

Grand Central Station, New York



Grand Central Station, New York, New York, c1920.

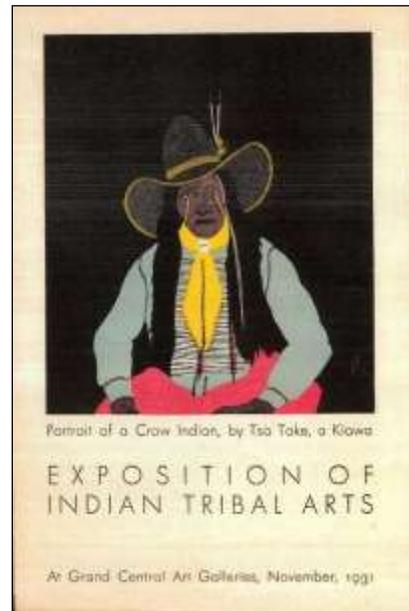
Mother was an enthusiastic supporter of a traveling exhibition of American Indian art in 1931. I believe this was the first time that the creative efforts of Indians were exhibited in this country as works of art rather than as anthropological artifacts.

(David Rockefeller)

For Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, collecting American Indian art was not only for personal pleasure. It was part of a movement to advance a uniquely “American” art and to transform mainstream society’s concept of art to include creative works by indigenous artisans previously relegated to ethnographic or archaeological museums. Back home in New York, she participated in a pivotal step in this movement: the 1931 Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts. Opening at New York City’s Grand Central Art Galleries, it traveled to major cities across the U.S. Selected works went on to be shown in Venice, Italy.

Like the Laboratory of Anthropology, founded in Santa Fe with Rockefeller funding, the Exposition grew out of a collaborative effort among artists, anthropologists and art patrons united in their tastes and in their politics against forces of racism and cultural destruction. Beyond boldly redefining art and calling on the public to give Indian artists “the recognition that is their due as creators of beauty,” they aimed to improve the social and economic conditions in Native communities by preserving and promoting their artistic traditions. Abby Rockefeller served on the Exposition board and loaned several pieces for the show. Additionally she and her husband were major financial contributors.

Copy of the cover of an advance flyer announcing the 1931 Exposition. The flyer was sent to patrons, museums, anthropology departments and American Indian communities – including those in Maine. (Rockefeller Archive Center.)



350 East 57th Street

Dear John,

Your letter which has greeted me upon my return from Wash- ington, has quite taken my breath away. It is tremendous, by generous of Mr. Rockefeller to take this big share in what is being raised for the Exposition, but I think it should be an pride to see that not too much be asked from him alone, though every one connected with the Exposition is both grateful and proud of his confidence.

The Exposition is trying to do - I am supposing that you have written Miss White as well, never- the less I am forwarding your letter to the Finance Committee at once.

Let me in the meanwhile ex- press my personal appreciation and thanks to Mr. Rockefeller, and to you too.

Faithfully yours,

Edna Morse Walker.

26 March 1921

Letter from the 1931 Exposition's secretary Edna Morse Walker to J.D. Rockefeller 3rd, who handled some of the correspondence concerning his parents' financial contributions to the cause. In her letter, Walker thanked him for news of an additional \$5000 pledge from his father. She also mentioned meeting with then U.S. Vice President Charles Curtis about the Exposition. Apparently Walker and Curtis (who was part Kaw Indian) did not see eye to eye on Indian art. Nonetheless, he became honorary chair of the Exposition's executive committee. (Rockefeller Archive Center.)

