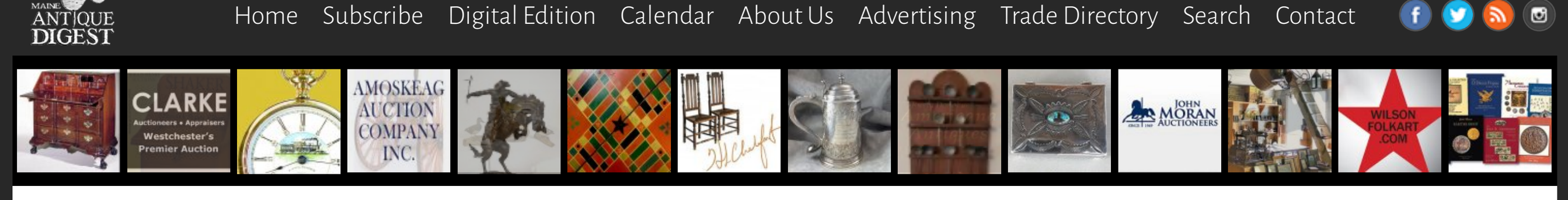

April 4th, 2012

Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art

by Jeanne Schinto

Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

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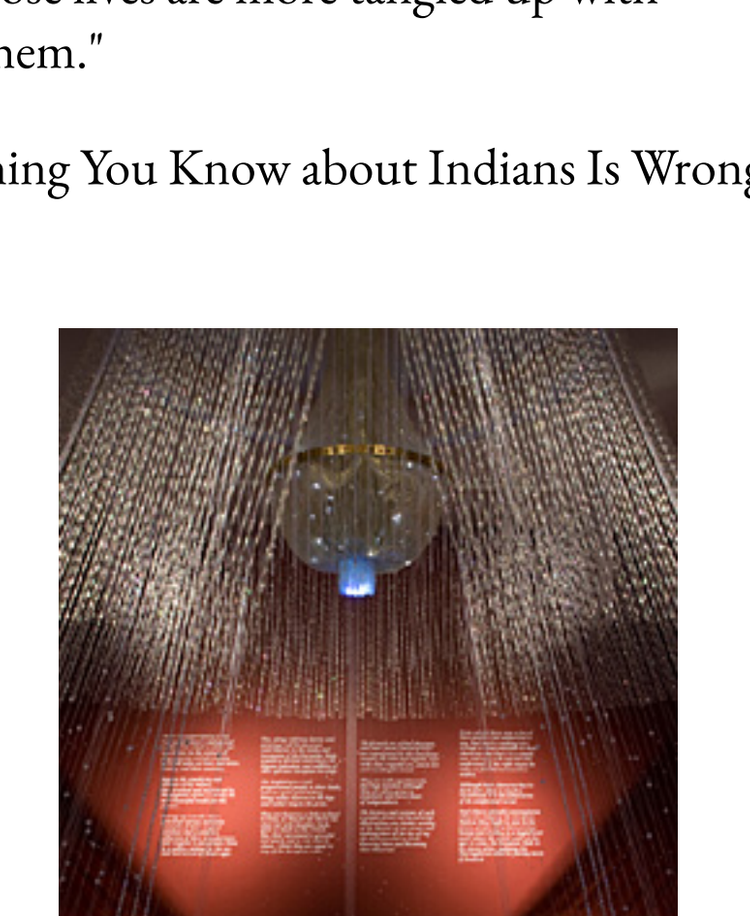
Photos courtesy Peabody Essex Museum

"If there is any people on earth whose lives are more tangled up with museums than we are, God help them."

