

History & Culture

*Beauty before me, I walk with.
Beauty behind me, I walk with.
Beauty above me, I walk with.
Beauty below me, I walk with.
Beauty all around me, I walk with.*
Navajo Night Chant

The Art of Daily Life

There is no equivalent in the many Native American languages for the word *art*. Yet the objects here suggest that Native Americans are a highly spiritual people who create objects of extraordinary beauty. In Native American thought there is also no distinction between what is beautiful or functional, and what is sacred or secular. Design goes far beyond concerns of function, and beauty is much more than simple appearances. For many native peoples, beauty arises from living in harmony with the order of the universe. The concerns and aspirations of a vital contemporary American Indian population changes as the world changes. Today some Native American artists continue traditions of their ancestors, while others transform those traditions in new and innovative ways.

An Introduction to Native American History and Culture

A Living Culture

Think not of indigenous cultures and nations all dead and gone from this sacred land. The physical world is not at all silent or what it seems. The nations live! My spirit lives! The spiritual world is everywhere!. If you listen, you will hear. There are so many ancient voices shouting from this sacred land. In the distance, I hear one of a thousand songs of an ancient spiritual man...

- Anna Lee Walters, Pawnee and Otoe-Missouria

American Indians are not extinct people. Their cultures have a past and present and a future. Generalizations about Native people contribute to stereotypic notions that make no allowance for individuality or for any possibility of change over time. Native American objects reflect aspects of cultures that should be ascribed only to the people who produced them and to the particular time in which the objects were made. In doing so, we respect the diversity of Native people and acknowledge that their cultures, like all others, and are not fixed in time.

Ideas about Art

In the past, Native Americans did not create art for its own sake. The form and decoration of handmade objects evolved out of daily needs and spiritual beliefs over thousands of years. Art, beauty, and spirituality are so intertwined in the daily life of traditional Native Americans that it is nearly impossible to speak of them separately.



Makah
Northwest Coast region (United States)
Basket, 20th century
Grass
Gift of Stanley H. Brackett 75.13.2



Nicolas Poussin
The Death of Germanicus, 1627
oil on canvas
The William Hood Dunwoody Fund,
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 58.28

Art in Western European tradition developed in a very different way. Paintings were the most esteemed form of fine art, with history painting considered the most important of painting types. European utilitarian objects were considered craft rather than fine art.

Spirituality

Many Native American people traditionally believe in a spiritual realm that exists beyond the tangible world. Access to this spiritual world is gained through dreams, visions, and ceremonies. Many Native people also believe in a single creative force. The name for this spiritual force varies from one group to another: it is called orenda (Or-END-a) by the Iroquois, manitou (MAN-e-too) by the Algonquin, and wakan (wah-KON) by the Lakota.

Historically, Native Americans' lives were shaped by their spiritual beliefs. Most Native people believed that they were connected to every other element of creation. Each animal, tree, or rock had its own spirit through which an individual could establish contact with the spirit world. The survival and well-being of Native people was dependent on maintaining harmony with the earth. Many contemporary Native people continue to hold these traditional beliefs.

Warfare

Although American Indian people engaged in warfare before European contact, as well as later in defense of their homelands, the image of the Native people as savage warriors has been grossly exaggerated. Native people who did engage in warfare were no more or less savage than other societies of the period. Although scalping has often been associated with Indian warfare, Europeans may have introduced it on this continent. Europeans certainly encouraged scalping, supplying metal scalping knives to replace flint or horn tools and offering bounties in the 18th century for the scalps of Indian men, women and children.

North American Indians did not have armies, but some Native cultures had military societies. Many Native people engaged in sporadic warfare with their neighbors for purposes of self-protection or acquiring resources, for revenge, but mainly for honor. In many societies, a man gained honor in battle. For example, among the Plains people, counting coup (to touch a living enemy and escape unharmed) was a more honorable act than to kill an enemy.

Oral Tradition

Most Native Americans passed their history and traditions from one generation to the next through the spoken word. Largely unknown to many non-Indians, the stories of American Indians are as rich as the mythology of the ancient Greeks. They explain the nature of creation and the universe, serve as a model of human behavior, and transmit history and tradition. Storytellers who were usually older members of the community, often grandparents, handed down these stories. In some instances, the stories are an integral part of works of art, communicating visually the rich cultural heritage of Native American people.

