Art is often reliant on perception, perspective, and how the viewer responds to the work. *Woman As...* is an intimate look at the Great Plains Art Museum’s permanent collection by Graduate Research Assistant Hannah Ashburn, who investigates how women are seen and represented in the museum’s holdings. The exhibition is an arrangement of vignettes. Each vignette focuses on the depiction of women in various contexts, framing them as a life source or matriarch, culture bearer, “good” and “evil,” laborer, memory keeper, storyteller, and person of interest. These representations are produced by both artists who identify as women and those that do not to highlight different perspectives and understandings.

Ashburn chose the pieces in this exhibition primarily to examine how women are perceived. Presenting them in vignettes intentionally directs the viewer to explore themes of gender, race, and class, and allows them to ask critical questions of these perceptions. This exhibition as a whole also brings to light the gaps in the permanent collection, and the lack of or minimal representation of BIPOC artists, women artists, and LGBTQIA artists that were and are a part of the Great Plains story. *Woman As...* invites you to question these depictions, sit with them, critique them, and experience what a woman is and perhaps what they are not.
**Woman As...Life Source**

**Milland Lomakema, Dawakema (“House of the Sun”)**  
(Hopi, b. 1941, Shongopovi, AZ)

**Squash Maiden, 1975**  
Acrylic on paper  
Gift of Patricia Janis Broder and Stanley H. Broder

The three sisters, according to the story shared in many Native cultures, are corn, beans, and squash. They grow in the same mound of soil in the garden, protecting and supporting each other. The corn provides a ladder for the bean vine; together, the corn sister and bean sister give shade to the littlest sister, the squash. Many of the three sisters’ stories vary between Native American cultures, but one thing is universal: the three sisters were and still are agricultural staples. Women are essential to the health and plentiful harvests of many Native peoples; in **Squash Maiden**, Milland Lomakema emphasizes their importance by depicting the squash sister with a woman’s face and squash-shaped body.
Woman As...Life Source

Bill Ganzel
(b. 1949, Lincoln, NE)

Migrant Mother, 1979
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Bill Ganzel

Migrant Mother is from Bill Ganzel's book Dust Bowl Descent, a project inspired by the photographs taken for the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression. Ganzel tracked down, interviewed, and photographed some of the same people, places, and situations on the Great Plains forty years later. Here we see Florence Owens Thompson surrounded by her grown children. Originally photographed by Dorothea Lange (see below for one example), Thompson became the face of the dustbowl in Depression-era America by mere coincidence. Thompson happened to be passing through a pea-pickers camp where Lange was shooting. When Ganzel met Thompson in 1979, she told him that when she was a young mother, she typically picked around 400–500 pounds of cotton a day, leaving home before daylight and coming home after dark. “We just existed,” she said. “We survived; let’s put it that way.” In both of their photographs, Ganzel and Lange capture resilience and fortitude personified as a mother.

Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936
Dorothea Lange (1895–1965)
Gelatin silver print
The Alfred and Ingrid Lenz Harrison Fund,
Minneapolis Institute of Arts
collections.artsmia.org/art/4383/migrant-mother-dorothea-lange
Woman As...Life Source

Bobby C. Martin
(Muscogee (Creek), b. 1957, Tahlequah, OK)

Mom, Sis and Rex, 2008
Drypoint on paper
Gift of the Mark & Carol Moseman Collection of Agrarian Art

This piece is an etching using drypoint printed from a zinc plate onto Rives BFK paper. According to Martin, the image is from an old family photo taken around 1940 near Checotah, Oklahoma. Portrayed are Martin’s mother, aunt, and the family dog, Rex. The softness of the drypoint mirrors the print quality of a cherished family photo. This moment captures a special bond between sisters, one of nourishment, guidance, and close connection. The older sister looks out toward the viewer, smiling, as the younger sister looks to the dog. Notice the hand placed on the shoulder, the intertwined shadows of the figures, and the objects in both their hands. There is a bond between the two siblings that is genuine, mirrored in each other, and comfortable. Siblings can be just as much of a life source for each other as a parent.
Woman As...Life Source

Laurie Houseman-Whitehawk,
Wakan-Ja-Pe-Wein-Gah (“Good Thunder Woman”)
(Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) Tribe of Nebraska/Santee Sioux,
b. 1952, Omaha, NE)

Circle of Life, 1995
Gouache on paper
Purchased through the generosity of the Friends of the Center for Great Plains Studies

Laurie Houseman-Whitehawk’s intentional use of women to represent the circle of life illustrates the interconnection between oneself and the next generation. All life passes through the mother. The women float in a continuity of shape and color around our mutually shared mother, Earth.

