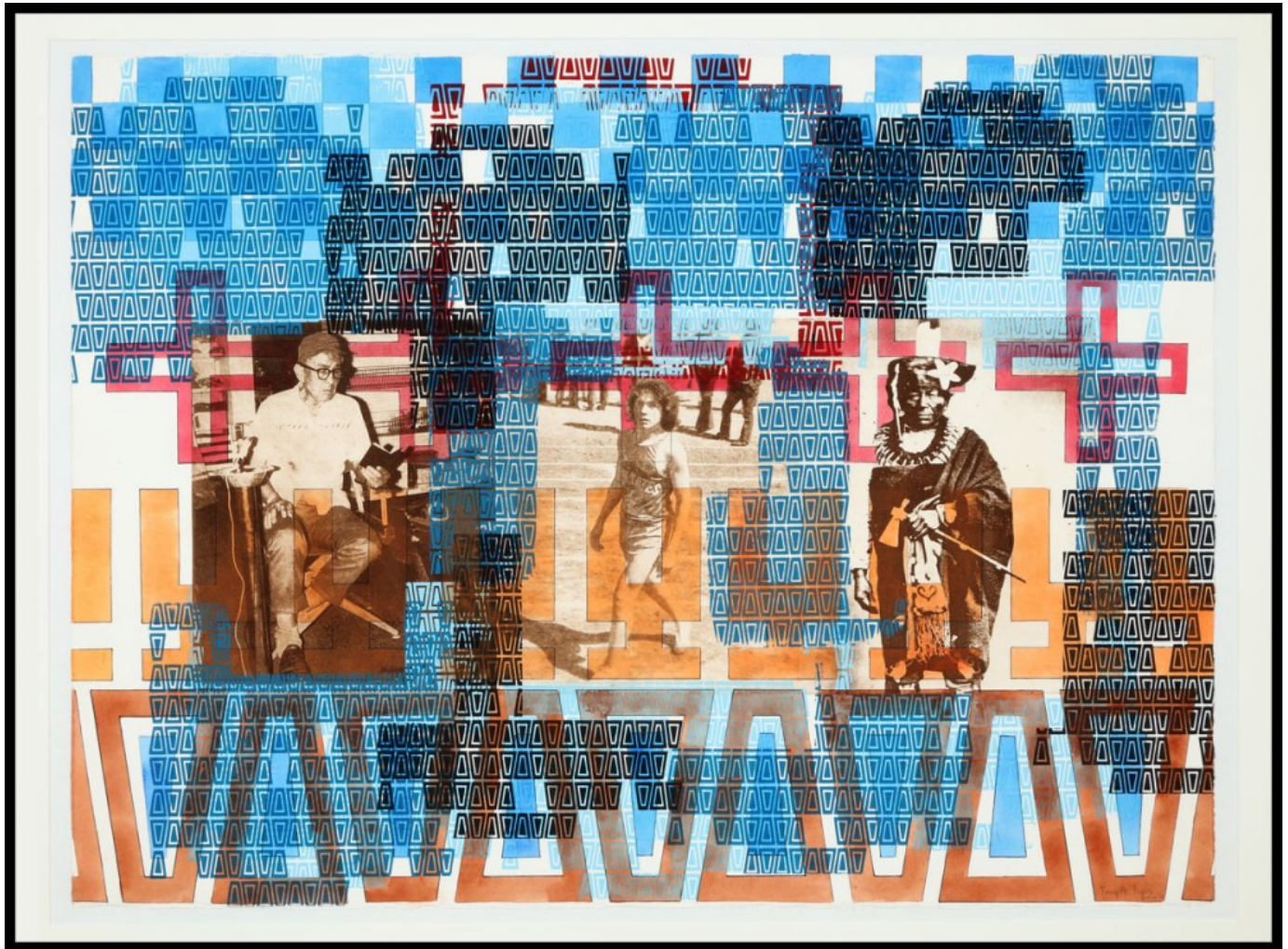


Methodist-sponsored airport exhibit spotlights Indigenous heritage

by [Jim Patterson](#)

December 8, 2023



Influence of Ancestors, an artwork by Tony A. Tiger, is about how ancestors can inform, inspire, and encourage. (Photo courtesy of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries)

While traveling several years back, [Chebon Kernell](#) came across something interesting at [Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport](#).