History

Too often in the past the history of America has been written as if it began with the arrival of the Europeans. This attitude excludes the long heritage of Native people who have lived in North America for tens of thousands of years (to traditional people, since the "beginning of time"). Five hundred years ago at the point of initial contact with Europeans millions of culturally diverse people speaking hundreds of different languages populated North America. The environments in which they lived shaped their lifestyles. Depending on the resources available to them, some were farmers or gatherers, others fished and hunted. Many tribes lived in one place most of the time, while others were nomadic hunters following the migratory patterns of large game animals, such as buffalo.

These different economies gave rise to diverse cultural characteristics and complex social, political, and economic systems. In the northeast Woodlands region, six nations formed the Iroquois Confederacy, aspects of which served as a model for the makers of the U.S. Constitution. Highly complex agricultural societies existed in the Southwest and Midwest for centuries prior to the arrival of the Europeans. In the Southwest, Native people developed irrigation systems that exist today, some still in use. Vast trade routes distributed everything from shells to fabric among the many cultures that populated the North American continent.

Why "Indians"?

Despite the five centuries that have elapsed since Native people and early explorers came into contact, the history and culture of Native people remains unknown or misunderstood by many non-Indian people. The misunderstanding began early. Christopher Columbus set out to explore Japan, Korea, China, and India, which were collectively referred to at the time as the East Indies. Believing that he had arrived in the Indies when he reached the lands of the New World, Columbus mistakenly called the Native people "Indians". This term has prevailed into the 20th century. Today, most North American Natives prefer to be called Native American or American Indian, although the majority of Native people originally referred to themselves in their own languages by words meaning "the people." For example the Ojibwe people, often referred to as Chippewa by non-Indians, call themselves "Anishinabe" which is the Ojibwe word for "the people."

Spanish Exploration

During the first half of the 16th century, several Spanish expeditions explored regions of the continent to the north of present-day Mexico. The earliest documented encounter with Native people occurred in 1513 when Ponce de Leon, who colonized Puerto Rico, sailed north to the peninsula that is now Florida. As a preemptive strike against the French who were exploring to the north, the Spanish made several attempts at colonization. They established the first settlement of St. Augustine in what is now Florida in 1565. In what is today New Mexico, a large group of settlers drove out the Pueblo people in 1598 to establish a Spanish colony. By 1610, the Spanish established their capital in Santa Fe, which they maintained until 1680 when the pueblo people revolted and in turn, drove the Spanish out. Fourteen years later the Spanish regained control.



Maya Mask of a Spanish Conquistador
19th century
wood, pigment
The Paul C. Johnson, Jr. Fund, The
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 99.3.2

French Exploration

At the same time that the Spanish were exploring the southern regions of the continent, the French established themselves in the Northeast, capitalizing on the abundant variety of fish, and establishing a lucrative fur trade with Native people of the Woodlands area. The French reached the Great Lakes by 1623. During the early 1700s, they pushed south from their settlements in Canada to the interior of the continent. Even though this land had been home to Native people for thousands of years, the French were able to establish dominion in the area from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico, which they named Louisiana after their king, Louis XIV.

The English and the Dutch

Along the Atlantic seaboard, the English and the Dutch joined in competition for the land of the New World. Before the end of the 16th century, the English had attempted to establish colonies on Roanoke Island off the coast of North Carolina. The first permanent English settlement was to the north at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. Two years later, the Dutch founded the colony of New Amsterdam (today's New York). It was here that the infamous trade occurred in which the Dutch acquired

Manhattan Island for goods that were valued at \$24 at that time. By the time the pilgrims settled at Plymouth Colony (Massachusetts) in 1620, the Native people held deep resentments against white settlers. Despite these hard feelings, Samoset, a Pemaquid chief, greeted the colonists in English and gave assistance to the newcomers. In 1625, the first deed transferring land from the American Indians to the Europeans was recorded. Samoset did not consider deeds important, unable to foresee the consequences of the European idea of exclusive land rights. Samoset, like other Native people, believed that the land belonged to everyone.

The Impact of Europeans

The three centuries that followed the early exploration and settlement of North America by Europeans witnessed the transformation of American Indians from free people who populated the entire continent to a vastly reduced numbers confined to reservations. In the beginning European colonists often reported encounters with Native people who were friendly and helpful to them. But Native people stood in the way of what colonists wanted. The motivation of European-Americans, which was the acquisition of land, was always in direct opposition to the desire of the Native people to live lightly on the earth in accordance with their own traditions. In many instances Native people were simply crowded out of their lands. When it was necessary to forcibly remove them, they were forcibly removed. Some Native people were used as unpaid laborers while others were kidnapped and sold into the slave trade. European diseases, for which Native people had no immunity, wiped out entire populations in many areas. By the middle of the 19th century, the Native population was reduced by one-half to two-thirds its size two hundred years earlier.

