Maryhill Museum of Art sits on the ancestral territory of the 14 Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation. Its near neighbors include members of the Ka-milt-pha (Rock Creek) Band (in the Goldendale area), Wayám and other residents of Celilo Village, Oregon, and diverse peoples inhabiting local in-lieu fishing sites.

The Ka-milt-pha Band was part of an 1855 treaty that created the Yakama Reservation. Shortly thereafter, the Wayáms were party to a treaty that established the Warm Springs Reservation. Both agreements were ratified and proclaimed in early 1859.

The 1855 treaties reserved the right for regional Indigenous people to fish at “all usual and accustomed fishing places....” These rights were often contested by the settler population, but they were upheld in the courts. In 1988, the United States Congress directed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to develop and improve treaty fishing access in lieu of the historic Columbia River fishing grounds that had been inundated by hydroelectric dams. Between Bonneville Dam and McNary Dam, more than 30 in-lieu fishing sites are now maintained by the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

The Ochechotes (sometimes rendered Uchi’chol) were also a party to the 1855 Yakama Treaty. They were a Tenino (Warm Springs) subtribe that occupied the area around the mouth of Oregon’s Deschutes River. Their territory included Miller Island, which is located in the Columbia River immediately southwest of Maryhill Museum of Art. Another village—named wálawitis—was located near the present-day settlement of Maryhill, Washington. Its residents were known as walawitistám.

A defining feature of the Middle Columbia River region was its prominence as a trade center—arguably the most important one in all of North America. The apex of this economic activity was The Dalles, which one early sojourner called “the great emporium or mart of the Columbia.” Eastern Plateau peoples came here to trade horses, buffalo robes, native tobacco, and other items for dentalium and miscellaneous coastal products. Celilo Falls was the premier fishery on the Columbia River and the residents of the Celilo area were specialists in the production of ch’lay, a protein powder made from dried salmon. It was an in-demand trade item for visitors from both the interior and the coast.

Human activity in this area dates back many thousands of years and the locale was occupied by diverse people groups speaking different languages and dialects. This complexity was compounded by the presence of numerous extra-regional trade partners. The importance of the area was such that at the beginning of the 19th century—prior to the arrival of foreign diseases—one observer estimated seeing between 7,000 and 10,000 Indigenous people in the 40 miles between The Dalles and the Cascades of the Columbia (present-day Cascade Locks, Oregon). Despite the presence of local reservations, descendants of the region’s permanent residents continue to live near the Columbia River and maintain identities that are tied to their ancestors, the river, its landscape, and the life it supports.