

From Private Collection to Public Exhibit: Designing a Native American Exhibit at the Houston Museum of Natural Science

Kathleen Young
Master's Professional Project
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Project Background

- ▶ Learning about the project
- ▶ Why it appealed to me
- ▶ Discussion with Dr. Caston
- ▶ First meeting with Lisa Rebori, HMNS VP of Collections
- ▶ Agreeing on the project
- ▶ Documenting the journey

The Donor & His Collection

- ▶ Meet the Collector: Gordon W. Smith, 1920-2010
- ▶ Collected between 1925-1939
 - ▶ Texas State Centennial, 1935
- ▶ Two institutions: Houston Museum of Natural Science (HMNS) & Fort Worth Museum of Science and History
- ▶ Collections scope
 - ▶ 600+ objects
 - ▶ 60+ tribes & regions from North & South American represented



The Collection



The Collection

Additional Tribes, Regions, & Classifications

- Arkansas
- Attu
- Aztec
- California
- Colorado
- Cree
- Haida
- Indiana
- Kwakiutl
- Maya
- Micmac
- Mound Builders
- Northwest Coast
- Plains
- Prairie
- Pre-Columbian
- Southwest
- South American



About the Houston Museum of Natural Science

- ▶ Established by the Houston Museum & Scientific Society in 1909
- ▶ Various locations over the years
- ▶ Collections & Exhibits
 - ▶ Paleontology
 - ▶ Gems & Minerals
 - ▶ The Americas
 - ▶ Texas & African Wildlife
 - ▶ Mollusks
 - ▶ Cockrell Butterfly Center



“Some days I think I understand, and other days I feel lost and it seems overwhelming.”

- ▶ Gordon Smith's autobiography

- ▶ *The Quest for High Bear, A Boy's Odyssey Through Indian Country: 1925-1939*

- ▶ Going through the collection

- ▶ Pondering exhibit themes

- ▶ Visitor participation



Facebook

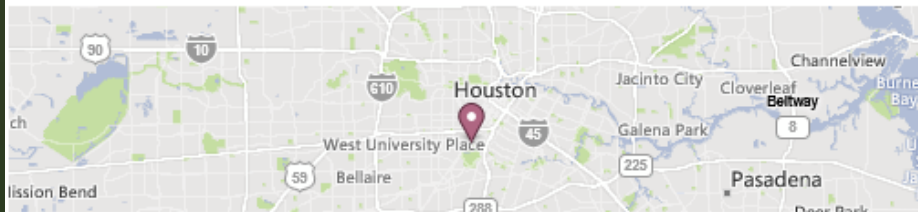


Kathleen Young

June 14



I'm helping to design an exhibit using a Native American collection at the [Houston Museum of Natural Science](#), and I wanted to get some outside input on the topic. My ideas so far include beadwork, clothing, and the importance of animals. What do y'all think? What would you or your children want to see at a Native American exhibit? — at [Houston Museum of Natural Science](#).



Like · Comment · Share · Tag Friends

3

and 3 others like this.

When I did programs at the Mayborn, the kids were always really interested in uses for Buffalo, how hide was tanned, etc. Not sure if Buffalo were that far South, though??

June 14 at 9:47am · Unlike · 1

How about the weapons and like cooking tools and things they made like arrowheads and stuff?

June 14 at 9:59am via mobile · Unlike · 1

I love to examine textiles, rugs and blankets. Baskets and pottery, the beautiful things they made to accommodate their lifestyle.

June 14 at 10:11am · Unlike · 2

I'm in agreement with what others have said so far. Usually hands on activities, or basically something they could hold or touch is the best route I think. I would like to reference here the Mayborn kids play area on the second floor, although slightly rudimentary in fashion, it proves to be a striking learning area for children of all ages, and let's face it...I love the play garden area haha.

June 14 at 10:18am · Unlike · 2

How they did agriculture. Tools, techniques, etc

June 14 at 10:19am via mobile · Unlike · 2

Is the collection from a particular tribe? Is there a general idea or concept you're trying to put across? Also NO HUMAN REMAINS (unless you want to be a case study for my far-in-the-future book) lol

Love,
Your NAGPRA nerd friend

June 14 at 10:32am via mobile · Unlike · 1



Kathleen Young Multiple tribes are represented, but primarily Plains tribes. And I have a lot of ideas, so I'm hoping these suggestions will help me narrow them down to one! Finally, there aren't very many human remains or other culturally sensitive materials in the collection, so that shouldn't be a problem 😊

June 14 at 10:39am · Like · 1

Their gods

June 14 at 10:40am via mobile · Unlike · 2

I asked the girl I'm babysitting and she said clothes and what they used for their war paint/ makeup/ idk what it's called haha. I think clothes jewelry animals and agriculture would all be good ideas 😊

June 14 at 10:51am via mobile · Unlike · 1

I like the symbols idea, children could use paint to make their own

June 14 at 11:50am via mobile · Unlike · 2

I love idea for kids! ^^

June 14 at 1:16pm via mobile · Unlike · 1

Maybe an activity where they could grind the maze? Love the baskets, too, as far as the display goes.

June 14 at 1:18pm via mobile · Unlike · 1

Initial Exhibit Themes

- ▶ Beads and Beadwork
- ▶ Animal symbolism
- ▶ Everyday objects as art
- ▶ Day in the life of a Plains Indian
- ▶ Clothing & Jewelry
- ▶ Entertainment (toys, games, music)
- ▶ Storage containers
- ▶ War/hunting culture
- ▶ Nomadic lifestyle seen through objects
- ▶ Relationship between Native Americans & pioneers

“I’m slowly learning how to make these tough decisions.”

