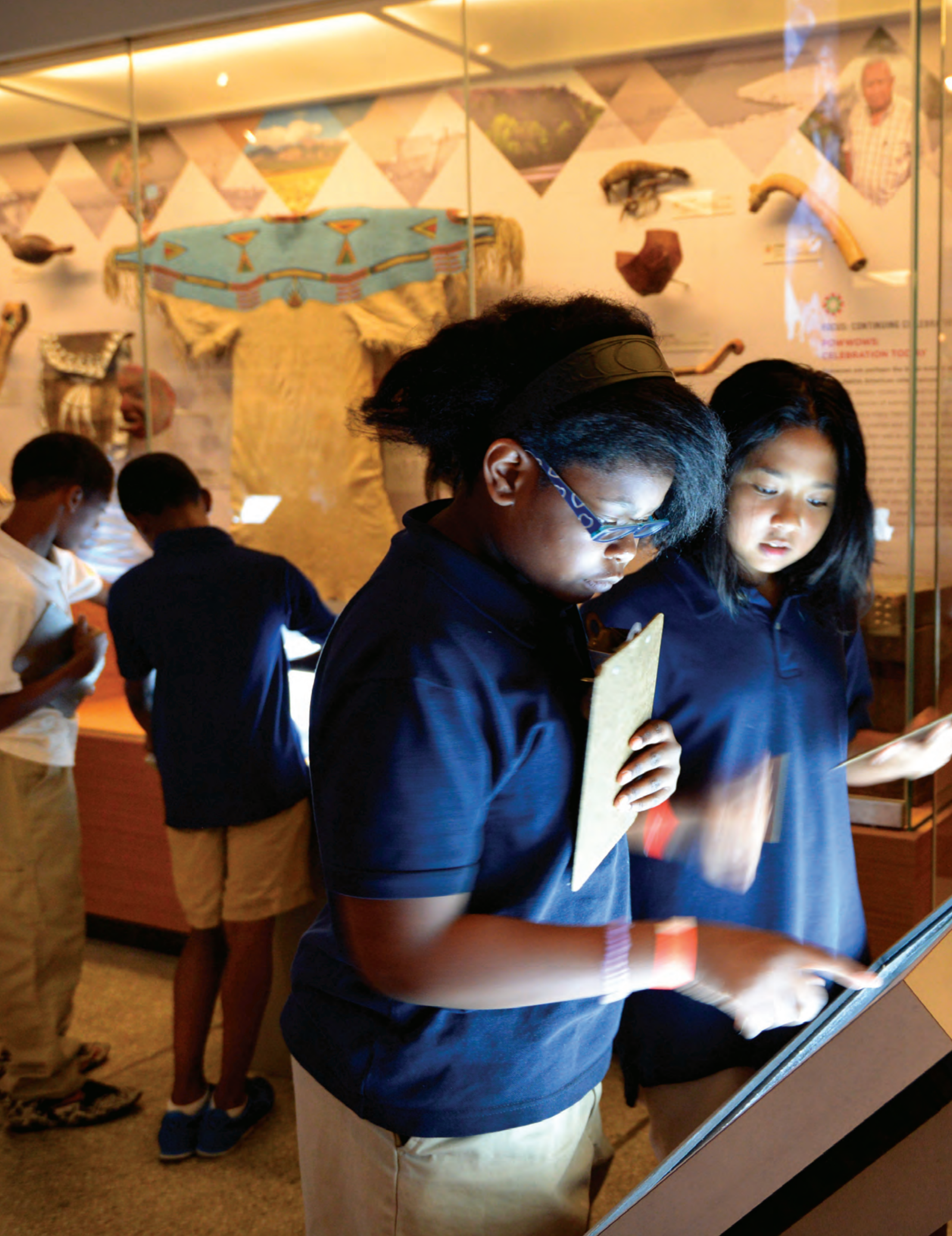
POWWOWS:
CELEBRATION TODAY

“KNOW THAT WE ARE STILL HERE”

BY BEEBE BAHRAMI

With the new exhibition, *Native American Voices: The People—Here and Now*, the Penn Museum and a team of Native American advisors and collaborators aim to “transform your understanding of Native America today.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CANDACE DICARLO

"Oh, you'd look so good in that,"

a high-school student gushed to her friend, as a third young woman took a picture and stepped closer to study the *that* in question—which, this being the Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and not Urban Outfitters (or even Anthropologie), was a circa 1876 Lakota war bonnet from South Dakota.

