

# *James T. Bialac Native American Art Collection*

at the Donald E. Pray Law Library at the College of Law



Gilbert Atencio (San Ildefonso)  
*The Delight Makers in the Process of Making Medicine*  
Great Reading Room

## **The James T. Bialac Collection**

Arizona attorney James T. Bialac began collecting Native American art in 1964. Over the next 50 years, he amassed one of the most important private collections in the world. His collection contains approximately 2,500 two-dimensional works of art and more than 2,500 three dimensional works, including katsina dolls, textiles, pottery, and jewelry. Works from the Native cultures of the Southwest comprise the majority of the collection, but tribal groups from regions across North America are represented, from the Arctic to the Northeast Woodlands, the Southeast, the Plains and into Mexico.

In making his gift, Mr. Bialac requested that his collection be displayed so that as many people as possible have the opportunity to view and learn about these important works of Native American art. The installation at the OU College of Law expands upon similar installations of the Bialac Collection at the University of Arizona and Arizona State University law programs.



Harrison Begay (Navajo)  
*Squaw Dance*  
Dean's Suite

## **Selections at the College of Law**

Over 300 works from the James T. Bialac Collection have been installed in the College of Law, including the Donald E. Pray Law Library. These works were selected to share the breadth of the two-dimensional work in the collection and to compliment the facility's generous exhibition areas. Through a cooperative arrangement between the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and the College of Law, the Bialac Collection is presented in the following areas:

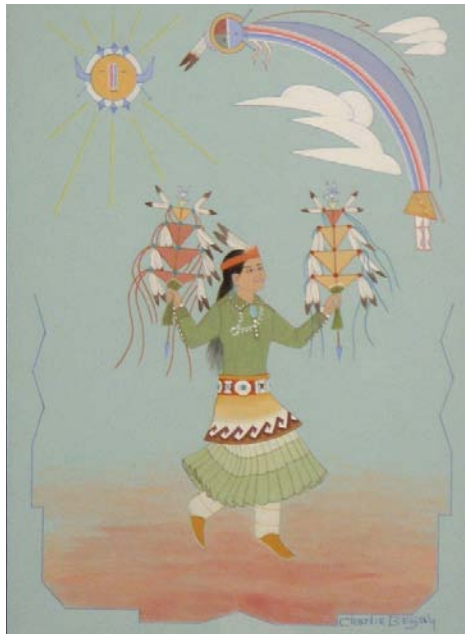
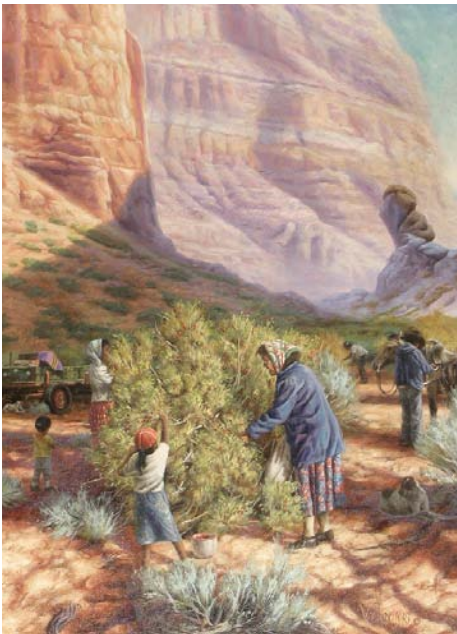
- Dean's Office Suite [limited public access]
- Legal Clinic hallway
- Faculty Office area (3rd floor)
- Donald E. Pray Law Library
  - Great Reading Room (main floor)
  - Circulation Stacks (2nd floor)
  - Library Administrative Offices (2nd floor) [limited public access]

## Tours

For visitors to the College of Law, it can take approximately an hour to complete a walking tour of the art installed in the public areas. Gallery guides are available at the College of Law and from the FJJMA website. The facility is ADA compliant. The Donald E. Pray Law Library and Faculty Office area are accessible to the public seven days a week, though visitors are encouraged to keep in mind that the facility is an educational environment and to follow all posted notices. The Dean's Office Suite, Legal Clinic hallway, and Library Administrative Offices are accessible during regular work hours, though access may be limited for public viewing of work installed in work areas.

## Collection Themes

The *James T. Bialac Collection of Native American Art* can be organized around themes that broadly represent the concerns and issues of the Native American community.



### Space/Place:

Indigenous cultures are place-based, meaning that tribal beliefs and customs are tied to particular locations, encompassing the local biosphere, seasonal weather patterns, and, often, distinct land formations (man-made or natural). Landscapes manifest these environmental spatial relationships. Artists provide sweeping views of their tribal home and simultaneously show the intimate spaces of their community. Within the landscape panoramas, it is quite common to see geographic references to sites that have deeply rooted symbolic meaning to the local tribal community.

