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# Identified Indian Objects: An Examination of Category

REBECCA S. HERNANDEZ

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In writing this article, I am responding to issues made apparent by my own research on the representation of Native American culture in public spaces, specifically, on the exhibition of objects in museums and culture centers. What began as an interest in gaining a better understanding of how American Indian objects are identified in the written materials that often inform museum didactic labeling and text panels, resulted in my realization that such terminology was applied inaccurately and inconsistently. This misapplication contributes to a prevailing ignorance of the complexities of Native cultures and lifeways. The myriad meanings associated with terms attached to current descriptors have confounded the task of writing about American Indian material culture and/or representing it in public space. My research—based on data gathered from scholarly and professional texts in the areas of fine arts, culture studies, art history, museum studies, public history, folklore, artists' biographies, anthropology, archaeology, and American Indian studies—and my work as a trained artist, museum consultant, and scholar indicates a need to clarify the terminology and, perhaps, to standardize it.

Writing and teaching about the representation of culture leads to some perplexing questions. Once in a museum-studies course a student asked me, "What is a *traditional* Native object?" The question was prompted by the use of the word on an exhibit label. This seemingly simple question led me to an exploration of the profound philosophies and pragmatic ramifications underlying the use of certain terminology. The answer became more of a philosophical quagmire than an actual response. As I conducted my own inquiry, the same questions continually arose about words such as *authentic*, *genuine*, and *Indian-made*. What did all of this terminology really mean? Was it

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dependent on context? Did it vary by academic discipline? Did the makers of the objects use different terms than those used by museum professionals to describe their creations?<sup>1</sup>

In searching for answers to these questions, I have formulated some preliminary assumptions: (1) there is a common yet unstandardized lexicon attached to American Indian objects, and (2) the terms currently in use fail to describe or define objects adequately or consistently. Ruth Phillips and Janet Catherine Berlo write about the difficulty of organizing objects based on the term *art* in the introduction to their book *Native North American Art*:<sup>2</sup>

However carefully we distinguish certain objects as “art” (and, by implication, relegate others to the realm of “non-art”), we enter inevitably into a cross-cultural morass. As a judgment made in relation to historical objects, the distinction imposes a Western dichotomy on things made by people who do not make the same categorical distinction and whose own criteria for evaluating objects have often differed considerably.<sup>3</sup>

Anthropologist James Clifford mentions similar problems with the act of collecting and thus organizing objects:

It is important to analyze how powerful discriminations made at particular moments constitute the general system of objects within which valued artifacts circulate and make sense. Far-reaching questions are thereby raised. What criteria validate an authentic cultural or artistic product? What are the differential values placed on old and new creations? What moral and political criteria justify “good,” responsible, systematic practices? The system [now in place] classifies objects and assigns them relative value.<sup>4</sup>

Although the lexicon is flawed, creating new terms and/or meanings to replace the existing ones will not resolve the taxonomic ambiguities. Therefore I have concluded that it is necessary to analyze the existing lexicon more carefully. To that end, I have examined and delineated the existing terms and descriptions typically attached to those terms, an examination that I believe renders the classificatory systems used by institutions representing Native American cultural objects more transparent.

Thus, this article does not attempt to offer a new paradigm but rather serves as a preliminary investigation into the complexities of categorizing and defining Native cultural objects. It is my hope that this discussion will prompt viewers, creators, and interpreters of Native objects to reflect on the entangled terminology attached to Native objects. I also want them to gain insight into how these terms are imbued with cultural assumptions and stereotypes and to use these new insights as a lens to examine the complexities of the culture under study as it was and continues to be lived.

## HISTORICAL PRACTICES

Perhaps the primary contributing factor to the problems associated with labeling Native art and cultural objects was (and is) cultural ignorance on the part of Western scholars. Although Western scholars began documenting and classifying Native American objects in order to provide insight into Native cultures, such insights inevitably reflect(ed) the biases of the researchers whose analyses relied on Western empirical forms of knowing. The lack of thorough understanding of the cultures that produced the objects and the attempt to develop “scientific” classificatory systems resulted in the now-confusing and arbitrary application of terminology. The term *traditional*, for instance, is generally used to invoke the notion of an uninterrupted continuum and was frequently attached to an object made before contact with non-Natives. In other instances, the term is used to describe objects made today using materials and techniques carried over from antiquity. To be considered traditional, someone who is or was able to prove direct links to a tribal community must make an object associated exclusively with that tribe, for example, a Hopi making a Katchina.

## THE MAKERS

The value of an art object is a type of cultural capital, a “stamp of approval,” usually set by the viewer, not the maker. Furthermore, because the shifting status and value of objects made by Native people are so closely related to issues of authenticity and legitimacy surrounding notions of Indianness, it is impossible to approach writing about descriptive terms attached to American Indian objects without entering into the complex discussion of Indian identity. What is an Indian object, who is Indian, and how much Indian he or she is—in other words, how authentic or legitimate the artist is—are crucial factors in determining how objects are evaluated. In order to provide proof of enrollment with a federally recognized Indian tribe, a Native must show a Certified Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) card that specifically lists what tribe the person is enrolled in and the amount of Indian blood he or she possesses according to guidelines established by the federal government. These cards all have assigned numbers, much like a social security card, and must be presented to obtain services allotted to Native peoples such as medical and dental care, food programs, and scholarship monies meant exclusively for Native American students. The CDIB card is also required of any artist who publicly markets his or her objects as Native-made.

