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# INFINITY OF NATIONS:

## Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indian

**I**nfinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indian is a ten-year exhibition opening at the National Museum of the American Indian's (NMAI) George Gustav Heye Center, New York on October 23, 2010.<sup>1</sup> It presents more than 700 works of art from throughout Native North, Central and South America. Objects include intriguing and remarkably early bird stones used as atlatl weights and dating to 3000 to 1000 B.C. (Fig. 4), a superb Moche-Huari Andean tunic possibly from Campanario, Peru and dating to A.D. 700 to 900, an unparalleled Mexica (Aztec) sculpture of a maize goddess probably from Tenochtitlan, Mexico and dated circa A.D. 1325 to 1521, an exceptionally rare late-eighteenth-century Anishinaabe man's outfit (Fig. 1), an outstanding Charles and Isabelle Edenshaw (Haida) painted spruce-root hat and a sculpture by Bob Haozous (Warm Springs Chiricahua Apache) titled *Sleeping Man*. This

superlative assemblage of American Indian cultural material represents the tremendous breadth and scope of the collections of NMAI, as well as the remarkable richness of Native traditional and contemporary art. It also explores the historic importance of a significant number of these deeply cultural, profoundly social objects.

In a departure for the museum, *Infinity of Nations* is organized regionally. Each of its ten geographic sections, however, should be seen as neither bounded nor static. Then as now, long-distance trade, intellectual exchange, migration and religious pilgrimage, political expansionism, military conflict and diasporas all created a high degree of interchange among peoples and shaped a complex and dynamic Native world. This dynamism is conveyed in the more than sixty objects, chosen for their aesthetic, cultural and historic significance, that are highlighted throughout the exhibition. More than fifty Native historians and community members have collaborated with the museum to interpret these objects, which are distinguished within the gallery through their design presentation and expanded label text.

<sup>1</sup> The NMAI and HarperCollins will copublish a book of the same title in association with the exhibition.

1. Anishinaabe man's outfit collected by Andrew Foster, Fort Michilimackinac, Michigan, c.1790. Birchbark, cotton, linen, wool, feathers, silk, silver brooches, porcupine quills, horsehair, hide, sinew. The NMAI's Andrew Foster Collection is the museum's earliest and largest collection of ethnographic material. It was acquired by Foster, a lieutenant in the British army at Fort Michilimackinac, on the northern edge of Lake Michigan, between 1792 and 1794. At the time, Fort Michilimackinac was the westernmost outpost of the British Empire. The Andrew Foster Collection; exchanged from George Terasaki. Cat. Nos. 24/2000, 24/2004, 24/2006, 24/2012, 24/2016, 24/2022, 24/2034. Photograph by Ernest Amoroso.

## Cécile R. Ganteaume

At the heart of *Infinity of Nations* are ten singular objects or small groups of objects that serve as regional focal points. The rich exposition of these focal objects further demonstrates the degree to which Native America was interconnected before European peoples arrived. The objects selected also illustrate the ongoing nature of cultural dynamism throughout the Americas and reveal how the visual arts were often important vehicles for this exchange. The focal-point presentations are the result of ten workshops convened by the museum. Involving both Native and non-Native participants, the workshops were designed to explore events evoked by each object's link to particular peoples and its association with a particular time and place central to deepening our understanding of Native history.

### Introduction to the Exhibit

The phrase selected as the title of the exhibition is taken from reports by the Intendant of New France to his superiors in which he describes the lands north and west of Lake Superior as being filled with an “infinity of nations” with whom he was eager to trade for furs.<sup>2</sup> Beginning with Samuel de Champlain's 1609 exploration of the lake we know by his name, France sought to lay claim to vast stretches of territory in Canada including, in the 1680s, the Upper Great Lakes region. Like other colonial powers, France was eager to expand its empire in America and to exploit the continent's natural resources. The intendant's expression, which he used repeatedly in late-seventeenth-century reports to refer to Anishinaabe (Ojibwe-speaking) peoples, embodies several meanings. In part it reflects the intendant's weak grasp of Anishinaabe social

