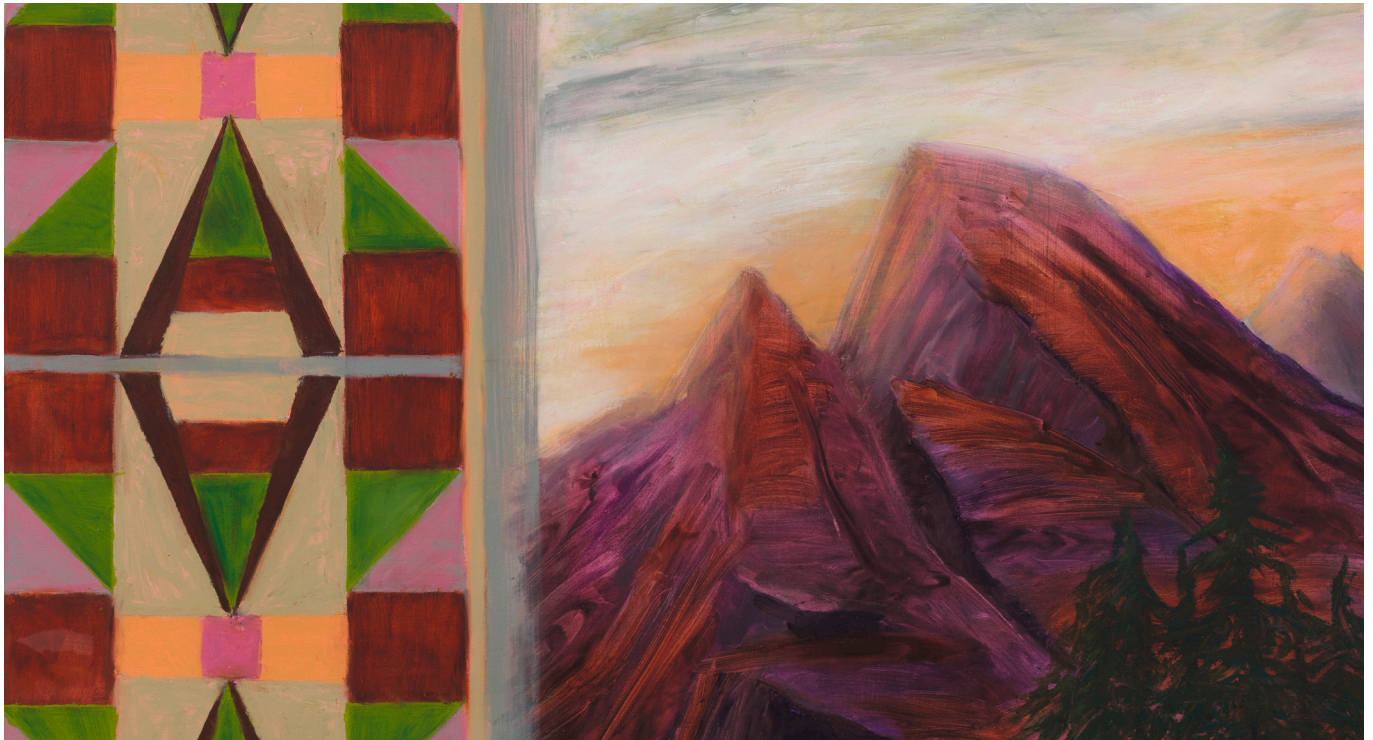


KAY WALKINGSTICK

Ellen Rosen, A Curator Happy to Shift the Museum Landscape, The New York Times, 6 March 2024



Kay WalkingStick, *Our Land Variation II*, 2008. Photo by JSP Art Photography

The New-York Historical Society, the oldest museum in New York City, named Wendy Nalani E. Ikemoto as its chief curator and vice president in January. Ms. Ikemoto is one of the first people of Indigenous descent to lead curators at a major museum in the United States. A native of Honolulu, she graduated from Stanford University, received a Ph.D. in art history from Harvard University and did postdoctoral work at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London and Vassar College.

How did you become interested in art history?

My parents, who are now retired, were radiologists. My sister and I spent a lot of time going to their offices and watching them look at X-rays and dictate into a microphone what they were seeing. And that's precisely what art history is — taking the visual and verbalizing it. At the time I didn't know that art history existed. But it was my sister, who was taking a class while in college at Stanford, who suggested that I take one as well. I did, and I was hooked.

And your sister?

She studied computer science and got a Ph.D. in computer graphics and now is a director at Apple.

Many art historians pursue a career in academia. You've selected an alternative path. How did you choose?

From the start of my graduate career, I always felt this reservation about the elitism of art history — it doesn't have the reputation for being a field of social service. I made the decision to leave academia; when a job became available at a school in Honolulu, it was an opportunity for me to give back to my community and to a school that had done a lot for my family.

What brought you to the New-York Historical Society, and what are your goals in your new position?

A few years ago, I came here to work as an associate curator; I felt it was the perfect marriage of my love of rigorous scholarship and my desire to serve the community. As chief curator, I want to take advantage of our really rich and deep holdings of American art and interpret them and contextualize them and activate them in a way that is relevant to today. For example, with the controversy surrounding monuments, we had an exhibition that tapped into the current debates but also drew out the very long historical lineage — that exhibition included a scene of New York colonists and Continental soldiers pulling

down a statue of King George III in Bowling Green — and depicted the toppling of tyranny.

Currently, we have a show of landscape paintings by Kay WalkingStick, a contemporary Cherokee artist, along with some Hudson River School paintings from our collection. As an artist, she wants visitors to have a sense of joy in the beauty of the land, but to understand that everyone here in North America lives, in her terms, in Indian Territory. Art is part of the world and not set apart from a lot of political questions or social turmoil — it helps to shape history. The exhibitions that I like to do are ones that grapple with — or honor — objects from the past and reactivate them in a way that gives a new perspective to them. And I tend to favor acquiring contemporary works that directly and explicitly address history.

In an age of distraction, how do you attract people to the museum?

The visitor experience is very important to me as well as to the institution. I want to work on a curatorial vision that honors and centers the visitor experience and want to make sure that the museum feels accessible and welcoming to the diverse publics that we serve. People go into an exhibition and stand in front of a painting and don't think they have anything to contribute to the interpretation. But they do.

You have received attention as one of the first chief curators of Indigenous descent at a museum that is not dedicated to any specific type of community or type of art.

I feel honored to have this position and also a responsibility to do well. And I see this as a chance to help to shape the museum landscape and make sure that museums are serving everyone. In addition, I'm happy to help shift the visual face of museums.