

# *Early Days: Indigenous Art from the McMichael Canadian Art Collection*

**Diana F. Pardue, chief curator**

Excitement built among the Heard Museum staff as we planned the installation and awaited receipt of the artworks for the exhibition *Early Days: Indigenous Art from the McMichael*. The exhibition traveled to Phoenix from the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, a museum in Kleinburg, Ontario, just 40 miles from Toronto. The McMichael assembled an exhibition encompassing 112 works by 61 artists, representing about 25 tribal nations from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast. Indigenous peoples represented include First Nations, Inuit and Métis. *Early Days* features objects ranging from 18th-century ceremonial regalia to the work of the vanguard artists of the 1960s, '70s and '80s, such as Norval Morrisseau, Carl Beam and Alex Janvier, and leading contemporary Indigenous artists such as painter Kent Monkman and photographer Meryl McMaster.

*Early Days* provides an opportunity to view majestic and transformative Northwest Coast carvings that exist only in limited numbers in the Heard collection and are rarely seen in Phoenix. One such artist, Charles Edenshaw, is known for his wood carvings as well as the silver jewelry pieces he made that feature designs reflective of his work in wood. Some of the works made available to Phoenix residents for the first time in this exhibition include rare Anishinaabe belts, garters and earrings from the late 1700s.

In contrast, contemporary works in the exhibition were created by artists who are well known to Heard members, such as Kent Monkman and Meryl McMaster. Other artists participated in one of the many biennial invitational exhibitions organized by the Heard in the 1990s and 2000s. Longtime Heard members will have an opportunity to reflect upon past Heard exhibitions when seeing recent works by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Faye HeavyShield and Rebecca Belmore.

Of special interest in the exhibition is a 144-by-390-inch mural designed by Duane Linklater based on the work of noted artist Norval Morrisseau. For reasons unexplained, Morrisseau could not make it to Montreal, Quebec, to attend the 1967 International and Universal Exposition, better known as Expo 67, even though he designed a mural for the Indians of Canada Pavilion. Instead, another artist painted Morrisseau's design.

Referencing that concept, Linklater designed a mural for *Early Days* with the intent that another artist would paint it at each venue. The mural is just one amazing work that captures visitors' attention as they progress through the gallery.

*Early Days* is the first survey of Canadian Indigenous art of this scope to be presented internationally. The McMichael staff worked in collaboration with current Indigenous stakeholders—scholars, traditional knowledge keepers and living artists—to develop the exhibition. According to Sarah Milroy, the McMichael's chief curator, "Our intent was to use

the collection to tell the stories of the myriad Indigenous cultures that have historically inhabited what we now call Canada, attempting wherever possible to leave the explaining to those Indigenous cultural stakeholders who know these works best.”