



100 W. 14th Avenue Pkwy
Denver, CO 80204-2788
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pressoffice@denverartmuseum.org

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**The Denver Art Museum presents
Storytellers: The Blackfeet Nation and Charles M. Russell
in Fall 2026 with legacy gift from Tom and Jane Petrie**



DENVER – May 16, 2026 – The Denver Art Museum (DAM) proudly presents its next show about the American West, *Storytellers: The Blackfeet Nation and Charles M. Russell*, on view Sept. 6, 2026, through Jan. 24, 2027. The milestone presentation is made possible by a landmark gift of masterworks from the collection of Tom and Jane Petrie, which significantly expands the museum's western American art holdings.

Storytellers will feature over 80 artworks including oil paintings, watercolors and bronzes by Charles M. Russell and ancestral artworks from the Blackfoot Confederacy (Nitsitapii),

especially the Kainai (Blood Tribe) and Amskaapii Pikanni (Blackfeet or South Peigan), from the late-19th to mid-20th centuries.

"With *Storytellers*, we are inviting visitors to look closer at the intersections of art, memory and Indigenous expertise," said Christoph Heinrich, Frederick and Jan Meyer Director of the Denver Art Museum. "By exploring themes like the buffalo hunt and the intricate roles of Blackfeet women, we are celebrating artistic skill and honoring a resilient cultural heritage. We thank Tom and Jane Petrie for their extraordinary gift expanding our western American art collection which continues to speak to their shared love of western American art."



The gift of the Petrie Collection includes some of the most celebrated masterworks by Charles M. Russell, both paintings and sculptures. The Petrie Collection will further strengthen the breadth and caliber of the DAM's western American art collection, one of the most comprehensive in the country.

"This year is the centenary year of Charles M. Russell's death, an important time for a refreshed focus on his legacy. Russell's work captures a spirit that transcends its era and it is a privilege to see these masterworks find a permanent home in the Petrie Institute of Western American at the DAM," said Tom Petrie. "To me, this exhibition is a testament to the power of art to act as a bridge between the 'West that has passed' and thriving Indigenous communities of the present. Jane and I are delighted to support the museum's mission to foster an ever deeper understanding of our shared heritage, while celebrating the vibrant cultures that continue to shape the West today and continuing the work of the Petrie Institute's pursuit of excellence in scholarship."

This exhibition will put ancestral Nitsitapii works from the DAM's collection into dialogue with Russell's representations of Blackfeet art and culture. Through these comparisons, the exhibition explores the deep spiritual connection to bison and the vital contributions of Blackfeet women, including excellent examples of beadwork, hide-tanning and saddle making. Other areas focus on the roles of Blackfeet men as warriors and medicine men, revealing how Russell's famous "Old West" scenes were built upon the real-world knowledge of his Indigenous mentors. The show also brings history to life through Hand Talk, using video and contemporary experts to translate the ancient Plains Indian Sign Language that Russell carefully painted.

Some of the themes explored include:

Bison and the Buffalo Hunt

Russell arrived in Montana in the 1880s, by which time bison herds had been reduced from many millions to less than a thousand. The near-total loss of the bison devastated the Indigenous cultures who had relied on them for centuries. Although Russell arrived too late to witness a buffalo hunt, the subject became a foundational component of his oeuvre. The exhibition presents a selection of Russell's representations of bison and buffalo hunts to consider his aesthetic and technical development as well as his reliance on Indigenous knowledge and history. Through Blackfeet perspectives and artworks, this section considers the Nitsitapii peoples' deep relationship with *iinii* (buffalo).

Blackfeet Women: Artists and Caregivers

Honoring Blackfeet women's multi-faceted contributions to preserving Blackfeet art and culture, the exhibition examines their roles in parenting, managing domestic life, breaking and moving camp, processing bison hides, making garments and as artists skilled in using leather, beads and porcupine quills. Artworks made by Blackfeet women regularly feature in Russell's work. Josephine Wright, of Blackfeet heritage, often modeled for him and served as a cultural broker. Blackfeet women had a profound impact on Russell's artistic development.

Blackfeet Men: Warriors, Scouts and Medicine Men

Russell often painted Blackfeet men in traditional cultural roles including medicine man, scout and warrior. The exhibition analyzes Russell's indebtedness to Indigenous knowledge and brings Blackfeet perspectives to bear on how we might better understand and appreciate these representations. It also considers Russell's creation of a "West that Has Passed" rooted in his understanding of a deeper regional history.

Hand Talk: Plains Indian Sign Language

Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL) is one of the oldest languages in North America, utilized for centuries by Indigenous people and eventually by European and American traders. Russell spoke PISL – which he called Hand Talk – with diverse Native communities and represented signs in his artwork. The exhibition presents new and enhanced interpretations of Russell's work based on the expertise of contemporary PISL speakers. It integrates video representations of contemporary speakers demonstrating



relevant signs as well as a historical video of Richard Sanderville (Chief Bull, Amskaapii Pikannii, 1866-1951) signing traditional stories.