It was *A Walk Through Atlanta History*, a permanent exhibit tracing the city's story up to the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games.

“They included Indigenous peoples there, but it was on just one little panel of this massive display,” said Kernell, executive director of the [Native American Comprehensive Plan of the United Methodist Church](#).

“I noticed that one panel was about 13,000 years of (Native American) history. And the entire rest of the exhibit was 200 years,” he said. “That didn't sit well with me, and so I began to use that example as a teaching moment, to talk about how we have silenced histories, especially in this country.”

Glenn Kellum, a colleague at the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, where Kernell worked at the time, suggested he meet with airport officials to talk it over. They were amenable.

“So fast-forward five years later, we have developed an art exhibit that gives contemporary examples of Native American culture, identity, and even our hopes and dreams for this area that we still consider our homelands in Georgia,” Kernell said.

He curated the exhibit with the help of museum professionals and other Native American Methodists and scholars. It is sponsored by UM Global Ministries.

The show, *This Land Calls Us Home: Indigenous Relationships with Southeastern Homelands*, features more than 60 paintings and objects by 26 artists and will be on display in the T North Concourse until November 2024. It's free to travelers in the airport.

“Global Ministries is pleased to partner with representatives from our denomination's Native American community to present this exhibit for display at Atlanta's airport,” said Roland Fernandes, the top executive of Global Ministries and the United Methodist Committee on Relief, in a statement.

“The installation offers a unique opportunity to help facilitate a greater understanding of Native American and Indigenous peoples of the Southeast. Many of the artists have close ties to specific ancestral sites now in the greater Atlanta and Georgia region, which may also be of special interest to travelers visiting the Atlanta area.”

Jeff Edwards, who has three pieces of art in the exhibit, said it was the first time his artwork was featured in an airport.

"I think it's pretty neat," he said.

One of Edwards's pieces is an [Andy Warhol](#)-inspired piece about [Sequoyah](#), whose creation of the Cherokee syllabary made reading and writing in Cherokee possible.

"I thought it was kind of cool that you actually have to be a traveler (to see the exhibit)," Edwards said. "If you get a six-hour layover, it'd be kind of cool to have an art show to go to."

Some of the exhibits tackle Native American issues such as missing and murdered Indigenous women, abuse at [Indian boarding schools](#), and climate change, albeit subtly.

"You'll see little bits and pieces in some of the expressions that we've selected," said Kernell, a Native American scholar and educator. "Sometimes they might take a little bit, maybe an explanation from the artist or different things, to kind of bring it to the forefront."

For example, there is a painting by Jody Bradley Lipscomb of a young girl clutching a tree. Titled *The Crying Tree*, it alludes to abusive Indian boarding schools— a few operated by Methodists—intended to separate Native Americans from their culture. *The Crying Tree* refers to an oak grove where children sought refuge from Cherokee Indian Boarding School in North Carolina.

[Tony A. Tiger](#), another artist featured in the airport show, believes exposure to Native American art could do the opposite of the boarding schools by sharing Native culture with people of other races.

"We have a narrative to share with America," Tiger said. "I think it's important that people understand that we weren't savages; we did have civilization here with many different languages and we had large villages. With more knowledge . . . possibly we can treat each other better."

But Edwards said there's a line he won't cross between honoring his Cherokee heritage and doing what he called "pity pieces," or art that reflects stereotypes.

"Oh, look at what has happened to us Cherokee. We've had such a horrible history," Edwards said. "Yes, of course we have. But . . . we're still here, you know, so we survived that history."

Having the exhibit at the airport means it may reach people who don't go to museums very often.

"One advantage . . . is to counteract the historical silencing that I feel the other exhibit does in the tunnel area of the airport," Kernell said. "To have something more in depth that provides the community with a deeper understanding of Native American people." —United Methodist News Service