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to University of Michigan historian Michael Witgen (Ojibwe) for introducing me to the expression “infinity of nations,” from his original research into seventeenth-century French colonial documents, and for generously sharing his scholarship on Anishinaabe and French relations including, in particular, the use of this expression in relation to Anishinaabe peoples. As early as 1626, French missionaries and colonial governors eager to establish commercial and diplomatic alliances throughout their colonial territories described the peoples of the New World as “an infinity of nations.”

organization and seasonal movements between the lake shore and the interior where Anishinaabe lived in smaller bands. Perhaps, too, it reflects his frustration in trying to recognize a political structure that would allow him to strengthen France's imperial grip. But the expression "infinity of nations" also captures quite correctly the intendant's impression of North America—of lands populated by a multitude of indigenous peoples, rather than the "pristine" and uninhabited "New World" of European imagination. Additionally, and most importantly, the word "nations" in the intendant's expression explicitly acknowledges the sovereignty of the Native peoples he encountered—a sovereignty that was soon threatened by colonial and national powers, a sovereignty that Native peoples throughout the Americas have fought to protect over the 400 years since and continue to fight to protect to this day.

The first view of *Infinity of Nations* that visitors will have upon entering the gallery is of ten headdresses representing not only each of the ten regions into which the exhibition is organized, but also the sovereignty of the Native nations across the Americas. Throughout North, Central and South America, Native nations have often been guided by leaders recognized for their abilities to maintain reciprocal relationships and to coordinate collective efforts through their oratory and judiciousness.

The right within a culture to don headdresses such as those displayed depends, first, on the acquisition of cultural knowledge and, second, on the ability to use that knowledge for the benefit of the people. These headdresses represent the right of Native peoples to govern and instruct themselves according to their own laws, customs and prophecies.

Perhaps the most striking headdress on view is the magnificent Mebêngôkre (Kayapó) *krok-krok-ti* from the state of Para, Brazil. It is a macaw- and heron-feather headdress worn by men and women during children's naming ceremonies and boys' initiation ceremonies. This headdress is worn, in other words, when Mebêngôkre young people enter into adult life, begin to learn Mebêngôkre cultural knowledge and take on Mebêngôkre identity. Equally striking is a Yup'ik bentwood hunting hat, adorned with ivory carvings, and worn by Yup'ik men when hunting sea mammals, such as seals and sea otters (Fig. 2). To be a successful hunter in the harsh Arctic environment, a Yup'ik man calls upon animal spirits and a corpus of communal beliefs. His ability to provide for the people is dependent on his entering into respectful and reciprocal relations with animals. Wearing the hunting hat helps empower the hunter, allowing him to attract sea mammals.



2. Yup'ik hunting hat, Yukon River, Alaska, c.1870. Wood, ivory, baleen, iron alloy, cordage. 10½" x 9" x 1⅜" (26.7 cm x 23 cm x 3.4 cm). Used when hunting sea mammals from a kayak, beautifully and powerfully adorned bentwood hunting hats, often decorated with images of prey as seen here, helped ensure a Yup'ik hunter's success. Cat. No. 25/4893. Photograph by Ernest Amoroso.



3. Tlingit basketry hat, Alaska, c.1820. Spruce root, bear grass. 4½" high, 15½" diameter (12 cm x 40 cm). Traditional Tlingit hats had a flat crown and broad rim. The overall shape, pom-pom and decorative band of false embroidery around the base strongly suggest that this hat was fashioned after a French or Russian sailor's hat. Cat. No. 16/5272. Photograph by Ernest Amoroso.

### Regional Displays

The ten regional sections of *Infinity of Nations* fill the exhibition's main 5,500-square-foot gallery. The space allotted to each section is proportionate to the size of the museum's collections for the cultures in that region. Preliminary object selections were made by specialists with extensive regional expertise, in collaboration with the author, the exhibition's organizing curator.<sup>3</sup> Selections were made to reflect the breadth and scope of the museum's collections, to highlight its strengths and to showcase objects of historical significance.

The regional installations feature some of the museum's oldest objects, including Valdivian figurines from Valdivia, Ecuador dating to 3500 B.C., a large Olmec ceremonial ax from Vera Cruz, Mexico dating from 800 to 600 B.C. and a Coso Range petroglyph dating to between A.D. 600 and 1300 (Fig. 6). Valdivian figurines are the earliest known fired-clay objects in the Americas. Like the four figurines presented in the exhibition,

they are always female and painted red. This is an extremely early example of the use of an Andean symbol of power—the color red—that became associated with the sun and jaguars throughout the Andes. The petroglyph, with two large and six smaller mountain sheep, comes from the Coso Range, a relatively isolated area of desert in eastern California and the site of one of the greatest concentrations of rock art in North America. The petroglyph is likely associated with hunting rituals of peoples who occupied the Great Basin prior to Numic groups (i.e., Paiutes).

