

**Native American Art:  
From Kansas City Collections**

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

## Native American Art: From Kansas City Collections

As we prepare for the 500th anniversary of Columbus' first voyage to America, it seems both timely and ironic to consider that many people remain virtually unaware of the diversity of Native American culture and accomplishments. Long before the arrival of Columbus, numerous societies flourished throughout the North American continent, and many of these native groups produced objects that are now highly regarded as important works of art. It is the intent of this exhibition, therefore, to offer students and the community a glimpse of the vastness and richness of Native American culture and artistic achievement.

The tremendous diversity of Native American society and the equally diverse art forms it produced cannot be emphasized enough. Consequently, a variety of works from different regions were selected for this exhibition. Chosen for their aesthetic merit, all pieces were produced after European contact and date from the 19th century to the present day.

An exhibition such as this also documents the strengths of local collections – notably works from Plains, Southwestern, Californian and Northwestern cultures. Located as it is, at the edge of the Great Plains and at the historic starting point of the Santa Fe Trail, Kansas City has strong ties to the West. It is only natural, therefore, that local collections of Native American art would reflect this reality.

Among the most important of Kansas City public collections is that of the Kansas City Museum. The extensive Plains holdings of this museum are due largely to the efforts of Colonel and Mrs. Daniel B. Dyer. During Colonel Dyer's appointment as Indian agent at Fort Reno, Okla., from 1884 to 1885, the Dyers amassed a sizable collection. With this single acquisition, the museum became the steward of an outstanding southern and central Plains collection. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art also possesses a number of significant Native American works, and in 1976, the museum organized the highly acclaimed exhibition *Sacred Circles: Two Thousand Years of North American Indian Art*. In addition, a number of important private collections have been formed as well.

Native American art, as any art, is the



*Basket*, Mrs. Dick Francisco, Yokut, c. 1900, 10" x 17", private collection

result of artists' physical, psychological and philosophical orientation to their environment. Throughout North America, native societies with widely divergent economies, social structures and religious beliefs developed art forms that were particularly suited to their needs and way of life. Art was influenced by the availability and variety of materials, the degree of permanence of settlements, customs and cultural patronage. Individual communities established their own aesthetic concepts and standards of quality, and artists working within these parameters

utilized natural fibers, hides, clay, wood and stone to create works that would fulfill societal needs. Inevitably, artists also vied for recognition and respect within their communities.

The common notion that Native American art has remained unchanged for thousands of years is erroneous. While native artists owe a great debt to ancestral tradition and innovation, they have continually grown and adapted in accordance with a variety of influences. In particular, the late 19th century and early 20th century witnessed some fairly dramatic changes in Native American art. Physical and economic hardships (including relocation to reservations and the denial of traditional livelihoods), the introduction of new materials (glass beads, commercial fabrics, metals, etc.), exposure to European aesthetic standards and concepts, and increased commercialization all exerted considerable influence on native artists. Accordingly – and often brilliantly – traditional forms and techniques were altered to accommodate these conditions.

Although Native American art was continually changing (especially in the last several hundred years) and was responsive to numerous influences, basic object-types remained constant. Hence, weavers such as Lucy Telles introduced non-traditional, two-color naturalistic design motifs to the traditional globular



