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Fact Sheet **“Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist” Exhibition**

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian will present the exhibition “Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist” from Nov. 7 through Sept. 18, 2016.

The exhibition is the first major retrospective of the artistic career of Kay WalkingStick (b. 1935), a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and one of the world’s most celebrated artists of Native American ancestry. Featuring more than 65 of her most notable paintings, drawings, small sculptures, notebooks and the diptychs for which she is best known, the exhibition traces her career throughout more than four decades and culminates with her recent paintings of monumental landscapes and Native places. Her distinctive approach to painting is poised between late modernism and postmodernism of the 1960s and 1970s. Over decades of intense and prolific artistic production, she sought spiritual truth through the acts of painting and metaphysical reflection.

The exhibition is organized chronologically around themes that mark Walkingstick’s artistic journey:

Section Descriptions

The Sensual Body: Early 1970s: While living and working in New Jersey, Kay WalkingStick benefited from the dynamic and edgy art-world developments of nearby New York City. The paintings’ details characterize minimalist modern painting of that moment: the large size, the reduction of form to flat silhouettes, the hard edges between areas of color and the brilliant neon palette. The nudes (most of them self-portraits) reflect the era’s newly liberated female sexuality and WalkingStick’s explorations of her artistic identity as a female painter in a male-dominated profession.

Material and Meaning: 1974–85: While WalkingStick pursued a graduate degree at the Pratt Institute in New York City, she explored the function of paintings as objects rather than simply as pictures of something else. She abandoned the human figure and worked with basic forms, often arcs or curves derived from the shape of draped cloth. WalkingStick’s artistic process was complicated, almost ritual. Many of her works at this time also pay homage to Native American leaders and reflect her exploration of Native history.

Two Views: Diptychs: In the mid-1980s, WalkingStick began to combine images of landscapes inspired by her home and travels with abstractions in what would become her signature format: two square, side-by-side paintings called diptychs. The diptych helped her express spiritual themes. Painted with her hands, the landscapes signified what she called “snapshot” memories, while the abstract panels represented deeper, “mythic” memory. When combined, the two panels express different but complementary kinds of knowledge: external sensory perception of the material world on one side, and internal spiritual comprehension on the other.

Italian Romance: A longtime admirer of Italian art, WalkingStick taught for Cornell University in Rome from 1996 to 2005. These extended trips gave her the opportunity to explore Italy’s countryside and study its artistic legacy. WalkingStick incorporated materials and techniques, such as gold leaf, pattern and design, from the art she encountered into her new works. On occasion, she excerpted directly from ancient and historical sources. These sojourns also marked a new beginning personally. The works reveal her deep struggles to reconcile the spiritual and corporeal through her art, themes also found throughout Italian Renaissance painting.

Landscape: The Power of Native Place: The relationship between Native people and the land has long been a source of fascination for WalkingStick. She has often used her landscape paintings to connect with the resonance of traumatic historical events or to understand the relationship between a place and its identity as a Native homeland. By incorporating designs made by the Native artists of each region, she ties Native identity to specific landscapes. Early American landscape painting traditions cast these iconic terrains as a foundation for the advance of American empire. WalkingStick reclaims these landscapes and instills them with the Native identity that the early painting traditions had largely erased.

Exhibition Facts

- Co-curated by museum associate curator Kathleen Ash-Milby (Navajo) and associate director of museum scholarship David W. Penney, in close collaboration with the artist
- 9,500-square-foot exhibition in Third-Floor Gallery South; more than five years in development
- Five sections: The Sensual Body: Early 1970s; Material and Meaning: 1974–85; Two Views: Diptychs; Italian Romance; Landscape: The Power of Native Place
- Featuring more than 65 of WalkingStick’s most notable paintings, drawings, small sculptures, notebooks and the diptychs for which she is perhaps best known and sourced from the museum and private lenders, including works from the artist’s own collection
- Notable works include the “Chief Joseph” series, “Me and My Neon Box” and “New Mexico Desert”
- One museum-produced in-gallery video, *Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist* (approx. eight minutes); shown in the exhibition theater within the gallery space
- One museum-produced, location-aware audio app, powered by Stqry, featuring enhanced audio and visual content for each section of the exhibition.

Symposium

The museum will hold a free symposium in honor of WalkingStick, titled “Seizing the Sky: Redefining American Art,” Thursday, Nov. 5, from 1 to 5:30 p.m. in the museum’s Rasmuson Theater. It features a diverse roster of nine scholars, artists and curators, including Cornell University’s Jolene Rickard, the renowned artist Robert Houle (Saulteaux) and Lisa Roberts Seppi of State University of New York in Oswego. The program celebrates the artist and uses her groundbreaking work as a launching point for a fresh perspective and dialogue about contemporary American art and how other Native artists are redefining it.

Publication

“Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist” will be accompanied by a publication (208 pages) edited by Ash-Milby and Penney. This book includes essays by leading scholars, historians and the artist herself, arranged chronologically to guide readers through WalkingStick’s life journey and rich artistic career. [*Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist*](#) traces a path of constant invention, innovation and evolving artistic and personal growth through visually brilliant and evocative works of art.

About the National Museum of the American Indian

For additional information about the National Museum of the American Indian, visit AmericanIndian.si.edu. Follow the museum via social media on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). Join the conversation using the hashtags #KayWalkingStick and #KWSAmericanArtist.

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