

NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN ART

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Chapter I Introduction

American Indian art now

Artists of Native American ancestry are making art today, at this moment. All over the United States, countless dancers, singers, artists who will display their work in booths, T-shirt vendors, and fry-bread cooks prepare for a weekend of powwows. The on-line “Gathering of Nations” website lists thirty-six powwows for the Fourth of July 2003 weekend, among them the Navajo Fourth of July Powwow at Window Rock, Arizona, the 131st Annual Quapaw Tribal Powwow in Quapaw, Oklahoma, the 35th Annual Ute Fourth of July Powwow at Fort Duchesne, Utah, and the 8th Annual Eastern Woodlands Intertribal Powwow in Lebanon, Maine. At the beginning of each event, every dancer, dressed in regalia perfected to the best of their abilities and talents, will line up in order of seniority and parade into the arena led by military veterans carrying flags and accompanied by the singers of the lead drum in the heart-stopping spectacle known as “Grand Entry” [1].

In the town of Alert Bay, British Columbia, several families assemble gifts and goods to distribute at potlatches scheduled for later in the year. Some will feature masked dances presented as treasured family possessions [2]. Skilled carvers in the community, like Beau Dick, will receive commissions to carve new masks. Old ones preserved in family collections will be painted and refurbished so they look their best during the ceremony.

Outside Santa Fe, Nancy Youngblood, a descendant of a long lineage of potters including matriarchs Margaret Tafoya and her mother Sara Fina of Santa Clara Pueblo, builds and polishes vessels of clay. Her lustrous black jars, whose ribbed forms derive ultimately from the shapes of squashes and pumpkins, are highly sought-after by collectors and museums [3]. Many are sold before she finishes them. In the recent past, long lines of hopeful

purchasers formed early in the morning in front of her booth at Indian Market in Santa Fe. Some walked away disappointed after she sold all she brought for the day.

In Washington, D.C., Ho-Chunk (or Winnebago) sculptor Truman Lowe, formerly the chair of the art department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, now serves as the curator of contemporary art at the National Museum of the American Indian. Among his many plans for upcoming exhibitions is one that will feature Native American artists who work in electronic media.

Some Native Americans today criticize museum exhibits, popular media, and books like this one, because they often situate American Indian culture in a historical past, as if there is no Native American culture today. This failure to frame the past from the standpoint of the present is particularly unfortunate when considering Native American arts, since indigenous artists have always been, and still are now, among those who most actively reconcile the traditions of the past with the circumstances of the present. Art is, and has been, one of the principal strategies of Native American “survival,” to use writer Gerald Vizenor’s term. While the word “survival” summons up images of last-gasp tenacity, the term “survival” refers more to the wisdom of memory and adaptability, and the strategies of resistance, accommodation, and transformation. Histories of survival connect the present with the past, linking the experiences of the aforementioned artists active today with those of countless forebears, the generations of Native American artists whose creations are the subject of this book.

Art and aesthetics

Readers of this book may be unaccustomed to thinking of art as a “strategy,” which implies a social and political intention. We may be more accustomed to regarding art as a personal expression of an artist’s creativity. Some may be comfortable with the notion of art as a collective expression of a worldview, particularly when considering religious symbols or the ritual role of art in religious ceremony. The term “art,” as it will be used here, encompasses all these things. The artistic object is created within a cultural system of aesthetics. There is no single and universal system of aesthetics. There is no privileged standard for what can or cannot be called art. “Art” is a word used to name certain kinds of things and its definition changes all the time. Aesthetic expression, on the other hand, seems to be a human universal. Human beings all over the