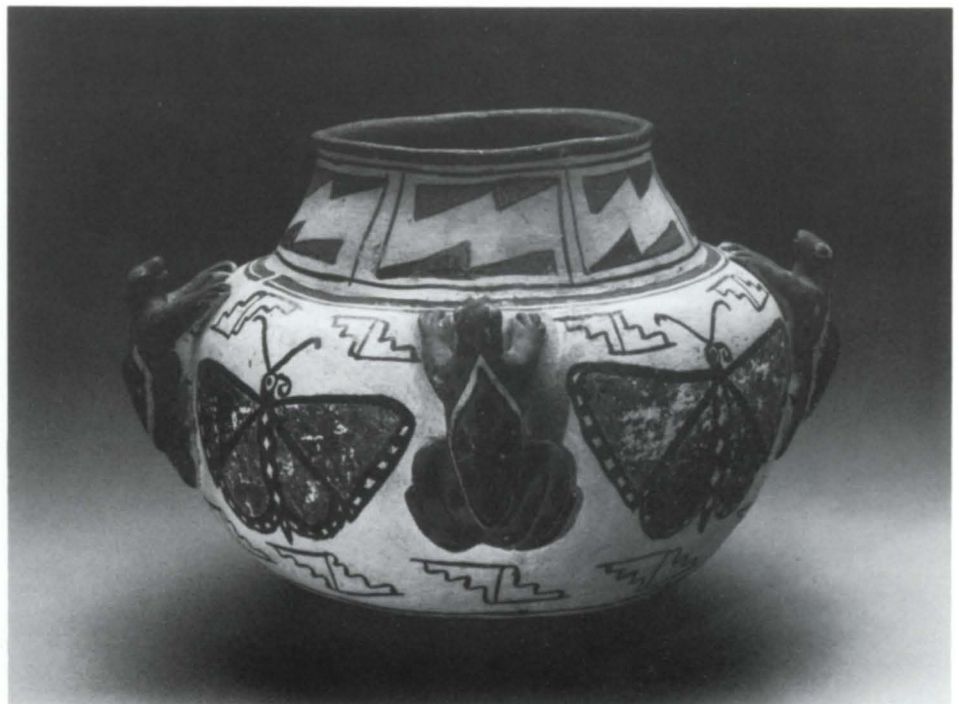
*Rattle*, Kwakiutl, late 19th century, 11 1/4" long, private collection



basket forms of the Miwok-Paiute (see the photo below). While such evolution may be perceived as subtle or even slow, one must remember that radical innovation in artistic expression has largely been the preoccupation of 20th-century European culture. Within native societies, the notion of continually rejecting accepted artistic standards was foreign.

Recognition of the aesthetic significance of Native American art has evolved slowly. Despite such landmark exhibitions as the Museum of Modern Art's 1941 *Indian Art of the United States* and numerous other exhibits, critical and popular appreciation languished for decades. While African and Oceanic art was hailed for its influence upon 20th-century art movements, most visibly Cubism and German Expressionism, few parallels existed for Native American art. Some Surrealists, such as Max Ernst (who fled to America during World War II), were heavily influenced by native culture, but for the most part, Native American works were viewed as ethnographic artifacts and were relegated to obscure sections of art museums.

The fact that Native American art is largely comprised of functional objects did not enhance its popularity or acceptance with art historians and critics. Within native societies, however, the concept of "art for art's sake" was non-existent. Art was inextricably linked to everyday life,



*Vessel*, Zuni Pueblo, c. 1880, 8" x 11 3/4", private collection

and as a result, artists lavished their attention on vessels, clothing, tools and, to a lesser extent, ceremonial objects. Their mediums were clay, stone, fiber, metal and wood, and in many instances, the works which they produced transcend the skillful manipulation of materials. At their best, Native American works embody the formal and intellectual qualities that define art.

The purposes of this exhibition are

twofold: to foster a broader awareness and appreciation of Native American art and to celebrate the depth and richness of Native American art collections in Kansas City. While the majority of objects in this exhibition date to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it is essential to note that Native American artists continue to produce works that build upon, expand and enrich their respective cultural traditions. In so doing, they contribute to one of America's most important artistic legacies.

