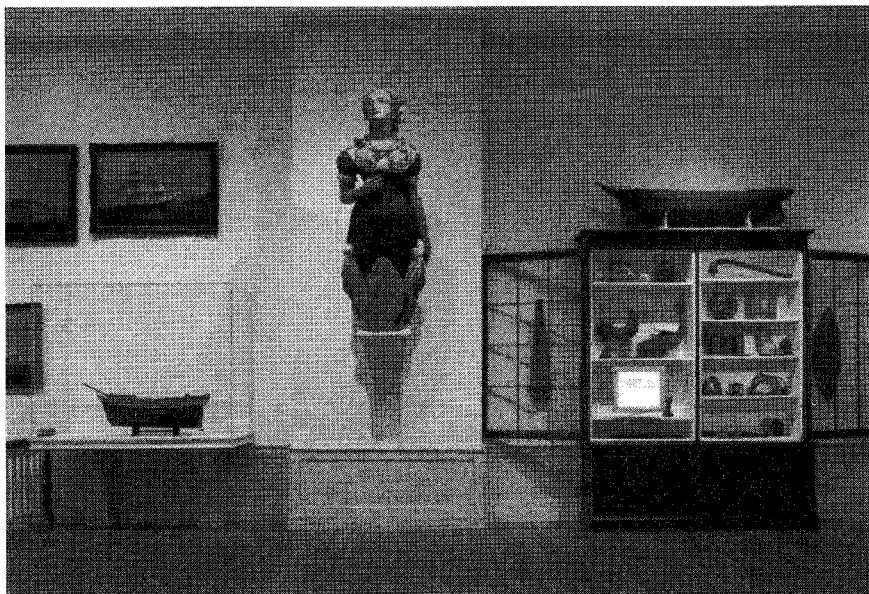


Fig. 2: East India Marine Hall, c. 2003.

3. *Id.*

4. Lloyd Brown, *The Story of Maps* 121 (Dover 1980). More than 100 journals, now in PEM’s Phillips Library collection, were accumulated by the EIMS.

Society members brought to Salem a diverse collection of objects from the Northwest coast of North America, Asia, Africa, Oceania, India, and elsewhere. By the 1820s, the Society's collection had outgrown its display capacity in a rented hall, and in 1825, the Society moved into its own building called the East India Marine Hall, constructed for the rare and valuable collection and also for Society gatherings. This space, which today contains the original display cases and some of the very first objects collected, is a cornerstone of the museum campus.⁵

"In the [museum's] earliest years, through the 1830s, Native American [art] objects were shown as part of an eclectic [and literal] cabinet of curiosities reflecting enlightenment sensibilities" that had been at play in Europe for decades by this point, "emerging American nationalism, and related [perceptions and] attitudes toward the exoticness of ["others"] represented in the society's diverse collections."⁶

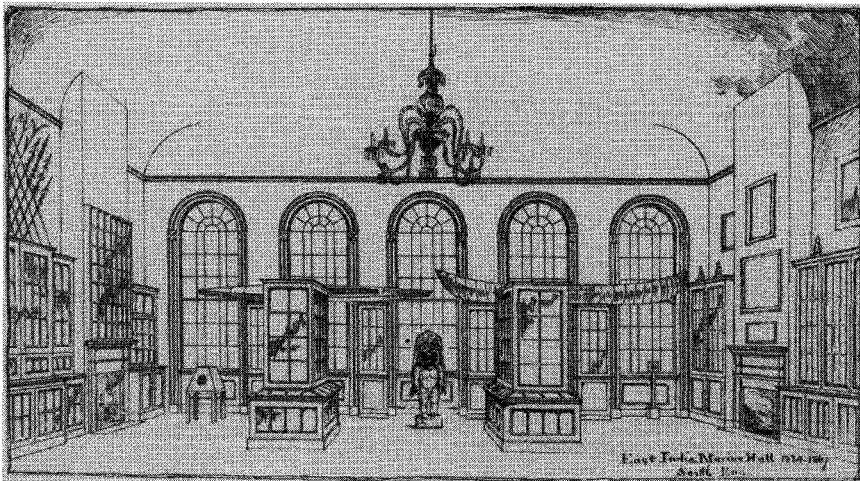


Fig. 3: East India Marine Hall, 1824-1867. Cabinets of curiosities lined the center and both sides of the room. An early 19th century Greenland kayak and the oldest known extant full-size birch bark Passamaquoddy canoe are presented by the windows.

