

The International
JOURNAL
of the ARTS
IN SOCIETY

Volume 4, Number 2

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American Aesthetic

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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE ARTS IN SOCIETY
<http://www.arts-journal.com>

First published in 2009 in Champaign, Illinois, USA by Common Ground Publishing LLC
www.CommonGroundPublishing.com.

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ISSN: 1833-1866
Publisher Site: <http://www.Arts-Journal.com>

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Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system
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Designed to Last: Striving toward an Indigenous American Aesthetic

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Abstract: Most documented Indigenous American art are objects that were either: made for trade/market, collected with little information about the cultural environment and context, or examined as decorative works. The existing Western discipline of art history and an inherently Western aesthetic perspective have guided scholarship on these materials. While the current dialogue about Indigenous American art is welcome in contrast to the vacuum that existed prior to the explosion since the 1980s, there is an aspect of the arts that continues to be omitted. Kay Walkingstick describes this void within the discourse as it affects contemporary Native artists, "Critics often avoid writing seriously about Native American art because what they consider 'universal art values' are actually twentieth-century Eurocentric art values." This investigation will attempt to examine what would define an Indigenous aesthetic and whether through that perspective a new appreciation can be gained for Indigenous art. Through this aesthetic it is proposed that the role of Indigenous art objects will be broadened to include how they are: 1) used to express individual artist and Native viewer identity within a complex socio-cultural community; 2) affirmed to serve as didactic materials and mnemonic references to traditional cultural cosmology and values; and 3) instrumental in intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. Resulting from this will be the potential for scholars to address the artistic expressions of the Indigenous aesthetic in a dialogue that can include a richer understanding of these Indigenous American artworks.

Keywords: American, Indigenous, Tribal, Framework, Methodology, Aesthetic

Introduction

WHILE CONDUCTING RESEARCH into Ponca culture for a museum exhibit, I was interviewing a respected tribal member about designs, asking questions about their application and production.¹ After responding to my questions, we completed our interview and I quit recording our meeting in relationship to the research. At this point, the gentleman brought out his own pipe bag with a floral design on the front panel. He asked me if I had seen this design before? I replied that it was a beautiful floral design, often seen in the beadwork patterns on materials from around the Great Lakes region. He smiled and asked if anyone had told me that it was a map? Having never heard this I told him so. He went on to explain to me how to read the map and that there is a hunting song that corresponds to this design that further explains where to find this site. The song is known within his family, but not many others know about the relationship between the song and the design. He smiled and said he thought I would be interested and that perhaps we could discuss it another time. Our meeting over, I returned to my car and sat there shaken.

¹ The museum for which this research, done in 2007, was being conducted is the American Indian Cultural Center & Museum in Oklahoma City, OK, scheduled to open in 2012. More information is available at their website: www.aiccm.org.

That quick moment, less than a few minutes, clarified for me the complexity of working with Indigenous American art and how much is left to be done to fully embrace its meaning.

Most documented Indigenous American² art have been objects that were either: made for trade/market, collected with little information about the cultural environment – much less context, or examined as decorative works. While the current scholarship about Indigenous American art is welcome in contrast to the vacuum that existed prior to the 1980s, Kay Walkingstick references the present void as it continues to effect contemporary Native artists, “Critics often avoid writing seriously about Native American art because what they consider ‘universal art values’ are actually twentieth-century Eurocentric art values.”³ Walkingstick’s comment about the “universal art values” is echoed in recent scholarship that bemoans the lacking available methodology to address the role of Native American art within a culturally appropriate context.

This is true for many areas of Indigenous humanities. Donald Fixico addresses the need to incorporate an American Indian perspective into the field of historical analysis and documentation:

Culture is an important concept in correctly addressing Native American history, as well as analyzing environmental impacts on Indian life. The scholar needs to stretch his or her imagination to ponder the depth of tribal ways and values as these influenced human behavior and history. The scholar must consider the worldview of an Indian group to comprehend its members’ sense of logic and ideology.⁴

Though the recognition that tribal views must be incorporated into the methodology has been present for Indigenous people, the methodologies used in the humanities have lacked a culturally engaged precedent from which to develop. Devon A. Mihesuah writes about scholarship examining Native women’s studies which shares common concerns with Native art history, “Instead of becoming culturally responsible, many scholars – often those in power positions – remain firmly ensconced in a colonial mindset...”⁵ This “colonial mindset” reference, like the “Eurocentric values” description by Kay Walkingstick, is a reference to the limitations imposed upon reading and understanding Indigenous American art from a Western perspective that does not engage Indigenous aesthetics.