Set in a floating mount, its sacred eagle feathers unfurling magnificently from crown to tail, the war bonnet stands at the entrance to the Museum's new exhibition, *Native American Voices: The People—Here and Now*, which opened in March for an expected five-year run.

While certainly striking, the war bonnet would make an impractical fashion accessory—not to mention an inappropriate one. As the teacher's guide for the exhibit notes, in advising against the venerable school craft-project of making "Indian" masks and headdresses, these are actually "often worn for religious purposes by Native people who have particular abilities, have achieved specific cultural goals, or possess cultural knowledge" and "are not for 'dress up' occasions, such as Halloween"—or, presumably, a trip to the mall.

One effect of the exhibition is to make the visitor more conscious of such innocent, if thoughtless, caricaturing of Native culture—along with the much darker versions of the phenomenon that Native Americans have faced and continue to struggle against. While it includes a wealth of artifacts drawn from the museum's collections—the earliest dating back 12,000 years—the exhibition is focused as much on the present as the past, inviting visitors "to leave preconceptions behind and discover a living tapestry of nations with histories and unexpected identities."

Next to the 19th-century headdress are lacrosse and "ball game" sticks dating from before 1845 to 1930, and a 2013 practice shirt from the Iroquois Nationals—the only professional Native American lacrosse team, which placed fourth in the 2006 World Games (but had to forfeit the 2010 games, the informative exhibit text notes, "when British Customs refused to recognize their sovereign tribal passports").

In the spacious gallery where the exhibition has been set up, four major display cases contain most of the nearly 300 objects in the exhibit. The space also features four 15-foot-tall media towers. Two flank the case containing the war bonnet at the entrance; the ones at the other end of the hall stand next to contemporary art installations—"Imaginary Indian," by Tlingit/Aleut artist Nicolas Galanin, and Seminole artist C. Maxx Stevens' "Perceptions of Cultural Values," respectively—to offer very different perspectives on Native American experience. In Galanin's piece, traditional Tlingit masks are nearly obscured by wallpaper depicting European pastoral scenes; Stevens' work features a handmade white dress (created in partnership with her mother and sister) and a small video monitor showing a rotating crow, "both an observer and a warning sign of physical and emotional containment."

The towers are interactive touchscreen media-obelisks designed to offer a mosaic of face-to-face

The team behind the Native American Voices exhibit have created an unusually rich array of online resources to accompany and supplement the materials in the gallery. These include full-length versions of the videos excerpted in the show's media display towers; links to articles that appeared in *Expedition*, the Museum's member magazine; and images and detailed information on the objects included in the exhibit. Visit the exhibit homepage at the Penn Museum website (www.penn.museum/sites/nativeamericanvoices/) to explore.

engagement in video, audio, and written essays from numerous Native American leaders, artists, activists, tribal members, and educators. The information explores the four major themes of the exhibit—Local Nations, Sacred Places, Continuing Celebrations, and New Initiatives—as they relate to issues of language retention, tribal sovereignty, group identity, and the representation of Native Americans.

In the center of the gallery is a circle with a fire pit. True, it's a virtual fire, projected by a mechanism in the ceiling, but there is the sound of crackling wood, and it does the job of campfires everywhere, drawing people close. Surrounded by crescent-moon-shaped benches, it offers an inviting place to pause and reflect.

The three high-schoolers and I took seats around the circle. It felt great to sit and relax, and take things in from that vantage point, with beautiful objects from the Native American past and present visible all around us. I sensed that my fellow journeyers felt the same. One student started to pull out her phone to check her messages, but the fire suddenly faded away, replaced by the exhibit's introductory video.

Projected at our feet, it began by speaking about the first inhabitants of North America, then about European contact: destruction from disease and removal from ancestral lands, forced assimilation, loss of religions and languages, children torn away and placed in federal Indian boarding schools, all traditional life torn apart. Then there were testimonies of survival and today's remarkable actions for healing, rebuilding, independence, and wholeness. Images, patterns, faces, and strong storytelling spiraled out from the center of the fire like a kaleidoscope. We could hear diverse voices—an older man, an older woman, a young woman, a young man, and a child. At times one of many indigenous languages wove into the English.

The brief presentation was elegant, efficient, and engrossing. When it was over, the fire returned. We sat still for a few moments. I looked up and saw the wannabe texter slipping her phone back into her pocket, forgetting why she had taken it out.

