

An aerial photograph showing a winding river cutting through vibrant green rice terraces. The terraces are arranged in a series of curved, stepped patterns that follow the contours of the land. The river is a dark, narrow channel that meanders through the landscape. In the background, there are some palm trees and a few small buildings, suggesting a rural or agricultural setting. The overall scene is lush and verdant, with a strong sense of natural beauty and human cultivation.

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IN REVIEW

WHY CANOES? AN EXHIBIT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA'S NORTHROP GALLERY

By David Morrison

Minnesotans love boats, and canoes are a particular favorite. The state has the highest per capita rate of recreational boat ownership in the nation, according to the Department of Na-

tural Resources.[1] Consequently, the current exhibit, *Why Canoes? Capacious Vessels and Indigenous Futures of Minnesota's Peoples and Places*, at the Northrop Gallery should find an



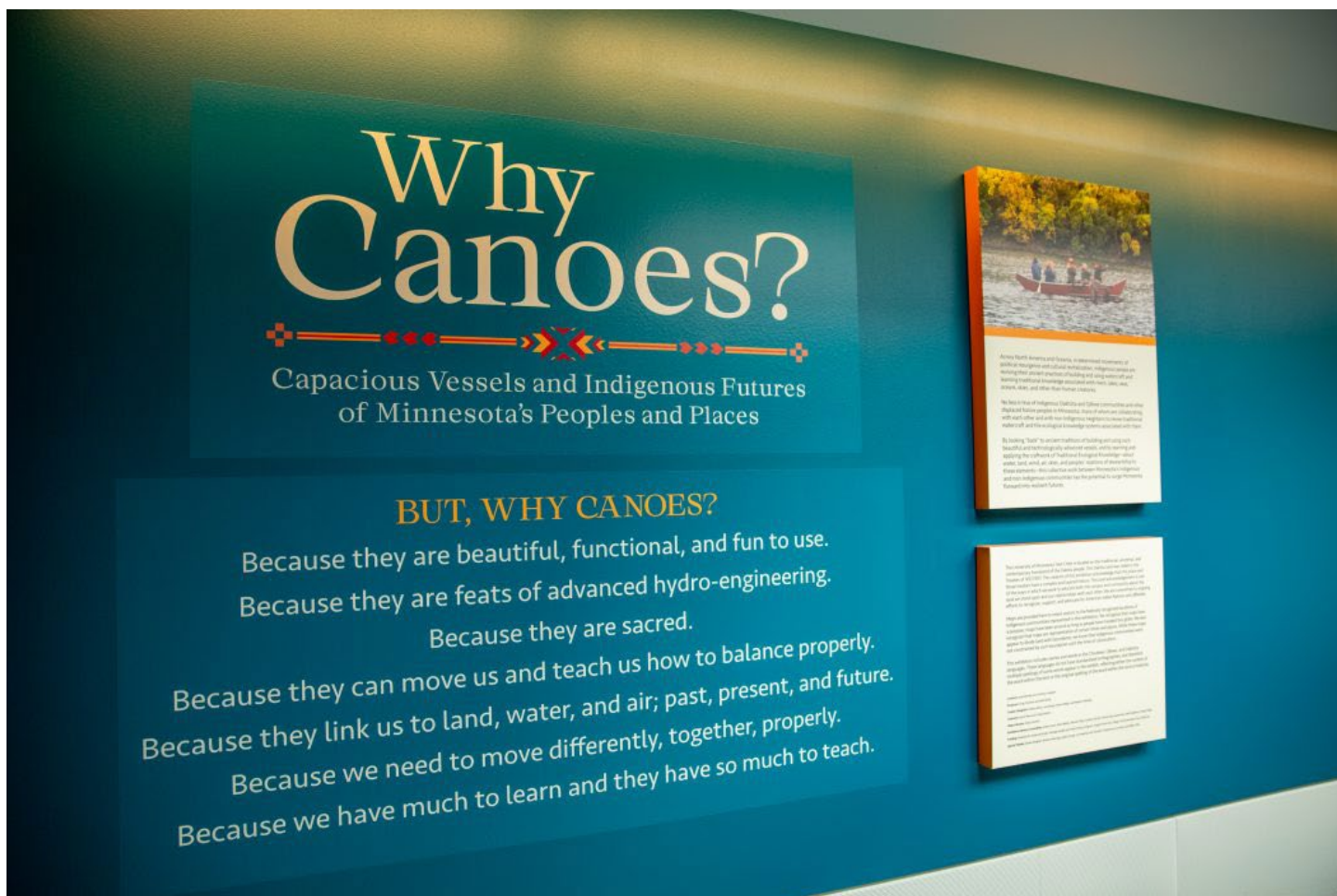
From the exhibit, a birchbark canoe, paddle, and creation stories from the Asabiikone-zaa'igan (The Bois Forte Band of Chippewa). Image by Laura Mazuch, UMN Printing Services.

interested audience. The exhibit reflects the desire of three Indigenous peoples—Dakota, Anishinaabe, and Micronesian—to revitalize their canoe-building traditions, and to pass them on to the next generation.