The United States

In 1776, the newly formed United States of America joined in the competition for land. Even though the U.S. government theoretically protected the rights of the Indians to their homelands, Indian people were coerced into signing treaties that relinquished their titles to lands. In response to pressure from settlers for additional land, Congress passed the Removal Bill in 1830, giving President Andrew Jackson the power to exchange land west of the Mississippi River for Indian homelands in the Southeast. The western land was loosely described as "an ample district west of the Mississippi, not within the states of Missouri and Louisiana or the territory of Arkansas." Those Indian people who voluntarily agree to the exchange were relocated in an area of present-day Oklahoma. Those who refused were forcibly removed. The Native people were to be guaranteed rights to the new land forever in exchange for their homelands.

The Regulation Act of 1834 prohibited non-Indians from settling in Indian lands and required them to have license to trade with Native Americans, but waves of white settlers continued to move west across the Mississippi River anyway. Once territories were established in Iowa and Wisconsin, it became necessary to move the Indian "frontier" from the Mississippi River to the 95th meridian. The new line extended from the Lake of the Woods near the Minnesota-Canada border, south through Minnesota and Iowa, along the western border of Missouri, Arkansas and Louisiana into Texas. Military forts like Fort Snelling were established to maintain this frontier. (In 1858, Minnesota was made a state. It extended west of the 95th meridian, 100 miles beyond the "permanent frontier" of the American Indians.)

The Conquest of the West

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 precipitated another wave of migration along the Santa Fe and Oregon trails. Settlers and miners overran Indian lands, obliterating their villages. Through a combination of disease and genocide, an estimated 70,000 Native people died in the west in the decade between 1849 and 1859.

By the outbreak of the Civil War, thirty million Euro-Americans populated the country to the east of the Mississippi and along the West Coast. A sizeable population of Africans brought into this country as a result of the slave trade also lived to the east. Although the war had temporarily slowed the movement of settlers from the east to the west, it was renewed with even greater force at the war's end. The decades from 1860 to 1890 that gave rise to the legends of the Wild West-of cowboys, range wars, cattle drives, and homesteaders-were sadly the same time in which the American Indian people faced the final conquest of their lands.

The Establishment of Reservations

During the last half of the 19th century, hundreds of battles were waged on the plains and to the west. Lives of both American Indians and Euro-Americans were lost, families were displaced, and treaties were made and broken. In the view of the government, the ultimate solution in the West, as had already occurred in the East, was to confine the Indians to reservations. Reservations are areas of usually very poor lands with specific boundaries, to which specific tribes were assigned to live. The assignments were made with little sensitivity. Tribes that were traditional enemies were sometimes placed together on a single reservation.

In an attempt to control the Plains Indians, the U.S. government encouraged the slaughter of the wild buffalo, the primary food source of the Native people. Once exterminated, the government believed that the Indians would have no choice but to willingly move on the reservations where they would receive food rations. Eventually, that assumption proved to be correct, but not before the Plains people waged a valiant fight.

The Final Battles

In a treaty negotiated in 1868 with Red Cloud, the chief of the Oglala Lakota band, the government recognized the Black Hills in South Dakota as part of the Sioux reservation. Because gold deposits were found there, the government unsuccessfully attempted to purchase the land from the Indians. The Black Hills was a sacred place to the Lakota people. The struggle for the Black Hills culminated in 1876 at the Battle of Little Bighorn where the combined forces of several Sioux tribes defeated General George Custer and the U.S. Army's 7th Cavalry. Although the Lakota won, the Army pursued them relentlessly, and ultimately their ability to resist was diminished by the extermination of the buffalo. The last Sioux bands were confined to reservations in 1878.

The Ghost Dance, which spread to the Plains from Nevada, prophesied the return of the buffalo and the disappearance of the white people. The Ghost Dance movement was viewed by many Native people as a "last chance" for the return of their old way of life, but the U.S. government viewed the movement as another threat. In the final episode of Indian wars, the U.S. Cavalry massacred defenseless men, women, and children of a starving Sioux band at Wounded Knee, South Dakota - an act that was rewarded by Congressional Medals of Honor for the Cavalry soldiers. The dispute over the Black Hills did not, however, end at Wounded Knee. Currently it is being fought in the courts rather than on the battlefield.