In my mind, and maybe theirs, a few of the last sentences echoed.

The objects that surround you hold our histories. They tell our stories.
See our faces as you explore our preserved histories.
Hear our voices in our cultures and arts that still thrive today.
Know that we are still here.

"The goal of this exhibition is to transform your understanding of Native America today," says Lucy Fowler Williams CGS'01 Gr'08, the exhibit's lead curator, who also serves as associate curator and senior keeper of the museum's American Collections. "We do so by focusing on the work and voices of some of today's most influential and visionary leaders across the country, against the backdrop of 300 remarkable objects in Penn Museum's expansive Native American collection."

Critical to the project, Fowler Williams is quick to add, was the participation of Native Americans in the development of the exhibition. In addition to more than 80 Native American collaborators who participated in video and audio segments, contributed essays, and provided specialist support, four Native American advisors—anthropologist and Penn staff-member Tina Pierce Fragoso, activist and writer Suzan Shown Harjo, artist Teri Rofkar, and journalist Patty Talahongva—played crucial roles in guiding the project.

Lead curator Lucy Fowler Williams and Tina Pierce Fragoso—a Penn staff-member and one of four Native American advisors who helped shaped the exhibit—in the gallery.

Fragoso is a Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape tribal member from Bridgeton, New Jersey, who is working to restore her tribal history. She serves as assistant director of equity and excellence and coordinator of Native recruitment at the University, and also holds degrees in anthropology from Stanford and Princeton universities.

Shown Harjo, a member of the Cheyenne and Hodulgee Muscogee Nations, is president and founder of The Morning Star Institute in Washington, a nonprofit Native-rights organization. She is one of Native America's preeminent leaders and advocates, as well as a writer, poet, curator, and lecturer.

Rofkar, a Tlingit member from Sitka, Alaska, is a fiber artist whose work is renowned throughout North America and has been recognized with many awards, honors, and fellowships, including from the National Endowment of the Arts, the Rasmuson Foundation, and the Governor's Award for Alaska Native Art. She is also a teacher, and a research associate at the Penn Museum.

Talahongva is a Hopi from Sichomovi village in northeastern Arizona. A multimedia journalist, she has covered international, national, and regional news—including a wide range of Native topics in education, health, and politics—over the course of her 30-year career. She also created a popular Smithsonian documentary on American Indian Code Talkers during WWII.

The fire pit was Rofkar's idea, says Fowler Williams. When she met with the exhibit team early in the planning stages, "She suggested we create a fire pit as a place to comfortably center the gallery space and to gather around to tell stories. We used this idea to shape our introductory experience in the center of the exhibition."

Only within the last century have Native Americans begun rebuilding their nations after a history of destruction reaching back to the 16th century. After a long legacy of government policies that strove to first remove, then subjugate, then forcefully assimilate Native Americans (as with the notorious federally run Indian boarding schools), the present era is more hopeful, defined by reclaimed identities, languages, sacred practices, and sovereign tribal nations.

While this is certainly a complicated and ongoing process, Native Americans have done more than survive the ravages of the past; today they represent vital, diverse, vibrant, creative, and multivocal nations, tribes, communities, and individuals.

Where to begin to represent this immense story?

"As with anything, you start with what you know," says Shown Harjo. In more than four decades advocating for Native-American rights, she has helped tribes reclaim more than one million acres of Native lands and been instrumental in the passage of several laws protecting Native American rights, including the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990. She is also at the forefront of the fight for more positive and accurate representations of Native Americans.

Shown Harjo reflects back to her work with the late Vine Deloria, Jr., an influential activist, author, and law professor who championed Native American rights. One of the things they envisioned, she says, "was the concept of using history as biography, biography as history. You start with the immense and bring it down to its simplest form, or, you start with its simplest form to understand all that is behind it. So, it's not just you walking into a room, it's you and all your ancestors, and all your future generations walking into that room."

That vision resonates with Fowler Williams, who says she has been imagining an exhibit like this one since she was a child. She remembers a school project in the third or fourth grade for which, with her father's help, she built an Iroquois longhouse to scale. But after finishing school, "I had to go out West to meet a Native person," she adds.