Why Canoes? is a small and beautiful exhibit. Full-sized canoes are unfortunately not on display, but detailed models of the boats of the three groups are featured, as are full-sized, newly carved paddles in the traditional Dakota, Anishinaabe, and Micronesian (Polowat) styles. Paintings by Indigenous artist Angela Richards grace the entrance to the gallery, and many maps and photos throughout offer historical and cultural context as well as documentation of present-day canoe building efforts.

Minnesota is, as we know, a well-watered landscape where geology and climate have produced an abundance of permanent lakes and streams. It was formerly what Professor Vicente Diaz, of the exhibit’s advisory committee, likes to call the kind of terrain “where to travel at all was to travel by water.”[2]

Why Canoes? illustrates how the birchbark canoe—*wiigwaasi jiimaan*—of the Anishinaabe was developed in response to that environment. It is a sophisticated piece of engineering created from available materials: spruce roots, pine pitch, cedar, and birchbark. For centuries before Teddy Roosevelt wrote, “Do what you can, with what you’ve got, where you are,” Indigenous people in Minnesota were doing just that, and doing it beautifully.[3] The birchbark canoe, light in



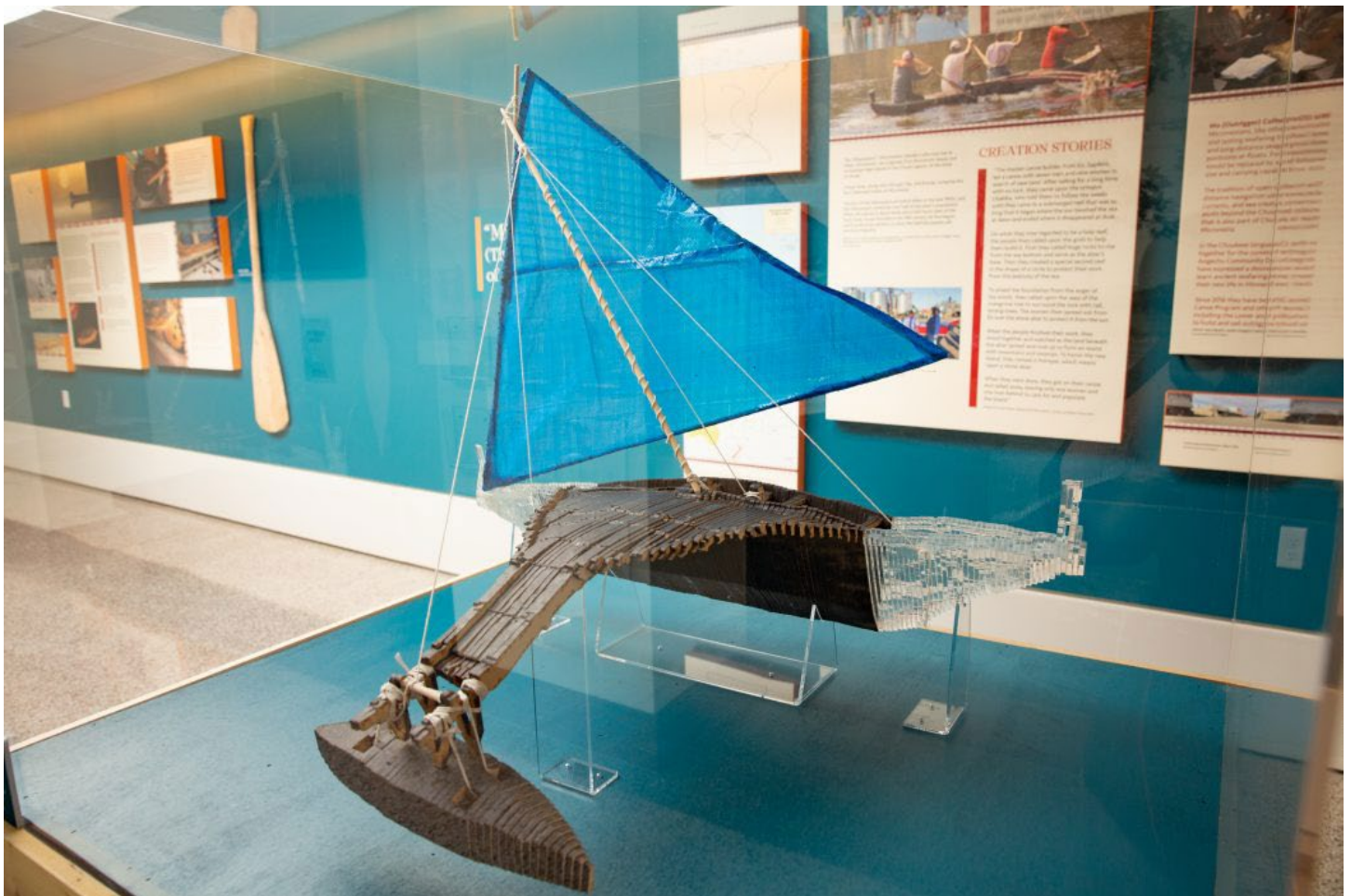
Why Canoes? Capacious Vessels and Indigenous Futures of Minnesota's Peoples and Places. Image by Laura Mazuch, UMN Printing Services.

weight, capacious, and easy to propel, was a great quality-of-life enhancement, useful for wild rice harvest, fishing, hunting, and movement between seasonal camps. The exhibit makes the case for the canoe's central importance to the Indigenous people's ways of doing and being—their cultural identity, and relationship to the environment in which they live.

