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THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIVE AMERICAN ART

BY FIONA FEWER



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INTRODUCTION

In the last quarter century there has been a dramatic increase in the number of books, study papers and magazine articles about Native Americans, about whom little was known beyond their Hollywood reputation. Indian art and design in particular has been dealt with extensively, including the aesthetics of contemporary Native American art and comparisons between the art of today and that of other centuries. Much has been written about the religious beliefs of the various tribes, and biographies and autobiographies of famous Indians, including such Great Chiefs as Geronimo and Black Elk, have been recorded.

Using this material my thesis outlines the history of the Native American and discusses comparisons and common characteristics between contemporary Indian art and that of the last century, examining its relevance and validity in the lives of both Indians and other Americans. In addition to this, I will consider the progression of Native American art, the way in which the Indians have adapted their art to changing times and how they are now incorporating new ideas into their art. I hope to show that their contemporary art is not simply the profitable tourist business it is often thought to be.

The number of Native Americans in the United States today is probably similar to what it was in

Columbus' time. Despite this, to many non-Indians, their existence and their culture is still thought of as being of the past. Many people believe that 'Indianism' died when the Indians were forced into reservations in the last century, that they no longer practice their religious beliefs and that their artifacts are no more than tourist souvenirs. To these Native Americans, however, their culture is very much a part of the present. Although the way of life of the Indian has changed and their numbers are much smaller than they were one hundred years ago, much more tribal belief and art tradition has been passed on than is generally suspected, tradition is still alive and well in Indian social spheres today, as it is the basis of their whole culture.

Originally, the Native Americans had no written language. Instead, visual communication took the form of graphic symbols incorporated into beaded tapestries or woven grasses, which formed a basis for their art. Thus their art derived from a necessity, and specifically a necessity to communicate, whether it be with each other or the spiritual world.

It has to be understood, therefore, that most Indian art, both old and contemporary, is essentially functional. Indians do not believe in 'art for arts sake' - all their artifacts have a purpose. For example, masks

made by the tribes in the Northwest are for the purpose of curing illnesses, and the miniature Hopi Kachina 'dolls' are not made for recreational use but to make children behave. Decorated talking sticks give one a stronger right to speak within the tribe.

In the classic Indian view, art is a part of every aspect of their lives. It is a natural part of their rituals and their religious and social expression. There is no word in any Native American language meaning art, as there is no word that means religion.

The traditional nomadic way of life of the old Indians is thought to be the reason for the restlessness in their descendants, reflected in the pow-wow circuit.

It is hoped that this thesis will demonstrate that there has been a progression in Indian art since the last century and that the beauty and craftsmanship of today's artifacts often surpasses those of the past.

CHAPTER 1

In order to understand the position of Native Americans and their art in the 19th and 20th centuries it is helpful to examine their beginnings on the American continent. This chapter will deal with their history and will briefly discuss early examples of Native American art.

The first inhabitants of the vast land which is now America came as nomad bands from Siberia, following Mammoths and other animals which they hunted in order to survive. They came by way of the Bering Strait, which, during the Ice Age (6 : p.12-13), may have intermittently been a broad grass grown plain. At that time, over 20,000 years ago, much of North America was covered in ice and it was only possible for these prehistoric people to travel across the continent because some corridors occasionally became free of ice - Alaska was one. Geologists suggest that travel to different ares within the continent and on down to South America was possible due to the existence of a number of these ice free corridors. One of these, hundreds of miles wide, ran from the Arctic to the plains south of Canada, and along the east side of the Rockies.

As these people moved south they split into different groups and went different directions. The separate developments of these isolated groups gave rise

to the different customs, languages and styles of art which the Europeans encountered when they first arrived (11: p.9).

Many archaeological finds over the last century provide proof of the existence of these early inhabitants of America and new finds are occurring all the time causing the estimated date of first life in America to be continually pushed further back .

One of the earliest remains of a human body to be found in North America is that of the controversial 'Minnesota Man', actually a young girl, whose bones are said to be more than 10,000 years old (6: p.15).

In some areas nothing more than a few bones have been uncovered but in others, elaborate and extensive burial sites have been discovered. Near Dallas in Texas, gravel-pit workers uncovered three heavy discs of sandstone with faces carved into them along with the bones of mammoths, camelops and large bison. These carved sandstone discs represent one of the earliest examples of Native American art. Other early examples are items of pottery, one being a jar found in a burial cave in Arizona dating from around 700 - 900 B.C.

The earliest evidence of art in North America

consisted of paintings on wood, bone or hide, but mainly on rock. Rock art has been studied intensively and there is evidence of examples in Minnesota which date between 1500 and 500 B.C. Some examples in the Great Plains, however, are little more than a century old. The first example of rock art was recorded by English settlers in Massachusetts in the 17th century (5: p.7).

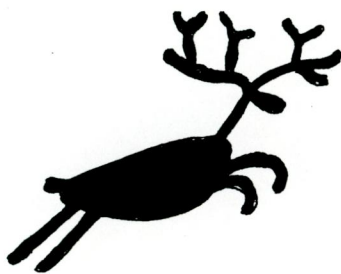


fig. 1.1 This is an example of motifs of Big Horn sheep found in South Eastern California.

Rock art expresses the harmonious relationship that the Native Americans had with nature and the animals around them, a relationship which became more evident in later years, most importantly the 19th century. Many paintings are simply pictographs of bighorn sheep, an animal common in America for many centuries, but there are also many references to the spirit world.

Representations of religious rituals are often found, as are aspects of astronomy and records of important events within the tribe - a war with a rival tribe, or the death of a chief, for example.

Different areas of the continent and different climates gave rise to different styles and techniques. Caves in California offered protection from wind and water erosion and so the pictures here are particularly precise and clear. Prehistoric Indians incised petroglyphs in dark rock faces in the Great Basin. Paints used were of mineral origin and were mainly red, white and black in



colour, although some rocks also produced a yellow ochre type colour. The minerals were ground with a pestle and mortar and were mixed with animal and vegetable fats before being applied with either a bone used as a paintbrush, or by finger.

Plains Indians' rock art was carried out in a similar fashion but dates much later than that of the west coast. We know this because there are clear representations of the horse to be found on many rocks and the horse, introduced into the Americas in the 15th century, did not reach the Plains until much later. Rock art in the Plains generally depicts images of hunting or warfare and it may well have been another means of religious expression.

fig. 1.2 Karl Bodmer's painting of an Indian buffalo dance, 1830s.

Those people living in Europe and the rest of the world saw their first impressions of the Native American, or the red man, as he came to be known, through the eyes of European artists who went either to explore or settle in the New World. One such artist was Swiss born Karl Bodmer. He travelled up the Missouri river in 1833 with a Prussian prince named Maximilian, who preferred to study natural history than rule his small state. Bodmer made over 400 sketches which he later turned into a series of coloured engravings (fig. 1.2 shows one example of his work).

