

Arts & Culture **Artscape**

Sonja Peterson's intricate paper cutting tells stories through time

"Sonja Peterson: What the Trade Winds Brought" is on display through Sept. 11 at the Minnesota Marine Art Museum in Winona.

By [Sheila Regan](#) | Columnist



Sonja Peterson, "Empire Builder." Cut paper on painted background.

Minnesota Marine Art Museum

Aug. 16, 2022 Sonja Peterson's delicate, dizzyingly complex paper cut works pack a provocative punch in an exhibition called ["Sonja Peterson: What the Trade Winds Brought,"](#) on view at the Minnesota Marine Art Museum.

The gem of an art center is one that not enough people know about. Nestled by the Mississippi River in the city of Winona, the museum displays art about the sea, boats, rivers, sailors, and watery landscapes. The museum has an impressive list of impressionist, post-impressionist, and modern works, numerous examples of the Hudson River School painters and more, with artists like Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, Jamie Wyeth, and Georgia O’Keeffe among its collection. The museum also rotates contemporary artists who also address marine themes in their work.

Based in Minneapolis, Peterson goes through X-ACTO blades by the hundreds, as she cuts out designs, first sketched on paper. She also creates three-dimensional works, designed on a computer, vectorized and then cut with a laser or with a high-speed drill bit.

The exhibition at the Marine Art Museum features past work as well as work she created for the show. Both are brought together thematically in a swirl of sea ships, bleached coral reefs, invasive plants and sea monsters. Through imagery that emerges from her careful designs, Peterson examines ways humans have moved through nature historically, and with increasing acceleration in recent years.

Peterson says the exhibition came together around the theme of trade history. “The trade winds were an initial point of which explorers figured out how to rebound across the Atlantic to the Americas,” Peterson says.

An epic new piece Peterson created for the exhibition, “Empire Builder,” (2022) references Moorish tile design, African batik patterns, and Mayan stonework carvings, as well as plants like pepper, tobacco, nutmeg, and tobacco, which were traded across the world. You see ships sailing amidst the cut patterns, as well as the figures of Queen Isabel, who sent Columbus to the Americas, Marie-Joseph Angélique, a Portuguese-born Black slave who lived in Quebec and was accused of burning down her owner’s home and subsequently an area known as Old Montreal. A third figure represents Cockacoeske, a leader of a Native tribe on the coast of Virginia. “I like the idea of putting these

women in different power structures together and choosing women to represent the same area in history,” Peterson says.

Using human faces isn’t something Peterson has done often in past work. The artist has often explored ways that humans have impacted the environment, but placing human faces, apart from self-referential imagery, proved a new development in her work.

“That’s definitely a leap for me,” she says. “Just having the right to try to portray a number of different people in history and try to understand where I fit in.”



Detail from "Ghost Ship." Cut paper on painted background.

Minnesota Marine Art Museum

Peterson’s work is often narrative, but normally she leaves room for the audience to have an open-ended experience. In this case, her use of historical figures charts the impact of colonialism on people and the earth.

“I think it’s important to tell a story of different power structures having a relationship together,” Peterson says.

Another piece, “Ghost Ship-Part One” (2015), references Romantic literature about colonial exploration, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 1798 poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” The epic poem relays a sea journey that goes terribly wrong, and pinpoints a seaman shooting a beautiful albatross— a bird that was supposed to bring good luck— as the reason for awful things that subsequently happen in the story.

Peterson’s “Ghost Ship” shows the sailor shooting the albatross from his ship. On the other side of the piece, a woman with an octopus coming out of her head casts a net from her eye toward the ship. The net — or perhaps web — contains different invasive species trapped within it.

“It’s connecting this figure of the woman to the ship with all these creatures being brought with it,” Peterson says.

At the time the poem was published, women were considered unlucky on voyages. Peterson is both playing with tropes of marine mythology and layering a contemporary understanding of the impact of colonial exploration on the natural world.

Peterson says she’s always been drawn to exploration and adventure. “I think the imagination just kind of goes wild, and I run with it,” she says. At the same time, she said her process of drawing from this topic has offered moments of introspection and critical analysis.

“I love reading books about explorers,” Peterson says. “I held them on this pedestal. Then it’s like, ‘Oh, wait a minute. Can we dig a little deeper here?’ I need to relearn what the hell I’m looking at here.” This kind of questioning has led Peterson to bend historical stories and narratives, adding elements of fantasy or imagination. “I’m trying to find a soft landing for some very important issues interwoven in it,” she says.



Detail from "Lost Searching." Cut paper on painted background.

Minnesota Marine Art Museum

Ultimately, Peterson's work looks at how exploration and colonialism viewed land as something that could be used for profits. They brought new plants to new places, reshaping the makeup of flora across the world.

In her "Islands and Intersections" series (2013-22), Peterson was thinking about how ship ballasts — which prior to the late 1800s were usually rocks and sand — as well as invasive species carried on ships decimated bird nests. "It's interesting because islands hold the most biodiversity, yet are the place of the greatest extinction," Peterson says. The ships came through these islands and brought new creatures. Another layer that has come into the work is the threat islands now face from glacial melt and rising sea water. "It just seems to keep layering up," she says.

Check out the exhibition through Sept. 11 at the Marine Art Museum in Winona (\$10). [More information here.](#)



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