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“Identity by Design” Exhibit Opens March 24: A Rare Look at the Beauty of Native Women’s Dresses

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian presents “Identity by Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women’s Dresses” Saturday, March 24. The exhibition presents the museum’s unique collection of historical and contemporary Native dresses, dating from the early 1800s to the present. Featuring 55 exquisitely beaded dresses and more than 200 accessories, including belts, leggings, moccasins and purses, “Identity by Design” reveals the inner depth of Native women’s identities through many generations. This comprehensive exhibit explores the cultural origins, artistic traditions and contemporary context of Native women’s dresses from the Plains, Plateau and Great Basin regions of the United States and Canada.

“Identity by Design” opens during Women’s History Month, which is particularly timely given that the Native women who created the objects showcased in the exhibition also can be credited for creating many of the objects in the museum’s collection. The exhibition in Washington, D.C., closes Jan. 2, 2008 and travels to the National Museum of the American Indian’s George Gustav Heye Center in New York City, where it will open in fall 2008.

“Identity by Design” co-curators Colleen Cutschall (Oglala Lakota) and Emil Her Many Horses (Oglala Lakota) collaborated with six celebrated Native women artists, whose many skills include designing dresses, to learn more about the museum’s collection of Native dresses and to describe what is being done today to assure that future generations reinforce cultural identity through making and wearing dresses. The six project consultants include Joyce Growing Thunder Fogarty (Assiniboine/Sioux), Juanita Growing Thunder Fogarty (Assiniboine/Sioux), Gladys Jefferson (Crow), Jhane Myers (Comanche), Jamie Okuma (Luiseño/Shoshone-Bannock) and Jackie Parsons (Blackfeet).

“The Native women’s dresses presented in ‘Identity by Design’ illustrate the evolving identity of Native people and communities,” said museum founding director W. Richard West Jr. (Southern Cheyenne). “The exhibition and the cultural arts programs to be held in its celebration concurrent with Women’s History Month also demonstrate the National Museum of the American Indian’s active role as a cultural center for civic engagement.”

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“Identity by Design” explores themes of history, life, trade, dance, identity and powwow, in relation to Native women and their dresses. Each dress has its own story, which reflects an individual designer’s artistic vision, a family’s status, tribal values and social and cultural change.

“For these artists, dresses are more than simple articles of clothing,” said co-curator Emil Her Many Horses (Oglala Lakota). “They are evidence of a proud and unbroken tradition, links to the generations of women who have gone before them and bridges to the future,” said co-curator Colleen Cutschall (Oglala Lakota).

The exhibition examines how Native dresses evolved as new materials were introduced through trade, such as the Sioux side-fold dress (ca. 1830) from the museum’s collection. A side-fold dress is made of one or two large pieces of hide and has only one seam and a fold that forms a flap from the wearer’s neck to waist. This style of dress was particularly common in the Great Plains in the early 1800s. This dress is significant because it is one of only 11 known side-fold dresses in museum collections. The lines of this Sioux side-fold dress are accented by beadwork created from shaded pony blue and white pony beads—the first glass beads introduced by non-Native traders to the Northern Plains, which were Venetian glass beads transported by pack ponies during the 1800s.

“Identity by Design” includes a spectacular Yakama two-hide dress (ca. 1890), which is made from hide, faceted “Russian” glass beads introduced by Russian traders; fire-polished glass beads; cut glass beads; seed beads; and sinew. Two-hide dresses, or “tail dresses,” were common among the dressmakers of the Plateau and were created by matching two hides. In these dresses, the actual tail from the animal hide was the central design on the front and back of the dress just below the opening of the neck. In this Yakama two-hide dress with beaded fringe, the tails have been replaced by beadwork in red, pink, yellow, blues and greens that draws attention to the triangular shape of the tail, creating striking bands of colors and geometric patterns across the sleeves and yoke of the dress.

From the Great Basin region, “Identity by Design” features a Shoshone two-hide pattern dress with a fully beaded yoke (ca. 1880) and accompanying beaded Shoshone belt, moccasins and leggings. As intermediaries in the region’s intertribal network, Shoshones often borrowed design ideas from other tribes and incorporated them into their own designs, such as the fully beaded yoke, which is a common style attributed to Sioux dresses. The intricate beadwork in this Shoshone dress and accessories was created with seed beads—small glass beads made in Italy that were introduced by non-Native traders around 1850. With the introduction of seed beads, dressmakers created more elaborate beadwork that covered more of the dress.

Isnati Activity Room

“Identity by Design” includes the Isnati Activity Room that provides children ages 5 through 11 and families with a comfortable, contemporary space to further explore themes presented in the exhibition. To the Lakota people, *Isnati* refers to the time in a young girl’s life when she goes to live apart from the

community and is instructed by the older women about lessons in womanhood, including how to make and decorate clothing. This room includes interactive learning stations where visitors can touch materials used to create dresses and learn about the process of tanning hide for dresses. The Isnati Activity Room also includes a trade map illustrating where materials come from; a map covering the geography of the region; design puzzles; and a beading interactive.

Cultural interpreters will be available to facilitate educational activities for children in the Isnati Activity Room during the exhibition's opening weekend from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Cultural Arts Programs

During opening weekend of "Identity by Design" (Saturday and Sunday, March 24–25), the museum will host several related cultural arts programs, including a beading demonstration (called a beading circle) from 10:30 a.m. to noon with Emil Her Many Horses (Oglala Lakota), Jhane Myers (Comanche) and Jackie Parsons (Blackfeet); and a song, dance and storytelling performance by "Sacajawea's Sisters," with Thirza Defoe (Ojibwe and Oneida Nation of Wisconsin) at noon and 3:30 p.m. The museum also will host two lectures with the co-curators and some of the project consultants: "Keeping Native Traditions Alive: Mothers and Daughters" at 1:30 p.m., with speakers, Joyce, Juanita and Jessica Growing Thunder Fogarty (Assiniboine/Sioux) and moderator Emil Her Many Horses; and "The Power of Dress" at 3:30 p.m., with speakers Jhane Myers (Comanche) and Georgianna Old Elk (Assiniboine) and moderator Colleen Cutschall (Oglala Lakota).

Catalog

To complement the exhibition, a 160-page book, "Identity by Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women's Dresses," presents essays and insights by Native women artists who design and make dresses, as well as numerous historical and contemporary photographs. The book was published in 2007 by National Museum of the American Indian in association with HarperCollins.

About the Museum

Established in 1989, through an Act of Congress, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian is an institution of living cultures dedicated to advancing knowledge and understanding of the life, languages, literature, history and arts of the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere. The museum includes the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall; the George Gustav Heye Center, a permanent museum in lower Manhattan; and the Cultural Resources Center, a research and collections facility in Suitland, Md.

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Note to Editors: For high-resolution images, visit http://newsdesk.si.edu/photos/nmai_identity.htm