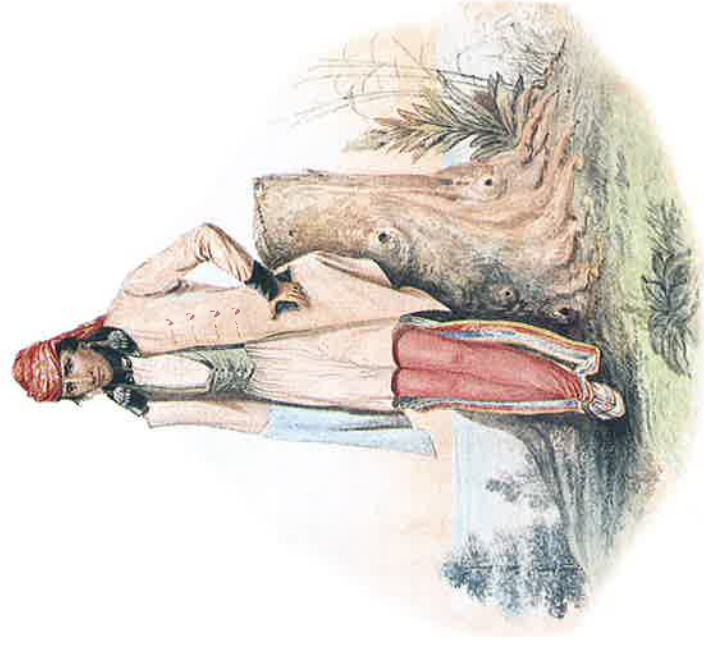
world express values about what is good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate, beautiful or ugly, holy or profane, through a system of aesthetic valuation. Aesthetics shape the qualitative and ethical perceptions of social life. As such, aesthetics permeate the political, religious, and economic realms of every society.

Aesthetic systems are culture-bound. Cultural misunderstandings and conflict can stem from contesting aesthetic and ethical systems. For example, the Enlightenment-era judgment that contrasted European civilization with the “primitive savages” of the New World can be understood as an essentially aesthetic evaluation deeply rooted in European philosophical and religious thought [4, 5]. The eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s appreciation of the “Noble Savage” represented a reversal of this aesthetic assessment, but his writing had more to do with a critique of European society than any real understanding of North American Indians.

Aesthetic systems change. They are permeable and easily absorb new ideas, attitudes, and shifting valuations. They are not always internally consistent. They are at once reenacted and reinvented by individuals, who, for the purposes of this book, are

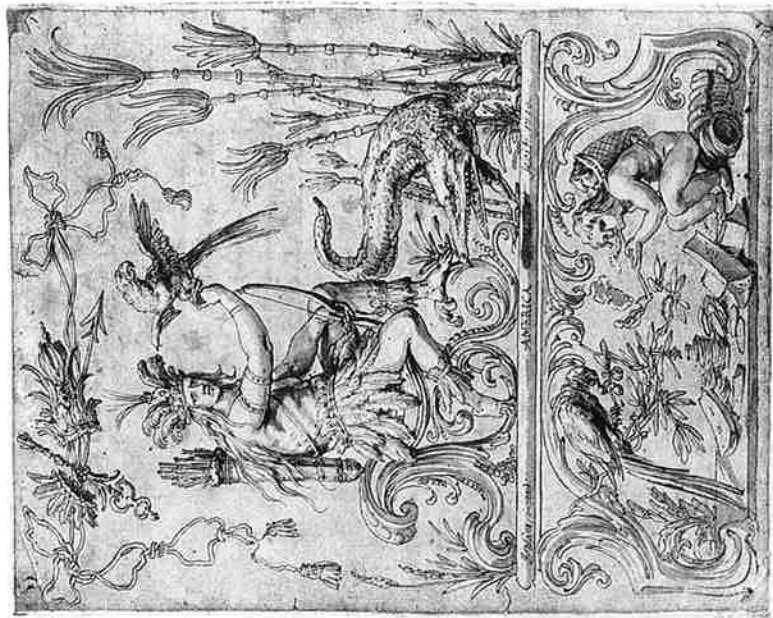


3 Ribbed melon jar, made by Nancy Youngblood, c. 1995. Youngblood’s art builds upon the blackware traditions of her ancestral home, Santa Clara Pueblo, in New Mexico. Her mother Meila Youngblood was a potter, as was Meila’s mother, the great Margaret Tafoya, Margaret’s mother Sara Fina, and very likely many mothers before that.



4 Watercolor portrait of Jean-Baptiste Brouillette, painted by George Winter, c. 1863–71, based upon a sketch of 1837. The clothing worn by Brouillette, a Miami *metis* or mixed-blood of Indiana, merited the following comment in the artist’s journal: “He wore a fine frock coat of the latest fashion. His ‘pes-mo-kin’ or shirt was white spotted with a small red figure, overhanging very handsome blue leggings, ‘winged’ with very rich silk ribbons of prismatic hues, exhibiting the [women’s] skillful handiwork.”