From within the art historical scholarship, Aaron Fry writes, “Even more troubling is that after 150 years of ethnographic studies of Pueblo peoples, art historical examinations of twentieth-century Pueblo arts have failed to fully engage Pueblo concepts and perspectives on the production of these arts.”⁶ This lack of a culturally sensitive perspective is evident across the continent. And while scholars have written about the lack thereof, few have at-

² Indigenous American will be used in place of American Indian, Native American, or any other erroneous though commonly used terms to reference the people who inhabited the North American continent prior to European contact, and their descendents.

³ Walkingstick, Kay. “Native American Art in the Postmodern Era.” *Art Journal*. Vol. 51, No. 3 (Autumn 1992), p 15.

⁴ Fixico, Donald L. “Ethics and Responsibilities in Writing American Indian History.” *American Indian Quarterly*. Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter, 1996), p. 36.

⁵ Mihesuah, Devon A. *Indigenous American Women*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. p. 25.

⁶ Fry, Aaron. “Local Knowledge & Art Historical Methodology: A New Perspective on Awa Tsireh & the San Ildefonso Easel Painting Movement.” *Hemispheres: Visual Cultures of the Americas*. Volume 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 46-47

tempted to define an Indigenous aesthetic or proposed a culturally sensitive methodology.⁷ So what would constitute an Indigenous American art historical methodology? Leroy N. Meyer eloquently describes a framework:

In traditional culture that is deeply integrated, unlike the fragmented, cosmopolitan culture of the dominant society, the ways in which traditional peoples engage in and value their arts are dependent upon a dynamic cultural network. Thus, appreciation and understanding of indigenous art requires considering more broadly and more deeply, the cultural web.⁸

There are scholars seeking to examine the works for their cultural value beyond an ethnographic analysis, but there is little to guide the development of a methodology that takes a culturally based perspective examining art borne from an Indigenous American aesthetic. This investigation will attempt to examine how this cultural experience and perspective is different and how it can be incorporated into an Indigenous aesthetic.

Through this discussion it is proposed that an Indigenous American aesthetic will reveal the role of Indigenous art objects as: 1) used to express individual identity within a complex socio-cultural community; 2) affirmed to serve as didactic materials and mnemonic references to traditional cultural cosmology and values; and 3) instrumental for intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. This attempt may be limited in its capacity to serve all tribes and every community, but perhaps it can serve as a pebble to generate ripples of dialogue within the stream of Indigenous consciousness.

Aesthetics

In “Native American Art History: Questions of the Canon,” Joyce M. Szabo examines the many generalities and omissions that have driven the development of scholarship on Indigenous American art. She describes that much of the analysis has been driven by the relationship and use of primitive works as a visual resource by Euroamerican artists. She further describes the broad dependency on European aesthetics for analysis and discussion as a result of the Euroamerican artists who were using primitive works as a visual resource, thus these standards were used for analysis of works from any of the *other* cultures.⁹ As mentioned before, the scholarship on indigenous arts is welcome and a broad range of interpretations are left to be done from many perspectives, but there is a distinct gap that can be served by developing a clearly defined Indigenous American aesthetic – one that can reflect the complexity represented by that Ponca pipe bag and its floral map design.

Among those who have attempted to address this issue is Steven Leuthold, who in *Indigenous Aesthetics*, addresses the need for a more culturally appropriate methodology, “In native communities the aesthetic is acknowledged as central to the expression of worldviews based on religion, myths, and relations to nature. Despite this centrality of the aesthetic to native communities, there has been little analysis of indigenous aesthetics in the general lit-

⁷ Among those of note who are making positive contributions towards this perspective in addition to those quoted here are Rennard Strickland, Gerald McMaster, Paul Chaat Smith, Jolene Rickard, and Margaret Archuleta.

