April 2, 2020

A Note...
Rachel de W. Wixom
President, Executive Director

The mission of the Ralph T. Coe Center for the Arts is “connection and learning through Indigenous arts.” How can we, while isolated from each other, remain dedicated to you and live up to that mission? How can we continue to grow awareness, continue educating, and appreciating Indigenous art without being able to emphasize a hands-on experience with the Coe collection? And how can we work to break down the barriers separating people from art, and people from each other? The answer is through being creative and willing to be in a constant state of evolving.

Please read through Bruce and Bess’s articles below as they not only work through these questions personally, but reach out to you—our visitors, our constituents, and supporters to ask for your creative involvement. Let us know how we can bring the Coe into your home by clicking here. We have many ideas, as you will see in the coming weeks, of ways we can come together while remaining so far apart. We, at the Coe look forward to bringing them to you.

In the meantime, I wish you, your family and friends well-being and, as always, we look forward to when our paths can cross again at the Coe.

Getting Your Hands on Art
Bess Murphy, PhD
Curator

How can we be “hands-on” in a time of physical isolation? This is a question that we at the Coe are trying to wrap our hearts and heads around. Our vision for the Coe is driven by our desire to facilitate learning through direct, hands-on experience of artworks. Since we cannot be with each other in person right now we are excited to think through how we can create a new model for how the Coe reaches out.

I have begun working with our Hands-On Curators assisting them in creating an interactive exhibition in the time of Coronavirus. They are all working from home, just as most of you likely are. They are learning how to navigate online, separated from their friends and peers. Two of
our students are about to graduate—facing one of the biggest transitions of their lives in this new state of separation. Despite all of this, they are stepping up to the plate, incredibly energized and excited to think about how to turn their exhibition in to something else entirely. Maybe it will be an online zine, maybe an interactive video experience, maybe a playlist, maybe all of these. We'll see and definitely keep you posted.

I am also working on how the Coe can somehow get something out to you—our friends, supporters, and followers that is tangible in some way. As a parent, I have been overwhelmed by what feels like ten million digital tools to help my child learn from home: tours, live webcams, every possible kitchen experiment, so many websites... We are lucky to live in an age where we have so much capacity to connect in these formats, even if it can be a little overwhelming at times. Most of all though, it makes me think that I want to step back and just do something without a screen between me and my family. So, how can the Coe, with our incredible collection that invites you to be present with artworks for moments of extended looking, touching, and learning, do something else?

My daughter, who is 8, suggested that we make a game so that people can learn some of the amazing stories that our collection holds. I’m working on it! I am also chatting with artist friends about other possibilities—and I’d love to hear from you, too. What can the Coe add to your life right now? Feel free to reach out to us with your ideas! Or just send us a story of an object or artwork that you put your hands on this week. We’d love to add those to our e-letters and return them back to all of you...

Photo above: Alma (age 8) hands on with a clay dinosaur by Antonio Chavarria (Santa Clara)

Art’s Curative Powers
Bruce Bernstein, PhD
Director of Innovation, Chief Curator

Like everyone, my family and I are overwhelmed by our current Coronavirus situation and isolation—learning new appreciation for things that once seemed so ordinary. Perhaps like me, you are also re-discovering artwork in our homes, a gift or something we purchased, something that we have had for many years or perhaps it is something new. Being in the house so much in recent weeks has provided me with the extraordinary opportunity to see and deeply delve into the artwork we have in our home, but, also I long for the artwork at the Coe that surrounds u at every turn. Being absent from the Coe building during our isolation also grows my appreciation for the Coe collection. One of the lovely outcomes of the Coe having such a small home is that everywhere you turn, there is art to enjoy and marvel at. As every visitor to the Coe experiences, I too, am in awe. The short walk to my office is filled with pieces to wonder at and enjoy.