5 Godfried Maes, *America*, pen and ink with gray wash over black chalk, c. 1690–1700. Distinctions between broad categories of human beings, European and Native American, depend upon equally broad generalizations. Note that even in this extraordinarily early and allegorical representation of a Native American, the artist has included the stereotypical feathered headdress, bow, and quiver full of arrows.



artists and their audiences. For example, attitudes about media and design can change easily. In the eighteenth century women of the Great Lakes region quickly understood the aesthetic opportunities offered by trade goods such as cotton cloth, silk ribbon, and glass beads. They adopted new techniques to use these kinds of materials when decorating formal clothing. More impervious to change were the underlying ideas that valued formal clothing and its display during public events as an expression of self-worth. The powwows of today mentioned at the beginning of this chapter stand as a contemporary expression of that underlying aesthetic value. So at any particular time, aesthetic systems reach simultaneously back into the past and forward to the future. Some aspects of an aesthetic system respond to the topical and contemporary, others draw from the traditions of generations past. This perspective reveals to us the continuities and innovations visible in the many thousands of years of Native American art.

What is Native American art?

If art stems from an aesthetic system, and aesthetic systems develop and operate within the realm of culture, what, then, is Native American art? Native American aesthetics? Native American culture? The world of North America, prior to the identification of its inhabitants as Native Americans or American Indians, was a world unto itself. It had been home to human societies for at least 15,000 years before the voyages of Columbus. The breadth of its cultural diversity was equal to or surpassed that of any comparable landmass on the planet. At least 170 different languages were spoken in North America, probably more. The multitude of languages, life-ways, and conventions for understanding the world spawned as many understandings of art and aesthetics. Prior to contact with Europe, it would be difficult to imagine that any resident of North America thought self-consciously of him or herself as a Native American. People referred to their cultures by names that translate frequently as their language term for “the people.” *A’aninin*, “White Clay People” (later named the Gros Ventre by the French), for example, or *Mesquakie*, “Red Earth People” (later named the Renards, or Fox, by the French). The creation of a “Native American” identity was forced historically by the circumstances of North America’s conquest. It is now common to speak of Native American culture, Native American art, or even a Native American perception of the world. My point is that this very human construct stems from a long and difficult history. And the implications of this history need some clarification because not everybody means the same thing when they speak of things “Native American.”

The modern nations of the United States and Canada have invested a great deal of their cultural identities in the concept of “Native Americans.” Images of Native people have decorated national currencies. “Red Skins,” “Indians,” and “Braves” are names of sports teams. The “Cherokee” is a popular automobile. Images of people dressed in buckskin and feathers, which everyone is supposed to recognize as “American Indian,” are used to advertise products as varied as butter, fruit, and tobacco. It may be stating the obvious to say that these kinds of appropriations of names and images have little to do with the identities of real Native people. It may be less obvious to some, however, that the experiences of real Native people are lost from view when replaced by these images.

Today some artists of Native ancestry draw attention to the ironies inherent in this cultural image of the "Indian." David Bradley's *American Indian Gothic: Ghost Dancers* appropriates Grant Wood's iconic painting of American cultural identity [6]. Instead of the earnest prairie farmer with a pitchfork and his unmarried daughter, Bradley substitutes another couple presented in the guise of iconic Plains Indians with flowing hair, braids, beaded garments, and a tipi instead of a farmhouse in the background. The exchange of stereotypes might seem humorous, a sly nod to the recognition that Native people preceded the so-called pioneers of the plains. Those with more insider knowledge, however, might recognize the couple's garments as those worn by practitioners of the Ghost Dance mentioned in the title of the painting, a religious movement of revival and resistance that spread throughout several Plains reservations during the year 1889 and thereafter. At Wounded Knee, South Dakota, during the winter of 1890, the United States military confronted Lakota Ghost Dancers and killed more than three hundred of them, men, women, and children. Bradley's seemingly playful manipulations of stereotypes take on far more sobering ironies: the stark differences between stereotypes and the experiences of real people. One now thinks of the Grant Wood painting reminded of the fact that his stereotype of national character remains oblivious to the suffering that made the life of the prairie farmer possible.

