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American Art: *The Stories We Carry* at the Seattle Art Museum

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The Seattle Art Museum (SAM)'s American art galleries open not with a Hudson River School panorama or a display of Revolutionary-era portraiture but with contemporary artist Wendy Red Star's (Apsáalooke, b. 1981) [Áakiiwilaxpaake \(People of the Earth\)](#): a monumental view of Mount Tahoma (Rainier) and the Seattle skyline with a group portrait of women and children from the region's Indigenous communities (fig. 1). Red Star's work—local, Native, and female—disrupts the Eurocentric masculinity of canonical American art, and it sets the stage for gallery spaces that challenge received notions of portraiture and landscape. There, scenic views by Frederick Edwin Church and John Frederick Kensett sit in dialogue with abstract paintings and sculptures by Morris Graves and George Tsutakawa to explore artists' strategies for responding to the natural world, while likenesses by Will Wilson and Kehinde Wiley face off against their historical counterparts to question notions of portraiture, privilege, identity, and representation in American art.



Fig. 1. Installation view of *American Art: The Stories We Carry*, 2022, Seattle Art Museum. Photo: Scott Michell Leen © Seattle Art Museum

This installation reflects curatorial goals to reimagine how we talk about American art at SAM and display it in our galleries. What is America? What is American art? Who decides and why? Answering these questions required stepping out of the dual museum comfort zones of chronology and institutional voice to take a more dynamic, thematic, and collaborative approach. Working with three artists—Red Star, Nicholas Galanin

(Tlingit/Unangax̄, b. 1979), and Inye Wokoma (b. 1969)—four interns, and twelve community advisors, we interrogated the American art canon, explored the context and history of SAM's American art collection, set priorities, identified big ideas, and developed ways of activating them—all to offer a more expansive vision of the American experience.

Front and center in all of our of conversations was the fact that American art is as multilayered as America itself. More a collective of regions than a homogenous whole, the geopolitical expanse now known as North America is home to numerous clearly identifiable yet often intersecting communities, each of which possesses equally layered artistic traditions and cultural practices. Through overlapping thematic displays of works from SAM's collection, our galleries now give voice to the stories told and carried in America through its art. To close with one example, we explore boundaries, borders, and cross-cultural exchange through the display of paintings by Church, Kensett, Robert Swain Gifford, and Cleveland S. Rockwell together with early American silver and Northwest Coast Native trade goods.

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