

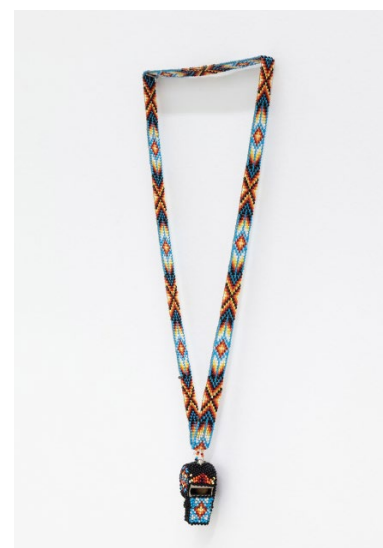


How Collectors Can Support Indigenous and Native American Artists

By Sandra Hale Schulman

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In recent years, Native American and Indigenous artists have become increasingly visible within the cultural mainstream. This past summer, the Museum of Modern Art hung Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill's (Cree/Métis) first solo museum exhibition in the United States. Earlier that spring, Jeffrey Gibson's (Choctaw/Cherokee) interpretation of a pre-Columbian ziggurat, accompanied by a series of performances by Indigenous creatives, could be seen at Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, New York. Around that time, one could also catch the final days of Kent Monkman's (Cree) monumental Great Hall commission at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the museum had recently hired its first curator of Native American art, Patricia Marroquin Norby (Purépecha), the year before. Right now, MoMA PS1's quinquennial survey "Greater New York" prominently features works by a number of Native American artists, including Alan Michelson (Mohawk), G. Peter Jemison (Seneca Nation, Heron Clan), Athena LaTocha (Standing Rock Lakota, Keweenaw Bay Ojibwe), and the poet Diane Burns (Chemehuevi/Anishinaabe).



Nichoas Galanin, Native American Beadwork: Rape Whistle Pendant, 2014

Meanwhile, Oklahoma City's First Americans Museum opened to the public for the first time this September, and major international exhibitions like the São Paulo Bienal put Indigenous artists from around the world at the center of their programming. This flurry of institutional activity can be seen in the commercial art world as well. Jessica Silverman's booth at this year's Art Basel in Basel marked the first time Rose B. Simpson's (Santa Clara Pueblo) earthenware sculptures had been shown in Europe. And at the most recent edition of the Armory Fair, works by Gibson, Wendy Red Star (Crow), Marie Watt (Seneca) and Brad Kahlhamer were catching collector's eyes left and right.

"There's a growing interest in Native arts that I've seen building in the United States over the past decade," said Candice Hopkins (Carcross/Tagish First Nation), executive director of the recently launched arts initiative Forge Project. Located in upstate New York on the unceded,

ancestral lands of the Muh-he-con-ne-ok, Forge supports and advocates for Indigenous cultural leadership, food security, and land justice through its fellowship program, teaching farm, and lending art collection. According to Hopkins, those interested in collecting works by Indigenous and Native American artists should do so with an informed, thoughtful, and intentional approach.

“It’s important that this work doesn’t just enter a private collection, never to be seen again,” she said. “Making this work accessible is one of the things we focus on at Forge.” The organization’s own lending collection currently houses over 100 works by contemporary Indigenous and Hudson Valley-based artists including Gibson, Red Star, Watt, Kahlhamer, Smith, and Simpson, in addition to pieces by Cara Romero (Chemehuevi), Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Unangax), Raven Halfmoon (Caddo Nation), Sky Hopinka (Ho-Chunk Nation/Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians), and Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne/Arapaho), among many others.

The collection is also accessible online for free via Forge’s website and is displayed physically in rotating on-site exhibitions. By focusing on acquiring works directly from living artists, Forge is able to use its resources to support and invest in their careers directly. “The existence of an organization like Forge really demonstrates that this was work we’ve all known needed to be paid attention to,” said Hopkins. “Now it’s starting to get serious.”

She added that galleries and the way collectors drive demand are integral to establishing sustainable support for Native American artists. “Generally speaking, work by Native American artists tend to be priced lower than the work of their contemporary peers,” she explained. “I think that we need to start addressing that gap in valuation. It requires people to look a little harder and to work with smaller commercial galleries.”

Hopkins also recommended that collectors seek out and work with artists directly, as many Native artists aren’t represented by galleries. “We have a history of losing control of the way we and our work has been represented,” she explained. “It’s incredibly important for commercial galleries to understand that if they’re going to represent Native artists, that there are particular ways our work should be contextualized.”

Something that’s been enormously beneficial to this effort has been an increase in the number of curators and institutional leaders who are educated about the topic, and who are themselves Indigenous. “There’s now a recognition that Native art has not been well represented in mainstream museums,” said Hopkins. “There’s still a glaring absence, but I think that some of the shifts we’ve been seeing are happening because curators are self-educating themselves and are increasingly coming from museum education departments as part of the ongoing dialogue of what it might mean to decolonize mainstream institutions.

This recontextualization also means that the assumed audience for these works is able to shift dramatically, allowing for more inclusive engagement. “When we’re represented through our own perspectives and lenses, Native people start to see that this is also a place for them; that their culture is not for the early waves of Europeans who were functioning from the Anglo-Saxon mindset, where artworks were collected for the wealth of white institutions,” said Hopkins.

Recently, Forge Project announced its four inaugural fellows: artist Sky Hopinka, architect Chris T. Cornelius (Oneida), environmental justice advocate Jasmine Neosh (Menominee), and writer Brock Schreiber (Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans). The diversity of this cohort speaks to the holistic approach Forge takes when it comes to supporting Native culture at large. “We’re really working with leaders on all levels,” said Hopkins.

She continued: “Forge’s co-founders—Becky Gochman and Zach Feuer—understood right from the beginning that this was a project that takes place on stolen land. We really understand that part of what is actionable in the ethics of land back is to return stewardship of territories back to Indigenous people.” This deep-seated understanding of contemporary Indigenous values and an acknowledgement of being part of a greater cultural network should also be applied to how collectors approach Native artists. “Art exists in an ecosystem,” explained Hopkins. “Museums, critics, curators, educators, the public, and collectors are all part of that.”