Hopi Art Exhibition Opens June 28 at OU Art Museum

NORMAN – Belief in spiritual beings who help balance an earthly existence is deep rooted in humanity’s past. For the Hopi people of the Southwest United States, katsinam are guiding examples of cultural practices, the physical representations of which have become an integral part of the Southwest’s artistic signature. A new exhibition at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art explores the art and culture of Hopi katsina figures in Hopituy: Hopi Art from the Permanent Collections, which opens to the public Friday, June 28.

Katsinam are ancient deities who are represented through katsina dancers during ceremonies and multiple art forms, including wooden figures often mistakenly referred to as “kachina dolls” by Western audiences. Although as many as 300 distinct spirits have been identified by the Hopi, Hopituy examines six types of katsina figures as depicted in 170 objects from the museum’s permanent collections across multiple mediums, including woodcarving, watercolor, basketry and ceramics.

Materials for the exhibition are drawn from the FJJMA’s permanent collections, including those given by James T. Bialac, University of Oklahoma President and Mrs. David L. Boren, Richard H. and Adeline J. Fleischaker, Dr. and Mrs. R.E. Mansfield, Tom F. Meaders and Rennard Strickland, as well as the Eugene B. Adkins Collection, which is jointly stewarded with the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa.

“Although we have held exhibitions spotlighting primarily paintings, works on paper and some three-dimensional works, we felt that it was time to organize an
exhibition of Hopi katsinas, specifically with additional objects and drawings related to the subject from our many permanent collections,” said Ghislain d’Humières, the Wylodean and Bill Saxon Director of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

“I would like to express my gratitude to University of Oklahoma President David L. Boren and First Lady Molly Shi Boren for their continued support of art and education and especially Native American art, as well as our many donors whose collections will continue educating generations of museum visitors.”

Although those outside the Hopi culture may value the aesthetic nature of the works on display, Hopi art serves more as a reflection of the unique personalities of the katsinam so key to instructing their lifestyle.

“For the Hopi, the katsinam actively offer a way of living that strives for peace, balance and self-respect that, when practiced, benefits the entire world,” said Heather Ahtone, the James T. Bialac Assistant Curator of Native American and Non-Western Art and curator of Hopituy.

“They follow these cultural practices, not because other options are not available to them, but because it has proven through centuries to be a manner of being by which they serve not only their own community but also humanity’s continuing need to seek balance with the earth. They follow the katsinam in the 21st century because, it could be argued, it is needed now more than ever.”

According to Ahtone, the katsinam provide the Hopi people with the blueprint for their aesthetic designs. Following the ritual and ceremonial practices, tribal artists use the same visual design elements that are guided by a strict protocol as a primary source for their other creative activities.

As Hopi men carve the katsina tihu, or effigy dolls, they are doing so to perpetuate their culture—to live as Hopi. Within the traditional community, producing art used in rituals reflects the artist’s participation in the ceremonies. The same figures that have entered the Native American art market as a commodity are still used as a didactic object to teach Hopi children traditional values and beliefs. In the 21st century, living in a capitalistic American society, the Hopi artisans can do this while also generating economic resources.

The role of the katsinam in the world of the Hopi is critical to their identity. The Hopi believe that they must follow the katsina teachings and guidance to survive. Further, they believe that the order the katsina offer is beneficial for humanity beyond their mesa home. The katsina culture teaches restraint, self-control and humility as necessary virtues to be practiced to achieve a Hopi identity. Through the practice of these virtues, the culture creates the potential to
apply them to the social, political and religious structures by which all Hopi are governed.

The relationship that the Hopi have with the katsinam is specifically tied to where the community lives in Hopituskwa, the broad expanse of land in northeastern Arizona that encompasses their shrines and sacred sites, including the three mesas within Arizona’s Coconino and Navajo counties on 1.5 million acres.

Hopi beliefs are guided by the katsinam who live in the region and actively visit the Hopi during their seasonal migrations. The Hopi credit the katsinam for guiding their survival against many forms of oppression, including living as an agriculturally based society in a location that receives less than 10 inches of annual rainfall (sometimes as few as 5 inches).

Hopi material culture, largely baskets, textiles and pottery, is marked by distinctive visual references to their katsina culture, both in design and purpose. The use of color, geometric patterns and line permeates across a variety of materials, creating a visual relationship between seemingly disparate forms in a manner that is distinctly Hopi, or Hopituy.

The exhibition closely explores the representations of six Hopi katsina figures in a range of materials: Angwusnasomtataq (Crow Mother), Soyoko (Ogres), Koyemsi (Mudheads), Palhikmana (Dew Drinking Maiden), Angaktsina (Longhairs) and Nimankatsina (Home katsina).

Educational programs are scheduled this summer at the museum, including a gallery talk with Ahtone at 12:30 p.m. Thursday, July 11; a guest lecture with Hopi (Tewa)/Mojave artist James Lambertus at 6 p.m. Friday, July 19; and a gallery talk with Hopi (Tewa) artist Neil David Sr. at 4 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 5. An exclusive event also is scheduled at 6:30 p.m. Friday, July 12, for Metro Arts Circle-level Museum Association members. These programs are offered at no additional fee to the public.

Additional information about the exhibition and programs is available on the museum’s website at www.ou.edu/fjjma.

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is located in the OU Arts District on the corner of Elm Avenue and Boyd Street, at 555 Elm Ave., on the OU Norman campus. Admission to the museum is complimentary to all visitors, thanks to the generosity of the OU Office of the President and the OU Athletics Department. The museum is closed on Mondays. Information and accommodations on the basis of disability are available by calling (405) 325-4938 or visiting www.ou.edu/fjjma.

Delbridge Honanie (U.S., Hopi, b. 1946)
*Palhik Mana*, ca. 1970-80s
Cottonwood root, paint, feathers, leather, shells, 24 in.
Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma; the James T. Bialac Native American Art Collection, 2010