For example, images that reference Monument Valley may provide a localized backdrop for family activity or they may also be referencing the Navajo creation stories that describe these great geologic structures as the remnants of the giants who in primordial times terrorized the people until the hero twins turned them to stone.

Indigenous people also consider space as representative of the relationship between earth, sky and the cosmological beings that provide social guidance and world order. Because this latter concept of space is difficult to represent, these concepts of space often get flattened into two-dimensional graphic references, often in the form of linear and geometric designs. Additionally, during the early development of contemporary Native American art styles developed that presented figures in undefined space, which allowed for subjective interpretation. The combination of these influences can be seen as part of the Indigenous American aesthetics.

**Image 1:**  
James King (Navajo)  
*Juniper Berries Pickers*  
Library, Circulation Stacks, (2nd floor)

**Image 2:**  
Charlie Begay (Navajo)  
*Boy Feather Dancer*  
Library Circulation Stacks, (2nd floor)

**Image 3:**  
Charlie Begay (Navajo)  
*Girl Feather Dancer*  
Library Circulation Stacks, (2nd floor)



**Left image:**  
Ernest Whitehead (San Carlos Apache)  
*The Pubescent Girl*  
Library, Circulation Stacks (2nd floor)

**Right image:**  
Alex Seowtewa (Zuni)  
*The Zuni Deity Bear Kachina's Spiritual Side of Identity*  
Library, Circulation Stacks (2nd floor)

## Identity:

Identity Native Americans sustain their cultural identities while maintaining lifestyles that are similar to those of other Americans living in contemporary society. As with all people, an individual's identity is built from the combination of the daily experiences that form a path and the memorable benchmarks. Retaining cultural traditions is made possible through the social systems that bind individuals to their families, clans, moieties, and to the natural environment as an extension of cosmological forces, called kincentricity. Artists represent these relationships, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, as unique individual experiences. For many Indigenous people, the intermingling cultural influences of belonging to a tribal community are made more complex by the influence of urban living and developing technologies. These collective influences are braided into a path as unique as their personalities resulting in the diversity that is Native America.



## Ceremony/Ritual:

The cultural practice of Native American ceremonies and rituals is believed to bring order and balance to the tribal community and, by extension, the world. Images that depict aspects of these ceremonies and rituals are often filled with the nuances of indigenous cultural aesthetics reflective of tribal beliefs and customs. For many communities, the beauty of the dance can be seen in the affective visualization of the step – serving as synecdoche, or a part representing the whole, for both the physical dance and the accompanying rhythm and beat of the drum or singer's voice. Participation in ceremonies perpetuates the dynamic nature of tribal cultures, extending the life of the culture through its active practice, and provides a means for tribal members to affirm their individual identities. Tribal artists may opt to document a particular event or they may choose to depict the essence of the ceremony through abstraction. The range of images presented in this theme reiterate the importance of these cultural practices for both participant and viewer. These images of ceremony and ritual are also the place where Indigenous artists are most likely to depict the human figure, necessary as the activating force centrifugal to the event pictured.



**Top image:**  
Ralph Roybal (San Ildefonso)  
*Rainbow Dancers*  
Faculty Office area (3rd floor)

**Bottom image:**  
James Yazzie (Navajo)  
*Yei-Ba-Chai Dance*  
Library, Circulation Stacks (2nd floor)

## Symbolism/Metaphors:

The Indigenous aesthetic for beauty is bound with tribal recognition that creative expression flows from the inherent potential of the universe. Indigenous art incorporates this flow of complex cultural concepts expressed as simplified graphic design elements. Design motifs have been found on Indigenous American art since time immemorial, used in cave drawings, applique work and linear pottery designs. Each design can simultaneously represent cosmological forces and aesthetic decoration, though knowledge of the specific culture is necessary to provide the interpretive context. The coded visual language of each culture is distinctive and interpretations cannot be generalized, however, these aesthetic metaphors are often what make Native American art so interesting to view. The geometrically organized designs have often been likened to modernist abstraction. In applying this term to contemporary American Indian art one must consider that the coded visual language of Indigenous arts was developed independently of Western influence. Contemporary Native American artists are often familiar with their traditional cultural motifs and modern art principles synthesizing these disparate influences as they seem fit.



**Left image:**  
Sheila Marie Bercier (Navajo/Cree)  
*The Face of Life*  
Library, Circulation Stacks (2nd floor)

**Right image:**  
Joe Maktima (Hopi/Laguna)  
*Design Spirit II*  
Faculty Office Area (3rd floor)



FRED JONES JR.  
**Museum of Art**  
The University of Oklahoma

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