

# Determining Quality in Native American Art

EVAN M. MAURER

Relative judgments of quality are intrinsic to the creation of an object and to its critical reception. In Native American cultures, judgments of quality were based on sets of rules or conventions passed on by example and teaching from one generation to the next. Daughters joined their mothers in daily tasks, which usually included making what we now consider works of art, such as weavings, baskets, or ceramics. As a girl grew older, she was expected to help in the process of producing these objects, and so learned the criteria of quality through observation, instruction, and criticism. There were rules governing the production of every type of object in all media, rules that directed the selection and preparation of materials; the methods and techniques by which they should be manipulated; and the shapes, surfaces, and methods of decoration.

The proper application of these rules and techniques required repeated experience in all phases of the process, and through this participatory learning, an individual acquired skill, which was expressed in technical excellence. In "The Pueblo Potter: A Study of Creative Imagination in Primitive Art," Ruth L. Bunzel reports that among the people with whom she worked, the concern for technical skill in the creation of an object ranked even higher than the aesthetic evaluation of its decoration. When she asked one of her Hopi informants to choose ceramics from the pueblo for her to purchase, the primacy of this criterion became apparent:

I soon discovered that the selection was made entirely on the basis of technical excellence of the ware. A handsome bowl by one of Nampeyo's daughters was discarded because one side had a slightly mottled appearance, showing that not all the water had been expelled in the firing. "It will break when you use it." She admitted that the painting was good, but this seemed too unimportant to be commented upon until directly questioned. The prophecy was, alas, correct. I purchased the bowl for the sake of its design, and although I did get it to New York unbroken, it crumbled the first time it was used (Bunzel 1929:60).

Bunzel's crumbling bowl is a perfect example of the importance of technical excellence in determining the quality of an object from Native American cultures, in which most things that we consider art had a functional purpose, or were based on utilitarian prototypes. In the eyes of the Hopi, the beauty of the bowl's shape and painted design were negated by the poor quality of its technique. How could it be considered beautiful when the essential fabric of the vessel was itself wrong?

The primary definition of the word "art" in the English language refers to skill, which is the result of knowledge and practice. The term was at first generally applied to a great variety of

123. Dress. Sioux. Ca. 1880, hide, beadwork, tin jingles. 58 x 40 inches. Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa. Roberta Campbell Lawson Collection, MI 2062.

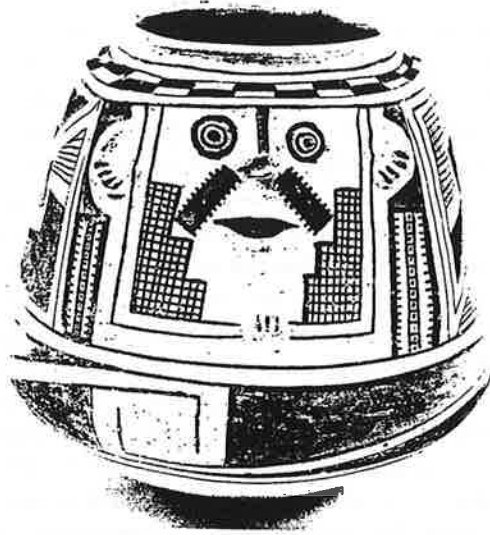
The delicacy of Plains costume design belies its massive construction. This dress, which weighs approximately thirty-five pounds, was worn only on festive social

occasions. Its broad tee-shaped configuration is accented by a heavily beaded yoke that extends from the neckline down the arms. The massive color block so delineated, and the simple floating geometric motifs, suggest the design influence of the Sioux's northern neighbors, the Piegan and Blackfoot.

THE ARTS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN

EDWIN C. WADE, ED. HUDSON HILLS PRESS, NY 1986





124. Ramos polychrome effigy jar. Casas Grandes. Ca. 1200–1340, polychrome pottery, 7½ × 8¼ inches. Museum of the Red River, Idabel, 058.

Ceramics of the Casas Grandes, like those of their northern neighbors the Mimbres, are enigmatic. These two traditions are similar to each other but have little in common with any other culture of the greater Southwest. Both traditions are filled with fanciful, imaginative, and transformational figures, but where the Mimbres favored painting, the Casas Grandes potters favored sculpted and painted effigies. Casas Grandes figurines like this Janus-faced effigy jar characteristically depict faces with crescent-shaped ears, tattoo marks, minimal protruding tattooed chins, concentrically ringed eye knobs, truncated pendant noses, and coffee-bean-shaped mouths with paint overlaid. Such faces float amid a collage of asymmetrically balanced geometric motifs.

activities, embracing the sciences and technological crafts, as well as the creation of things of beauty. Not until the latter part of the nineteenth century did the words “art” and “artist” begin to change in emphasis and meaning. In modern Western cultures, artists are no longer seen as ordinary people, highly skilled and gifted in the accomplishment of their work, but as unusual individuals isolated from general society, who seek new, personal modes of expressing their sense of the beautiful, and of representing the life around them.

