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THE LEGACY OF TED COE

Exhibition at the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian
explores Native American art through Ted Coe's career

By **BRUCE BERNSTEIN** executive director **RALPH T. COE FOUNDATION**

This essay is adapted from the catalog essay accompanying the exhibition curated by the author and on view at the Wheelwright Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico, through April 17.

“All my life I’ve relied on this measured process of aesthetic absorption, whether the work is a Renaissance plaquette or a Native American wearing blanket.

It involves returning over and over again to the individual work of art. I revisit and bear constantly in mind the objects of my own collection, however large or small, to gain new insights. They are not trophies but instruments of passion, with the power to unexpectedly reveal mysteries.” –Ted Coe

Ralph T. Coe (1929-2010), known to all as Ted, was the consummate curator and collector. Eclectic in his tastes, he brought to the intersection of object and opportunity a passion for collecting itself, remaining innately focused on education and connoisseurship.

Coe was a pioneer in the field of Native art studies, curating landmark exhibitions, writing seminal books and promoting Native art connoisseurship. Trained as an art historian specializing in European art, Coe ultimately found his life's passion in collecting Native American art and working tirelessly to expand the public's understanding and appreciation of traditional and contemporary forms, even as many connoisseurs, collectors and even artists thought them to be lost. Largely self-taught through years of study and interactions with Native artists and community members, he elevated people's appreciation and understanding of Native art and, importantly, the cultures and artists that created these works.

The exhibitions he organized, such as the groundbreaking international *Sacred Circles*, *Two Thousand Years of North American Indian Art* and *Lost and Found Traditions: Native American Art, 1965-1985*, both emphasized and empathetically presented artistry and people. These exhibitions proved to museum audiences that the art of Native Americans could meet the highest standards of any culture.

Experiencing, perhaps, is a more apt word to describe Ted's methodology. Whether sitting in front of one piece, finding an isolated artist, rummaging around antique and tribal arts galleries, or researching in the store rooms of the world's great museums, he absorbed by doing and experiencing rather than just studying and researching. Beginning in the late 1970s and only concluding with the deterioration of his health, he traveled thousands of miles each year to meet artists and engage in cultural activities. Driving up the Alaskan Highway or through the Great Lakes and Maritimes, he would stop to attend a powwow or Sun Dance at someone's invitation, participate in a funeral or wake, revisit and reignite friendships and acquaintances, and stop along the way in his never-ending quest for the perfect piece of pie.



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Growing up in household filled with art, Ted pursued a traditional art history education, earning his bachelor's in art history at Oberlin College and Masters of Arts from Yale in 1957. He worked in a number of museums, most notably the Nelson-Atkins Museum, where he was instrumental in its transformation from a small regional museum to an international presence. He eventually rose to director, a position from which he resigned in 1982 to afford himself more time to curate and collect. He relocated to Santa Fe in 1984, his Agua Fria Street home quickly overflowing with his ever-expanding art collections, including a totem pole that stood over the backyard fence. The house also served as a gathering place for artists, collectors and curators.

Ted was instrumental in inventing Native American art connoisseurship, learning that scholarship can fill in the dry details of an artist's name but did little to know the art. He believed that *"Art is what unites people rather than pulls them apart, it clearly and succinctly the purest form of human culture and society."* Ted's connoisseurship is transcendent; it is about the object

above all else, freed from entangled definitions of quality and current trends and taste.

Visiting Ted's Santa Fe home was a matchless experience. Every nook and cranny of the house was covered with his acquisitions, and he was conversant in every art form, from the smallest and rarest of tribal items to the European and American paintings that adorned the living room walls. He arranged his collection by how the pieces looked together or associations among them, baskets stacked in corners,

model boats in the laundry room and special cabinets filled with treasures. He long desired to add a Chilkat robe to his collection, and once he did, he hung it in his bedroom where he could enjoy it as his first and last waking thought each day.

Ted spoke and wrote about "absorbing" art through a process of discernment, of object, of process and of cultural context. Although never a prodigious writer, he published and lectured broadly about European, decorative and contemporary art in his years as a museum professional. As he ventured into the field

1. *Chilkat Robe*, c. 1850.
Tlingit or Haida, Alaska or
British Columbia.
48 x 61 in. Mountain goat
and commercial sheep's
wool, cedar bark and dyes.
Acquired from Jackson
Street Gallery, Seattle, WA,
2007. NA1313.



2. Coat, c. 1740. Cree or Ojibwa (attrib.), Ontario or Quebec. Moose Hide, quills, wool, rocker stamping on the hem and natural dyes. Acquired from Taylor A. Dale and Ted Trotta, 2006. NA1172.