So who are Native Americans? Ultimately, the identity of Native Americans stems from countless local cultures that, historically, have found themselves and their descendants bound together in the situation of contending with the consequences of conquest and colonial repression. Some authors of Native ancestry have attempted to contrast the essential differences between indigenous North American and European-derived cultures. It becomes obvious, however, that drawing these differences only becomes possible as the result of the encounter. The encounter and its historical consequences established the framework of difference on such a broad scale. The entire enterprise of cross-cultural reflection, us looking at them looking back at us, stems from a long history of such encounters and their consequences, and this book is a part of that. Native American art on the level of the *local* community is experienced through participation. When it is observed, recorded, translated, and analyzed, it becomes part of a cross-cultural discourse in which such broad terms as "Native American" might apply.



6 David Bradley, *American Indian Gothic: Ghost Dancers*, acrylic on canvas, 1989. Bradley's picture appropriates the famous Grant Wood composition, "American Gothic," replacing the farmer and his daughter with images of Plains Indians in Ghost Dance dress. The picture is a play on stereotypes, substituting one for another, and yet reminding the viewer of the very real, violent, and tragic events that stereotypes attempt to hide.

History and anthropology

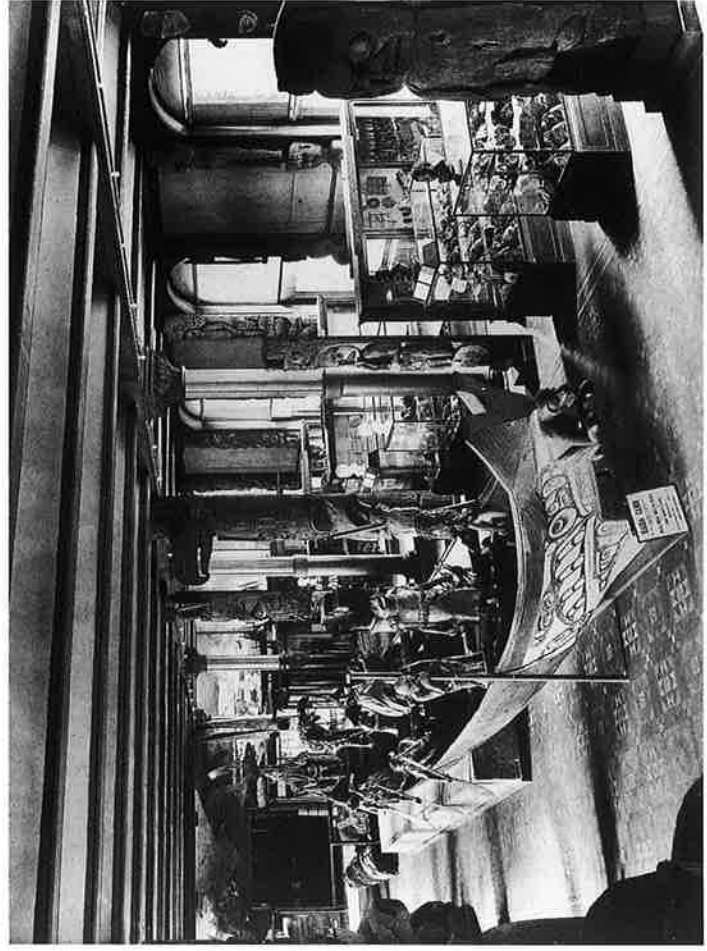
Most of the objects illustrated in this book belong to museums. Some art museums now collect and display items made by Native American artists, but the largest collections of Native American “material culture” reside in natural history and anthropology museums, such as the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, and the National Museum of Natural History (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, D.C. During the period between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I, hundreds of thousands of objects were excavated from the ground or collected (purchased, gifted, stolen) from Native people and placed in museums. During the first years of the twentieth century, museum collecting among Native communities became so competitive that curators often ran into each other in the field, racing to procure artifacts before their colleagues could find them. A vast network of traders and field agents who collected items from Native communities waited for the parade of curators to line up at their door and purchase them. What did museums want with all these things?

