

# The Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship at the Heard Museum

## **Velma Kee Craig, assistant curator**

The Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship program at the Heard Museum is a paid, nine-month diversity fellowship program for those who want to learn about museum curation, research and exhibition development, collections management, collections care, and conservation as it relates to the Heard Museum collection. Fellows are able to return for a second and third year if they are interested. The Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship program is overseen by Assistant Curator Velma Kee Craig (Diné), who was a participant in the program from 2017 to 2020. Since its inaugural year in 2017, the Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship at the Heard Museum has had 12 participants. Upon finishing the fellowship, past fellows have moved on to such institutions as the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque, N. M.; the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Okla.; PaleoWest Archaeology in Phoenix; and the Arizona State University Art Museum in Tempe. Past fellows Roshii Montaña (Diné) and Olivia Barney (Diné) have joined the Heard Museum staff and work in the curatorial department in the positions of assistant registrar and collections coordinator, respectively.

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The Andrew W. Mellon fellowship provided me with the opportunity to learn more about the backstage process of museums. As someone with a preference for hands-on learning, working with the collections has been the best part of the experience. You get to know the objects personally and find out about their history that transcends the labels on display in the galleries. Recently, I sat with artists Joyce Growing Thunder and Juanita Growing Thunder Fogarty and listened to the stories of their soft sculptures currently on display. They shared with me anecdotes about their learning experiences with each one, as well as details about their materials. It was fantastic to work closely with artists who have a fond connection with their work.

—REBEKA PESHLAKAI (DINÉ), ANDREW W. MELLON FELLOW, 2022-23 AND 2023-24

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Each fellowship year is a unique experience for the fellows, as projects and events are aligned as much as possible to the interests of the year's fellows, the Heard Museum's exhibition schedule and what incoming artwork donations have been or are expected to be received. This year's fellows are Jaiden Sanchez (Tohono O'odham) and Rebeka

Peshlakai (Diné). Peshlakai is a returning second-year fellow. It is only the beginning of the current fellowship term, but already the fellows have had an opportunity to join in meetings with visiting researchers to get a glimpse of the knowledge the visitors bring as they survey and discuss the objects in the Heard's permanent collection which are of interest to their research. Sanchez and Peshlakai have also assisted with packing and delivering to the Heard Museum a recent large donation of baskets and some objects loaned to the museum for upcoming exhibitions. Early in November, the fellows had an opportunity to visit the ASU Art Museum's conservation lab to learn about and practice surface cleaning works on paper.

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As a Mellon Fellow, I am able to be immersed in cultural heritage and objects at the Heard Museum. Within the recent months since I've started the fellowship, I've been able to learn in depth about the history of the Heard through a review and organization of our exhibition files going back to the 1970s. Through visits by artists who come and look at items within our collection storage, we are able to ask and learn about the materials and history of objects, such as how Northwest Coast and First Nations communities came to carve designs such as snakes on non-functional argillite pipes or the types of pigments harvested and used on boxes, masks or rattles.

We are also learning firsthand the type of care that is taken with these storage objects and our outdoor bronze and stone sculptures through weekly cleanings. We've also been able to learn through museum trips, conferences and workshops that focus on material conservation and preservation through the cleaning of objects, such as the ASU Art Museum Conservation Lab's paper conservation workshop or the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (ATALM) annual conference. The Fellowship has allowed me to delve into research on artists and artworks that may be used in the curation of upcoming exhibitions of Harry Fonseca or the Basha Collection of baskets.

—JAIDEN SANCHEZ (TOHONO O'ODHAM), ANDREW W. MELLON FELLOW, 2023-24

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During their time at the Heard Museum, fellows have many opportunities to work closely with and care for objects in our collection, including paintings, sculpture, textiles, carvings, pottery, baskets, beadwork and jewelry. The fellowship also provides the opportunity to attend professional development workshops and convenings and to travel to local and non-local tribally run museums and cultural centers, as well as other museums that house and care for Indigenous-made objects. Each year's fellows also have the experience of

working with conservators who specialize in various mediums to practice hands-on skills under the oversight of an expert in the field. For most fellows, past and present, the more memorable events have been the conservation and artist collection review sessions, which are held twice per term for each cohort of fellows.

Another big event each fellowship session is working with Ron Harvey of Tuckerbrook Conservation, LLC, during his annual weeklong visit for the purposes of deep cleaning and intensively caring for the sculptures on the Heard Museum grounds.

At the end of their fellowship term, fellows share personal narratives with us that focus on their most meaningful learning experiences. These are always filled with gratitude to the Heard Museum and the program's funder, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, for doing their part in supporting emerging Indigenous museum professionals.