Few Native American languages have words that correspond to our terms “art” and “artist.” However, when the word “artist” does occur, it usually has a primary reference to talents involving skill and craftsmanship. In the Choctaw language, the term for an artist is *to*’ *kšali imponna*, the first word meaning work and the second connoting skill, workmanship, talent, and understanding (Byington 1915:355). Our modern willingness to consider aesthetics and beauty apart from qualities of technical skill is one symptom of the separation of art from life that exists in our culture, a separation that has promoted a general misunderstanding of the purpose and meaning of art, and led to the estrangement of the artist from his own society. However, in traditional Native American cultures, art was totally integrated into the social fabric, and many individuals of both sexes produced some sort of object that reflected a concern for the harmonious union of beauty and function. To live and work properly, according to tribal ideals and rituals, was an affirmation of one’s spiritual world view.

In Native American cultures, a properly and skillfully made object that adhered to conventions of ritual, material, and style reflected the sacred nature of the people’s lives and the harmony of the world’s forces. The aesthetic and technical quality of the object was a visual metaphor for a spiritual attitude, a mental state of being; consequently, even functional objects, such as spoons, bowls, robes, or moccasins, could be regarded as symbols of spiritual power or personal feeling. A well-documented illustration of this relationship among quality, function, and meaning can be seen in the quillworker society that was found among first the Northern and then the Southern Cheyenne, before their culture was drastically affected by ever-increasing white incursions into the Plains during the second half of the nineteenth century.

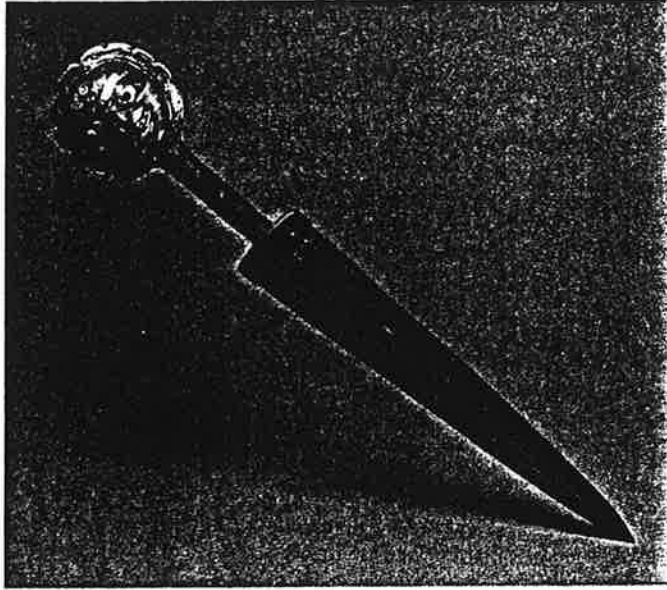
The women's quillworker society, known as *moneneheo*, "the selected ones" (Petter 1915:97-98), produced porcupine-quill-decorated robes, moccasins, containers, lodges, lodge liners, ornaments, and other objects that were sometimes associated with special individuals or groups, such as priests or tribal societies, or with the fulfillment of certain personal vows. The technical production of these quill-decorated objects was regulated by a carefully followed set of rituals, and the objects themselves were in many ways thought to be sacred. Initiation into the quillworker society included learning the proper rituals and techniques to create the objects, as well as the meanings and usage of the traditional abstract designs, representational images, and colors. The objects created by the "selected ones" were considered to be among the highest in quality because of the consummate skill that their makers had gained through long experience and through strict adherence to the traditions governing style and decoration. The high cultural value of the art produced by this society was recognized by all in the tribe, and a woman's feats in creating such aesthetic utilitarian artifacts were parallel to a warrior's acts of bravery and the counting of coup in battle (Grinnell 1923:161-162).

The most complete description of the traditional quillworker society is found in George Bird Grinnell's classic study of the Cheyenne. His investigations demonstrated that mistakes were not tolerated in the creation of the quilled decorations made by members of the society. When a mistake was detected, it had to be removed according to a carefully prescribed ritual in which a proven warrior cut away the defective work with a knife. The warrior recited his personal battle honors as he severed the stitches, ending the process of removing the faulty quills from the hide with the phrase, "And when I scalped him, I did it in this way" (Grinnell 1923:166). The older Cheyenne women who had been members of the society were, by their own account, as concerned with the overall visual quality of their work as they were with proper ritual technique. The clean, even surface of the robe was an important element in their concept of quality and aesthetics, and they took great pains to ensure the pristine aspect of their creations. They reported that when a finely tanned buffalo robe was being decorated with quillwork, the society member took the precaution of covering her hands with white clay or gypsum, and that she kept the robe in a protective sack, only taking out the portion on which she was working (Grinnell 1923:164).

