

## Art of the Americas - Cultural Considerations

It is unfortunate but true that stereotypic, racist language developed over time among non-Native society in regard to Native (and other non-European American) peoples. Along with the privilege of being a docent comes the responsibility to be sensitive and respectful “custodians of culture.” It is important to recognize that certain attitudes, assumptions, and language often are, or can be seen as, pejorative and disrespectful.

Below are some general guidelines help you feel comfortable talking about the indigenous arts and cultures of the Americas. These guidelines are adapted from an earlier Mia docent training handout, the Smithsonian Institution [http://wintercounts.si.edu/html\\_version/pdfs/guidelines.pdf](http://wintercounts.si.edu/html_version/pdfs/guidelines.pdf), and *Anthro Notes*, Museum of Natural History Publication for Educators (1990).

- **Strive to portray Native people as real human beings.** Avoid referencing and reinforcing stereotypical, one-dimensional Hollywood “Indian” portrayals (Tonto, Pocahontas, etc.). Consider the complexities of individual and community strengths and weaknesses, achievements and failures, motivations and beliefs.
- **Avoid qualitative assessments of Native or European beliefs, traditions, or lifestyles.** History is, by nature, subjective and represents the needs, beliefs, and viewpoints of the culture to which it belongs. Native and European accounts and interpretations of the same historical events often differ. Use these differences to enrich your discussions, but avoid the temptation to judge each point of view.
- **Emphasize the diversity found among Native American cultures. Avoid making generalizations about all Native Americans.** Recognize regional and cultural differences.
- **Avoid portraying indigenous peoples as peoples solely of the past with fixed traditions and beliefs.** While some Native cultures with ancient origins have not survived, many continue to thrive. Native cultures are dynamic, evolving entities that can adapt to new conditions, migrate to new areas, and keep control of their own destinies. Like most humans over the course of time, Native peoples have adapted their lifestyles in response to the ever-changing world.
- **Use the most specific language possible when referring to individuals, communities, or cultures.** Refer to the artist by name, if known. Instead of generalizing (e.g., Great Plains Indians), use the specific cultural group’s name (e.g., Lakhóta, Dakota, or Pikuni).

- Remember that culture and ideas are learned and not inherent according to ethnic background.** Do not single out or make assumptions about Native American students as “experts” on their ancestry and/or the ancestry of all Native Americans. Imagine how ridiculous it might seem to expect a Norwegian-American to be an expert on all of European history and culture. Your use of open-ended questions and a genuine openness to contributions from the audience will create opportunities to share for both Native and non-Native individuals who have expertise and knowledge.

<b>Instead of...</b>	<b>Say...</b>
Indian	Native American, the museum refers to the original inhabitants of this hemisphere as Native Americans because the permanent collection includes objects from North, Central, and South America. American Indian is sometimes used or understood to refer to only Native peoples of North America.  Also acceptable: American Indian, indigenous people, Native people
chief, brave, squaw, or papoose (Use “chief” only in formal titles like Chief Seattle. It designates leadership similarly to Governor or President and should never be loosely applied to any American Indian man.)	man, woman, or child
White man	European American, non-Native, or specific European nationality when talking about the Conquest (Spanish, French, British, etc.)
medicine man, shaman	spiritual or religious leader, healer, elder, or a more specific title/designation used by individual cultural groups
Pre-Columbian (Emphasis is on Columbus.)	ancient, ancestral, historic (Emphasis is on historical roots.)
myth, legend	oral tradition
they, them, those people	the ancient Inca, the Anishinaabe

all, everyone, always, never

many, some, often, seldom, might

made, believed, thought

make, believe, think (When appropriate, use present tense to emphasize continuity and vitality of Native cultures today.)

primitive, tribal

traditional, Native, indigenous

**A note on the word “tribe”:** Based on a 19<sup>th</sup>-century theory of social development, a “tribe” is a social formation existing before the development of, or outside of, states. The implication is that “tribes” are less “civilized” than “fully-developed” state-based societies. For many, the term is troubling in that it reinforces racist stereotypes of primitivism, timelessness, and savagery with regard to indigenous peoples. However, complicating matters is the fact that in the United States, “tribe” or “band” is a political designation used by the federal government and by many indigenous peoples to identify themselves. While still commonly heard and accepted by many, it is preferable, when possible, to avoid using “tribe.” Instead, you could refer to a specific cultural group by saying, for example, “the A’ani people;” “the A’ani;” “Navajo communities;” “Navajo artists;” or “Navajo community members.”