⁸ Meyer, Leroy N. “In Search of Native American Aesthetics.” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. Vol. 35, No. 4 (Winter, 2001), p 27.

⁹ Szabo, Joyce M. “Native American Art History: Questions of the Canon.” Bruce Bernstein (ed.) *Essays on Native Modernism*. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 2006.

erature on aesthetics.”¹⁰ Through his analysis, Leuthold develops a systematic approach to art that:

addresses the relationship between aesthetics and other cultural realms without reducing one realm to the other. In this sense, an artwork can be valued for its expressiveness, complexity, creativity, or formal structure – qualities that make up aesthetic experience – without artificially separating the experience of art from other valuative dimensions of experience: the moral, economic, political, interpersonal, or spiritual. A systems view emphasizes the collective aspects of aesthetic experience, not just the formal properties of art.¹¹

This consideration of the fundamental role that aesthetics play in the experience of art, both in production and in reception, is sensitive and well described. Leuthold’s discussion of the disparity between art as a formal object and art as an aesthetic experience provides a glimpse of what is needed in considering how to qualify an Indigenous American aesthetic. In reading considerations that Leuthold gives to his system it becomes clear that a Western construct serves to seek out points of distinction and difference, to use a linear approach of hierarchy for identifying culturally based expressions. In his book, Leuthold applies his aesthetic system to new media works in film and video. This application does not suitably defend whether this system can work with other kinds of artistic media. Further, the limitation created by this application in arts that are made from Westernized technology is that Leuthold is beginning his analysis removed from the traditional cultural context of indigenous art production and aesthetics. Is Leuthold’s construct a suitable system for defining an Indigenous aesthetic? Further, what characteristics can or should be found in an Indigenous aesthetic?

In Leuthold’s system, the reduction of aesthetics to points of distinction, or difference, from the Western aesthetic is valuable for discussion but not the strongest starting point for the analysis of Indigenous American art. This construct is at such odds with an Indigenous approach which is more prone to finding relationships and shared commonalities that the concept of a system based on distinctions will continue to limit the consideration of work within a more Western derived perspective.

In the Indigenous cultures for whom relationships are critical, using relationships as a guiding structure can serve as a cornerstone for developing an appropriate system for analysis. Using a relationship structure will mimic the cyclical and interrelated characteristics often found within Indigenous culture, lending to an appropriately formed definition of an Indigenous aesthetic. What I suggest here is that an internally generated cultural premise be used from which to develop this aesthetic, one drawn from relationships.

The use of relationships is a part of the coded language embedded in all aspects of Indigenous American culture. Drawing relationships is a fundamental way of understanding nature and of forming one’s personal identity. The use of non-human signifiers for clan identities, animate and inanimate, is commonly layered with relationships linking present community members back to the genesis stories.¹² Consideration for how coding is performed

¹⁰ Leuthold, Steven. *Indigenous Aesthetics*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998, p. 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹² An example of this is evidenced in the Muscogee (Creek) Wind Clan. This clan name documents the genesis emergence into this world by the Muscogee (Creek) ancestors and their initial experience of the sensation of wind.

within the culture can be given through the extensive use of living metaphors within Indigenous society and their translation into visual design elements. The use of living metaphors within the oral history reflects a deep understanding of the relationship between the forces of nature, human forces included.

Observing these relationships between natural forces brings understanding and contributes toward the commonly revered concepts of balance and reciprocity. Balance is used within Indigenous American communities describing the mutually dependent relationship that all forms of life have with each other and is reflected in both internal and external behaviours. Reciprocity is used to describe the necessary acts of generosity that maintain balance between interacting forces, including human, natural, and spiritual. Through a deeply embedded understanding of mutual benefit and interdependency, the circular and cyclical patterns of nature are reflected within cultural protocol, social behaviours, and the arts. Developing the formal structure of an Indigenous aesthetic by necessity must follow an interdependent pattern that extends like a spider web and draws strength from the interdisciplinary, yet tangible, connections.

