

# Who decides our **history**?



Courtesy image/gallupARTS

A selection of artwork made in the Gallup area in the 1930s is displayed in this courtesy image from gallupARTS' New Deal Art Virtual Museum prototype. The virtual museum will feature about 160 pieces from this period.

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*GallupARTS develops prototype, hopes to secure \$400K in funding*

By Will Jennings  
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oping a virtual museum dedicated to New Deal era art originally created for an experimental art center in town during the 1930s.

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Art museum

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atmosphere, Executive Director Rose Eason said, giving residents of Gallup an opportunity to reflect on our unique history as a bordertown that is still confronting many of the issues depicted in the art.

“It was so surprising to me, ... how much resonance they have today and how many of the issues that they address or that they raise are issues that we’re still grappling with today,” Eason said. “It’s everything from different recountings or versions of history to who gets to decide what the truth is or who gets to tell those stories ... to conversations about stereotypes and representation and what Native art is, too.”

Adding to the benefits, Eason said, is that consolidating the collection virtually will help make it a worthwhile resource for Gallup schools.

“We want it to have teacher resources available, like ideas of how to use the website in the classroom, and then lesson plans that you can download and implement and adapt to your classroom that meet social studies and English language arts standards,” Eason said of the 160-piece collection. It features 62 pieces of furniture, 51 easel paintings, 10 murals, 10 decorative wall paintings, nine prints, two drawings, two buildings and one sculpture.

While the website will initially focus on residents of Gallup, Eason said she is optimistic that the museum can and will become a resource for the entire state of New Mexico.

Eason said, adding that any waiting time is spent showing their prototype to a diverse group of museum and art history professionals to give feedback. “This project is not trying to be like the 1619 project of the New Deal, but we’re still going to honor those perspectives and that history.”

Addressing potential critics, in particular, Eason said **gallupARTS** would not shy away from controversial histories because they believe it essential to have difficult conversations about the shared history between Native Americans and U.S. Americans.

“The art’s legacy is that it’s still a living, breathing collection, that’s part of our community and ... gives us an opportunity to have some of those hard conversations ... to understand different perspectives and to build a stronger, more integrated, healthier community,” Eason said. “This collection, it really is an actual resource for us all.”

Eason said **gallupARTS** also plans to be transparent with their information sources; each art piece will have a footnote section with hyperlinks for further reading.

**Special features**

The museum’s core exhibits will also help ensure cultural and historical accuracy, by giving local artists, tribal leaders, historians, scholars and even the public the opportunity to contribute in a visible way.

“We want the website experience to be like an onion where it has different layers,” Eason said, referring to the homepage as the top “layer.” It shows key information, background on what the collection is, and displays many of the art pieces. However, under the surface, there are

### Why go online?

Developing an online hub for the collection was a natural decision in light of the pandemic, though the decision to go virtual was created pre-2020, Eason said. Originally, **gallupARTS** chose a virtual option because they knew it had a better chance of being fully developed.

"It was the most practical and feasible," Eason said. "The artworks are in so many different locations and controlled by so many different entities. Getting them together, it takes political will, and it would take a lot of financial resources and other resources." Currently, the art is split across the Octavia Fellin Public Library, Red Rock Museum, Gallup City Hall, the McKinley County Courthouse, the Larry Brian Mitchell Recreation Center and Gallup-McKinley County Schools.

Presenting the collection virtually also gives visitors, particularly children, the opportunity to get up close and personal without fear of damaging historical art.

"It's really cool seeing what you can do virtually in terms of getting up close with the objects or seeing them in different ways," Eason said, using 1930s furniture as an example. "A lot of us would never spend a single second looking at the work of furniture for aesthetic value. ... but you can get this kind of interactivity and these features and functionality on the website that enable you to see those things in a way that might not be so obvious, just viewing them in person."

### Where's the money?

The initial money for the project dates back to 2018, when Eason secured a \$30,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to plan the Gallup New Deal Art website. Eason and the team at **gallupARTS** spent the next several years developing a plan before applying for and receiving a second grant worth \$100,000 in 2021 to build the prototype.

The next step is to apply for a \$400,000 grant in June. The \$400K will not only be used to build the final virtual museum but to "launch it, market it and get it into classrooms and tourism magazines," as well as ensure the website is accessible. In terms of accessibility, Eason said **gallupARTS** will ensure "the website functions for people of all abilities" and includes translations of "key parts" into Navajo, Zuni and Spanish.

Eason said they will learn whether they were awarded the grant roughly a year from now in early 2023. Should they receive it, they will begin work on the actual museum and will have a completed version midway through 2024.

### Cultural sensitivity

Though the museum's timeline might seem slow, at first, Eason said it has actually been an asset, rather than a hindrance, allowing the **gallupARTS** team to ensure the website depicts history accurately.

"It's been a huge benefit to be given the time and resources to really do it thoughtfully and carefully and considerately."

more creative and in-depth components that people can discover as they peruse the site. "You can kind of dig down or peel back the layers of the onion as you go," Eason said.

One such layer to the website will be the "Special Exhibits" section. Here, selected art historians will curate an exhibit, spotlighting major aspects of the collection from a scholarly point of view.

The virtual museum will also include a "Creative Perspectives" section where contemporary artists, writers, poets, historians and educators can respond to the collection. Response types can vary, taking the form of guest-guided video tours or a companion piece to the original art.

The prototype created by **gallupARTS** displays a few examples, including a guest-tour by Pueblo historian Teri Frazier and a video response to a piece from Gallup artist Eric-Paul Reige.

Another area, the "Do-It-Yourself" section, allows visitors to create their own publicly available exhibit of artworks from the collection, similar to a Pinterest board or Spotify playlist.

But Eason said these features are only the beginning.

"Our plan is to at least add a new special exhibit every year," Eason said. So once we launch the website, that's not the end goal. The end goal is there is no end goal."

Eason has one end goal in mind, though. "My dream is still to build a (physical art) museum in Gallup. From my perspective, this is kind of like the first step towards that," Eason said. "The hope is that we can show where the value is in creating a museum for these artworks and we can show what it would look like to have them all together."

"I feel strongly that it's going to generate a lot of interest at first, and then that way it will show this just totally untapped tourism and economic development asset that we have just sitting here."



This courtesy image provided by **gallupARTS** shows a timeline of New Deal Art Programs.

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