

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism. By W. Jackson Rushing.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7499z8bd>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 20(1)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Trump, Erik

**Publication Date**

1996

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

fiable histories and consider themselves nations, with or without the dubious honor of U.S. sanction.

The encyclopedia is very thorough in its coverage of twentieth-century events. The entries are written clearly and in a style that is sophisticated enough for professionals yet capable of being read by students as well. In addition, the entries refreshingly attempt to be apolitical; it is clear that the editors strove for objectivity when discussing issues that are anything but neutral.

By far the strongest criticism of a work that otherwise provides an enormous amount of useful information is that, in its attempt to be apolitical, it unavoidably takes a political stance. Although the entries for individual Indian nations cover such topics as economic development, current political structure (generally BIA), and social services, very few entries include aspects important to traditional people in defining the essence of their own nations. Little is offered in the way of describing who the people are and what they mean to themselves. Indian nations are more than the sum of government programs. In the end, one wonders what actually distinguishes one nation from any other if the distinctive values actively maintained by each are not mentioned.

Despite these concerns, I highly recommend *Native America in the Twentieth Century* as an extremely useful resource. In particular, I would urge teachers and school librarians to acquaint themselves with the work, and I am quite certain that all who do so will readily find it a necessary educational tool and an indispensable part of their collection.

Lee Miller

**Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism.** By W. Jackson Rushing. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. 250 pages. \$39.95 cloth.

W. Jackson Rushing argues both that the Euro-American concept of Native American artifacts as "art" is a twentieth-century idea inextricably tied to the development of modernism, and that modernist American painting from the period 1910 to 1950 in turn owes a great intellectual and stylistic debt to Native American art. Rushing's book makes an important contribution to the field of American modernist art, where even William Rubin's major exhibition and catalog "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art* (1984)

only hinted at the central influence of Native American art on American modernist painters. With its meticulous research and thoughtful visual analyses, Rushing's book will become a central text for students of American modernism. Yet Native American studies scholars should not overlook this book. By drawing together studies of patronage, museum practices, and art criticism, Rushing offers a cogent history of how the idea of Native American art was formulated and developed in the twentieth century.

At the core of Rushing's study is his analysis of cultural primitivism, which he divides into a pre-1941 "soft" romantic primitivism that stressed the idea of the "good Indian" and a post-1941 "hard" or "raw" primitivism that posited the idea of a universal "natural Indian" (p. 191). The modernists under consideration here drew on Boasian anthropological theory but also borrowed freely from older ideas about evolution and race. Rushing resolves the inherent contradictions in such combinations by sorting out several ideas held in common by the modernists: that Indian art was uniquely "American"; that Indians represented an earlier (but desirable) stage of human and/or cultural evolution; that modern white Americans could recapture that stage through the study of Indian art and culture; and that the appropriation of Indian art and culture could stimulate the development of a distinctive American aesthetic.

The role of the Santa Fe and Taos colonies in promoting Indian art has been studied elsewhere, but Rushing emphasizes that between 1915 and 1930 these colonies enjoyed close ties with the avant-garde art world of New York. Longtime residents such as Mary Austin, Alice Corbin Henderson, Amelia White, and Edgar L. Hewett familiarized New Yorkers with the idea of Indian art "as art" through articles and small exhibitions, while Mabel Dodge Luhan hosted a number of New York artists at her Taos home. Together these residents and their visitors assembled a body of Indian art criticism that emphasized a number of themes: a resistance to the "increasing secularization of modern American life"; a sense of loss of "community and social intimacy"; a modernist tension between nature and culture; and a tendency to see Indians as simultaneously racially immutable and culturally vulnerable to change and loss (p. 39).

