Fetishization & Subjugation: Colonized Craft in America

by
Uri Sarig

Submitted to the Department of Art History
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2023

Sponsor: Sarah Warren
Second Reader: Hilary Whitham Sánchez

Fetishization & Subjugation: Utilizing the "Noble Savage"

Art and craft movements have often been interested with the perceived cultural "other"; whether the artist from the past, as in a nostalgic yearning for simpler times, or one from a distant origin -- an intrigue in a culture divided from one's own geographically or socially. This romanticism of perceived "unsophisticated" or "exotic" craft is reflective of the problematic history of primitivism within the arts -- a pattern linked with colonialism that brings up issues of prejudice and marginalization, as well as complex questions of ethical representation and consumption. Euro-American art and craft circles have often displayed a pattern of fetishizing the craft of the cultural "other," showcased in a history of social and intellectual movements, museums of art and ethnology, appropriation of indigenous culture broadly within the craft market, and in elements of exoticized primitivism manifested in 20th century fine art.

Primitivism is a term used to describe an intellectual movement that emerged within the arts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries which celebrated the supposed "primitive" or "naive" in the cultures of preindustrial and non-Western societies. This thinking was driven by a fascination with the perceived simplicity, authenticity, and spiritual purity of these cultures -- often in contrast to the perceived decadence of Western civilization.

This romanticized view of "primitive" society, however, comes at the expense of the indigenous peoples that it purports to value. Even when the perceived exoticism or naivete is deemed valuable -- to be admired and aspired to -- indigenous peoples are depicted as savage, and in turn, inferior in primitivist art, perpetuating harmful cultural conceptions and reinforcing the idea that such cultures are in need of "civilizing" by the West.

Philip Deloria explains in his book *Playing Indian* that the concept of “noble savagery” has a long history, tracing back to philosophers of the European Enlightenment like Jean-Jacques Rousseau who used the idea in voicing a certain nostalgia for a pre-modern, “natural” state of being. Deloria notes that while an emphasis on the “noble” aspect employs indigenous peoples in a critique of Western society, leaning into the image of “savagery” serves as justification to dominate and destroy them. “Two interlocked traditions;” Deloria writes, “one of self-criticism, the other of conquest. They balance perfectly, forming one of the foundations underpinning the equally intertwined history of European colonialism and the European Enlightenment.”[1] While the concepts of “romanticization” and “demonization” may at first glance appear to directly contradict one another, both ideas work together within primitivism as two sides of the same coin.

The real “contradiction” of primitivism lies in its conceptions of authenticity: atavistic appropriations are often grounded in the assumption that one must look *outside* of one’s own society in order to find a true, authentic expression of what’s *inside* them. This is the very paradox post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin personified in his continuous search for “another culture that’s purer, closer to origins,” and as Abigail Solomon-Godeau simply put it, his “luxe, calme et volupté.”[2]

It was in 1890 that, after considering the French colonies of Madagascar and Indo-China, Gauguin finally landed his search on the Polynesian Islands -- where he would go on to spend nearly all of the rest of his life. In describing the “fertile soil” that was awaiting him in Tahiti in an 1890 letter, as Charles Harrison notes, Gauguin engaged in a metaphor referring to his belief

---

[1] Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 4.
[2] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Going Native,” in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism And Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Routledge, 1992), 315.

that "within a 'savage' environment, he could somehow recover from himself a more basic, primeval mode of artistic expression."[3] The idea was that the native culture and civilization would "replenish" his artistry, tapping into a more authentic way of being, closer to Rousseau's "state of nature". In 1891 Gauguin wrote, "I only desire to create a simple art. In order to do this it is necessary for me to steep myself in virgin nature, to see no one but savages."[4]

Of course his disparaging characterizations of the native peoples are troubling in how they seem to imply their imminent need of "taming" by the benevolent colonizers, but even much more disturbing was Gauguin's way of interacting with the Native people he encountered. In Abigail Solomon-Godeau's essay "Going Native", she unpacks Gauguin's primitivism for its component parts, characterizing it as a "dense interweave of racial and sexual fantasies and power."[5] She notes that the image of the native Polynesian female body in the work of Gauguin and other European artists is fraught with the all-familiar duo of fetishization and demonization: "simultaneously monstrous and idealized."[6] On one hand a racist impulse to loathe the "other," and on the other hand, a troubling desire for the perceived "exotic," steeped in the colonial ethos of cultural domination.

