



Native Fashion Exhibit Brings Tradition And Modern Style To Life

By Monica V. Reynolds

For some, fashion is more than just clothing; it's a language tied to identity, culture, and belonging. The *Native Fashion* exhibit at the Spencer Museum of Art at The University of Kansas has brought this idea to life by highlighting the creativity of Native American designers past and present, locally and nationally.

The display features more than 100 pieces that span centuries of Indigenous clothing design. Items range from photography and prints, alongside traditional garments like moccasins and powwow regalia, to contemporary streetwear, accessories, and haute couture. Several museums and cultural centers lent pieces from their collections. The Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art and The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art provided works from well-known Native designers, while the Haskell Cultural Center and Museum offered items that connected closely to local Indigenous history and culture.

The exhibit is built around “the four R’s” – key themes that include Resilience, Resistance, Representation, and Relations. “The Four R’s are about showing how Native fashion is more than just clothing,” said Curator Sydney Pursel, a member of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska. “It’s a way to express identity, challenge stereotypes, and connect deeply with culture, history, and community.”

The idea for this thought-provoking exhibit came about after Sydney became the Curator for Public Practice at the Museum. She felt it was important to connect with the community to learn how the Museum could better serve and represent local people. This led to a series of open forums that invited members of Black, Indigenous, and disability communities to share their ideas. During these discussions, Indigenous residents shared their interest in a Native fashion exhibit. The idea quickly gained support. Throughout the curation process, Sydney prioritized including Indigenous voices in every stage, from planning to art selections, to ensure it was a true reflection of local voices and heritage. “As an Indigenous person, I’m still learning about my own tribe,” she said. “I can’t possibly know everything there is to know about all tribes, and I would have made a lot of mistakes if I was working on this project by myself. So it was really important to have advisors who represented a bunch of different Indigenous communities.”

From Sydney’s perspective, the *Native Fashion* exhibit opens up an essential conversation, as Indigenous fashion has often been overlooked or dismissed as a craft rather than recognized as an art form. “For a long time, Indigenous fashion hasn’t been seen as ‘real’ art,” she said. “But by showcasing these designs in a museum setting, right alongside traditional art forms, we’re sending a message that Native fashion is just as skilled, creative, and meaningful as any painting or sculpture.”



Sydney Pursel



The “Relations” section of the exhibition, featuring works by Wendy Red Star, Rita Belgarde, Jamie Okuma, and AJ Holder.



Instead of only looking at traditional designs from the past, the exhibit features work from contemporary designers to show that Native culture is still alive, evolving, and relevant today. Sydney and her team showcased local Indigenous designers alongside nationally recognized names to show that local talent deserves the same recognition and spotlight. Among the contemporary designers featured is Raya Lebeau, who brings a punk rock flair to the exhibit with her studded and spiked handbag made of recycled materials. This piece is featured in the “Resistance” section of the exhibit. “She uses a lot of sustainable and eco-conscious materials so she’s recycling things and creating new garments,” Sydney said. “She’s a leather worker primarily, so she makes a lot of accessories, chokers, earrings, and also utilizes a lot of horse hair.”

An unexpected piece in the collection is a beaded backpack by Jamie Okuma, featuring a hyper-realistic depiction of “Pinhead,” the central villain in the 1987 horror film, *Hellraiser*. By using traditional Native beadwork to portray a pop-culture antihero, Jamie challenges visitors to rethink what Native fashion can be. “When people think of Native fashion, I know they’re not expecting to see that work,” Sydney said.

Another noteworthy piece on display is the *Remarkable MMIW* pantsuit, designed by Lisa LaRue Baker and Konrad Pumpkin Seed. The garment features images of three women on the back and is emblazoned with the letters MMIW to raise awareness for the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW). This design is featured as part of the exhibit’s “Resistance” theme.



Ryan Cole Waggoner



“Becoming” by Jamie Okuma

“Lisa wore it to an award ceremony because it brings awareness to the plight of missing and murdered Indigenous women,” Sydney said.

According to Sydney, the *Native Fashion* exhibit has increased Museum attendance from Native visitors. Students from Haskell Indian Nations University have been particularly engaged, with many making special trips to see the display. From Sydney’s perspective, the exhibit is more than just a collection of fashion pieces; it’s a space for dialogue, education, and breaking down stereotypes. “It’s not a super heavy exhibition that’s just all about trauma,” she said. “We can talk about some of those tragic histories, but hopefully, we want people to see how vibrant our contemporary cultures are and all the amazing things that people are making today because we are still here, and we are still creating works that might be unexpected.”

The *Native Fashion* exhibit is on display through December 31, 2024, at the Spencer Museum of Art. For more information, visit spencerart.ku.edu.kcindependent.com

Installation view of the exhibition, “Native Fashion,” at the Spencer Museum of Art