OU Museum of Art prepares for Native American exhibitions

With the Weirzenhofer French Impressionism exhibition now closed until further notice, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, 410 W. Boyd St., is turning its focus to Native American art.

Two exhibitions, "Inuit Art from the Collection of J. Donald Walp" and "Allan Houser: Water," will open at the museum on Saturday, Feb. 3. An opening reception for both exhibitions, sponsored by the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art Association, will be held at the museum from 7 to 9 p.m. today. The public is welcome.

"Inuit Art"

Friend and patron of the FJMA, Walp is an avid collector of art who has amassed an outstanding assembly of Inuit sculptures. These captivating and sometimes playful carvings made from stone, whalebone and other natural resources illustrate many aspects of Inuit history and culture in the exhibition. Mary Jo Watson, Ph.D., adjunct curator of Native American art at FJMA, will curate the show.

A native of Ohio who has lived in Dallas for many decades, Walp began collecting art when he was in college at the University of Michigan. His primary interest initially was Asian art, but while on a cruise from Greenland to Cape Dorset (located in the northern Canada’s Nunavut region), Walp was introduced to Inuit art. The charm of the sculptures captured his attention, and he has been collecting Inuit works ever since.

Though he has a favorite sculpture in the collection, he is reluctant to disclose which one it is. "My (late) wife always said, 'In art, you only see what you know,'" Walp notes. "What appeals to me may not appeal to someone else."

The Inuit works produced today are descended from an era when Inuit ancestors carved tools and occasionally nonfunctional art objects out of ivory, antlers and stone. Art carving waned when traders, whalers and explorers entered the Inuit region and threatened the economy, but soon the Inuit realized that they could assist their economy by bartering their artwork. With the assistance of Inuit art pioneers, James and Alma Houston, and later their son John, admiration for Inuit sculptures has increased dramatically since the 1940s.

In 1949, James Houston recognized the potential for Inuit carvings to become widely appreciated. Through his work with the government-subsidized Canadian Handicrafts Guild, Inuit were encouraged to carve, and their works started to become a major part of the Inuit economy. In April 1999, the Nunavut region was confederated and thus freed from the threat of cultural extinction. Now the Inuit are in the midst of a celebration of their land and culture.

John Houston, son of James and Alma Houston, will speak at OU’s Meacham Auditorium at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 27, in conjunction with the exhibition. An artist and filmmaker, Houston, like his parents, has dedicated his life to advancing awareness of Inuit art worldwide. He is the owner and director of the Houston North Gallery in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, which he founded and co-owned with his mother prior to her death in 1997.

"Allan Houser: Water"

A rare collection of watercolors by Houser, who died in 1994, will be shown in the exhibition "Allan Houser: Water." Organized by the Allan Houser Foundation and Archives in Santa Fe, N.M., it contains 46 watercolors from the collection of the artist’s widow, Anna Marie Houser. Most of the works in the collection have never been publicly exhibited prior to this traveling exhibition.

The exhibition spans four decades of Houser’s career, from the 1950s through the 1980s, with works created in the studio and outdoors. Lushly colored landscapes of Utah, Arizona and New Mexico — as well as both tranquil and action-filled portrayals of Native American life and legend — demonstrate Houser’s mastery of an extremely sensitive, difficult medium.

Seven small-scale sculptures created by Houser are also included in the exhibition. The sculptures offer a context for his work in watercolor while providing comparative examples between the two mediums.

Houser’s painting career began in 1934 when he entered the art program at the Santa Fe Indian School under the direction of Dorothy Dunn. He quickly emerged as the school’s most talented and famous student, and by 1941 had exhibited internationally and completed two major mural projects.

Washington, D.C. Returning to Santa Fe in 1962 to join the faculty of the newly created Institute for American Indian Arts, he gradually focused his public exhibitions on his evolving sculptural creations. As his output of sculpture increased, he found less time to paint and gradually eliminated paintings from his exhibitions. Fortunately, these works have been preserved, and through a series of museum exhibitions, the Allan Houser Foundation will be sharing many of them with the public.

Museum hours are Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Thursday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.; and Saturday and Sunday, noon to 4:30 p.m. Parking is available on the campus’s north oval with a museum parking permit (available at the museum security desk) or in the visitor parking lot on the north side of Boyd Street across from the museum. Additional parking is available in the Aspen Elm Street parking garages. Admission to the museum is free.

For more information and accommodations, call the museum at 682-7272.

photos provided

Art featured includes Allan Houser’s 1970s watercolor “Untitled (Man on Horseback)” (top) and Kiow; Asohono’s “Shamam” (bottom).

The weekly magazine pop is committed to showcasing interesting art that is displayed locally. While visually appealing suggestions of coverage are always encouraged, only one exhibit will be featured each week.