The growth of American natural history museums and their collections of Native American “artifacts” during the nineteenth century is tied closely to the development of American ethnology and anthropology. Early in the nineteenth century most ethnological thinking about American Indians concerned itself with speculations about the origins of the New World races and their connection to Genesis (the divine origin of human beings according to Judaic-Christian traditions). There was an implicit question here: how did the societies of the world become so diverse, with such evidently disparate capacities for technological invention and social complexity? To put the question in the language of the time, if all mankind descends from a common Genesis, why are “we” so civilized while “they” are so savage? Lewis Henry Morgan, an extremely influential American anthropological theorist of the mid-nineteenth century, addressed this question when he reasoned that complex societies grew from simple ones. The differences between societies, he thought, lay in the fact that some had grown more complex than others. Therefore, these differences reflected stages of growth from simple to complex or, to use his terms, from “savage” to “civilized.” Drawing upon the ideas of the English naturalist Charles Darwin, Morgan viewed social growth as a natural, almost biological process. He called it “social evolution.” From his point

of view, in its distant historical past European civilization had passed through a stage of “savagery” and now represented the uppermost stage of social evolution, which would continue to refine and improve itself through progress, while Native American societies remained at an abased evolutionary stage. Morgan and subsequent anthropologists reasoned that understanding processes of social evolution as a whole would profit from the study of what they considered to be living fossils of savagery: American Indians.

A society imagined to be stuck in an early stage of social evolution has no history. In fact, the only history of Native American societies that concerned many early anthropologists was their decline in the wake of American progress. These anthropologists, many of whom worked in the field and collected for museums, feared that Native American societies were destined to disappear altogether or would become so transformed by their contacts with civilization that they would no longer reflect accurately earlier stages of social evolution. They did not want their research tainted by “acculturation,” a term that refers to changes resulting from contacts and interactions between Native American and European American

7 North Pacific Hall, American Museum of Natural History, c. 1910. The canoe full of figures is intended to represent the moment when a Chilkat Tlingit chief and his entourage arrive at a village as guests of a potlatch. Captives hold the canoe steady in the surf with poles as the nobles sing songs for those waiting on shore. The entire display freezes the customs of Northwest Coast natives in a timeless “ethnographic present.”



societies. During their fieldwork, these anthropologists interviewed elders and mined their memories for accounts of the old days before whites had come. When making their collections, they avoided “trinkets” made for sale because, as one anthropologist argued, “They chiefly embody the ideas of the white race and in no proper sense represent Indian arts.” Anthropologists transcribed oral accounts of old ways and collected old things in order to preserve a record of Native American cultures in texts and museum collections that could be consulted long after Native societies had disappeared. When we read these older ethnographic texts or look at old museum representations of Native cultures (the North Pacific Hall at the American Museum of Natural History is a well-preserved example [7]), the cultures thus described seem situated in no particular historical moment, but timeless, forever enduring but, we know, enduring no more. We can call this conceptual moment of time without time, without history, the “ethnographic present.”

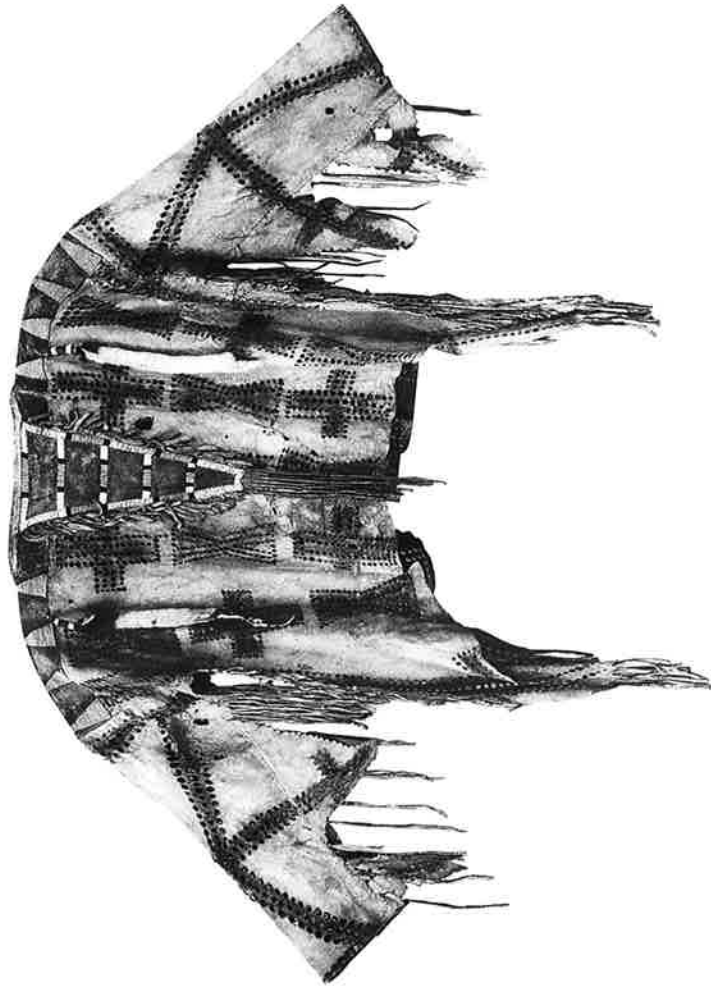
More recent anthropology looks critically at this legacy of ethnographic research. Anthropologists today reject a model of unilinear social evolution. They remain interested in studying the dynamics of culture change but have become far more sensitive to the particularities of local histories. In this light, the history of the relations between Native communities and white outsiders becomes profoundly interesting: the histories of resistance, adaptation, and transformation (Gerald Vizenor’s “survivance”). When earlier generations of anthropologists in the field failed to situate themselves historically within the context of the communities they studied, the texts they produced often failed to take notice of what was going on around them, how the acculturation they dismissed was part and parcel of a local history of culture change. As for those of us interested in the objects they collected for museums, we are less interested in them as examples of primitive technologies or design and more interested in the particular histories of their creation, use, and circulation. The so-called trinkets made for sale become extremely important in this regard, as artists adapted their craft to the possibilities of new consumers. And, not surprisingly, many of these kinds of objects ended up in museums when early anthropologists collected them while remaining ignorant of their local histories. Situating these objects historically dismantles the monolithic construct of the ethnographic present and restores the potential of a fuller understanding.