Her fascination with Native American cultures and material culture led her to New Mexico, where she attended the University of New Mexico and worked with Alfonso Ortiz, a renowned Pueblo Tewa expert. Along with her interest in studying anthropology, Fowler Williams also knew she wanted to do museum work. After finishing her studies in New Mexico, a prestigious nine-month Penn Museum collections internship program brought her to Penn and concluded with an offer for fulltime employment at the museum as a keeper in the American Section. Under then professor and curator Robert Preucel's mentorship, she also earned her PhD in anthropology at Penn.

"I always knew that some day I was going to do a show where you walked in and you met living people. Because that is just something you never see," she says. "It was very clear that I wanted to start with the people, and those were the key leaders of our time today. It also was very clear to me that it [couldn't be about] issues raised that are important to white people. It had to be issues in the Native community that are important, and in an anthropology museum."

These ideas served as the exhibit's guiding principles. From there, Fowler Williams developed four themes that captured issues important to contemporary Native American experience:

Local Nations is to honor the original culture of the region, the Lenape, whose ancestral lands include the entire Penn campus, the city of Philadelphia, and beyond.

Sacred Places is to recognize the issues at stake for Native American communities in achieving cultural and spiritual self-determination, through regained access to lands where their ancestors lived, where their origin stories took place, where special qualities in the land itself imbue sacred ancestry, and where special natural resources for sacred ceremonies and traditions are found.

Continuing Celebrations is to show the vibrant cyclical celebrations that strengthen Native American cultures, identities, and communities.

New Initiatives focuses on current realities concerning health, economics, and education—while also highlighting the remarkable accomplishments among Native Americans in these areas to offer a more balanced and accurate picture.

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The perspective of the Native host-culture, the Lenape, is woven throughout the exhibit to remind us not only of the original inhabitants of *Lenapehoking*—the region that now encompasses Philadelphia and eastern Pennsylvania, northern Delaware, all of New Jersey, and parts of southern New York—but also of their descendents and their vibrant present-day culture.

"When did I know that I was Indian? Forever," says Tina Pierce Fragoso. As a child growing up in Bridgeton, New Jersey, she would frequently stand up in class and correct classmates and teachers about the continuing Native American presence in the area—now and for the last 10,000 years. "People don't think that we're here, and think we suddenly became Indian. People have started to share that they are already here."

Particularly in the context of mainstream American culture, it may be mind-blowing to contemplate people having that long a connection to one place. More poignantly, this lapse in perspective arises from events in the 1800s, when the Lenape were forcefully displaced from their land. Many went to Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Canada. Only in recent years, as it has been deemed safe to reveal the truth, has it become widely known that not all left. The Lenape who stayed in the region quickly assimilated, hiding in plain sight. The Methodist church became the gathering place, and the means through which the community held itself together. These days, with more open policies, the formal structure of the tribe is exercised through tribal government and council.

Those who left the region became known as Delaware Indians, but they were still Lenape, and they never forgot their homeland. In recent decades, some have been returning. Pierce Fragoso has been working as a tribal historian to weave the fragmented stories back together. In her work she began to find the missing pieces of stories from her community in New Jersey in the stories told to her by those who had gone to Oklahoma.

"To have our community identified is an overwhelming feeling of happiness," she says, of the long road to recognition. As for what it means to her that the Penn Museum—which stands upon ancestral Lenape land—has opened this exhibition, Pierce Fragoso says she feels "appreciated," adding, "I mean I feel appreciation for my community and also [for] being a part of something that is very different than what you typically see in a museum.

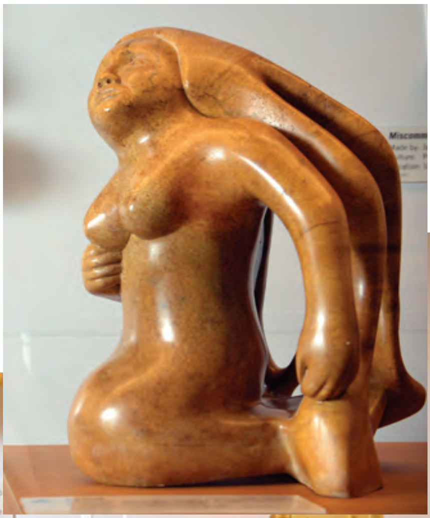
"You don't usually see the past and the present side by side," she explains, or "such a strong focus on voices like this. I also love that the voices are next to other tribal voices that are covering other topics."

