

ASU professor curates historic exhibition of Native artworks

Gift of modern works is largest Indigenous donation in Phoenix Art Museum's history

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Story highlights

JoAnna Reyes, an assistant professor of art history and museum studies at ASU, is curating a historic new exhibit at the Phoenix Art Museum.

The museum received the single largest gift of Native art in its history.

The modern and contemporary works are by 99 artists representing 44 tribal nations.

An Arizona State University professor is helping to tell a more complete story of art in America.

Earlier this year, the Phoenix Art Museum received a historic donation of 185 Native artworks, the single largest gift of Native art in the museum's history. The modern and contemporary works, by 99 artists representing 44 tribal nations, were [donated](#) by The William P. Healey Collection of Native American Art.

This week, the museum premieres "The Way We Came: A Century of Indigenous Art from The William P. Healey Collection at Phoenix Art Museum," featuring more than 80 works from the collection.

The exhibition is being curated by [JoAnna Reyes](#), an assistant professor of art history and museum studies at ASU and the museum's adjunct curator of Art of the Americas.

"These are beautiful works with so much history," she said.

"We think about modernism and the American West, and now we can show two sides of that story."

Connecting the narrative

Reyes is co-curating "The Way We Came," which runs [Aug. 26 through July 11, 2027](#), with Tony Abeyta, a Navajo artist whose work is in the show.

The exhibit, with works spanning the early 20th century to 2020, examines how Indigenous artists have sustained and expressed their cultural knowledge.

"Part of the challenge for me is creating a cohesive narrative and thinking about the ways these stories connected," Reyes said.

"One thing we're looking at is generational art. We have three generations of women artists that we're able to represent in the exhibition, and a few father-son pairs."

Another theme is the complicated legacy of boarding schools, where many of the artists learned their craft while also being separated from their families and stripped of their Native identities.

"We're looking at traditions of Native American art education, so institutions like the Carlisle School. It's telling the story across the 20th century of how Indigenous artists went through different studio schools and their shared experiences."

Reyes was part of the team that unpacked the donated works from their crates in the spring. She was very moved by many of the works.

"There's a basket by an artist named Shan Goshorn, and it's essentially a basket woven inside of a basket," she said.

"She takes historical ledgers with the names of students who have been put into boarding schools and cuts them into strips and weaves them into the basket. It's very powerful.

"There's a feeling of this deep history and traditions."

Reyes said she is working to highlight what's distinct about the different tribal communities.

"I'm bringing in a lot of Indigenous voices. I have artists and people from these communities who are doing voice recordings that will be heard in the exhibition space, and also writing labels to keep that distinct cultural knowledge available to visitors," she said.

Visit the collection

What: "The Way We Came: A Century of Indigenous Art from The William P. Healey Collection at Phoenix Art Museum" exhibit.

Where: Phoenix Art Museum, 1625 N. Central Ave.

When: Aug. 26–July 11.

Details:

phxart.org/exhibition/the-way-we-came-a-century-of-indigenous-art-healey-collection

Helping students find their path

Angelina Baca, a spring 2026 graduate of ASU, was hired as an intern to work on the exhibit. With a major in political science, she had not really considered making a career in the arts until she started a job as a gallery attendant at the museum two years ago.

“It’s (gallery attendant) a really entry-level role. You’re the one who directs people to the restroom and tells people, ‘Don’t touch the art,’ but that was where I really fell in love with art and the idea of who gets to make these exhibitions and who gets to create the stories that people come from all over the world to see,” she said.

After she started applying for jobs in the spring, she realized she was drawn to museums and libraries.

“And I realized that maybe this is the path that I’ve always wanted to go down. I just didn’t think that I was the right one for it,” she said.

Baca applied for the internship even though she had no experience, and she was thrown into the job right away, helping to uncrate the artworks.

“You’re figuring out art styles, mediums, location of the artist, and you immediately start having to recognize patterns of different tribes, different regions, different schools,” she said.

