



Friday, January 18, 2002

Students bring Native American art to OU

By **Debbie Patrick**

AH 490 is always an upper level seminar in art history, but for fall semester 2001, it became much more. The focus was Native American art and the scope - creating, developing and designing an art exhibition for a respected gallery.

Eleven art history majors, many with designs on careers as curators for museums and corporate collections, were presented a unique and challenging opportunity. The result is *Harmony in Variation: Form and Meaning in Native American Art*, now at the **Meadow Brook Art Gallery**.

"The idea was that students would do the majority of the work," says Andrea Eis, course instructor and special lecturer, Art and Art History.

Students selected and researched the art objects, compiled and wrote the exhibition catalog, and developed the exhibition design.

"They had to figure out what they needed and what they wanted to tell people," Eis said. And that's not all. Students also had to prepare informative signage, generate publicity, meet a series of deadlines, solve lighting issues, and make sure the artifacts were mounted according to American Museum Association standards.

On top of these responsibilities, the 11 were expected to develop related lectures, symposia and performances, which OU professors could include in their courses.

"Academically, there were several goals," Eis said. "One was to develop a knowledge and understanding of Native American art from multiple perspectives (aesthetic, art historical, anthropological and Native American). Another was to acquire hands-on experience in curating, designing and exhibiting Native American art. We also wanted to explore repatriation issues."

Redefining the classroom

Some AH 490 full class periods were spent at the Cranbrook Institute of Science (CIS), which has contributed several objects to the exhibition. Students worked with CIS staff to learn proper handling techniques for the 100- to 200-year-old artwork and the intricacies of curating. They also got to view the institute's storage collection. Cranbrook curates about a quarter of a million objects across nine disciplines, according to Michael Stafford, head of science.

Other field trips gave students the chance to view Native American art at the Detroit Institute of Arts and in the homes of private collectors.

There were no quizzes, no mid-terms, no final exams, but the course remained academically rigorous, Eis said. Grades were based on participation level, research and writing quality, and how well students fulfilled their responsibilities.

Rewarding relationships

Harmony in Variation includes everyday and ritual objects, such as clothing, drums, a winter count (a visual accounting of the history of the tribe, etc.), pottery and other objects that date from post-European contact - the early 1800s to the early 1900s. It explores how the objects were used, the imagery that adorns them, and color and numerical symbolism. Objects represent tribes from all over the United States and Canada.

Lenders include the Detroit Institute of Arts; the Flint Institute of Arts; Beloit College's Logan Museum of Anthropology; private collectors Ted Hadfield, Wendy MacGaw, Gary and Melissa Lipton; and Cranbrook.

Oakland's English Department and Department of Music, Theatre and Dance co-sponsored the oral tradition performance. Richard Stamps, professor, Sociology and Anthropology, worked with the class on a repatriation symposium.

Harmony in Variation: Form and Meaning in Native American Art runs from Jan. 11 - Feb. 17 at **Meadow Brook Art Gallery**.

For the full story on *Harmony in Variation*, see the January 2002 issue of *Inside OU*.

SUMMARY

AH 490 is always an upper level seminar in art history, but for fall semester 2001, it became much more. The focus was Native American art and the scope - creating, developing and designing an art exhibition for a respected gallery.

Created by CareTech Administrator (webservices@caretechsolutions.com) on Friday, January 18, 2002

Modified by CareTech Administrator (webservices@caretechsolutions.com) on Friday, January 18, 2002

Article Start Date: Wednesday, November 12, 2003