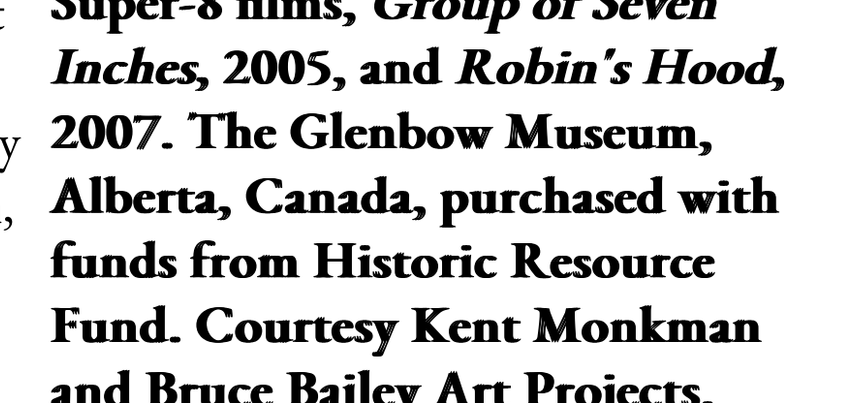
—Paul Chaat Smith, Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong

The monumental skeleton hanging from the ceiling must represent a whale, it's easy at first to conclude. After all, its title is Cetology, the branch of marine science devoted to studying these sea mammals. But the structure isn't made of bone or anything like bone, a closer look shows. Hundreds of white plastic chairs—ubiquitous, mass-produced, non-biodegradable, stackable seating for patios across America—are its medium and its message.



***Théâtre de Cristal* by Kent Monkman (b. 1965), Cree, 2007. Approximately 168" high x 240" diameter, the piece is made of plastic beads, acrylic string, cabochons, a chandelier, simulated buffalo hide, and two Super-8 films, *Group of Seven Inches*, 2005, and *Robin's Hood*, 2007. The Glenbow Museum, Alberta, Canada, purchased with funds from Historic Resource Fund. Courtesy Kent Monkman and Bruce Bailey Art Projects. ©Kent Monkman, image courtesy MacKenzie Art Gallery, photograph by Don Hall.**

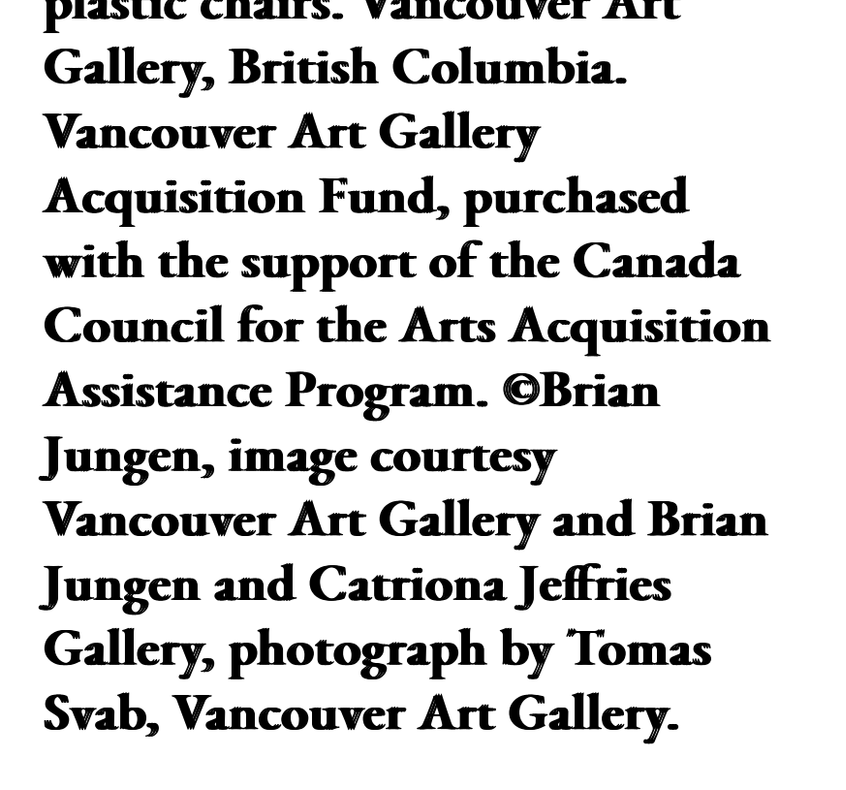
Nearly 50' long, the unignorable Cetology, a 2002 sculpture by Brian Jungen (b. 1970), is the grand finale of *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art*, a groundbreaking exhibition of historical and contemporary art by Native Americans on view through April 29 at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts. The show presents more than 70 items drawn from collections in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. The objects, some being shown in the United States for the first time and others for the first time in decades, span Native American art and culture from 200 B.C.E. to the present.