Several of the objects displayed in *Infinity of Nations* are exceptionally rare. Notable among them are a Tlingit spruce-root hat dating to about 1820 (Fig. 3) and a Yámana model canoe from Tierra del Fuego dating to 1907 or 1908. The pom-pom on the crown of the spruce-root hat, a tour de force of the basketmaker's art, is a characteristic feature of both French and Russian sailor hats of the time, which the Tlingit hat strongly resembles. French explorers were trading with Tlingit people along the Pacific coast by 1786. By 1795 Russians, who had been in Alaska since the 1740s, were living in settlements in Tlingit territory. Poignantly, the Yámana model canoe displayed in *Infinity of Nations* dates to the period when the Yámana people were severely threatened by the sudden and dramatic increase of settlers to Tierra del Fuego. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Yámana families harvested the rich marine life of the Beagle Channel and, later, Murray Narrows using moon-shaped bark canoes. The model canoe is accurate to the last detail. Its gear includes a piece of turf used to keep a fire going in the canoe at all times, paddles, a harpoon, a dip net lashed to the end of a pole, a bark canoe bailer, a storage basket for carrying shellfish and a mooring rope.

To be sure, visitors to the exhibition will see several of the museum's best-known masterpieces, including an exquisite carved and polished Olmec blue-green jade

<sup>3</sup> The regional specialists for North America included Joyce Bear (Muscogee [Creek] Nation), James Brown (Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois), Linda Cordell (School for Advanced Research, Santa Fe, New Mexico), Catherine Fowler (University of Nevada, Reno), Steven Karr (Southwest Museum of the American Indian, Autry National Center, Los Angeles), David W. Penney (Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan), Charles Redcorn (Osage Nation), Shelby Tisdale (Museum of Indian Arts & Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, Santa Fe, New Mexico), Kathleen Ash-Milby (Navajo, NMAI, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.), Emil Her Many Horses (Oglala Lakota, NMAI, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.) and Mary Jane Lenz (NMAI, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.). The regional specialists for Latin America included Leonardo López Luján (Museo Templo Mayor, Instituto Nacional Antropología e Historia, Mexico City), Alejandro González Villarruel (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City), Joanna Ostapowicz (National Museums Liverpool, Liverpool, England), George Stuart (formerly *National Geographic* magazine), William Fisher (The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia), Thomas Dillehay (Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee) and Paul Ossa (Arqueología Austral/Southern Archaeology, Berkeley, California).



4. Archaic bird stones, Schenectady, Schenectady County, New York and Watertown, Jefferson County, New York. 3000–1000 B.C. Left: porphyry. 4¼" x 1½" x ¾" (11 cm x 4 cm x 2 cm). Right: slate. 3½" x 1" x 1⅝" (9 cm x 2.5 cm x 3.5 cm). Bird stones are exceptionally early Woodlands objects used as atlatl weights to help propel spears. Their value, it seems, was associated with their materials, in this case banded slate and spotted porphyry. These materials and objects were in use for thousands of years. Collected by I. McGirk Mitchell and E. M. Jackson. Cat. Nos. 7/4409, 5/4385. Photograph by Walter Larrimore.

5. Mississippian gorget, Castalian Springs, Sumner County, Tennessee, A.D. 1250–1350. Whelk shell. 4" diameter (10 cm). This supernatural warrior holds a severed head and stone mace. He also wears a copper hair ornament. The gorget itself was worn as an emblem of rank. William E. Myer Collection. Cat. No. 15/853. Photograph by Ernest Amoroso.

head with a classic man-jaguar face, an extraordinary engraved Mississippian gorget representing a supernatural warrior—that is, Morning Star (Fig. 5); the Arapoosh (Apsáalooke [Crow]) shield; and what is widely considered the finest Mexica (Aztec) sculpture of Xipe Totec, the spirit lord associated with fertility and war. Also included are important works that have never been exhibited or published before, such as an exquisite Maya carved portrait vessel from Chocoló, Guatemala, a magnificent Teotihuacan greenstone mask from Taltelolco, Mexico and a masterful Haida argillite carving representing Bear Mother and her two cubs (Fig. 7).