The quillworkers were one traditional group that adapted to new conditions brought about by the advance of white culture into the Cheyenne's traditional homelands. Alice Marriott continued Grinnell's work by demonstrating how this important women's society changed, though it also continued to maintain its central purpose. Natural materials such as buffalo hides and porcupine quills were no longer available to the people, so they substituted canvas and glass beads obtained through purchase or barter. However, one factor that remained constant was the strong emphasis placed on personal accomplishment, ritual, technique, and design (Marriott 1956:20). The people no longer possessed the freedom they had previously enjoyed, but they still clung to traditional values of quality in their lives and work.

The integration of creative activity with daily life was even characteristic of those Native American cultures that developed a specialized class of artists, whose principal work was to create art objects, usually on commission. The best example of this phenomenon was found among the tribes of the Northwest Coast, where unique social, economic, and religious systems fostered a magnificent creative tradition, employing the skills and genius of professional artists.

There also seem to have been individuals singled out on the basis of technical skill and aesthetic prowess in nonspecialized Indian cultures, where most adults were expected to engage in the production of objects. Archaeological evidence has established that in many areas of the ancient Southwest ceramic vessels were produced by specialized individuals for trade to other, often distant, villages.



125. Dagger. Tlingit. Ca. 1870–1890, copper, mountain-sheep horn, abalone shell, wood, hide, whale baleen, 21 × 3¼ inches. Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, 6337.229.

On the northern Northwest Coast, daggers were often much more than functional weapons, though they did have a place in intertribal warfare. Sometimes masterpieces of design and craftsmanship, they achieved the status of prestigious clan emblems. In the late 1800s, most functional daggers were of trade iron, but later in the period copper, the dagger material used in ancient times, was again a favorite for elaborate, mainly decorative, weapons. The face on this piece probably represents the sun, which is frequently portrayed in the art as a hook-beaked human face surrounded by radiating beams.

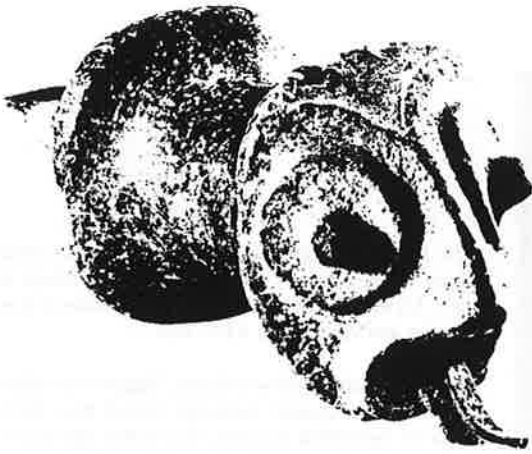
That this tradeware was generally of good quality is indicative of the shared aesthetic standards and mutual appreciation of fine workmanship that existed between producers and buyers. In the contemporary Southwest, this phenomenon is perhaps best represented by the San Ildefonso artist Maria Martinez (fig. 157), who worked from about 1900 to the 1970s. The ceramics of great technical quality and beauty that she created during her long and active life were enthusiastically appreciated by both Indians and whites, who provided her with a ready commercial market for over fifty years.

A survey of any large museum collection of Native American art will demonstrate that by no means all Indian objects are of high quality. As in any culture, there is great variation in technical capability and aesthetic genius among Native American artists. To be sure, a large percentage of those who made objects produced work of good quality. But it seems to be universally true that only a small number of artists in any culture produce works that go beyond average skill and sensitivity into the realm of artistic genius.

Native American societies, like Oriental cultures, maintained an essentially academic art, governed by systems of conventions. But while artists in such traditional civilizations must respect these conventions, they are still free to express their creative individuality within the confines of the general rules. These personal inventions and subtle nuances in the manipulation of forms separate the ordinary object of good quality from the spiritually evocative work of a gifted artist. (For the best presentation of this issue, see Holm and Reid 1976.)

Observations on the relative quality of Native American arts were often made by European travelers who visited North America. In 1787, an English captain praised the sculpture he encountered among tribes of the Northwest Coast as “well proportioned, and executed with a considerable degree of ingenuity, which appears rather extraordinary amongst a people so remote from civilized refinement” (Dixon 1968:243).

During his famous expedition to the Northern Plains in 1833–1834, Prince Maximilian of Wied Neuwied gave an enthusiastic description of the aesthetic quality of the shirts, dresses, and



126. Slave killer or dagger. Nootka. Pre-1778, pecked and ground basalt, native pigment, hide strap,  $11\frac{1}{16} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$  inches. Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna, Captain Cook Collection, 210.