Artists

Individual artists are largely absent from the historical record of Native America. Unlike the art histories of Europe, which are largely biography-based, Native American art history has been hard pressed to recover the names of the people who made things. It is easy to see why. When objects were collected as “artifacts,” they were intended to be representative examples of the kinds of things that the *culture* produced. With this emphasis on culture, the identity of the individual is repressed.

Focusing on artists, however, their motivations, social relations, and the cultural significance of the things they make, brings into light the aesthetic system in which they operate. We find culture through the individual, through personal experience, not the other way around. The objects artists make are not simply *cultural* expressions, but the creations of individuals intended to fulfill cultural and social purposes. Their imagery, form, design, symbolism, and iconography are intended to bring the ideas that informed their creation into collective perception and help motivate social action.

Consider for example, Big Plume, a Blackfeet man, and his role in the creation of the “Lord’s Shirt” now at the Denver Art Museum [8]. Sometime before 1850, when Big Plume was on his first war expedition and still quite young, he became separated from his comrades. While lost and isolated, he dreamed of a shining figure who comforted him each night for four successive nights. On the last night, the shining figure wore a shirt pierced with holes and instructed Big Plume to make one just like it. Big Plume understood that the dream was in fact a spiritual encounter and that the right to make the shirt had been given to him, along with substantial spiritual powers. It was a common understanding among the Blackfeet, and many other tribes as well, that dreams sometimes offered such opportunities. Painted images for shield designs or lodges (tipis), as well as designs for items of ceremonial dress or special weapons, might be offered in dreams, and these things held great potential for personal power and accomplishment. Big Plume made the shirt, very likely with some help, and enjoyed its benefits. But then, through a formal ritual of transfer, he gave it to a man named Bear Chief. When Big Plume gave his shirt away, he did not lose anything, because he retained the right to make another. What he gained, in fact, was the formalized relationship with Bear Chief and the social recognition of his spiritual power. Big Plume made a second shirt and gave this one to Chewing Black Bones. Bear Chief, who now also possessed the right to

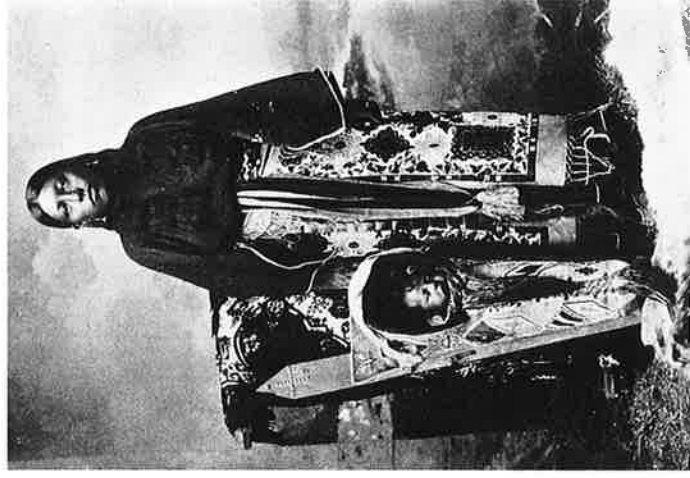


8 "Lord's Shirt," by an unknown Blackfeet artist, c. 1930. The shirt originated in a vision experienced by a man named Big Plume and was made in at least five different versions.