***Cetology* by Brian Jungen (b. 1970) of the Dunne-Za nation. Made in 2002, it is 63" x 496" x 66" and consists entirely of white plastic chairs. Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia. Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund, purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program. ©Brian Jungen, image courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery and Brian Jungen and Catriona Jeffries Gallery, photograph by Tomas Svab, Vancouver Art Gallery.**

Exhibition curator Karen Kramer Russell, however, has taken great pains not to present the show chronologically. Nor has she arranged it geographically, ethnographically, or in any of the other ways that museums have presented Indian pottery, blankets, masks, and the like through the ages.

"Organizing objects in terms of tribes is useful to anthropologists but doesn't necessarily lend a lot of insight in terms of understanding the objects as art," Russell told exhibition visitors one morning. Instead, she said, the pieces are "anchored by ideas" that "explore links and continuities" and "address touchstones that have operated in Native American culture over time."



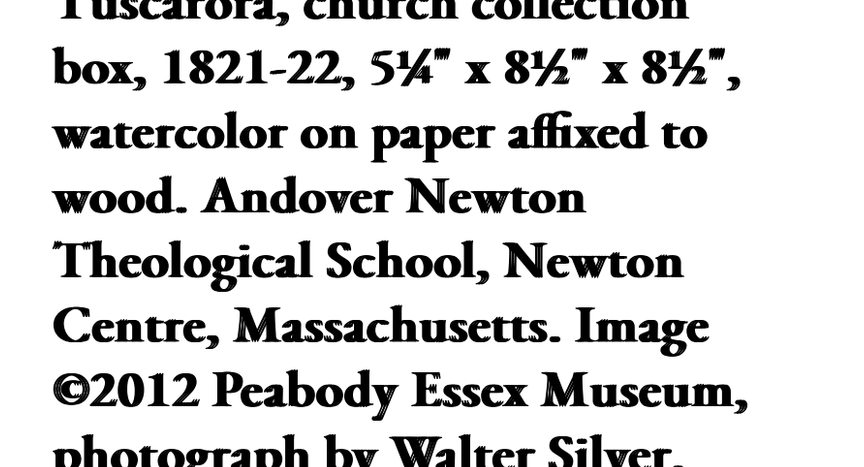
Karen Kramer Russell with a circa 1832 Chilkat blanket by a Tlingit artist. Worn as a cape during ceremonial dances, it is 50" x 63¾" and made of wool, bark, and leather. Peabody Essex Museum, gift of Robert Bennett Forbes, 1832. Schinto photo.

These ideas are expressed as four single words: changing, knowing, locating, and voicing. Each is written large and explicated on the walls of the multiple galleries, but changing seems to be the key concept, embodied in the meaning of the show's title.

In Native American culture, "shapeshifting" is the term for a human being's ability to change into an animal or a supernatural entity and vice versa. As explained by PEM's chief curator, Lynda Hartigan, the title is a metaphor for the show's main purpose, which is nothing less than "shifting the shape of people's perceptions" away from stereotypes and false monolithic views of Native American culture and toward the complicated truth. From my perspective, the show may also shift the way people and institutions collect Native American art.

Identified as possibly Pokanoket Wampanoag, this 6" x 22½" x 4½" ball-headed war club dates from circa 1675. Made of maple, whelk, quahog, and horn, the weapon was said to have belonged to King Philip (Metacom), a Wampanoag war chief, and may have been used in King Philip's War. Karen Kramer Russell called it "a symbol of native resistance and persistence of the Native American voice." Fruitlands Museum, Harvard, Massachusetts. Image courtesy Fruitlands Museum.

Most collectors concentrate on regions or types of items. Post-*Shapeshifting*, they may find their collecting goals and strategies no longer make as much sense or give as much satisfaction as they once did. Contrarily, some may resist the show's political message and resolve to continue as before, even more passionately. Either way, I feel sure they will be affected.