Travel to the Pacific Northwest coast, a mere sixteen years after the establishment of the United States, was frequent due to the burgeoning sea otter fur trade. These especially soft and lustrous furs proved remarkably profitable cargo for Salem ships in China trade. Collected in sometimes two to three year periods at a time, and then traded in Canton, China for tea, silk, and porcelain, many handsome donations to the collection were made through the first half of the nineteenth-century. Through social contact and business relationships with local officials, Society members were collecting "curiosities" –however, the singular nature and superior quality of many of the individual works they collected suggest that these pieces were likely gifted, and possibly received, as objects of diplomacy—not just mere objects of curiosity.⁷

5. See Figs. 1 & 2.

6. John R. Grimes, Thomas Haukaas, Mary Lou Curran & Karen Kramer, *Power and Beauty: A New Native American Art Gallery at the Peabody Essex Museum*, 29 *Am. Indian Art* 48, 48 (2003). See Fig. 3.

7. In Castle McLaughlin's 2003 publication, *Arts of Diplomacy: Lewis & Clark's Indian Collection* (U.

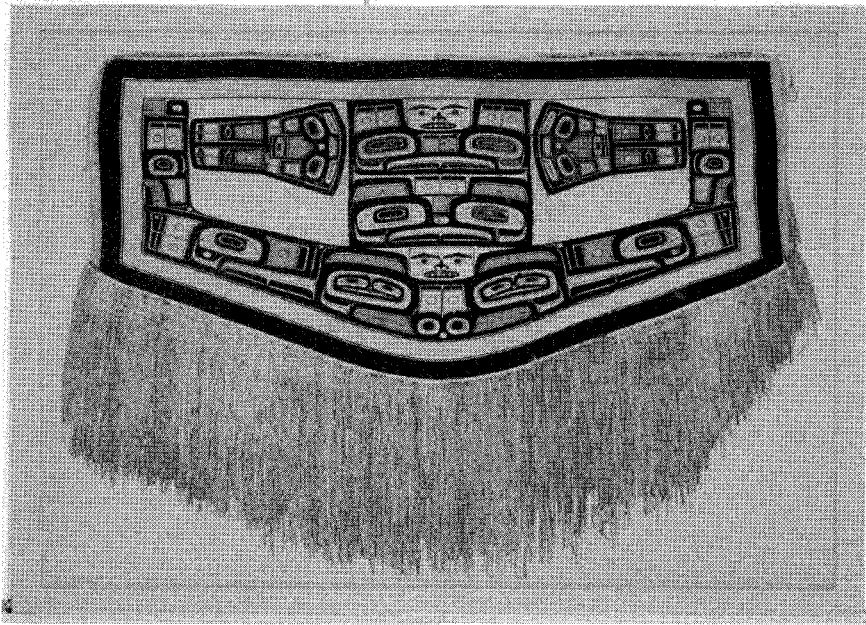


Fig. 4: Earliest known Chilkat blanket, c. 1832, Tlingit artist. Mountain goat wool, cedar bark. PEM Cat. No. E3648. Gift of Captain Robert Bennett Forbes. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.

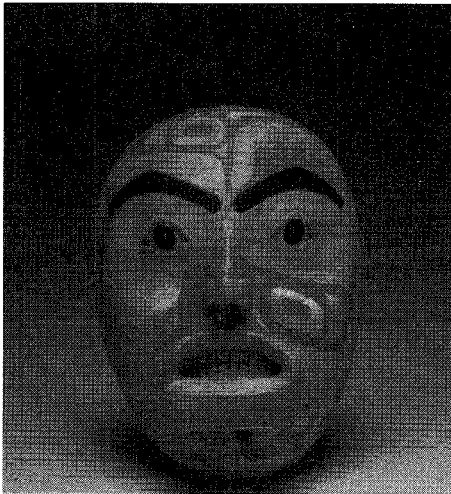


Fig. 5: 1 of 14 known Djilakons masks from this early period, donated by Captain Daniel Cross, 1827. PEM Cat. No. E3483. Kaigani Haida artist, Village of Kasaan, Southeastern Alaska, circa 1820. Wood, paint. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.