The finely carved portrait vessel depicting a Maya lord is accompanied by a glyphic inscription that is translated as “This is the cup of K’ahk’uht K’inich, King of Akankeh and Ball Player.” The inscription was discovered during the object selection process for the exhibition. Not only do the glyphs tell us that Maya ballplayers were elites, but they also identify a Maya lord and where he is from—information heretofore unknown to Maya scholars.<sup>4</sup> Carved stone masks may be considered a quintessential Teotihuacan art form, and the mask selected for display in *Infinity of Nations* is an especially large and spectacular example of this ancient (A.D. 1 to 600) lapidary art. The Haida argillite carving represents Bear Mother with her two offspring—the ancestors of the Haida bear clan. Renowned Haida artist Robert Davidson identified it during an exhibition workshop as the work of his great-grandfather Charles Edenshaw (Fig. 7), a master carver who worked in various media and was one of the most influential carvers of his day.

<sup>4</sup> The glyphic inscription was deciphered by Maya epigrapher Stanley Guenter (Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas).

## Highlight and Focal Objects

Central to the *Infinity of Nations* exhibition are the highlighted objects and regional focal points, and the Native voices, rooted in communal life, that inform us of these pieces’ deeper meanings. The more than sixty objects highlighted in the regional sections fall into three categories. Many are iconic objects, emblematic of Native cultures. Like the Navajo First Phase Chief blanket and many of the objects mentioned above, they speak to who a people are and what they do at a certain point in time. Several highlighted objects are associated with prominent Native individuals, some of whose names—like Osceola—are quite well known today, and others whose names—like John Quinney—may be less familiar. These objects allow us greater insight into important events through compelling individuals. Their stories personalize significant moments in history. Still other highlighted objects speak to encounters between Natives and non-Natives. Objects such as a ceramic dish and pair of candleholders from the ancestral A:shiwi (Zuni) village of Hawikku or a 1676 General Court of Massachusetts Bay peace medal are highlighted because the encounters they reference are pivotal moments in Native history.

To interpret these objects, the NMAI has turned to Native historians and community members.<sup>5</sup> Their contributions provide salient historical information and interesting new perspectives that expand our understanding of Native history as well as the significance of objects in

<sup>5</sup> I am particularly indebted to Steven J. Crum (Western Shoshone, University of California, Davis), Michael Witgen (Ojibwe, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) and Craig P. Howe (Lakota, Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies, Martin, South Dakota) for their consultations on Native contributors to this exhibition.

the museum's collections. But most fundamentally, they reveal for us the lives and experiences of others.

Speaking about a *ngâp*, or ceremonial necklace, made by Mebêngôkre (Kayapó) women from freshwater mussel shells, Piydjô Kayapó, a Mebêngôkre elder and knowledge keeper, tells us,

They are worn by both adults and children in rituals such as the Bemp, Takâk, Kworokangô, and Mebiok. These ceremonies, which continue to be performed today, are the central focus of social life in Mebêngôkre communities. In them, people receive new names, normally from their grandparents...The participation of the entire community in Mebêngôkre ceremonies is very important. The Mebêngôkre also seek to be beautiful in their rituals. The value of beauty (*mêтч*), as well as its power (*prâ*), are of major importance to Mebêngôkre people (Kayapó 2010).

Mapuche linguist Maria Catrileo gives us insight into the significance of a roughly hewn *machi's rewe*, or ceremonial ladder from Collico, Chile. A *machi* is a Mapuche religious leader. On becoming a *machi*, a man or woman has a *rewe* made for him- or herself and uses it during healing or pleading ceremonies to climb closer to "the space above where deities live." As Catrileo explains,

The Mapuche medicine woman or man called *machi* possesses ritual objects to carry out the ceremonies for each medical treatment or pleading ritual. The new shaman provides herself or himself with a wooden pole called *kemukemu*. This pole is converted into a sacred *rewe*—clean and pure space—when she or he is initiated through the ritual *Ngeykurewen*. A *machi's* first *rewe* has four steps representing the four main sacred spaces. As time elapses, the *machi* acquires new power and skills to appeal the blessings of *Ngünechen* and fight against the evil spirits. Each new spiritual power gives way to a new sacred step carved into the pole (Catrileo 2010).

