



Courtesy University of Pennsylvania

Staffers at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History were a bit surprised several months ago when they informally polled visiting school groups about their favorite parts of the new museum. While the spectacular dinosaurs were invariably mentioned, almost every group placed the Fred E. and Enid Brown Gallery's more sedate exhibition of Native American art high on the list.

"It was a favorite place for kids," Pam Wallace, exhibit coordinator, says of the Brown Gallery, where over 200 paintings and ethnographic items were on display during the museum's first year. The exhibition, celebrating more than a century of growth, variety, and ingenuity in the works of Native American artists, proved a hit with grownups as well.

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Native American Art and Special Exhibitions Gallery

Kiowa/Comanche cradles follow a highly popular art exhibit into the museum's most versatile space.

BY MICHAEL WATERS



The spacious Fred E. and Enid Brown Gallery is the new museum's most flexible exhibit space, allowing various configurations to display a traveling exhibit to its best advantage. The gallery opened with a well-received showing of Native American art collected by Fred Brown over his lifetime and given to SNOMNH. Shown with the artworks were related ethnographic objects from the museum's collections.

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“We had more than one person who said by the time they left the gallery, ‘I didn’t know I liked Native American art’ or ‘I didn’t even know what it was,’” Wallace adds. “People who would not necessarily go to an art museum found something special and unique here.”



The gallery's second exhibit, “Gifts of Pride and Love: Kiowa and Comanche Cradles,” seems sure to draw similar praise from patrons. Created by the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology at Brown University in conjunction with consultants from the Kiowa and Comanche tribes, the traveling presentation is on display at SNOMNH from June 30 to September 23, 2001. OU is one of only six stops around the country during the exhibit's two-year tour.

The spacious Brown Gallery, located on the east side of the museum's first floor, will show over 30 historic lattice cradles, or “cradleboards,” crafted by members of the two tribes, and loaned for display by families who have venerated these symbols of devotion for generations.

The cradles generally consist of a cover made from hide, wool or canvas, anchored with rawhide supports and fastened to a pair of V-shaped boards, supported by a pair of cross pieces. They were crafted generally by Plains Indians from about 1870 to 1920.

The decoratively embroidered cradleboards are a testimony, Wallace says, of “how much these families

cherish their children. Each cradle represents months and months of work.”

The cradle exhibit itself represents a monumental effort of design and consultation. In that respect, it was certainly similar to the Native American art presentation, which SNOMNH officials planned on their own over a five-year period, working with OU donor Fred E. Brown's extensive collection of Native American paintings, drawings, sculptures, and mixed-media objects.

Both exhibitions seem to reflect the concept established by museum officials of Brown as a “people gallery,” in which visitors are given opportunities to “connect” with and heighten their appreciation of the items on display.

Wallace notes that one special aspect of the cradleboard presentation is a “try-on” cradle expressly made for the exhibit by Jimmy Arterberry, a Comanche cradle maker. Parents may place a baby inside the cradle and appreciate its use in a personal way, she adds.

In addition to the display of cradles and accompanying historic photographs, the exhibit will feature an informal “Brush Arbor” seating area, at which visitors may browse through photo albums or watch any in a series of 16 short videos explaining the craft of cradle-making and the cultural importance of the cradles within Kiowa and Comanche families. Material in the videos is taken from interviews conducted in Oklahoma over a three-year period.

Such invitations to familiarity are reminiscent of



SNOMNH's own design for the Native American art exhibit, in which Wallace and her cohorts skillfully matched several of the artworks to relevant ethnographic objects from the museum's collections. For example, the beadwork style on a buckskin jacket in a display case provided a three-dimensional counterpart to the beadwork in a mounted painting nearby. A rendering of a stomp dance leader was displayed near a real-life sash worn, or so it appeared, by the dancer in the artwork.

"To us, art is not just art; it's the people behind it," Wallace says. "So, we differ considerably from an art museum in that perspective."

It could be said as well that while a substantial amount of the material shown in both exhibits at the Brown Gallery is certainly enjoyable as art, it is viewed so only in retrospect. Wallace notes that to Native Americans, what others call "art" served important functions a century ago in the Native societies' everyday life or cultural teachings.

Certainly, the cradleboards, as strikingly decorated as they were, provided Kiowa and Comanche mothers

with an efficient way to transport and shelter their infants while on the move—a must for such mobile peoples. Wallace points out that the cradleboards were easily attached to saddles, or leaned against a stable structure, as well as affixed to a mother's back.

In fact, a traditional belief among Kiowa and Comanche elders was that the cradleboards helped in "socializing" the infants, who were constantly placed in an upright position, at eye level with adults.

Similarly, while the Native American art exhibit offered patrons much in the way of modern-style painting and sculpture, it also displayed items such as a Cheyenne ledger book and a traditional hide painting from around 1875. Such media were created not as "art," Wallace says, but as an important part of the storytelling tradition of Native societies.

Since the practitioners of those traditions, and their descendants, are practically neighbors of the museum, Wallace expects a great deal of interest in the exhibit from Native communities. "We're at the back door of the Kiowa and Comanche territories, so we expect this to be a well-attended exhibition certainly for those tribes and

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Cathy Carver

for the other tribes in Oklahoma," she adds.

What they and other visitors will witness is a striking presentation of a nostalgic and touching subject, one that was on the minds of museum officials back when the museum's new building was only a gleam in an architect's eye.

Even while planners were busy envisioning their opening exhibit with "Fred Brown's paintings, and this wonderful space he'd given us," Wallace recalls, "the cradleboard exhibit was the first exhibition that we looked to rent. We were supportive of it long before our building came to be, and wanted very much to be a part of it."

The hopes of museum officials have become reality. Although the opening Native American art exhibit is now history, the walls of the Brown gallery once again echo with the excited whoops of children—and the softer voices of their parents—as they now look upon, and wonder at, precious artifacts that bore the babes of a century ago. The stories of "love" and "pride" behind those artifacts leave patrons, like earlier visitors to Brown, richer in the ways that matter. 🏠

As the first traveling exhibit in the Brown Gallery, the Kiowa/Comanche cradleboards demonstrate the art of their Native American makers and also their practical use in tribal culture.