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Indigenous Beauty: Masterworks of American Indian Art from the Diker Collection

Curated by: David W. Penney

Exhibition schedule: Seattle Art Museum, February 12–May 17, 2015; Amon Carter Museum of Art, Fort Worth, July 5–September 13, 2015; Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta, October 8, 2015–January 3, 2016; Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, February 14–May 11, 2016

Exhibition catalogue: David W. Penney et al., *Indigenous Beauty: Masterworks of American Indian Art from the Diker Collection*, exh. cat, New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, in association with the American Federation of Arts, 2015. 192 pp., \$55.00 (ISBN: 0847845230)

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Undoubtedly students, scholars, and general enthusiasts marveled at the many renowned works of art featured in the traveling exhibition, *Indigenous Beauty: Masterworks of American Indian Art from the Diker Collection*. This was only the third major presentation of these works since Charles and Valerie Diker began collecting Native American art in the 1970s. The primary theme of this exhibition invited viewers to celebrate the masterful surface achievements of the works, as well as their formal beauty, in color, form, and design. In other words, the show focused on the features that identify works of art according to Western modernist standards. As curator David Penney points out in his introduction to the accompanying catalogue, the privileging of visual and material qualities has been the dominant mode for exhibiting Native American art since the 1930s. This curatorial strategy aided in the classification of Native American objects as art instead of their earlier designation as artifacts. What was exemplary of more recent trends are the ways Penney threaded multiple understandings of the objects throughout the exhibition. This approach follows museum practices since the 1990s, where broader scopes of interpretation and representation of Native American creative endeavors replaced the single curatorial voice. The complex approach to object appreciation is further developed in the catalogue. A team of Indian and non-Indian authors offer diverse and detailed perspectives on the social and cultural histories of selected works of art.

Indigenous Beauty presented one hundred twenty works out of nearly four hundred in the Dikers's collection. Dating from the second century to as recently as 2011, the works originate from a variety of indigenous North American homelands and cultures. They were

clustered into eleven sections, demarcated by geography, media, and some shared historical experiences. As visitors made their way through the exhibition, they traveled from region to region, identified by different colored walls, maps, and introductory texts. At the Toledo Museum of Art, the exhibition began with the Eastern Woodlands, examining sculptural objects and ornamented clothing and bags. From there, visitors made their way through the remaining sections: Southwest pottery and Katsina dolls, Arctic masks, Northwest Coast sculpture and potlatch art, Bering Strait Ivories, Western baskets, and finally, Plains beadwork and pictographic arts.



Figure 1. *Indigenous Beauty*. Installation view, Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, February 14-May 11, 2016. Photo credit: Andrew Weber.

The opening room of the exhibition at the Toledo Museum of Art featured four items of clothing, each from different geographic and cultural regions of North America: a Nez Perce man's shirt, 1850, a Naskapi caribou coat, 1840, a Pueblo manta, c. 1850–60, and Tlingit tunic and leggings from the late nineteenth century. The choice of objects certainly underscored the regional variances within the collection, as well as the major period from which the Dikers' works derive. The dramatic presence of these first few objects set the tone for the rest of the object displays. Isolated forms hung in front of solidly colored walls, with spotlights that enhanced their shapes (fig. 1). In the following sections, works with complementary forms were housed together in display cases. Most were carefully arranged to enhance the visual relationships objects formed across the exhibition spaces, or in some cases to link objects with historical photographs of significant indigenous artists or leaders (fig. 2). Wall and label texts were the primary means the exhibition conveyed additional perspectives. Each cultural region was subdivided by one or two topics. Many labels outlined historical contexts and regional artistic trends. One of the stories that wove its way through several rooms was that of European colonization and subsequent aesthetic transformation. Within the Eastern Woodlands for example, a group of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sculpture illustrated the cultural encounters between Native nations and European colonists.



Figure 2. *Indigenous Beauty*. Installation view, Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, February 14-May 11, 2016. Photo credit: Andrew Weber.

Another theme focused on the central role of women in material productions and exchanges. Some labels directed viewers to consider indigenous artists' technical achievements generated by new tools obtained through the fur trade. Other texts explored Native American creative ingenuity in their appropriation of European materials, designs, and objects. Still other lines of inquiry in this section traced the impact of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the forced emigration of southeastern tribes as motives for artistic changes in this period.