These colourful paintings, showing a way of life no European could even imagine, are in many cases the only record we have of some of these tribes, because with the 19th century came the advent of the white settlers and white man's diseases, of which the Indians had no resistance; a smallpox epidemic in the 1830's wiped out several complete tribes. This was only the beginning of the end for the Native Americans who, within 70 years, were stripped of their land, their livelihood and their pride.

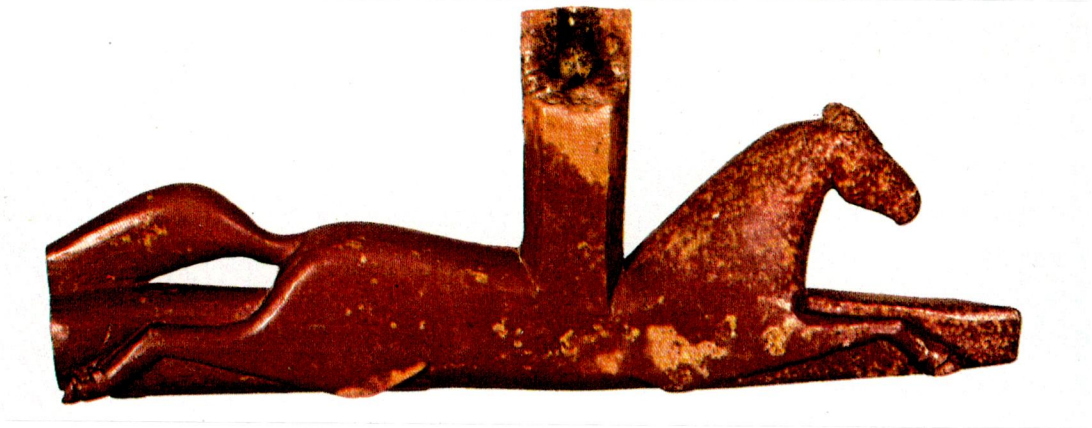
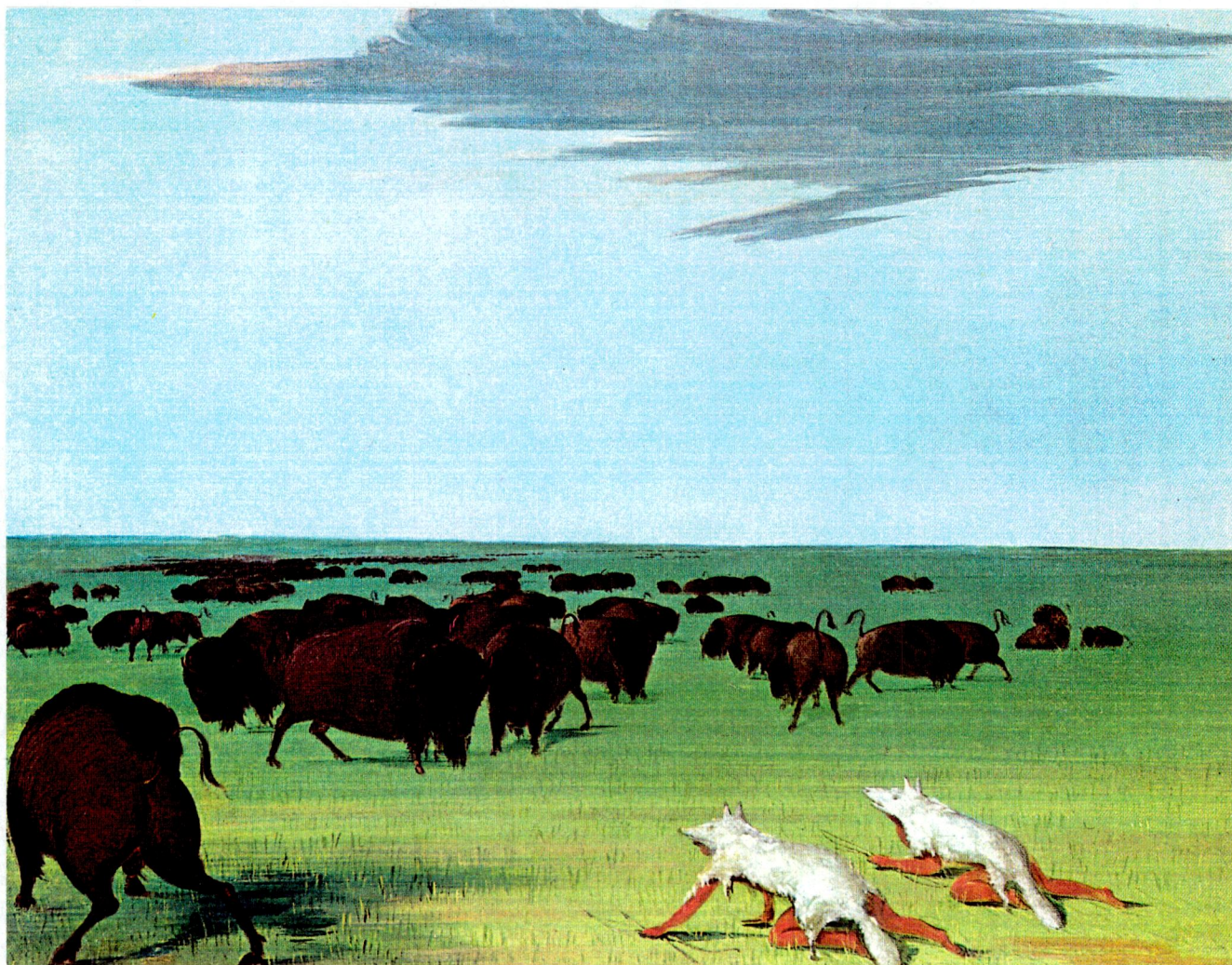
CHAPTER 2

This chapter will consider the Indians in the 19th century, how the events which occurred led to their eventual 'imprisonment' in reservations, and how these events affected their art.

The white man came to the New World believing the land was his to be conquered for the simple reason that he had 'discovered' it. The Indians' view was never taken into consideration - their belief was that the land belonged to the 'Earth Mother' and that it was the obligation of each tribe to be guardian over the area of land on which they lived. They believed the land to be a gift of the spirits and not something to fight wars over (2: p.153). However, it would become necessary before long for them to do so.

By the late 18th century the original small European settlements were already becoming sprawling colonies and the Native Americans were constantly being pushed ever westward, away from their ancestral homes, across the vast continent of America.

In 1778 the first of many broken treaties was signed between the United States and the Indian tribes. In return for the Delaware tribe's support in the fight against the English, the U.S. promised to set up an Indian state with the Chief of the Delaware tribe as its head. Many more treaties followed promising the Indians gifts, titles



and false hopes if they sold their land to the white man and moved westward.