Through this lens, Paul Gauguin's works such as *Ia Orana Maria* (1891), *Nevermore* (1897), and *Where Do We Come From?* (1897) are perhaps even more unsettling. In these paintings, Gauguin depicts nude or scantily-clad indigenous women and girls, many individuals seemingly no older than adolescent. These women and girls were not just being used as vague symbols of an exotic primitive society in their nakedness,[7] but as clear objects of Gauguin's

---

[3] Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gillian Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 28-29.
[4] Ibid, 29.
[5] Solomon-Godeau, 315.
[6] Ibid, 321.
[7] Harrison et al., 30.

desire. Disturbing at the very least; the artist infamously had a series of adolescent Polynesian mistresses during his years on the islands, writing of their sexual obedience to him, and appallingly, his desire to dominate or brutally rape the Native women. Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes of this “darker side to primitivist desire” -- a concept, she explains, that’s already engaged deeply in *imagined* ideas of power and rape -- but in actuality, as she notes; “these fantasies…are sometimes underpinned by real power, by real rape.”[8]

What is the nature of the relationship between ideas of admiration, fetishization, and horrifying abuse? Within the tradition of primitivism, all three shift and float in sync -- a representation of broader histories of colonial domination of indigenous peoples and their land, and by the same token, their bodies and material culture. Like a zoogoer pointing in fascination at the silly caged animal, the colonizer’s thirst for “nativeness” and its “primitive” unfamiliarity admits a degree of dehumanization to take place. This false alternative to more overt racism underlines conceptions of cultural superiority, justifying histories of exploitation, enslavement, and genocide. Moreover, in turning Native culture into an instrument, utilizing the exoticism and otherworldliness, the colonizer establishes a distance between indigenous culture and that of their own that makes the injustices and violence inflicted easier to stomach and make sense of. And of course, as a result of the plundering of a native people, a culture becomes endangered, which causes it to be idealized all the more for *being* endangered. These patterns put into context the European inclination for cultural pillaging, as well as the reality of its harmful consequences. The capturing of the image of “nativeness” -- whether in primitivist painting or, as we will see, in the appropriation of “exotic” native craft styles -- runs as a parallel to the conquering of new far-off lands and the subjugation of their people.

[8] Solomon-Godeau, 323-326.

In 1893, painter Camille Pissarro wrote that Paul Gauguin was "always poaching on somebody's land" for his art[9] -- a characterization reflecting the very way Europeans and Euro-Americans have engaged with indigenous cultures throughout the last several centuries. Both despised and desired, conceptions of "nativeness" are routinely utilized by colonialist societies towards a variety of ends, and often not with the natives' best interests in mind.

In North America since at least the Boston Tea Party of 1773 -- in which a group of white Bostonian protestors dressed in stereotypical Native American garb during their demonstration against British rule -- the image of the "Indian" has been utilized both as a symbol of a "primitive" *other* and co-opted as a tool to represent an "authentic" American identity.[10] Adorning themselves in an array of indigenous signifiers, the Sons of Liberty sought to identify themselves with a history of visual and literary depictions of the "noble savage"[11], but also to form a collective "native" identity that would distinguish them from their European rulers.[12]

The Boston Tea Party serves as a potent illustration of the simultaneous appropriation and othering of indigenous Americans that corresponds to patterns of the very same within the world of art and craft. In a 1910 issue of American Arts and Crafts leader Gustav Stickley's magazine the *Craftsman*, it was written that the only true American craft -- one born from our native soil -- was "that of the Indian." Historian Glenn Adamson refers to this ideology as a "cult of authenticity" and posits that the revival of indigenous craft during this period was central in formulating and displaying an "American identity" within broader American society of the time.[13] Philip Deloria describes the turn of the century as a time in which industrialism, technological advancements, and urbanization grew alongside feelings of disconnectedness and

[9] Harrison et al., 29.
[10] Deloria, 2.
[11] Ibid, 6.
[12] Reetta Humalajoki, "Consumption as Assimilation: New York Times Reporting on Native American Art and Commodities, 1950-1970," *Journal of American Studies* 53 (2019): 974.
[13] Glenn Adamson, *Craft: An American History* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 147.

identity-confusion: “Intellectuals began to worry about how easy it was to lose track of individual and social identities,” he writes, “which seemed to fragment the instant they collided with the corporation, the factory, and the city.”[14]

