Indigenous Art at the YUAG

BY YILIN CHEN, ONLINE EDITOR

After ascending the monochromatic, geometrically pristine staircase of the Yale University Art Gallery (YUAG), I reach the fourth floor. The first thing that leaps out at me is a wall of vibrant purple hue. Titled “Place, Nations, Generations, Beings: 200 Years of Indigenous North American Art,” the exhibition features over 90 works of drawings, photography, textiles, woodwork, pottery, and basketry from over 40 Indigenous nations.

Curated by Katherine Nova McCleary (Little Shell Chippewa-Cree) ’18 and Joseph Zordan (Bad River Ojibwe) ’19, the exhibition marks one of many firsts for the University. It is the first major Indigenous art exhibition to ever go on view at the YUAG. It is also the first initiative to foster a direct conversation about Indigenous art between the YUAG, the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Of course, it was no easy task. Bringing the exhibition from concept to reality required a critical examination of Yale’s relationship with Indigenous art, as well as an open discussion around best practices for educating the public.

As McCleary and Shrestinian point out in their introduction to the exhibition catalogue, “Indigenous North American art is an enduring yet under-recognized presence at Yale University.” Yale was founded on land that belonged to the Quinnipiac people, and its institutional establishment was inextricably connected with the Quinnipiac people’s displacement. Generations of Yale scholars and alumni have amassed a sizable collection of Indigenous objects, the majority of which are held at the Peabody.

“These who collected these objects ... often believed they were helping to preserve Indigenous cultures by doing so—a practice known as ‘salvage anthropology’—even as settler institutions were dispossessing Indigenous nations of their lands and forcing them to abandon their cultural practices,” the curators wrote. They argued that the act of removing art from their communities threatened present and future Indigenous art practices.

After sorting through thousands of objects scattered in the three major institutions, the curators carefully compiled a list of artworks to put on view. According to Laurence Kanter, the Chief Curator at the YUAG, the process involved considering the role of the objects within their original contexts and cultural practices. He explained that if, for example, the object was meant to be buried or was part of a living ritual, the museum has no right to display it.

What came to life is an exhibition that honors the cultural story and aesthetic value of Indigenous objects. Under the umbrella of “Place, Nations, Generations, Beings,” four thematic sections respectively highlight the relationship between Indigenous people and their lands, the expression of nationhood and sovereignty, the transmission of traditions and values from one generation to the next, and the significance of non-human entities and spirits.

Featured prominently on one side of the gallery, First Teachers Balance the Universe anchors the exhibition. This 2015 work by Marrie Watt (Seneca) consists of two embroidered wool blankets that situate the Seneca creation story of Sky Woman in the context of twenty-first-century popular culture and technological advancements. The rich colors of the threads stand out against a dark background, imbuing the gallery space with the energy of their bright purple, pink, blue, and red hues. These are exactly the colors dominating the gallery room, each corresponding to a theme in the exhibition title.

“We didn’t want to choose earthly colors, because they often make the space feel darker and visitors would tend to associate Indigenous people more with nature. We wanted to steer away from that implicit messaging,” Shrestinian said. Such “implicit messaging,” or misrepresentation, was a central reason for the curators’ efforts to move Indigenous art from the Peabody to the YUAG; they hoped to convey that Indigenous art is art, not artifact. Zordan emphasized the way that the setting could influence visitors’ perception of Indigenous works. In a natural history setting, people consider the object was meant to be buried or was part of a living ritual, the museum has no right to display it.

Indigenous art is art, not artifact.
Exchange project of Photos from the tic practices and cultural legacies continue to make in their respective nations. Even though their exact that these artists once occupied an important place instead of the conventional phrase “Unknown Art cil, the curators chose to use “Artist Once Known” titled “Misunderstood! Indigenous Art and Poetry possible to an audience that is not as familiar with our able to think about how to make their work accesses. curators were doing. And on their end, they were willingness to be honest with us in a way that other tors address the misrepresentation of Native peo provided crucial knowledge that helped the curators’ recommendations, the YUAG, the Pea the curators established an all-Native curatorial group. had open discussions about the selection of objects, the Cultural Center, the curators collaborated with the possibility should be approached on a case-by-case basis. curators stressed that there is no unified, monolithic feel is important to communicate?” Specifically, the curators echoed this sentiment by expressing influence for Indigenous art at Yale. yale is certainly not the first institution to assemble an Advisory Council, yet it aims to carry out the Yale Museum of Art project that was gifted to be lacking elsewhere. “The unfortunate reality is that in a number of cases [at other museums], the recommendations of the Advisory Councils were a purely token exercise, followed by the curators said. “Yale did not want to go down that path because [the advice of the Council] is not a shopping list. It quickly became clear to everyone [in the Council] that . . . Yale wanted to know what the greatest number of people think is the right way to approach any given issue.”

While Indigenous artworks from Indigenous communities, the curators collaborated with the the legal acquisition of objects in the past two centuries is inseparable from violent assimilation practices. “Many of the works were created under duress,” Kanter said. “Others, Indigenous artists who were forced to participate in a settler-colonial economy in which they made artworks for a non-Indigenous market in order to survive. In some cases, they were forced to make objects that were not authentic to their culture. This process of confronting the hardships that Indigenous people had to endure, the exhibition celebrates the artistic prowess and communal identities that unite these objects.

“I think the exhibition has done something remarkable,” Kanter said. “I can’t congratulate the participants, producers, and curators on my own. We’re all definitely determined to not let the momentum die out,” he concluded. It’s almost closing time when I leave. The security guard pacing in the room seems to be making sure it’s not going to be wondering what’s taking us so long. As I step out of the door, I think about the legacies of this exhibition that extend beyond the fourth floor of the YUAG. Tomorrow the vibrant purple will once again await the arrival of curious visitors. It wants to tell a story of 200 years of Indigenous art, a story molded into glistening bowls and woven into radiant textiles.