Since then, she’s done a lot of research as part of the internship.

“My political science training did come in handy because I spent most of my time as a political science intern and student participating in a lot of research. And it was really interesting to switch gears from trying to analyze numbers and statistics and constituents, and instead research people and lives and how they experience art via emotion,” she said.

She has spent time talking to the artists, many of whom are also activists, Baca said.

“There is the constant reminder that art will always be political. I think if I went into this internship having been an art history major and not had that political rounding, I don’t think I would’ve looked at this art the same way.”

Demystifying career inroads

Reyes is excited to find ways to connect more ASU students to the exhibition. This fall, she’ll be teaching a graduate-level course about collecting that will meet at the museum. She’ll also be reaching out to K–12 schools.

She likes to show her ASU students as many aspects of a museum career as possible.

“Students will oftentimes think, ‘Oh, if I want to work in the museum, I’m going to be a curator.’ But there’s registrar, there’s conservation, there’s educational, there’s the public outreach, development.

“Part of the way that I conceive of my classes is to show them these multiple inroads because I think it’s really mysterious. It certainly was for me.”

Even as she pursued her degrees and worked for a collector and at the Getty Research Institute, Reyes was unsure what her career would look like. Then she got a position as a curatorial assistant at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

“That was really formative and showed me what I want to be doing,” she said.

After earning a PhD at UCLA, she became a Presidential Postdoctoral Fellow at ASU and then became a curator at the Phoenix Art Museum, where her position is a collaborative appointment between the museum and the School of Art in the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts.

Reyes said that after the exhibition, the works will become part of the larger collection at the museum.

“It’s not going to be kept separate. I really perceive this as enriching the entire collection,” she said.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU Assistant Professor JoAnna Reyes discusses artwork from a new exhibit at the Phoenix Art Museum titled “The Way We Came: A Century of Indigenous Art,” on Monday, Aug. 24. The exhibition showcases how Indigenous knowledge, culture and creativity have flourished through generations, and it includes more than 60 pieces recently donated from The William P. Healey Collection of Native American Art. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Phoenix Art Museum curatorial intern Angelina Baca, an ASU alumna, discusses artwork from the new exhibit “The Way We Came: A Century of Indigenous Art” at Phoenix Art Museum on Aug. 24. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery



Phoenix Art Museum guest curator and Navajo artist Tony Abeyta (left) discusses artist Shan Goshorn's traditional double-weave basket designed to comment on the lasting impacts of boarding schools on Indigenous communities.



Artist Shan Goshorn used historical ledgers with the names of students who had been put into boarding schools to weave a basket as a commentary on the complicated legacy of boarding schools, where many Native artists learned their craft while also being separated from their families and stripped of their Native identities.



Abeyta discusses Fritz Scholder's "Indian with Pipebag," c. 1975. Scholder was an enrolled member of the Luiseño tribe in Southern California, and his work often confronted stereotypes of Native Americans.

Gallery



ASU Assistant Professor JoAnna Reyes and students in her graduate seminar, ARS 591: *Kunstkammer and Collecting*, observe works in the new Phoenix Art Museum exhibit "The Way We Came: A Century of Indigenous Art," on Monday, Aug. 24.



Reyes said she tries to show her students as many aspects of museum careers as possible to help demystify the field for them.



The new exhibit features more than 80 works from the collection of 185 Native artworks, the single largest gift of Native art in the Phoenix Art Museum's history. The modern and contemporary works, by 99 artists representing 44 tribal nations, were donated by The William P. Healey Collection of Native American Art.



Oscar Howe's "The Medicine Dancer," c. 1965. The Yanktonai Dakota artist from South Dakota used bright color and a modernist aesthetic to depict Native American traditions.



Quincy Tahoma's "The Navajo Country," c. 1948. Tahoma was a Navajo painter from Arizona and New Mexico who often depicted his subjects in action.