

Spencer Museum of Art Appoints Curator of Global Indigenous Art and Lifeways

Scholar Ryan Clasby to begin in the position on August 5, 2024



Portrait: Ryan Clasby

Lawrence, KS (May 16, 2024)—The Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas announced today the appointment of Ryan Clasby as Curator of Global Indigenous Art and Lifeways. Clasby recently completed a postdoctoral fellowship with the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), where he focused on developing a manuscript on the art and archaeology of the Upper Amazon, and also served as a collaborator for the reinstallation of the ancient Andean art exhibition at the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. At the Spencer, Clasby will be responsible for the collaborative stewardship, care, and accessibility of the museum’s collection of Global

Indigenous Art, which currently includes approximately 9,300 works across the cultures of the Americas, Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Europe. He will begin in his new role on August 5, 2024.

The Spencer’s collection of Global Indigenous Art features historical and contemporary works across media. In recent years, the Spencer has acquired more works by Indigenous artists, enhancing its ability to present the range and depth of Indigenous art and making Indigenous voices more prominent across the museum. Among the recent acquisitions are [Reserving: Tuberculosis](#) (2018) by Ruth Cuthand (Plains Cree), [Pretty Shield and Raven](#) (1990) by Rhonda Holy Bear (Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe), and [Ul’nig’ \(Strong\)](#) (2020) by Rhiannon Skye Tafoya (Eastern Cherokee, Santa Clara Pueblo).

Lawrence, Kansas—where the museum is located—and the surrounding region is also home to thriving Indigenous communities, and the Spencer is actively working to expand its collaborative relationships with tribal leaders and members. In fall 2024, the Spencer will open *Native Fashion*, an exhibition celebrating Native designers through time, curated by Sydney Pursel (Iowa Tribe of KS & NE), the Spencer’s Curator of Public Practice, with support from community advisors. In his new role, Clasby will continue to build relationships with contemporary Indigenous knowledge keepers and community members to integrate their voices and perspectives into the Spencer’s curatorial practices and programming.

“I am excited to continue my career in a university museum known for its innovative exhibitions and collections-based pedagogy. My research follows deep career interests in museums and their importance to not only reconstructing histories of often ignored peoples through exhibitions, catalogs, and events, but

in the power of that history to shape modern identities, in particular through a shared collaborative approach with source communities,” Clasby said.

In addition to his roles with the ACLS and Krannert Art Museum, Clasby served as a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) Program Office at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. During his time with NAGPRA, he focused on identifying and reuniting funerary belongings, while also developing records of collection holdings to help facilitate repatriation. Clasby has also worked as a research assistant at the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale University and at the University Museum at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville. He has held numerous teaching positions including at Skidmore College and Central Washington University and has lectured extensively, including on subjects relating to the history and archaeology of the Andes and Amazonia. He holds a Ph.D. from Yale University and has research interests and experience in the Indigenous cultures of North and South America.

Clasby was appointed following a rigorous selection process led by a six-member committee that included Indigenous individuals. As part of the process, the committee sought feedback from Native faculty and staff at the University of Kansas and at the Haskell Indian Nations University Museum and Cultural Center as well as Native community leaders. It was essential to ensure that Native voices were actively engaged and considered in the appointment, given the role’s emphasis on developing collaborative practices with Native communities.

“The Spencer has a long history of collaborative and cross-disciplinary work. In recent years, we have worked to integrate works from our extensive collection of Global Indigenous Art into presentations and dialogues about the environment, social change, and culture more broadly and to center the voices of Indigenous artists and cultural leaders more actively,” said Saralyn Reece Hardy, the Spencer’s Marilyn Stokstad Director. “As we continue in this important work, we know that Ryan’s experience and deep interest in developing new collaborative methodologies will be invaluable. Likewise, his strong engagement with NAGPRA will ensure that we are implementing best practices in our swiftly changing field. I am delighted to welcome him to the Spencer team.”

About the Spencer Museum of Art

The Spencer Museum of Art, located on the University of Kansas Lawrence campus, explores the intersection of art, ideas, and experiences. With a diverse collection of more than 48,000 works, the Spencer is the only museum in Kansas with contemporary and historic artwork in all mediums from cultures across six continents. The Spencer Museum facilitates arts engagement and research through exhibitions, artist commissions and residencies, conferences, performances, lectures, children’s art activities, and arts and culture festivals. Admission to the Spencer Museum of Art is free.

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