Sherry Farrell Racette (Timiskaming First Nation), an art historian at the First Nations University of Canada, Regina, Saskatchewan, writes about a painted Cree moose-hide coat, further embellished with loom-woven quillwork (see cover). According to Farrell Racette, only about ten such coats are known to exist today, most of them in European collections. They date to the early 1800s and, made by Cree women, they were worn by both Cree hunters and (later) European fur traders. Farrell Racette writes about how they are a window into a "dynamic space where different systems of knowing the world came together." She tells us, "This northern Cree coat, made from a single moose

hide, wrapped around the body, as it once wrapped around the animal, and the wearer's spine aligned with the spine of the animal" (Farrell Racette 2010). While no two coats are exactly alike, the band of colored geometric patterns painted down the back of the coats, as Farrell Racette explains, accentuate the spine.

Jim Enote (A:shiwí [Zuni]), director of the A:shiwí A:wam Museum and Heritage Center, Zuni, New Mexico, writes eloquently about a ceramic candleholder and plate from Hawikku (Fig. 8). First noting that Hawikku was a regional crossroad for trade and knowledge, Enote reflects upon the European shape of these vessels crafted by A:shiwí hands. He writes,

During the Spanish occupancy, which lasted roughly 140 years, many new things were introduced to our people, including ceramic styles that met the cultural and religious needs of the missionaries. This candleholder and plate obviously do not follow the traditions of A:shiwí ceramic-making before the Spaniards' arrival or after their departure. That said, the plate in particular is revealing because the painted designs represent a



6. Petroglyph depicting mountain sheep, Sand Tank, Inyo County, California, A.D. 600–1300. Basalt. 8" x 18½" x 20" (20 cm x 47 cm x 50 cm). Petroglyphs of this style are abundant in the Coso Range of eastern California, where it has been estimated that 100,000 rock art elements occur within an area of less than ninety square miles. Petroglyphs are notoriously difficult to date, but researchers believe that after A.D. 1300 the Coso rock art abruptly ceased. Collected by Charles W. Furlong. Cat. No. 20/3884. Photograph by Ernest Amoroso.



7. Carving of Bear Mother and her two cubs by Charles Edenshaw (*Da.axiigang*), Haida, Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia, c.1900. Argillite. 2¼" high, 2¾" wide (6 cm x 7 cm). This free-standing sculpture, carved in red argillite, illustrates, according to his great-grandson Robert Davidson, one of Edenshaw's favorite stories, the Bear Mother and her two cubs. Davidson notes that its uniqueness is that there are only a few carvings done in red argillite, and one of the cubs shown is in the human state while the other is in the animal state. Cat. No. 19/6253. Photograph by Ernest Amoroso.

definite continuity of A:shiwi artistic and cultural sensibilities even through the disruption of the Spanish period (2010).

Brenda J. Child (Red Lake Ojibwe) of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, writes about the two-piece wedding dress worn by Susette LaFlesche in 1881. Susette LaFlesche, probably the first nationally known Native activist, was the daughter of Joseph LaFlesche, an Omaha chief, who believed that Omaha people needed to become formally educated in white schools if they were to survive in a world increasingly shaped by whites. Child writes:

A defining moment in LaFlesche's life was when she witnessed the expulsion of the Ponca tribe from their homeland to Indian Territory in 1877, and the subsequent imprisonment of Standing Bear and other Ponca who had attempted to return to Nebraska. These events launched LaFlesche's career as a nationally known activist, who argued against the involuntary removal of indigenous people from their homelands and for Indian citizenship rights. To great effect, LaFlesche "played Indian" in eastern cities by wearing an Omaha buckskin dress as she enlightened Boston and New York audiences, including the writer Helen Hunt Jackson, on the suffering of tribal communities and American injustice, calling for new direction in federal Indian policy. LaFlesche found a soul mate in Thomas Tibbles, a newspaper reporter for the *Omaha Herald* who followed the Ponca case. Bi-cultural, bi-lingual and schooled in western ways and Omaha culture, LaFlesche chose an elegant cream colored wool skirt and jacket, trimmed in hand-stitched silk, satin and lace when she married Tibbles on July 23, 1881. Symbolically, the wedding was held on restored Ponca land. LaFlesche and Tibbles each played a major role in the civil

rights case that ended the Ponca imprisonment and the historic ruling, "an Indian is a person within the meaning of the law of the United States" (2010).