The artist’s own words illustrate the meaning behind this painting:

“Everything that is sacred to Indian People is created in Fours. This image depicts the Four Stages of Life. The first stage is the beginning of our Life here when we are born into this world—that is the direction of the East. The Second Stage of Life is Childhood—the time of observation and learning—the direction of the South. The Third Stage of Life is Adulthood—a difficult stage where we apply what we have observed and learned; the direction of the West. The Fourth Stage of Life is the North, when we are elders; we have passed through various phases of life and this is when we apply our knowledge and seek wisdom to help our children, grandchildren, and our Nations.”
The Blessingway is part of Navajo healing ceremonies. Blessingways are held to give joyous blessings and to ward off evil and misfortune. They are performed for many reasons; women’s health in pregnancy and the kinaalda (a young girl’s coming of age ceremony) are a few. These ceremonies are performed at different life stages to bless the individual’s path into a new chapter and restore balance. Each ceremony involves the community as well as the individual. Song, gifts, and food are all shared to strengthen the journey either into maturity or their next phase of life. Begay depicts a family unit on their way to a Blessingway. The individual subjects interact with each other, as the mother holds the infant and the father looks toward the eldest daughter. This inclusion and connection of the whole family unit emphasizes communal celebration of life, those that bear life, and shared responsibility for it.
Woman As..."Good" and "Evil"

Charles W. Guildner
(b. 1932, Hastings, NE)

White Lady Your Bad, 1995
Gelatin silver print
Gift of the artist

Photographer Charles Guildner captures this graffiti message on the ruins of an old store in Mutual, Utah, located in Spring Canyon. Now labeled a “ghost town,” Spring Canyon’s ghost is the “white lady” referenced here. Though multiple versions of the “white lady” myth exist, each portray tragedy. One version is that a woman’s husband died in a mine, and, having no other financial support, the woman became destitute. Not wanting her child to die of starvation, she took it down to the river and drowned it. She then lost her mind and was taken to a mental facility. Later, she escaped and returned to Spring Canyon to search for the infant. The woman later died, but still searches for the baby after death.

The continued existence of the myth of the “white lady” creates an interesting dichotomy between perceived femininity and the theme of good and evil. The woman takes the blame for larger systematic problems, such as the perils of the mine and lack of financial and emotional support from the community. Her “bad” actions are the result of her circumstances.
Woman As..."Good" and "Evil"

John Telfer
(active nineteenth century)

_Heroism of the Pioneer Woman_, circa 1851
Wood engraving on paper
Gift of Dr. John and Elizabeth Christlieb

This image is from the *Historical Collections of the Great West: Containing Narratives of the Most Important and Interesting Events in Western History*, written by Henry Howe and published in 1851. John Telfer created this wood engraving, though multiple artists contributed to the illustrations found in this manuscript. Captioned under the engraving is the title, “Heroism of the Pioneer Woman.” Books such as this were used to illustrate the frontier of the west to people back east, and they were distributed and often taken as fact by some who might never travel farther than the Mississippi River. Accounts of the West often glorified the European Americans who settled on this land, and frequently portrayed Native people as dangerous or “wild.”