One Bull; Hunkpapa Lakota, Custer's War, about 1900, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund, 94.47.1

Euro-American & Native American military historians still discuss the Battle of Little Big Horn, but accounts through Indian eyes are relatively rare. One Bull fought in the 1876 battle & later painted this comprehensive view of events.

Acculturation

The U.S. government attempted to, force the Native people on the reservation to accept the cultural practices of the Euro-Americans. However, many reservations created after the Civil War were little more than prison camps. The reservation lands were often unproductive and rations given to people were inadequate, so many died of starvation and disease. Some reservations required that Indians apply for permits to leave the reservation. To discourage Native people from retaining their own cultures, reservation officials denied them the right to speak their own languages or to practice their most sacred ceremonies. Native American children were often taken from their families and placed in boarding schools against their parents' wishes. Once removed from their own traditions, the children were more likely to become assimilated into white culture.

Allotment of Land

Government policy towards Indian land changed from tribal ownership of reservation land to individual ownership of lots of land with the passage of the Dawes Allotment Act in 1887. The Act was implemented to give each American Indian a plot of land with the intention of teaching them to farm and hasten assimilation of Native people into the Euro-American culture. In order for the individual allotments to be made, Native people had to surrender their reservation lands to the government. After the government allotted 169 acres to each adult and 80 acres to each child, the rest of the reservation land was offered for sale to non-Indians. Of the 138 million acres of land in Indian possession at the onset of the Dawes Act, only 48 million acres remained in Indian hands by 1932. Today, only 2 percent of the land of the 48 contiguous states belong to American Indians. The people of the Red Lake Reservation in Minnesota take great pride in the fact that they never surrendered their land for allotment. Today their reservation is among the few lands in America never owned by Euro-Americans.

Native Americans Today

The history of the Native American people is a story of loss, but more than that, it is a story of resilient strength, and continuity. Despite tremendous obstacles, Native Americans have survived. Although their population was decimated, they have recovered. In 1917, for the first time since the arrival of Europeans on this continent, more Native Americans were born than died. Today approximately 2,500,000 Native Americans live in the United States. And, the world they live in is changing. Native Americans are renewing their own pride in their traditions. Education has enabled the Native people to benefit themselves and to accomplish much in the outside world. Today, many American Indian people regard themselves as nations within a nation, governed by their own tribal governments. They have hope for the future.

Tribal Web Sites

Tribal names & their meanings: <http://members.tripod.com/~PHILKON/names.html>

Kwakiutl web site: <http://www.umista.org/main/>

Haida (and Tlingit) web site: <http://www.tlingit-haida.org/>

Makah web site: <http://www.makah.com/>

Comanche web site: <http://www.comanchenation.com/>

Iroquois web site: <http://www.sixnations.org/>

Pawnee web site: <http://www.pawneenation.org/>

Navajo web site: <http://www.navajo.org/>

Hopi web site: <http://www.hopi.nsn.us/>

Glossary

abstract

used to describe a composition based on forms existing in nature that are reduced or simplified and may no longer be recognizable. Morrison's collage is an abstract landscape.



George Morrison, Anishinabe (Ojibwe) 1919-2000
Woodlands region (United States)
Collage IX: Landscape, 1974
Wood
The Frances E. Andrews Fund 75.24

acculturation

a process that is intended to condition a person of one culture to the ways of another culture.

adobe

sun-dried clay brick used for dwellings in the Southwest



An Adobe Building

Anishinabe

means "first people." The term refers to the native people of the central and northern Great Lakes areas. They are the same people who are today known as Ojibwe and Chippewa.

assimilation

the cultural absorption of a minority group into the dominant culture

balance

an equal distribution of weight. Symmetry is the term used to describe balance when the same elements exist on either side of a central axis. The Navajo bracelet is symmetrical. Asymmetrical balance occurs when unlike elements having equal weight are placed opposite each other. The upper section of the bandolier bag is asymmetrical. The lower portion is symmetrical.



Walter Henry
Diné (Navajo)
Southwest region (United States)
Bracelet, about 1935
Silver
Bequest of Virginia Doneghy,
90.58.77



Anishinabe (Ojibwe)
Woodlands region (United States)
Bandolier Bag, early 20th century
Beadwork on muslin and black
velvet, wool yarn
Bequest of Dorothy Record
Bauman 74.63.8

Chippewa

variant of the name Ojibwe. Today, it is used interchangeably with Ojibwe by many people.

coiling technique

a method of forming pottery by hand. A coil or rope of clay is wound around in successive layers and pinched together to form the walls. Baskets are also made by coiling, using plant materials.



