

[Transcript of David Nicandri interview podcast]

My name is David Nicandri. I am the director of the State History Museum in downtown Tacoma. I've been in this position since 1987, and because of the demands of administrative duty, [I] really haven't curated an exhibit since I came here (which means that it's going on close to 25 years since I've done a show). I've always wanted to do something like the "Icons of Washington History", which I think of as kind of a masterpiece show for a history museum. "Masterpiece" shows are very common in the art museum realm; there are the Picassos, and the Matisses, the Rembrandts. History museum collections are far more eclectic than that, and so [by] creating a masterpiece show out of individualized objects as an act of significant interpretation, ... I've just chosen some of the items in the collection of the History Museum that appeal to me. I call them icons because they are highly representative. They tell a story almost in and of themselves, although all objects are mute to an extent. The value and the meaning to them does get attached by other mediating figures, such as a curator or a historian, as in my case. And so this is the result of 20-plus years' worth of reflection on state history in our collection, and I've just chosen a few things from the collection that speak to me most powerfully.

Some of them, I consider the classics, like Ronald Debs Ginther's Depression-era scene from Hoovervilles around the Northwest, and labor organizing efforts on the waterfront in Seattle during the New Deal Era, breadlines...scenes of that type. Harold Cundy's sketchbook: Harold Cundy was an amateur anthropologist in the 1930s, when the dams in eastern Washington were about to inundate a lot of the Native American rock art. He just made it his mission to go out and record these pictographs before they were swamped. I won't say forever, since nothing is forever, but as long as the dams exist, one won't be able to see this rock art, but Harold Cundy recorded it in his sketchbook.

In the collection we have many manuscripts [and] maps. One of my favorites is the Richard Covington map of Fort Vancouver, drawn in the 1840s. It was almost like an evidentiary exhibit in the boundary settlement between Great Britain and the United States, for Vancouver was a British establishment, but it was in territory that was about to become American. So to record the value of the asset known as Fort Vancouver, Covington drew a map of the fort and where all the outbuildings and farms were in order to document its value. It's a tremendous representation of Fort Vancouver, literally at its peak of fame and influence.

The exhibit also includes Clovis points, which are very large and, at times, nearly translucent spear points. Excavated from a site in east Wenatchee, 15 to 20 years ago, they are some of the largest spear points ever recovered in North America.

One of the most famous artifacts in the history of the institution is Ezra Meeker's covered wagon. Ezra became a professional pioneer late in his life, early in the 20th century, when he was by that time a very elderly man. He tried to call attention to the pioneering effort of his generation. And so he had a covered wagon made (like the one he traveled west on in the 1850s) and did Oregon Trail reenactments everywhere from Tacoma to

Washington, D.C. - the Oregon Trail, of course, being a western phenomenon. To call attention to the trail, he traveled all over the country, selling postcards and giving demonstrations. This wagon, although not an original pioneer wagon, was made in the style of one, and with its association with Ezra, is a very important artifact for that reason alone.

The show also talks about iconic structures, such as the Space Needle, which is probably the single most recognizable structural form in the state of Washington, but also groups of buildings, such as the State Capitol group. [It] is an ensemble of Capitol buildings, rather than a single one, which was somewhat of an architectural breakthrough in terms of planning for seats of government, as well as being rather pleasing to the eye in its own right.

We have iconic people in the exhibit. My favorite is probably the image of Ken Griffey, Jr., crossing home plate in the deciding game against the New York Yankees in the 1995 American League Playoff Series, accompanied by Dave Niehaus, who is the broadcaster for the Mariners. [It is] accompanied by Niehaus' radio call, which is an iconic moment for sports fans throughout the Northwest.

We've got Jimi Hendrix, Dale Chihuly, Jacob Lawrence, Asahel Curtis, [and] numerous other figures important to the state's history, including Chief Seattle, who, of course, is the namesake for the state's largest city.

Of course, the greatest icon in Washington is Mt. Rainier, certainly our greatest natural icon. It's visible from a great extent of the state, both east and west and north and south, and points in between. And we have several representations of Mt. Rainier, including the largest painting of Mt. Rainier ever prepared, that by James Everett Stewart. It's an oil on canvas painting done in 1889 that, upwards of fifteen feet wide and six feet high, is a magnificent tableau. And its large dimensionality is fitting, given the primacy of Mt. Rainier, as our single most topographic icon.

"Icons of Washington History" promises to be one of the most interesting exhibits the History Museum has had on view, not only because of the rarity of the many items on display, but also because of the suggestive nature of the interpretive framework, which we're hoping will evoke other people to think about how they would substitute, add to, or replace their own sense of what are the iconic people, places, [and] things of the state of Washington.