Much like Gauguin and the primitivists, some looked once again toward “nativeness” in confronting modernity. In the first decade of the 20th century, Ernest Thompson Seton helped to found both the Boy Scouts of America and his youth program “The Woodcraft Indians” with the goal of cultivating the next generation of boys with robust “American character” in spite of the corrupting forces of an “effeminate, postfrontier urbanism.” Seton’s sense of American identity was this time not formulated as just an alternative to Europe, but rather in contrast to an ever-changing industrializing society. He believed that engaging in primitive “woodcraft,” and “playing Indian” were key to forming rugged outdoorsy types in the spirit of an authentic dying patriotism. The boys in Seton’s make-believe “Sinaway tribe” wore feathered headdresses and constructed large tipis together.[15] In 1936 Seton wrote;

> Indian teachings in the fields of art, handicraft, woodcraft, agriculture, social life, health, and joy… need no argument beyond presentation; they speak for themselves. The Red Man is the apostle of outdoor life, his example and precept are what young America needs today above any other ethical teaching of which I have knowledge.[16]

These practices of appropriation are accompanied with an exoticism that values indigenous arts and crafts by the extent to which they are primitive and culturally separate.[17] Adamson points out the obvious irony present: the same white society that sought the destruction of Native American culture through colonialist displacement was also fetishizing it for what it

[14] Deloria, 99.
[15] Ibid, 95-97.
[16] Ibid, 96.
[17] Humalajoki, 982.

represented.[18] Again and again, Euro-Americans have utilized imagined understandings of "Indianness" to meet the ideological, artistic, and commercial aspirations presented by their time.

Questions of Autonomy and Authenticity in a Modern Market

With the increased accessibility of "Indian country" brought by railroads and modern forms of transportation, the late-19th and early 20th century began to see an increased interest in the craft of indigenous Americans. Born around 1860 in what's now Arizona, Hopi-Tewa potter Nampeyo was one of the craftspeople at the front lines, meeting the demand for exotica early on in the boom. Trained by family in traditional Hopi pottery since childhood, Nampeyo became an emblem of Hopi culture at the turn of the century, not only through the popularity of her wares, but also as a result of the oft-reproduced, immortalizing images of her by photographers including the likes of Edward Curtis and Adam Clark Vroman.[19]

According to Ezra Shales, Nampeyo was presented in photo-postcards as a "curiosity" out of a quaint and distant "natural history"; her image used as a signifier of primitive culture to an industrializing Euro-American society, and depictions of her traditional craft styles and technique "implicitly asserted Western industrial progress" to their viewers.[20] In Adam Clark Vroman's 1901 photograph titled *Nampeyo, famous Hopi Potter*, Nampeyo is seen kneeling on the ground over newly mixed clay -- her hands muddied by her work.[21] She and other potters dug up and mixed their own clays by hand, and working on the ground without the use of a pottery wheel would have signaled to an early 20th century viewer "a narrative pitting modern technology against the primitive."[22]

---

[18] Adamson, 148.
[19] Ibid, 148.
[20] Ezra Shales, *The Shape of Craft* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), 35-36.
[21] Adam Clark Vroman, *Nampeyo, famous Hopi Potter*, 1901, photography, University of California, San Diego, accessed April 2023, library.artstor.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001271376.
[22] Shales, 36.

Images of Nampeyo's "primitive" methods of pottery presented a culture at odds with modern American society's manufacturing and technology, and tourists and collectors eagerly flocked to the American southwest. The fascination with Native southwest craft, sparked at least in part by the power of photography, represents yet another example of fetishistic desire for an archaic authenticity -- but ultimately aided Nampeyo's great renown and individual success. Shales examines this complex dynamic observed in the life of Nampeyo, explaining how "she herself fed the fascination that veered towards objectification in her portraits and willingly endured hundreds of photographic exposures. She used her craft to leverage a distinct identity" -- therefore regarding her as "among the first self-consciously modern Native American artists."[23]

In 1879, trader Thomas Keam opened his first trading post in the southwest -- a perfect time for money-making as the newly-running Santa Fe Railway ushered in a steady stream of fascinated tourists. Keam specialized in the sale of a variety of Native American crafts, including Hopi "kachina dolls" and traditional southwest pottery, as well as Nampeyo's work.[24] The local pottery practice was originally rooted in traditional Pueblo techniques but in part thanks to the influence of Keam and his market, over time developed features both anachronistic and, typified in the case of Nampeyo, nontraditional entirely.