Tribal enrollment is irrevocably linked to the objects made by Native people because it is attached to the maker. If Native Americans are not enrolled but self-identify as Indian, regardless of proof of blood quantum shown otherwise, they are not allowed to sell objects they make as authentic Native art. This situation creates resentment, and many Native artists and writers consider it a form of cultural defiance to reject federally defined identity outright, refusing to participate in a system that was not established by Indians. One such artist, Jimmie Durham, expressed his opposition saying, “I’ve lived all my adult life in voluntary exile from my own people, yet that can

also be considered a Cherokee tradition. It is not a refusal of us, but a refusal of a situation.” Durham is not alone in objecting to this legislated scrutiny of identity as another instance of “imposed-from-without limits,” which further ghettoizes, assimilates, and/or divides Native people among themselves. As for its effect on “identity,” Durham, reserving the right to be perverse in the face of perversity, went public in 1993: “I am not Cherokee. I am not an American Indian. This is in concurrence with recent U.S. legislation, because I am not enrolled on any reservation or in any American Indian community.”<sup>5</sup> Durham’s commentary illustrates the substantial differences in the political and cultural understanding of Native identity, which will most certainly continue to be a topic of debate for many years to come.<sup>6</sup>

### CHARTING THE OBJECT

Historically, writers from outside the maker’s community have analyzed Indian objects, and their assessments are typically structured as follows: (1) a description identifying the object, (2) facts about the individual or group who created it: a named person or the member of a tribe (the latter is always the case when writing about “prehistoric” objects), (3) a date indicating when it was made, and (4) a description detailing materials used. With this information I created a chart while researching term usage (see fig. 1). Whenever an object was described in texts as an artifact I made note of specific data such as when the object was made, the context in which it was written about, what discipline the author was working in, the type of materials it was made with, and so on. These details became the far left column of the chart. I then chose category headings that are most frequently used to describe those objects (again, recognizing that the terms I’ve chosen are not universally used and are eminently contestable). I then selected the terms used at the bottom of the chart that typically denote, either in academic writings or colloquial usage, the objects included in each category.<sup>7</sup>

This chart is meant to serve as a source for comparative analysis of terms and categorical discussion. While recognizing the multivalency of terminology and the inadequacy of labels to describe and explain cultural works, it seeks to provide a working model to examine the classificatory system now in place. I have shared this chart at conferences and with colleagues, and feedback has varied depending on the discipline of the scholar. However, there has been agreement that usage is awkward, somewhat arbitrary, and in need of better overall consensus or at least heightened public awareness of its limitations. How all of that eventually gets negotiated is exactly what I hope this discussion will inspire. Below are the most commonly used categories:

#### **Precolonial**

From “specimen” to “relic”—the very shift in terms alerts us to a radical change in conceiving the relationship of the historical object to the past. And of course it is not only the relationship, but the class of object which has changed.<sup>8</sup>

Categories created for the types of objects made by American Indians	Precolonial	Early Colonial	Stylized Traditional	Contemporary	Tourist and/or Trade	Regalia	Sacred Art
<b>Function</b>	Use	Use, sometimes decorative	Decoration	Decoration	Decorative and/or use	Use	Ceremony or sacred purpose
<b>Description</b>	Objects produced by Native communities prior to European contact	Created after contact with the intent to preserve the precontact aesthetic	Objects made to deliberately replicate precontact styles and motifs	Created by Indians with formal art education, objects rarely identify culture group	Made for sale or trade	Any objects (such as clothing or accessories) used during powwow dance performance	Made for specific use. Includes all objects determined by the maker/tribe as sacred
<b>Examples</b>	Weaving, pottery, jewelry	Weaving, pottery, jewelry	Weaving, pottery, jewelry, clothing	Painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, photography, glass, printmaking	Jewelry, leather work, clothing, dishware, beadwork, ceramics	Beaded bags, belts, shawls, dresses, shoes, bonnets, bustles	Masks, fetishes, totem, sand paintings, medicine bags, rattles
<b>Producer</b>	Tribal members	Tribal members, usually in their own community	Tribal members, trained in school and by the community	Usually enrolled members of a tribe, some self-identified	Usually made by Natives, many exceptions exist	Native and/or non-Native participants, family or friends	Only members of the tribe with privilege to do so
<b>Consumer</b>	Community, museums, collectors	Community and non-Natives, museums, collectors	Museums, galleries, collectors, general public	Museums, galleries, collectors, general public	General public, collectors, museums	Participants, collectors, museums	Tribal members, museums, collectors
<b>Quantity made and how often</b>	Varied, as needed	One of a kind, as needed	One of a kind or limited editions	One of a kind or limited editions	Mass-produced on demand	Usually one of a kind	One of a kind, as requested or needed
<b>Term typically used to describe</b>	Artifact	Traditional	Authentic	Fine art	"Indian made"	Costume	Religious

FIGURE 1. This chart is a working model to help examine the classificatory system currently used to categorize and define Native objects.

Precolonial objects consist of all the objects created by Native peoples prior to contact, and, as has been frequently noted, most of the objects were made for practical use. Anna Lee Walters explains that, from the Native perspective, “there was no separation between art and life, or between what was beautiful and what was functional. Art, beauty, and spirituality were so firmly intertwined in the routine of living that no words were needed, or allowed, to separate them.”<sup>9</sup>

The precolonial period was perhaps one of the only times in history when Native Americans produced objects exclusively for themselves, making it the most reflective of the Native aesthetic. This is due to the fact that the objects were made to meet the standards of a particular nation (Apache, for instance) or a specific tribe (such as White Mountain). As markers of the time before discovery, precolonial objects are looked on as authoritative in the sense that they provide the most “pure” version of any given item—the most authentic type. A large number of these objects were, and in some cases continue to be, taken from archaeological sites or abandoned locations; therefore, they are often referred to as “prehistoric.”