Salem trade in South America was also extensive in the nineteenth-century; rubber brought Salem captains into contact with indigenous people in the Amazon River basin, and trade in guano and silver brought them to Peru. Several important pieces to the collection were donated, including remarkable featherwork collected in the Amazon River Valley by Henry P. Upton and M.W. Shepard between 1821 and 1853.⁸

Other Native American art made its way into the collection in the nineteenth-century by way of missionary and military activity and through family connections.

Wash. Press 2003), the idea of gift exchanges as symbolic diplomatic gestures is explored in depth. See Figs. 4 & 5.

8. See Figs. 6 & 7.



Fig. 6: South American feather headdress. PEM Cat. no. E6987. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.



Fig. 7: South American feather headdress. PEM Cat. no. E6988. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.

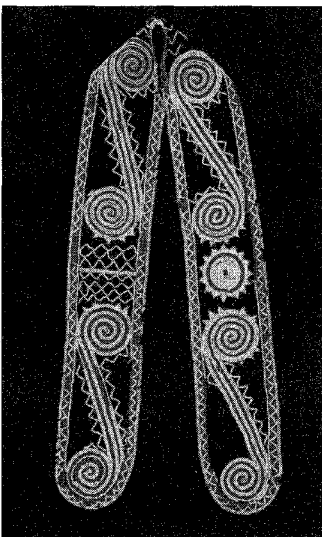


Fig. 8: Choctaw sash. PEM Cat. no. E25410. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.

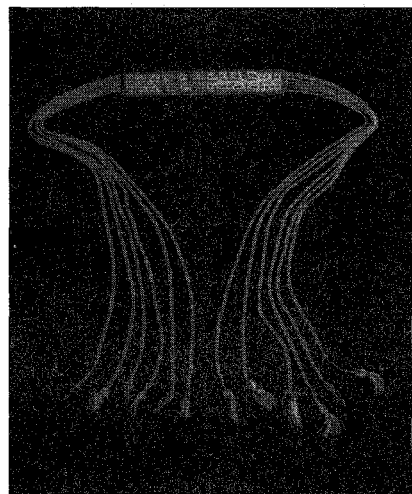


Fig. 9: Southeastern sash, possibly Choctaw, mid-19th century. Wool, silk, and glass beads. Gift of Charles Heald, 1955. PEM cat. no. E25963. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.

Salem, Massachusetts was a hub for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the nineteenth-century. From 1817–1883, missions were conducted among Native American communities, especially the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and the Dakotas. PEM houses some very early and rare Southeastern material collected by these ABCFM Missionaries.⁹

In the 1860s, as Salem declined as a seaport and center of trade, the East India Marine Society experienced waning membership and financial troubles. In 1867, the great benefactor George Peabody created the Peabody Academy of Science, which subsumed EIMS museum holdings, as well as natural history collections from Salem's Essex Institute.¹⁰ With the museum's transformation came the optimism of modernity. Extensive renovations to the museum's galleries produced new, systematic exhibitions that followed the latest classifications of biology, geology, and ethnology, as illustrated in the 1860s display of "specimen types" in East Hall, a gallery adjacent to East India Marine Hall.¹¹