Like the highlighted objects described above, the ten regional focal points also depict Native peoples as active participants in their own histories. Presented in stand-alone cases, the focal points do not concern themselves with epic historical events, but rather with what might be taken to be smaller-scale experiences. Nonetheless, these experiences are profoundly significant to Native peoples. Each of these parts of the exhibition uses a single object, or small group of objects, as a point of entry for exploring these experiences and allows us to better understand the Americas' indigenous past, including how Indians and Europeans together made colonial history.

The Mesoamerican and Caribbean focal point presents an exquisitely carved classic Maya limestone bas-relief depicting a ballplayer. This carving dates to A.D. 600 to 800 and comes from La Corona, a royal center in northwestern Peten, in Guatemala. The focal point speaks to the competition among Maya city-states and the place of La Corona in the rivalry between the great city-states of Calakmul and Tikal. La Corona was politically, economically and militarily allied to Calakmul, one of the largest sites in the Maya Lowlands, and there is strong evidence to suggest that it had a special and important relationship with the larger city. In addition to Maya ballplayer protective gear, the figure in the panel wears an elaborate headdress that would not have been worn during an actual game. The ballplayer may represent a supernatural playing the ballgame or a Maya lord impersonating a supernatural dressed as a ballplayer. Archaeologists Edgar Suyuc (Kaqchikel Maya) and Marcello Canuto of Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana provide the major interpretation at this focal point. Suyuc is the only Maya person to codirect a major archaeological project in Guatemala—the Proyecto Arqueológico Cuenca Mirador (Mirador Basin Project). Suyuc and Canuto discuss the iconography of the ballplayer bas-relief in light of the importance of La Corona in the late seventh century.

The Woodlands focal point presents the museum's earliest and largest collection of ethnographic material. These objects were acquired by Andrew Foster, a lieutenant in the British army at Fort Michilimackinac, on the northern edge of Lake Michigan, between 1792 and 1794, when the fort was the westernmost outpost of the British Empire. The Foster collection numbers forty-three objects and includes mostly Anishinaabe (Ojibwe and Odawa) clothing, as well as a King George III silver medal, a pair of Huron moccasins, three Dakota calumets (pipes) and a Dakota shield. According to Foster family records, Foster was "made a chief" while his regiment was stationed in North America. Because of Foster's status as a British army officer and the importance of alliance making at this time in Upper Great Lakes history, it is quite possible that Foster was adopted

by pro-British Anishinaabe seeking an alliance to counter attempts by the American army to push the boundary of the United States farther west. In this context, it makes sense that many of the objects in Foster's collection, which include an entire suit of clothing, are the result of diplomatic gift giving (Fig. 1). It is also quite possible that, like many army officers, Foster collected Indian "curiosities" as he traveled through the western interior of North America. This could account for the somewhat eclectic range of material—the Huron and Dakota objects, in addition to the Anishinaabe material. Historian Michael Witgen (Ojibwe) and art historian Ruth Phillips of Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario provide the interpretive narrative for this focal point. Witgen specializes in what he calls "the invention of empire in seventeenth-century western North America" and American Indian and early American history. He and Phillips explore the phenomenon of curio collecting among British army officers and the possibility that Foster may have been trying to put together a "chief's outfit" (this was not uncommon), as well as the possibility that Foster was adopted by Anishinaabe people. They explore why the Anishinaabe would have wanted to mobilize British power on their behalf, and what an alliance with the British would have meant to them.