Because of that practice, museums, Native cultural centers, and very exclusive collectors own most of these items, and museums and culture centers are usually the only places that the public may view them. The best examples of these objects in what is now the United States are carvings from the Pacific Northwest such as totem poles or masks, baskets made by California tribes, hunting tools and clothing from the Plains, and pottery in the Southwest. The rarity and exclusivity of such items make them of special concern. Tribes seek many out for repatriation, and there is much dispute regarding who has authority to care for them.<sup>10</sup>

### **Early Colonial**

Early colonial objects are those that incorporate a combination of precolonial media, techniques, and motifs with that of the newly arrived European styles and materials. Therefore, this art not only looks very similar, if not identical, to precolonial art but also incorporates components such as glass beads, metal buttons or notions, and various types of fabric brought to the Americas by Europeans. Examples of these objects are Crow and Lakota (Plains) lazy stitch and loom beadwork, which essentially copy the design format of quillwork produced before contact.<sup>11</sup> The famed red, black, and white Tlingit (Alaska Native) button blankets also replicate designs and patterns used prior to encounters with non-Natives, while employing machine-manufactured wool cloth and glass buttons introduced by Russians to the region. These examples of transmitted and acquired customs exemplify how adaptation of selected and/or determined (implying choice) media can evolve. Early colonial objects are unique contributions to the whole of Native art because many of the types became traditional while marking transitions in an indigenous style.

As trading became more common, Native Americans often decorated newly fashioned clothing, accessories, tools, and other personal belongings with tribal designs using foreign (usually European) materials. A stellar

example of such borrowing can be seen in the cotton patchwork clothing made by the Seminole. It has been written that the Seminole were experts at appliqué and flat-weave work prior to contact. They used various types of leaves and reeds to make design patterns on the surface of mats used in their living quarters and onto various types of clothing.

With the introduction of the sewing machine, circa 1910, the patchwork process of combining various colors of cotton broadcloth soon began. “The essence of patchwork is the infinite number of combinations and recombinations of shapes and colors. Cloth, usually store bought, is cut into strips. It is then sewn together into bands that are then cut into larger segments and assembled in a pattern.”<sup>12</sup> These garments have since become the signature creation of the Seminole tribe, quickly identifiable and extremely profitable. Every year at the Annual Native American Heritage Festival in Hollywood, Florida, one can find a minimum of twenty makers displaying and selling these garments as well as potholders, table cloths, bedspreads, baby clothes, bags, purses, and wallets.<sup>13</sup> The practice of using store-bought cloth and sewing machines to make “traditional” Seminole clothing does not appear disconcerting to either the makers or admirers of these creations.

The debate over when patchwork came into being and its symbolic nature reflects the Western academic need for strictly-defined terms and boundaries. . . . Cultural meanings are transitory, constantly redefined to account for new experiences and information. Patchwork continues to be created by the Seminoles, because of the Seminoles. If there were no tourists, they would probably still make it for themselves as they did a hundred years ago. In the modern world, patchwork has become almost synonymous with Seminole identity.<sup>14</sup>

There are examples of transformed “traditions” from throughout Indian Country. In the American Southwest some of the most valuable and highly prized clay works are the result of changing lifeways:

Dough bowls, used for making large quantities of yeast bread, were brought into New Mexico after the Spanish introduced grain into the region. They came into existence just at the time when Indians began to feed enormous numbers of people during the feast days, which had become very popular.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore the objects created during this period did not lose any dimension of “Nateness” even though they were made for recently adopted practices or used newly introduced materials. Instead, they serve as a type of marker—they embody an indigenous aesthetic and are highly prized and collected for that very reason. However, today when artists make an object that reflects some kind of adaptation, it is often seen as lacking or distorting a Native American tradition, thereby devaluing the object and the maker. Such an assertion not only ignores historical precedent but also is used to manipulate



decision-making processes that affect many aspects of Native American creative expression today.<sup>16</sup>

The producers of early colonial objects were usually American Indians. However, non-Natives could and probably did participate in the creation of such items, especially if they were closely associated with a Native community. For the most part, these objects have a high monetary value, so exclusive collectors purchase them, and museums and culture centers hold a large number in trust. Exceptions to this rule might be those objects that have been family heirlooms for generations, or objects that are communally “owned” by the tribe.

### **Stylized Traditional**

A problem *with* tradition, then, is its multiple meanings and conceptual softness. Given to emotional usage, tradition can appear imprecise, inconsistent, and infuriatingly elusive. At the same time, therein lies its significance, for it offers something essential in the human condition. Tradition is a term we all hear and use, even if it defies crisp definition.<sup>17</sup>

Stylized traditional materials date back to about the turn of the eighteenth century and have been continually created to the present day. I have named this category *stylized traditional* because the objects included are purposely made to resemble precolonial and early colonial objects. Unlike the first two categories, stylized traditional objects are usually created for decorative purposes only, though there are exceptions. Examples of such exceptions are ollas (clay pots) used in some dances performed by Pueblo Indians and woven rugs or blankets that are used for practical purposes by the Navajo and Hopi.

The types of objects most commonly given a place in this category are carvings, weavings, jewelry, and pottery. Consequently, stylized traditional is the first category in which the descriptive term *art* is fittingly used and the term *artist* appropriately applies. These creators/artists make a conscious decision to produce materials (wool from sheep that is hand dyed with natural pigments, as “traditionally” done) and/or objects (rugs or blankets made with such wool) in this manner—Indian as aesthetic choice, so to speak.