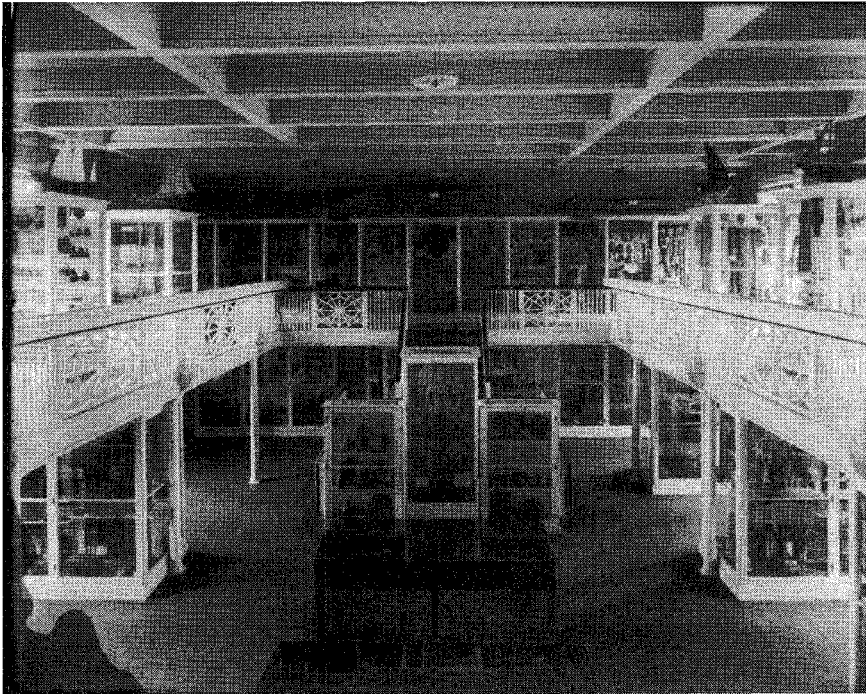


Fig. 10: East Hall gallery, 1860s (adjacent to EIMH) with specimen boats in center.

By the last part of the nineteenth-century, as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was coming to light, Native Americans were being documented tirelessly, incorrectly

9. Figs. 8 & 9. See John R. Grimes, *New England Missionaries and American Indian Art at the Peabody Essex Museum*, *Mag. Antiques* 302, 309 (Sept. 1999).

10. See generally Peabody Essex Museum, *Mission, Museum History*, http://www.pem.org/mission/museum_history (last accessed Sept. 29, 2009).

11. Figs. 10 & 11.

thought of as a dying, vanishing race. At this time, the museum continued to focus on developing science-based, systematic collections and exhibitions. Figure 11 illustrates an 1892 display case of primarily South American ceramics and featherwork. Here the museum took a natural history display approach, presenting like objects as non-functioning specimens, certainly not as artistic creations. As in the East India Marine Hall and East Hall displays, no general information or individual artifact labels were offered. At the time, these pieces were not seen as part of a continuum of any modern world and, therefore, really did not need any explanation.¹²

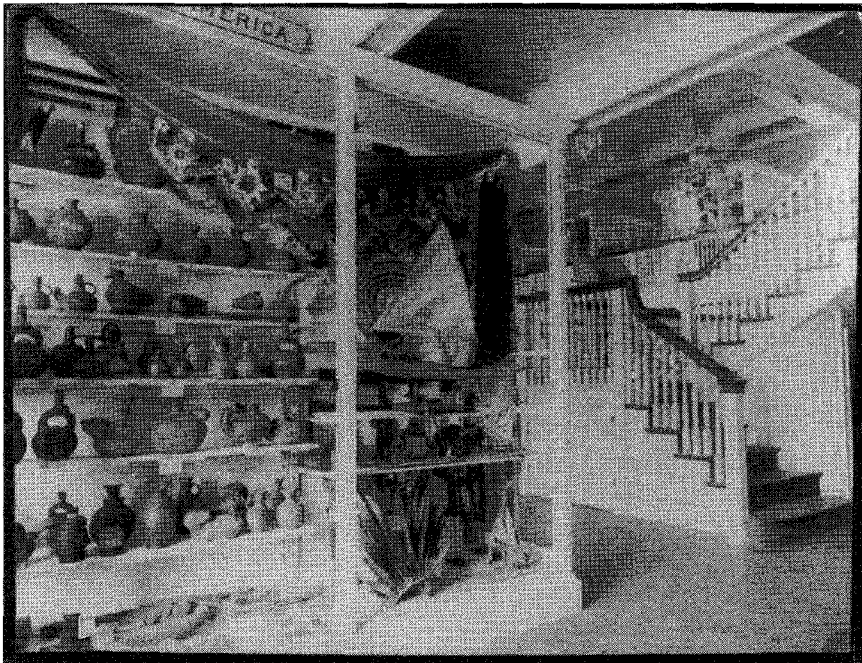


Fig. 11: East Hall gallery display, 1892.

By the beginning of the twentieth-century, the Peabody Academy of Science became the Peabody Museum of Salem and the museum focused more on local history.¹³ Native American objects displayed in East Hall remained relatively untouched throughout much of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, acquisitions continued slowly but steadily.¹⁴ During the 1970s and 1980s, “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.”¹⁵

It was not until the 1990s that the museum broke free from prior historical orientation. Under the leadership of Executive Director and CEO Dan L. Monroe, the

12. See generally *Gifts of the Spirit: Works by Nineteenth-Century & Contemporary Native American Artists* 6, 11–13 (Peabody Essex Museum Collection vol. 132, 1996).