This dagger is a type of hand-held mallet with a stone blade. Slaves were known to have been killed ceremonially at important events with weapons such as these; hence the Anglo-derived name "slave killer."



127. Mask. Nootka. Pre-1778, wood, native pigments, shell inlay,  $4\frac{1}{8} \times 9$  inches. Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna, Captain Cook Collection, 222.

These works were acquired by Captain Cook on his exploratory voyage in 1778 to Nootka Sound, in what was to become British Columbia. These important objects provide a rare insight into the design and style traditions of

late prehistoric, precontact art of the southern Northwest Coast. The mask shows remarkable stylistic continuity with objects produced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the Nootka and Southern Kwakiutl. Both the mask and the sculpted stone slave killer (fig. 126), which is structurally compatible with ancient petroglyphs found along the coast, indicate the enormous time span of this tradition.

robes made by women of the Crow tribe. However, the prince had developed a connoisseur's appreciation of Plains Indian art and preferred the "graceful" and "highly original" costumes of the Minetaree, calling them "the most elegant Indians on the whole course of the Missouri," and judging that their work even surpassed that of the Crow (Thomas and Ronnefeldt 1976:36-37). Individual women in Plains culture were also singled out for the skill and quality of their creative decorative arts, as was observed by Samuel Weygold among the Lakota beadworkers at the turn of the century, when the traditional life-style of the tribe was replaced by that of the reservation (Haberland 1981:29-56). We should also note that these arts continue today among the Crow, who carry on the creative traditions admired by Prince Maximilian one hundred fifty years ago.

The relative percentage of objects of extreme technical skill and artistic quality varies widely in North America, according to region, tribal group, and time period. In the Southwest, for example, the ceramics made at Acoma are, for many reasons, of a consistently higher quality than those from Picuris to the north. However, even famous ceramic centers such as the Hopi and Zuñi pueblos have experienced serious fluctuations in the quality of their wares. At Zuñi, the art of making pottery, which had been a vital tradition for hundreds of years, fell victim to the pressures of social change



and had virtually died out by the time Bunzel published her work on Pueblo potters in 1929 (Bunzel 1929:62).

A non-Indian observer unfamiliar with Indian art might not recognize those details expressive of technical skill which were hallmarks of quality immediately apparent to a Native American artist's peers. However, it would be fair to say that both the Indian and the non-Indian would have a high regard for generally observable skills in the technical production of an object. While there has not been extensive research on the subject, studies have shown that universal, cross-cultural standards of aesthetic quality do seem to exist (Child and Siroto 1971). Non-Indians will never fully comprehend the complex cultural, religious, and metaphysical associations of a traditional Indian art object, but they can derive pleasure from its technical and aesthetic excellence and, if they are receptive, experience some limited appreciation of its spiritual force. Many Western philosophers, especially since the eighteenth century, have written at length about the nature of judgments of artistic taste and quality, and it is generally agreed that the response to a work of art depends more on the mental state and experience the viewer brings to the act of perception than on any definable physical characteristics of the work itself. Nevertheless, most philosophies of aesthetics also agree that the great work of art is that which, through some ineffable configuration and combination of forms, colors, and materials, is most powerfully evocative, expressive, and suggestive. In the final analysis, what determines the quality of a work of art is its capacity to act on man as nature does: setting the mind and spirit in motion. In the following pages, we will look at examples in some traditional Native American media of objects which attain that power through excellence.

To be able to make informal comparative judgments about the quality of art objects, one must be familiar with a wide selection of works in the same media, and understand the technical and aesthetic conventions that governed their creation. While a complete description of the range of media used by Native American artists is beyond the scope of this essay, the following observations on objects of high quality will demonstrate the close relationship of technique to aesthetics in the art of Native America.

The critical ranking of media in order of relative importance has been integral to European art for hundreds of years. In the official art academies, the "noble" arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture were regarded as possessing far more innate value than the graphic arts or the so-called "decorative" arts of textiles, ceramics, metalwork, glass, and furniture. Objects in these latter media were closely related to more purely utilitarian productions in the same materials; therefore, the quality of workmanship and design and the use of precious materials were, and often still are, the principal factors used to differentiate between the ordinary object and the work of art.

In effect, this traditional bias against certain media has led to a misunderstanding of the artistic value of certain types of objects produced by non-Western cultures. As in the more recent case of photography, many Western observers still argue the question whether a basket or pot is a craft object or a work of art. However, this question would not arise from members of Native American cultures, for whom the value of an object rests more on its artistic success and utility than on its creator's choice of medium. In this context, "craft" must be defined as the technique of making the art object, rather than as the end product of that process. A comparison can again be made between the arts of North America and those of Oriental cultures, where people also understand and appreciate the great aesthetic potential of media other than painting and sculpture. In the following pages, examples of woven textiles, basketry, and ceramics will be discussed to illustrate some of the basic determinants of technical and aesthetic quality in Native American art.



