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Author: Randy Kennedy

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Native American Treasures Head to the Met, This Time as American Art

By RANDY KENNEDY APRIL 6, 2017



A Pomo basket from Northern California, from around 1890, is paired with "Dance in a Subterranean Roundhouse at Clear Lake, California," by Jules Tavernier, in the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The basket is among works donated to the Met by Charles and Valerie Diker. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

When they visit the majestic American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, some international art lovers — especially ones from Canada, Australia and Asia — leave a bit perplexed, as if they've somehow missed an important gallery.

“They go through and expect to see Native American work here,” Sylvia Yount, the curator in charge of the wing, said the other day. “Because often where they come from, indigenous art is part of the narrative of a nation’s art, in a way that it’s not in the United States. We’re really behind the curve.”

But now the museum, with the help of a promised gift from one of the most comprehensive collections of Native American art in private hands, is poised to catapult itself well ahead of that curve. And the pieces that will soon arrive — among them a masterpiece jar by the Hopi-Tewa potter Nampeyo; an 18th-century Tlingit dagger with a haunting face-shaped hilt; a painted shield by the Hunkpapa Lakota master Joseph No Two Horns, from the Standing Rock reservation in the Dakotas — will not go where historical Native American art is often found, in the galleries for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas.

They will go instead in the American Wing, among paintings and sculpture by Gilbert Stuart, John Singer Sargent, Frederic Remington and Augustus Saint-Gaudens, “to display art from the first Americans within its appropriate geographical context,” as the museum says.

For the donors of the gift, Charles and Valerie Diker, who live in an apartment brimful of Native American pieces and American modernist painting just a few blocks from the museum, the Met’s curatorial decision is nothing less than a groundbreaking affirmation of the way they have thought about their collection for more than 40 years.



A rare water jar from the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, foreground, in the apartment of Charles and Valerie Diker. Among the couple's overall collection are pieces by (clockwise from left) Isamu Noguchi, Joan Miró, Jean Arp, Alexander Calder (two works), Mark Rothko and Deborah Butterfield. Joshua Bright for The New York Times; Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York; 2017 Jean Arp, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Successió Miró / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris, 2017; 2017 Calder Foundation, New York/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; All Rights Reserved, Deborah Butterfield/Licensed by VAGA, New York

“We always felt that what we were collecting was American art,” Mr. Diker said in a recent interview with the couple in their apartment. “And we always felt very strongly that it should be shown in that context.”

Behind them was a rare 19th-century clay water jar from the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, sitting cater-corner from a radiant Minimalist painting by Agnes Martin made in the next century and the same state, in Galisteo, N.M., less than 150 miles from the pueblo. And the spot where the Agnes Martin work now hangs was, not long ago, they said, occupied by a prized Navajo chief's blanket, whose slightly quavery horizontal stripes, punctuated by insect-dye red, look like something Martin might have painted.

“More than 40 years ago,” Mrs. Diker said, “we made a very important decision — to remove all the fireplaces from this apartment so that we could make room for more art. Even the doors here are in funny places, to accommodate pieces.”

The couple started out in the early 1960s, as soon as they could afford it, collecting mostly American contemporary painting and sculpture — Mark Rothko, Isamu Noguchi, Louise Nevelson — and then, in an unusual but passionate adjunct, pre-Columbian work.

“But at some point we began to think, ‘Why collect pre-Columbian, from Mexico and Guatemala, when there’s so much wonderful work that was made here, in the place where we live, and is part of that history?’” said Mr. Diker, an investor who became successful early on as president of the Aurora model and toy company.

(In addition to their relationship with the Met, the Dikers are founding chairman and chairwoman of the National Museum of the American Indian’s George Gustav Heye Center, in New York.)