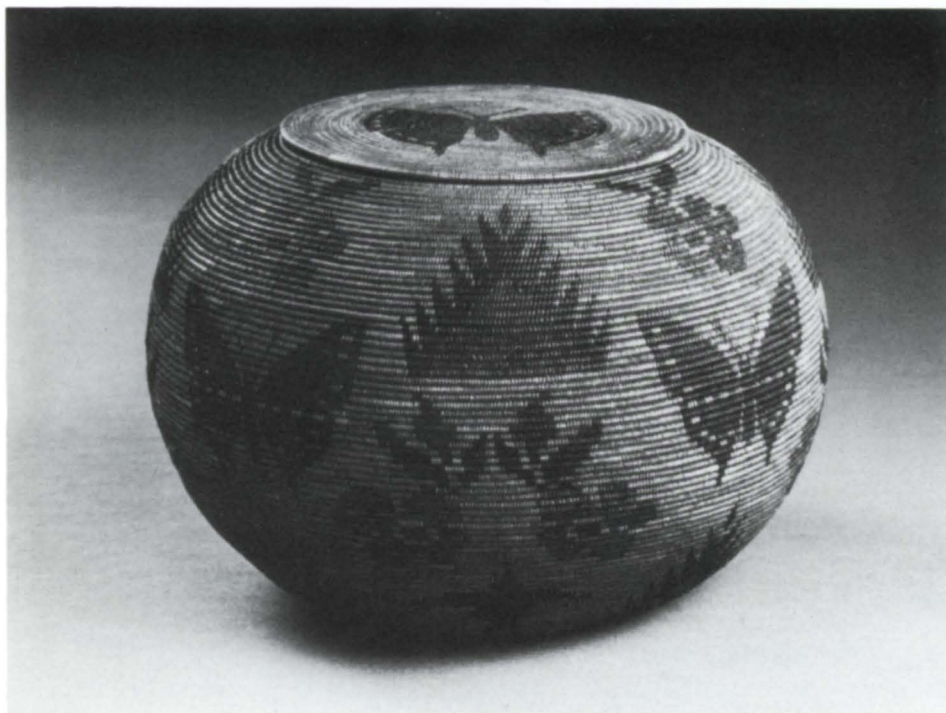
*Bruce Hartman*  
Director, Gallery of Art

### Acknowledgment

We are deeply grateful to the private collectors and public institutions who loaned works for this exhibition. Without exception, the lenders we approached responded to our requests with considerable generosity and enthusiasm.

In particular, we would like to thank David Ucko, president of the Kansas City Museum, and Julie Mattsson, the museum's registrar, for their invaluable assistance.

Finally, a special thank you to JCCC Community Services, and especially Judith Choice, program coordinator, for organizing and supporting a diverse offering of lectures, conferences and performances pertaining to Native American art and history.



*Basket*, Lucy Telles, Miwok-Paiute, c. 1920, 7 3/4" x 11 1/2", private collection

## Exhibition Checklist

### Northwest Coast

#### *Basket*

Tlingit, c. 1910  
3 1/2" x 6"  
Private collection

#### *Hat*

Haida (painted design attributed to Charles Edenshaw), c. 1890  
18" x 21"  
Private collection

#### *Frontlet*

Bella Coola, late 19th century  
11" x 7"  
Private collection

#### *Rattle*

Kwakiutl, late 19th century  
11 1/4" long  
Private collection

#### *Bowl*

Haida, early 19th century  
4" x 5 1/4"  
Private collection

#### *Chilkat Blanket*

Tlingit-Kwakiutl, early 20th century  
49 1/4" x 59"  
Private collection

#### *Beaded Coat*

Tlingit, late 19th century  
37 1/2" x 68 1/2"  
Private collection

### Arctic

#### *Basket*

Aleut, c. 1910  
6" x 4"  
Private collection

#### *Mask*

Eskimo, late 19th century  
12" x 7"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

### California

#### *Basket*

Lucy Telles  
Miwok-Paiute, c. 1920  
7 3/4" x 11 1/2"  
Private collection

#### *Basket*

Lizzie Hickox  
Karak, c. 1910  
5" x 7 1/2"  
Private collection

#### *Basket*

Tootsie Dick  
Washo, c. 1910  
5 3/4" x 10"  
Private collection

#### *Basket*

Tubatulabal, c. 1900  
5 3/8" x 9"  
Private collection

#### *Basket*

Panamint, c. 1900  
5 1/2" x 7 1/4"  
Private collection

#### *Basket*

Mrs. Dick Francisco  
Yokut, c. 1900  
10" x 17"  
Private collection

#### *Basket*

Pomo, c. 1900  
3" x 5"  
Private collection

### Southwest

#### *Vessel*

Zia Pueblo, c. 1910  
13 1/2" x 16"  
Private collection

#### *Vessel*

Zuni Pueblo, c. 1880  
8" x 11 3/4"  
Private collection

#### *Vessel*

Hopi Pueblo (attributed to Nampeyo), c. 1890  
9" x 16"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