The exhibit's multiple layers allow visitors a range of approaches. For instance, delving into language, you discover that there are more than 150 Native American languages spoken in the US today, with the highest concentration of Native-language use in Alaska and the Southwest, where Native populations are larger than other regions. That richness is counterbalanced by the fact that most of these are endangered, even while many efforts are underway by Native Americans and linguists to turn the tide.

Here in Lenapehoking, Shelley DePaul, chief of the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania, has been central to this mission. DePaul teaches Lenape at Swarthmore College, and through her and others' efforts, the language is being taught in other area schools and universities as well. Still, even with this growing interest, Lenape is still listed by UNESCO as a "critically endangered" language, needing continuous efforts to keep it alive.

Language is a particularly fraught issue; its loss figures in many of the narratives: for parents and grandparents, Native languages were forbidden and their speakers were severely punished if they used anything but English. Today, nearly everyone speaks English first, but learning Native languages is now more possible, a matter of choice and pride—and urgency, given the dwindling number of fluent speakers.

Rather than being arranged chronologically, each of the exhibit's four main display cases includes a representative selection of objects from the Penn Museum's extensive collection. The objects on display range from 12,000-year-old stone projectile points from Clovis, New Mexico to contemporary art installations and other works. The highlighted object (right) is a Brazilian soapstone carving called "Sedna" by Abraham Anghik Ruben, from the Inuit culture in Canada's Northwest Territory.



Antler Purse
Needle Case
Needle Cases
Sea Monster Rattle
Pipe and Stem
Pipe Bag

Talahongva and Fowler Williams traveled to four regions of Indian Country—the Northwest, the Southwest, New Jersey, and Washington—to shoot five videos in which they interviewed key advocates, scholars, writers, and artists. Clips from these are used in the exhibition, and full-length versions can be viewed on the exhibition page of the museum's website.

Navajo graphic artist, JoleneYazzie, whose art emphasizes female superheroes, remarks, "I just want people to realize that there is a strength within themselves, that it's always going to be there." Santa Clara Pueblo potter and embroiderer Shawn Tafoya explains that when his pueblo comes together for ceremonial occasions, "We ask for everything for everybody so that everybody will be okay. That everybody will have long lives. It's not just for us, it's for everybody. It's for the world."

Fiber artist and exhibit advisor Teri Rofkar also appears in one of the segments. Referring to the momentous events that are woven into her textiles, she instructs, "Don't look at the end. It's the journey that's important"—making the point that art is created to tell a story, not to be objectified as a piece of material, a commodity.

Fowler Williams worked intensely with the four advisors to arrive at the best ways to present the four core themes. She then turned to the task of picking some 300 objects from the 300,000 or so items included in the Penn Museum's American Collections.