Indians of the Plains had always lived from cultivation of their lands, fishing and seasonal hunting of buffalo. They could not foresee that this would all change by the end of the 19th century. In 1841 the first convoy of covered wagons brought pioneers across the Plains and within two years, 1,000 people had made this journey. One of these was George Catlin, a painter, who spent many years on the Plains and whose paintings are among the first responsible for giving Europeans an insight into the Indian way of life at the time. He witnessed their ceremonies and rituals and accompanied them when hunting buffalo, disguised as a wolf (2: pp.68,69). (fig. 2.1). His name was given to a red stone used in crafting pipe bowls like the Sioux warrior's bowl, fig. 2.2 opposite. This reddish stone was given the name catlinite after Catlin visited the sacred site in Minnesota where it was quarried (2: p.28).

fig. 2.1 George Catlin's painting of Indians disguised as wolves stalking their quarry.

fig. 2.2 Sioux warriors pipe bowl made of catlinite.

The Plains Indians depended on the Buffalo for almost everything they used, ate and wore. They hunted this animal only out of necessity and used everything from the bones from which arrow-heads were made, to carve into arrows, to the stomach, used as a water vessel. When they were forced off their land it meant leaving the



buffalo and their means of living behind. As it was, buffalo were becoming scarce because the white men were killing them in order to sell their furs which were in great demand. Both these points and the devastating effects of disease and alcohol introduced by European contact, eventually led to the Plains Indians being herded into reservations in the 1880s (6: p.366).

However, some of the Plains tribes were still determined to keep their land and their pride and these were the last group of Indians to battle with the white man. Probably the most famous battle with the Indians, and the one which caused a turn for the worse for them, was the defeat of General George A. Custer, at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, in June 1876 (6: pp.368,369, 2: p.226,227). A young Sioux named Red Horse kept an account of what happened that day in the Indian way - a ledger book full of illustrations. These pictographs are a clear representation of the story (see fig. 2.3 opposite). The illustration technique is simple and symbols, such as hoofprints indicating that the cavalry are retreating over their own footsteps, tell the story as well as any written account.

fig. 2.3 Red Horses ledger book recording Custer's defeat.

The Indians' supremacy was short lived however ; on December 29th 1890 the struggle against the white conquerors finally ended in a bloody massacre

in the snow at Wounded Knee Creek (1). This happened as a result of Sitting Bull, the victor of Little Big Horn, being arrested and accidentally shot. With Sitting Bull dead, Big Foot, one of the few remaining Sioux chiefs, decided to cross the Plains with some 350 of his people, in order to surrender and live in a reservation. They were arrested by a detachment of the U.S. cavalry before they reached their destination, and during a minor fracas, the soldiers opened fire on the Indians, and most, including women and children were slaughtered. Few Indians survived - those who were not killed outright died later of their wounds in the bitter cold with no shelter. Wounded Knee was the last Indian battle and those Indians who were left on the continent had no choice but to concede that the white man had won America. They had lost all their pride and hope, and virtually abandoned their cause in an atmosphere of despair.

In spite of being almost wiped out as a people, however, they held on to their culture, religion and craftsmanship and they continued to produce the artifacts that they had been producing for centuries. These objects were beautifully decorated for religious purposes as the Indians still had their religion and still hoped that the spirits would bless and give the 'power' to the tools and clothes and other objects which were part of their everyday life.

Indians had been trading between themselves for centuries, but at this time, with European interest in Indian artifacts increasing dramatically, trade with the white man became very important.

CHAPTER 3

Trade occurred between various Indian tribes long before the white man ever set foot on American soil. The Plains Indians worked with sea shells from the Pacific or the Gulf of Mexico, catlinite traded from tribes in Minnesota to the Plateau and then to the Plains and they also traded for manufactured goods from the Valley of Mexico.

Trade with the white man began as soon as Columbus and his men set foot in the New World which would later become America. This chapter will show that Indians have always been traders, both within and outside their culture. Trading is still an integral part of their lives, as is religion and art. One of the advantages of their trade with the white man is that it resulted in their using many everyday objects of the white mans in their art and so some of their art began to be produced in a different fashion and was the foundation stone for the work which is being produced today.

When Columbus arrived he brought many things with him that Native Americans had never previously seen. Among these items were mirrors, metal utensils and weapons and, the most important thing to effect future trading, the horse.

Trading Posts were originally established by

Europeans to deal in furs and other native commodities and by 1840 there were over 150 of them (2: p.62). Beaver pelt was the most common fur bought from Indians as it was very fashionable in Europe in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Traders were able to barter with the Indians for a fraction of the price that the fur would be sold at in Europe. In the 19th century the trend then turned to buffalo skins and trading posts began to grow. One of the biggest and most well - known was Fort Williams, which later became Fort Laramie. It was probably one of the busiest because it was situated in the Great Plains and, due to the arrival of the horse, Plains Indians were able to travel longer distances to buy and sell their wares.

The horse came to represent wealth to the Plains Indians and it soon became a unit of currency. Indians traded in accordance to the worth of a horse. If a white trader wanted to buy buffalo robes, for example, he would have to give one horse for every eight robes. In return, if he wanted to buy a fast Indian horse he would have to give the Indian one gun and 100 rounds of ammunition or maybe a carrot of tobacco weighing three pounds. Since these mounted Indians could travel greater distances they could afford to pick and choose what post to trade at. This caused increased competition between white traders, and so, more varied classes of goods

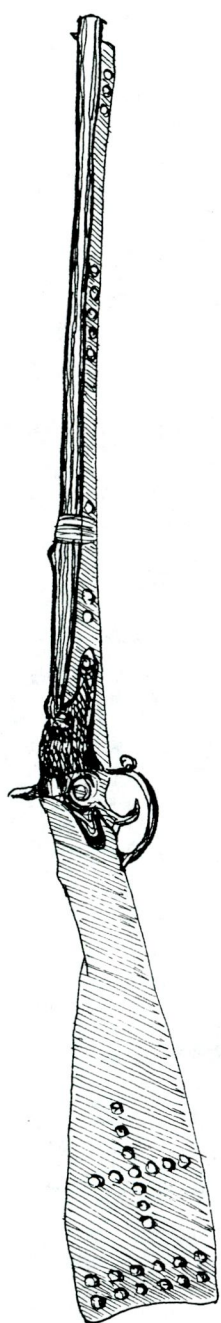


fig. 3.1 Rifle modified by Plains warrior.

became available. Bells began to appear in Indian teepees as well as English cloth , Sheffield knives and beads from Venice.

Indians did not always use the white mans objects, that they acquired through trade, as they were. They often modified and adapted them to their own liking. Knives proved to be more useful than sharp stone blades in the cutting of buffalo meat but their handles were finely carved before being used. By the 1850s the rifle had begun to replace the bow and arrow, as Indians got accustomed to handling these white man's weapons and these factory made objects were altered also. This included shortening the barrel, changing rear and front sights and sometimes covering the stocks in rawhide. or decorating them with brass tacks. The rifle in fig. 3.1 opposite is typical of that of the time.