3. Model Totem Poles: Left to right: 2003. Henry (Hank) Robertson (b. 1932), Haisla, British Columbia. NA1096; c. 1910. Charlie James (1867-1938), Kwakwaka'wakw, Alert Bay, British Columbia. NA1106; 1982. Alver Tait (b. 1943), Nisga'a, Nass River, British Columbia. NA0463; 1983. Kenny McNeil (b. 1961), Tahltan, Alaska. NA0201; c. 1860. Haida (attrib.), Haida Gwaii, British Columbia. NA1080; 1957. Henry (Hank) Robertson (b. 1932), Haisla, British Columbia. NA1099.

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of Native art, however, he published less, perhaps realizing the inadequacy of language to describe his experience of the material that drew him so deeply to it:

The Indians I have met...don't call [art] anything, for they have little need to. They look beyond what we call an art object, not directly at it...The old anthropological term 'material culture' has often seemed as good as any other way to fill the bill. Except that the culture often isn't material but reaches into other realms aesthetically far beyond categories of the materials from which it was made or the social expression for which it was devised. 'Art history' leaves out the functional aspects upon which the aesthetics often return. The conclusion may well be that the English language has failed to come up with an appropriate term; it is simply too finite a language for the inclusive coverage demanded here.

Ted saw not art but people's experiential existence in their world. He understood the continuity of form, and that the past and present are powerfully bound.

His eye fell to the piece itself, allowing the piece to reveal its beauty and intrigue. Nor was he one to theorize, choosing instead to expound on the beauty and singularity of art, as well as the ceremonies he witnessed. He described his life as one of absorbing art through a measured process of discernment—of object, of process and of cultural context. Although he published and lectured broadly about European, decorative and contemporary art, it is for his pioneering work in the Native American art field that he is best remembered. Art was his way of life, not a profession or avocation, but his life force, essence and reason for being.

I had the time of my life in Indian Country...I was lucky to have been knee-deep in Indians as my closest Indian family friend explained to someone who wondered where I was. I attended numerous powwows, potlatches, feasts, and doings on the Northwest Coast, [and] Plains Indian celebrations...witnessed tribal council and society meetings, met fascinating elders and wise tribal dignitaries. ...'You've changed from someone only interested in art into someone who is interested in the people,' my friend and occasional traveling companion [Reverend] Tom Wiederholt said to me as we circled about in my trusty old Chevy Blazeer [sic].



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Upon graduating Yale, Ted spent two years as a curatorial assistant at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. In 1959 he arrived at the Nelson Gallery as an assistant curator of European paintings and sculpture. He was appointed assistant director in 1965 and director in 1977. At the time, the Nelson Gallery was a small provincial museum with a rather standard unexceptional collection of world art. Upon his departure in 1982, its collection was not only world-class but the museum had taken extraordinary risks in diverging from Roman antiquities, medieval arts, European painting and decorative arts to collect and exhibit contemporary and cultural art. Leading up to the *Sacred Circles* exhibition had been a succession of increasingly important showings of non-Western art, African sculpture and the remodeling of the Primitive Art halls. During his Kansas City years, Ted was repeatedly able to use the museum's exhibitions and acquisition program to bring new and challenging ideas to his board and audience, shaping much of the museum's future growth and development.

Ted was deeply absorbed in his work in this period. His archived papers at the Nelson-Atkins Museum reveal the palpable vibrato he felt in developing funders and followers, building a dynamic museum organization more by feel than careful planning. His lectures were met with exclaim, admirers showering him with thank you letters and dinner and party invitations.

Active in both museum and art worlds, his correspondence files are filled with inquiries and offers of sale from galleries and artists whom he knew personally and visited on his frequent trips to New York and Europe. Ted worked fluidly between collecting, dealing, curating and raising funds—he saw no differentiation between them. At the front end of his career, he might take at face value an object's



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documentation, whether from museum record, dealer or collector, without checking the source. But such documentation could fall short. As a result, increasingly, his own vast experience became the necessary documentation. What his eye fell to was the piece itself. He desired that the art speak, without intervention. He appreciated and celebrated beauty where he found it rather than where he was directed to find it.

Although hired as curator of European art, Ted took an active interest in modern art, within his first year organizing exhibitions and suggesting new acquisitions. It was not without controversy. Upon accepting his curatorial job at the museum, Ted was warned about the “comfort level” of how things were and that change was not encouraged. He was told, “People here don’t want to see this sort of thing [modern art].” But Ted leapt into bringing change to the Nelson Gallery, suggesting: “It was not enough in Kansas City to curate an art



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4. *Comb*, 1983. Stanley Hill (1921-2003), Mohawk, Grand Island, New York. Moose antler. Acquired from Alma Hill, Grand Island, NY, 1983. NA0339.
5. *Cottage*, 2000. Irene Desmoulin (1920-2013), Odawa, Manitoulin Island, Ontario. 7.25 x 7 in. Birchbark, quills, sweetgrass and dye. Acquired from Ten Mile Point Trading Post and Gallery, Sheguiandah, Manitoulin Island, ON, 2000. NA0216.
6. *Bag*, 2007. Kenneth Williams (b. 1983), Arapaho/Seneca, Cattaraugus Seneca Indian Territory, New York. Hide, cloth and beads. Acquired through Morning Star Gallery, Santa Fe, NM, from the artist, 2008. NA1387.

historical collection, however judiciously.”

