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FEATURED

Native American art showcased, celebrated at Great Plains Art Museum

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A gallery in the exhibition “A Vital Presence: Native Art at the Great Plains Museum” on Wednesday, Nov. 17, 2021, in Lincoln, Nebraska. The collection features artists from Great Plains and Southwest Indigenous tribes.

Photo by Katy Cowell

Native American art has a profound purpose at the Great Plains Art Museum in Lincoln. November is Native American Heritage Month, and Ashley Wilkinson, the Great Plains Art Museum director and curator, knew she wanted to do something to honor and recognize the

Indigenous people of the Midwest.

“A Vital Presence: Native Art at the Great Plains Art Museum” features around 50 pieces of artwork and spans over 80 years, according to Wilkinson. She said the title and the goal of the exhibition were crucial to get right.

“I struggled with the title for a little while, just wanting to find something that conveyed how important this art is to us, but also to the region,” Wilkinson said. “For me, ‘A Vital Presence’ conveyed that the presence of Indigenous people is an important thing that we want people to know about in the Great Plains. The presence of this collection at the museum is also important.”

There are several well-known pieces at the Great Plains Art Museum, but Wilkinson said one of the most striking is a 2010 piece by Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie titled “The Promises were so sweet.” Wilkinson said this piece was a collaboration between Tsinhnahjinnie and the Great Plains Art Museum.

“She did an exhibition where she looked at historical photographs from our collection, then made new artwork based on that to reclaim the perspectives that were represented in these photographs,” Wilkinson said.

The photographs were taken by 19th century photographer William Henry Jackson. Wilkinson said that Tsinhnahjinnie conveyed power with this piece.

“She has taken those photographs, which are really small, and made them huge to emphasize the presence of these people, to give them more agency and to draw attention to some of the issues that have affected Indigenous peoples in the Great Plains and beyond,” Wilkinson said.

The informational placard connected to the piece states that the title, “The Promises were so sweet,” references “the promises made and broken to Native People.”

This piece is senior psychology major Sophia Lanphier’s favorite in the exhibition. She said the voice and perspective of the piece is strong.

“It’s so interesting that it started off as a photograph taken by William Henry Jackson, and then the artist manipulated it and made it in order to take their voice and history into their own hands,” Lanphier said. “It’s very striking.”

Lanphier has worked at Great Plains Art Museum for four years and said this exhibition was different from previous ones that featured Native art.

“This exhibit very much highlights Native voices themselves,” Lanphier said. “I feel like sometimes there's a lot of work that presents or portrays Native people, but not necessarily through their own viewpoint.”

A painting on display in this exhibition that has a strong perspective is “Untitled (snow scene).” The 1968 painting by Allen Sapp is derived from personal experience, and it is about the everyday life of Native Americans and what he observed growing up on the reservation. Under the biography card, he is quoted as saying, “I can't write a story or tell one in the white man's language so I tell what I want to say with my paintings ... I put it down so it doesn't get lost and people will be able to see and remember.”

Wilkinson said another well-known piece is by Laurie Houseman-Whitehawk, titled “Our Past, Our Future, Our Elders.” The piece, done in 1991, is three parts that tell a story. While the piece can be interpreted, under the artist's biography it said the painting is supposed to represent “American Indian culture as both past and present.” In the description, Houseman-Whitehawk said this painting is supposed to represent “the beauty and strength of Native Women.”

Wilkinson said she loves this piece because it is one of the most vibrant and eye-catching in the exhibition.

“I love the vibrant color, the use of landscape to kind of silhouette the figures and the detail on the clothing and the rest of the outfits that the women are wearing,” Wilkinson said. “And then when you look at it closely, you see all of this detail, and kind of the beauty of these women and the landscape.”

In 2018, Henry Payer was in the residence program at Great Plains Art Museum. He has two pieces in this exhibition, and both pieces represent the history of his Ho-Chunk tribe.

“Henry's work is about the historic removal and relocation of the Ho-Chunk people from their ancestral homelands of Wisconsin to Nebraska,” Wilkinson said.

Payer's 2015 piece titled “K(no)w Exit” is a collage that features wall outlets, maps and a hotel key card. According to the piece's description, these items “reference the concepts of relocation and motion.”

Wilkinson said this exhibition is important for the community.

"It's just important, I think, to share Indigenous art with our community and let them know what has been made and what continues to be made by Indigenous people," Wilkinson said.

Lanphier said walking through the exhibition left her in awe, and she experienced a quiet reflection. She said she was left with a deeper understanding and encourages everyone to view this exhibition while it's up through March 19, 2022.

"I hope they can see how Indigenous peoples are so intrinsic to this area, and how their history is continuing today and how we shouldn't forget what happened in the past," Lanphier said.

Wilkinson said she hopes people leave the exhibition with more curiosity of Native art.

"I hope that it really encourages them to seek out more Native artists to learn more about them, just learn more about the history of Native peoples," Wilkinson said. "It's just important to share Indigenous art with our community and let them know what has been made and what continues to be made by Indigenous people."

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