

VISUAL ARTS



AN EXHIBIT AT THE
FROST BORROWS FROM
MAJOR GALLERIES FOR
A REFLECTION ON
SEMINOLE CULTURE

COMING HOME

AH-TAH-THI-KI MUSEUM PERMANENT COLLECTION

MODERN LOOK: Noah Billie reinterprets the Catlin portrait, replacing Osceola's cotton shawl with a U.S. flag draped over his shoulders.

BY JOHN COPPOLA
Special to The Miami Herald

On a visit to the Smithsonian Institution, Carol Damian, director and chief curator of the Frost Art Museum, recalls looking at George Catlin's portrait of Osceola and thinking, "You are very far from the Florida community of Seminoles you represent. Wouldn't it be nice to bring you back for a visit?"

The great Seminole leader is indeed back for a visit as the centerpiece of an exhibition at the Frost, *Reflections Across Time: Seminole Portraits*, the first in a year-long series of exhibitions and programs to mark the 500th anniversary of Ponce de Leon's arrival in Florida.

The exhibition was organized by the Frost with the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum of the Seminole Tribe in Big Cypress, where it was first displayed this past autumn.

Both museums are Smithsonian Affiliates, which enabled them to borrow not only the 1838 Catlin portrait, *Osceola, The Black Drink, A Warrior of Great Distinction*, from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, but also additional works from the National Portrait Gallery, National Museum of the American Indian and National Gallery of Art.

The portrait's homecoming was very much on the mind of Osceola's great-great-great-grandson Larry Mike Osceola at the exhibition's opening when he remarked that his forebear's portrait was "finally" back home. "It's about time we shared our history and carried on our tradition. It's what keeps us alive" as a culture, he said.

A preeminent military figure of the Second Seminole War (1835-1842), Osceola posed for Catlin just days before his death from malar-

ia in an army prison at Fort Moultrie in Charleston, S.C.

Catlin wrote, "I shall paint Osceola [and other Seminoles] to show ... how these brave fellows look." Later, he added, "I have painted [Osceola] precisely in the costume in which he stood for his picture, even to a string and a trinket. He wore three ostrich feathers in his head and a turban made of a varicolored cotton shawl — and his dress was chiefly of calicoes, with a handsome bead sash or belt around his waist, and a rifle in his hand." Part of that regalia was a gorget, a crescent-shaped silver breastplate. The one Osceola is depicted wearing in the portrait was virtually identical to one Mike Osceola wore at the exhibition's opening.

The installation is in halves — the first comprised of portraits by white artists that depict Native Americans as a waning race, the second works by contemporary Seminole artists that emphatically show the tribe's continuing presence.

And that is precisely what the exhibition's curator, Annette Fromm, says she intended. "The exhibition gives the public the opportunity to see differing images of Native Americans as depicted by non-natives in the 19th century and by native artists in the 20th," she says. "The show demonstrates that Native Americans are an active part of the community nationwide and in Florida specifically."

Catlin's magisterial portrait of Osceola is bookended by five other works by the artist, who spent eight years out west and painted more than 600 images of American Indians, but only about 10 of Seminoles. One of them is an unusual image of a woman, which is included in the Frost exhibition.



AH-TAH-THI-KI MUSEUM PERMANENT COLLECTION
CONTEMPORARY VISION: Henehayo 'Leroy' Osceola's Untitled, 1993.



SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM
19TH CENTURY VIEW: George Catlin's 'Osceola, The Black Drink'

Osceola's iconic place in the American imagination is displayed graphically by additional portraits of him by Robert John Curtis, a South Carolina artist, who also painted a portrait shortly before the warrior's death; Richard William Hubbard, a Hudson River School landscape painter; and Thomas McKenney, who had served as superintendent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1816-1830.

Seen together, these 19th century portraits by white artists offer an ethnographic attention to details of dress and ritual, as if they were documenting a disappearing culture. Fromm noted that "depictions of 'the other' have played a significant visual role in creating, defining and reinforcing stereotypes."

By contrast, contemporary works by Seminole artists challenge those stereotypes and assert the preservation and innovation of native culture. Looking at the Catlin portrait, Mike Osceola saw "anger and despair" in his ancestor's eyes over what might have been. The modern works address that uncertainty by demonstrating the continuity of Seminole culture.

Particularly instructive are several modern representations of Osceola, including one by Noah Billie that reinterprets the Catlin portrait. Replacing his cotton shawl with a U.S. flag draped over his shoulders defiantly places Osceola in a pantheon of American folk heroes. Contemporary works by Henehayo "Leroy" Osceola and Jimmy John Osceola (neither of whom is known to be a descendant) further underscore the Seminoles' ongoing vitality.

Interspersed throughout the exhibition are traditional and contemporary exam-

ples of decorative arts that both confirm the authenticity of the early portraits and reinforce the exhibition's theme of cultural continuity. The display of beaded bandoliers from the mid-19th and 21st centuries, both from the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki collection, clearly demonstrates the persistence of the art form. Also noteworthy are a man's deerskin coat, silver wristband and gorget — historical artifacts on loan from the National Museum of the American Indian.

Anne McKutcheon, director of the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, remarked that she was particularly pleased at the inclusion of the traditional crafts in a show of portraiture because "it supports the tribe's agenda to display [those works] at other Florida museums and share Seminole culture with a larger public in South Florida."

An upcoming exhibition at Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki of Seminole photographs from the 1930s and '40s will bridge the chronological gap between the depiction of the tribe by white 19th century artists and 20th century Seminole artists that are on display at the Frost.

If you go

What: 'Reflections Across Time: Seminole Portraits'
Where: Frost Art Museum, 10975 SW 17th St., Miami, through Jan. 13.
When: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday.
How much: Admission is free.
Info: www.thefrost.fiu.edu or 305-346-2890.