

America's FIRST FACES

Joslyn's new exhibit of contemporary American Indian images has a connection to historical portraits in the museum's Bodmer collection.

By DANE STICKNEY
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When Fabian Fontenelle slips into a hand-crafted headdress, grabs a beaded dancing stick and holds an ornate fan of feathers, he is thinking of the past.

When he bounces around a dirt-floor arena, he remembers his great-grand-uncle, Logan Fontenelle, who 150 years ago was one of the most powerful men living along the Missouri River.

When he chants and sings, he honors an even more distant relative, Big Elk, an Omaha tribal legend.

The American Indian powwow is more than a dance or a get-together. Its roots are spiritual, and the point is to honor the rich American Indian lineage.

Fabian Fontenelle — part-Omaha, part-Zuni with roots in Nebraska and a home in New Mexico — is one of 40 powwow dancers featured in "Faces From the Land: A Photographic Journey Through Native America," on display through September at Joslyn Art Museum.

Seattle photographer Ben Marra has spent nearly two decades traveling to powwows to capture American Indians in full regalia during one of their most sacred events.

Being part of that project is special, Fabian said, but having the exhibit displayed at the Joslyn makes it mean even more. The building is full of the Fontenelle spirit.

A beaded deerskin jacket — said to have been owned by Logan Fontenelle, a famed Omaha chief — hangs in the museum's Durham Gallery.

Footsteps away hangs a near-priceless and prestigious collection of Karl Bodmer watercolors. The Swiss painter recorded some of the first-known images of American Indians in the 1830s. One of his works is of a fur-trading post near Bellevue. French-American fur-trader Lucien Fontenelle — who married Big Elk's daughter and was Logan's father — owned the shack, and he traveled with Bodmer.

It makes Fabian Fontenelle proud to have his image hang in a building full of such important relics.

"It really is an honor to be included with the likes of my ancestors," said Fontenelle, who lives in Albuquerque, N.M., but still has relatives in the Omaha area. "They were great men, and to keep honoring them is important to me."

And to his family.

One of Fontenelle's local relatives — Logan Lucien Fontenelle

— took family members on a museum tour last week.

They studied the Bodmer paintings. When Logan Lucien Fontenelle looks at them, he sees past their beauty and historical significance. He can picture his distant great-grandfather Lucien standing near the artist.

The Fontenelles also admired Chief Logan Fontenelle's jacket of ornately beaded tan hide. His namesake again doesn't study patterns or functionality. He can feel the ancestral spirit that gave him life and still gives him inspiration.

The Fontenelles stared at Fabian's photo in Joslyn's Mind's Eye Gallery. The pictures in the Marra exhibit feature serious-looking American Indians wearing incredible regalia — hides, furs, colorful face paint. Each of the subjects is vivid and arresting against a dark, rustic background.

"The Joslyn is a special place for us," Logan Lucien Fontenelle said. "We are very proud of our ancestors, and to come here and see our lineage on display is important to us."

Marra has devoted so much of his life to "Faces From the Land" precisely to give American Indian families that kind of recognition.

In 1988, the commercial photographer took an assignment that required him to go to a Seattle-area powwow. Marra, who has no American Indian ancestry, had never been to the event and didn't fully understand its significance.

The visual impact of the American Indian regalia wowed him. The array of colors and the details of the attire proved perfect for a photographer.

But the people were even more impressive. Their pride — and the respect they paid to their heritage — is unparalleled, Marra said. He suddenly became obsessed with capturing that emotion in one quick click of a camera shutter.

"The powwow is just an amazing event," Marra said during a recent visit to Omaha. "It really sparked an interest in me, and it became a real passion for me to photograph these dancers."

For the next six years, he toured the nation with his wife, Linda. The two attended as many powwows as they could, pulling aside participants in full regalia for quick portraits.

At the time — before American Indian casinos began pouring money into the reservations, before the powwow circuit was as widespread and popular as it is now, and before the film "Dances With Wolves" — Marra's work was unusual. Finding financial support proved difficult, but Marra kept at it.

By 1994, he had accumulated hundreds of striking portraits.



Linda Marra quit her job to work on finding an outlet for the series. She negotiated a calendar deal. In 1996, the couple released a book.

But they still wanted something more for their work.

In 2003, they found it.

The Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Ky., hung the best portraits from the project as part of a Lewis and Clark bicentennial celebration. The exhibit was so successful, the museum extended the show's run through the Kentucky Derby. It then moved to Washington state, Minnesota and Florida.

Anne El-Omami, the Joslyn's education curator, heard about the show and was immediately interested. Marra's photos reminded El-Omami of Bodmer's portraits.

"Both artists let the regalia come alive and become a reflection of the person and their heritage," she said.

It was a coincidence that the show included a Fontenelle and two other American Indians from Nebraska, but it made the exhibit even more relevant and powerful for Omaha, El-Omami said.

"That's a tangible example that the Native American isn't so distant a part of our history as many people think," she said. "They are still around us. They still have a place in our community."

Local American Indians have easily related to the images.

Richard Pendell, a teacher of American Indian-centered education at Omaha's Indian Hill Elementary School, has taken Indian students to the show.

"The exhibit has really con-

nected with the kids," said Pendell, who also is of American Indian descent. "It's easy for them to personalize these images. They are impressed with the pride that all of the portraits show."

That's rewarding for Marra, who still is photographing powwows.

"There are so many stereotypes, so much bad news about Native Americans," he said. "I want this exhibit to be something positive, something that shows these people at their best."

That's why Fabian Fontenelle wanted to participate. Marra and Fontenelle met at a powwow in the Pacific Northwest, and Marra asked to take his photo.

Fontenelle hoped the photos would make younger American Indians aware of the powwow's importance. He never imagined his portrait would hang in the same museum that honored his ancestors.

But the karma of the situation ties in with his spirituality. He daily gives thanks to "grandfather" — a term both figurative, alluding to the creator, and literal, referencing his lineage.

"I'm thankful to grandfather for every day he gives me, for everything he bestows on me," Fontenelle said. "Without him, I would not be here, breathing on this earth."

He keeps that alive. By remembering. By posing for pictures. By dancing.

"We can't let the younger generations forget who they are, where they came from," Fontenelle said. "Once you lose your history, your language, your tradition, you're just a bump on a log."

FROM THE EXHIBIT

Here's a sampling of the photographs in Ben and Linda Marra's exhibit at Joslyn.



Waylon McCloud Yallup
Yakama tribe



Dawn M. Crom
Blackfeet tribe

IF YOU GO

Faces From the Land: A Photographic Journey Through Native America

What: An exhibit of 40 portraits of American Indians in full powwow regalia by Ben Marra
Where: Joslyn Art Museum, 2200 Dodge St.
When: Through Sept. 30.
Hours: Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Sundays from noon to 4 p.m.
Admission: \$4 to \$7, free from 10 a.m. to noon Saturdays
Information: www.joslyn.org or 342-3300.