However, there were also disadvantages to trade with the white man. One of the most unfortunate of these was that Indians got their first introduction to alcohol and its ill-effects. Many traders used it to soften up Indians so that they could make a more profitable deal with them. This technique often worked. But more importantly, it was a problem because many Indians actually became alcoholics and lost their will to hunt or fight, causing a lot of tribes to split up or die out altogether (2: 3).

When the Indians were forced into reservations they continued to trade with the white man but tended to make items according to the demand for them and so many of their original and important artifacts ceased to be produced.

Contemporary Native American artists continue to trade in the traditional way today. Many make and sell their artifacts in order to survive financially and others enjoy the social gatherings which are now linked with trade. Ceremonies and tribal or inter-tribal pow-wows are the most common places for Indians to set up their booths. Here they can sell their goods as well as wandering around themselves to see what things the other tribes are producing. Some tribes who no longer have the equipment or necessity to make certain items are in a position to obtain them from another tribe.

However, some have the opinion that Indian trading today is no more than a trade in curios. This bothers the Indians very much as they put a lot of attention and hard work into the artifacts that they produce. This pride is evident in the care and attention that is taken in the packaging of their goods and it is obvious that they are reluctant to part with them (Ralph T. Coe - Lost and Found Traditions, Native American

Art , 1965-1985).

As the Native Americans have always traded,
and as it is a natural part of their life, they see no reason
to cease just because their situation is different now than
it was in the last century.

Trade today in Native American art objects is the
result of the increase in the interest in collecting Indian art
that occurred at the turn of the century and this led to
some Indians producing artifacts purely for sale.

CHAPTER 4

This chapter will provide an introduction to the Plains Indians and discuss their art in detail. The work of the Sioux tribe, in particular, will be analysed and their dependence on the horse and buffalo will be considered.

The area of North America known as the Great Plains covers the vast grasslands of the states of Wyoming, South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, Colorado, Oklahoma, Kansas and Idaho. On these prairies a number of tribes known as the Plains Indians led a nomadic way of life, and it is these that are known throughout the world as the American Indians. They are seen in the old western movies costumed in colourful Many-feathered headresses, buckskin breeches and painted shirts of buffalo hide. It was the Plains Indian who, for so long, blocked the white man's path to the west and who had the most conflict with the white man over ownership of lands.

One of the main differences between the Plains Indians and those of the North Woodlands or the Great Lakes for example, was the Plains Indians assimilation of the horse. The first horses were brought to America by the Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortes, in 1519. It was not until the 18th century, however, that they were introduced to the Plains and by the 19th century the Indian tribes who lived there spent most of their lives on

horseback, whether it be for hunting, travelling or fighting. Thus the white man christened these natives of the Plains 'the horse Indians'. They quickly became skilled horsemen and it was considered a very heroic action for a young brave to steal a white man's horse. These animals, which the Indians called 'god dogs' soon came to be worshipped by them. The Sioux decorated themselves and their horses when going into battle against a rival tribe or against the white man. In fact, they were so attached to their steeds that they actually sang to them! Below is an example of one Sioux warrior's song to his horse:

My horse be swift in flight,
Even like a bird,
My horse be swift in flight,
Bear me now in safety,
Far from the enemies arrows,
And you shall be rewarded,
With streamers and ribbons red. (2: p.55)

Many made carved offerings to a horse if it was killed in battle. The hair making up the tail would be that of the horse that was killed and red marks indicated where the horse was injured. So as the horse became important to the Plains Indian part of their craft-making was devoted to objects needed for excellent horsemanship. Almost all horsemen used an object called

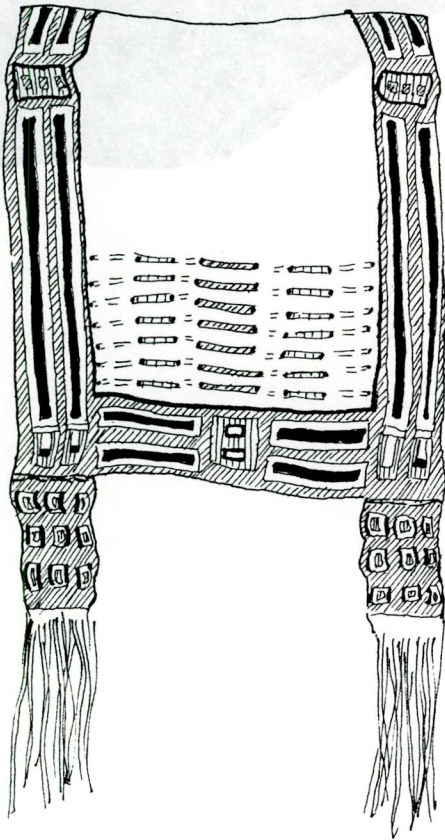


fig. 4.1 This blanket went under a saddle for dress occasions.

a quirt. This was a type of whip with long rawhide tails and a finely carved handle of heavy wood so that it could also be used as a weapon in battle. Other pieces which began to appear included finely decorated saddles; while most Indians preferred to ride bareback, saddles were essential for long journeys and ceremonies. Brightly coloured beaded blankets like the one shown in fig. 4.1 opposite were used under saddles for special occasions and rituals.

It must be remembered that objects owned by the Plains Indians, his horse stick or quirt for example, were not just decorated for meaningless reasons but as a necessary part of the owner's riding kit. The form of decoration or the extent of decoration symbolised his skill as a hunter or warrior. Also, the Plains Indians and the Sioux in particular decorated themselves and their horses with feathers (mallard feathers added a mystical touch) and paint for spiritual reasons. By virtue of this decoration they hoped that the spirits would bless them and give them the 'power' as they went into battle.

The advent of the horse meant a substantial improvement in the Plains Indians living standards. The carrying power of the animal meant that their teepees could be larger and more comfortable, with longer lodge poles and heavier hide covers.



fig. 4.2 A hide skin painting from the end of the last century.

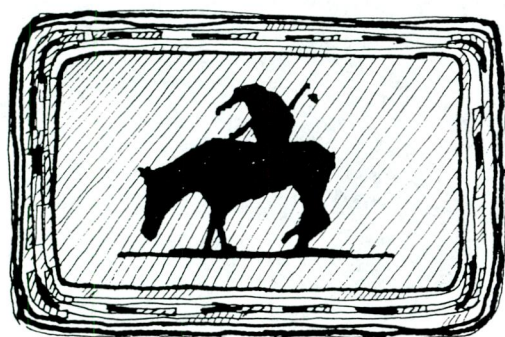


fig. 4.3 Contemporary belt buckle
'The end of the trail' Mae Whitman
(Sioux).

