Moab Museum continues its evolution into modernity with its 2022 programming

by Alison Harford
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“We look different, and we are different,” said Forrest Rodgers, executive director of the Moab Museum. “But we haven’t lost our commitment to telling local stories.”
Rodgers is referring to a number of things, the primary being that in the past two years, the museum went through a major renovation not only in the museum’s physical space, but also in the work it does.

“We don’t want ourselves to be the only people deciding and designing what goes on display,” said Mary Langworthy, who does community relations for the museum. “We’re passing the mic, so to speak, to other folks in the community that have stories to share ... There’s a lot of people doing incredibly valuable work here, and to be able to give a stage to that work, to work together, is something we’re really keen to grow into more. I want everyone in the community to feel like at least once a year, there’s a temporary exhibit at the museum that they really want to go see.”

The museum’s evolution—from dated displays to a contemporary space for local stories—is being seen nationwide, Rodgers said. Museums have moved from being set apart from their communities to positioning themselves in the center.

“The commitment we make in that is not to tell stories, but to provide opportunities for stories to be told,” he said. In 2022, the Moab Museum is doing that through its community-based programming.

In March, the museum will host an exhibit in collaboration with the Moab Valley Multicultural Center. The exhibit, called “Culture on Camera,” will showcase photographs taken by Mexican photographer Agustin Casasola and portraits of Frida Kahlo captured by photographer Nickolas Muray. There will be an opening reception for the exhibit on Tuesday, March 8 at 6:30 p.m.

“It’s a celebration of what MVMC does, of the power of photos to transcend culture,” Langworthy said. “And a reminder to our audience that this place is multicultural.”

The Casasola photographs were given to the museum on loan from Artes de Mexico en Utah, an arts organization based in Salt Lake City that hosts traveling exhibits; the Frida Kahlo portraits are courtesy of the Nickolas Muray Photo Archive. Another aspect of the museum’s growth is its ability to properly store and showcase artifacts, Rodgers said.

 “[The renovation] isn’t just a style change,” said Tara Beresh, the museum’s curatorial and collections manager. “A lot of what people see downstairs is getting us to a higher standard so that we can work with higher caliber institutions to take on loans and to be able to host traveling exhibits ... it’s more than just taking care of objects—it’s also building a reputation so that we can continue to change, and we can bring more cultural stories to the museum.”
In the first half of April, the community exhibit will change: the museum will partner with Seekhaven Family Crisis and Resource Center to showcase an exhibit about Sexual Assault Awareness Month. The exhibit will act as a follow-up to Seekhaven's previous exhibit last fall about Domestic Violence Awareness Month, which showcased items that brought awareness to the issue of domestic violence in Moab—the exhibit in April will likely be similar, Langworthy said.

In the second half of the month, the exhibit will change to showcase artwork from students at the Moab Charter School.

“It’s always absolutely joyful,” Langworthy said. That exhibit will open on April 19.

April will also see the return of the Ancestral Load Basket—one of the museum’s most iconic pieces, Langworthy said—to the museum. It’s a conical, woven basket that acted similarly to a backpack to the ancestral people of Moab, found in the 1990s near Hidden Valley. It will return to display, in a custom-made display case with environmental controls, after receiving conservation treatment in Salt Lake City.

The basket will also return to display with proper consultation.

“Whenever we think that we would like to put something on display that is of native ancestral origin, we need to have someone from the tribe most closely linked to that object be the person to tell that story,” Beresh said. “And if they can’t, we won’t rush to display the object anyway just because it’s cool.”

In preparing to display the basket again, the museum did “years” of consultation work, she said, in order to have the story of the basket correctly told by the descendants of the people who used it. Beresh goes through a multiple-step process to display the histories of ancestral objects correctly, gathering feedback from the people she got the information from until the history is absolutely correct and told in a way that tribal members want it to be.

“All of these exhibits, all of the things we’re planning on doing, it’s never going to be [museum staff] in a vacuum,” Langworthy said. “We have no business curating stories without the input of the people they’re about ... What we do with all exhibits is center them on the experience of the people whose stories we’re sharing.”
In May, the museum will round out its spring exhibits by showcasing the annual exhibition from the Delicate Stitchers Quilting Guild—this year’s exhibition is titled “Lotsa Dots,” and will feature quilts made by local quilters.

Throughout the year, the museum will work on its Community History Project, in which museum staff will gather, preserve, and curate stories from the Moab community. The project will put together the oral histories the museum has gathered in the past, and also offer trainings to community members on how to create an oral history and how to properly care for historical family heirlooms.

“We’re trying to position the museum as that essential community resource,” Rodgers said. “A place where stories can be told—and we’re not the only arbiters of what should be told.”