128. Bowl. Haida. Ca. 1830, carved wood.  $7\frac{1}{4} \times 12 \times 10\frac{1}{4}$  inches. Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, Elizabeth Cole Butler Collection, 82.1.75.

One of the most significant aspects of Northwest Coast culture was the development of the seagoing canoe. So important were canoes to native life that they were even imitated in elaborate oil bowls used for feasts. This fine

example illustrates the principal features of the northern canoe—flaring sides and upswept ends with finlike projections. The stern, now cracked, sweeps upward at an angle from the keel, while the bow line is interrupted by a notch, which defines the projecting wave cutter. The shallow groove inside the gunwales is a feature both of canoes and of many forms of bowls.

## TEXTILES

In the Southwestern region of North America, the art of weaving cotton textiles on a loom can be dated to approximately A.D. 700. During the ensuing centuries, the art spread through the region, reaching its apogee with the work of the Navajo weavers of the mid-nineteenth century. These women worked with fine wools prepared from the fleece of sheep first introduced by the Spanish, as well as with commercial yarns obtained from traders. The well-deserved reputation of the tradition rests on the elegant garment known as the "Chief's blanket" (figs. 90, 92); however, the Navajo also made serapes, which were woven in the longer-than-wide format adopted from the Spanish. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Spaniards themselves were duly impressed by the quality of these great weavings and reported that the Navajo "made the best and finest serapes that are known" (Wheat 1979:26).

The art of weaving requires a substantial degree of technical skill in the preparation of raw materials. The wool must be gathered, cleaned, carded, and then spun into yarn. The skeins of yarn





129. Serape. Navajo. Ca. 1860, natural-dyed native wool yarn, cochineal-dyed bayeta, indigo,  $73\frac{1}{4} \times 47\frac{1}{4}$  inches. Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, 9736.115.

Classic Navajo serapes at their finest equal the delicacy and sophistication of any premechanical loom-woven textile in the world. Quality is indicated by the weaver's mastery of a number of attributes. Fineness of weave (as indicated by weft and warp count) allowed greater complexity and graphic cleanness of design. Symmetrical balance, with borderless, floating overlays of banded designs accentuated by primary colors, created vibrating fields of composition. And, in the most sophisticated blankets, weavers experimented with vegetable and commercial dyes, as is evident in this textile, where the spent indigo used to color the deep cobalt bands has been reused to yield a vivid pastel turquoise.

are then dyed, using either vegetable dyes prepared by the weaver, or, in more recent times, commercial dyes. Using a large upright loom, the artist works carefully to produce a fine, even, tight weave that will make a practical as well as beautiful garment, strong yet soft and supple. Illustrated here are two superb examples of the Navajo serape (figs. 129, 130). Both demonstrate the so-called classic design elements that are the basis of their reputation as the most expressive vehicle of Navajo textile art. The main elements of the classic design are the horizontal stripe and the terraced, or stepped triangle. In the weaving, the arrangement of these elements in varying shades of red, blue, and sometimes pink, yellow, and green is contrasted to similar motifs in a natural white yarn. The success of the serape design depends upon the creative interrelationship between the active stepped triangle and zigzag, and the more stable horizontal line. By the careful yet inventive balancing of design and color, the artist creates a unique solution for each woven object and, despite the visual complexity of the pattern, the artistic integrity of the object is maintained by the harmonious proportions of individual units to the whole.

#### BASKETRY

The creation of a basket as a work of art also requires considerable skill in the proper selection and preparation of the natural materials with which the artist works. The fibers used as the weft form the visible surface of the basket and must be very carefully peeled and split so that all strands are as uniform as possible. These weft fibers must then be precisely coiled around the larger bundles, or



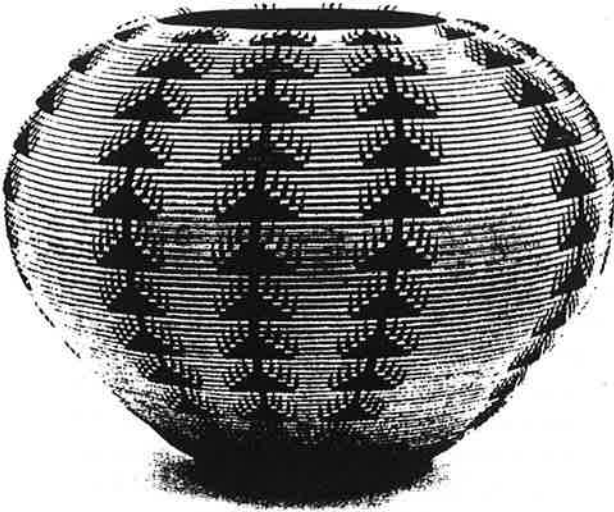
130. Child's blanket. Navajo. 1860s, bayeta, homespun wool, natural and indigo dyes,  $46\frac{1}{2} \times 30\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Woolaroc Museum, Bartlesville, IND 379.