Ted would encounter the same short-sighted myopic thinking about Native arts as well.

He led the museum and its constituents to appreciate all types of visual stimuli rather than a narrowly defined single field or art style. His home in Kansas City was a meeting place for his burgeoning supporters and where he recruited new collectors. A person who attended these gatherings remembered his home as eclectic mix of pop art and funny items. “He never told us what to collect, only leading us to be visual experts and art critics.”

Of his time in Kansas City, some described him as the “pied piper” because of his enthusiasm and accessible way of talking and teaching about art. Many people today continue to fondly remember him. He was inspirational; without his eclectic and visceral appreciation and understanding of Native arts, the field would be less stimulating and perhaps passion-deprived. Gaylord Torrence, curator of Native art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum, credits Ted in creating the present-day Native American art department.



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When the new Native American art hall was opened in 2009, Ted received many acknowledgments of his role:

Thank you for what you started and nurtured—which is bearing beautiful fruit in the new American Indian wing—it was your scholarship and spirited pursuit and wisdom and the inspiration...that started everything and made this collection possible. ...Your influence was everywhere, in the...objects which you introduced us to and in the hearts of your trustees. Your legacy is forever.

Ted was an astute art observer, a *connoisseur*; in the

vernacular, he had a *Good Eye*. But even this venerated word falls short in describing Ted’s life and career. He was able to do so because he was not shackled by academia or institution—as long as he was able to cobble together the dollars he would need for gas and food, he was free to come and go as he pleased. Importantly, not only did he possess a well-earned and enormous freedom, it was not squandered but shared through his friendships, exhibitions, and publications.

By 2000, when Ted began the work of preparing the



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7. *Moccasins*, 1870-75. Oklahoma. Deer hide, hardened natural hide soles, trade cloth, beads. Acquired from Toby Herbst, Santa Fe, NM, 2005. NA1140.
8. *Cradle Decoration*, c. 1830. Eastern Sioux, Minnesota. Hide, porcupine, quills and tin cones. Acquired from Donald Ellis Gallery, ON, 2003. NA0683.
9. *Chisel with Bear Handle*, c. 1880. Haida, British Columbia. Alder or maple wood, metal. Acquired from James Economos Works of Art, Santa Fe, NM, 2005. NA1138.
10. *Wall Pocket*, c. 1865. Woodland Cree (attrib.). Wool trade cloth, beads. Acquired from Trotta-Bono, Shrub Oak, NY, 2006. NA1171.

Photos by Addison Doty. © Ralph T. Coe Foundation for the Arts, Inc.

exhibition *The Responsive Eye: Ralph T. Coe and the Collecting of American Indian Art* for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he had coached his eye and mind to simultaneously see the object and hear and see the people whose culture, traditions and hands had formed the piece.

Although trained as an old-style art historian to appreciate Western art above all others, he grew steadily in his finely tuned appreciation of non-Western arts/tribal arts. He made American Indian art accessible and understandable and introduced people to its makers. Through his life and work he grew to appreciate that art-making is a particular kind of human activity that involves both the creativity of the producer and the perceptions of users and appreciators to use the objects as art.

In the end, Ted saw not art but people's experiential existence in their world. He understood the continuity of form, and that the past and present are powerfully bound. The formula was simple: by displaying art he was making people know, and by working with artists he was making art known. One is connected to the other, without hesitation or gaps, a long continuous looping ribbon. By finding and identifying the makers of traditional art, he was able to put people first as well as see their work within the broad contexts of culture and landscape rather than on a pedestal in a museum. The art of a particular society is best understood in relation to its place within that society—where it was produced—rather than in relation to how members of another society might understand it. It is only in this way that Ted could comprehend what he was looking at.

To continue his life's work, Ted created the Ralph T. Coe Foundation for the Arts, home to his 2,000-plus art objects and his enduring vision to create understanding, appreciation and passion for Native Arts. The foundation is fulfilling its mission through inclusive and innovative programming. Located in Santa Fe, the foundation is open each first Friday of the month, as well as by appointment. Find out details at www.ralphtcoefoundation.org. «

Connoisseurship and Good Pie: Ted Coe and Collecting Native Art

Through April 17, 2016

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