Native Americans are usually the producers of stylized traditional objects; however, there are some complications in this regard. These items typically have very significant relationships to the tribe of origin, and there is usually a long-standing practice by specific tribes, from various geographical areas, of making certain types of objects: for example, pottery made by Pueblo Indians, weaving done by Navajo, or baskets made by California tribes. However, more recently, members of other tribes (albeit Indians) started making these items as well. Such an instance occurs when a Cherokee (American Southeast) produces Katchina dolls, objects that are physical manifestations of Hopi deities (American Southwest), or a Salish artist (Pacific Northwest) sews beads onto garments in the Crow (Plains) style; neither artist’s tribe is recognized

for having made the objects “originally.” For this reason there is much debate in Indian Country over who can claim legitimate authority over the creation of certain objects, and this often causes disturbing and hostile Indian-to-Indian creative possessiveness.<sup>18</sup>

This situation is made more complicated by the fact that large percentages of mixed-heritage Native Americans are producing objects. The debate then becomes associated with what tribe the artist identifies himself or herself with and whether or not that individual is creating objects according to what has been done historically, or if being a Native American of any ethnic combination is in itself license to produce Native American objects. Because these divisions between artists and object types begin in this category, so the ideas about what is “Indian” (whether it be the artist or item) become more difficult to define. Artists who wish to preserve what they consider to be traditionally authentic create from the standpoint that making these objects is a legacy and a responsibility. Most make painstaking efforts to learn the standardized processes involved in making objects in their community for their own people, while sometimes hoping to make a living from outside consumers.

Because the term *authentic* is typically used as a descriptor, stylized traditional objects are sold as such to museums, collectors, and the public at large. They are, without question, what most people would point to as American Indian art. Therefore, it is important to consider what the artists have to say about this. Santa Clara Pueblo potter Nancy Youngblood, granddaughter of noted artist Margaret Tafoya, also makes objects with tremendous respect and reverence for her ancestry, her family, and the history of excellence and innovation the Tafoya name stands for. Her objects are “born of tradition, yet they are modern.” In an interview with Andrea Robinson, Youngblood said,

I used to watch my grandmother and my mother and my aunts all making pottery when I was very young. I never knew how much went into it, how much raw ability, perfecting your technique, and being able to have some creativity concerning your designs. I think I was 13 or 14 years old the first time I made a piece of pottery, the way I was taught by my mother. The people in my family are trying to carry on a tradition that otherwise will die out. What a privilege. What better family to be from? What great teachers I had. We have a strong support and love for each other. We share techniques and encourage each other. Being a Tafoya brings with it a tremendous responsibility. It is also the greatest privilege, because we will carry on this tradition.<sup>19</sup>

A majority of the time these artists/makers are taught by family or by other members of the tribe and learn important information about the relevance and responsibility of being an artist in their tribal community. Youngblood continues,

I learned how to weave from my mother. She never told me specifics—like how many lines you have to weave or what to do when you want

to weave an arrow—but the basics came from watching her. My involvement with weaving also came from my personal interests and experiences—taking fiber classes and reading books in high school and college increased my knowledge. . . . I want people to see Navajo weaving from the weaver's point of view. Weaving is a part of my culture and my heritage. I'm always asked the question: is Navajo weaving a dying art? I don't think so, because I work with a lot of young women who are interested in weaving, and they want to learn. . . . I don't have any daughters, but there are many Navajo women who want to learn, and I want to share all the information that I have. I want to help preserve the art of Navajo weaving. As a Navajo, a belief that is very strong in my heart is that being a Navajo woman means knowing how to weave, and how to deal with the process of weaving itself. I grew up with weaving. This belief is a central part of my life. Incorporating my interest in weaving with this belief makes me an artist.<sup>20</sup>

It is not unusual for some of these Native artists to be formally trained in universities or subject-specific schools such as the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Art courses are also available in tribal colleges where students may learn a variety of techniques to create objects but may be fixed instead on maintaining specific tribal aesthetic traditions and perfecting rather than completely changing them.<sup>21</sup>

There are many other artists whose work stands out in this category; some of the more prominent are potter Maria Martinez from the American Southwest and the wood carvers David Neel and Bill Reid, both from the Pacific Northwest. The book *Solitary Raven: Selected Writings of Bill Reid* offers a very personal look at the creative genius of this artist and also includes accounts of his childhood and thoughts about his mixed ethnic heritage: his mother was Euro-American; his father was Haida (Northwest Coast/Southeast Alaska Native):

And so the Indians of our coast have passed from the scene as vital contributors to the world of art. And they left us a great clutter of objects for museums around the world, a line, a shape and a form, an example and a hope. An example of a people, very few in numbers, who developed a high artform, understood by and participated in by all, so that every aspect of everybody's life was enriched by it. An example that contains within itself the hope that we may someday, on a much broader scale, do the same.<sup>22</sup>

Two basket makers must also be mentioned, Elsie Stone Holiday (Navajo) and Mabel McKay (Pomo, California Native). Native scholar Greg Sarris wrote a biography, *Weaving the Dream*, about Ms. McKay. He tells of her tireless efforts to protect and preserve large areas of grassy flatlands in California where she and other basket makers collect their materials. Because of her commitment, many of these areas are now national landmarks and cannot be developed.<sup>23</sup>

There is a legal aspect to the creation and sale of stylized traditional objects. These artists, as well as those who produce objects included in the tourist and/or trade art category, are most affected by Public Law 101-644, the American Indian Arts and Crafts Act. I discuss this issue further in the section about tourist and trade art. Galleries and dealers throughout the world specialize in the sale of this art, and it is extremely profitable to do so.<sup>24</sup>

### **Contemporary**

The contemporary category is the most straightforward. It is made up of all that is considered “fine art” created by American Indians, such as painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, electronic art, photography, installations, glass works, ceramics, clay works, and mixed media. It is also the first category where the label “artist” is aptly used. These objects are strictly decorative (“art for art’s sake”) and are usually produced primarily for the art market. Most of the artists have been formally educated and trained in Western art technique and theory. Many hold advanced degrees in the arts (master of fine arts, the terminal degree in the discipline), but some may have had instruction from tribal members as well. The artists whose work falls into the contemporary category borrow freely from the entire spectrum of Native motif and design but rarely or never work in what is typically considered “traditional” media.