Dennis Cusick (c. 1800-24), Tuscarora, church collection box, 1821-22, 5¼" x 8½" x 8½", watercolor on paper affixed to wood. Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, Massachusetts. Image ©2012 Peabody Essex Museum, photograph by Walter Silver.

That said, the exhibition seems geared more toward people who haven't had much exposure to Native American art, even as historical artifacts. Their eyes may be opened the widest.

In a catalog essay, Paul Chaat Smith, an associate curator at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, discusses the old status quo. "This is a fact: give Ms. Almost Anyone Anywhere a picture of a headdressed Indian, and she'll nod and say, 'Indian,'" Smith writes. "If you consider how few headdress-wearing, horseback-riding Plains Indians there ever were (a few hundred thousand?), and how briefly they existed (a hundred years?), it's pretty amazing."

The widely disseminated photogravures of the American West by Edward S. Curtis come to mind. So do the chromolithographs of George Catlin, who "tirelessly recorded and romanticized the 'noble savages,' helping to establish a long legacy of distorted representations," Russell states in her catalog essay. I've heard the sins of our fathers enumerated many times before, but I'd never seen them so well debunked until now.

Take the show's other monumental installation, which greets visitors upon entering the show, just as Cetology sends them on their way. Created in 2007 by Kent Monkman (b. 1965), it's titled *Théâtre de Cristal*. A 14' tall tipi-shaped structure, it has "walls" made of strings of glittery plastic beads at the top of which hangs an immense crystal chandelier. If Liberace were to imagine a tipi, this would be it.

Visitors may enter the tipi and view a silent film projected on a simulated buffalo-hide rug on the floor. The actors look vintage but are contemporary, engaged in a spoof of 19th-century explorers. The plot centers on natives who force white men to model as "authentic examples" of European males. A tipi toured with Catlin's traveling Indian Gallery exhibition, and the film borrows from his diaries and those of a comparable Canadian artist, Paul Kane (1810-1871).

Many of the smaller objects exhibited in galleries between the crystal tipi and plastic skeleton are no less provocative or visually arresting. There is, for example, from PEM's collection an 1820's coat made of sea lion intestines. A waterproof, windproof, translucent shell, it is akin to rain gear that was worn for hunting by members of the Aleut nation. This one, however, was "shapeshifted" by commerce. Styled as a Russian dignitary's coat of the period, it was intended for sale to white visitors when the powerful Russian American Company had full control of the seal and otter trade in the region.

Until now I haven't readily associated PEM with Native American art, but as PEM's executive director, Dan Monroe, told the press at a preview, the institution got its first pieces shortly after it was founded in 1799. For that reason, PEM can claim to have "the oldest ongoing collection in the Western hemisphere"—some 15,000 artworks and 50,000 archaeological works. In 1996 the museum had its first exhibition devoted to Native American art. Since then it has been "committed to presenting it in a new light," Monroe said. The collection continues to grow.

One of PEM's 2002 acquisitions, a circa 1840 cradleboard made by an anonymous Dakota (Eastern Sioux) artist, is part of the show. Elaborately decorated with porcupine quills, it has design elements similar to the few other known examples or fragments from this early period. (Ironically, the only other full-scale example extant was collected by Catlin. It's in the Smithsonian's collection.) Those similarities suggest that all the cradleboards were made by the same artist or family.