Apsáalooke (Crow) painted buffalo hides depicting warriors' exploits—remarkable documents of Apsáalooke history—are, in many ways, the quintessential art form of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Plains Indian warrior societies. An Apsáalooke warrior's exploits robe, circa 1850, is the focal point for the Plains and Plateau section (Fig. 9). From the arrival of the first European and American observers on the Northern Plains in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, these travelers recorded in their journals that Apsáalooke buffalo robes were especially handsome. This particular robe was executed after the Apsáalooke had acquired horses and firearms, and while they were defending their country—prime buffalo territory—from the Blackfeet, Shoshone and Arapaho. (Warfare with the Lakota would come later.) The robe was painted by a powerful and brilliant draftsman, and its main figurative scenes depict five war deeds. The intense expressiveness of each scene captures the importance of military accomplishments in an Apsáalooke warrior's life. Among the Apsáalooke, a man had to accomplish four war honors if he was to achieve status in his society and become a chief. This robe was given to William H. Schiefflin at Fort Benton, Montana, in 1861. A wealthy New Yorker, Schiefflin received the robe, according to an eyewitness account, from either Cree or (more likely) Blackfeet in an exchange of gifts. Fort Benton, located along the Missouri River in Blackfeet territory, was an important trading post. It is most interesting to speculate about how the Blackfeet would have acquired this robe from the Apsáalooke. But whatever the circumstances, this exploit robe, called *chiwaálaatua* ("his writings [telling his war deeds] on his robe"),



8. Hawikku plate and candleholder, A:shiwi (Zuni), Cibola County, New Mexico, 1629–1680. Clay. 2¼" high, 8" diameter and 6¼" high, 2¾" wide (6 cm x 20.5 cm and 16 cm x 7 cm). Permanent Spanish settlement began in New Mexico in 1598, and in 1629 Spanish Franciscan missionaries established a church at the ancestral A:shiwi (Zuni) village of Hawikkuh. These A:shiwi objects were likely made for the Franciscan mission church. Hendricks-Hodge Expedition. Cat. Nos. 8/6825 and 9/6974. Photograph by Ernest Amoroso.

remains emblematic of an Apsáalooke warrior's life. Tribal historian Patrick Hill (Apsáalooke/Pawnee) and anthropologist Tim McCleary of Little Big Horn College, Crow Agency, Montana provide the narrative at this focal point. An interpretive ranger at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument for many years, Hill is deeply knowledgeable about nineteenth-century Apsáalooke life. He is also an artist. He and McCleary discuss the significance of each scene depicted on the hide, including the row of eleven trade muskets, intertribal warfare on the northern Plains in the mid-nineteenth century, the importance of achieving military honors in Apsáalooke society, and how it came to be that this robe, created by Apsáalooke, could have been given away by Blackfeet at Fort Benton in 1861.

## Conclusion

*Infinity of Nations* concludes with a display of contemporary Native art. Contemporary traditional arts are found throughout the regional displays. One of the most recent works of art in the exhibition is a carved and pyro-engraved gourd made in 2008 by Percy Medina (Quechua). Gourd carving is among the oldest art forms in the Andes, and Medina, born in Cochas Chico, Peru, is an acknowledged master gourd carver, following in the footsteps of his grandmother Catalina Medina. Percy Medina often carves traditional subjects such as Quechua fiestas, ceremonies and village scenes, but he has also introduced entirely new subject matter into his art while maintaining the compositional mastery for which only the most accomplished Quechua gourd carvers are known. All this can be seen in his gourd depicting a variety of fish.

The final section of the exhibition, however, presents art by contemporary Native artists whose work reflects

a clear and strong engagement with Western artistic currents and media, yet speaks to their Native identity. The objects on view in the final space of the exhibition address how contemporary Native artists perceive themselves and their people today. The conclusion of *Infinity of Nations* looks at contemporary Native art as a medium for consciously exploring and expressing this moment in Native history.

Bob Haozous's work serves as a fitting example. Haozous (Warm Springs Chiricahua Apache) speaks provocatively about his desire to challenge and re-evaluate what it means to be Native, and he calls for "an honest portrayal of our contemporary human condition" (Haozous 2005:12). The Hupa-Yurok artist George Blake's 1993 sculpture *Hang Around the Fort Injun* is an all-too-honest, if not mocking, portrayal of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century Indians who tried to ingratiate themselves with whites, and, implicitly, about the compromises that

contemporary Native peoples make within the dominant society. Known largely for his work in traditional media and formats, Blake's larger-than-life sculpture portrays an Indian dressed in a white shirt, vest, jacket, and American flag tie, who, for all his self-satisfaction, looks somehow implausible. By choosing "hanging around the fort Injun" as his subject, Blake questions those who seem to choose not to respect their own traditions.

