American Collections Inspire Native Artists and Indian Communities

The American Section of the University of Pennsylvania Museum has developed a rewarding relationship with the National Museum of the American Indian—Smithsonian Institution’s Artist in Residence Program. As a partner with NMAI, the Museum annually hosts up to six native artists who travel to the east coast to conduct research on particular aspects of Native American collections. Recipients of the 21-day travel awards move between New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, to conduct research at the American Museum of Natural History, Brooklyn Museum of Art, George Gustav Heye Center, University of Pennsylvania Museum, and the Smithsonian Institution. The objectives of the program are to enhance artistic growth, strengthen career development of the artists, and to encourage native artists to share the results of their work with their home communities.

Involved in the program since 1998, the American Section has welcomed and learned from nine individuals, all well-established artists in their own communities and each bearing a long list of credentials. Their artistic works range in subject matter, style, technique, and materials from traditional to modern. As a whole, the artists’ interests reflect a resounding appreciation for authenticity and accuracy surrounding their cultural heritage, a responsibility to demonstrate success as artists and to contribute meaningfully to their communities, and a thoughtful drive to inspire younger generations at home.

Visiting artists have included Haida basketweaver Lisa Telford, Choctaw beadworker Marcus Amerman, Wasco fiber artist Pat Courtney Gold, Hawaiian mixed-media artist Bernice Akamini, Nuxalt wood carver Sylas Saunders, Pawnee painter and print maker Jimmy Horn, Pheasant Rump Nakota jeweler and sculptor Nelda Shrupp, Haida weaver Evelyn Vanderhoop, and Navajo painter and educator Shonto Begay. As the program evolves and additional artists visit the Museum, we hope to share their vitality and artistic innovation with the wider Museum community.

Lucy Williams
Keeper, American Section

Melissa Wagner
Assistant Keeper, American Section

Evelyn Vanderhoop (center) discussing a late 19th century Chilkat dance blanket in the UPM collections with volunteer Caroline Wischmann (left), Lucy Williams, and Associate Curator Robert Preucel. Upon completing her research, Evelyn plans to share her findings in a lecture to docents, students, and native peoples at the Burke Museum, University of Washington. Photograph by Suzanna Urminska, 1999
Full-size Chilkat robe being woven by Haida artist Evelyn Vanderhoop, 1999. Evelyn is one of a small number of Northwest Coast fiber artists with the knowledge and skill to produce the traditional Raven’s Tail and Chilkat style weavings. The textiles are made of wool and conceal warp strings of yellow cedar, using traditional handweaving techniques. Research at UPM enabled Evelyn to better understand specific techniques used to join the selvedge braid to the main body of the robes, improved her understanding of the use of native signatures which are incorporated into each weaving, and enhanced her knowledge of robe design.

Navajo painter, author, and educator Shonto Begay reviewed Navajo hide bags, horse gear, hunting equipment, and knives in storage. Shonto plans to share photographs of these objects in a series of workshops for students on the Navajo Reservation. His goal is to increase his students’ knowledge of their ancestors and their place in the modern world.

Photo by Suzanna Urminska, 1999

Shonto Begay’s painting “Lavender Glow: Advice of the aunt to the expectant—amidst brand new knowledge, the elder’s voice still counts.” Shonto’s anticipated outcome of the fellowship is “to gain more knowledge, to see and store images of my culture’s history, and to translate these insights into paintings depicting modern native life and its struggle to remain true to its ancestors.”

Acrylic on canvas, W. 51.2 cm, H. 82 cm, 1998