- ▶ Choosing the theme – Plains Indian Clothing and Accessories
- ▶ Choosing the objects
- ▶ Outlining
- ▶ Research – “Every day I learn more and more about this topic, and it does make the rest of the process seem much less daunting.”



“Each time I begin a new step in this process I think it is the hardest part.”

- ▶ Writing! – text panels and object labels
 - ▶ “It actually seemed like my panels got better the more I wrote.”
- ▶ Title
 - ▶ Working Title – *Wearable Art: Plains Indian Clothing and Accessories from the Gordon Smith Collection*
- ▶ Final product
 - ▶ 117 Selected Objects
 - ▶ 12 Text Panels
 - ▶ Exhibit Overview, Object List, Exhibit Packet

Sample Text Panel

Introduction to Native American Clothing

Have you ever wondered how your clothes are made? For some pieces, plant fibers are formed into cloth that becomes a shirt or a pair of pants. Other pieces are made from animal hide, which is turned into leather and shaped into a jacket or a pair of shoes. Now imagine one person doing all of that work by hand, without the help of factories to make the materials, and sewing machines to create the clothes. Native Americans went through similar processes to make their clothing, a practice that lasted well beyond the arrival of Europeans. This exhibit will explore how Plains Indians created the functional and beautiful outfits and accessories that are considered pieces of art by many today.

Sample Object Label

LR040



Dress

Oglala or Lakota

Buckskin, glass beads, thread

Late 19th – Early 20th Century

Gordon Smith Collection

This dress is an example of a Sioux-Style two-hide dress, which was actually made using pieces from three hides. The “U” in the center of the yoke, which is the top section of the dress, represents where the tail would have been if the dress had been made using only two skins. It is estimated that 320,000 glass beads were used to decorate the front and back of the dress.

Sources

-Jennys, Susan. 19th Century Plains

Indians Dresses. Pottsboro, Texas: Crazy Crow Trading Post, 2004. Print.

-Smith, Gordon. The Quest for High Bear, A Boy's Odyssey Through Indian Country: 1925-1939. Chapter 5 p. 29

Supplemental Material



- Maps
- Photographs
- Hands-on Elements

Learning Opportunities & Challenges

- ▶ Technology
- ▶ Working with multiple institutions
- ▶ Working with donor family
 - ▶ “As ill prepared as I was, meeting Mr. Smith was a great experience because it’s a part of the job.”
- ▶ The collection and collection storage
 - ▶ Sensitive Materials
- ▶ Delegation
 - ▶ “[Lisa] told me one of the things I could learn from this project is that while exhibit design does need a leading vision, there also needs to be delegation. In a real job with adequate staff and volunteers, much of what I did... could be delegated to make the process more efficient.”
- ▶ Procrastination
 - ▶ “A part of me still wants to put it off another day. Thankfully I am not in high school anymore.”

Project Future

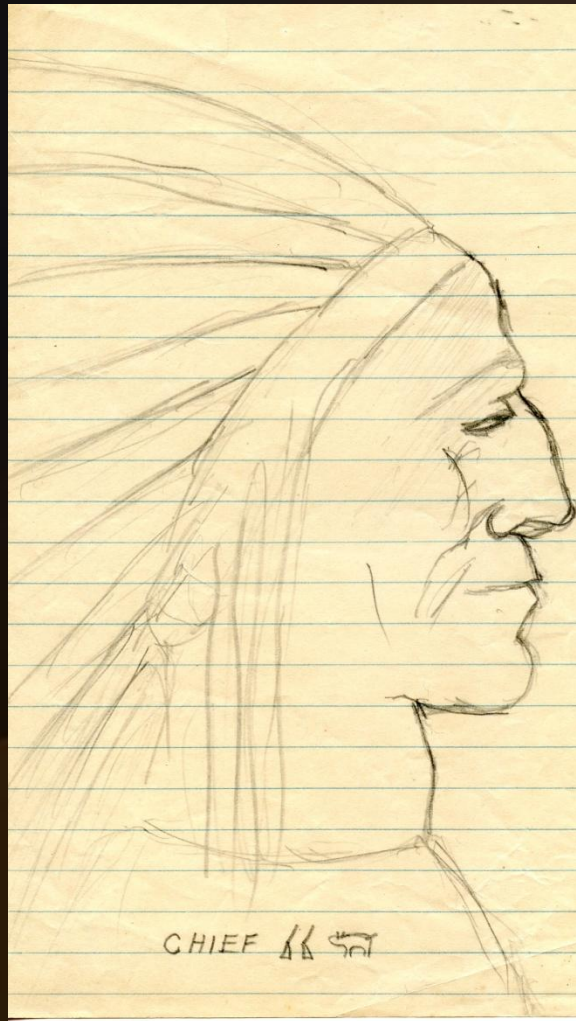
- ▶ Exhibit proposal to Fort Worth
- ▶ Online Exhibit
- ▶ Future physical exhibits



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- ▶ Beth Copeland
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- ▶ Brandon Bissoon
- ▶ Gordon's children, Dee & Blaine Smith
- ▶ Dr. Ellie Caston

Questions?



Drawing of Chief Two Guns White Calf
by Gordon Smith, age 5