Children's blankets, primarily those intended for young boys, were miniaturized versions of men's serapes. They rank among the finest examples of Navajo weaving, often rivaling the sophistication of prehistoric, Basketmaker Phase (A.D. 200–400) hair and cotton textiles.

rods of the warp, so that each horizontal line of the basket is of a regular thickness, and each vertical stitch is a perfect repetition of the one it follows. Thus, the skillful replication of small parts unifies the surface of the object as it builds toward a three-dimensional whole.

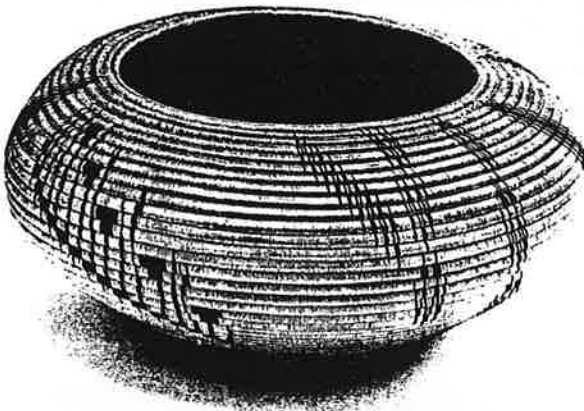
The essence of the subtle art of basketry lies in the harmonious relationship of the form of the object and its two-dimensional decorative motifs. A superb example of this creative process can be seen in the large and imposing basket woven by the famous Washoe artist Louisa Keyser, also called Dat So La Lee (fig. 131). This full, round shape, known as a *degikup*, gradually rises from a narrow base until it reaches a maximum breadth at about three-quarters of its height. From that widest point, the form curves smoothly inward, ending in an open neck, slightly larger in diameter than the base.

Integral to the conception of the three-dimensional form is the abstract design that the artist has woven into the structure of the basket, using black and red natural fibers that contrast with the predominant light tan of the background. This design is known as the scatter pattern, and consists of a series of stepped triangles arranged vertically on a narrow black band. The sloping sides of these triangles support smaller, acute triangular forms that begin at the point of each step segment and extend upward on three rows of coils. The stepped triangles grow in size as the form of the basket widens, and diminish as the form curves inward at both top and bottom. These motifs are arranged in four groups of three, evenly spaced around the form of the basket. The central element of each group is aligned on a vertical axis, but the two flanking elements gently bow outward, to compen-



131. Basket. Louisa Keyser (*Dat So La Lee*, 1850–1925). Washoe. Ca. 1917–1918. willow, redbud, bracken fern. 12 × 16¼ inches. Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, Clark Field Collection, BA 666.

Considered by many the consummate expression of Native American basketry, this masterwork of Louisa Keyser perfectly fuses classic sculptural form with surface decoration. The unique woven columns expand and contract in relation to the swelling of the vessel's form in the manner known as *entasis* in Greek architecture.



132. Basket. Maggie James (ca. 1870–1952), Washoe. Ca. 1915–1920, willow, redbud, dyed and undyed bracken fern. 3¾ × 8½ inches in diameter. Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, Clark Field Collection, BA 78.

This woven vessel by Maggie James illustrates several stylistic traits typical of the weaver's work in the middle of her active career. The dramatically bulging shoulder, flattened wide top, and narrow base are characteristic of the shape she developed by exaggerating Louisa Keyser's *degikup* basket form (fig. 131). Fine stitching and lightweight, dynamic designs, arranged diagonally, also mark Maggie James's style. Though technically brilliant, this basket does not exhibit the extraordinary fusion of decoration and three-dimensional form seen in Louisa Keyser's work.

sate visually for the perspective changes that result from the curving surface. This subtle and sensitive adjustment is comparable to the ancient Greek architects' use of a similar swelling of the column, called *entasis*, which serves the same visual purpose when the viewer looks down the exterior column line of a temple. In this way, the decoration is not only totally integrated into the very fabric of the basket, but also serves to emphasize the harmony of its surface with that of its form.

Another Washoe basket of high quality (fig. 132), though less expansive and organic than the example by Louisa Keyser, also shows a high degree of technical skill and control. Upon close examination, it can be seen that the weft fibers of this basket are even thinner and finer than those used by Keyser, resulting in a weave count of approximately ten more stitches to the inch. However, a tour-de-force technical achievement does not necessarily make this basket a finer work of art than the *degikup* made by Keyser. The design elements on this basket have very little relationship to one another and almost no integral relationship to the form of the basket itself. Skillful technique, or craft, can produce a beautifully detailed form, but only an overall harmony of form and design can result in a truly superb work of art.