Celebrated Ojibwe artist Norval Morrisseau's emphasis was on exploring a modernist style of painting to reimagine traditional Ojibwe imagery and spiritual beliefs, as suggested in his *Early Shaman* (1973). Distinguished by their saturated, often startling colors and black outlines, the style and subject matter of Morrisseau's visionary paintings at times created cultural and political tensions. Nonetheless, Morrisseau brought new feelings to traditional Ojibwe pictorial language and beliefs, and influenced a generation of Native artists to look within.



9. Warrior's exploit robe, Apsáalooke (Crow), Fort Benton, Montana, c.1850. Buffalo hide, pigment, red wool trade cloth, beads, porcupine quill, horsehair. 88¼" long, 76" wide (224 cm x 193 cm). The juxtaposition of fluid, elegantly curved lines with sharp angles to represent the human figures is a graphic technique that helps point to an Apsáalooke attribution. The pictorial liveliness of the painting also distinguishes it as Apsáalooke from, for example, Blackfeet paintings. While the stroke of each line is drawn with precision, the delineated forms convey a decidedly dynamic feel. Reading the vanquisher in each exploit as the figure on the right and enemy on the left, the war exploits may be read as follows. Top detail: the Apsáalooke warrior, with his hair worn in a distinctive Apsáalooke fashion (upright bangs, or pompadour, and long hair extension), is about to seize a gun from a wounded enemy. That the enemy is wounded can be seen from the musket ball that has passed through his lower torso. The Apsáalooke warrior's face is painted red. Bottom detail: the Apsáalooke warrior sits astride a horse and is about to touch a live enemy with his lance. The two painted red stripes on his horse may signify two previous war honors. Collected by William H. Schiefflin; presented by William de la Montagne Cary. Cat. No.1/2558. Photograph by Ernest Amoroso.

In the 1980s, after a long and successful career as a sculptor and installation artist, Larry Beck, whose mother was Norwegian and Yup'ik, moved to Skagit Valley, Washington “to look within,” and began making masks he called *Inua* (spirit). These assemblages, made from tires, hubcaps, side mirrors, dental mirrors, safety pins and other found objects, were Beck's response to traditional Yup'ik art and culture. They embody his deep desire to connect with his Yup'ik heritage, his appreciation for Yup'ik sculptural forms and his modernist aesthetic sensibility. Indeed, in them we sense Beck's two worlds, modernist and Yup'ik, coexisting. These connections are fully apparent in Beck's sculpture *Ooger Uk Inua* (Walrus Spirit; Fig. 10).

As seen in his *Raven* (2001), the paintings and drawings of Rick Bartow (Wiyot/Yurok) are graphic and intense. At times disturbing, his art captures impressions and memories of the different worlds that Bartow has inhabited, including serving in Vietnam. His Native ancestry informs his work in the same haunting manner as his impressions of war. Native imagery recurs in his art on the same emotional level: it evades narrative content and is subjected to the same aesthetic contemplation that defines all his work. Bartow describes himself as an artist who happens to be Indian.

Importantly, and in concert with the exhibition's overarching theme of cultural dynamism and interconnectivity, the conclusion of *Infinity of Nations: Art and History in the Collections of the National Museum of the American Indian* presents these powerful and compelling works of art, along with other engaging though less-familiar contemporary artworks, in dialogue with one another, and as the most recent definition, if you will, of Native America. In October 2010 and for the first time in many years, a substantial cross-section of the NMAI's holdings will be on view in New York, allowing visitors to experience the full richness of the museum's collections. The exhibition will also encourage visitors to enter into dialog with contemporary Native peoples who share their covenant with these extraordinary objects.

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10. *Ooger Uk Inua* (Walrus Spirit) by Larry Beck, Chnagmiut Yup'ik, 1982. Hubcaps, tires, chair legs, PVC plastic. 21" high, 12 $\frac{1}{8}$ " wide, 19" long (55.2 cm x 30.8 cm x 48.5 cm). Fascinated by the Yup'ik mask-making tradition, Beck used modern-day castoffs—from car parts to kitchen and dental utensils—to bridge his Western minimalist training and Native heritage. Transferred from the Department of the Interior, Indian Arts and Crafts Board Collection. Cat. No. 25/5423. Photograph by Katherine Fogden.

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