These artists may be enrolled tribal members (though enrollment is not indicative of success) or self-identified Indians affiliated with a specific tribe. It is most common to find Native people of various tribes and ethnic mixes and those from urban areas in this category. Because Native American identity tends to be much more open-ended and diversified for artists creating “fine art,” I began to search for contemporary writers and scholars who were addressing that issue in their work. Scott B. Vickers writes:

In short, the history of modern Indian art is one of exceeding complexity and diversity. Its concerns are both personal and cultural, historical and transhistorical, and as such modern Indian artists seek to reinvent themselves in a syncretic and volatile world where neither the medium nor the message is predicable. . . . By virtue of their very Otherness, Indian artists, having been both inoculated with some whiteness and given a new freedom with which to discover an antidote to that inoculation, live on the decisive edge of their alienation, knowing that, as stereotypes, they are forever condemned to a receding past.<sup>25</sup>

So it is with these artists: they often find it a frustrating place to inhabit. Most know that they are expected to compete in an art market that readily supports “traditional” Indian arts, one that rarely embraces the types of objects they make. Each of these artists in their own way have worked hard for recognition in fine-art circles and choose to exhibit their objects in art galleries that are not focused on culture-specific arts. Many of them teach fine-arts courses at

colleges and universities as well. Therefore, most artists in this category resent having their creations measured by a “traditional” or “tribal” standard that they feel has little to do with their own vision as individuals.

At the [Institute of American Indian Arts], following Fritz Scholder’s and T. C. Cannon’s lead, students were encouraged to use their creativity to respond to life experiences. They were often young artists who knew that they were neither enfranchised as members of American society nor were they living the historic reality of their ancestors. Realizing their marginality, relative to “mainstream” culture, and experiencing simultaneously a sense that they were not leading *authentic* Indian lives, they portrayed themselves in a liminal identity. These works began to represent a pan-Indianism and, subsequently, an expression of the modern conditions of American Indian lives.<sup>26</sup>

Because Native fine art reflects the varied lifestyles of American Indians today, it could be argued that these artworks are the most authentic Indian art being produced today. Lucy R. Lippard writes about the Chinagmiut Yup’ik artist Larry Beck,

who is a quarter Yup’ik (Inuit) living in Seattle. He rediscovered his Alaskan heritage and Native Arts in depth only after receiving an MFA. . . . Beck creates pristine, neo-industrial artifacts. “I am an Eskimo, but I’m also a twentieth-century American,” he says. “I live in a modern city where my found materials come from junkyards, trash cans, and industrial waste facilities, since the ancient beaches where my ancestors found driftwood and washed-up debris from shipwrecks are no longer available to me. But my visions are mine and even though I use Baby Moon hubcaps, pop rivets, snow tires, Teflon spatulas, dental pick mirrors and stuff to make my spirits, this is a process to which the old artists could relate.”<sup>27</sup>

This quote points out that contemporary artists also practice the act of blending ethno-aesthetics or Native aesthetics with modern-day materials, creating contemporary interpretations and reflections of their existence. Typically, contemporary fine artists do not feel any hostility toward the objects made by other Native artists; these individuals acknowledge and appreciate the historical role that creating has held for tribal peoples in the past and find strength in that continuum. Painter Jaune Quick-to-See Smith states,

In the most oppressive times in our history, we have produced some of the most illustrious work. When all else in our lives has failed, our ability to produce beautiful work has been the sustenance that carries us through. That process takes us to an inner world, lifts our spirit and nurtures our soul and keeps us strong today.<sup>28</sup>

Clay worker Roxanne Swentzell is a contemporary Native American artist whose figures have been interpreted as a commentary on the complicated issues of being an American Indian in the world today. She is famous for her ability to translate serious emotions and conditions while making fun of stereotypes through the forms she creates:

Today, Swentzell is a perceptive and empathetic observer of human nature and society. She uses her art, often with a touch of humor, to mirror what it means to be alive, to be a Native American, to be connected to and nurtured by the past, and to be caught up in the present world. . . . Other clay figures over the years have emerged out of issues such as identity—Swentzell is the daughter of a Pueblo mother and non-Native father—politics, family and community relationships, Pueblo cosmology, and the effects of pressure to conform to social standards and roles.<sup>29</sup>

Another artist whose work is effective in presenting commentary on contemporary Native American life is photographer Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie. Tsinhnahjinnie was raised on the Navajo (Diné) Indian reservation, and she is the daughter of well-known Navajo painter Andrew Tsinajinnie. She attended the IAlA and the California College of Arts and Crafts where her interest in photography first began. Most recognized for her photo-collage images, Tsinhnahjinnie also combats general Native stereotypes and non-Native expectations through humor. Her series *Photographic Memoirs of an Aboriginal Savant* (1994), which has been displayed in major American and Canadian museums, has been written about in international art/photography periodicals.<sup>30</sup>

Ownership of Native fine art is often limited to museums, cultural centers, collectors, and a select group of the public. Some other artists of importance to be included in this category are T. C. Cannon (painter and printmaker), Kevin Redstar (painter and printmaker), Linda Lomahaftewa (painter), James Luna (performance artist), Alan Houser (sculptor), Bob Houzous (sculptor), Rick Bartow (painter and sculptor), Emmi Whitehorse (painter), and Fritz Scholder (painter and printmaker).