reproduce the shirt, made a third version, which he gave to Albert Mad Plume. When this third shirt was destroyed in a fire, Albert Mad Plume made a fourth one. In the 1930s a fifth was made by a man named Three Calf, who had received the right to reproduce the shirt from Chewing Black Bones. It became known as the "Lord's Shirt," an awkward translation that refers to its spiritual origin. Potentially, many more shirts might have resulted from the original experience of Big Plume, but their proliferation depended upon formal rights of transfer that created indelible social bonds between those who owned them. The shirt, in fact, is simply the material expression of Big Plume's gift of spiritual power. The shirts were useless unless the spiritual and ritual knowledge remained tied to them, and this was accomplished through rituals of formal transfer from one recipient to another. The story of Big Plume and his shirt is useful to keep in mind since it illustrates a pattern of visionary origin and formalized circulation of art forms that seems to have recurred frequently in North America.

Art making, at some level, was a day-to-day activity for many in indigenous North America. Women of the Plains region customarily made and decorated clothing for their families. But there were always some who excelled. Among the nineteenth-century Kiowa of Oklahoma, it was customary to honor a favored child, an *atiday*, with a cradle or baby carrier elaborately decorated with glass bead embroidery [9]. The parents might commission women widely recognized for their skills to make one for them. Or a female relation might be asked, if the family was fortunate enough to include a skilled beadworker among their kin. Over the years, such cradles have been separated from their families and found their way to museum collections. Barbara Hall, a scholar and museum curator, has been able to discover the names of several women who made cradles many years ago by interviewing their descendants and studying historic photographs.

The artists' experience reveals the family structure of support and lineage descent of training. In many instances, it was customary for artists to learn from elder relations, either biological or fictive. Excellence of artistic production led to personal and family prominence. Among many Native communities, the creation



9 Photograph of Lizzie Woodard (Kiowa) and child in a beaded cradle, c. 1890.

10 Headdress frontlet, attributed to Albert Edward Edenshaw (Haida), c. 1870. This carving tells the story of a man who captured and killed a sea-monster and now wears its skin. The man possessed the power to dive beneath the sea and hunt whales, like the one he holds in his hands.



and distribution of art were often tied to the obligations and potentialities of leadership.

In this regard, we might think about the life and art of Albert Edward Edenshaw, as brought to light by the research of art historian Robin Wright. Born sometime around 1812 in a small village on the Queen Charlotte Islands, also known as Haida Gwaii, Edenshaw grew up to be one of the most renowned chiefs of the nineteenth-century Haida. Like his maternal uncle and great-uncle, through which the name *Tidansuu* (sic, later anglicized to “Edenshaw”) had passed to him, Albert was also an artist. As Robin Wright explains, “Artists with a professional status on the northern Northwest Coast were usually members of the noble class who inherited their position and were trained as artists as well as leaders.” Albert Edenshaw carved monumental memorial poles from great cedar logs for his wife’s family, a customary obligation between clans joined by marriage. He trained himself as a blacksmith and, in one notable instance, salvaged guns burned in a fire on a shipwreck, repaired them, and sold them to increase his

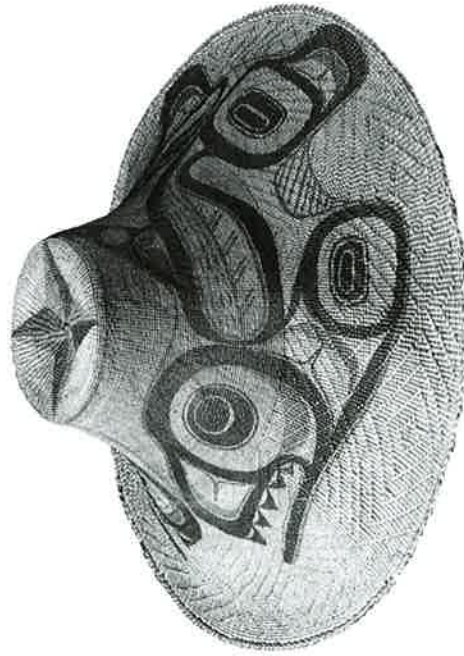
wealth. Some of his carvings survive today in museums. A frontlet (carved panel) for a headdress he made illustrates the Haida story of the young hero who killed a Wasgo, or sea-wolf [10]. In the carving, the hero wears its pelt like a headdress and holds a whale in his hands. Albert Edenshaw’s skills and accomplishments as an artist were part and parcel of the obligations stemming from his noble status and they were critical to his success as a leader. As we shall see, art in indigenous North America frequently offered a path to social recognition and influence.

