

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



LAWRENCE, KS
Native Fashion
 Spencer Museum of Art

THE CURRENT EXHIBITION at the University of Kansas's Spencer Museum of Art, *Native Fashion*, is a celebration of exactly what the title says and more. Curator Sydney Pursel (Iowa) and Native Community Advisors Christina Haswood (Diné), Alicia Swimmer (Oglala-Sicangu Lakota), Felicia Miner (Cheyenne River Sioux), and Miranda Bradford (Citizen Potawatomi) along with two curatorial interns, Elena Theresa (Apache Tribe of Oklahoma) and Dominique Stringer, collaborated to develop a program that would be holistically inclusive.

"We intentionally developed the exhibit to include as many local designers as possible," said Pursel. "We have so

many wonderful Native designers living right here!"

Lawrence is not only home to Haskell Indian Nations University but a strong Native American community and Indigenous studies program at the University of Kansas. The two universities collaborate often. Lawrence is near to the Kansas City metropolitan area, the capital city of Topeka, and the four federally recognized tribes in the state. As a result, more than 100 tribes are represented in the exhibition, locally and from coast to coast, as designers, artists, content creators, participants, advisors, and curators.

The team started working on the exhibition design in 2022, and one of the first tasks was to identify the themes that would be addressed. Representation,

Resilience, Resistance, and Relations, while separated into sections throughout the exhibition, can all be considered throughout the show. For example, the resilience of Indigenous people to use what materials are available is shown through pieces from different eras in the Resilience section but also throughout the four sections.

Every piece has a story, which connects the four themes, and also a backstory special to the artist or nation. One exceptionally touching piece, *She Brings the Rain* by Sage Mountainflower (Ohkay Owingeh/Taos/Diné), illustrates a story from 2017 when the Pueblo experienced a lengthy drought. The skirt is made up of 365 ribbons hanging vertically, one prayer for each day of that year,

ABOVE Installation view of *Native Fashion* with dresses by Jontay Kahm (Plains Cree), Patricia Michaels (Taos), and Sage Mountainflower (Ohkay Owingeh/Taos/Diné). Photo: Ryan Waggoner, Spencer Museum of Art. Image courtesy of the Spencer Museum of Art.

OPPOSITE Patricia Michaels (Taos), *PM Waterlily, Antlers in Aspen Meadows*, 2019, couture dress. Photo: Joshua Tso (Diné). Image courtesy of the artist and Spencer Museum of Art.

laid out from dark to light representing the water flow and movement with each step of the wearer. The deeper in, the darker the water. The accompanying beaded vest represents lightning and the gentle rain "making the land, flowers, and skies vibrant. As she [the rain] fades away, you see the cloud blossoms fade back into the mountain," the label reads.

The exhibition covers clothing and accessories, including jewelry and shoes. Each of these reflects various eras and regions. One pair of shoes from the late 19th or early 20th century are particularly graceful and embody all four exhibition themes. A pair of beaded moccasins with heels, made by an artist now unknown, demonstrate cross-cultural stylistic exchanges and portray how Indigenous people incorporate Eurocentric fashion while maintaining their own identity. Juxtaposed with these shoes are a variety of more recent shoes including beaded high-heeled sneakers, hand-painted shoes, as well as shoes by

commercial athletic manufacturers who now partner with Native designers. In years past, these manufacturers were creating "Native-style" designs but after much public outrage and media coverage, relationships are developing with Native American artists.

Streetwear is clearly a crossover. Possibly the most visible of Native fashion to the world at large, Native streetwear intertwines culture with Western clothing, highlighting resilience. For example, *Bless All Those Who Walk Here* are a pair of hand-painted shoes by Chris Pappan (Kaw/Osage/Cheyenne River Lakota) that are fine art, comfortable on the runway and on the sidewalk. A hand-painted vegan leather jacket by Konrad Pumpkin Seed (Oglala Lakota) was worn on a Los Angeles red carpet and is also right at home on the campus or at a concert.

Diversity is key to this exhibition. Every age group as well as the LGBTQ2+ community are represented.



The opening reception featured Native clothing modeled by the attendees. Ribbon skirts, shirts, vests, moccasins, hair ties, and jewelry were all there at their finest—each representing Native designers from everywhere. While my attention was drawn to a ribbon skirt made of Blue Bird Flour sack, a small toddler ran by in his perfectly fitted ribbon shirt. And where was he going? To the doll section, of course! A selection of handmade dolls by Rhonda Holy Bear (Cheyenne River Lakota)—delicate and intricate—are alongside Barbies in the exhibition.

Although the Spencer Art Museum will be hosting a runway show in December with live models, the runway has not been neglected in *Native Fashion*. One gallery has been dedicated to *Indigenous Couture Goes Vogue*, a runway show that was hosted by Haskell Indian Nations University in April 2024. The original show, organized by Esmarie Cariaga (Isanti Dakota) and Rya LeBeau (Cheyenne River Lakota/Diné), was recreated in the gallery with clothes on mannequins, video of the runway models, and seating. It feels like the live show. Included is an interactive screen with fashion photography, providing a wall-mounted, digital lookbook.

Entry to the museum evokes a New York department store with the wonderful lightbox windows. Tables covered in tablecloths with ribbon weaving and designs line the red reception carpet. The tall pillars in the main gallery hold enormous banners created by Mona Cliff (Aaniiih/Nakota), echoing designs from her recently commissioned mural on bridge piers near Haskell. The banners' title, *NDN-uity*, comes from a phrase Cliff's grandfather would say, "We had to make do with what was around to accomplish a task." The banners are made from cotton, satin ribbon, Pellon, and tin jingles. All of the elements in the exhibition remind the visitor that Native fashion and design aren't just for wearing.

The show inspires Natives to look their best, be creative, and represent their tribes everywhere, every day. It also educates patrons that the vibrant cultures of Native Americans are not just historical tributes, but part of life today.

—Lisa LaRue-Baker (Cherokee Nation)