The Plains Indian's dependence on the buffalo was as strong as on the horse. Every part of the animal was put to some useful purpose. The hide was used for such things as moccasins coats and capes, shirts and warriors robes. These were often painted with pictographs portraying a particular battle in which the owner was a hero or they were used as calendars showing important tribal events as in fig. 4.2 opposite. The ribs of the buffalo were used to make ice sled runners and other bones were used for such things as dice for games, arrow-heads, sewing equipment and as tools for scraping the fresh hide. Hairbrushes were made out of the rough side of the tongue and the Indians even managed to manufacture glue from the hoofs. The stomach lining was used as a vessel for carrying water while the brains, liver and fat were used as tanning agents. Most of this everyday equipment incorporated an aesthetic element.

Due to this dependence on the horse and buffalo by the Plains Indians and the Sioux, many of the motifs which appear in their art are centred around these animals. Even today, contemporary Sioux artists continue to use these animals into their designs. (see fig. 4.3 opposite)

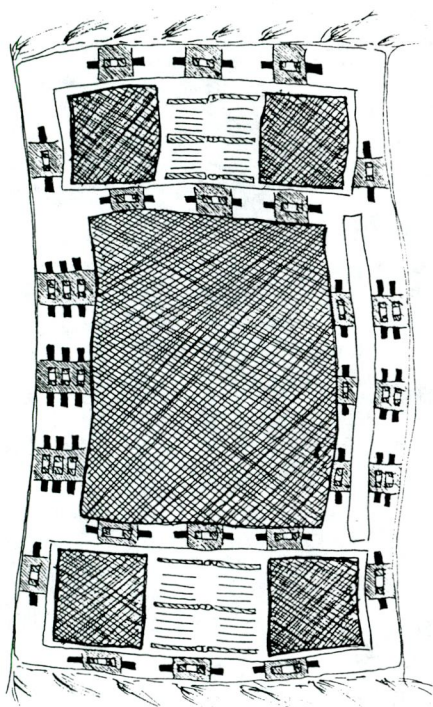


fig. 4.4 Sioux Blanket 1880s.



fig. 4.5 Sioux woman's ceremonial dress 1890s.

Indian art was not only for the purpose of decoration but was an integral part of their beliefs. Symbols from an individual Indian's dream were painted on his clothes hoping to induce the spirits of his dreams. It is possible to identify many religious concepts in the art of these people and they believed that decoration of everyday things served to influence the spirits. For hunting and fishing it was thought that images on clothes and weapons would invoke the good will of the animal spirits. Personal adornment included medicine pouches, amulets and bear claw necklaces which also acted as a protection against evil spirits. Masks representing beings of the spirit world were worn during ceremonies in the belief that the wearer would be as powerful as the being depicted.

Designs and patterns on Sioux objects, of the 19th century, such as mocassins, quilts, teepees and shirts are more than often geometrical. The Sioux blanket opposite, fig. 4.4 is an example of this as is the ceremonial dress, fig. 4.5. Sioux designs appear to be based on the square, the triangle and the circle. Indeed, according to Indians, life, the universe and everything is circular. According to their belief everything in life returns to the way it was mirroring the sun rising and setting. They do not believe in a beginning and an end - life and religion is constant and continuous. Circles do

not only feature prominently in their art but in their ceremonies also. They sit in circles, dance in circles and when setting up camp they erect the teepees in a circle also. Almost their whole culture is based on this belief.

The use of geometrical shapes in Indian art also reflects the fact that many of their ideas and designs contain reference to the cardinal points - north, south, east and west. The Sioux tribe have different colours and meanings for each direction. West is black, which symbolises the home of rain and thunder beings; North is white, which symbolises wind and the cleansing of the spirit; East is red, symbolising light and wisdom; and finally, South is yellow, symbolising warmth and summer growth (3: p.122). Many Sioux crafts people exhibit this symbolism in their designs by using many motifs in groups of four using these colours.

The nomadic lifestyles of the Sioux and other Plains Indians made it impractical to utilise large items for periodic ceremonial or everyday use. Their art therefore revolved around easily portable things like the covers of their teepees, clothes or their horses trappings in addition to necklaces, headresses, recreational equipment such as shinny balls and ceremonial equipment like rattles or masks. The largest examples of Plains Indians art were probably the buffalo skin paintings which were used as warriors robes or teepee covers (see fig.4.3). The

tanned skin or rawhide of the buffalo was treated with a glue-like substance which was taken from the hoof of the animal. The outline of a picture was scratched on the surface and then the colour was applied using a piece of bone or wood. The original colours used were of mineral or vegetable origin but more colours became available through trade with Europeans (11: p.15).



fig. 4.6 Section taken from a shoulder bag of the Ojibwa tribe 1800s.

The designs of other tribes of the Plains were often quite different to that of the Sioux. The Ojibwa, for example, designed in a much looser fashion and floral patterns were a common feature. This is evident in fig. 4.6 which is typical of what they were producing during the 1800s. The designs of the Blackfeet tribe, though not as loose, were not as clear or definite as the Sioux design. The fact that different tribes specialised in different styles and objects further encouraged inter-tribal trade.

Other tribes in different areas of the North American continent at the time were producing totally different objects than the Sioux. This mainly had to do with where they lived and their way of life. The art and craftwork of the Indians of the Northwest coast contrasted considerably with that of the Plains Indians due to their easy access to timber, and their less nomadic lifestyle. The use of timber gave a sculptural dimension

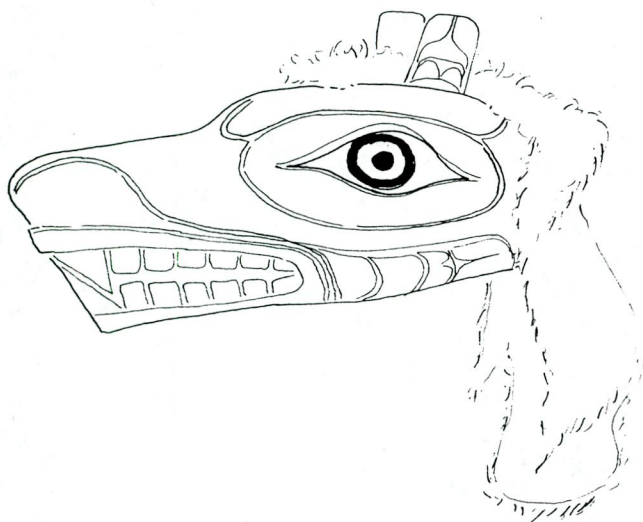


fig. 4.7 Bear Mask, cedar, paint and fur
Northwest tribe, 1880s.

to their art, and they produced many wooden artifacts such as wooden face masks similar to the one in fig 4.7, wooden bowls and totem poles . Clans and families in this area were symbolised by animal crests so these kinds of motifs featured strongly in their artwork.

The Pueblo Indians of the South were renowned, as they still are today, for their pottery and weaving. The Iroquois were known to produce wooden and cornhusk masks.