The potential from these connections is that scholars will be able to tap into the interrelated knowledge that exists between the distended disciplines of social and physical sciences, humanities, music, geography, religion, cosmology, and politics that are linked through the visual materials of the culture. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of Indigenous arts, scholarship in these other disciplines becomes necessary to formulate the qualities of an Indigenous American aesthetic. Constructing an Indigenous American interdisciplinary approach, it is possible to move towards defining an aesthetic.

Within an Indigenous American cultural construct the interconnectedness of the human experience with the natural environment makes it difficult to draw distinctions, may even reject the need for distinctions, allowing that as part and parcel of the experience of living the drawing of relationships is a more powerful act than drawing lines of separation. In *Native Science* Gregory Cajete states that, “The idea that science and art are two sides of the same coin is what Indigenous people have always tried to convey.”¹³ His reference to the relationship that the sciences have with the arts serves as a point of connection, a shared history of creative thinking and experience resulting in a knowledge-base broader for the inclusivity of an interdisciplinary approach.

Reciprocity

The traditional knowledge of Indigenous American culture, largely anchored to concepts of regeneration and reciprocity, is expressed and practiced in a network of symbols, metaphors, and myths. This interdependent network reveals itself in the intellect of the culture as ceremonies, prayers, songs, dances, and the arts – largely communal experiences. Cultural experiences embed this knowledge in a subtle, yet sophisticated, manner within the community strengthening the rootedness of that network. Cajete explains how this is performed within the culture:

Since then, the Wind Clan is often organized in the front of processions within ceremonial protocol, invoking this genesis experience.

¹³ Cajete, Gregory. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Santa Fe, NM: Clearlight Publishers, 1999, p. 78.

Creative participation with the living Earth extends from birth to death and beyond... Indigenous peoples view the body as an expression of the sensual manifestation of mind and spirit. Death and the body's ultimate decomposition into the primal elements of earth, wind, fire, air and water mark the transformation of one's relatives and ancestors into living landscape, its plants, animals, waters, soils, clouds, and air. This is a literal biological truth as well as a metaphoric one.¹⁴

In consideration of this truth, then the traditional arts of the Indigenous communities are rooted to the archetypal experience of creative action. The relationship to nature drawn from the regenerative process is supported by the concept of reciprocity. The balance between reciprocity, expressed through acts of generosity and gratitude, and regeneration mutually benefit the individual, the community and the well-being of the culture. Culturally, performing in a generous and grateful manner is part of the creative act and reflects a cultural rootedness even into the contemporary experience.

The use of materials is a key element within the Indigenous aesthetic, more so than in the Western experience. Providing insight, Lucy Lippard writes, "Art itself must have begun as nature – not as imitation of nature, nor as formalized representation of it, but simply as the perception of relationships between humans and the natural world. Visual art, even today, even at its most ephemeral or neutralized, is rooted in matter."¹⁵ The materials used within the earliest forms – basketry, pottery, carving, and weaving, etc – are drawn from that natural environment and into the relationship with the primal elements and the natural cycle of reciprocity. The cultural perspective of the environment, as described by Cajete above, leads to the belief that these materials are held within the sacred¹⁶ realm for their part in that regenerative process. Many communities have protocol regarding the collection of materials that recognizes these relationships, expressing the human relationship to the earth, protocol that continues to be practiced. Within this protocol live expressions of reciprocity that are a core characteristic of the community and the aesthetic.

Materials

Consideration of the source of artistic materials merits further discussion. Many are familiar with the relationship drawn by tribes to the Earth and the metaphor that refers to the land as the "Mother" providing for all things that sustain us. Traditional stories will often describe the metaphorical relationship of the people to the land through "myths."¹⁷ These stories vary in relation to the geographic area as tribes reflect the local dynamic of nature. It is not un-

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 21.

¹⁵ Lippard, Lucy M. *Overlay*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983, p. 41.

¹⁶ The elaboration of the distinctions between Western and Indigenous use of the word "sacred" are beyond the scope of this paper. To summarize the point Cajete writes, "The essence of Native spirituality is not religion in the Western sense of the word, but rather a set of core beliefs in the sanctity of personal and community relationships to the natural world, which are creatively acted upon and expressed at both the personal and communal levels." (Cajete, *Native Science*, p. 14). Further suggested reading includes: E.O. James, "The Concept of the Soul in North America" 1927.

