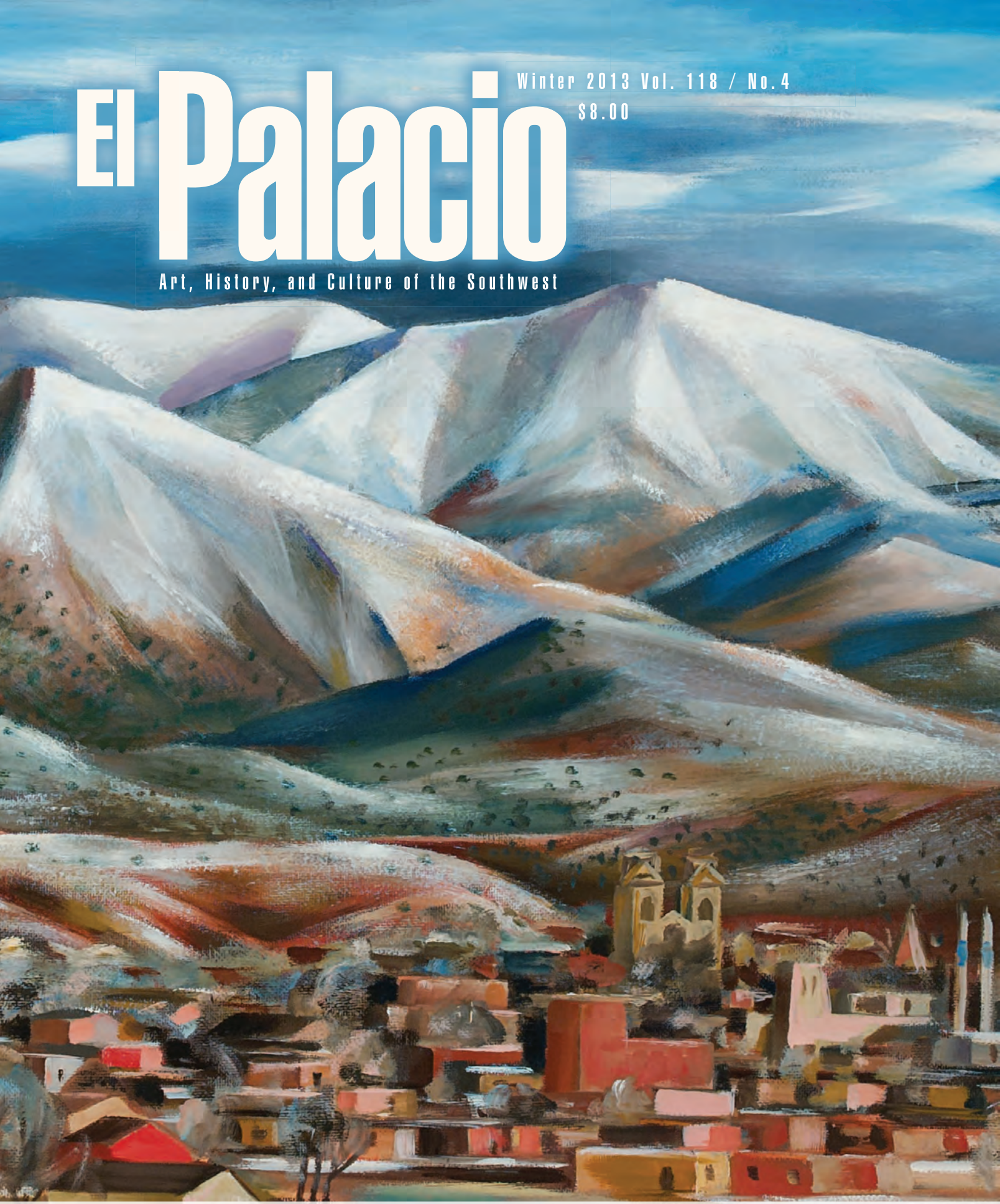
Winter 2013 Vol. 118 / No. 4
$8.00

El Palacio

Art, History, and Culture of the Southwest



100 YEAR ANNIVERSARY ISSUE 1913–2013

Here Now, But Not Always:
Native Arts and the Museum

BY NANCY MARIE MITHLO

It's the 2013 Southwestern Association of American Indian Art's Indian Market, and I am attending the State of Native Arts symposium at the swank New Mexico History Museum auditorium. Occupying the stage are the best and brightest minds in the business, including leading artists, museum directors, and curators.[1] As the discussion turns to exhibition aims and display techniques, a panelist from the Brooklyn Museum argues that Native arts are "ghettoized" in institutions that show only American Indian cultures. Their proper presentation should be with the best arts of the world. Other panelists respond favorably to this stridently presented proposal, as does the audience, who enthusiastically clap in support.