Watch the video [“Why Canoes?” A New Exhibit at the University of Minnesota.](#)

Although not a large exhibit, *Why Canoes?* has quite a lot of content, and may offer the visitor new information and insights on familiar topics, as it did for me. I was previously unaware of the Dakota tradition of making dugout canoes. I had been in dugouts made by the Indigenous

Guna Yala people on the coast of Panama, but I had not imagined that technology also existing here in my own back yard. The exhibit tells of the dugout's antecedents here in the land that the Dakota call Mni Sota Makoce, including a nearly thousand-year-old dugout canoe pulled from Lake Minnetonka. We learn that this canoe and other dugouts found submerged in local lakes prompted Mat Pendleton of the Bdewakantunwan Community at Lower Sioux, where he is Recreation Director, to revive the Dakota tradition of the *chanwata*, “wooden boat.” Pendleton sees the revival of this tradition as offering the youth of the Dakota Indigenous community the tools and support system, in his words, “to walk with a good heart and a good mind” as they learn about who they are as Dakota.



A model of the Micronesian wa, an outrigger canoe. Image by Laura Mazuch, UMN Printing Services.

For some visitors the exhibit may serve as an introduction to the Micronesian community of Milan, Minnesota, where over half the population stems from Chuuk State in the Federated States of Micronesia. It should be no real surprise that the renowned outrigger canoe heritage of Oceania remains culturally important to them. The “Milanesians,” as they call themselves, have been working since 2016 in the Native Canoe Program to revitalize the tradition here by building and sailing outrigger canoes. Collaborating with other Indigenous groups including the Upper and Lower Sioux Communities, the Milanesians have helped to build not only their own Micronesian outriggers, but also Dakota dugout canoes. The exhibit includes construction photos of both kinds of boats as well as photos of the finished boats being paddled on local waters.

Several other programs and initiatives related to Indigenous peoples’ canoes, culture, and ecological knowledge are showcased in the exhibit in text and images. Among them are Navigating Indigenous Futures, Dakota Wata UMN Regional Sustainable Development Program, and the student organization Canoe Rising.

Why Canoes? is a fascinating exhibit exploring the background and meaning of what for Minnesota has become an icon—the image of the canoe important enough to the state’s identity to appear on our license plates since 1978. *Why Canoes?* beautifully offers insights—through the lens of Indigenous peoples’ experience—into the centuries-old story and present-day significance of small boats here in the Land of 10,000 Lakes. A video preview of the exhibit can be seen online



A model of a Dakota chanwata, a wooden dugout canoe. Image by Laura Mazuch, UMN Printing Services.

at <http://northrop.umn.edu/events/why-canoes>, and a more in-depth discussion at the University of Minnesota's Institute for Advanced Study at <https://ias.umn.edu/events/why-canoes>.

The Why Canoes? Capacious Vessels and Indigenous Future of Minnesota's Peoples and Places exhibit is currently open at the Northrop Gallery at the University of Minnesota through Fall 2021. An online, [virtual tour](#) is also available.

References

[1] "Boating, canoeing and kayaking," Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, updated September 26, 2016, dnr.state.mn.us/faq/mnfacts/boat_canoe.html.

[2] Kenneth G. Robert and Philip Shackleton, *The Canoe: A History of the Craft from Panama to the Arctic* (Camden, ME: International Marine, 1983), quoted in Diaz, Vicente, "Oceania in the Plains: The Politics and Analytics of Trans-Indigenous Resurgence in Chuukese Voyaging of Dakota Lands, Waters, and Skies in Miní Sóta Makhóche," *Pacific Studies* 42, no. 1/2 (April/Aug. 2019): 5.

[3] Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1920) 337.

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About the Author

David Morrison is a graphic designer and visual artist. For years, he has kept his old aluminum canoe on the banks of the river that the Dakota call Hogan Wanke Kin. Countless hours paddling among its islands have made that landscape the main focus of his artwork for several decades. With an abiding interest in native plant communities, he has converted his small, urban yard into pollinator-friendly gardens—to the apparent satisfaction of local butterflies and bees. A University of Minnesota alumnus, he enjoys increasing his understanding of the geology, ecology, history, and culture of the spot on earth where he resides in Mni Sota Makoce.