

what is “indian art”?

by gwen sharp and lisa wade

Each year tourists flock to communities that promise a connection to the “Old West,” a mythologized place where American pioneers battled nature, each other, and native populations. In regions like the Black Hills of South Dakota, the draw of the cowboy-Indian confrontation isn’t just history, it’s an industry. Through historical markers, museum artifacts, and shops filled with mementos, tourists consume the past. Part of this process is an ongoing re-narration of American Indian history and its place in stories of the Old West. And one of the sites of this re-telling is art.

Art depicting life during westward expansion is widely available, and items by American Indian artists or depicting American Indians are particularly popular. But what is Indian art? Paintings, sculptures, and other items described as “Indian art” often follow very narrow aesthetic rules, typically including traditionally-dressed American Indians in a pre-modern world, often alongside or even conflated with nature (commonly represented by animals such as eagles and wolves). The term “Indian art,” then, refers to the background of the artist, but also to an artistic product with an identifiable style and set of themes.

The production of “Indian art” is highly influenced by patrons and consumers. American Indian artists often find they must produce a specific kind of art if they want to be com-

mercially successful as an *Indian artist*. In *Indian Painters & White Patrons* (1971), art historian J.J. Brody argued that non-Indians often have significant influence over Indian artists and their art because of their roles as gallery owners, benefactors, and consumers. Often these groups share a preference for works with “traditional” themes.

Artists of Native ancestry are aware of the narrow range of styles deemed appropriate for their art. Painter Oscar Howe, a member of the Yanktonai Dakota tribe, knew he wasn’t free to paint as he liked and still qualify as an Indian artist. He explained that one of his Cubist paintings (see below) was “rejected from the 1959 Indian Artists Annual because it was ‘non-Indian’ and embodied a ‘non-traditional’ Indian style” (quoted in Strickland and Archuleta’s *Shared Visions*, 1991). Howe was forced to choose between artistic freedom and conforming to others’ ideas of what American Indians’ paintings should look like. While all artists face pressure to meet the preferences of potential customers, Howe’s racial background placed unique constraints on what types of work buyers were interested in seeing him create. A letter reveals Howe lamenting to a friend, “There is much more to Indian Art than pretty, stylized pictures... Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting...?” (Ibid.)

At times, Howe and others have intentionally taken aim at



“The American Indian” by Fritz Scholder, courtesy the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution.



Oscar Howe, “Victory Dance,” c.1954. (c) Adelheid Howe, 1983. Courtesy Philbrook Museum of Art, Inc., Tulsa, OK. Museum purchase 1954.6.



"Collector #5," courtesy the Estate of T.C. Cannon.



When searching for a piece of American Indian art on a popular website, all of the results are "traditionally themed" paintings.

the rules that constrain Indian artists. For instance, Fritz Scholder, a member of the Luiseño tribe of California, painted *The American Indian* in 1970 in an attempt to deconstruct images of Native Americans (p. 76, left). The painting depicts a man wearing a traditional breastplate, with a feather in his hair and a tomahawk in his hands. His long robe is fashioned from an American flag. Discussing his works, Scholder explained that he'd decided "somebody should paint the Indian subject matter...and do something with it that wasn't a huge cliché" (quoted in W. Jackson Rushing's chapter in *Shared Visions*). *The American Indian* undermines clichéd images of American Indians wrapped in traditional blankets while also referencing 19th century military photographs of imprisoned American Indians dressed in flags handed out by the U.S. Army after their own clothing had been confiscated. The result of the combination of traditional elements with the symbol of the U.S. is a subject who is identifiably American Indian, yet not a pre-modern throwback to a romanticized past—an American citizen but not a fully incorporated one.

Similarly, Caddo-Kiowa painter T.C. Cannon's *Collector #5* reverses our idea of who collects or appreciates which type of art by showing a traditionally-dressed Native American man sitting in front of a copy of Van Gogh's *Wheatfield* (see above). Cannon combines traditional Native American elements—a Navajo rug, a wicker chair with a stylized animal design, moccasins, a bear-claw necklace—with a painting associated with sophisticated artistic tastes and high culture. He drew on the painting styles of Matisse and the 1960s Pop Art movement, further blurring the distinction between "modern" art and "Indian" art. Both the content and the style of the painting subvert assumptions about what constitutes Indian art.

American Indian artists often find they must produce a specific kind of art if they want to be commercially successful as an *Indian* artist.

These paintings, along with the works of Joe Herrera (Cochiti Pueblo), Quincy Tahoma (Navajo), George Morrison (Ojibway), Harry Fonseca (Nisenan Maidu/Native Hawaiian), and other American Indian artists, challenge the perception that in order to be "authentic" Indians they must inhabit a time-warp

universe in which their cultures and lifestyles—and artistic styles—have remained basically unchanged since the turn of the 20th century. But stereotypical depictions of pre-modern Indians communing with nature (in paintings as well as movies like *Dances with Wolves* and books about "noble savages") remain the dominant narrative about American Indians. If you wander through the tourist shops of the Black Hills in South Dakota, galleries of Taos, New Mexico, or roadside stands near the Grand Canyon, it becomes clear that the appetite for romanticized, mythologized images of Indians remains strong, and that many American Indian artists still face a choice between commercial success and artistic innovation, a choice imposed because of a larger cultural narrative in which Native Americans are historical artifacts incompatible with, and living outside of, modern American society.

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