The idea that Native arts belong on display with mainstream fine arts is not new. In fact, here in New Mexico the discussion about the place of American Indian arts is over a hundred years old and coincides with the first issue of *El Palacio*, published in 1913.[2] By the time the state art gallery (now New Mexico Museum of Art) opened its doors in 1917, the definition of Native arts was a full-on debate. Santa Feans, including the director of the School of American Research and the Museum of New Mexico, Dr. Edgar L. Hewett; philanthropist Amelia Elizabeth White; artist John Sloan; arts patron Mabel Dodge Luhan; and other well-known figures promoted (sometimes at cross-purposes) the presentation of American Indian art in the same settings as the work of non-Native fine artists, not only in the museum's galleries but at exhibitions nationally and internationally. In the early 1920s, Pueblo painters such as Awa Tsireth

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Top: Hall of Ethnology exhibit, also called the Hall of the Modern Indian, Palace of the Governors, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1942. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 132068.

Middle: This undated historic photograph was labeled, "A young Indian girl from one of the nearby pueblos guides visitors through the Museum of New Mexico's Hall of the Modern Indian." A lack of Native-controlled exhibition policy later lead to establishment of the New Mexico Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in 1987. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 127552.

Bottom: View of *Young Indian Painters* exhibit, Museum of Fine Arts (now New Mexico Museum of Art), Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1966. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 050043.

(Alfonso Roybal) and Fred Kabotie were frequently exhibited as named individual artists, their works displayed, sold, and reviewed in major cities.

Problematically, this early inclusion of Native arts was accompanied by rationales that reinforced rather than questioned established racial hierarchies. An *El Palacio* article described the 1919 art gallery's exhibition of Santa Fe Indian School paintings (cited by J. J. Brody as possibly the world's first exhibition of Pueblo Indian painting)[3] as "racial, not individual."[4] It was argued that even Western art instruction inhibited Native artists' "spontaneous expressions of released natural talent."[5] While the intentions of early patrons appeared progressive, their rationales were informed by a variety of personal and political motives that ultimately compromised their lofty ideas.[6] In another twenty years, Indian painting was no longer celebrated in the same fashion. Native arts were more commonly exhibited as ethnographic items. Acceptance and inclusion of Native art as art in the museum setting was not consistent over time. We were here for now, but not for always.

The recent digitization of the entire 100-year history of *El Palacio* has enabled new readings of curatorial trends in light of current professional standards of inclusive curatorial practices. A progression from the paternalistic control of the 1920s to ethnographic objectification in the 1940s to multicultural celebration in the 1960s is evident in the pages of over a hundred volumes in the *El Palacio* archives. Sometimes humorous, other times offensive, these vital records are key to understanding our regional concerns, attitudes, and preoccupations. Early documentation of the cultural shock of encounter is vividly exposed in first-person essays such as this passage by Taos art colony founder Ernest L. Blumenschein in 1926: "The great naked anatomy of a majestic landscape once tortured, now calm; the fitness of adobe houses to their tawny surroundings; the vastness and overwhelming beauty of skies; terrible drama of storms; peace of night—all in beauty of color, vigorous everchanging light." I'm not even sure he is talking about the landscape here! But wait, there's more: "After a hundred miles in New Mexico, we drove out to the foot of the Taos peak prepared to camp at the pueblo itself, but the Indians refused us permission to locate in their midst and also wanted considerable money for the privilege of sketching. So back we went to the Mexican village, three miles away."[7] This potent mixture of hope, dreams, and the reality of living among the natives is poignantly recorded in these narratives of the times.

The pages of *El Palacio* illuminate complicated biases, motivations, and changes. A 1934 editorial depicts the romanticism of the age in the essay "Will the Pueblo Amalgamate with the White?"[8] According to the article, a Pueblo Indian "lives in the past, communes with the past, derives his wisdom from the past and is satisfied." Chastising his own culture, the author muses, "Have we anything to be proud of? Hundreds of thousands in our cities must go hungry, cold and half-clothed—or accept public charity; while thousands of others have more money than they can possibly spend. Does this indicate a high general civilization?" Here, disenchantment with urban values and American capitalism was linked to and made more explicit by exposure to idealized Native lifeways.