13. Grimes et al., *supra* n. 6, at 50.

14. *Id.* at 50 n. 3.

15. *Id.*

Peabody Museum of Salem merged with the Essex Institute in 1992 to become the Peabody Essex Museum and began to concentrate more on art and culture, celebrating form, design, cultural context, and continuities of artistic and cultural creativity.¹⁶ At this time, PEM embarked on a multiyear, multimillion-dollar expansion and renovation project. The 1990 federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was still fairly new, and PEM carried NAGPRA's spirit of collaboration into its curatorial program by proactively committing itself to working collaboratively with contemporary Native American artists and scholars and to collecting contemporary Native American art.¹⁷

Between 1996 and 1997, PEM mounted a special traveling exhibition and companion catalogue that underscored these programmatic changes. Five people curated *Gifts of the Spirit: Works by Nineteenth-Century & Contemporary Native American Artists*, including two Native American guest curators, Suzan Shown Harjo and Richard W. Hill, Sr., and brought together nineteenth-century works from PEM's collection that were shown alongside contemporary works borrowed from artists and public and private collections across the country.¹⁸

Gifts of the Spirit was PEM's first endeavor to display Native American objects as art.¹⁹ Rather than grouping the objects chronologically or geographically, the curators took a thematic approach. Within each theme, artworks were displayed in individual vitrines rather than grouped into cases or on the walls en masse as in former ethnology displays.²⁰ The exhibition strategy juxtaposed nineteenth-century works with contemporary art, emphasizing cultural and artistic connections and continuities between past and present.²¹ In addition, first-person quotes and footage of contemporary artists were incorporated into labels and computer kiosks. In the case of the nineteenth-century artwork where the maker's identity was unknown, labels described the maker as "Anonymous Artist," signaling to visitors that a specific person created the works rather than an entire tribe.²²

Building on the success of *Gifts of the Spirit*, PEM mounted subsequent special exhibitions with a focus on art and culture based on the museum's holdings. *Indian Market: New Directions in Southwestern Native American Pottery* (2001) and *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum* (2001), represented further attempts at layering interpretation, themes and timeframes, as well as working with Native consultants.²³

16. *Id.* at 50.

17. *Id.* at 50–54. Since the 1990s, PEM has added more than 250 works of contemporary Native American art to the collection, including paintings, works on paper, ceramics, jewelry, sculpture, and textiles.

18. *Gifts of the Spirit*, *supra* n. 12, at 6–7.

19. Displaying Native American objects as art was not an entirely innovative approach in museums. One of the most celebrated and earliest examples is the Museum of Modern Art's 1941 seminal exhibition, *Indian Art of the United States* that emphasized art and aesthetics.

20. Fig. 12.

21. See generally *Gifts of the Spirit*, *supra* n. 12, at 10–18.

22. See generally *id.* at 6–7.

23. *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum* was a traveling exhibition co-organized by PEM and the American Federation of Arts, New York.



Fig. 12: *Gifts of the Spirit* exhibition, view of installation. Photograph by Mark Sexton and Jeffrey Dykes.

In June 2003, PEM underwent a dramatic transformation expressed both physically—through 250,000 square-feet of new and renovated facilities—and intellectually—through a complete reformulation of the museum’s mission and interpretive philosophy. This recent initiative expanded, reconfigured, and transformed the 210-year-old institution, enabling PEM to showcase its outstanding collection of contemporary and historic art and culture from around the world. The new museum fulfills our deepened commitment to exhibitions and interpretation, scholarship,

programs, and acquisitions, which have increasingly focused on creativity, cultural context, and the complex relationships that connect art to the world in which it is made.²⁴