¹⁷ The word myth is placed in quotations to mark the distinction that Indigenous peoples often accept these stories of creation and "how things came to be" as a factual telling of their history, though these stories are regarded as folk tales by many Western scholars. This is also a valuable point of expressing the author's frustration with the weakness of the English language in providing appropriate options for communication between Western and Indigenous thinkers.

common to find tribes referring to the materials used in traditional arts as gifts of the “Mother.” So when an artist is collecting grasses or reeds to make a basket, or digging clay to make a pot, or using hide or fur to sew clothing, these materials are a part of the regenerative process to which we all belong. Materials are provided by the Earth for use within that reciprocal relationship.

An example of this can be given from Southwestern pottery. The artist will make offerings and prayers during the act of collecting the clay. The clay is then often shaped into a circular form with an opening at the top. In its earliest form, it formally communicates the common genesis belief in the region of emerging from the underworld into the present world. This is done through the metaphor of the spherical shape of the earth and singular passage as point of emergence. Further, the application of surface designs often refers to the natural activities on the earth’s surface, such as water cycles or animal migration references. As participants in this regenerative process, these materials are treated with care and the best creative energy is invested in them. Through this process of reverence and utilization of materials, many Indigenous people share a reverence for the objects based just on materials alone that is without comparison in the Western culture. The materials serve as a metaphoric reference for that regenerative process.

Within an Indigenous aesthetic, this metaphor is actively performed through the use of natural material, and serves to reinforce the communal relationship to the Earth. As long as these traditional materials are used, this relationship continues to be expressed. For many, the choice to work in these traditional materials while evolving the formal shapes and applied designs is a way of maneuvering their continuing cultural identity while responding to a heavily technological, dominant culture. There are tribes who have lost layers of that reciprocal and material relationship, especially as expressed in the traditional arts, who are making a concerted effort to revive these creative traditions as efforts to retain their culture through concerted efforts of supporting the artists.¹⁸

Conversely, the continued use of traditional designs and shapes while evolving their application within nontraditional materials works in a similar capacity of tribal connection and contemporary cultural response. The evolution of either materials or forms is part of the Indigenous aesthetic premise. By acknowledging the materials as part of this regenerative process, the network of symbols and metaphors continues to grow and be renewed by this evolution. Those artists whose objects follow a strict tradition of materials, forms and use of designs are highly regarded for this cultural retention by tribal community members. Equally so are those who incorporate new materials and designs expanding the visual dialogue about the Indigenous experience.¹⁹ Tribal members often express a reverence for the finished object as representative of the network between metaphors, symbols, cultural beliefs, historical experiences and knowledge. Further, the creative act continues to perform within that metaphor of regeneration as a cornerstone to the Indigenous aesthetic. This self-servicing process, linking the visual metaphor to the intellectual knowledge base and spiritual belief system within the aesthetic may partially be credited with the viability of so many tribal cultures after centuries under colonial hegemony.

¹⁸ This can be seen in the work of Jereldine Redcorn (Caddo), Joanna Underwood and Sue Fish (both Chickasaw).

¹⁹ The works of Tony Abeyta, Preston Singletary and Tammy Garcia come to mind as examples of this kind of material evolution.

Metaphors

Understanding how the metaphoric mind serves to connect our human experience with nature is primary to being able to fully engage the Indigenous American aesthetic. The role of metaphor cannot be emphasized enough. Metaphors are a creative catalyst to understanding and perception beyond the limitations of our rational mind. Both Western and Indigenous scholars have studied the philosophical discussion of the metaphorical mind²⁰ in opposition to the rational mind.²¹ Within Indigenous philosophy and culture, the valuation placed on the metaphoric mind is central to participating in that cultural network nested within the aesthetic. The metaphoric mind serves as a gateway managing the cultural flow of intellect and spirit. We get closer to the depth of meaning that is embedded within the Indigenous art object by embracing the arts as an expression rooted in, but also an act of, cultural affirmation and as a participant within that cycle of regeneration. At that point, the symbolism often used and referenced by Indigenous artists becomes revealed as the visual narrative of that metaphoric process.

