

# Of One Mind: An Excerpt Adapted from *Substance of Stars*

**Sean Mooney, guest curator**

We humans have the blessing and the curse that is conscious intelligence. From the earliest stages of our childhoods, we ask questions, we imagine our futures, we measure time, and we consider everything we see, hear and feel. Our world is small—until we realize that the shared world is larger, more vast than ourselves, our homes, our families, our village. One day comes when we look up at the sky and realize that the universe is more expansive than we can see or touch, more immense than we can measure or imagine, that it extends beyond any boundaries we fathom, and has existed before us and will do so after us—after every generation we can picture as our family is gone, and before any generation of what we know as our family was ever born. Once we start to articulate this vastness, we begin to wonder what made everything, what order might have invented it. We come to learn of where life began, and over time we learn of this from a host of philosophies. Some of those ways of understanding might be called religion, or science, or simply knowledge.

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In the centuries before our modern lifetimes, when the earth was not flooded with electric lights and the sounds of machinery, our nighttime experience of the sky was so obviously different—deeper, darker, more brilliant and subtle. Today, we experience the night sky shrouded in “light pollution,” a term well known by astronomers, for whom only a very small portion of the Earth can be considered immune. (Arizona is uniquely endowed with six recognized “Dark Skies” sites.) But for traditional societies that experienced the night sky very differently than we can imagine it today, the lights, shapes, patterns and amazing depths of space must have been the most profoundly mystical of realities. Anyone who lived on Earth prior to 1870 would have understood the nighttime in a way we can barely sense today. Our exploration of traditional knowledge begins by reminding ourselves what this profound visual sensation was like: the palpable reality of darkness, of stars, a universe once commonly experienced but now a rarity.

We are also reminded that knowledge systems are born from our common human curiosity to understand the world around us, and our place within it. As with the wonder inspired by the night sky, our observed Earth has been a source of mystery; and as humanity strove to survive, it developed sciences and religions as a means of transmitting accumulated knowledge from one generation to another. Almost universally, this has taken the form of storytelling, in which cultural histories have been intimately transmitted from the mouth of one person to the ears of another. After millennia of oral tradition, origin stories have evolved in endless varieties and richness, as the narratives of individual storytellers continually accrued. These complement rather than contradict one another, reinforcing cultural knowledge and understanding.

Indigenous societies throughout the world know endlessly varied truths in their traditions, in origin stories, sky and star sciences, and oral histories. This wonderful complexity is expressed in song, dance, and limitless visual and physical arts. Anthropology defines this collective knowledge of creativity as “material culture.” Euro-American culture tends to distance the Self (in the present) from the World (in the past), as if history and science are somehow apart from us as people; it considers knowledge as something competitively acquired and jealously guarded, rather than as an inheritance, and it defines art as the works of uniquely visionary individuals. Other intellectual traditions define creativity collectively, by many names, and consider it evidence of divine intervention and a living, spiritual presence. Making art, in the Indigenous context, reflects the works of the Creator, however defined.

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This exhibition has come about as an invitation to witness the deep intellectual and spiritual relationships of Indigenous American artists. It explores the collection of the Heard Museum from the perspective of the descendant communities whose ancestors created the baskets, textiles, paintings, sculpture and many other works, and it provides additional context rooted in Native language and traditional knowledge. New works have been commissioned by contemporary Native American artists and filmmakers, and Indigenous curators and scholars have been asked to contribute to further interpretation and analysis of traditional iconography and form. The exhibition begins, fundamentally, with an immersive video environment in which photographers from each Native community included in the exhibition selected locations and elements of their home landscape to present and celebrate, to acknowledge the profound and eternal relationship between the

people and the Earth we all inhabit. This video environment also places us, communally, in dialogue with beauty and truth, calling upon us to recall where we came from and consider what legacies we are responsible for. We refer to this video space at the Heard as the "Sky-Dome," in honor of the Haudenosaunee terminology for the place of the Sacred Beings. It is also, because we stand upon it, the Earth-Dome, and our contemplation is the metaphoric sacred ladder which connects the Sky-Dome to the Earth-Dome in the Opening Address.

As knowledge-keepers and storytellers, Indigenous artists acknowledge that they descend from these divine works and recall that they themselves are the substance of stars.