### **Tourist and Trade Art**

Tourist and trade art has gained significant recognition over the past twenty to thirty years as major studies, such as the book *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* by Ruth B. Phillips, have been conducted on the genre. She writes:

Taken literally, the term “tourist art” seems to set up a contradiction in terms. “Touristic” summons up the inauthentic, the mass-produced, and the vulgar, while “art,” in the Western tradition, is identified with the beautiful, the rare, and the elite. It is a striking fact of modern life, however, that despite the generally dismissive response of Western consumers to tourist art as a named category, members of nearly

all social classes have for 150 years regularly consumed the objects subsumed by it. The confused responses of consumers arise, on the one hand, from a general distrust of the touristic as an inherently superficial form of experience and, on the other, from the widely held view that the stylistic hybrids characteristic of tourist art are not true “primitive art.” Yet despite this ambivalence, the need persists to accumulate objects that attest to experiences of travel. The capacity of the “tourist art” to irritate is a clear sign that it requires further investigation.<sup>31</sup>

Originally believed irrelevant by serious collectors, many of these objects have proven valuable and important over time. Several scholars have used these items to frame Native arts production overall, and others use the objects to gauge how cultural capital affected cultural production and vice versa. Two other recognized studies of tourist objects produced in North America are Nelson H. H. Graburn’s *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* (1976) and “Marketing Magic: Process Identity and the Creation and Selling of Native Art” by J. C. H. King.<sup>32</sup>

For the most part this art is made en masse, quickly and inexpensively. The main consumers of these objects are tourists or the general public, making it the first category in my chart to be accessible to everyone. The trade aspect of this art would have been more common at the turn of the last century, but trading is still somewhat common on reservations where owners of general stores trade merchandise for handmade objects and then sell them to tourists. The items vary significantly and include everything from hand-molded ashtrays, stone or clay fetishes, blankets, dolls, baskets, pottery, jewelry, and carvings to ceramic tiles, dream catchers, incense burners, miniatures, coasters, and toy bows and arrows.

It would be unfair to insist that all the objects in this category are mass-produced for quick sale or for the tourist who has an appetite for “culture”; in fact, some of the objects are quite unique. However, in order to keep costs low, producers generally use repeated designs and inexpensive materials and then grapple with being criticized for lack of originality or quality. Because these objects are made with a specific buyer in mind, they are frequently dismissed by the art community overall, but they do have their place in the canon of American Indian art, being both historically relevant and currently appealing. They often serve as ambassadors of Native culture to a vast audience and can aid in educating the public when presented in context.<sup>33</sup>

## **Regalia**

When I first compiled the chart of American Indian object categories, some people questioned my decision to add regalia. It can be argued that these objects serve more of a practical function than an artistic one because they are used for, or in, public dance performances. Yet I believe it is important to include these objects because they reflect, for lack of a better term, the “popular culture” of the Native aesthetic. Most of the individuals who utilize these objects are young adults, as they are the largest participant group at powwows.

Almost all of these objects are made to wear or use while performing dances at powwows or at other intertribal ceremonial dances. Though these items can be made in large quantities and sold for profit, many of them are created by, or for, a particular performer or individual. I must make it clear, however, that the regalia referred to here is never the same regalia a dancer would wear in a closed ceremony or sacred dance. Those garments would likely fall into the sacred art category.

When one attends large arena powwows, such as the Gathering of the Nations that takes place annually in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and watches the participants come in at the Grand Entry, it is easy to spot the differences in the clothing styles of each dancer despite the pan-Indian slant of the regalia. One way that participants differentiate themselves from one another is with the various motifs shown in their wardrobe, each unique to the individual dancer. The variables in regalia are usually the result of both the personal tastes of the performer wearing them and dance-specific designs and motifs. Included in this category are jingle dresses, feather bustles, shawls, purses and pouches, fans, headdresses, wrist cuffs, and jewelry. Musical instruments such as drums and rattles are included as well. Variations in design are common because clothing makes up the bulk of the objects (handmade moccasins or boots, shawls, leggings, headdresses, shirts, pants, and dresses). The same style shirt can be made in any number of fabric and color combinations.

Because such types of public performance and intertribal gatherings are a relatively recent phenomenon, these objects are only now gaining popularity among collectors and museums. Some books, including titles for children, have been published on powwow dancing and regalia. One of the most popular of these is *Powwow* edited by Clyde Ellis, Luke Eric Lassiter, and Gary H. Dunham. Another is *Moving History: Evolution of the Powwow* by Dennis Zetigh.<sup>34</sup> In his book, Zetigh includes photographs of various types of powwow clothing and gives specific examples of when and how it is worn. It is not uncommon for non-Indians to make the mistake of referring to regalia as “costume,” a term that is often offensive to the individuals who create and wear it, because it is of great personal value to them.<sup>35</sup>

All of the items in this category employ a broad, generic, pan-Indian system of iconography for decoration, making it the only type of art in my categorization that actually encourages such borrowing. Many of the producers/artists are well-known in their communities for producing high-quality, exceptionally crafted garments for dance competition. Dancers make a substantial investment in their regalia; a performer’s entire wardrobe can be worth thousands of dollars.