The metaphoric narrative of the Indigenous discourse is embodied in the range of symbols descended through generations of cultural activity. These symbols reveal and describe that relationship to the regenerative process. This is not only true for their relationship to natural powers, such as rain and clouds and the earth, but also for their references to the principal cosmological characters embedded within the cultures participating as creation figures and tricksters.²² These participants often have a direct relationship to natural phenomena, specific sites, and land forms. They may also be the figures that represent aspects of that regenerative process revealed in the creative acts, such as Spiderwoman and Corn Mother. Through their representation they are actively incorporated into the vitality of timeless culture through the arts and storytelling. This timelessness is also part of that network, where Indigenous people perceive history less in terms of a chronological linear placement, but as a part of their own personal experience. Hearing the story of Changing Woman for a Navajo girl is just as powerful for her as it was for her grandmother. As she participates in the ceremonies that mark her own womanhood, she physically reenacts the metaphors that Changing Woman embodies; the symbols of that character become part of her own identity.

The application of symbols that refer to these regenerative processes is so deeply rooted that it is sometimes difficult to identify them apart from other designs that may be more contemporary or uniquely personal, all valuably drawn into the Indigenous artistic dialogue. Recognizing that symbolism refers to the regenerative process allows Indigenous artists to incorporate ancient symbolism while also creating new visual references; they accept that this ongoing symbolic dialogue is not new and because of its part in the regenerative process, is not old either.

²⁰ Einstein said, "The intuitive or metaphoric mind is a sacred gift, and the rational mind its faithful servant." (Samples, Bob. *The Metaphoric Mind*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1976.)

²¹ Further discussion on the metaphoric mind can be found in the works of Gregory Cajete, Donald Fixico, Bob Samples, and Paul Ricoeur, among others.

²² An excellent example of scholarship on this topic is the Heard Museum's exhibit catalogue *Rain: Native expressions from the American Southwest*, Phoenix, AZ: Heard Museum, 2000.

Symbols

George Kubler wrote, “Everything made now is either a replica or a variant of something made a little time ago and so on back without break to the first morning of human time.”²³ In this statement, Kubler relates what was to what is. Knowing that these symbols are ancient, but actively using them in the contemporary experience and as relevant contemporary expressions endows them with a continued life. This may seem rather abstract, but in more concrete terms one can understand that the symbol for rain was as inherently powerful an image as much 1500 years ago as it is today in referencing the continuing human need for rain. This relationship has not changed and though the symbol may have undergone an artistic evolution, the use of the symbol is no less relevant since its first inscription.

The use of symbols for those natural elements or mythical figures representing the elements persist through time and reflect their revered position within the Indigenous cultures and thusly the Indigenous aesthetic. Cajete writes, “[An] aspect of the creative process involves thinking in metaphors, that is, in symbols and images. Unless one is open to metaphoric thinking, Indigenous natural philosophy will remain mysterious because it has evolved from multileveled and multilayered symbols.”²⁴ These symbols serve as a coded language communicating relationships and networks found in the Indigenous experience. Leroy Little Bear compounds these layers of relationship by writing, “The Native American paradigm is comprised of and includes ideas of constant motion and flux, existence consisting of energy waves, interrelationships, all things being animate, space/place, renewal and all things being imbued with spirit.”²⁵ This circular process of drawing relationships between the “constant motion and flux” within which we are all participating is expressed through these symbols. They provide anchoring points for Indigenous people to acknowledge and be reassured that their current dilemmas and circumstances are no more than an evolution of the difficulties and bounties shared by their ancestors.²⁶ Through the continued use of symbols the artist is linked to the past and sets a path for being linked into the future.