"We strive to be a space where history is actively revisited and understood through new lenses," said JR Henneman, Director of the Petrie Institute of Western American Art. "*Storytellers* represents a vital moment for our Denver community to engage with the complex legacies of the American West. By placing

ancestral Nitsitapii artworks in direct conversation with Russell's iconic paintings, we move beyond the 'myth' of the West to celebrate the enduring presence and vibrant culture of the Blackfeet people today and the ongoing relevance of Russell's art. It is an honor to facilitate this dialogue and share these stories with our neighbors. We are deeply grateful to Amskaapii Pikannii (Blackfeet Nation) advisors to this project who shared their time, knowledge, stories and humor with us. We thank Tom Petrie for continuing to expand his commitment to western American art through this incredible gift."

The exhibition's interpretative elements will be provided in English and Spanish, with key components presented in American Sign Language (ASL), Niitsi'powahsin (Blackfeet) and PISL. Amskaapii Pikannii advisors provided insight at every stage of the project, including choosing Nitsitapii objects from the DAM's collection, providing knowledge and content for catalog and exhibition text, undertaking language translation, advising on catalog and exhibition design and providing songs and stories for interpretive content.



The Institute of Western American Art was founded in 2001 with a significant gift of art from William Sr. and Dorothy Harmsen. In 2007, the department was renamed the Petrie Institute of Western American Art (PIWAA) thanks to the generosity of Tom and Jane Petrie. In 2013, Henry Roath's gift of masterworks and, in 2014, the acquisition of the Dr. George C. and Catherine M. Peck collection greatly enriched the department's collection. In 2024, Barbara Thompson's gift of significant fine art prints featuring the American

Southwest reinvigorated the department's work on paper program. Tom and Jane Petrie's planned gift of masterworks by Russell further deepens the DAM's commitment to telling a comprehensive story of American art in the West.

The Petrie Institute of Western American Art (PIWAA) tells the story of American art from a western perspective and situates western American art in a global context. It is a national leader in scholarly research and programming. Its collection is one of the most important of its kind, spanning nearly two centuries of artistic production in and about the West.

Storytellers is a traveling exhibition organized by the Denver Art Museum. Following the debut at the DAM, the exhibition will travel to the C.M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana. It is curated by JR Henneman.

Storytellers: The Blackfeet Nation and Charles M. Russell is organized by the Denver Art Museum. It is presented by Tom and Jane Petrie. Additional support is provided by Mary Pat and Richard McCormick, Kent Thiry and Denise O'Leary, The Americana Foundation, the Wyeth Foundation for American Art, the donors to the Annual Fund Leadership Campaign, and the residents who support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD).

Planning Your Visit

The most up-to-date information on planning a visit to the Denver Art Museum can be found online under the [Plan Your Visit](#) tab. Use this page to find details on ticket pricing, public transit options and access information. General admission for museum members is free every day. Youth aged 18 and under receive free general admission everyday thanks to the museum's Free for Kids program. Free for Kids also underwrites free admission for school and youth group visits.

About the Denver Art Museum

The Denver Art Museum is an educational, nonprofit resource that sparks creative thinking and expression through transformative experiences with art. Its mission is to enrich lives by sparking creative thinking and expression. Its holdings reflect the city and region—and provide invaluable ways for the community to learn about cultures from around the world. Metro residents support the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District (SCFD), a unique funding source serving hundreds of metro Denver arts, culture and scientific organizations. For museum information, visit www.denverartmuseum.org or call 720-865-5000.

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Media Contacts

Andy Sinclair/Press Office

Denver Art Museum

720-913-0096/719-761-9390

asinclair@denverartmuseum.org or

pressooffice@denverartmuseum.org

One Luv Hull/Press Office

Denver Art Museum

720-913-2799

ohull@denverartmuseum.org or
pressoffice@denverartmuseum.org

Image Credits:

Image 1: Charles Marion Russell, *Piegans*, 1918. Oil paint on canvas; 24 x 36 in. Promised gift of Tom and Jane Petrie. Photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy Denver Art Museum

Image 2: Charles Marion Russell, *Buffalo Hunt, Number 40*, 1919. Oil paint on canvas; 39 x 57 in. Promised gift of Tom and Jane Petrie. Photo by Christina Jackson, courtesy Denver Art Museum

Image 3: Kainai/Blood Tribe artist, *War Robe*, Late 1880s to Early 1900s. Deer hide and commercial pigment; 58-1/4 x 48-1/2 in. Denver Art Museum: Native Arts acquisition funds, 1938.260

Image 4: Nora Spanish, Blackfeet, *Pair of Gloves*, 1940s. Leather and beads; each approx. 18 x 8-1/8 x 4-1/4 in. Denver Art Museum: Bequest of the Estate of Gerald E. Welsh, 1981.240A-B