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By 1930 Director Edgar Lee Hewett had installed the "Hall of Indian Arts" in what was then known as the "new museum building," now the New Mexico Museum of Art. His aim was to replace what was then the trend to "crowd as many specimens in as small a space as possible" with a display of "well-selected type specimens" to give a "clear-cut impression of unity."[9] Baskets, jewelry, stone axes, Edward Curtis photographs, paintings of missions, and "drawings by famous Pueblo Indian artists" were displayed together in order to show "well-presented pictures of each phase of culture of the Southwest." It is difficult to imagine how the adjacent display of these different objects would today be considered a unified exhibit. More problematic was the addition of human remains on display in the Hall of Indian Arts in 1934. An essay titled "Exhibition from Summer Activities" describes how a "child

Top and Bottom: *Young Indian Painters* exhibit, Museum of Fine Arts (now New Mexico Museum of Art), Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1966. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Negative Numbers 050037, 050038.

mummy from Jemez forms the center of the exhibit. It is flanked by beautiful hand made fabrics from the Indian villages of Guatemala."[10]

By 1940 American Indian material culture had moved back across the street to what was called the "Hall of Ethnography" in the Old Armory at the Palace of the Governors. This space was also known as the "Hall of the Modern Indian." Curated by Bertha Dutton, the exhibits featured typological cases such as "Weapons," "Leather," "Headdresses," and "Weaving." Glass cases featured miniature maquettes of "models representative of Southwestern house types with inhabitants" such as a "plains Indian village."[11] American Indian participation in this anthropological approach to curation appears limited to host functions such as guiding tours or providing services. Navajo singers were in residence at the museum for six weeks to produce a set of sandpaintings of the Shooting Way ceremony for the exhibit's opening. During this time, Bertha Dutton, "under whose supervision the singers worked," obtained "detailed notes, explanations and legends," including copies of additional ceremonial sandpaintings on paper in tempera. It is apparent that these works on paper were not to be considered "art" by the museum system, but rather as research to be exhibited "in the ceremonial alcove of the ethnology hall."[12]

In 1966, concurrent with the Hall of the Modern Indian exhibits, Curator Bob Ewing initiated a series of exhibits featuring the work of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) faculty and students at the Museum of Fine Arts (as the art gallery was then called). One of these exhibits, *The Rain Cloud Callers*, showed "Indian-created material from an aesthetic rather than an ethnological point of view." Another exhibit, *The Changing Image of the Indian*, traced "the history of non-Indians painting Indians." The accompanying 1969 *El Palacio* article, "New Indian Art," featured the work of Native artists such as Otellie Loloma and "non-Indians who are working in the context of the New Indian Art," including the arts director of the IAIA, James McGrath, and artist Tom Dickerson. National and hemispheric examples of "New Indian art" were cited, providing an important point of reference for current scholarship engaged in indigenous global art movements. More troublesome from current curatorial standards is Ewing's premise that inclusion as a "New Indian art" practitioner should not be limited to artists of Native heritage: "Occasionally there is a flash of antagonism from an Indian questioning the validity of the non-Indian borrow-

Top and Bottom: Work by faculty and students of the Institute of American Indian Arts was exhibited in the Museum of Fine Arts (now New Mexico Museum of Art) in 1966. A New Mexican review stated, "*Young Indian Painters* demonstrates a new step in indigenous art. Though much traditional influence is shown, so are contemporary art modes…[T]here is no uniform approach to creativity here. The sensitive and perceptive instructors at the Institute have helped each individual develop his own style." Photographer unknown. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. Nos. 050044, 050042.

ing from his culture, or an Indian painter may be caustically labeled a 'professional Indian' by fellow artists who feel that he is unfairly trading on his Indian status. But art is free and in the United States in the 1960s it is possible and valid to work from any source which helps the creator to 'do his own thing.'"[13] By 1990 art was less "free" in the United States, with federal legislation under the Indian Arts and Crafts Act enforcing standards of tribal membership in order to sell or have works be distributed as Indian art.

Today, American Indian arts are displayed at virtually all Museum of New Mexico facilities to varying degrees. The decision to develop the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture (MIAC) as a separate facility for interpreting American Indian material culture in 1987 signaled the achievement of Native-directed interpretations of American Indian lives. This development grew from national trends that empowered Native communities as collaborators, consultants, and leaders in the "new museology" at the turn of the twenty-first century. As W. Richard West Jr. (now CEO of the Autry National Center and one of the speakers at the SWAIA panel) asserted at the time of the opening of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in 2004, "The party missing at the table of conversation about native cultures and peoples, present and past, has been the voice of the native person himself."[14]

Clearly, exhibit strategies change over time. Museums over the past century have represented and interpreted Native peoples utilizing varied approaches that tell us much about our social world. Far from leading in an ultimate direction, the debates about Native arts and Native communities are cyclical and in many ways unchanging. American Indian participation as leaders of the Indian arts field is certainly essential to equitable and accurate interpretation of Native culture, but how much have these conversations really changed? Museum of Indian Arts and Culture director Della C. Warrior notes that while more Native professionals are entering the profession, "Native kids still experience a devaluation of who they are. Museums should be a gathering place for elders, youth, community, a reflection of who they are, what they represent and what they should be proud of." The museum by definition is informed by ideas of ownership and commercial value, and these priorities are often at odds with Native cultures. In a 1987 *El Palacio* essay, Dr. Rina Swentzell asked, "How, then, can a museum dedicated to Indian arts and culture establish a working relationship with, for example, the Pueblo people and communities when it is an institution created within

a world where individual genius, ownership of products, object-orientedness, connoisseurship and specialized roles and activities are honored?"[15]