Wednesday
115 East 50th Street

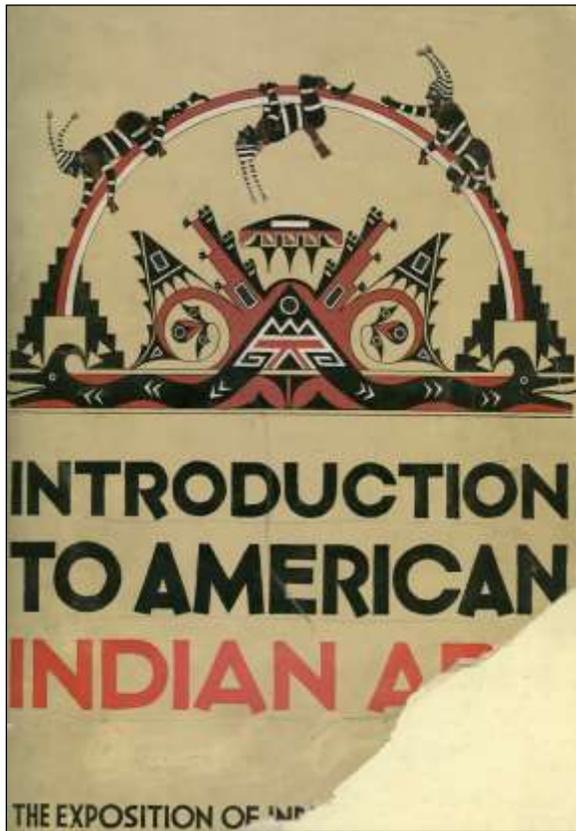
Dear Mr. Rockefeller,

The Indian painter, Apwa Pi, wrote you a letter yesterday to say that the San Ildefonso Indians would like to have the Eagle Dance especially for you, as the best way to thank you for your help in restoring the costumes for it. If Friday evening is convenient

time for you I will ask Mr. Carie to ar- range to open the galleries for it.

Sincerely yours,
Amelia Elizabeth White

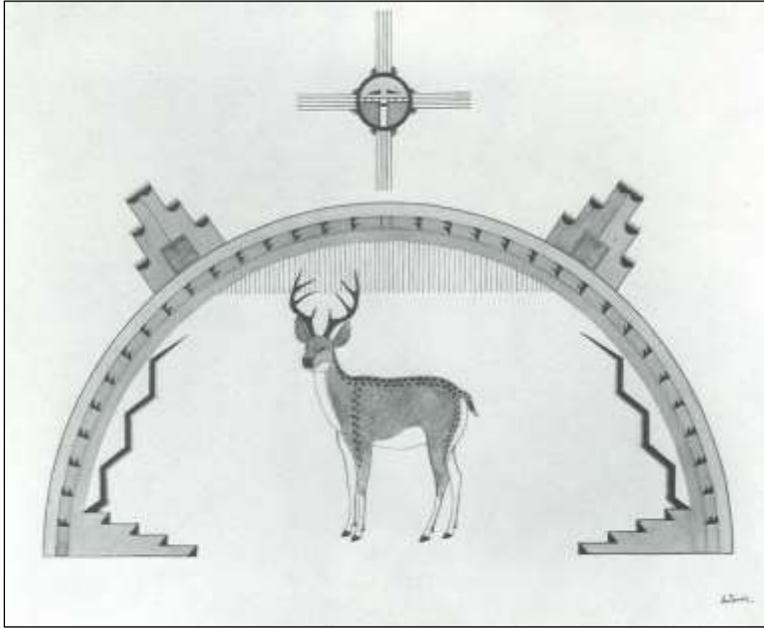
In this letter, art patron Amelia E. White (Chair of the Exposition's Executive Committee) informed J D. Rockefeller, Jr., that San Ildefonso Indians wanted to perform an Eagle Dance for him at the 1931 Exposition as an expression of thanks for contacting National Park Service on their behalf and arranging for them to get feathers and buffalo skins needed for ceremonial dances. (Rockefeller Archive Center.)



Catalog of the 1931 Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts. (On loan from Weyhe Art Books, Bar Harbor.) The list of American Indian tribes featured in the Exposition includes two found in Maine: the Abenaki and Mi'kmaq. It appears that the Penobscot were also represented – or at least submitted pieces for consideration. Speaking of the Exposition in an interview with a Maine newspaper, Penobscot Indian performer Lucy Nicolar Poolaw (“Watahwaso”) said she had collected works by fellow Penobscots to submit to the selection jury – carvings by Joe Frances and baskets by Herbert Ranco. Lucy was involved in a parallel organization for performing artists: the Society of the First Sons and Daughters of America, created to provide “authentic” American Indian performers with “fine and dignified opportunities for artistic expression.”

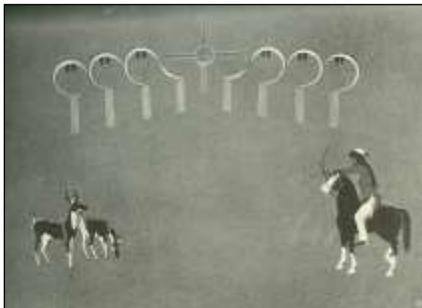
Clip from unidentified newspaper, showing J.D. Rockefeller, Jr., at the 1931 Exposition opening. (Rockefeller Archive Center). Among the 650 artworks exhibited, Southwest Indian pottery and weaving were especially well represented. But paintings by Pueblo artists drew special attention because they transformed the art form most familiar to mainstream society. Described as “distinctly original” and “purely Indian in motive,” their style, technique, contents and colors sprang from the shared symbols of ancient ceremonies. In the eyes of many of the Exposition’s organizers, these works were the “most modern and sophisticated expressions of Indian art.”