One important effect of the exhibition trajectory on aesthetic transformation was that

it portrayed Native American artistic practice as a dynamic and ongoing tradition; it challenged widely held beliefs that artistic change and innovation are the sole purview of European artists. However, by restricting the reasons for changes to European contact and colonization, the exhibition put viewers in the position to search for what was authentically Indian about objects. Based on my informal observations, an exhibition visitor commented appreciatively that the Anishinaabe twined bag of 1830, was “not influenced by outsiders.” Likewise, among the Southwestern grouping of pots, other visitors critiqued the Acoma water jar, 1890, because it was “not Native American.” This jar featured realistic pictorial imagery of pumpkins. The label identified the pumpkins and realist style as atypical of Acoma pottery, and a departure from strictly geometric designs. In this case, the text explains that the potter probably used seed catalogues and magazines as inspiration; by this period, most Pueblo potters had access to many types of mass media publications. These visitors failed to grasp the many times before European contact that Acoma potters transformed the shapes and designs of their pots. They also missed out of knowing that in the Southwest, naturalistic and figurative representation on pottery is not uncommon. For these viewers, the exhibition affirmed the widely held misunderstanding that change in Native American art is bad.

These were unfortunate but not surprising responses. They are very common assumptions that the exhibition further reinforced by featuring only a few contemporary artworks. Of one hundred and twenty total works of art, there were only six that were created after 1960. Among these, most appear very much like the older works, just updated in a few ways. Some recent pieces were nestled in among the older materials without noting the new methods and meanings. Additionally, the display of large black and white photographs of artists and tribal leaders only helped preserve a sense of Native Americans as historical figures, and not living peoples. Despite Penney’s admirable intentions to glean a variety of important stories from the Diker collection, in some ways this exhibition reinforced an old myth that indigenous beauty is only to be found in the past.

Yet, as Penney observes, the task of interpreting a single collection is challenging.¹ The Dikers are devoted to a very particular Western modernist sensibility, which does limit the types, periods, and styles of works they purchase.² The vast majority of the Dikers’ objects date from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was a particularly intense period of indigenous dispossession of lands and material culture. Penney supports the Dikers’ aesthetic choices, while extending the perimeters of appreciation for their collection. This includes the sometimes “cruel histories” of how Native American objects have become separated or “otherwise removed from the communities in which they were made and used.”³ These more uncomfortable stories of colonialism are often ignored in Native American art exhibitions that direct viewers’ eyes toward the purely pleasurable and sensuous. Yet, Penney reminds readers that many objects in this collection were never made for museum display.⁴ While examining the Apsáalooke (Crow) man’s shirt, 1875, for example, I found myself wondering how a man lost or became separated from such a magnificent shirt? Its collection history was not explained on the exhibition label or in the catalogue. Of course, this story may not be known.

The paucity of information about the objects haunts not just those belonging to the Dikers, but many historical Native American art collections. The real value of bringing them to public attention is to ameliorate historical deficiencies. As Penney points out, viewers can admire the beauty of the objects in this collection, and they also can glean awareness of North American indigenous experience. This more inclusive approach to the discourse on

Native American art follows the last significant display of objects from the Diker Collection. In 2004, the National Museum of the American Indian exhibition (NMAI), presented *First American Art: The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection of American Indian Art*, organized by Gerald McMaster and Bruce Bernstein, was comprised of about two hundred works from around seven Native American aesthetic principles of idea, integrity, emotion, intimacy, movement, composition, and vocabulary. The NMAI curatorial team emphasized the visual, along with the moral, political, and philosophical ideas evoked by the objects. The exhibition additionally presented connections between the artwork, the original makers, and contemporary Native peoples. This strategy is key to the overall success of *Indigenous Beauty*. While the voices and creative endeavors of present day artists are minimally represented in the Diker Collection, the exhibition addressed aesthetic values that are key to indigenous cultural sustainability. Though the installation focused on the materials, designs, and technical mastery of the artwork, thereby reifying beliefs in indigenous purity for some viewers, the exhibition texts challenged such conventional perspectives. *Indigenous Beauty* engaged the potential of the Diker Collection to teach complex stories about high artistic achievement, cultural transformation, and past injustices. The real lasting beauty of the exhibition is in its inclusive museum practices, which in turn contributes a model for a better world.

A later exhibition of this collection, Art of Native America: The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was reviewed in Issue 5.1 of Panorama. Please [click here](#) to read the review by Jami Powell.

Notes

¹ David Penney, "Indigenous Beauty: An Introduction to the Diker Collection," in *Indigenous Beauty: Masterworks of American Indian Art from the Diker Collection*, exh. cat. David W. Penney, ed. New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, in association with the American Federation of Arts, 2015, 18.

² Charles and Valerie Diker, Foreword to *Indigenous Beauty: Masterworks of American Indian Art from the Diker Collection*, exh. cat. David W. Penney, ed. New York: Skira Rizzoli Publications, in association with the American Federation of Arts, 2015, 8.

³ Penney, *Indigenous Beauty*, 19.

⁴ Penney, *Indigenous Beauty*, 14.