Tribes of the Southwest and Far West, including the well-known Navaho, concentrated on weaving as their form of art, and produced trays, blankets and woven water storage bottles made of coloured grasses.

The symbols found in the Indian art of the 19th century are still used today. Contemporary Native American artists often decorate everyday objects produced by the white man, putting their own cultural stamp on the item.

The influence that European contact and their fashion and materials had on Indian art and craftwork becomes evident in the work of the late 19th century. One typical piece is a woman's bonnet produced by a Sioux woman in 1890. It is made out of buffalo with

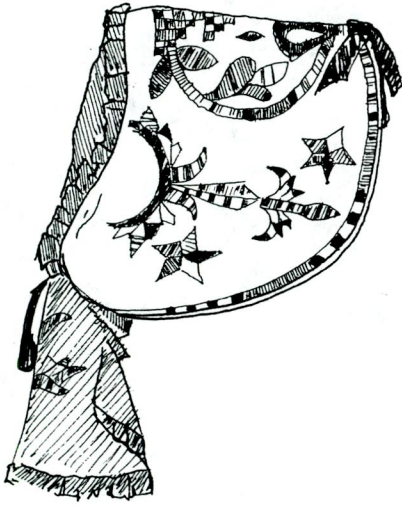


fig. 4.8 Woman's bonnet, geometrical and floral patterns are mixed showing the effect of trade.

quillwork and ribbons used for decoration. It is a direct imitation of a bonnet which would have been worn by a white woman of the time and the way in which the geometrical and floral patterns are integrated shows the influence from other tribes from the Plains which would have resulted from increased trade. (see fig.4.8)

A simple dress made in the 1870s by a Sioux woman using shells as decoration was made with stroud cloth, an import from England. This was one of the first cloths to be introduced to and accepted by the Indians.

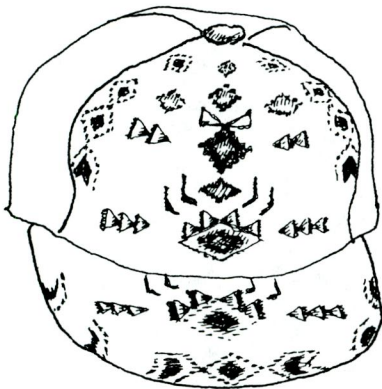


fig. 4.9 Contemporary beaded bill cap, Rita Metcalf.

Opposite (fig.4.9) is an example of a contemporary Indian's interpretation of a white man's creation. This beaded bill cap was designed by Sioux Rita Metcalf. It is a form of decoration which has become popular with North Central Plains Indians and the design is intended to be decorative rather than symbolic.

The Indians of the 19th century did the groundwork for contemporary Native American artists of today like Rita Metcalf. Although their situation is very different today the symbols, decorations and reasons for their art in the last century are still relevant today.

Contemporary Native American art will be discussed in this chapter. Whether or not a 'viable traditional Native American art exists today' (Ralph T. Coe)will be considered.

Contemporary Native American art is often thought to be nothing more than a profitable tourist business, and Indians have been accused of producing cheap imitations of the past. Some believe that the old ways should have died with the great Chiefs of the last century like Geronimo and Sitting Bull, and that the Indians should shrug off the past and become fully involved in contemporary American life. It is easy in this materialistic world to be unaware of the spiritual context that inspires the creation of simple Indian artifacts, and the meaning and care that the Indians put into their art.

While some contemporary Native American artists are involved in producing tourist art, it is clear that the majority are producing unique new works incorporating traditional designs and motifs, indicating a very obvious artistic survival. Far from today's work being a shoddy and poor reflection of the past, many examples of Indian art of the last century do not measure up in quality and excellence to similar artifacts being made today.

While Indian art is a profitable tourist business, the majority of Native Americans in the United States live in poverty and have little to do with this mass-production of Indian souvenirs. They set up booths, with their quilts and baskets and moccasins for sale, at various pow wows and tribal celebrations as a means of survival. The fact that Indians still trade with their artifacts is only a natural progression from the way they traded in the last century. They are adapting to the modern ways by changing their ways but only marginally. The artifacts being produced are adaptations of those made by their parents and grand-parents . In fact, almost every type of Indian artifact made in the 1800s is still being made, in some form, today.

Indians continue producing traditional artifacts because they are an essential part of their culture and have been for thousands of years. Some consider that contemporary Plains clothes design is just fancy dress for tribal pow wows. But it must be understood that pow wows and the other ceremonials are part of the Native Americans tradition, central to their culture and religion, and the correct traditional garb and symbols are essential parts of these ceremonials. These traditional activities are crucial to the continuance of the Indians heritage.

Indian artists take enormous pride in their work



fig. 5.1 Moccasins, 'Regina Brave Bull'.

and their skills are passed on from generation to generation. Regina 'Brave Bull' (Sioux), who produced the woman moccasins (opposite in fig. 5.1), has handed on her skills to her daughter Elaine who now works with her mother. Most Indian children learn by watching the elders of the tribe or older family members as they work, and when they grow older they in turn become the teachers. On some reservations small classes are held to teach the children these traditions.

Indians work tirelessly on their particular expertise, hoping that the elder chiefs on the reservations will choose one of their creations to be used in the many ceremonies and festivals that are held tribally and inter-tribally each year. They are happy to sell objects that have not been selected for a ceremony or ritual, and they will part with it without reluctance because this object 'holds no power' (3: II). This idea goes back to the 19th century when their everyday utensils were decorated in order to encourage the spirits to bless and give power to them.

They do not necessarily see their works as modern versions of an older item but rather as a simple progression. In the Indian view their art does not become dated because it is a 'mythic' art and a functional art. It exists in the present the same way as it did in the past - as

a functional art. For them, both past and present art belongs together. This may be because the reasons for their art and the meanings behind it are a part of their tradition.

Recently Indians have been taking it upon themselves to see that their traditions are preserved, not just by being passed by word of mouth, but by writing them down, sometimes in book form. They encourage the writing of books about their history and culture, and arrange to have recordings made of their elders stories. This preservation is important to them because, in the words of Nathan Begay, Hopi / Navaho, 'When you let tradition die your culture dies' and according to Greg Colfax (Mahah), 'Traditions answer your major questions of life'.

However, authenticity is important to tradition and many problems occur in trying to find things like the right paint pigments, coloured cloth or leather suitable for tanning. Often commercial substitutions are made for original native materials. An example of this is a Narragansette weaver named Ella Seketau, who has to import her native hemp from Italy because if she were to grow the equivalent in America she would be harvesting marijuana . Dental floss has been found to be stronger than sinew and therefore is often used in the sewing of

contemporary Plains moccasins.

Elks teeth were a popular form of decoration on women's clothing in the Plains during the 1800s and were an indication of the wearer's social status. However, real elk teeth are virtually impossible to obtain today so many Indians carve replicas from bone or they can buy moulded plastic versions in a Native American supply store. These are retail outlets set up on reservations and they sell many items or replicas of items that Indians need for their crafts. They also use 'alternative' goods - an infant seat, for example, can serve as the head rest of a buffalo dance headdress.