Who is good and who is evil in this portrayal? Are there similar tactics used today that label people as “good” and “evil”? By asking these questions, we can critique and analyze ways in which historically dominant groups have used power and privilege to frame themselves and others throughout history and in visual representations like this one.
Kirk Hughey
(b. 1940, Grand Rapids, MN)

The Rider Cries Danger, n.d.
Monotype on handmade paper
Gift of Mrs. Fritz Scholder

Kirk Hughey paints thematically within the myth of the Old West, which often romanticizes the experience of the European Americans who settled in the West during the nineteenth century. His style is loose and rhythmic, conveying a sense of urgency. Because this piece is so abstract, I used the artist’s thematic interests and the artwork’s title to analyze the subject. To the right I see a figure of a pioneer woman in a blue bonnet, her horse rearing to action. To the left I see another horse and perhaps another person. The title, The Rider Cries Danger, confirms this sense of tension. I included this piece in the “Good and Evil” vignette because in this image, there is the potential for the subjects to be both. What is the motive of the “flight reflex” depicted? Who is being portrayed (out of view and in view) as the “danger” of the title, and why?
Woman As...Person of Interest

George Tuck
(b. 1942, Amarillo, TX)


Two Room School,              The Toll Troll, 1998
Middle Class, 1998

Gelatin silver prints
Gifts of the artist
This vignette and these four photos are from George Tuck’s photographic series *Flat Places and Interesting People*, a documentation of the Great Plains and its inhabitants. Apart from being interesting people, the women depicted in this vignette portray what it is like to have a noteworthy occupation and position in their communities. The information gathered by Tuck from each woman conveys the challenges these positions present, including censorship and lack of support.

*(Top left)* Myra Coker was the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce in Ness City, Kansas. She talked with Tuck about the lack of volunteers for renovation projects and the frustration felt over the same people doing the work each time.

*(Top right)* Lynn Schneider was a tour guide at the Garden of Eden National Historic Site, a house and sculpture garden made entirely of concrete in Lucas, Kansas. She noted that the sculpture of Eve was originally painted nude, but after many complaints by neighbors when first constructed, she (Eve) was “toned down.”

*(Bottom left)* The teachers of Pleasant View School in Keya Paha County, Nebraska, are divided between two rooms, having to cater to multiple age ranges and subjects every day as well as provide educational and emotional support for their students.

*(Bottom right)* Kathy German was a toll collector at the crossing between Nebraska and Iowa near Plattsmouth, Nebraska. She described herself as a “troll” because that is what many of her regular customers called her.
Woman As...Laborer

Charles W. Guildner
(b. 1932, Hastings, NE)

Lola Leu, 2002
Gelatin silver print
Gift of the artist

*Lola Leu* is from Charles Guildner’s *Lives of Tradition* series. I included her in this vignette because she represents many older women that still work in their respective field. Guildner provides more context on the subject of this image and her work:

“This elegant ranch woman of 93 years has spent her life breaking and training horses and raising cattle on her ranch near Hayes Center, Nebraska. She has taught school, and, although [she has] no children of her own, has raised and guided a number of children and young people who worked for her and her husband on their ranch. Her indomitable spirit, keen mind and good humor are pervasive.”
Judy McElroy is known for her realistic depictions of the land and its inhabitants, nature, and wide-open spaces. McElroy’s inclusion of women in these spaces is vital to capturing an accurate and realistic depiction of rural farm life. According to the Farmers Bureau, as of 2019, women make up 39% of United States farmers.
Woman As...Laborer

Lynn Dance
(b. 1949, Los Angeles, CA)

Vicki Hurd, Jazzercise Instructor, 1986

Becky Vahle, Homemaker/Businesswoman, Seward, NE, 1986

Gelatin silver prints
Gifts of the artist

In the mid-1970s, Lynn Dance and Robert Starck produced a photographic document of the state of Nebraska, capturing its inhabitants, landmarks, and exciting spaces. The two photographs by Dance on display here were not part of the project but are similar in composition and subject matter.

Here, we have two women of differing professions, identified as a homemaker/businesswoman and a Jazzercise instructor. In portraits like these that are posed or curated, it is interesting to think about what has been included and excluded to form each shot’s narrative.

