

Florida Humanities Speakers Directory



Engaging Speakers



Compelling Topics



Thought-provoking
Discussions



Sandra Starr

Scholar, Researcher, Art Historian, Curator

Her interest in the history of Florida, and the art and history of the American Indians of the Western Hemisphere, led her to the Smithsonian Institution where she assisted in planning the grand opening of the National Museum of the American Indian.

Programs Available

Indians at the Post Office: Murals as Public Art: A 21st- Century-Look at New Deal-era Post Office Murals

In 1933, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal had sponsored several art programs to help get people back to work and to restore confidence in a nation facing 25 percent unemployment. His intent was to install public art in federal buildings, intended to "help boost the morale of people suffering the effects of the Great Depression." Fine art murals are on the walls of more than 700 post offices nationwide, usually above the postmaster's office door. Fine art originals depicting scenes of the history of that town or the state. Standing frozen in time, post office murals hold on their surfaces, visual, autobiographic essays of how America saw itself, considered its minorities, and presented its heroes as the Nation moved from a rural to an industrialized society.

Beauty from the Ashes: American Indian Art as Witness to American History

There is a certain feeling one has about an object imbued with both beauty and history: a pot used, a moccasin worn, a doll carried. The art of the American Indian not only expresses the creativity and purpose of the makers, but also contains an aura that transports us to critical periods in North American Indian and American history when native artists chose to continue to create beautiful things that would survive their lives of chaos, displacement, and poverty. If an object could speak, it might say: "That which did not kill me made me stronger." When I approach an object, I know that each component material brings with it a different historical reference—all bound together into another form—by hands that were continually witnessing community manipulation, daily loss, betrayal, and random acts of aggression.

Contact Information:
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Program Format:

- In-person
- Virtual

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Need to reach Florida Humanities? For Grants, contact Lindsey Morrison at lmorrison@flahum.org, for Florida Talks, contact Lisa Lennox at lennox@flahum.org. For more information about the Florida Humanities Speakers Directory, visit <https://floridahumanities.org/speakers>.

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The Pre-Columbian Bird-man: Ancient Art History as Evidence of a Sacred Bird-Man Deity of Maize Agriculture

This presentation follows Ms. Starr's 17-year investigation into the meaning of a 2000-year-old golden diadem unearthed at a burial site in the Pacific Coastal area of Paracas, Peru. The diadem depicted a man with wings. Her research has taken her on a virtual journey north from Peru and Bolivia following visual clues into the Pre-Columbian art history of South and Central America, Mexico, the rim of the Gulf, and north along rivers to as far as the Lakes Region of North America. Evidence of such a Bird Man was also found in Florida and the Caribbean resulting in the gathering of images of over 900 objects created by ancient indigenous peoples depicting a singular flying deity of agriculture. Contemporary Indigenous peoples still revere him as an iconic part of their celebrations and ceremonies. Her investigation is ongoing.

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Turbans, Wigs, Crowns, and Authority:

Headwear and Power in American Indian History

The Florida Museum of Natural History holds in its collections an example of contemporary Seminole male headwear referred to as a turban. At first glance, it appears to be a simply made device of colored cotton fabric wrapped around a cardboard form, then encircled by a metal band as a crown-like decoration. The turban is adorned with a feather. But its simplicity belies a vast depth of storied historic and even prehistoric implications. Its value as a signifier of cultural individuality and power reaches back millennia. The meaning of headgear in the Western Hemisphere can be found throughout recorded time, serving across 2,500 years as a culture and social-status signifier, a carrying device, a height enhancer, an indicator of king or queenship, an international trendsetter, and possibly a signal for the intention of war or peace.

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