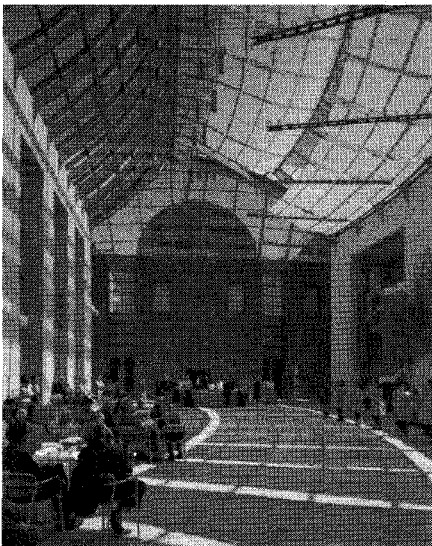


Fig. 13: Dancers from the Alaska Native Heritage Center perform in the museum’s new atrium. Led by Steve Blanchett and Ossie Kairaiuak, dancers and singers in the group include Jennifer Ann Bacon, Debra Dommeck, Treena C. McCormick, Emery Omiak, Samuel James Roberson, Carl D. Topkok, and Stephanie M. Wassilie. Photograph by Peabody Essex Museum Staff.

24. Fig. 13.

Included in the new museum campus are changing exhibition galleries. One of the first exhibitions the Native American Art and Culture department unveiled within the new museum paradigm in these changing galleries was *Our Land: Contemporary Art from the Arctic*, a collaborative traveling exhibition project between PEM and the governments of Canada and Nunavut during 2004 and 2005. *Our Land* celebrated the growth of Inuit creative expression over the past five decades. Interpretive labels and text panels, emphasizing the perspective of Inuit elders, artists, writers, and other community members, were provided in both English and Inuktitut, the Inuit language that is strikingly graphic in its design and composition. A likeness of the Northern Lights appeared on the vaulted ceilings of our house galleries, giving the galleries a very subtle ambience. Additionally, another deliberate “design as interpretation” decision was made to display as many objects as possible without plexiglass bonnets, rendering visitors with a perceived increased accessibility to the material. The show had several new media components including a three-dimensional flyover map that showed the United States in relation to the northern-most points in Nunavut, and four flat-screens showing filmwork by Zacharias Kunuk, award-winning Inuit filmmaker, director, and producer. In addition, there was a touch-screen sound-station featuring selections of Inuit throat-singing and contemporary music.²⁵

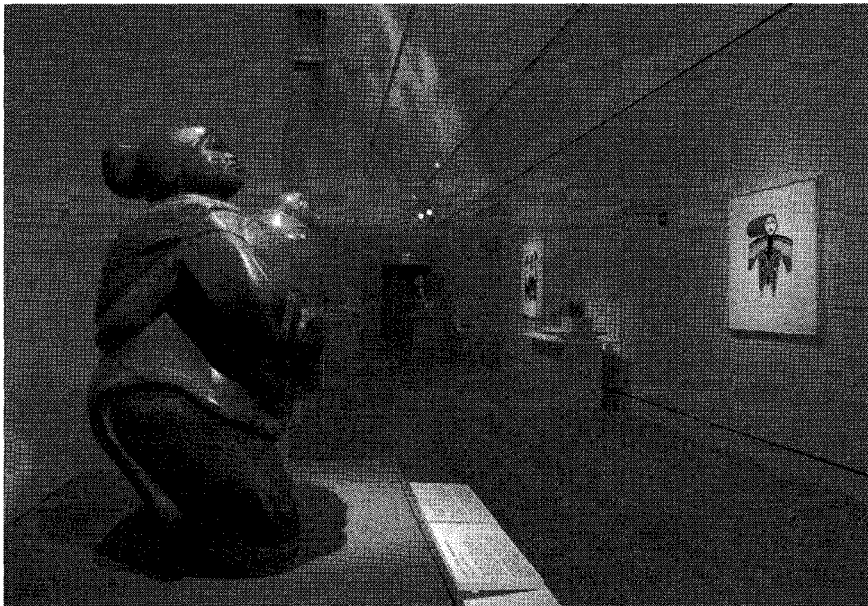


Fig. 14: View of *Our Land* exhibition at PEM, 2005. Most of the sculptures were in individual cases, while several larger works were on pedestals without plexiglass bonnets. The exhibit’s lighting design also made use of the museum’s lofty new gallery spaces, suggesting the *aurora borealis*, or Northern Lights. Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes.