Symbols serving as a communication tool flexibly carry multiple interpretations as well as layers of information. Symbols provide a means to an evolutionary process allowing for artists to imbue personal meanings while invoking cultural premises. The use of a black bird by one artist within one tribe may serve as a visual reference to the trickster. For another artist a similar black bird may serve as symbol of a spiritual messenger. The viewer may infer a meaning vastly different from either based upon his own cultural and personal experiences. The visual similarities between symbols, in this example of the black bird, serve to strengthen each other. The use of the symbol invokes all those experiences and allows for these multiple meanings to inform one another. The use of symbols is shown to be open to these layered meanings, and more, without losing the power of reference for any one of them. This valuation of relationships is a core strength of the Indigenous aesthetic, serving to support the multiple readings of the symbols, but also linking layers of meaning together.

²³ Kubler, George. *The Shape of Time*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962, p. 2.

²⁴ Cajete, *Native Science*, p. 45

²⁵ Little Bear, Leroy, “Introduction.” to Cajete, *Native Science*. p. x.

²⁶ This is similar to Donald Fixico’s extensive discussion about the natural democracy that exists within American Indian culture and how it affects Native peoples’ intellectual processing of information in *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World*.

Through the drawing of relationships, the Indigenous aesthetic gains from each additional layer. By allowing for the multiple layers of meaning in the use of symbols, Indigenous American arts serve as a conduit for cultural perpetuity. The linking of knowledge from one discipline to the next through the arts also generates a cycle of revelation. Each symbol is potentially related through layered metaphorical references, perhaps linked in a song or a ceremony, and this additional reference becomes linked back to that symbol. In this way, each viewer is allowed and encouraged to draw upon his or her personal experiences and to decipher the symbol based on that without any further requirement. In a process of self-discovery, these multiple layers of meaning gain in value for the individual and serve as an affirmation of personal and cultural identity.

In this process of using the symbol repeatedly, it becomes a point of reference to remember all of those varied metaphoric meanings leading to its role as a mnemonic device. The continued use of a symbol as a reference to a story or song or relationship strengthens its value within the culture. When a symbol has steadfastly served as a mnemonic device, then it is apt to be used as a teaching tool. An example of this is the use of patchwork within the Seminole and Muscogee (Creek) tribes in Oklahoma. The development of aesthetically pleasing designs in the early twentieth century with scraps of colored cloth allowed families to provide beautiful clothing in dire economic times. As these designs became named in relationship to natural phenomena, including lightning and trees among others, the stories of those phenomena became attached to the designs. Since many clans are identified through their relationship to natural phenomena the designs have gained a visual relationship as a symbolic presentation of the clan system. The evolution of the design presents itself in the contemporary practice of using the appliquéd or sewn patchwork designs on clothing as an opportunity to teach children the cultural cosmology. In the process, the linking of the stories to the symbolic design then serves as a visual reminder of that story.²⁷ The designs become mnemonic devices to the culture through this process.

The symbols, often simplistic geometric designs, are visual metaphors for these stories. In proposing this version of an Indigenous aesthetic, the arts, ancient and contemporary alike, serve as an act of self-determination and “reaffirmation of identity”.²⁸ Further, the potential for understanding the role that the arts play within the cultural community, beyond being the artist’s individual expression to the object’s service within the community as an expression of shared identity, reveals that the arts are acting as a conduit to the metaphoric mind and as part of the dynamic that ensures cultural survival.

The sophisticated process by which the symbols, metaphors and materials are combined to document cultural knowledge is one that has only just begun to be recognized by scholars.²⁹ But this cultural knowledge is not new for many Indigenous American artists. Some have been quite public with their explanation of this process, including Michael Kabotie. His online description of the process of layering visual information can be found at his gallery’s web-

²⁷ This reference is part of ongoing research by the author for another article that is currently in development.

²⁸ Juane Quick-to-See Smith “We, the Human Beings.” Thalia Gouma-Peterson. *We, the Human Beings: 27 Contemporary Native American Artists*. Wooster, OH: The College of Wooster Art Museum, 1992, p. 8.

