

PRESS RELEASE

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SEATTLE ART MUSEUM (SAM) EMBARKS ON TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN ART GALLERIES

Two-year project initiates groundbreaking model for inclusive exhibition planning at the museum

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SEATTLE, WA - The Seattle Art Museum (SAM) has embarked on a two-year project to transform its American art galleries in an unprecedented collaboration among SAM curators and staff, artists, and advisors from the Seattle community. Funded primarily by a \$1 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the project deepens the museum's commitment to inclusive exhibition-planning practices with a shared-authorship model that reflects and responds to community knowledge. The reimagined galleries will debut in October 2022.

The project is led by Theresa Papanikolas, Ann M. Barwick Curator of American Art, in partnership with Barbara Brotherton, Curator of Native American Art. Beginning summer 2021, they will interrogate and recontextualize the collection with artists Nicholas Galanin, Wendy Red Star, and Inye Wokoma, all of whom will also create new commissioned work in response to the collection; two emerging museum professionals in paid curatorial and conservation internships; four Emerging Arts Leader interns; and an advisory circle comprised of 10 experts from Seattle-area communities. The project received additional funding from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

"This project will bring not just an exciting reimagining of our American art galleries, but a new approach to exhibition planning that will have long-term impacts within the other permanent collection galleries," says Amada Cruz, Illsley Ball Nordstrom Director and CEO. "We are deeply grateful to the Mellon and Terra foundations and others for their support of this crucial undertaking, which opens up possibilities for transforming how the museum engages with the communities it serves."

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“With this project, SAM joins museums across the country in reconsidering American art in light of the many traditions, cultures, and regions reflected in its history,” says Papanikolas. “Thanks to the incredible generosity of these supporters, we can tap into the knowledge and experience of our community of artists and experts and together reinterpret the museum’s historical American art collection to meet our present moment.”

WHAT IS AMERICAN ART?

The project will begin with the question, “what is American art?” SAM’s permanent American art galleries are critically overdue for a comprehensive reinterpretation; the last time they were substantially reinstalled was in 2007 for the opening of the expanded downtown museum. The galleries currently present a historical overview of American art history that does not fully consider the many histories and perspectives that have driven cultural production in North America from the 17th century to World War II, particularly those of artists active in the Pacific Northwest region’s diverse communities.

SAM’s historical American art collection is comprised of over 2,500 examples of painting, sculpture, works on paper, and decorative arts. It features works by nationally renowned and historically significant artists, as well as Pacific Northwest artists long overdue for closer examination within the American context. The reinstallation will emphasize a more critical and intimate approach to the story of American art, in particular how it intersects with the museum’s Native American art collection, which is presented in adjacent galleries.

WHO DECIDES THESE STORIES, AND HOW?

Another key question at the heart of the reinstallation project is, “who determines what American art is, and how?” The planning process will expand on the museum’s institutional narrative by opening its collection, its history, and its exhibition-planning process to artists, emerging museum professionals, and community members, who will collaborate with curators and staff to determine a definition of American art for SAM and Seattle.

Artists

Working collaboratively with guest artists and curators has long been a practice at SAM, but this marks the first time the museum has taken this approach with its collections from the Western world. Three artists will work alongside SAM’s curators to review objects in the American art and Native American art collections, decide on artworks for display, offer new interpretations, create fresh juxtapositions and comparisons of objects, collaborate on gallery design, and share their regional and cultural knowledge. They will also create new frameworks for interpretation, either in the form of gallery design or new work in response to works in the collection.



- **Nicholas Galanin** (Tlingit/Unangax) is a multidisciplinary artist based in Sitka, Alaska. His work engages past, present and future to expose intentionally obscured collective memory and barriers to the acquisition of knowledge.
- **Wendy Red Star** (Apsáalooke) is a Portland-based multidisciplinary artist working primarily in photography as well as sculpture, video, fiber arts, and performance. Her work operates at the intersections of traditional Native American culture and colonialist histories and modes of representation. She was the 2016 winner of SAM's Betty Bowen Award.
- **Inye Wokoma** is a Seattle-based visual artist, filmmaker, photographer, and community organizer. He is a founder of Wa Na Wari, a center for Black art and culture in Seattle's Central District.

