

Using Podcasts to Broaden the Reach of Smaller Museums

Often one-person operations, museum podcasts draw in listeners close to home and in faraway places.

By Alex V. Cipolle

April 27, 2022, 5:02 a.m. ET

This article is part of our latest special section on Museums, which focuses on new artists, new audiences and new ways of thinking about exhibitions.

Peering into a glass case that holds a glistening 640-pound boulder of milky green jade at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Tim Gihring points to its little carved figures frozen in frolic on a mountainside.

“Did you know it was about poets drinking?” Mr. Gihring asks, laughing.

The sculpture is one of Minnesota’s charismatic art megafauna, as Mr. Gihring puts it, known to locals as simply the Jade Mountain.

“Jade Mountain Illustrating the Gathering of Scholars at the Lanting Pavilion” (1790) was the topic of a recent episode of the museum’s podcast, “The Object,” hosted and produced by Mr. Gihring, the museum’s editor.

In the episode, “The Mountain That Came to Dinner,” Mr. Gihring narrates the story of how one of the largest jade sculptures in the world — commissioned in 18th-century China by the Qing dynasty emperor Qianlong and carved by an unknown artist — finds itself in a Midwestern museum.

“The fact that we’ve had listeners in 75 different countries suggests you don’t have to be a Minnesotan to appreciate the art in Minnesota,” Mr. Gihring said.

“The Object” is one of a cohort of podcasts that have sprung up in the last five years, produced by art museums outside the major art hubs, that are carving out a place in national conversations around art, culture, curation and the museum industry.

Recorded in home offices and basements, small museum studios and public radio stations, these podcasts include the far-reaching “Museum Confidential” by the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, Okla., and “Art Unbound” by the Portland Art Museum in Oregon; the deep dives such as “5 Plain Questions” by the Plains Art Museum in Fargo, N.D., and “A Frame of Mind” by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo.; as well as the University of Michigan Museum of Art’s plans for a podcast titled “Not on View.”

At the Plains Art Museum, Joe Williams, director of Native American programs, had personal and professional reasons for starting, at the onset of the pandemic, “5 Plain Questions,” a weekly podcast that asks career-oriented questions to Indigenous artists and culture bearers. The podcast has been downloaded 10,000 times, he said.

Mr. Williams, who is Dakota and was raised on the Lake Traverse Reservation in South Dakota, recalls how, growing up, he didn’t have access to success stories of Native Americans.

“Over my adult life, I’ve come to know so many successful Native American artists,” he said, “and I thought it was a shame that their stories aren’t being told.”

Mr. Williams has now produced an archive of more than 80 episodes, with listeners across the United States, and, according to SoundCloud metrics, a few devoted listeners in Perth, Dublin, and Brussels.



Joe Williams, the director of Native American programs at the Plains Art Museum, started the “5 Plain Questions” podcast to showcase Native American culture bearers. He has completed more than 80 episodes. Jeremy Albright

The podcast features candid interviews with people like Dyani White Hawk, a Lakota artist and curator; Sean Sherman, who founded a food education business and caterer, The Sioux Chef, and the acclaimed Owamni restaurant in Minneapolis; and Joy Harjo, the first Native American to serve as poet laureate of the United States.

Essentially a one-man operation, Mr. Williams researches, conducts interviews from his home office and edits each episode.

From a small studio in the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Mr. Gihring is also the sole producer of “The Object,” which he was inspired to start after reading “Making Museums Moral Again,” a 2016 column by Holland Cotter, co-chief art critic of The New York Times. Mr. Gihring’s takeaway? “If museums are going to maintain their authority as arbiters of truth and history, they need to start telling their own history.”

Each episode of the podcast, now in its fourth season, is grounded by a piece in the museum’s collection that illustrates themes of love, power, ambition and greed. “Can you capture someone with a great story?” Mr. Gihring asks. “Is that enough? Our listenership would suggest it is.”

In Portland, Jon Richardson, the associate director of creative programs for the Portland Art Museum’s Center for an Untold Tomorrow, produces “Art Unbound.” As the museum’s chief media producer, Mr. Richardson noticed good content was being left on the cutting-room floor from short videos the museum produced for exhibitions. Then the pandemic hit.

“It was a large responsibility of mine to try and figure out how we become a place that is relevant to people who cannot physically come to the museum,” he said.

With 34 episodes and counting, “Art Unbound” explores the Portland art scene and beyond, with no set host, rather inviting different curators, artists and scholars to lead or join in, depending on the topic.

Mr. Richardson said he chose this format because the museum has many voices, “so the podcast should reflect that.” This includes partnering with The Numberz.FM, Portland’s only all-Black radio station, which broadcasts from the museum.

In a recent episode, “Awkward Questions for Kara Cooney,” Jeannie Kenmotsu, the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Asian Art, led a discussion about the traveling “Queen Nefertari’s Egypt” exhibition. In October, Ms. Cooney, a professor of Egyptian art and architecture at U.C.L.A., gave the virtual museum talk “When Women Ruled the World.”

Ms. Kenmotsu began the episode by acknowledging that the talk and the exhibition, which began at the Museo Egizio in Turin, Italy, and is now on view at the New Orleans Museum of Art, provoked questions in the community around ethics, race, power, the role of museums and “grave goods.”

“Exhibitions of ancient Egyptian material don’t just raise awkward questions for Egyptologists,” she said, “they can raise awkward questions for visitors, and they definitely raise awkward and difficult questions for museums as institutions.” In its first day, Mr. Richardson said, the episode broke all of the podcast’s listenership records, and was “charting” in Egypt and Japan.

Perhaps the most far-reaching of this class of podcasts is the Philbrook Museum of Art’s “Museum Confidential,” currently in its

sixth season, with about 100,000 subscribers. The host, Jeff Martin, the Philbrook's online communities manager, describes it as a "strange mix" of a museum conference, "A Prairie Home Companion" (Mr. Martin writes fake museum-centric ads for each episode) and "Radiolab."

Episodes range from museum unionization and the 1921 Tulsa race massacre to interviews with the rapper Killer Mike about joining the board of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, and, recently, the artist Lillian Milgrom, who spent six weeks painting a recreation of Gustave Courbet's "L'Origine du monde" (1866) at the Musée D'Orsay.

Mr. Martin has also taken "Museum Confidential" on the road for live sessions at the Aspen Art Museum and the American Folk Art Museum in New York.

The secret of the podcast's success, Mr. Martin said, is a mixture of unique and high-profile guests and its early partnership with an NPR affiliate, Public Radio Tulsa, which gave Mr. Martin access to a professional studio and a producer, Scott Gregory. Not only can listeners access the podcast worldwide, but Tulsans can tune in on terrestrial radio.

"We have to cast as wide of a net as we can," Mr. Martin said, "and hopefully we'll find people where they are."

A version of this article appears in print on , Section F, Page 37 of the New York edition with the headline: Stretching the Limits