In 1992, at the height of what we now label "the new museology," scholar Michael Ames concluded, "Indigenous peoples view their creative works, contemporary and earlier alike, as neither art nor artifact but both, or even more likely, more than both. Deciding what is 'art' . . . is a political act."[16] A key consideration to our understanding of these exchanges is the degree to which public institutions like museums are willing to expose the process of colonization and oppression of Native people through time, or as University of California, Santa Cruz, professor Amy Lonetree argues, to tell the hard truths: "For Native peoples, the question around museums has been, 'How can we begin to decolonize a very Western institution that has been so intimately linked to the colonization process?' A decolonizing museum practice must involve assisting our communities in addressing the legacies of historical unresolved grief."[17]

This truth-telling curatorial standard is far from the origins of Native representation at the Museum of New Mexico. Museum director Hewett stated in 1922, "The destruction of original American culture, commenced four centuries ago, has not been as thorough as we supposed . . . the soul of a great people has survived the shock of subjugation . . . with the enlightened encouragement of a people that is in some degree emancipated from its conceits the American Indian can come back."[18] From a Native perspective, our art has always been "here," but only occasionally represented in the museum as "now." A fuller look at cyclical changes in museum practice over time exposes what these developments can tell us about our collective values, orientations, and desires. ■

The title of this essay refers to Here, Now and Always, *a long-term exhibition at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture. See the calendar, page 95, for a listing of exhibitions currently on view and opening at the museum.*

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Notes

1. The Fourth Annual State of Native Arts Symposium, "Positionality and Contemporary Indigenous Art," was held Friday, August 16, 2013, at the New Mexico History Museum. See swaia.org/Indian_Market/Indian_Market_Schedule/, accessed Sept. 1, 2013.
2. *El Palacio*'s inaugural issue in November of 1913 framed its mission as being devoted to "the conservation of the native arts and architecture of the southwest" and "advancement of knowledge of and interest in the historic past of the Southwest." *El Palacio* 1 (1): 3.
3. J. J. Brody, *Pueblo Indian Painting: Tradition and Modernism in New Mexico, 1900–1930* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1997), 4.
4. "Exhibit by Indian Pupils," *El Palacio* 7 (9, April 7, 1919): 143.
5. Dorothy Dunn, "The Development of Modern American Indian Painting in the Southwest and Plains Areas," *El Palacio* 58 (11, Nov. 1951): 348.
6. I am grateful for the scholarship of O'Keeffe Museum director of curatorial affairs, Cody Hartley, who argues that, despite the apparent opportunity for more integrative presentation, ultimately, "Indian art was treated as separate and unequal." Cody J. Hartley, "Art in an Arid Climate: The Museum of New Mexico and the Cultivation of the Arts in Santa Fe," University of California Santa Barbara dissertation in history of art and architecture, 2005, 185.
7. Ernest L. Blumenschein, "Origin of the Taos Art Colony," *El Palacio* 20 (10, May 15, 1926): 190.
8. Roy A. Keech, "Will the Pueblo Amalgamate with the White?" *El Palacio* 36 (1–2, Jan. 3–10, 1934): 1–3.
9. "Hall of Indian Arts," *El Palacio* 29 (14–15, Oct. 28, 1930): 260–65.
10. "Exhibition from Summer Activities," *El Palacio* 37 (11–12, Sept. 12–19, 1934): 95.
11. "Ethnology Installation Project," *El Palacio* 48 (2, Feb. 1941): 29.
12. Ibid.
13. Robert A. Ewing, "The New Indian Art," *El Palacio* 76 (1, spring 1969): 33–39.
14. W. Richard West Jr., "Native Treasures," PBS NewsHour, Sept. 21, 2004, pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec04/museum_9-21.html?print.
15. Rina Swentzell, "The Process of Culture: The Indian Perspective," *El Palacio 93* (1, summer/fall 1987): 3–5.
16. Michael M. Ames, "Museums in the Age of Deconstruction," in *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, edited by Gail Anderson (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 83.
17. Amy Lonetree, Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
18. Edgar Hewett, "Indian Art an Asset," *El Palacio* 13 (1, Nov. 15, 1922): 124–25.

Thanks to New Mexico Museum of Art librarian Rebecca Potance; Palace of the Governor's photo archivist Daniel Kosharek; Laboratory of Anthropology librarian Allison Colborne; director of the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, Della C. Warrior; and mentors Dave Warren and Chuck Dailey for their kind assistance in preparing this article.