Curatorial and Conservation Interns

This project will launch six new paid internships in the curatorial and conservation departments, targeting two career paths in the museum field that are particularly lacking in equitable representation by people of color. Within each department, SAM will hire three interns: an intensive 21-month internship for students at the graduate level and two 10-week internships for emerging leaders that builds on SAM's Emerging Arts Leader (EAL) internship model.

The curatorial interns will conduct research, participate in checklist development, write interpretive texts, and present on the reinstallation to colleagues and the public. The conservation interns will collaborate on examining and treating artwork, display needs, framing and archival work, and presenting work to professional and public audiences.

Advisory Circle

SAM has an established history of working with community advisors and has, for the past three years, convened paid Advisory Committees for major special exhibitions, as well as for the Seattle Asian Art Museum reinstallation project, which debuted in February 2020. For this project, SAM deepens that existing process, convening a group of advisors who will meet every three months for the duration of the project, beginning in April 2021. They will bring their own expertise and experiences to the project, providing critical input on the development of the checklist, interpretation, marketing, and programming. The group will aid in creating an installation that explores America's complicated history in a way that empowers community perspectives.

- **Rebecca Cesspooch**, Northern Ute/Assiniboine/Nakota visual artist and educator
- **Juan Cordova**, Elementary School Teacher at Highline Public Schools

- **Fulgencio Lazo**, artist and co-founder of Studio Lazo
- **Jared Mills**, Seattle Public Library
- **Chieko Phillips**, cultural administrator
- **Jake Prendez**, Nepantla Cultural Arts Gallery in White Center
- **Delbert Richardson**, Ethnomuseumologist
- **Juliet Sperling**, Assistant Professor of Art History, Kollar Endowed Chair in American Art, School of Art + Art History + Design, University of Washington
- **Asia Tail**, Cherokee Nation, artist, curator, co-founder of yehaw Indigenous Creatives Collective
- **Mayumi Tsutakawa**, Writer with focus on Asian American history

PROJECT SPONSORS

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Photo captions: Installation view of the American art galleries at SAM. Photo by Tim Aguero. Installation view of the American art galleries at SAM. Photo by Stephanie Fink. Photo of Nicholas Galanin by Will Wilson. Photo of Wendy Red Star by Beatrice Red Star Fletcher. Photo of Inye Wokoma by James Harnois.

ABOUT SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

As the leading visual art institution in the Pacific Northwest, SAM draws on its global collections, powerful exhibitions, and dynamic programs to provide unique educational resources benefiting the Seattle region, the Pacific Northwest, and beyond. SAM was founded in 1933 with a focus on Asian art. By the late 1980s the museum had outgrown its original home, and in 1991 a new 155,000-square-foot downtown building, designed by Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, opened to the public. The 1933 building was renovated and rededicated as the Asian Art Museum in 1994, and it reopened on February 8, 2020, following an extensive renovation and expansion. SAM's desire to further serve its community was realized in 2007 with the opening of two stunning new facilities: the nine-acre Olympic Sculpture Park (designed by Weiss/Manfredi Architects)—a "museum without walls," free and open to all—and the Allied Works Architecture designed 118,000-square-foot expansion of its main, downtown location, including 232,000 square feet of additional space built for future expansion. The Olympic Sculpture Park and SAM's downtown expansion celebrated their tenth anniversary in 2017.

From a strong foundation of Asian art to noteworthy collections of African and Oceanic art, Northwest Coast Native American art, European and American art, and modern and contemporary art, the strength of SAM's collection of approximately 25,000 objects lies in its diversity of media, cultures, and time periods.