## CERAMICS

The production of ceramics is the oldest continuing artistic tradition in North America. This is especially evident in the Southwest, which has long been regarded as a center for quality ceramics. Archaeologists have identified over one thousand different Southwestern pottery types, from the earliest examples of circa 100 B.C. to the establishment of a strong Spanish presence in the area during the seventeenth century. Even today, the people of the Pueblo farming communities have retained ceramics as part of their strong cultural heritage, in the face of increasing pressure to adopt a Western life-style. While the number of active ceramic artists has significantly decreased during the last hundred years, objects of high quality are still being created by the ancient methods passed down from generation to generation for two thousand years.

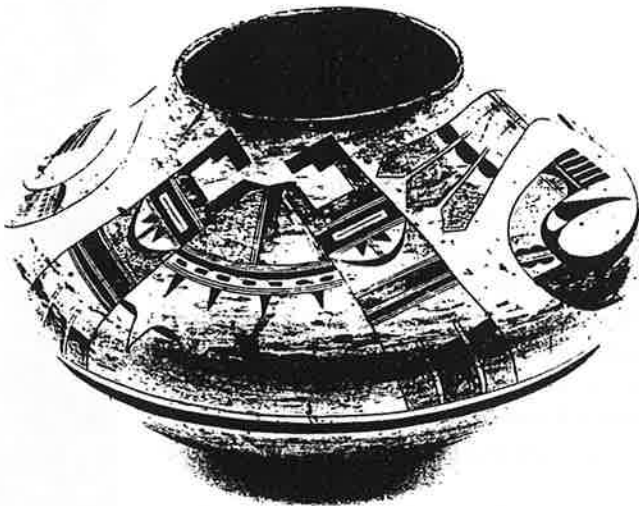
Proper and skillful technique is crucial to the successful creation of ceramic wares, as the smallest mistake in the long and careful process can result in total loss of the object. Each artist has her favorite source of special clay, which must be laboriously gathered and prepared with a tempering agent of fine sand or carefully ground fired pottery shards before it can be mixed with water and used to create the work of art. All Native American pottery is made by hand, without the use of the potter's wheel; the wheel was never used in North America prior to the coming of the Europeans. Knowing this, we must marvel all the more at the consummate artistic control of these ceramicists, who are able to produce large, thin-walled, round vessels of graceful yet powerful form.

A very fine example of the high-quality ceramic tradition of the ancient Southwest is the large Tularosa-style olla that was made in northern Arizona or New Mexico in about 1100–1250 (fig. 133). The artist who made this piece built up the beautifully controlled shape from the bottom, adding coils of clay which were then smoothed to form the growing wall of the vessel. Because of the consistent thinness of the wall and its relatively large dimensions, there was an ever-present danger of collapse while the piece was being made. After the shape of the vessel was carefully completed and sun-dried, the artist applied a thin clay slip to the surface and burnished it until it was regular and smooth. At this stage, the artist applied her design directly to the surface of the vessel, without first making drawings. Different tonal values were achieved through the creative use of wide black

133. Olla. Tularosa. Ca. 1180, black-on-white pottery. 13 × 17 inches. Museum of the Red River, Idabel, 745.1.

This jar is a superlative example of the ceramic brilliance of the ancient Puebloan potters of New Mexico. In its complex composition, banded and negatively outlined, interlocked step-frets delicately meld into the serrated concentric spirals of the upper shoulder. As with Louisa Keyser's basket (fig. 131), the expansive designs perfectly complement the vessel's sculptural form.





134. Jar. Nampeyo (1860?-1942), Hopi. 1910-1915, polychrome pottery,  $8\frac{1}{4} \times 14\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, 5437.4396.

The Hopi potter Nampeyo ranks with Maria Martinez as one of the greatest known Indian ceramicists of the twentieth century. Nampeyo adapted prehistoric motifs to then-contemporary Hopi designs, creating an entirely new visual vocabulary. She also experimented with ancient and modern design techniques such as stippling and the use of multiple lines of various widths, drawn on a white surface, to approximate values of gray. All these considerations are present in this unique five-color water jar.

lines, groups of thin parallel lines that read as areas of medium gray, and white slip as a background and a positive design element. The painting was rendered with fine yucca brushes, using mineral or vegetable pigments prepared by the artist, and then the vessel was ready to be fired in the open, using wood and dried dung for fuel. Tularosa artists excelled in the creation of overall abstract patterns that were made up of the straight, zigzag, and spiral lines that formed their decorative vocabulary. Each pot bears a unique combination of those basic motifs, which have been manipulated according to the vision of the individual.