Indian artifacts are still produced by hand however, as they have always been. Basketry is still executed manually mainly by women as is beading and tanning.

Native American art today produces similar objects to those produced in the last century. Indians are still making and using objects that were used one hundred years ago. In some instances their art is purely for decorative purposes - it is their tradition to decorate all things possible. Today they decorate white man's inventions like key-rings, bottle-openers and salt and pepper shakers. This puts their stamp on things that were

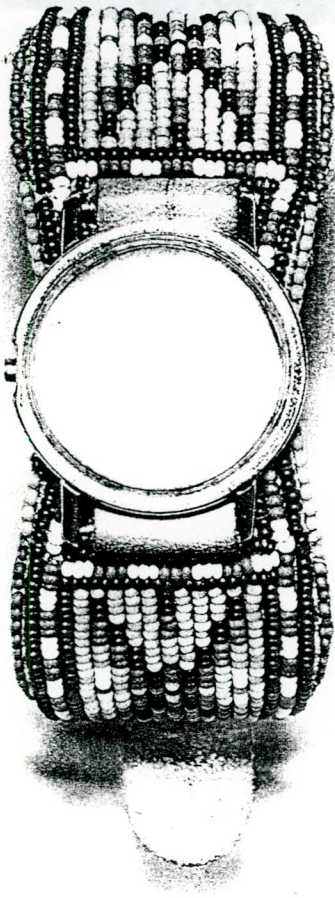


fig. 5.2 Joan 'Growing Thunder' Fogarty's watch without a face.

introduced to them by the white man. Nevertheless the Plains Indians were beading holders for cigarette papers longer than cigarette cases existed. A new breed of artists are incorporating elements outside the Indian culture into their work while still keeping Indian symbols and techniques. One example of this is Joyce 'Growing Thunder' Fogarty's watch without a face see fig. 5.2 opposite. This has an intricately beaded strap but the face is blank with no hands or numbers. It is a prime example of the Indian's using their ideas with an everyday object of the white mans. Indians do not observe time as the white man does. There is no rush or hurry in an Indian society and artifacts are produced in their own good time with no deadline to be adhered to (3 : IV).

Indians today are adapting old designs and modifying them in their own individual way. Throughout the continent old designs are mixed with new designs in basketry to produce an exciting new effect. New figurative designs have emerged, in comparison to the more linear designs of the last century, as well as bright colours and patterns. There is a general tendency to simplify designs on moccasins but beadwork is still very complex in design.

A pair of moccasins designed by Regina Brave Bull in 1981 (fig. 5.1) are a typical example of this new



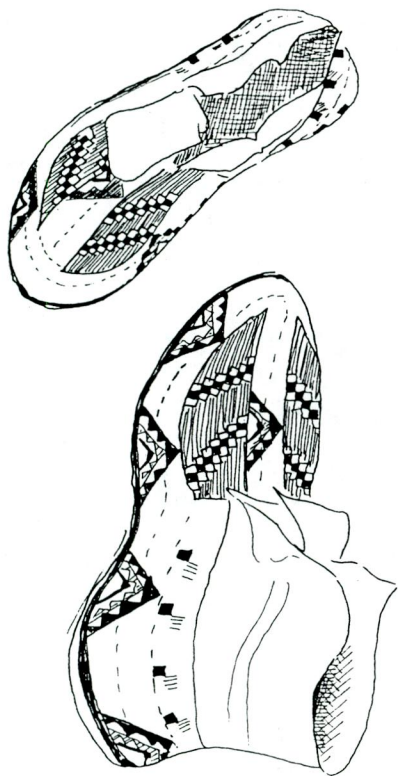
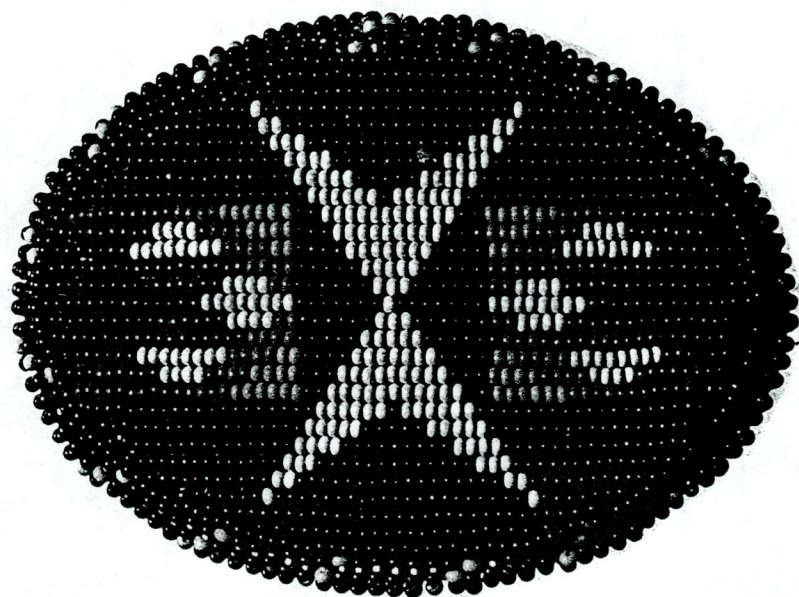


fig. 5.3 Moccasins 19th century

simplicity in design. They are made of deerskin and the beading around the bottom edge has been incorporated from an original design used on teepees in the 19th century. The floral beaded pattern is non-characteristic of the Sioux tribe, but has been copied from another tribe, probably the Ojibwa, a neighbouring tribe. The moccasins in fig 5.3 are a typical example of those made in the last century and can be seen to be much more complex in design. This swapping of ideas from tribe to tribe and individual to individual is quite common today but would not have occurred so often in the last century.

fig. 5.4 Eagle Quilt, 'Regina Brave Bull'.

The same artist designed the eagle quilt , fig. 5.4, in 1982. Plains Indians have been making quilts since the mid 1800s, when they realised that living on reservations would end their nomadic existence. It is a very popular craft among artists of all tribes today and is part of the Indian home industry. The star pattern used in this quilt is an old design (see opposite) which has become popular along with designs of trees, houses, teepees and floral imagery. This is an excellent example of an old design being adapted by the artist. While sticking with the traditional star motif she has incorporated into it an eagle motif and the single small circle in the centre of the quilt (the eagle's eye) draws our attention to this symbol of powerful medicine. The artist believes that the quilt itself has 'power'.



Regina Brave Bull is typical of most Native American artists today. She concentrates less on producing objects that are very characteristically Sioux in design, and more on objects and design which she has adapted in her own way and given a personal and individual touch to.