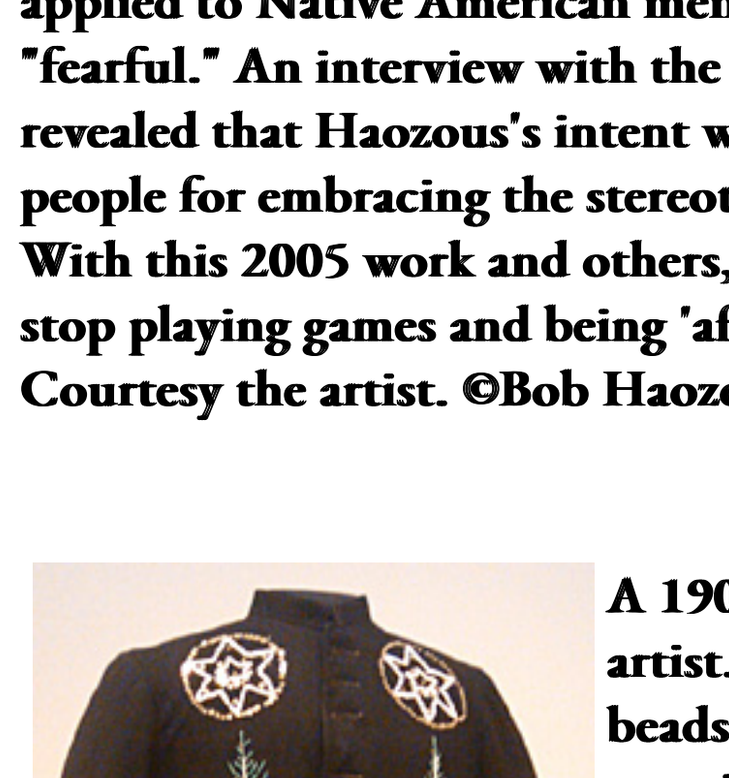
Traditionally, Native American artists have been thought to be "interchangeable—mere craftspeople who blindly follow tradition," comments catalog essayist Bruce Bernstein. Following that logic, their products were viewed as replications of existing forms. Only recently have scholars begun to try identifying individual hands, thereby raising the works to the level of art. It's a change worthy of being called shapeshifting.

No one piece in this show, and no one artist, is meant to stand alone, and visitors who try to make connections will get the most out of their experience. For example, in one gallery, there's a page from a circa 1876 drawing book by Bear's Heart, one of the so-called Fort Marion artists who were incarcerated in St. Augustine, Florida, and, in an unusual and commendable experiment, taught to read and write there.

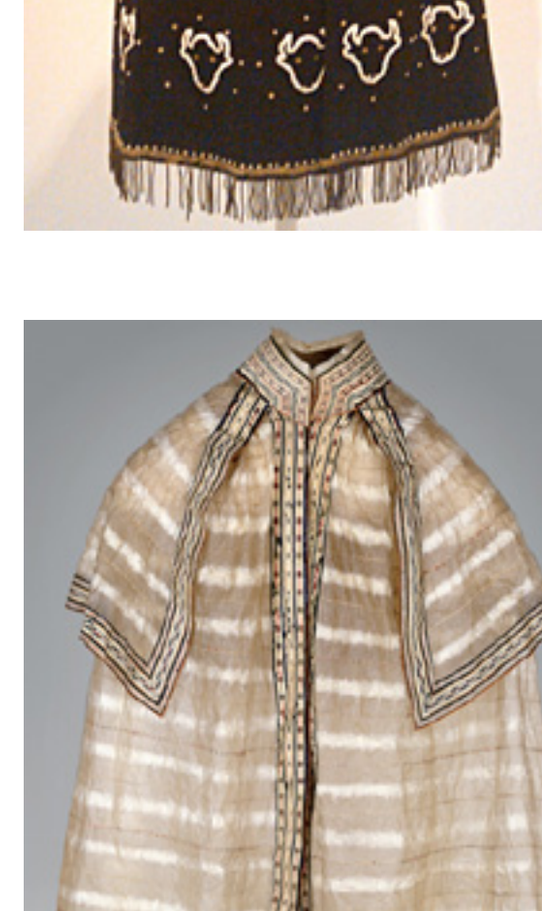
Then, in another gallery there's a Plains Indian-style pencil drawing on antique ledger paper by a contemporary artist, Dwayne Wilcox, an Oglala Lakota. Showing George Armstrong Custer attaching a Stars and Stripes-decorated ball and chain to a Native American's ankle, it's titled *After Two or Three Hundred Years You Will Not Notice*. The piece is one of many in the show that use "Indian humor"—defined by catalog essayist Janet Catherine Berlo as "a certain self-deprecating spin on life"—to make their point.

In 1987 Luiseño artist James Luna (b. 1950), wearing only a loincloth, lay motionless in a museum display case in the San Diego Museum of Man. An audacious performance artwork, it was called *The Artifact Piece*. A photo of it hangs in this exhibit. Berlo writes that the picture is "only a pale documentation" of the event, in which Luna "bravely grappled with a long history of Native people embodied in museum representations." Using his own body, he "ensured that 'Indian artifacts' could never again be experienced uncritically."