²⁹ James R. Cunkle’s *Talking Pots: Deciphering the symbols of a Prehistoric People* Phoenix, AZ: Golden West Publishers, 1993. describes his analysis of symbols used on the pottery near Arizona’s White Mountains. This book details the process of identifying the symbols, their repeated patterns of usage and the relevance that the whole images have when combined with the local oral history stories of the Navajo, Hopi, and Apache.

site.³⁰ In his description of a recent painting, he invokes the meanings of ancient symbols that continue to be used in this visual dialogue, such as the Hopi feathered-serpent. The iconic feathered-serpent appears in so many tribes' work that it is difficult to identify any singular source for its inception making it a strong example for discussion in this proposed concept of the Indigenous aesthetic. In Kabotie's explanation, the symbol represents the dynamic between heaven and earth and the constant power struggle between these two energy sources. The feathered-serpent image in his painting posits this ancient symbol as commentary on our contemporary dependence on the oil industry. His use of this ancient symbol presents for consideration how these symbols, metaphors, and materials continue to be used by Indigenous American artists to document not only cultural traditions but also contemporary experience.

Conclusion

Through the continued use of symbols, including designs and colors that serve as metaphors to cultural concepts, the Indigenous American artist is able to participate in that "constant ebb and flow" of energy within a contemporary environment. The constant evolution of that creative energy into new works incorporating traditional symbols and metaphors contributes to the role that the arts play as mnemonic devices lending towards an extended memory and ever-evolving Indigenous identity. Using art as a way of documenting experiences can be an independently individual action, but it can also be perceived through this aesthetic as contributing to cultural historical record. For the Indigenous American community, these visual documents have kept the cultural and historic memory alive despite so little other documentary voice. While there are a growing number of Indigenous American scholars who are able to traverse the gap between indigenous and Western intellectual constructs, the arts continue to serve as a necessary component of cultural memory within the tribal community. By relying on this synergetic relationship between visual symbols, cultural metaphors, and personal expression, the Indigenous aesthetic is designed to last.

For the Indigenous American community, considering art through this aesthetic web of knowledge and incorporating these considerations into methodologies may benefit the research and documentation of this integrated knowledge system. It is valuable to consider the role of reciprocity in the development of traditional arts, to incorporate the layers of symbolic meaning and their multiple but not mutually exclusive readings, and to examine the power of metaphor in the creative process. It may certainly encourage a more appropriate examination of the arts, allowing for a fuller reading.

The concept that the arts can be analyzed based upon this version of an Indigenous aesthetic is open to critical review. As the author has considered a limited range of Indigenous American art, this concept of the Indigenous aesthetic seems to functionally open a door to a broader understanding of the meaning of this work. Further evidence to support this aesthetic description is that these concepts are often akin to the kind of commentary found when reading artists' statements about their work. Using this aesthetic, those concepts of the metaphoric mind, uses of symbols and myths, within a culturally specific context, allows for a discussion about the art that incorporates the metaphysical without becoming romantic

³⁰ Glenn Green Galleries, Michael Kabotie, "Artist Interview" <accessed 08 July 2009>
<http://www.glenngreen.com/interviews/Artist-Interviews.html>.

or sentimental. Further the examination of arts through this aesthetic lens addressing the formal qualities of material, form, symbolism, and process can be made in a way that enriches both the traditional and the contemporary work. Is this premise a stone in that river?

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the mentoring support of R. Douglas Elmore, Mary Jo Watson (both at University of Oklahoma), Greg Cajete (University of New Mexico) and Don Fixico (Arizona State University); thanks especially to Gloria Emerson, Yvonne Lever and David Cateforis for their kind review and editing; and Marwin Begaye, Mikolyan Begaye and Talullah Begaye for their unwavering patience.

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The primary focus of Ahtone's research and writing has been to place contemporary Indigenous art within the context of American art history. This has included curating contemporary art exhibits with historic didactic materials, documenting the evolution of tribal design usage and materials – pre-contact through removal and post-colonial production, and developing an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing Indigenous art, especially related to the history of tribes currently present in Oklahoma. Recent exhibits include "Art from Indian Territory 2007: the state of being American Indian" (American Indian Cultural Center & Museum) and "Looking Indian" (Untitled Artspace, Oklahoma City, OK). Based on research, she is currently developing a framework that incorporates an Indigenous perspective on the production and purposes of art to provide a more deeply-rooted inspection of how the arts serve a community whose history and literature are embedded in oral history and art. She draws from her own experience as a tribal person (Choctaw/Chickasaw Nations) and as a scholar.

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