Each day I pass and marvel at the yellow cedar pole carved by Calvin Hunt (Kwakwaka’wakw). With it comes a flood of memories for me—driving down Agua Fría Street in Santa Fe and seeing the pole sticking out above the back fence of Ted’s house; water and the sounds made when traveling on the inlets between northern Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia; and the Hunt’s carving shed. Also, at the Coe’s entry I pass a mask with paint and horsehair carved by Reginald Davidson (Haida) (NA 1098). The piece was acquired in Victoria. Ted had been present in Masset to see this mask danced by Davidson; the dance and its paraphernalia were part of a ceremony to pay the village for Davidson’s social digression. The mask reminds me of community and harmony; and, more importantly, the restoration of balance and good. The mask and pole together are tremendous mnemonic devices for our present-day circumstances of maintaining and restoring harmony and balance within our world.
In my mind’s eye I turn down the short hallway into my office. By doing so, I have the extraordinary privilege to walk by more art from around the globe—Indonesian beadwork from Borneo (AS 0025) with intricate depictions of the world and its vast and unending meanings; an extraordinary set of Kiowa paintings on untanned hide or vellum (NA 0599a,b,c) which lives right next to a Apsaalooke beaded strip (NA 1159) when used is attached to the skin of a buffalo robe that would be worn across the shoulders...
And, some of my favorite work, the caribou and reindeer hair tufted images reside here (NA 0490). Each is intriguing but it is Doris Beck’s tufted caribou hair portrait of a howling wolf on a frigid night that continues to demand my attention. (NA 0491) Acquired in June 1990, Ted left us a record of his concerted search for the wolf portrait:
In search of a fine tufted caribou hair item, I kept hearing that the finest worker in this media lived at Fort Resolution, along the southeast shore of the Great Slave Lake. I headed out of Hay River, and went as far as Fort Smith, then doubled back to Fort Resolution. I finally heard the name Doris Beck, and went to sit on her stoop. After I had been there a disconsolately long time, a passerby looked at me quizzically. I explained that I was trying to find Doris Beck. He said, "she's not here, she's off at fish camp." There was nothing to do but go back to Hay River.

The next morning, I went rather indifferently along the main street and found a gift shop run by a very nice lady from Saskatchewan (it seems to me that everyone from Canada flees Saskatchewan) .... Here was the large, salient image that I had hankered over so longingly, right back in Hay River from where I had started out, and the author proved to be the sought-after Doris Beck. She had signed the picture "D.B. Ft. Res. NWT." The wolf is depicted in exquisite profile and one can almost sense the plaintive bark as he serenades the darkling approach of night. There is an indescribable element of the long ago and far away and of the desolateness of the far north in winter that could only be achieved by someone who had spent a lifetime there. Despite the use of only a black and white palette, there is a subliminal sense of broad colorism so subtle are the undulating masses of caribou hair that delineate legs, haunch, and stretched muscles on the wolf. —Ted Coe

Clearly, Ted was taken by this evocative piece. How can a thing so tightly grasp us and embrace our intellect and emotion? As some people want to say, "These are just things." But are they just "things"? I first consider that Doris Beck put herself into the piece, perhaps in unknown ways. By considering this, we can more easily appreciate her vision and technical skills.

We are all surrounded by things, things we know, things we want to know, and things we might never know. But yet we continue to surround ourselves with visual stimulation that might in fact touch all of our senses. Art is the most human of all human characteristics. Each person’s aesthetic senses are tuned—some to the movement of caribou in the Arctic Tundra, others to painting and sculpture, and yet others to being able to differentiate music (is that the Rolling Stones or Beatles?) or visual acuity ("Oh! Look at that 1957 Ford pickup!). We all have fine-tuned aesthetic sensibilities and we all use them every day.

Whether in your home or at the Coe, these are not just mere objects or things, but rather ideas and words given form and substance. It comes down to one word—voice. The indelible transposition and use of the world that surrounds us, which we hear and experience as voice. Artists place this deep knowledge—consciously or unconsciously—into every piece they make, through their choices of materials to the designs they paint. Objects work in powerful ways. Perhaps subversive, perhaps not. These pieces come home with us, permeating our consciousness, reminding us of a broader and bigger Native place.
Creativity surrounds us and during these unprecedented and trying times within that creativity there is a contemplated pleasure and memory for us to dwell within and enjoy as well as to learn from and to take solace.

Our best wishes for good health and well-being to everyone during this difficult time.

Please support the Coe and donate today.

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