

Saint Louis Art Museum and Minneapolis Institute of Art announce major gifts of Native American textiles



Chief-Style Blanket," Second Phase, c.1880; Diné (Navajo); wool and dye; 71 1/4 x 55 1/4 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Elissa and Paul Cahn 221:2017.

ST. LOUIS, MO.- The Saint Louis Art Museum and the Minneapolis Institute of Art today announced gifts from St. Louis-based collectors Paul and Elissa Cahn that will elevate the museums' collections of Native American and South American textiles. The Cahn gifts include 156 weavings and related art works.

The Cahns developed their textile collection starting in the 1980s with the intent of enabling museums to offer more comprehensive presentations of Native weavings. The gifts to the two museums are particularly strong in works by Dine' (Navajo), Pueblo, Mexican and Aymara artists and include textiles from the U.S. Southwest, Northwest Coast, Mexico and South America.

"We hope this gift opens the world of American Indian weaving to the museums' visitors," said Paul Cahn. "These works of art represent unbelievable craftsmanship and sophisticated aesthetic expression, and we are proud that museum visitors in St. Louis and Minneapolis can now encounter for themselves the great beauty of the works we have loved of years."

The directors of the St. Louis and Minneapolis museums said the gifts represent significant additions to their collections.

"I am grateful for the Cahns' continuing generosity," said Brent R. Benjamin, the Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum. "Their thoughtful collecting of weavings has resulted in holdings of remarkable depth and extraordinarily quality that now can be shared with the people of St. Louis and Minneapolis."

"With this extraordinary gift, Paul and Elissa Cahn have more than tripled our holdings of Native American textiles at Mia," said Kaywin Feldman, the Nivin and Duncan MacMillan Director and President of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. "The Cahn collection of Navajo, Aymara, and Saltillo serapes represents one of the most important collections of indigenous textiles in private hands, and we are grateful for the Cahns' generosity."

Paul Cahn was born in Mainz, Germany, his family fled Nazi anti-Semitism and settled in Montreal, Canada. In 1956 he married Elissa and the couple moved to St. Louis with their two daughters in 1960. Paul Cahn started what would become Elan Polo International Inc. in 1976. Headquartered in St. Louis and Nashville, Tenn., the firm designs and distributes more than 45 million pairs of shoes annually.

In St. Louis, the Cahns are well known for their generosity. Since its creation in 1993, the Paul and Elissa Cahn Foundation has provided funding to St. Louis arts groups, educational organizations and the Jewish Federation of St. Louis. In August, the non-profit Covenant Place Community for Seniors broke ground on the 107-apartment project for seniors named in honor of the couple.

The gift to the Saint Louis Art Museum

Forty-six Diné works—including wearing blankets, mantas, serapes, saddle blankets, small-form weavings, and rugs—make up the heart of the gift. A highlight of this group is a wearing blanket featuring bold horizontal stripes in cream and dark brown with red bands. Historically prized by high-ranking men from the Plains and Great Basin, this style of Diné weaving is often called a chief's blanket.

Most textiles in the gift to the Saint Louis Art Museum date from 1868 to 1900, at a time when Diné weavers experimented widely with materials, design, and scale. In the 1890s Diné artists began to make rugs, the major form of 20th-century textile production. The Cahn gift features 10 rugs in the Two Grey Hills style—a local approach distinguished by technical fineness, intricate design, and exclusive use of undyed wool—and 22 Diné textiles collected by Warren Dale Hollister, who acquired work mostly from 1900 to 1910. Hollister made watercolor drawings of each work that he collected, and those watercolors are included in the gift.

The gift to the Saint Louis Art Museum also features Pueblo and Mexican textiles, a dancing blanket from the Northwest Coast, as well as 20 garments woven and worn by indigenous Aymara peoples, a group centered on the highland plateau of western Bolivia and southern Peru. Dating from the early-16th to the mid-19th centuries, these Aymara textiles enabled artists to maintain pre-contact artistic practices and express indigenous identities during a period of colonial rule.

The Saint Louis Art Museum will highlight several works from the Cahn collection in “Southwest Weavings: 800 Years of Artistic Exchange,” an exhibition that will open in late 2018.

The gift to the Minneapolis Institute of Art

The Cahns' gift to Mia includes 44 Native American textiles: 18th century Aymara, 19th and 20th century Native North American, and 19th century Mexican Saltillo serapes. Highlights of this group are rare Aymara and Saltillo serapes made from silk, a Navajo “Slave Blanket,” Hopi mantas, a Northwest Coast Button Blanket and a Navajo Sandpainting textile woven by Mrs. Sam Manuelito, niece of the renowned medicine man and weaver Hosteen Klah.

In addition, Mia received 14 watercolors depicting 14 of the textiles in the collection, created in 1904.