Between 1910 and 1940, avant-garde artists responded to Indian art and culture by seizing on the idea that it justified their own excursions into abstract representation. Rushing carefully

documents each artist's contact with Indian art and teases out the stylistic influence it had. Max Weber and Marsden Hartley studied Native American objects in museum collections and incorporated elements of their design and decoration into their paintings, with Weber using them to establish the "Americanness" of his work. Paul Burlin painted Indian topics during the 1910s with a simplified style that his wife, Natalie Curtis, attributed to his ability to see the world from the Indians' view; Rushing argues that Burlin's later efforts in Cubism owe something to the "liberating" influence of Native American designs (p. 52). After Robert Henri visited Santa Fe in the late teens and early 1920s, his palette became noticeably brighter in response to the colorfully decorated Indians he observed, and his portraits of Indians prominently included Indian art objects, as though to suggest the intimate connection between the Indian and art. Rushing is especially eager to rescue several New Mexican painters from the regionalist label of "Southwestern modernists" to which art historians have confined them. He argues that Raymond Johnson and Emil Bistram should be seen as American modernists whose engagement with "abstract" Indian art precipitated their own moves into abstraction. Rushing concedes that during this period each artist shaped his conception of Indian art and culture to fit his own artistic and intellectual prejudices. In fact, some of these artists had only a superficial knowledge of the Indians from whom they claimed inspiration. What is significant for art historians, Rushing maintains, is that "Native American art, and its attendant notions about landscape, self, and consciousness, as perceived by the modernists, provided a powerful justification for finding spiritual values in abstraction" (p. 96).

The impact of Indian art on the New York avant-garde came not just from those artists who visited the Southwest but from two major exhibitions of Indian art held in New York City in 1931 and 1941. The 1931 Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts marked the first major installation of Indian art presented as art. Its organizers hoped to stimulate a market for Indian arts, and its catalog stressed the "modernness, the Americanness, the collective nature [and] the (psychological) universality of Native arts" (p. 99). In short, the exposition offered Indian culture as a perfect fit for an America looking for a national identity. In terms of its effect on avant-garde artists, however, the 1941 exhibition "Indian Art of the United States" had a greater impact. Supported by the federal government and private donors and organized by Rene

d'Harnoncourt, the installation filled three floors of the Museum of Modern Art. Overwhelmingly favorable reviews in the popular press revealed the public's newfound appreciation of Indian arts, and in the context of impending war, museum-goers were particularly attracted by the resiliency and adaptation demonstrated by the Indian arts on display. Jackson Pollack and other avant-garde artists who attended were likewise impressed, leaving determined to search out indigenous arts for inspiration.

During the 1940s, avant-garde artists turned to Indian art, myths, and ritual for gateways into a universal consciousness. Often steeped in Jungian psychology, these artists believed that Indian cultures were close to the primordial past locked inside everyone's brain. By appropriating the structure or process of Indian art, they would be able to reconnect with the ancient spirituality necessary to complement the scientific side of modernism. Thus, these artists were "advocates of a new, transformed consciousness for modernity" (p. 121). Their praise of the "ceremonial" and "monumental" aspects of Indian art allowed them to extend that praise to their own work, which appropriated aspects of Indian art. Likewise, they could point to Northwest Coast Indian art to show that modern abstract art was not elitist but could be understood and even created by the simplest of peoples. In a slightly different vein, Adolph Gottlieb enthusiastically incorporated Indian art into his own because he believed that the tragic and violent aspects of Indian myth confirmed the universality of brutality, fear, terror, and insecurity that darkened the 1940s.

Rushing reserves his final chapter for Jackson Pollack, offering a detailed and lucid analysis of the centrality of Indian art to Pollack's work. Pollack was interested in Indians from his youth, and his enthusiasm for Indian art intensified in New York City. Rushing discovered that between 1938 and 1950, some of Pollack's paintings revealed definite borrowings from native works, disproving his own contention that any references to Indian art were unintentional. Instead, Rushing argues that until 1947, Pollack appropriated Indian masks and other designs with a "shamanic intent," incorporating them into his paintings as a way to get in touch with the "unconscious mind" (p. 173). Between 1947 and 1950, Pollack stopped using Indian images and began to approach the painting process itself as ritualistic and shamanic. Inspired by the example of Navajo sand paintings, Pollack began his drip paintings, imagining that in standing on the canvas and dripping

paint, he could “heal” himself (of alcoholism and depression) just as sand painters healed their patients. The Pollack chapter provides a strong conclusion to Rushing’s thesis. Unlike some of the earlier chapters, this one is excellently illustrated, allowing the reader to see at a glance the iconographic and stylistic connections between Pollack’s paintings and specific works of Indian art (with which Rushing’s research convincingly indicates Pollack was familiar).

