

'Super Heroes: Art! Action! Adventure!' at Heard Museum, 5/16-8/23



Kellie Hwang, The Republic | azcentral.com 1:02 p.m. MST May 7, 2015



(Photo: Heard Museum)

Say "superhero" and people usually think of Superman, Batman or Captain America.

But Native cultures have their own superheroes, from real-life men and women who left their marks on history to animals with special abilities to characters created by contemporary American Indian artists.

Learn about them at the Heart Museum's summer exhibit, "Super Heroes: Art! Action! Adventure!" It opens Saturday, May 16, and follows last summer's successful, family-friendly Lego exhibit. And with Phoenix Comicon at the end of May, the timing couldn't be better.

"At some point, it dawned on me there were a number of Native American artists whose work I admire, taking the theme of superheroes in different ways, and I started to think that there could be an exhibit," curator Ann Marshall said. "We had so much fun with the Lego exhibition and saw that in the heat of a Phoenix summer, it's nice to have a place where families can go, have a good time, learn some new things and see some new things."

The exhibition parses the definition of superhero. One section features American Indian artists who re-imagine imagery from well-known comic books. It includes a jar by artist Jason Garcia that depicts the cover of "Tribal Force," the first comic book with an all-American Indian team of superheroes, created by Jon Proudstar and published in 1996 by Mystic Comics.

The section also features Superman re-imagined as Cherokee by artist Tom Farris; Wonder Woman's "cousin" Pueblo Girl, depicted on ceramic by Susan Folwell and Autumn Borts; and the Powerpuff Girls cartoon characters fighting crime in a New Mexico pueblo, by artist Dominique Reano.

"We looked at the term superhero in a pretty broad way," Marshall said. "We have the tradition of animal superheroes in Native American lore, and then the real superheroes. We didn't want to overlook the impressive achievements of American Indians that are important and deserve the title of superhero."

Another section features graphic-novel superheroes, including Theo Tso's Captain Paiute and Arigon Starr's Super Indian. After eating tainted commodity cheese, Super Indian gained impressive strength, supersonic hearing, a heightened sense of smell and the ability to breath fire.



"Kagagi — The Raven," a comic character by Jay Odjick (Kitigan Zibi Anishinabe). (Photo: Heard Museum)

"I started reading comics as a kid," Starr said, "and my mom and dad encouraged it, so I grew up reading everything I could, buying Superman, Batman, Archie at the drugstore.

"In 2005, I was at a theater conference in Brisbane, and I was sketching all the time then. I thought, 'Wouldn't it be funny if there was a Native superhero?' And I started bouncing ideas off of my colleagues."

Starr wrote some scripts about Super Indian and tested them in 2007 during a live-audience radio show for "Native Voices at the Autry," a program of the Autry National Center of the American West in Los Angeles. She used her remaining scripts to launch a web comic in 2011. Because Starr already is known in the Native community for her acting and singing, her web comic was received well.

"Super Indian is not an historical piece," she said. "It's about contemporary people living now, and that message resonates with younger people, kids and teens. Parents will get the jokes, too, with throwbacks to the '60s and '70s. I took some of my experience, too, and threw it in there, and Native people have responded to it."

In the exhibit, visitors can follow the journey of Super Indian, with pin-up art of the main characters: Hubert Logan of the Leaning Oaks Reservation (aka Super Indian), Diogi (Super Indian's dog), General Bear (Super Indian's best friend) and Technoskin (an evil robot).

The artwork of New Mexico's Virgil Ortiz kicks off the section on real superheroes. Ortiz's work is inspired by pieces made by pueblo potters from the 1800s, using the same materials and techniques. Ortiz, who hopes to revive the art form, brings the 1680 Pueblo Revolt and its hero, Po'pay, to the year 2180. In the story, Po'pay calls on the Spirit World Army of Blind Archers, Runners and Venutian Soldiers to fight the Castillian Army.

"They don't teach about the revolt in school here, and it's swept under the carpet," Ortiz said. "I want to educate the world about what happened to our 19 pueblos here in New Mexico. All of the work I do is based on my interpretation of that event. I try to tell it in a more modern and fun way. I love movies, 'Star Wars' and 'Star Trek,' and I think I can connect more with kids from this point of view rather than an academic one."