#### *Vessel*

Zia Pueblo, c. 1900  
12 1/4" x 14"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

#### *Vessel*

Maria and Santana  
San Ildefonso Pueblo, c. 1952  
5" x 7"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

#### *Vessel*

Helen Shupla  
Santa Clara Pueblo, 1984  
9 3/8" x 11 1/2"  
Private collection

#### *Vessel*

Tony Da  
San Ildefonso Pueblo, c. 1975  
5 1/2" x 6"  
Private collection

#### *Vessel*

San Ildefonso, c. 1900  
10 3/4" x 14"  
Private collection

#### *Vessel*

McCarty's Polychrome, c. 1890  
10 7/8" x 11"  
Private collection

#### *Vessel*

Acoma Pueblo, c. 1900  
11" x 11 3/4"  
Private collection

#### *Vessel*

Polacca, c. 1880  
4 7/8" x 7"  
Private collection

#### *Bracelet*

Zuni Pueblo, c. 1930  
2 3/8" high  
Private collection

#### *Bracelet*

Zuni Pueblo, c. 1920  
1 1/4" high  
Private collection

#### *Bracelet*

Navajo, early 1920s  
2" diameter  
Private collection

#### *Pin*

Navajo, c. 1920  
3 1/8" long  
Private collection

#### *Necklace*

Santo Domingo Pueblo, c. 1920  
12" long  
Private collection

#### *Necklace*

Navajo, c. 1890  
13 1/2" long  
Private collection

#### *Dress Ornament*

Navajo, c. 1910  
3" x 6"  
Private collection

#### *Pin*

R.Q. Panteah  
Zuni Pueblo, c. 1975  
4 1/4" diameter  
Private collection

#### *Blanket*

Navajo, c. 1870  
63" x 46"  
Private collection

#### *Blanket (eye dazzler)*

Navajo, c. 1890  
72" x 48"  
Private collection

#### *Rug (Teec Nos Pos)*

Navajo, c. 1930  
86 1/2" x 47"  
Private collection

#### *Rug (Wide Ruins)*

Mary Lee  
Navajo, c. 1971  
59" x 35"  
Private collection

#### *Basket (olla)*

Western Apache, c. 1900  
21 1/2" high  
Private collection

#### *Basket (tray)*

Chemehuevi, c. 1900  
3 1/8" x 9 1/4"  
Private collection

#### *Kachina (Sbalako mana)*

Hopi, c. 1880  
9 7/8" high  
Private collection

### Plains

#### *Vest*

Sioux, c. 1880  
21 1/2" x 19"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

#### *Vest*

Sioux, c. 1880  
22" x 16 1/2"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

#### *Amulet*

Northern Cheyenne, c. 1870  
16" x 5"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

#### *Amulet*

Sioux, c. 1880  
4" x 1 1/2"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

#### *Amulet*

Sioux, c. 1880  
3" x 3"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

#### *Child's Belt*

Cheyenne, c. 1880  
22 1/4" x 8 1/2"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

#### *Toy (horse and figure)*

Blackfoot, c. 1880  
9" x 5" x 9"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

#### *War Shirt*

Cheyenne, c. 1880  
39" x 63"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

#### *Cradle*

Sioux, c. 1880  
43" x 13"  
Collection Kansas City Museum

### Southeast

#### *Basket*

Chitimacha, early 20th century  
6 1/2" x 4"  
Private collection

#### *Basket*

Chitimacha, early 20th century  
5" high  
Private collection

#### *Vessel*

Maude Welch  
Eastern Cherokee, c. 1930  
7" x 6"  
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Byron Cohen

### Northeast

#### *Club*

Iroquois, early 19th century  
14 3/4" high  
Private collection

#### *Bandolier*

Chippewa, c. 1900  
45 1/2" x 12 3/4"  
Private collection

On the cover: *Vessel*, Zia Pueblo, c. 1900, 12 1/4" x 14", Collection Kansas City Museum