

Beauty and Significance of Native Fashion Spotlighted in New Exhibition

medicinemangallery.com/blogs/essential-west/spencer-museum-september-2024

BY CHADD SCOTT ON SEP 04, 2024

The Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas in Lawrence shares the beauty and significance of Native fashion in a new exhibition by that same name. “Native Fashion” explores the diversity and ingenuity of wearable artworks produced by Native people from the 19th century into today. On view are traditional garments, contemporary couture and streetwear, and an expansive array of accessories, including jewelry, bags, and other adornments.

“‘Native Fashion’ offers our audiences a compelling opportunity to explore fashion as both core to Native identity and as a living art that continues to have meaning and impact to tribal communities,” Saralyn Reece Hardy, the Marilyn Stokstad Director of the Spencer Museum of Art, said.

The Museum tells this story through four themes: resilience, representation, resistance, and relations.



Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas in Lawrence “Native Fashion” exhibition installation image. Photography by Ryan Cole Waggoner. Courtesy the Spencer Museum of Art.

“Resilience” explores Indigenous innovation and resourcefulness in the use and development of materials and techniques. This includes an examination of how trade among Native communities, and later Europeans, influenced craft, design, and embellishment.

“Representation” celebrates the diversity of tribal nations showcasing various styles of traditional and contemporary dress. The exhibition features makers from over 40 tribal nations. Among the contemporary artists with work on view are superstars in the fashion and broader art worlds like Teri Greeves (Kiowa) – a bead worker who’s participated in countless museum exhibitions and was featured this summer in the *New York Times* – Jamie Okuma (Luiseno, Shoshone-Bannock, Wailaki, and Okinawan) – who has outfitted attendees at the Met Gala and Oscar nominee Lilly Gladstone at the Independent Spirit Awards – Patricia Michaels (Taos Pueblo) – who took first runner up on Season 11 of Bravo’s “Project Runway” with her Native inspired fashion – Chris Pappan (Osage, Kaw, Cheyenne River Lakota Sioux), Ryan Redcorn (Osage), Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke) – an artist with numerous solo shows at major museums around the nation over the past three years – Cara Romero (Chemehuevi) – her photography has been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art – and Diego Romero (Cochiti Pueblo).

The impact of celebrity designers like these has already had a trickle-down effect on Native fashion; their breakthroughs should fuel the movement forward for years to come according to Sydney Pursel (Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska), Spencer Museum of Art Curator for Public Practice, who curated the show alongside a group of Indigenous advisors and collaborators.

“Seeing someone who looks like you or represents your culture at major fashion festivals and on television shows like ‘Project Runway’ inspires younger generations to follow their dreams,” Pursel said. “It shows that it is possible to come from a small Indigenous community and succeed on the big stage. It was exciting for all Natives, not just those from Taos Pueblo, to root for Patricia Michaels on ‘Project Runway.’ She made all of Indian Country proud!”

“Resistance” examines the impact of colonization, government policies, and activism on Indigenous identity and dress, including the ways in which activist groups utilize wearable symbols for awareness and solidarity.

Pursel credits resistance for the notoriety Native designers are currently experiencing.



Cara Romero, 'Naomi,' 2018. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri (Gift of Steven and Keely Rosenberg).

“Because of countless activists who call out brands and companies who appropriate Native designs the industry is starting to listen and learn that they need to hire and involve Indigenous people,” she said.

To her point, “Native Fashion” includes works produced in collaboration with global brands such as Nike, Ralph Lauren, and Mattel.

Pursel also credits Indigenous fashion writers like [Christian Allaire \(Ojibwe\)](#) highlighting Native designers in major magazines, and the power of social media to help designers promote themselves, diminishing their reliance on mainstream media, for [pushing Native fashion to new heights](#).

In addition to a selection of patches and pins dating from the 1970s into the 2020s, the “Resistance” section includes photographs, paintings, and works on paper capturing the trajectory of Native innovation and style through time.

Finally, “Relations” highlights connections between people and place through artists, designers, and storytellers from Lawrence and the surrounding region.

“The Native advisors on the project wanted to make sure that we support and showcase the work that people are doing right here in our community and uplift them by showing their work alongside nationally recognized designers and artists,” Pursel said. “We have a very diverse Native presence here in Lawrence because of [Haskell Indian Nations University](#) which has students from over 140 different tribal Nations; many tribes and their cultures are represented through the work of local designers in the exhibition.”



Teri Greeves, 'Spider Woman-Emerging Woman,' 2015. Collection Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas. Gift of the H Tony and Marti Oppenheimer Foundation.

An interactive display features portraits of prominent Indigenous community members taken by students studying photography at Haskell Indian Nations University. Additionally, video documentation from the "Indigenous Couture Goes Vogue" runway show organized by Esmarie Cariaga (Isanti Dakota) at Haskell in April 2024 will accompany outfits worn in the show.

"Native Fashion" opened September 1 and runs through January 5, 2025. Visitors will come away understanding how Native fashion is inseparable from Native culture and identity.

"Native fashion is and has always involved storytelling, tradition, and adaptation. Certain designs, patterns, and even hairstyles belong to specific tribes and have historically been used to identify people as being from a community," Pursel said. "Today, Natives wear designers from various tribes to support them and their art."

In addition to the exhibition, on December 14, 2024, the Spencer will host a runway show to highlight contemporary Native fashion and celebrate Native designers from the region.

The exhibition is also accompanied by a series of workshops for aspiring Native designers and models led by Native fashion writer Jessica Metcalfe (Turtle Mountain Chippewa), designer and filmmaker Steven Paul Judd (Kiowa, Choctaw), and designer, filmmaker, and model Peshawn Bread (Comanche, Kiowa, Cherokee).

[PREVIOUS ARTICLE](#)

[Into Old Growth Forest with Photographer Mitch Epstein](#)

[NEXT ARTICLE](#)

[Pendleton Round-Up brings thousands of visitors - and art - to eastern Oregon](#)