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## **Exhibition of Native American Dresses to Open in New York**

Fifty-five Native dresses from the Plains, Plateau and Great Basins regions comprise “Identity by Design: Tradition, Change and Celebration in Native Women’s Dresses,” opening Friday, Sep. 26 at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in New York, the George Gustav Heye Center. The exhibition, which includes dresses and accessories from the early 1800s to the present, will be on view at the museum through September 2009.

The exhibition was originally presented at the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall, where it will close Aug. 3.

“Identity by Design” examines the roles of Native women through works from a heavily fringed White Mountain Apache’s cape and skirt, worn at the start of a girl’s entry into womanhood to the many masterful quillwork and beadwork designs that signify the hand of a mature, accomplished artist. Proud warrior wives wore painted dresses detailing the battles of a loved one, even replicating bullet wounds endured. Many of these treasured dresses are decorated with dozens of ivory elk teeth which signify longevity and great hunting skills of male relatives as each elk has just two ivory teeth.

The exhibition also traces the development of the side-fold dress (ca. 1830), the two-hide dress and the three-hide dress styles to the elaborate beaded powwow regalia by contemporary dressmakers Joyce Growing Thunder Fogarty (Assiniboine/Sioux) and Rebecca Brady (Cheyenne/Sac and Fox).

Designs on the yoke evolve from the actual deer tail of a two-hide dress to an abstract rendering of a turtle to larger, beaded landscapes of lakes, clouds and stars. The expansion of trade routes directly influences the dresses’ adornment from the labor intensive quillwork patterns, to the original pony beads of the 1800s. Cloth begins to appear along with brass buttons, beads of all kinds, brass sequins, ribbons, dentalium and cowrie shells, and other intertribal trade items such as the Navajo woven blankets.

“The stories of generations can be told in these compelling works,” said Kevin Gover (Pawnee/Comanche), director of the National Museum of the American Indian. “From the women who wore them, and the artists who made them to the trade and travel that brought the materials together, the dresses are a rich tradition that, through the leadership of today’s artists, will continue into the future.”

“The artistry and expression behind each of these works is a revelation,” said John Haworth (Cherokee), director of the George Gustav Heye Center. “Far from simple adornment, the details of these dresses speak of new landscapes, changing environments, persecution and confinement, proud traditions and artistic mastery.”

Highlights include a spectacular Yakama two-hide dress (ca. 1890), which is made from hide, faceted “Russian” glass beads introduced by Russian traders; fire-polished glass beads; cut glass beads; seed beads; and sinew. The dress is adorned by thousands of red, pink, yellow, blue and green beads, creating striking strips of colors and geometric patterns across the sleeves and yoke of the dress. The exhibition also includes a Shoshone dress with a fully beaded yoke (ca. 1880) and accompanying beaded Shoshone belt, moccasins and leggings. As intermediaries in the region’s intertribal network, Shoshones often borrowed design ideas from other tribes and incorporated them into their own designs, such as the fully beaded yoke, which is a common style attributed to Sioux dresses. The intricate beadwork in this Shoshone dress and accessories was created with seed beads-tiny glass beads made in Italy that were introduced by non-Native traders around 1850 and enabled the creation of more elaborate designs.

“Identity by Design” co-curators Colleen Cutschall (Oglala Lakota) and Emil Her Many Horses (Oglala Lakota) collaborated with six celebrated Native women artists, whose many skills include designing dresses. The six project consultants are Joyce Growing Thunder Fogarty (Assiniboine/Sioux), Juanita Growing Thunder Fogarty (Assiniboine/Sioux), Gladys Jefferson (Crow), Jhane Myers (Comanche), Jamie Okuma (Luiseño/Shoshone-Bannock) and Jackie Parsons (Blackfeet).

## **Catalog**

To complement the exhibition, a 160-page book, “Identity by Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women’s Dresses,” presents essays and insights by Native women artists who design and make dresses, as well as numerous historical and contemporary photographs. The book was published in 2007 by National Museum of the American Indian in association with HarperCollins.

## **Isnati Activity Room**

“Identity by Design” will include a family activity room that provides children ages 5 through 11 and families with a comfortable, contemporary space to further explore themes presented in the exhibition. This room includes interactive learning stations where visitors can touch dressmaking materials and learn about the process of tanning hides, as well as maps, puzzles and an interactive beading activity.

## **About the Museum**

The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian’s George Gustav Heye Center is located at One Bowling Green in New York City, across from Battery Park. The museum is free and open every day from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and on Thursdays until 8 p.m. Call (212) 514-3700 for general information and (212) 514-3888 for a recording about the museum’s public programs. By subway, the museum may be reached by the 1 to South Ferry, the 4 or 5 to Bowling Green or the R or W to Whitehall Street. The museum’s Web site is [www.AmericanIndian.si.edu](http://www.AmericanIndian.si.edu).

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