Transforming Perceptions at the Carlos Museum

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The exhibition by Indigenous Beauty: Masterworks of American Indian Art, a walk through the third floor of Emory’s Michael C. Carlos Museum is a walk through the vivid visual history of our continent’s earliest inhabitants, featuring 118 breathtaking pieces from the collection of Charles and Valerie Diker.

The Diker Collection has been displayed at the Seattle Art Museum, the Ann Carter Museum of American Art, and will be on display at the Carlos until Jan. 3, 2016, after which it will move to the Toledo Museum of Art. As private collectors, the Dikers have achieved something remarkable.

"What’s extraordinary about this collection, in my view, is the enormous range of art that it contains," the Fred and Virginia Merrill Senior Curator of American Indian Art at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Gaylord Torrence said. "Most collections — not only of American Indian art, but any other kind of category — tend to be somewhat compartmentalized. Some people collect Navajo blankets, or Plains art or Southwest pottery, but the Dikers have collected across the North American continent, and they’ve done it with an amazing connoisseurship."

The breadth of which Torrence speaks is immediately apparent and awe-inspiring. The exhibition features masterworks from peoples across the North American continent and is organized by geographical region, resulting in what feels like a walk across the continent as one moves from displays of buffalo hides, meticulously painted with the traditional geometric patterns of the Plains people, to Navajo pottery and tightly woven baskets to strikingly delicate, yet powerful, Inuit masks.

"In walking through [the exhibition] for the first time, I was so struck with what’s been done," Torrence said. "There’s something remarkable about this installation. One thing is that you’re going to be able to see things very closely, which doesn’t happen in tribal museums."

The installation opens with a pair of Plains shirts, but to call them shirts is an understatement in light of the symbolic nature of every stitch and bead and the care and craftsmanship that went into their creation.

"In one [shirt], you have deerkin, ermine tails, glass beads, human hair, trade cloth," Dr. Torrence said. "And it is all beautifully organized into this stunning shirt, which would’ve been worn by a man of great prominence. In other words, this guy could walk through a crowd and not have to say a word about who he was or what he’d achieved in life."

With their many elements from the human, animal and natural world, these shirts are perfect examples of the unique way in which Native American art is not only a reflection of the cultural beliefs and traditions of the peoples, but a reflection of the North American land itself and the interconnectedness between these early nations and the world around them.

The part of the exhibition devoted to the geographic Southwest is an homage to the robust pottery and intricately woven baskets created by the peoples of this region.

To us, these pieces may seem to belong in art museum, however, it’s incredible that these perfectly formed vessels with their intricate geometric designs were created to serve mundane, daily purposes, such as carrying foodstuffs. These people seem to have infused beauty and symbolism into every part of their lives, laboring over something as seemingly simple as a basket or piece of pottery until it came to mean something.

In the Inuit gallery, a striking mask features a salmon, seal, bird and human hand, all intertwined and barely distinguishable to create an abstractive human face.

"It’s human," Torrence said. "But it’s also all of these creatures, all at the same time, as part of this amazing construct. The idea of transformation, of a human being able to shift form, to become a prey animal and come back. It’s part of the shamanistic journey, but also of hunting. Of course this [mask] would be danced in a ceremony during winter, so it has an amazing sense of drama and truly expresses the connection between humans and animals and the world, and by extension the landscape."

While many pieces in the Diker Collection are historical, the exhibition features three modern pieces, one of which is a breathtaking sculpture that was completed in 2010 by the Native American artist Rhonda Holy Bear.

"[Holy Bear] calls it a doll, but really it’s a sculpture," Stone said of the complex, colorful forms of a powerful woman on horse with saddlebags and babies and ceremonial adornments. "It relates to the Sioux Nation’s creation myth, in which the first mother gave birth to a boy and a girl twin, and they married and created the rest of the people. [This sculpture] is not just a mother and her children, but it has a cosmological reverberation."

Of the Collection’s modern pieces, Stone emphasized, "Native American culture and art [are] not dead.”

It is often easy to think of Native American culture in the past tense, but Indigenous Beauty highlights the vibrancy that is contained within these masterworks and invigorates our understanding of the breadth and the complexities that lie beneath our perceptions of Native American art.