The finely rendered geometric designs used on this vessel are repeated in a varying orientation over most of its surface, so that they emphasize the unified and organic form of the vessel itself. These two-dimensional patterns are freely and creatively expressed, yet they remain subordinate to the general visual effect, achieving a delicate balance that is indicative of the vessel's quality.

Around the turn of the century, there was a renaissance of the potters' art among the ceramicists who lived on and around the Hopi First Mesa, in northern Arizona. This resurgence involved the revival of vessel shapes and decorative patterns from the fifteenth-to-seventeenth-century Hopi site of Sikyatki. The most famous artist of this period was a woman named Nampeyo, whose granddaughters are among the finest contemporary pottery artists working today at Hopi.

The vessel by Nampeyo featured here (fig. 134) was created in about 1915 and is a prime example of Hopi pottery at its finest. Its walls are of an even thickness and describe a shape with a wide shoulder that slopes directly from the high waist to a perfectly formed circular neck. As in the Tularosa olla (fig. 133), the comparatively high midline gives an animating sense of muscularity and lift to the form. This emphasis on the upper part of the vessel is reiterated in Nampeyo's painted design, which is anchored by a thick black line running around the vessel several inches below its widest point. The large painted elements arranged above this line consist of two pairs of designs, one based on a spiraling curve and the other on a large, broken-topped triangle. Both forms are themselves subdivided into smaller components, parts of which seem to be totally abstract, while others, like the bottom sections of the triangles and the ends of the spirals, are generally interpreted as symbols of feathers. Nampeyo's palette usually consisted of various shades of red and black. However, this pot is distinguished by the artist's use of an unusual five-color scheme of dark red-orange, light orange, dense black, stippled black (medium gray) and thinly painted black (charcoal gray). As in the Tularosa olla, these painted designs are proportionately suited to the size and shape of the vessel on which they are painted. While each design can command an independent visual presence, together they are part of a larger aesthetic unity.

## CONTEMPORARY WORK

The contemporary Native American artists who express themselves in essentially nontraditional formats are also affected by the values and experiences of their Indian heritage. They may have been trained in contemporary Western methods and means, but their art is very much related to their individual sense of cultural background. The long and successful career of the Chippewa artist George Morrison provides a meaningful example of this, and is exemplary of contemporary Native American art at its best.

Morrison was raised in a small town in the dense woodlands of northern Minnesota. His father and grandfather were trappers and woodsmen and the family still practiced many traditional activities, making certain objects, hunting, and gathering wild rice. As a young man, Morrison decided to pursue a career in art. He graduated from the Minneapolis School of Art and went on to win several major fellowships and teaching positions while establishing a well-deserved reputation in the competitive world of contemporary painting and sculpture.

For over ten years, George Morrison has been exploring the medium of collaged wooden sculpture. In 1977, he created the first in a series of *Red Totems* (fig. 135). The large scale of *Red Totem* makes an immediate impact on the viewer, who is forced to relate the sculpture to the surrounding spatial environment that he shares with it. In its general form, the tall, vertical shaft is reminiscent of Native American sculptural traditions such as the totem poles of the Northwest Coast and the decorated sacred center pole of the Plains Sun Dance ceremony. As their name implies, the works in Morrison's *Red Totem* series are all stained a rich, mellow tone that recalls the ceremonial earth paint used for centuries by Native Americans.

The skillfully rendered patterns of wood that cover the surface of *Red Totem* have two basic stylistic precedents. They can be traced to Morrison's earlier personal style, beginning with his paintings of the 1940s (Kostich 1976:47, 51), as well as to traditional Chippewa and Great Lakes decorative motifs historically found in quillwork, beadwork, and ribbon appliqué (Maurer 1977: figs. 105–106, 113, 127, 134, 145). These associations emphasize the thematic role of the interlocking curves of the design, which reflect the ubiquitous harmony of a traditional nature-oriented world view. These barklike patterns enclose, yet seem to emanate naturally from, the core of the sculpture that stands like a tall tree in the gallery space. By achieving this evocative and suggestive image, the artist presents us with a self-sustaining work of art—an imaginative and nonconceptual natural metaphor that is rooted in his personal genius and in the traditions of his Native American cultural experience.

135. *Red Totem*. George Morrison (1919– ), Chippewa. 1980, wood, paint, 16 feet × 20 × 20 inches. Collection of the artist, Minneapolis.

Morrison is a pioneer of contemporary abstraction in Native American sculpture. His interest in the in-

teraction of forms in a compacted space is evident in *Red Totem*, where asymmetrical components climb tier upon tier to create a smoothly columnar obelisk. This preference is also visible in his layered acrylic landscapes, whose environmental features are delineated through graduated hues.