

Phoenix's Heard Museum Showcases Musical Instruments, New AMIS Ethnomusicology Working Group

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On a recent trip to Phoenix, Arizona, I decided to visit the world-renowned Heard Museum, dedicated to the advancement of American Indian art. Unlike many museums that have collected native materials, the Heard situates their objects within the lens of art, not just ethnography. Modern pieces are displayed next to antique objects, perhaps as a way to show that Native traditions are living traditions, and are still important facets of daily life. The Museum maintains relationships with local and national First Nations Tribes and even the gift shop is comprised of art and jewelry made by Native artists. I was happy to see a wide variety of musical instruments interspersed throughout the museum, especially in their permanent exhibition: Native Peoples in the Southwest.

While many anthropological museums take a very traditionalist ethnographic lens in their displays, the Heard Museum bridges filled glass displays with modern art installations on par with any major art museum. They are able to blend culturally focused displays with installations of fine art. Their collection is carefully curated, and the pieces on display are in beautiful condition. Most cases are organized by tribe, with an emphasis on Southwest tribes. Within these displays, smaller groupings are made according to object type and function, thus musical instruments usually fall into the area classified by ritual, and are grouped together.

Musical instrument highlights include a display on music of the Southwest Yaqui tribes. Here we see the most in-depth music case in the museum, which focuses on the native harp tradition, coupled with a drum, rattle, and cane flute. The harp and flute were made by a Yaqui instrument maker named Alex Maldonado, who wrote label text which explores the introduction of harps by the Spanish, and how the Yaqui people have incorporated the harp into their ceremonies. The museum also has an extensive collection of musical iconography, including antique and modern depictions of music making.

The exhibition "Remembering Our Indian School Days: The Boarding School Experience" focuses on the forced migration of thousands of Native American children to "Indian Schools." From the 1870s through 1975, native children were taken away from their families and sent to off-reserva-


tion boarding schools for government-sanctioned assimilation. Children were forbidden from speaking their native languages, forced to cut their hair, and were punished if they were caught breaking the rules by participating in native customs. Many of these schools were in disrepair, and in the worst cases, there were outbreaks of disease, negligence, and malnutrition. One section of the exhibition highlighted the western bands and orchestras established for the students, including a sousaphone and baritone horn used in one of the schools. Children were discouraged from playing music from their own tribes, instead being forced to learn band and orchestra instruments. The exhibition was at times haunting, but is an important reminder of the atrocities perpetrated on the people of America's First Nations.

The Heard Museum is a mainstay of the Phoenix cultural arts scene. Every spring, visitors flock to the annual Indian Fair and Market, typically featuring over 600 native artists, dancers, and musicians. The Heard's purposeful mission has helped it to relate to many diverse communities in Arizona. I was truly impressed by the

exhibition design, the diverse collection, and by the content provided for visitors. I encourage AMIS members to visit, next time they are in Phoenix.

New AMIS Ethnomusicology Working Group

Having studied and taught ethnomusicology as part of my master's degree studies, and also having worked on several ethno-centric research projects at the MFA, I look forward to spearheading a new and important movement within AMIS. In the coming months, AMIS will establish an Ethnomusicology working group in which we examine ways the society can incorporate a more representative perspective on the world of musical instruments. We hope to discuss issues of decolonization, race and representation, and generally focus on instruments and cultures outside of the western canon.

If you are interested in joining this working group, or have recommendations for people who would be good additions, please email jaymiku@gmail.com. 



"Remembering Our Indian School Days: The Boarding School Experience" exhibit.