Vicki Hurd is in her workout gear, perhaps a little exaggerated in pose. There is no action or illustration of her literal profession, apart from her clothing. The title suggests that Becky Vahle is a housewife first and a businesswoman second. What is her business? Why was this excluded in the labeling of this portrait?
Christina McPhee is known for her large-scale abstractions. Landscapes and effects on the land influence her pieces, and her inspiration stems from her childhood in Nebraska and young adult life in Kansas. McPhee’s work is also a reflection of space and time, with the physical layering of marks acting as a tool to convey the passage of time. Here McPhee focuses on a specific time, the “dog days” of summer, which are often the hottest, laziest days of that season. By abstracting a moment down to the artistic elements of color, brushstroke, and flow, the piece takes on an emotive quality, conveying what it is like to remember a moment’s feelings and experiences. The layers of warm and cool colors, the haziness created by the wash, and the fluctuating pressure with each brushstroke and smear transport us to summers gone by. McPhee is working as a memory keeper for ordinary lives, lands, and days occupied by people like us.
Woman As...Memory Keeper

Nancy Warner
(b. 1951, Fremont, NE)

Old Moeller Place No. 15, 2004
Gelatin silver print
Museum purchase

This photograph is from Nancy Warner’s book This Place, These People: Life and Shadow on the Great Plains. Warner works with the concept of memory and decay, and what is remembered, preserved, or experienced when engaging with photography. For this image, Warner described the scene:

“My Uncle Martin grew up in this house, and his mother lived there until 1984, when she passed away. I began photographing it in 2003 and have returned every year since. I started with the interior, not knowing how long it would remain safe to enter, especially the upstairs. I’ve also photographed the exterior and some other farm buildings. Each year it’s a bit different, as nature does its work. A new hole in the roof can illuminate something I hadn’t noticed before.”

Warner captures an individual memory that ties her emotionally to the house and by extension the woman that lived there. What Warner does by cropping and selecting only a portion of the house, like the window and curtain, is to include us in an emotional response to the scene, making the individual memory feel universal of a place and time.
Woman As...Memory Keeper

J. Marlene Mueller
(b. 1948, Dayton, OH)

Into the Ashes III: Fire and Ice, 2012
Charcoal and conté on paper
Gift of J. Marlene Mueller

In addition to her artistic career, Marlene Mueller worked as a volunteer firefighter. During State Fire Marshal sanctioned controlled burns, used in training instruction, Mueller photographed the various fire suppression stages. Mueller says of her practice, “My intent was to observe the transformation of solid matter into ash. The ephemeral elements of flame, water, steam, and smoke provided the foundation of my study.” The experiences that one manifests into their artwork can be very personal and simultaneously very universal. Mueller emphasizes the transience of emotion, time, and her experiences into charcoal, noting, “Charcoal seemed to be the most direct and logical medium from which to make these drawings...The use of charred wood in my hand recalled the emotional and sensuous aspects of sight, smell, and temperature.” I included this piece with those surrounding the ideas of memory and recollection of experience because Mueller’s work conveys intense introspection.
Woman As...Culture Bearer

Tonita Peña, Quah Ah (“White Coral Beads”)  
(San Ildefonso Pueblo, b. 1893, San Ildefonso Pueblo, NM;  
d. 1949, Kewa Pueblo, NM)

San Ildefonso Buffalo Dancers, n.d.  
Gouache on paper  
Gift of Patricia Janis Broder and Stanley H. Broder

Tonita Peña was the only female artist included in the San Ildefonso Self-Taught Group. She used traditional methods of painting to depict Pueblo life and tradition. Peña defied gender norms in Pueblo culture by choosing to paint canvases instead of ceramics and pottery, which the community expected of women artists. The detail on the dancers in this image mirrors her love for her culture; the coral necklace, the evergreen sprigs, and swaying fringe are meticulously placed, breathing life into the two figures dancing, moving to the rhythm of an unheard song.
José Rey Toledo was a skilled artist, art educator, lecturer, actor, and health administrator. As an artist, Toledo worked thematically with traditional Pueblo subject matter, such as dances and ceremonies. A flat background and solid, saturated colors are distinctive to his style. *Jemez Maiden in Tableta* depicts the headdress worn in ceremonial dances performed at the opening and closing of the sacred Katsina season, particularly the corn dances. The tableta features a stepped motif on the top and is usually painted with symbols that represent prayers for rain.
Woman As...Culture Bearer

Laurie Houseman-Whitehawk,
Wakan-Ja-Pe-Wein-Gah (“Good Thunder Woman”) (Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) Tribe of Nebraska/Santee Sioux, b. 1952, Omaha, NE)