The perspective of the artist’s experience also permits more insightful consideration of those artists who once negotiated between cultures through exchanges of gifts or sales to tourists, and those who operate in environments today that include both the art studio and local communities. The life of Albert Edenshaw’s nephew, Charles Edenshaw, represents an important transition in this regard. Although he produced many objects customary to Haida social life, he is best known for his carvings of argillite, a black slate-like stone found on the Queen Charlotte Islands [11]. Charles trained under his uncle and assisted him with several important memorial poles in the villages of Skidegate and Masset, perhaps completing some commissions on his own. A number of frontlet headdresses are also attributed to his hand, but most of his known work was made for sale to outsiders. Charles also worked closely with ethnographers, making models of noble houses and house poles that accurately reproduced their complex designs for museum displays, and offered anthropologists invaluable detailed accounts of crest rights, genealogies, and



11 Charles Edenshaw (Haida), carving in his home, c. 1906. The argillite model of a memorial pole standing on the box in front of the artist is like the many he made for purchase by visitors to the Northwest Coast.

12 Painted spruce root hat with whale design, c. 1905. The hat was woven by Isabella Edenshaw and the whale design was painted by her husband Charles Edenshaw (Haida).



traditional stories. Late in his life, Charles lived and worked in Masset with his wife Isabella, herself an artist who wove baskets and hats of spruce root [12]. The argillite carvings, silver bracelets, painted hats and baskets they made could be purchased at a trading post at Port Essington and they often traveled to the larger towns and cities on the Northwest Coast – Juneau, Ketchikan, and Victoria – to sell their work. Charles Edenshaw is considered today one of the most skilled, prolific, and influential artists of the Northwest Coast. He represents that historical moment, which occurred at many different times in many different places, as we shall see, when artists of indigenous America expanded their view from the local community to encompass the larger world that quickly came to surround them.

The expanse of that view, and its artistic potential when reconciling local with more worldly experience, is revealed in the biographies of many Native artists of the twentieth century. There is the case of the late George Morrison, who grew up with his Ojibwa family on the Grand Portage reservation on the Lake Superior shore of Minnesota. His paintings are best understood in the company of the Abstract Expressionist artists Franz Klein, Clyfford Still, and Jackson Pollock, who were his contemporaries and colleagues in New York City during the 1940s and 1950s. Late in his life, George Morrison told me that he “never used being Indian” in his work. There is no overt reference to American Indian themes, symbols, or stereotypes in any of his paintings, save perhaps for his focus on the subject of the northern Lake Superior shore which was the home of his childhood and the

home of his senior years. Although active politically and culturally in Minneapolis, where he taught for many years, it is probably fair to say that Morrison’s most powerful experiences of being “American Indian” stemmed from the sights, sounds, and feeling of his home community, Grand Portage. The paintings produced at Red Rock, his studio on Lake Superior, are profoundly authentic to that experience [172].

The lives of countless additional artists of Native American ancestry, active over a span that amounts to many thousands of years, remain hidden from view, but every object they made reflects the trace of their hands. With a focus on the artists and the social lives of the objects they made [13], even when their individual identities remain obscure, the significance of imagery, form, design, symbolism, and iconography becomes easier to grasp and understand. Although we can only approximate the meanings of many of the objects illustrated in this book, remembering that their meaning resides somewhere in the interplay between artist and audience provides us with a valuable starting point for interpretation.

13 Ceremonial feather belt made by a Maidu artist of California sometime between 1855 and 1870. Curator Stewart Culin purchased this belt for the Brooklyn Museum from Ann Barber in Chico, California, on 6 July 1908. The belt had been given to Mrs. Barber by her first husband, Pomaho, on the occasion of their marriage.