Coiling Technique

collage

a work of art that has been made by gluing materials to a surface. The term comes from the French word meaning "paste."

Dakota

the eastern branch of the people often referred to as Sioux. Dakota means "friend" and is also the name given to the people's language.

Dine

the original name of the Navajo. The term means "the people."

diversity

the quality of being different; of great variety

firing

the process of heating ceramic pottery to a high temperature to harden it.

geometric shape

a regular shape such as a square, rectangle, circle, or triangle. The opposite is an organic shape, which resembles curving forms in nature. The bandolier bag has both geometric and organic shapes.

Haida

tribe of the Northwest Coast Indians

hozho

the Navajo concept of beauty

Lakota

the western branch of the Plains people frequently referred to as Sioux.

maize

a crop cultivated by Native Americans. Modern corn is a kind of maize.

Mound Builders

The name given by archaeologists to the native people who constructed earthen mounds along the Mississippi River.

nation

a group of people connected by lineage or language.

Navajo

native people who migrated from northwestern Canada and settled in the Southwest around 1400. They call themselves Dine.

nomad

a person who moves around rather than living in a permanent location.

Nootka

Northwest Coast native people who resided in the Vancouver Island area.

Northwest Coast people

those native people who lived in the area along the Pacific Coast from Alaska to northern California. Some of the Northwest Coast tribes include the Haida, Nootka, Tlingit, and Bella Bella.

Oglala

band of the Lakota tribe.



Anishinabe (Ojibwe)
Woodlands region (United States)
Bandolier Bag, early 20th century
Beadwork on muslin and black
velvet, wool yarn
Bequest of Dorothy Record
Bauman 74.63.8

Ojibwe

another name for the Anishinabe people who lived in the Great Lakes region. Many Ojibwe people live in Minnesota today.

Pictograph

a pictorial image that has a specific meaning. Pictographs constituted a type of written communication for many native people.

Pima

native people who live along the rivers of southern Arizona.

Plains people

many different groups of native people who lived between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains from the provinces of Canada to Texas. Some of the Plains tribes include the Pawnee, Comanche, Kiowa, Dakota, and Lakota.

potlatch

an elaborate ceremony of the Northwest Coast people held to celebrate an event. At this ceremony, the host gives away large quantities of material possessions.

pueblo

a type of multi-unit adobe dwelling built by Southwest native people. Pueblo is a Spanish word meaning "town" that was also applied to the people who lived in these dwellings.

reservation

land with specific boundaries to which native people were assigned by the U.S. government.

Seneca

Woodlands people who lived in the area of present day New York state.

Shoshone

native people of the Great Basin. Today, many Shoshone people live on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming.

Sioux

a group of Northern Plains people. Their name is a corruption of an Anishinabe word meaning "snake like" or "enemy." Their original name is Dakota, which means "friend."

Southwest people

those native people who live in the southern area of Utah and Colorado and throughout New Mexico and Arizona. Examples of Southwestern tribes include the Navajo, Pima, Hopi, and Zuni.

Stereotype

a fixed idea about a person or group of persons held by a number of people. A stereotype does not allow for individuality and is often based on misconceptions. For example, many people believe that all Native Americans rode horses, hunted buffalo, and wore feather headdresses.



One Bull
Hunkpapa Lakota
Custer's War, about 1900
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund, 94.47.1



Pima Ceremonial Ki, photo by E. Curtis, on ArtsConnectEd

Sun Dance

the most sacred ceremony of the Plains people.

tribe

a term used by both Indians and non Indians to refer to groups of Native Americans sharing a common linguistic and cultural heritage. Some Native Americans prefer to speak not of "tribe" but of "nation."

two-dimensional

used to describe an object that has only height and width. The elkhide is two-dimensional.

utilitarian

pertaining to an object that is functional, made for a specific use

Wakan-tanka

in the Lakota language means "the Great Mystery." The name refers to the creator of the earth.

wigwam

a Woodlands dwelling made of saplings and bark or hide

Woodlands people

the many native people who occupied a vast region of forested area from the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi River. Examples include the Ojibwe, Seneca, and Iroquois.

Zuni

Pueblo people of New Mexico.



Attributed to Cadzi Cody, Wind River Shoshone
Great Plains region (United States)
Wyoming, Wind River Reservation
Scenes of Plains Indian Life, about 1900
Elk hide with pigment
Gift of Bruce Dayton, 85.92



Seneca
Woodlands region (United States)
Feast ladle, 19th century
Wood
The Christina N. and Swan J.
Turnblad Memorial Fund 89.89.2