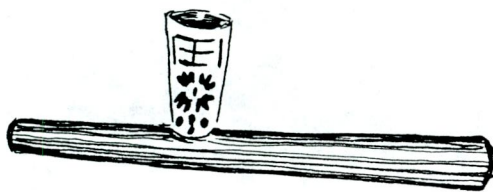


fig. 5.5 Pipe Bowl, Myron Taylor.

A pipe bowl made by Chippewa/Sioux Myron Taylor between 1980 and '81 is another example of this individuality (fig. 5.5). The pipe bowl is elaborately inlaid with lead and was based on an earlier pipe designs from in the 19th century. Because the artist had something to begin with, something to base his work on, he is in a better position to release his own creativity and so he has changed and adapted the design as he sees fit in order to satisfy his personal wishes.

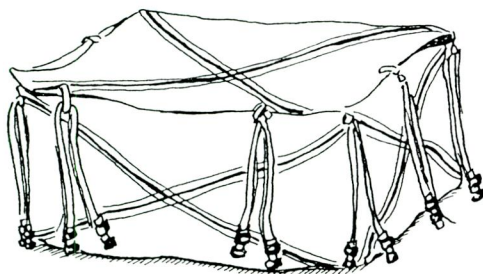
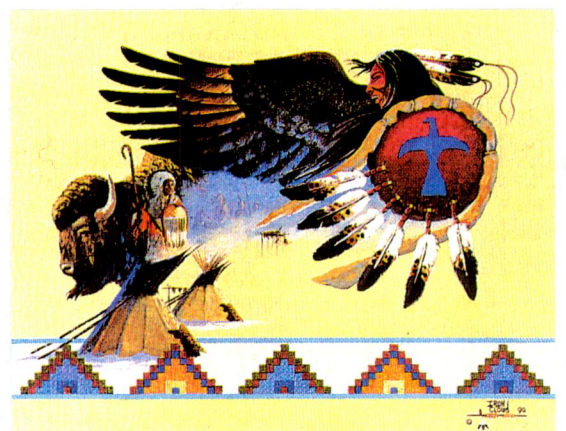


fig. 5.6 Container.

A simpler adaptation of an old design is the small container pictured opposite in fig. 5.6, which was made in the early 1980s and is a smaller example of a mid 19th century rawhide trunk.

Mike Stoup, Patricia Bird and Emil 'Her Many Horses' are just three Indian artists who work in the traditional way but add something fresh and new to their pieces. The buckle opposite, fig 5.7, uses traditional

fig. 5.7 Belt Buckle.



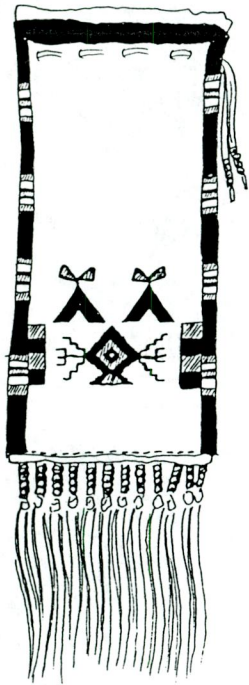


fig. 5.8 Pipe Bag, Douglas 'Fast Horse',
framed in feeling is contemporary and
pan-Indian in feeling.

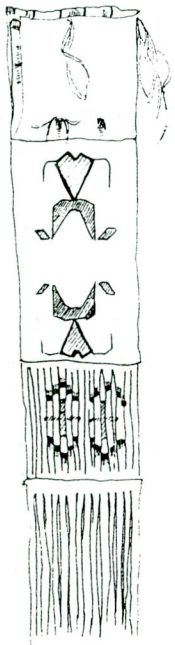


fig. 5.9 Sioux pipe Bag mid 19th
century.

fig. 5.10 'The Dream Maker', Del
Iron Cloud.

motifs but they are put together in a way that would not have been done in the past. 'The small buckle frame makes us rethink our colours and the impact of our design you have to say on a tiny surface what was said on a vest or shirt in the past' according to Mike Stoup (3 : p.127).

The pipe bag opposite, fig 5.8, contains a contemporary feature which is that it is designed as a picture within a frame, a feature which is not evident in similar bags of the last century. Fig 5.9 , a pipe bag produced at this time shows this clearly. One can see that fig 5.8 is produced in the style of a painting and paintings by Indians were very rare in the last century. This was probably because there was no necessity to paint pictures to offer to the spirits when the same message could be portrayed by beading a shirt or moccasins or decorating a teepee cover. Today Indians have the means and the inclination to paint on canvas. However, their art seems to revolve around scenes of the past. The Ghost Dance features prominently probably because it was through this dance that Indians in the late 19th century had their last hope of being free of the white man again.(see fig 5.10)

Having studied the art of the Native American one must come to the conclusion that contemporary Indian art no longer has its emphasis on tribal art but on that of the individual artist. A non-tribal pan-American art has emerged. This has come about as a result of the necessity for Native American artists of today to adapt to the way of life they must now live.

Native American art has progressed from the last century and is still very much an integral part of their lives today as it was an integral part of the lives of their ancestors.

Despite the mass-production of Indian tourist art the majority of Native American art being produced by individual artists is functional, as it was 100 years and more ago. Every piece, down to the smallest medallion, has a spiritual meaning.

Native American art must be recognised as a viable art. It could almost be termed a 'movement' in art similar to that of the Impressionists, Dadaists and Surrealists, for example. However, it differs from these movements in that it is probably one of the oldest and the most rich in imagery of all movements in art, which has survived for thousands of years and will hopefully be appreciated for many more.

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GLOSSARY

Camelop - A prehistoric giraffe

Chippewa - Tribe of Indians of the Plains

Blackfeet - Tribe of Indians of the Plains now living in Montana.

Kachina - One of the hundreds of supernatural being that live in the San Francisco peaks, north of Flagstaff, Arizona. Kachina dolls representing these spirits are carved by Hopi men and given to children as instructive images.

Lodge poles - The trunk of a tree used as the centre pole in the teepee.

Naragensett - Tribe of the North Woodlands

Ojibwa - Tribe of the Plains now living on reservations in Ontario and Minnesota.

Petroglyph - rock carving or inscription found mainly on rocks on the East Coast of America.

Pow Wow - A modern day gathering of Native Americans for dancing, socialising and trade. They have a strong nationalistic as well as spiritual / historical reference.

Quillwork - An ancient sewing technique that uses dyed porcupine, moosehair or, more rarely, birdquills.

Reservation - A tract of land to which the Indians were removed or restricted by government treaties during the 19th century.

Stroud - A coarse woollen trade cloth, often red in colour, used by Indians of the Plains and the Prairies.

Tanning - The preparation of hides by soaking, scraping and curing with mordant (lime or, preferably brains) which gives the skin a soft effect.

Totem Pole - A free standing wooden pole set up before a house, carved and painted with a series of emblematic or crest symbols which may refer to family lineage, historical events, or honour a deceased tribal member.