## Sacred

[T]radition exists from the view of how religion draws its meaning from continuities of shared ritual and belief and how individual expressions of art and literature respond to socially inherited aesthetics, symbols and themes.<sup>36</sup>



This is the category to which I am most reluctant to attach the term *art*, because these objects reflect an aesthetic deeply rooted in Native American spirituality and religious beliefs. These objects are used exclusively for ceremony or for specific purposes (such as healing or puberty rites) and include all objects the tribe or tribal members define as sacred. Items such as rattles, masks, totem poles, and medicine bags are included here. Indians who make use of these objects in worship or sacred practice are greatly offended when they are reduced to, compared with, or called “art” and appreciated merely as objects to look at rather than respected as integral to a tribe’s history and/or belief system. Iroquois scholar Richard W. Hill Sr. writes:

But as more college-aged Native Americans began to seek out their spiritual heritage in order to reconnect with traditional values, they found many of the paths blocked because the objects needed to perform necessary ceremonies and rites were in the possession of museums. When those same Indian students began to visit these institutions, they found the material component of their cultural heritage behind glass and strangely silent, the objects of non-Native’s gawking stares.<sup>37</sup>

Native Americans who create sacred art are always individuals deemed worthy of that privilege and are usually trained by one or more mentors from their tribe. These artists (or makers) hold an honored place among their people and have earned that position over time. Some are healers, members of healing clans, or leaders of healing groups who make distinct objects for specific needs. Others are responsible for ensuring that specific ceremonial needs are met. Thus, the amount and frequency of production is dependent on demand. There would be little or no chance that a non-Native would produce this type of object, though I suppose it could occur. In circumstances when that might happen, the non-Indian would have to be an active member of the community, for example, by entering the family unit, band, or clan through marriage. Even in that case, all concerned members of the tribe would have to agree on their participation in such an act.

Some examples of these objects are Gan (Apache deity) and Katchina (Hopi deity) masks, Lakota medicine bags, and Navajo sand paintings used for healing purposes. This category can also include clothing and other hand-held objects. Native sacred art is the most coveted by non-Indians of all Native art, due to its rarity and the fact that these objects were used in exceptional circumstances. Most of the American Indian sacred art held in collections today was obtained in less-than-fair exchanges. Nevertheless, there is an international interest in owning these items by collectors and museums, and both have spent vast amounts of money to secure and preserve them. The objects in this category are the most controversial for non-Indians and museums to own.

American Indian sacred objects fall under the auspices of the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). President

George H. W. Bush passed NAGPRA in 1990, and the legislation protects Native American tribal governments and people from grave desecration, making it possible to repatriate the remains of thousands of dead relatives or ancestors and to retrieve stolen or improperly acquired religious and cultural property. It is a complex law that

[s]ets out detailed procedures and legal standards governing the repatriation of human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony and provides for the protection and ownership of materials unearthed on federal and tribal lands. NAGPRA requires federal agencies (excluding the Smithsonian Institution) and museums (including state and local governments and educational institutions) to return human remains and associated funerary objects upon request of the lineal descendent, Indian tribe, or Native Hawaiian organization where the museum or agency itself identifies the cultural affiliation of these items through the required inventory process.<sup>38</sup>

I note this law to make readers aware of the standards by which all museums and individuals who hold and/or intend to purchase these types of Native objects should conduct transactions and interact with tribes.<sup>39</sup>

Many museums and cultural and educational institutions have developed better relationships with tribes and tribal leaders and regularly consult them regarding the proper care and storage of the objects now that American Indian sacred art is protected by NAGPRA. The practice of exhibiting Native sacred art has also changed in recent years because tribes now have the right to request that certain objects not be exhibited to the public. These new practices are a good first step to establishing sensitive and appropriate exhibits and helping to create an environment of respect where it has been greatly lacking historically.

## CONCLUSION

Native peoples, like others, use objects not only as a means of adornment or as tools for living but also as statements about themselves in the greater whole of the universe, conveying many levels of information. These objects will remain a statement of tribal and individual identities serving as communicators to the outside world and as points of reference for Native Americans. This article presents an overview of ways that the categorization of Native North American creations from precontact to the present day has usually taken place. It neither attempts to be encyclopedic nor definitive but rather seeks to demonstrate how categorization and the labels attached to categories could be more carefully considered especially when utilized by exhibiting institutions or in public spaces. It is my hope that this article will engender a greater dialogue about the much-needed evaluation of terms and categories attached to Native objects and aid in the transition of practices in museums and cultural centers as they relate directly to terminology, leading to a fuller understanding of the people whose creations continue to inspire us.

## NOTES

1. For a more thorough investigation of the relationship between naming and/or defining objects and exhibiting, see my PhD dissertation: "Past is Perfect in the Present Tense: Exhibiting Native America in Museums and Cultural Centers," University of New Mexico, 2004.

2. The system(s) of categorizing, naming, and writing about American Indian creations has been a source of complication for many scholars before me, especially in the disciplines of art history and anthropology. Those scholars who take a more theoretical approach to the topic of analyzing culture have had to grapple with the terms as well. I appreciate the approach of two scholars in particular, James Clifford and Ruth B. Phillips, whose writing has deeply influenced my own thinking on the subject.

3. Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, eds., *Native North American Art* (New York: Oxford Press, 1998), 7–8.

4. James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 1998), 98–99.

5. Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Hot Dogs, a Ball Gown, Adobe, and Words," in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (New York: Routledge, 1999), 127.

6. For the purposes of this article, I did not verify whether or not an artist was or is an enrolled member of a tribe before including him or her.

7. The first three categories are chronological, with *precolonial* referring to any object made before contact. A period will range in date depending on the tribe, but there are universal similarities in the grouping nonetheless. *Early colonial* includes objects created in the first 100 +/- years of the contact period and objects that reflect attempts to maintain tribal aesthetics while incorporating new materials and techniques. *Stylized traditional* is comprised of objects made in the past 100 +/- years and that continue to be made today. These objects are created with the intent to duplicate precontact style, motif, and technique and are often identified as "authentic" in the market today. Artists whose works can be identified by the same criteria as all other "fine art" created today make what are typically called *contemporary* objects. The next two categories do not follow a chronological timeline; all of these objects intersect with the other four but are also set apart (by authors and makers) from the objects previously mentioned. *Tourist/trade* items reflect the direct interactions between Natives and non-Natives and the quick-sale market generated from them. Generally, the objects were/are made by Native Americans, though there are many exceptions. However, in part or whole, the objects I include are handmade. *Regalia* are objects made for use during public performance, especially powwow dancing. Last on the chart are objects that are considered sacred and are valuable to Native communities due to ceremonial and/or religious use.