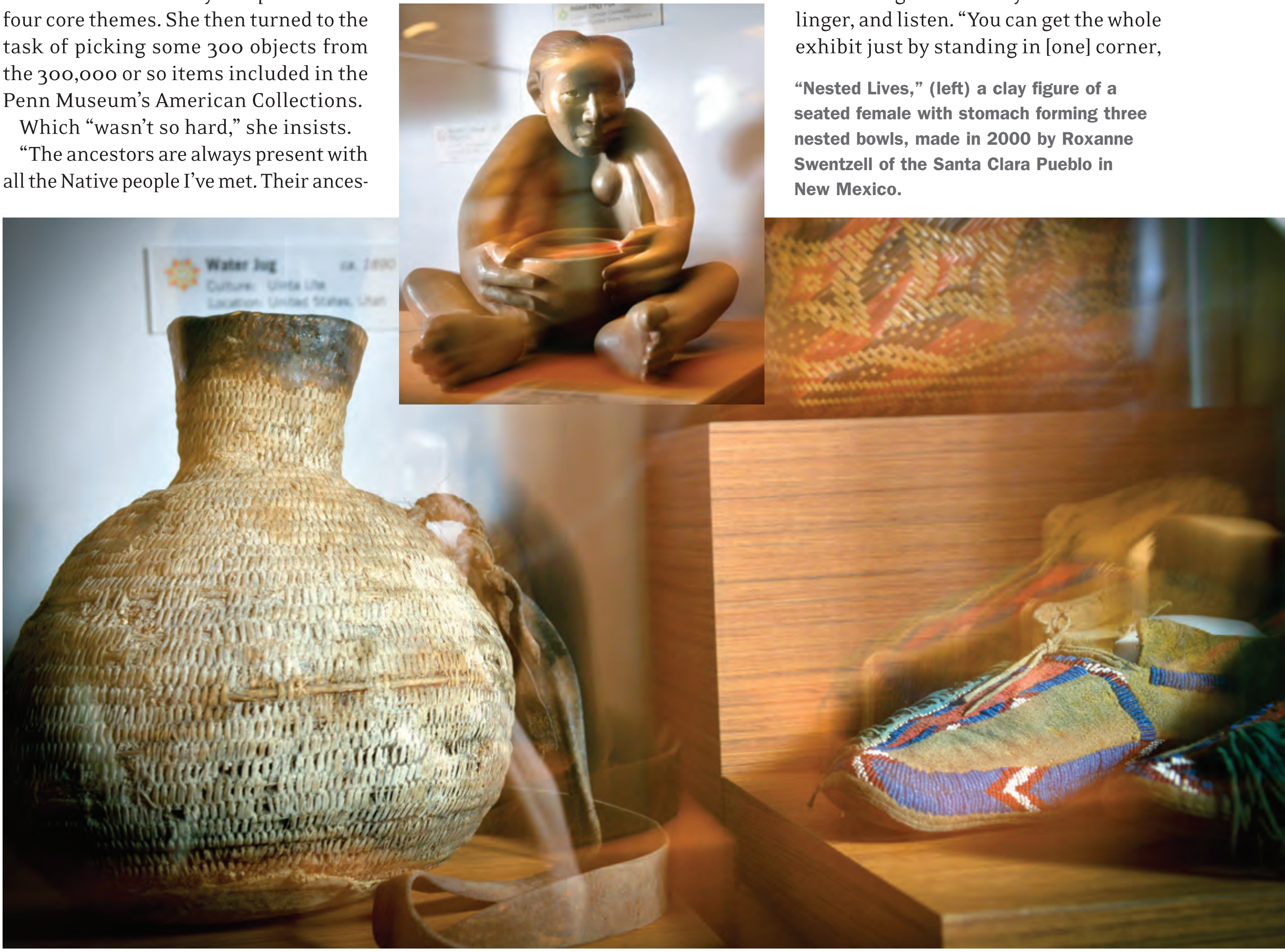
Which "wasn't so hard," she insists.

"The ancestors are always present with all the Native people I've met. Their ancestors are still very much alive. I think of these objects as the ancestors," she says. "I had to pick objects that would still give geographic breadth, have items represented from all over the United States and Canada, and of course, hitting on the strengths of the Penn collection. [But] it was really led by the people and the voices themselves and then the rest sort of fell into place."

Objects in the exhibition range from 12,000 year-old stone projectile points from Clovis, New Mexico (the earliest material remains of human presence in North America); to a delicate wooden Oglala elk flute from the Dakotas of the 1880s; to thought-provoking installations, beautiful pottery, textiles, and glass works from modern-day Native artists.

(Stacey Espenlaub, the Kamensky NAGPRA Coordinator, made sure that nothing included was the subject of active repatriation claims. "All objects in the exhibition were carefully chosen because of their significance to the key themes and topics, while [being] mindful of the spirit in which NAGPRA was intended," she says.)

The arrangement is not chronological, but rather designed so as to flesh out the stories each object contains. Each quadrant of the exhibit hall holds a group of representative items that address the overall themes of the exhibit, which allows visitors to go where they are drawn and linger, and listen. "You can get the whole exhibit just by standing in [one] corner,



"Nested Lives," (left) a clay figure of a seated female with stomach forming three nested bowls, made in 2000 by Roxanne Swentzell of the Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico.

because in every corner, every one of those themes is addressed by the objects that are there," explains William Wierzbowski, associate keeper of the American Collections.

One charming juxtaposition pairs a piece from about 1500 from what is now Arkansas with a contemporary piece titled "Miscommunication," by Jason Garcia. The older object is a clay effigy jar in the shape of a head, with the crown as the bowl's opening; its slightly open lips and eyes pull one in to hear what the head has to say, vocal in the present with a message from five centuries ago. It sits above—and almost seems to be glancing down at—a square vessel from Santa Clara Pueblo, on the sides of which are painted images of young people chatting or clicking pictures on their cell phones while dressed in full ceremonial regalia for the Feast of Saint Clare of Assisi. It is a whimsical dance between Native cultures, between time, between geography, between a wealth of stories, some whispered from the ancient lips, some transmitted through mobile devices. Both show faces, both are about the same size, and both have similar openings at their crown.