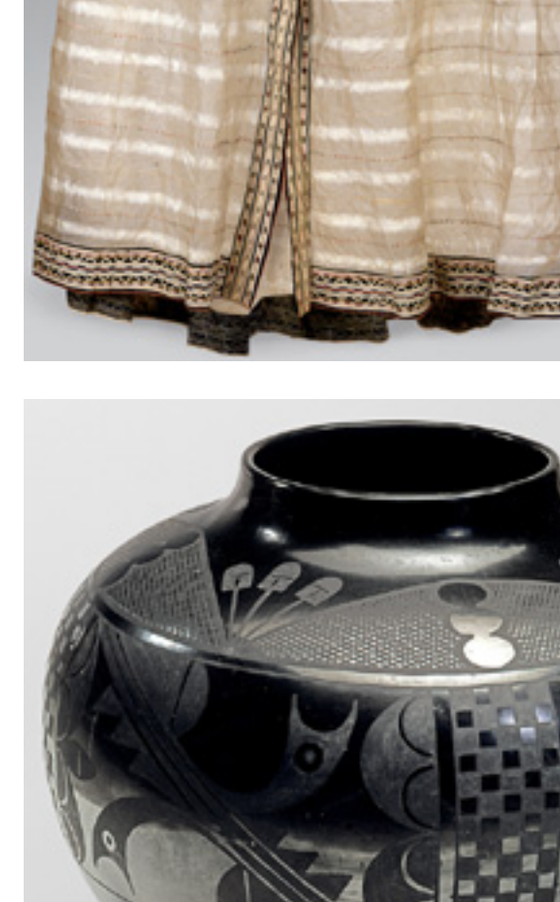
The same should be said of *Shapeshifting*, which as of this writing has only the single venue. PEM hopes, however, that something else will develop. For more information, see the museum's Web site (www.pem.org).



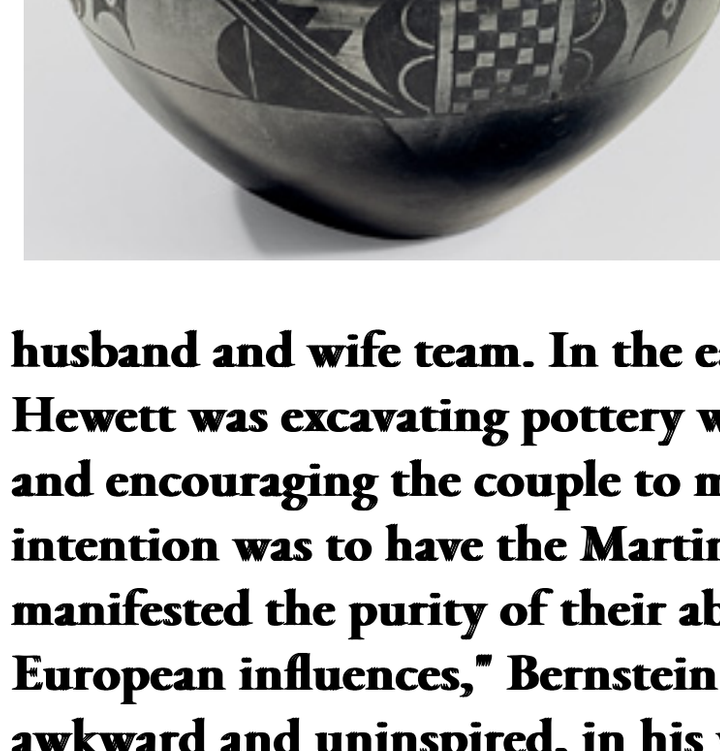
***Wheel of Fortune* by Bob Haozous (b. 1943), Chiricahua Apache, is a comment on identity. Made of steel and paint, it is a 96" diameter wheel at the center of which is an iconic image of Geronimo—the same one employed by Andy Warhol. The wheel can be spun (yes, just like Vanna White's) and may land on one of several contradictory words conventionally applied to Native American men, e.g., "brave," "coward," "fearful." An interview with the artist for the catalog write-up revealed that Haozous's intent was to take to task his own people for embracing the stereotypes that the words imply. With this 2005 work and others, he has challenged them "to stop playing games and being 'afraid of our own reality.'" Courtesy the artist. ©Bob Haozous.**



