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THE DENVER POST

Denver Art Museum prompts American Indian outrage over plans to move sacred sculpture

The museum reached an agreement with “Wheel” artist Edgar Heap of Birds to reinstall his work at Acoma Plaza

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Edgar Heap of Birds' "Wheel" sculpture stands just outside the entrance of the

An iconic sculpture at the Denver Art Museum that is considered sacred by some American Indians will receive an unusual relocation — including the soil it stands on — after last week's outrage that the museum planned to move it without the artist's input.

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In response to a letter of protest from the artist, the Denver Art Museum this week said it reached an agreement with renowned American Indian artist Edgar Heap of Birds to relocate his "Wheel" sculpture, which faces Civic Center park along West 14th Avenue Parkway, once the museum begins a \$150 million renovation of its North Building in 2018.

Heap of Birds, a Cheyenne tribal leader whose work has been displayed at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, sent the letter to the museum on Dec. 11 after learning from a Denver Post story about the museum's plans to move the sculpture.



Denver Post File

Artist Edgar Heap of Birds stands on a ladder checking one of 10 of the red porcelain- enameled standing forms that stands 12 feet tall as a part of the "Wheel" sculpture at the Denver Art Museum May 24, 2005.

"I oppose any dismantling, moving or upsetting of the sculpture," wrote Heap of Birds, who has worked as a professor of Native American studies at the University of Oklahoma for 28 years. "By contract, DAM must consult with the artist on the future of 'Wheel.' DAM did not abide by the contract. The site of 'Wheel' is holy ground."

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The sculpture, which was dedicated in 2005, sits at the Gio Ponti building's north-facing entrance and references American Indian lodge and medicine wheel iconography with its circle of red, forked tree forms. It has been ceremonially blessed by regional tribal leaders and has lately served as the ending point of the annual Sand Creek Massacre Spiritual Healing Run-Walk.

"Countless emotional tears were shed at the site thus transcending normal museum decorum and firmly ushering 'Wheel' into the realm of Native American sanctuary as a ceremonial Medicine Wheel worship place," wrote Heap of Birds, who referenced the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978.



Denver Post File

The anniversary of the Sand Creek massacre of native Americans was marked with a candlelight vigil in front of the Denver Art Museum Friday night, Nov. 28, 2008.

In the letter, Cheyenne Chief Gordon Yellowman is also quoted as saying that moving the sculpture would "deface and desecrate the artwork and Cheyenne blessing prayers which were offered during the last 10 years."

"This is especially true given the DAM's reliance on and dependence upon Native artists and its relationships with Native artists, which it has pursued to great self-benefit," said Christina Fiflis, who owns a nearby law office in the Golden Triangle neighborhood. "To so blatantly disrespect these facts in this manner is an egregious breach."

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This week, however, the museum provided The Denver Post with a joint statement from Heap of Birds and museum director Christoph Heinrich. The statement came after in-person meetings Thursday and Friday that were organized in response to Heap of Birds' protest letter.

"As part of this process ... the DAM hosted Mr. Heap of Birds in Denver to explore potential sites for 'Wheel.' ... 'Wheel' is one of the museum's largest-ever art commissions and a prominent piece in its collection. The DAM recognizes that the piece has a special significance to members of the American Indian community," the statement read.

"With sensitivity towards history, tribal heritage, celestial alignments, issues of renewal and memorial, 'Wheel' will be re-sited very near the original location," Heap of Birds wrote in the joint statement. "The new setting for the sculpture shall carry all of the original and important, earth-based references and now becomes a central element of the DAM's renovation project."

As part of the relocation, the museum will collect the top 12 inches of soil from the sculpture's current site and move it to the new site. Heap of Birds said it will probably sit a few dozen yards away on Acoma Plaza, between the Denver Public Library's main branch and the art museum's North Building — where Mark di Suvero's orange steel sculpture, "Lao-Tzu," is now installed. (It, too, will be retained and reinstalled).

"It's stressful, but it'll be revitalized with the museum's ownership in a sense," said Heap of Birds, 62, who is also a Headsman of Traditional Cheyenne Elk Scraper Warrior Society. "I will be back (in Denver) when they get the ground ready in a year and a half or so. I'll bring leaders with me and we'll make the blessing again with ceremonial peace pipes and chiefs and medicine men."

"The museum did not persuade the artist in any way regarding his claims," the museum told The Post in a statement. "We understand through our outreach efforts that there are differing opinions within the Cheyenne and local Native community about this topic; however, we understand that the suggested future site satisfies the artist's vision and provides prominence to this very important work of art and place of gathering."

"The contract referenced expired in 2002 (three years before the piece was installed), although with the placement of major outdoor sculptures like 'Wheel,' we aim to collaborate with living artists about their works in our collection. In this case, we had planned all along to collaborate with Edgar Heap of Birds should a move be needed, and are delighted to work with him moving forward on the object's move and re-installation."