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Past Common Works of Art

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2021 Common Work of Art

Native Hosts, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds

Cultural affiliations: Cheyenne, Arapaho

born 1954

Kaw, 2018

Kickapoo, 2018

Potawatomi, 2018

Ne Me Ha Ha Ki, 2018

loway, 2018

from *Native Hosts*

metal

Museum purchase: Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund,

[2018.0237](#), [2019.0059](#), [.0060](#), [.0061](#), [.0062](#)

2021 Common Work of Art | "Native Host," Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds



The [KU Common Book](#) program represents a campus-wide initiative to engage first-year students in a shared reading and discursive experience. Each year, the Spencer Museum of Art selects a KU Common Work of Art to complement and expand upon the Common Book's themes. This year's Common Book is *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Kimmerer weaves together Indigenous and scientific ways of knowing to prompt a relationship of reciprocity in which people and land serve as good medicine for each other. One obstacle to this reciprocity, Kimmerer argues, is a need for greater knowledge about the history and culture of the land. She states, "Our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories." This need prompted the selection of this year's Common Work of Art, a series of five signs by Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds.

Heap of Birds addresses issues of place, heritage, dominant culture, and memory through his text-based artworks. The five panels in this *Native Hosts* series name Native

tribes who historically or currently inhabit the region that is now called Kansas. The place name Kansas is derived from that of the Kaw Nation (or Kanza or Kansa). On each sign in the *Native Hosts* series, the colonial name of a location is printed backwards, while the name of the land's original occupants is printed forwards. Heap of Birds explains:

The Kaw selection represents a historic tribe and river from the Lawrence area. The tribe has since been forcibly removed to Oklahoma Indian Territory near Ponca City, Oklahoma. The other four nations listed are the only tribes that have reservation status and land holdings in Kansas. Ne Me Ha Ha Ki is the preferred name of the Sac and Fox Nation of Kansas. With my project it is often fitting to offer an original tribal spelling of the Indigenous nation.

The visual tension that Heap of Birds creates between these names aims to remind viewers of the displacement of Native Americans from their homelands as well as their continued and active presence in the Americas. The signs acknowledge that the land holds history and stories beyond or outside colonial expectations. When speaking about another series of *Native Hosts* signs on a university campus, Heap of Birds said "I hope that the [students], staff, and faculty come through this campus and that they wonder about the tribal identity that they are actually walking over. That they wonder about the sacred sites. [That] they wonder, 'well, what is that word?' It's a foreign word, but here they are in Native America and why is it a foreign word? This is the place it all starts."

Heap of Birds is very conscious of his identity and responsibility when researching incarnations of *Native Hosts* across North America, noting that when he is home among the Cheyenne he understands what that means, but when he steps away from that territory he has to acknowledge the tribes wherever he might be. This responsibility compels Heap of Birds to ask himself—and us—how do you conduct your own life as a visitor?

The *Native Hosts* panels are installed outside the entrance to the Spencer Museum of Art on Mississippi Street. A virtual exhibition drawing further connections between *Braiding Sweetgrass* and the Spencer's collection is forthcoming, and a sampling of art included in the virtual exhibition will be on display in the Spencer's Learning Center when the Museum reopens in fall 2021. This page will continue to be updated with relevant resources for expanding conversation about the 2021 KU Common Work of Art.

[Update about the theft and vandalism of the *Native Hosts* installation.](#)

Videos

- [Watch](#) Edgar Heap of Birds's 2019 lecture at the Spencer Museum of Art recalling his studies at the University of Kansas, his public art, studio practice, and the *Native*

Hosts series at the Spencer (1 hr 16 min)

- [Watch](#) a 20-minute guided nature tour with Robin Wall Kimmerer commissioned by The Commons at the University of Kansas
- [Watch](#) a short introduction to the KU Field Station

Artist's website

- [Explore](#) other works by Edgar Heap of Birds

Related readings

- [Robin Wall Kimmerer exploring loss and restoration of the Tallgrass Prairie](#)
- [Learn](#) about Lawrence's endeavor to return a sacred prayer rock stolen from the Kaw Nation's homelands

Related assignments

- [Adding Art to the KU Common Book](#)
 - [Engaging with Art and the Common Book](#)
 - [A Cultural Geography Approach to Place](#)
 - [Connections Between Issues of the Post-Frontier Era and Representations of Land at the Spencer Museum of Art](#)
 - [Cultural Geography, Art, and the Power of Place](#)
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