Visual Arts

Native American art breaks free in Stretching the Canvas

Pop Art and contemporary politics energise an eye-opening show at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York

Dick West, Untitled (1940–1960)

Patrick Mulholland 16 HOURS AGO

When the art critic Walter Pach reviewed an exhibition of watercolours by the Pueblo peoples of Arizona and New Mexico, on show at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York in 1920, he was astounded. They were unlike anything he had ever seen. In the same way that Egyptian reliefs and

ancient Greek vases had laid the foundation for European art, wrote Pach in The New York Times, the watercolours constituted an ancient uniquely American style — a culture at once both classic and modern.

It was around this time, too, that a portly Manhattan investment banker with a fondness for cigars and limousines first developed the idea of showcasing his own collection of Native American art. His name was George Gustav Heye. As a young railroad superintendent in Kingman, Arizona, Heye had become fascinated by "disappearing" Native cultures, practically buying the clothes off the backs of Navajo Indians he met.

Harry Fonseca, Dance Break (1982)

The collection started off with one piece, then a few, until over the course of a lifetime Heye had amassed some 800,000 artefacts from across the Americas. It is now housed in what became the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC.

The NMAI's New York branch is now showing a new exhibition that will run for two years in its complex near Battery Park. Entitled *Stretching the Canvas: Eight Decades of Native Painting*, it showcases 29 painters to begin with (more will be added later), spread over five galleries. The curators' aim is not only to challenge expectations about what Native American paintings looks like; it's to show how Native artists navigated the particular complexities of how their art has been seen and shown.

"The title of this exhibit is a metaphor for stretching the definition of Indian art and how it is thought about in American society," David Penney, associate director of research and scholarship at the NMAI, explains.

While the show doesn't follow strict chronology in the gallery, the earliest works are in what became known as "the Studio Style", encouraged by government-sponsored Indian schools in Santa Fe, New Mexico and Oklahoma. The curriculums at these institutions stressed a kind of anthropological preservation, which produced "a flat, illustrative style that focused on ceremonial or cultural subjects", according to Penney.

One work that broke this mould was "First Furlough" (1943) by Quincy Tacoma. The piece depicts a Navajo GI returning home to his family from active combat, and departs from traditional approaches in narrative, form and style. Not only is there depth and perspective; Tacoma depicts the subjects in motion, not posing. The work is unmistakably contemporary.

Kathleen Ash-Milby, one of the NMAI's curators, says, "Tacoma's work is really defying all of those ideas of what Native painting should be."

Fritz Scholder, The American Indian (1970)

A generation later, the Luiseño artist Fritz Scholder took such visual experiments a step further, winning acclaim for his frank representations of Indians as they were actually living and his willingness to explore thorny political issues. Drawing upon the bold colour palettes of Pop Art, Scholder's "The American Indian" (1970) shows a chief draped in star-spangled garb. "Walking to the Next Bar" (1974), painted in both cool and warm hues, confronts themes of alcoholism and poverty.

Into the present day, the contemporary Salish artist Jaune Quick-to-see Smith has shown herself equally willing to confront politics. “Trade Canoe: Adrift” (2015) borrows traditional imagery from the displaced Duwamish people, who are currently petitioning for federal recognition as a tribe, and combines it with imagery of Syrian refugees as masked figures, crowding aboard a canoe. It is a powerful show of solidarity.

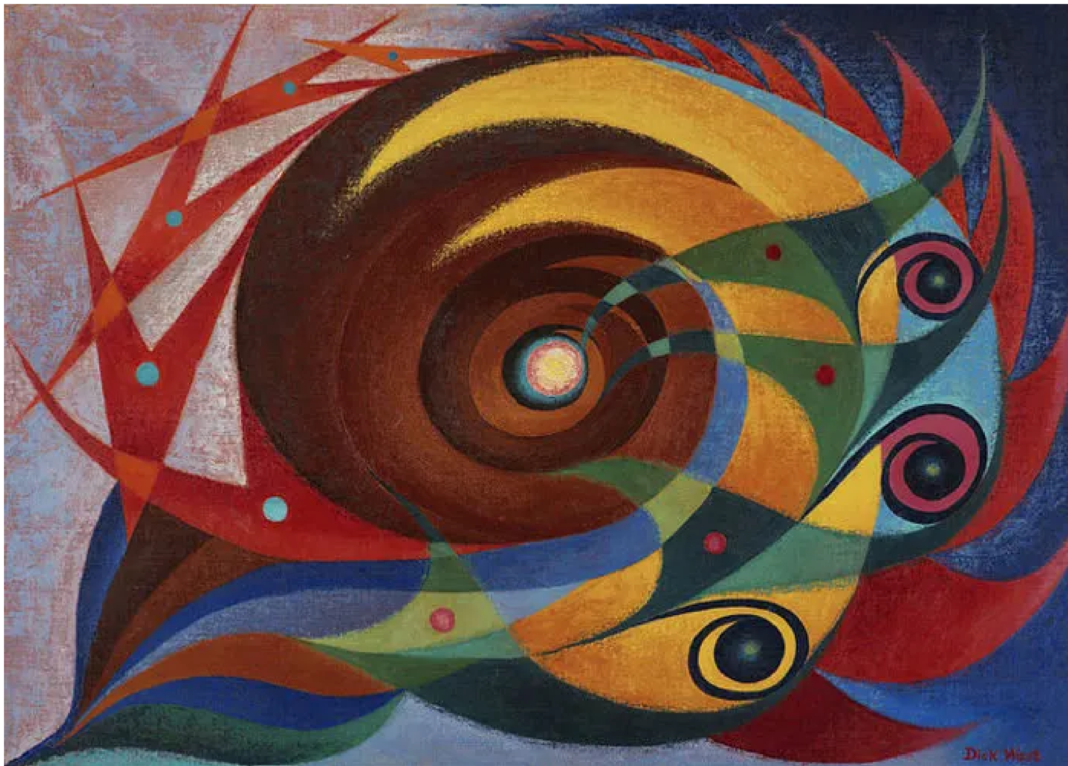
The museum also exhibits esteemed works by George Morrison, Emmi Whitehorse and Kay Walkingstick — artists who show less obvious connections to Native culture, other than that they themselves are Indian.

Julie Buffalohead, The Confirmation (2009)

The abstract painter Mario Martinez has two paintings, “First Flower” (2002) and “Brooklyn” (2003), on display. A member of Arizona’s Pasca Yaqui tribe, he often depicts his adopted home of New York, and draws inspiration from sources as diverse as cinema, jazz and rock ’n’ roll (growing up, he tells me, he danced to Little Richard “like everyone else”).

“The cultural information of my tribe was not allowed to be communicated visually,” Martinez explains; depicting sacred ceremonies was taboo. But after being introduced to Native contemporary art in 1972, he began to make his own work. Although his visual influences include Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Arshile Gorky and the German Expressionists, he says, “I still knew where I came from . . . I always looked at myself as a multi-layered person.”

Indeed, amid the joyous brushwork of Martinez’s paintings there are hints of flowers, natural forms and other abstract patterns, all of which have their origins in the pre-Columbian Yaqui religion.



Dick West, Spatial Whorl (1949–1950)

He gestures towards a much earlier painting, “Spatial Whorl” (1949), by Dick West. “That’s as good as anything else being done at that time,” he says. “What’s great about this exhibition is that it shows our connectivity to everything that was going on in American art.”

Perhaps that’s the lesson of *Stretching the Canvas*: far from these works being separate from the mainstream, or in need of preservation, they are part of the ongoing story of American art. Not a culture apart; part of American culture.

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