

CONTEMPORARY IROQUOIS ART COLLECTION AVAILABLE ONLINE

COLETTE LEMMON

*Colette Lemmon is the Curator of Exhibitions at the Iroquois Museum in Howes Cave, NY.
iroquoismuseumlemmon@gmail.com*

Thanks to two Institute of Museum & Library Services grants, the Iroquois Museum's 2400-piece collection of contemporary Haudenosaunee/Iroquois artwork is available online. The Museum established its collection in the late 1970s, when the focus on Native American art was almost exclusively on the southwest. The Museum's co-founder, Dr. Christina Johannsen, conducted seminal research on Iroquois art at a time when few institutions were aware of, or interested in, contemporary Haudenosaunee expressions.

Today, the Museum's collection stands out as one of the largest and most comprehensive of its type worldwide. It includes objects constructed using traditional materials and techniques such as baskets, dance rattles, moccasins, waterdrums, snowsnakes, cornhusk dolls, beadwork, pottery, and contemporary mediums such as paintings, photography, mixed-media, metalwork, stone, ceramic, and antler sculpture. The bulk of the collection dates from 1979 to the present. A smaller proportion of the collection, predominantly beadwork and basketry, dates to the early 1900s.

The Museum also houses 64 paintings from the early 1970s by Ernest Smith (1907 – 1975). Ernie was a member of the Seneca Nation from Tonawanda Reservation and one of the best known Haudenosaunee painters of his time. His colorful, often dramatic paintings were produced as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Indian Art Project and interpret and document Iroquois stories and cultural practices. Other collection highlights include 77 antler carvings by retired ironworker Stanley Hill, Sr. (1921 – 2003) and a smaller, but equally impressive body of work by Mohawk silverworker Julius Cook (1927 – 1999). Both of these artisans were retired ironworkers and remain unequalled masters in their chosen mediums.

The Museum actively adds to the collection each year with objects uploaded to the database bi-annually. From beaded high top sneakers to hand-carved lacrosse sticks, the collection represents a rich and tactile expression of the values, stories, traditional teachings, and environmental and social concerns of Haudenosaunee people today.

The online collections database is sortable by artist name, nation, material, or descriptive keyword such as wampum, confederacy, or clan. With the exception of works which contain direct references to masking traditions, entries are accompanied by multiple color images and links to individual artist bios and associated works.

The works and their accompanying biographical information offer insight into the important economic and social role these hand crafts served, and continue to serve, in Iroquois communities. The time span represented by the collection is one characterized by significant change. Together, it illustrates the shift from works created for a non-native market with a predominance of Pan-Indian symbolism to a robust reclamation of cultural identity, political sovereignty, and a multi-layered Haudenosaunee stylistic vocabulary. Prior to the 1970s, Iroquois art was viewed primarily as ethnographic or tourist craft. Today, it is considered fine art worthy of an international stage.

For a small museum with limited staff, making our collections available online was no easy task. The project was begun in 2017 and, in 2022, is nearly complete. A vital part of the process included inviting Iroquois consultants to examine the collection and provide insight into techniques, vocabulary, and cultural context unique to their art forms and specific communities. They included Tuscarora beadworker Grant Jonathan; Mohawk basketmaker Carrie Hill; Oneida woodworker and silversmith Noel Benson and Onondaga ceramicist Peter B. Jones. Other visiting Iroquois continue to suggest attributions and offer clarifications, making the online database a dynamic resource that will only be made richer in the years to come.

From museums and galleries planning exhibitions, to Iroquois artists seeking fresh inspiration, to independent researchers, authors, publishers, and those simply looking for an enjoyable afternoon of visual exploration, the collection is available 24/7. Each entry has a “Send Us Feedback” button and we welcome your questions and investigations.



Walking the Two Row, Elizabeth Doxtater, mixed-media, 2009



The Frost Spirit, Ernest Smith, watercolor, c.1970



The Spirit of Spring, Ernest Smith, watercolor, c. 1970



Clan Mother, Andrea Chrisjohn, acrylic on canvas, 2021



Loon Nation, Leigh Smith, clay, 1989



Bean Spirit, Stanley Hill, Sr., moose antler, 1983



Turtle Island, Stanley Hill, Sr., moose antler, 1992



Three Sisters Pendant, Julius Cook, silver with inlay, 1991



Red Devil, Ženja Hyde, acrylic on canvas, 1999