*Double Eagle Woman*, 1991
Gouache on paper
Gift of Michael W. Young

*Double Eagle Woman* is a depiction of an indigenous woman, in regalia, done by Laurie Houseman-Whitehawk, a Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) and Santee Sioux artist. Houseman-Whitehawk pursues themes of identity in her work and highlights the beauty and strength of Native women particularly. Though the literal identity of this woman is not explicit, what is captured is distinctive features of the face, regalia, and movement of the fabric that are unique to her.
Virginia Stroud is a Cherokee-Muscogee Creek painter from Oklahoma whose work recalls Plains ledger art, a practice that emerged in the late nineteenth century when ledger or account books became available as a medium on which Native people could visually record their history. Stroud’s pieces reflect the style of these historical ledger books in her flat gouache application, minimal facial features, and narrative style. In this work, which shows a woman cooking beside a small fire, Stroud highlights the act of nourishment, preparation of food, and everyday performances as something noteworthy.
Woman As...Storyteller

Dan Ladely
(b. 1947, Omaha, NE)

*Lillie Belle Williamson (My Grandmother)*, n.d.
Silver-dye bleach print
Gift of the artist

Dan Ladely is the Director of the Mary Riepma Ross Media Arts Center. This photograph portrays his grandmother, whom he fondly remembers as a great storyteller. Ladely recounted one of her stories in the Lincoln newspaper, *The Star* (now the *Lincoln Journal Star*) in a story titled “A remarkable life in the Sandhills” (reproduced on the adjacent panel).
Once, when the children were playing out in the yard, a bull broke down the fence and got in the yard.

“He was a pawin’ and a bellerin’ and a going on. I went out to see what was taking place. I had a shepherd dog there and I was going to set the dog on him, but I saw that he was mad enough as it was. And when he seen me, he just took right after me and I run to the door, but I missed the door.

“So around the house I went and I could turn those corners faster than he could, see. I made it twice around the house and there them kids were out in the middle of that yard.”

She yelled at them, “‘Get under that wagon, run and get under that wagon.’ Finally, I made about two or three more trips around the house and the old bull right after me and I finally made the door. I got the rifle, a 30-30. I sure made that old bull hard to catch. He got about as far as that laundry-mat and died.”

Ladely: “YOU SHOT him?

“Shot him, I just filled him with holes. But that scared the kids then. From then on I didn’t have too much trouble with them because when I’d holler, why they’d hightail it. That really scared them. Scared me, don’t think it didn’t.”
Woman As...Storyteller

Philippe Halsman
(b. 1906, Riga, Latvia; d. 1979, New York, NY)

Mari Sandoz, 1947
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Colonel Robert Latimer

Philippe Halsman is renowned for his celebrity headshots and action photos. The subject of this photograph is Mari Sandoz (1896–1966), a novelist, biographer, lecturer, historian, and teacher. Sandoz was the firstborn of six children to her Swiss immigrant parents in western Nebraska. She faced discrimination for being an immigrant, abuse from her father, and the hardships of homesteading from a young age. The people and stories of the Great Plains, the conflicts between peoples and between people and the environment inspired Sandoz’s writings. Sandoz published more than twenty books (two of which are on view nearby) and dozens of short stories.
Mari Sandoz, author
(b. 1896, Hay Springs, Nebraska; d. 1966, New York City)

Slogum House
1937
Published by Little, Brown and Company, Boston
Christlieb Library, Great Plains Art Museum

Mari Sandoz published *Slogum House*, a novel set in the Sandhills that warned about the rise of fascism. The main character, the matriarch Gulla, is Sandoz’s embodiment of this fascism. *Slogum House* was considered an attack on the character of rural Nebraskans. The book received criticism for being “dirty,” and both the Nebraska cities of McCook and Omaha banned it from their respective libraries in 1938.
Capital City (Mari Sandoz’s second novel) was seen as an assault on the city of Lincoln. Written during the interwar period and published right before the onset of World War II, some say Capital City is Sandoz’s angriest and most political novel. The focus is an unspecified capital city (she synthesized several accounts from various capital cities) and the civic response to working peoples stuck in the Great Depression.