Deer by Awa Tsireh of San Ildefonso Pueblo, c1930. Watercolor on paper. Purchased by Abby Rockefeller at 1931 Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts. One of his works won first prize at the Exposition.

Awa Tsireh (Cattail Bird), also known as Alfonso Roybal (1895-1955), painting *Corn Dance*, 1939 (*right*). (Palace of the Governors.) A prize-winner at the 1931 Indian Tribal Art Exposition, Awa Tsireh came from a family of noted San Ildefonso artists. He made his first signed drawings in primary school – his only formal education. By age 22, he had won recognition beyond his Native community. After seeing some of his work for sale in a souvenir shop in Santa Fe, writer and Native rights activist Alice Corbin Henderson sought him out and in 1920 arranged for an exhibition of his watercolors at the Arts Club of Chicago. Two years later, he was among the several artists to receive prizes at the first Santa Fe Indian Market. In the 1920s, the School of American Research (then a branch of the Museum of New Mexico) sponsored several Pueblo artists, including Tsireh and Ma-Pe-Wi, so they could paint full time. The sponsorship included studio space in the museum. In 1925, Tsireh's one-man show at Chicago's Newbury Library earned critical acclaim. Painting murals and mural-sized canvases in the 1930s, he continued to show in prestigious venues. A versatile artist, he painted in a range of styles: abstract; representational combined with conventional Pueblo symbols; and naïve realism with which he represented genre subjects and ceremonial dancers.



Deer Hunter (*left*) and *Deer* (*right*), both watercolors on paper by Awa Tsireh of San Ildefonso Pueblo, were part of the collection at one time. They appear as loans from Abby A. Rockefeller in the 1931 Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts. (Their whereabouts today is not known – thus they do not appear in the Abbe exhibition.)



Buffalo Hunt by Ma-Pe-Wi (no date). Watercolor on paper. Purchased by Abby A. Rockefeller and exhibited in the 1931 Exposition.



Ma-Pe-Wi, also known as Velino Shije Herrera (1902-1973), c1930. (Photo by T. Harmon Parkhurst, Palace of the Governors.) This native of Zia Pueblo was in the original group of early Pueblo Indian easel painters known for depicting the social and ceremonial scenes of their communities. Their watercolor paintings on paper marked a distinct change in subject matter and medium among Pueblo artists. Ma-Pe-Wi began painting while attending the Santa Fe Indian Boarding School in the 1910s, when he and some of his classmates participated in after school painting sessions hosted by Elizabeth De Huff, wife of the school superintendent. After a 1919 exhibition of their paintings at the Museum of New Mexico, Ma Pi We became one of several Pueblo artists sponsored by the museum's director, Edgar L. Hewett. In time, he gained notoriety for his sensitive stylization of landscapes and hunting scenes and established a studio in Santa Fe. In addition to painting, he taught at the Albuquerque Indian School and illustrated books (including several

by anthropologist Ruth Underhill). In 1939 he and five other artists painted 2,200 feet of murals for the U.S. Department of the Interior Building in Washington, DC.

Dancing Lesson by Ma-Pe-Wi (no date). Watercolor on paper. Purchased by Abby A. Rockefeller and exhibited in the 1931 Exposition.





Ceremonial Dance: Buffalo Dance & Chorus by Peña (Quah-Ah), San Ildefonso, c1930. Watercolor on paper. Purchased by Abby A. Rockefeller at New York's Grand Central Art Galleries in 1932. Abby loaned a similar painting (pictured *below*) titled *Hunting Dance* to the 1931 Exposition.



Tonita Peña (1895-1949) and baby, 1935. (Photo by T.Harmon Parkhurst. Palace of the Governors.) Known in her native San Ildefonso Pueblo as Quah Ah, Peña lost her mother at age 12. She then went to live with an aunt at Cochiti Pueblo, where she married and spent the rest of her life. Having numerous artists in her family, she began painting at an early age and was the only woman painter among Pueblo artists in the "San Ildefonso movement" of the 1910s and 20s. She and others in the group received encouragement from the Museum of New Mexico – first from director Edgar L. Hewett, who began commissioning their paintings around 1918, and then from Kenneth Chapman. By the early 1920s, Peña had earned national attention, especially for her ethnographically detailed paintings of ceremonial dances. At the 1931 Exposition, her painting *Spring Dances* won best of show. Teaching at the Santa Fe Indian School and Albuquerque Indian School, she mentored a new generation of artists.