The museum's conservation department, headed by Lynn Grant, has the task of ensuring all the objects are properly handled and protected while on display. Those made of more fragile organic materials will be removed and replaced with similar objects throughout the exhibit's five-year run to protect them from too much light exposure. Though it's not noticeable to the visitor, to minimize such damage, the exhibitions team, headed by Kate Quinn, planned for different levels of light exposure in the exhibit space.

The exhibitions team also designed the layout and interactive multimedia components, and worked with Philadelphia-based Blue Cadet Interactive to execute the technical aspects of the display, from the animated fire pit to the interactive video towers and object touch-screens.

The opening of the exhibition has provided "a wonderful opportunity to present a wide range of our North American collections," says Julian Siggers, the Williams Director of the museum. "In addition, the gallery functions as a digital springboard to explore a number of contemporary issues and aspirations of Native American communities. I'm particularly pleased by how interactive digital technology has been harnessed to achieve this forward-looking aspect, and response from our visitors has been very encouraging."

The exhibit's formal opening at the end of March began with a blessing and ribbon-cutting ceremony led by Chief Shelley DePaul, who spoke first in Lenape, then in English.

Also present, having traveled from Oklahoma for the occasion, was Ann Noe Dapice Nu'74 Gr'80, a member of the Delaware and Cherokee. A consultant, scholar, educator, administrator, and advocate, Dapice is the founder and chair of Penn's Association of Native Alumni and has been an important voice in many efforts to enhance the experiences and opportunities of Native Americans at the University.

"Things continue to come full circle," she said after the ribbon-cutting ceremony. "The one thing we always see at Penn is cultural integrity and academic integrity."

She later elaborated by email: "unlike the campuses of the past, planning was done not *by* the campus non-Indian 'experts' but *with* the indigenous people who are both academically educated in fine undergraduate and graduate universities and also *active in and respected by their tribal communities*."

Talahongva says that perspective is central to understanding. "As journalists, we know that there are more than one or two or three sides to a story," she says. "So, I talk a lot about perspective. What kind of perspective do we bring? We're only 2.5 percent of the population, so the chances of an American meeting us [is slim]."

According to the 2010 Census, some 2.9 million people out of 308 million claimed to be Native American, while a total of 5.2 million individuals claimed some Native American ancestry. As of 2014, there are 566 federally recognized tribes, but that leaves out the unrecognized tribes, and those in Canada. But regardless of how small a percentage of the US population Native Americans may be, collectively they represent an astounding wealth of cultural and linguistic diversity and their voices tell remarkable stories that can enrich us all.

As an example of the uniqueness of the Native perspective in this country, consider the common question: *Where are you from?*

"People ask me [that], as an American," Talahongva recounts. "I say, 'Here.' And they say, 'Yes, but before that, where?' I say, 'Here.' And then they realize, '*Oh*, you're Native American.'"

Asked how she hopes the younger people of her family will engage the exhibit, Suzan Shown Harjo says, "If it did nothing other than [make] our grandchildren feel good, rather than bad, that would be it for me. So, it lifts up our family. But, this also lifts up everyone's family.

"It is [a celebration of humanity] and I love that it's a kaleidoscope, that you look in one end and see all these great patterns behind a person. You look in another lens and you see all this great history and every so often a person popping out," she says with a laugh. "That's nice."

Talahongva echoes this sentiment. "I think that's really important for the next generation because my son is biracial," she says. "He's very strong. We raised him in the Hopi way. He is very much aware of Hopi issues and such. I would want them to really enjoy it and see how they could also help tell the story, of not just Hopi, but other Native people."

And what about non-Natives—children and adults?

"I would want them to learn about Native people," answers Talahongva, "and how again we arrived today, what we're doing, and to understand that our cultures are to be respected. I think that we have a loss of respect overall in America."

She offers the example of the NFL, which fines players for using the "N" word but allows one of its teams to actually be called the "R" word. "When you reduce Indian people to caricatures, you lose that respect for people as people," she says. "Now they've become cartoon characters, and it's okay to make fun of cartoon characters because they're not real. But we're real and our kids are real. So, understand this culture, and understand that there should be some respect. We respect other people, too. So, have that understanding and that enlightenment."◆

Beebe Bahrami Gr'95 is a writer, anthropologist, and frequent contributor whose current writing projects include a travel memoir set in southwestern France, Neanderthals, and walking the Camino across southern France and northern Spain (www.beebesfeast.com).