25. Figs. 14 & 15.

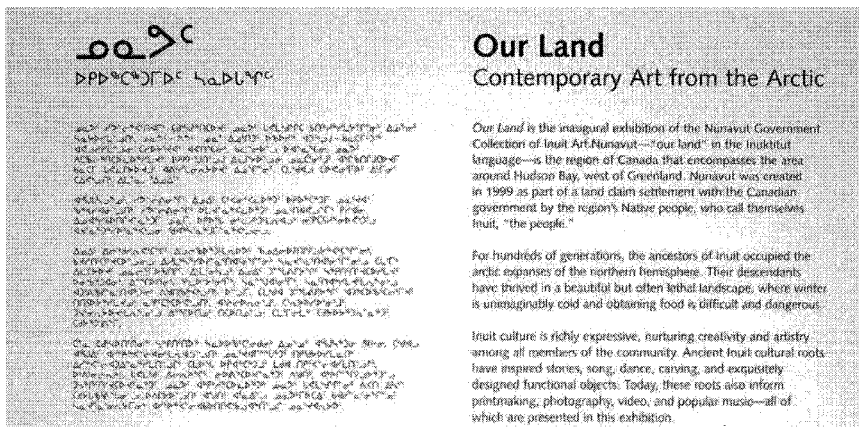


Fig. 15: Label in *Our Land* exhibition at Peabody Essex Museum, 2005. Information was presented in English and Inuktitut, a written form of the Inuit language that employs syllabics. Photograph by Jeffrey Dykes.

Also included in the new museum is a 3,700 square foot gallery dedicated to showcasing the unique richness and range of the Native American art collection, emphasizing aesthetic strengths of and cross-cultural connections between individual objects. *Intersections: Native American Art in a New Light* opened in June 2006, as an exhibition that transcends the boundaries of time and geography, and materials and techniques, to explore identity, politics, and cultural exchange in Native American art.²⁶

Intersections has 75 artworks and is divided into three sections that offer perspectives on Native American art. *Metaphor and Identity* explores personal and cultural identities and how these are expressed visually; *Continuity and Innovation* examines intercultural influences in Native American art and illuminates the dialogue between tradition and innovation; and *Icons and Politics* addresses the question of what it means to be Native American in a changing world. Through the interplay of historic objects and contemporary works, this section inverts popular stereotypes. The three thematic sections are interconnected, and the exhibition design reflects this through sculptural backdrops that also serve as wall dividers. The open floor plan encourages visitors to make visual connections within and between the divisions.²⁷

Intersections reflects PEM's core values, which drive the show's criteria, choices, and approaches. The exhibition takes a thematic approach and is not organized according to chronology or geographic regions. Groupings of art objects encourage comparison and contrast, and the artworks emphasize connections between and within thematic categories. The full expression of the museum's Native American curatorial program is still being realized.

PEM seeks to foster a culture of respectful inquiry between Native American and non-Native American artists, scholars, tradition bearers, and museum visitors. It is a process that starts and continues in dialogue: in the development of exhibitions, staff

26. I co-curated *Intersections: Native American Art in a New Light* with guest curator Laurie Beth Kalb, which is the second exhibition in this gallery since PEM's reopening in 2003. *Intersections* has object rotations and changes at least once a year.

27. Fig. 16.

exchanges, internships, and collections sharing; through the implementation of NAGPRA; and through the development and presentation of publications, lectures, demonstrations, films, on-line resources, and other digital media. This initiative is premised on the idea that our collection is a living network of artworks, their makers, and their viewers, together with the ideas and attitudes that flow between them. No museum is merely an assemblage of things, but a microcosm of human interaction, engagement, and inquiry. Within a museum setting, we are seeking interpretive approaches that move beyond the biased historical narratives of the past. What can art “mean” to our museum visitors, given the frequently vast differences in culture, language, and worldview between artist and viewer? As a people-centered museum, our resources are dedicated to providing compelling and meaningful experiences to diverse audiences and toward multiple ways of developing and sharing perspectives on Native American art.²⁸

Collecting goals, exhibition paradigms, and interpretive strategies have changed over the past 210 years, but encouraging people to discover and explore the rich interconnections among artistic and cultural expressions of the past and present remains at PEM’s very core.



Fig. 16: In the *Intersections: Native American Art in a New Light* gallery, the backdrops consist of scrimms with enlarged digital images of works in the collection. They are textural gestures and abstractions of designs, colors, and patterns, rather than literal representations. Photograph by Barbara Kennedy.

28. Grimes et al., *supra* n. 6, at 57.