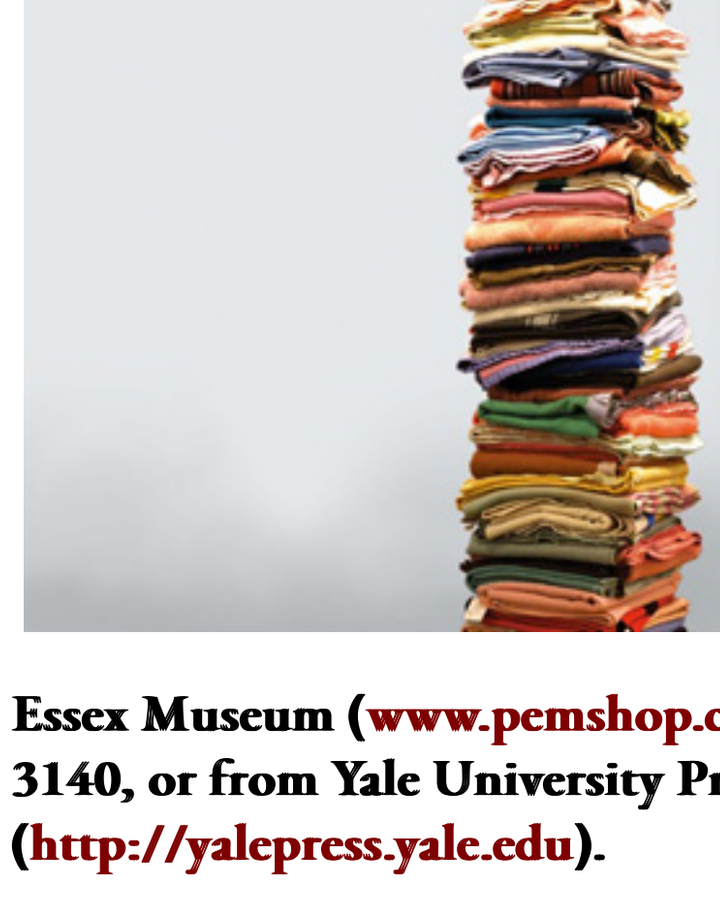
A 1900-20 Faw Faw coat by an Oto artist. Made of wool cloth, glass beads, metal, and sequins, it is associated with a short-lived messianic religion that originated with William Faw Faw, who taught his followers to reject European influences and return to their traditional roots. Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma, museum purchase, 1991. Schinto photo.



A cape made of mammal intestine, esophagus, and dye by an Unangan (Aleut) artist, 1824-27. Peabody Essex Museum, gift of Seth Barker, 1835. Schinto photo.



Maria Martinez (1881-1980) and Julian Martinez (1879-1943), San Ildefonso Pueblo, 18¾" x 22½", circa 1938, ceramic black-on-black jar. How their style evolved is discussed in a catalog essay by Bruce Bernstein, who derides the influence of anthropologist Edgar Hewett on the husband and wife team. In the early part of the century Hewett was excavating pottery with designs painted on slip and encouraging the couple to make replicas of it. "Hewett's intention was to have the Martinezes make works that manifested the purity of their aboriginal style before European influences," Bernstein writes. But their early work is awkward and uninspired, in his view. Once the Martinezes were free to make their own reinterpretations, their true style emerged. Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, Department of Cultural Affairs, Santa Fe. Image courtesy Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, photograph by Blair Clark.



***Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art*, by Karen Kramer Russell with Janet Catherine Berlo, Bruce Bernstein, Joe D. Horse Capture, Jessica L. Horton, and Paul Chaat Smith, Peabody Essex Museum in association with Yale University Press, 2012, 248 pages, softbound, $39.95, or hardbound, $65, plus S/H from the Peabody Essex Museum (www.pemshop.com) or (978) 745-9500, ext. 3140, or from Yale University Press (http://yalepress.yale.edu).**