In his conclusion, Rushing confronts the fact that many of the artists in his study appropriated Indian art (often sacred objects) without any “dialogue” with the Indian artists themselves. This appropriation was itself facilitated by the numerous and enormous collections of Indian artifacts in New York City; real Indians were at both an intellectual and geographic distance. Rushing explains the avant-garde appropriation of Indian art by suggesting that in the pre-civil rights era, artists had not been sensitized to the colonial implications of such appropriations. Moreover, he points out that because these artists were trying to create a “universal” art, they felt free to integrate whatever sources they discovered.

Although Rushing’s book should garner only praise, his conclusion may raise a number of questions for scholars, especially about the relationship between Indian policy and those who formulated the idea of Indian art as art. Without commenting on it, Rushing shows that those artists (the “soft” primitivists) most preoccupied with the study and protection of real Indians were least likely to be stylistically influenced by their art or to include sacred objects in their paintings. On the other hand, those artists who engaged Indians primarily through texts and museum objects often demonstrated a “hard primitivism” and showed little concern for the political or cultural rights of living Indians. When one considers that the 1940s were followed by major setbacks in Indian self-determination (for example, government support for Indian arts declined, and the “termination” policy sought to dismantle gains made during the Indian New Deal), the avant-garde’s post-1941 silence on Indians’ rights seems quite ominous, and their appropriation of Indian art and culture seems more disturbing than Rushing acknowledges.

A related line of inquiry would concern Rushing’s note about the absence of Indian voices in any of the texts about Indian art that he examines. This absence fits neatly with his thesis that the idea of Indian art was created and modified to fit the needs of white Americans. Still, there were Indian voices participating in the call for the preservation of Indian arts during the 1910s (see the

Society of American Indians), and their addition to the story would make it richer. Rushing's study highlights the need for a book-length history of Native Americans' participation in and response to the appropriation of their art.

These final observations are intended not as criticisms of Rushing's book but as demonstrations of the stimulating effect his book will have on anyone interested in the topic of Native American art.

Erik Trump

**The Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute: An American Tragedy.** By David M. Brugge. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994. 307 pages. \$35.00 cloth.

This book is a very pessimistic commentary as well as an engaging narrative about some events that brought the Navajo-Hopi land dispute into U.S. courts. Brugge introduces the topic with two chapters on the Spanish and early American eras as they affected Hopi and Navajo people. But the bulk of the book concerns the preparation for, and negotiations during, the various lawsuits and legislative initiatives between 1958 and 1973.

The book's primary contribution is its firsthand account of the behind-the-scenes machinations of this landmark lawsuit, to which Brugge was eyewitness and participant. Anthropologist Brugge served as an expert witness for the Navajo tribe for a decade beginning in 1958 as part of a team of archaeologists and archival researchers dedicated to building an ironclad case to support the tribe's claim to a substantial portion of the 2.47-million-acre Hopi Reservation set aside by Executive Order in 1882. From Brugge's "insider" participant-observer perspective, readers learn about the expectations that drove the research team and about the team's logic in translating scholarly discoveries into legal arguments; about the attorneys on both sides—Boyden for the Hopi and first Littell, then Mott for the Navajo; and about the internal political machinations within the Navajo tribe at this time.

Also covered is commissioner of Indian affairs Robert Bennett's establishment of the "Bennett Freeze" area in 1966. The "Bennett Freeze" severely restricted the remodeling and construction of housing and infrastructure. It covered the 1882 reservation outside of district 6 and more than 95 percent of the western Navajo