

Exhibit transforms gaming into artwork

By Deanna Hearn, Nevada Today

When contemplating works of art, the gambling industry is not typically top of mind. But at UNR's Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center beginning July 1, more than 80 pieces of imaginative and entertaining artworks depicting the world of gambling and casinos will be on display throughout the library in a tribute to Reno's longtime gaming industry.

An opening reception for the public will be July 7 from 3-5pm. There will be people on each floor to discuss the art and answer questions, some of the local artists will be available and those in attendance will receive a free, 56-page commemorative booklet. The exhibit continues through Sept. 15.



"Card Shark" by Joan Arrizabalaga is part of the exhibit.

The centerpiece of the exhibit includes many of the 26 whimsical sculptures from eight artists who were commissioned by Stremmel Gallery for Harrah's Reno in 1995 when Harrah's opened the Hampton Inn tower, which has since been rebranded by Harrah's. The sculptures playfully evoke casino life including ceramic and fabric slot machines and blue and white

cows sitting around a blackjack table.

According to Donnelly Curtis, head of the library's Special Collections and University Archives Department, Jim Rogers, president and CEO of Kampgrounds of America (KOA), was the senior vice president and general manager at Harrah's at the time, and he was the driving force behind the creation of the sculpture exhibit.

"Because Jim still has a home in Reno and is excited about the revival of the sculptures, he paid for new Plexiglas cases for some of them," Curtis said. Rogers was recently featured on CBS Television's Undercover Boss.

"This show involves people from both the local art and casino worlds," said Curtis. "There is a tradition among people involved with casinos to appreciate the art that relates to their world which includes many motifs such as luck and chance, drama, obsession and all those themes we see in casinos. There are also many motifs from art and cultural history than end up in casino design. The design of face cards – kings, queens, jacks and jokers – is derived from European royalty, and games like faro date back to the 1600s in European culture when the cards displayed pictures of Egyptian pharaohs, part of a fad that existed at the time to revive Egyptian art.

"There is also a great deal of symbolism in casino games and art. Certain artworks depict the devil because some believe there is a sinful association. Others don't think gambling should be honored, but it's part of our history and our culture, and people have had fun not only with the gambling but also creating the art derived from gambling themes. That's really what we are celebrating. Just like any exhibit we do that involves historical materials, we're trying to honor nostalgia and help people remember earlier times in Reno," Curtis said.

The exhibit also features showgirl costumes, neon signs, old slot machines, advertising art, photographs of performers, postcards and many visual representations of casino culture as context and background to the art exhibit.

“This isn’t a typical special collections exhibit that features historical pieces owned by the University; it is really an art show with historical, borrowed art,” said Curtis. “There are some good, serious designers who did great work, but it often got swallowed up in the distractions inside a casino.”

Local artist Joan Arrizabalaga, a casino show wardrobe mistress for many years, is curator of the show.

“Joan is the curator because we are using so much of her art, and she was the entrée into this entire collection of work,” Curtis said. “She has many connections in the local art world, and she told us about the Harrah’s sculptures. We worked with Turkey Stremmel, gallery director at Stremmel Gallery, and found the sculptures in a warehouse.”

The artists and the collections include: Bob Adams, Kathleen Akers, Joan Arrizabalaga, Erni Cabat, Dwight Davidson, Paul DiPasqua, Mary Lee Fulkerson, Mistinguett, Mick Sheldon, Peter Shire, Therman Statom, Larry Williamson, the Will Durham neon collection, the Karen Burns MGM costume collection, IGT conceptual drawings, University special collections photographs, the Marshall Fey antique slot machine collection, Joe McKenna gambling ephemera, Steve Stremmel slot machines and the Donald Spaulding photo collection.

This year’s exhibit is, for the third year, in partnership with Reno Artown.