Visitors will see clay figures of Tahu, the leader of the Blind Archers; Mopez, a half-human, half-cardinal who is leader of the Runners; and the enemy Castilians, who have sleek armor, shields and weapons. Also in the exhibit are the Aeronauts, the newest addition to the Spirit World Army, portrayed as mannequin-size figures. Ortiz, an accomplished designer who developed a collection with fashion powerhouse Donna Karan, created the Aeronauts' outfits.



"Wonder Woman" jar, by Jason Garcia (Santa Clara Pueblo). (Photo: Heard Museum)

The real superheroes section also includes graphic drawings by Starr of historical Native figures: Maria Tallchief, who is considered America's first major prima ballerina, and the Code Talkers of World War I and II. The section also explores the story of Sarah Winnemucca, who founded a boarding school in Nevada in the late 1800s that taught students English as well as the Paiute language and traditions. The school operated for just a few years, but many of the children thrived in the changing world, and it would be many decades before another school like it opened.

The section on animals superheroes features Jonesy the Sheep, created by University of Arizona graduate Jonathan Nelson. Jonesy just graduated from high school and lives on the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico. Kids can try out a computer game called Never Alone about Nuna, an Inupiaq girl and her helper Arctic fox, who must travel through a blizzard to find the source of the storm that destroyed their village. The game was created by the Cook Inlet Tribal Council in Alaska and E-Line Games in Seattle, who together formed Upper One Games, the first indigenous video-game company in the U.S.

An interactive section invites kids to make their own superhero capes and cuffs, or pull together an outfit from the superhero closet. The museum is working with UrbanSTEW, an arts collective, to create a photo area where kids can don costumes and choose an animal companion to be in a photo with them. Also featured are superhero costumes and figures from TV shows and movies, including a costume worn by Lynda Carter in the 1970s TV show "Wonder Woman"; a figure based on Christian Bale's Batman; and Thor's hammer.

Starr wants the exhibit to inspire Native and non-Native people.

"I always hope people who come to the museum get a dose of what contemporary Native people are doing, that they are also influenced by mainstream culture and are contributing to society," Starr said. "The exhibit is geared toward kids and family, and it's great to start them young in experiencing Native culture. I hope Native kids and families see this and feel proud. A lot of times we're invisible in society, and with exhibits like this, I want them to feel they are seen."

'Super Heroes: Art! Action! Adventure!'

When: Saturday, May 16, through Sunday, Aug. 23. 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sundays. 6-10 p.m. First Fridays.

Admission: \$18.50-\$23; \$12.50 for students and ages 6-12; \$5 for ages 1-5 and American Indians; free for museum members and children younger than 1.

Where: Heard Museum, 2301 N. Central Ave., Phoenix.

Details: 602-252-8840, heard.org.

Grand-opening gala

When: Saturday, May 16. 9:30 a.m. for museum members; noon for the general public. Kids are encouraged to dress as superheroes and enter the costume contest in the afternoon.

Admission: \$18.50-\$23; \$12.50 for students and ages 6-12; \$5 for ages 1-5 and American Indians; free for museum members and children younger than 1.

Theo Tso Book Signing

What: The creator of Captain Paiute will sign copies of his book.

When: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Saturday, May 30.

Where: Books & More in the museum's central courtyard.

'Super Heroes!' Summer Programs

What: Weeklong summer camps for ages 7-13 feature stop-motion animation, building activities, museum tours and Lego projects.

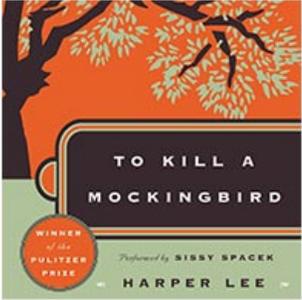
When: 8:30 a.m.-noon. June 1-5; 8-12; 15-19; 22-26.

Admission: \$95 for museum members, \$110 for non-members.

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