8. Stephen Bann, ed., "The Poetics of the Museum: Lenoir and Du Sommerard," in *The Clothing of Clío: A Study of the Representation of History in 19th Century Britain and France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 86.

9. Anna Lee Walters, *The Spirit of Native America: Beauty and Mysticism in American Indian Art* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1989), 119.

10. Author Michael Brown writes extensively on the "ownership of knowledge and artistic creations traceable to the world's indigenous societies" in his book *Who Owns Native Culture?* It is an excellent overview of the "ethical and economic questions

raised by the worldwide circulation of indigenous art, music, and biological knowledge” (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), ix.

11. Plains tribes produced quillwork as a decorative appliqué on clothing, religious paraphernalia, and accessories. It consisted of quills removed from porcupine, softened through a process of soaking, and then dyed using organic materials such as rock mineral and plant leaves. Once the quills were pliable, they were flattened and intricately woven to the surface of leather to form complicated design patterns that served as both decorative elements and sometimes as identifiers of band or tribe. For a more detailed explanation of this process see Joel Monture, *The Complete Guide to Traditional Native American Beadwork: A Definitive Study of Authentic Tools, Materials, Techniques and Styles* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993).

12. Ashley E. Remer and Nessa Page-Liberman, “Seminole Patchwork: Pride in Many Colors,” in *Dimensions of Native America: The Contact Zone*, co-curators, Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk and Robin Franklin Nigh (Tallahassee: Museum of Fine Arts—Florida State University, 1998), 69.

13. Information obtained from the promotional pamphlet *Annual Native American Festival* released by the Florida State Office of Tourism, 1997.

14. Remer and Page-Liberman, “Seminole Patchwork,” 72.

15. Rina Swentzell, “The Sense of Progress,” in *All Roads Are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture*, ed. W. Richard West Jr. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Press, 1994), 116.

16. For further reference on what I call *Native aesthetic*, see Steven Leuthold, *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art, Media and Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

17. Simon J. Bronner, *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* (Logan: University of Utah Press, 1989), 10.

18. For an excellent article on the transition of Kachina from sacred object to souvenir, see Noah Young, “The Artification of the Hopi Kachina *Tihu*,” in *Dimensions of Native America: The Contact Zone*, co-curators Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk and Robin Franklin Nigh (Tallahassee: Museum of Fine Arts—Florida State University, 1998), 128.

19. Andrea Robinson, “Potter Nancy Youngblood Lugo, Santa Clara Pueblo,” *Indian Artist Magazine* (Fall 1998): 30. Nancy Youngblood has dropped the last name Lugo since this interview.

20. D. Y. Begay, “A Weaver’s Point of View,” in *All Roads Are Good: Native Voices on Life and Culture*, ed. Terence Winch (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1994), 82, 84.

21. To attend the IAIA on a fully paid tuition stipend from the federal government, one must be an enrolled member of a federally recognized tribe. The college now awards a variety of two- and four-year degrees. For an historical overview of IAIA, I recommend Joy L. Gritton, *The Institute of American Indian Arts: Modernism and U.S. Indian Policy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).

22. Bill Reid, *Solitary Raven: Selected Writings of Bill Reid* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 39.

23. Greg Sarris, *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

24. See Robert Fay Schrader, *The Indian Arts and Crafts Board: An Aspect of New Deal Indian Policy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983) and Gail

K. Sheffield, *The Arbitrary Indian: The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

25. Scott B. Vickers, *Native American Identities: From Stereotype to Archetype in Art and Literature* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 44.

26. Bruce Bernstein, "The Indian Art World in the 1960s and 1970s," in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (New York: Routledge, 1999), 67.

27. Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 187.

28. *Ibid.*, 204.

29. "New Vision through Pueblo Eyes: Roxanne Swentzell," in *Native Peoples: Arts and Lifeways* XVI, no. 2 (January/February 2003): 17. No author given.

30. For an exceptional text on the contemporary arts created by Native Americans see Rushing, *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*. The information about Tsinhnahjinnie was taken from an article that appears in the Rushing book: Lucy R. Lippard, "Independent Identities," 134–47.

31. Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 6.

32. Marie Mauzé, ed. *Present Is Past: Some Uses of Tradition in Native Society* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), 81–96.

33. For more on this genre, see James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

34. Clyde Ellis, Luke Eric Lassiter, and Gary H. Dunham, eds., *Powwow* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

35. Dennis Zetigh, *Moving History: Evolution of the Powwow* (Tulsa: Oklahoma Center of the American Indian, 1998). Photographs of powwow regalia are also the topic of *Powwow: Images Along the Red Road* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996). For an academic treatment on the history of powwow, see Gloria Alese Young, "Powwow Power: Perspectives on Historic and Contemporary Intertribalism," PhD diss., Indiana State University, 1981 and Josephine Paterek, *Encyclopedia of American Indian Costume* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).

36. Simon J. Bronner, *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1989), 9.

37. Richard W. Hill Sr., "Regenerating Identity: Repatriation and the Indian Frame of Mind," in *The Future of the Past: Archaeologists, Native Americans, and Repatriation*, ed. Tamara L. Bray (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), 127.

38. Jack F. Trope and Walter R. Echo-Hawk, "The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act Background and Legislative History," in *The Repatriation Reader: Who Owns Native American Remains?* ed. Devon A. Mihesuah (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 212.

39. For an overview of the UNESCO, see Mauch-Messenger, *The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property: Whose Culture? Whose Property?* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 115–17.