A 19th-century Iroquois/Haudenosaunee pouch donated by the Dikers and displayed in the Met's American Wing. The pouch depicts sacred conjoined twins — central figures in the legends of New York's Iroquois, or Haudenosaunee.
Joshua Bright for The New York Times

Their Native American collection began with mostly Southwestern art bought during frequent trips to Santa Fe, N.M., where they eventually bought a house. “But then we began to encroach, I guess you might say, on the rest of the country,” Mr. Diker said. “We wanted quality, not quantity, and we wanted the collection to represent the breadth of the country. We wanted it to be a collection you could teach from.”

A few of its pieces are already performing that function in the American Wing, in a preview of what the entire gift, 91 works in all, joining 20 already given by the couple, might look like when it arrives at the museum next year. The gift will be unveiled in a major exhibition scheduled for fall 2018.

During a recent walk through the galleries, Ms. Yount pointed out a work previously donated by the Dikers, a black-on-black olla vessel, by the renowned New Mexican Tewa potters Maria and Julian Martinez, newly on display between Ernest Blumenschein's 1933 painting "Taos Valley, New Mexico" and Remington's 1907 painting "On the Southern Plains." Nearby, a zigzag-patterned Pomo basket from Northern California, made around 1890, rests next to a recently acquired 1878 painting by Jules Tavernier (1844-1889), "Dance in a Subterranean Roundhouse at Clear Lake, California," a depiction of a Pomo coming-of-age ceremony, showing one of the baskets featured in the foreground.

"These are things we're starting to experiment with," Ms. Yount said. "We don't want Native work to just seem to be an illustration of what you might be seeing in a painting. But at the same time, we want pieces to be integrated, to be a regular part of what we do in these galleries, and not ever made to seem like an add-on."

A new pairing of a Iroquois pouch and a John Trumbull painting of George Washington with Billy Lee, Washington's slave servant, brings up relationships between Native and enslaved people. It's one of many ways "to complicate the narrative" told by so many works in the wing, Ms. Yount said, the products of artists on the conquering side of Manifest Destiny.

While some American art museums — among them the Denver Art Museum, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey — have notable collections of Native American work, many large encyclopedic institutions continue to have spotty holdings. And the sometimes-troubled history of sizable collections of Native art in natural history museums, where the work is usually presented ethnographically, underscores those gaps. The National Museum of the American Indian in New York and Washington, considered one of the world's best collections, has bridged some of the gaps. But curators describe an immense distance yet to be traveled before Native American art is given its due in public collections.



An olla by the New Mexican Tewa potters Maria and Julian Martinez, donated by the Dikers, is paired with Ernest Blumenschein's 1933 painting "Taos Valley, New Mexico" at the Met. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

“There’s a huge opportunity,” said Gaylord Torrence, senior curator of American Indian art at the Nelson-Atkins, in Kansas City, Mo., and curator of the exhibition “The Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky,” which traveled to the Met in 2015. “The field is still very much in play, and so many things are still emerging from closets and attics and basements, some of them real masterworks.”

The Met’s decision not only to begin pursuing Native American collections — a priority of Thomas P. Campbell, the museum’s director, who is leaving in June — but also to rethink “old curatorial constraints,” is “a massive leap, really a transformative event,” said Mr. Torrence, a guest curator for the 2018 show. “And the Dikers help make that possible. Partly because, as collectors of modern and contemporary art, they approached Native American art with a sense of connoisseurship and aesthetic appreciation that is rare, which is not to say they weren’t also interested in the cultural and historical significance of it — and that’s a difficult balance.”

The Dikers, leading a winding apartment tour through guest bedrooms and hallways showing work bound for the Met, said that their interest was fueled, and continues to be, by a sense of discovery rare in most collecting fields. “We felt like we were uncovering something the world really didn’t know much about,” Mr. Diker said. “So few people were collecting this work seriously.”

Mrs. Diker added: “We never bought these things so that they would go into storage. We wanted art only to be able to live with it.”

The thought of much of it soon leaving their home for one of the world’s largest, busiest museums, they said, isn’t something they like to dwell on. But then again, it won’t be going far.

“It’s a great museum, it has a huge hole in its collection that needs to be filled — and we can walk there,” Mr. Diker said. “I’d say that’s a good fit.”

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