Around the 1890s, Keam and an assistant found ancient pottery artifacts at nearby archaeological site *Sikyátki* and encouraged Nampeyo and other potters to make contemporary versions to sell. In 1895, when the site was officially excavated by J. Walter Fewkes and the Smithsonian, Nampeyo's husband Lesou worked on the crew. Nampeyo's work began to take influences from the likely 15th and 16th century motifs found, as did many other potters working within the "Sikyátki revival," but she later took the spirit of adaptations to a further level; trading

---

[23] Shales, 35-36.
[24] Adamson, 148-149.

traditional interlocking geometric patterns for images and designs of her own innovation. Shifting away from the normative styles, she developed an individualist style seemingly at odds with the collectivist spirit of true traditional craft, but found its exceeding market popularity. Edwin L. Wade explains that Nampeyo was recognized for not only her great talent, but also her "willingness to adapt her art to white taste."[25]

For example, Nampeyo's *Seed Jar with Sikyatki Motifs*, currently in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, features large symmetrical swirling patterns and repeated abstracted feathers -- both design elements commonly included in her pottery as personal innovations. The designs appear somewhat independent of each other -- floating somewhat disconnectedly on the jar's painted off-white ground.[26] This was also a compositional feature typical of Nampeyo's work; in contrast to a traditional work like the ceramic Sikyátki jars in the Peabody Museum's collection, with tightly interlocking forms that wrap around the vessel completely.[27]

Additionally, while traditional Hopi pots commonly sported curved bases, indicating no expectation for perfectly level surfaces, Nampeyo understood her market well; sculpting flattened bottoms that would sit nicely on a table or shelf.[28] This difference is also apparent between the AIC and Peabody jars; the latter are rounded in shape, tilted in photographs and seemingly resting on a stabilizing stand, while Nampeyo's seed jars make a point in their flatness on both bottom as well as top. Nampeyo's flat-topped seed jars -- which Edwin L. Wade regard

---

[25] Adamson, 150; Edwin L. Wade, *The Arts of the North American Indian: Native Traditions in Evolution* (New York: Hudson Hills Press/Philbrook Art Center, 1986), 180-184.
[26] Nampeyo, *Seed Jar with Sikyatki Motifs*, 1895-1910, ceramic and pigment, Art Institute of Chicago, accessed April 2023, artic.edu/artworks/180751/seed-jar-with-sikyatki-motifs; Wade, 182.
[27] Pueblo, *Sikyatki polychrome pottery jar, ceramic vessel*, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, accessed April 2023, library.artstor.org/asset/AHARVARDIG_10313515206; Pueblo, *Restored pottery jar-sikyatki*, ceramic vessel, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, accessed April 2023, library.artstor.org/asset/AHARVARDIG_10313531745.
[28] Shales, 38.

as “ingenious technical feat[s]” -- drew much admiration, but also served no functional role as a vessel.[29]

While her photographic depictions curated a brand of primitive authenticity, her work in actuality followed the “inauthentic” interests of the market. In other words, she played both sides to her advantage. The market desires “authentic” craft only when it’s inauthentic enough to fit into modern lives and preconceived notions, and “self-consciously modern” Nampeyo was keenly aware and savvily benefited. This dynamic is reminiscent of the concept known as “strategic essentialism,” positing that individuals from marginalized cultures may play out “essentialized” preconceptions of themselves in an aim to be valued by the dominant society, often turning to the importance assigned by complex or even problematic ideas of authenticity and its relation to preconceived stereotypes. In her writing, anthropologist Sylvia Escárcega reflects this idea -- and possibly Nampeyo’s situation more broadly -- explaining that indigenous peoples sometimes end up needing to “resort to claims of authenticity, originality, primordialism, and/or gate-keeping roles to be recognized as peoples, adopting the language that is ultimately used by nation states to define their own peoplehood.”[30]

In a fashion paralleling Thomas Keam, 1950s rug salesman Harry R. Bowlby appeared to have encouraged Navajo weavers to produce products for him more colorful than the traditional norms, an indication of his desire to meet the interests of his Euro-American market. A 1954 *New York Times* article quoted a customer complaining, “We have to come to [Bowlby] to get an attractive Indian rug” -- an obvious illustration of greater interest in fashionable exotica than authentic forms of traditional craft. Meanwhile, Bowlby was quoted explaining how the rugs he sold were crafted via techniques developed in “prehistoric times,” on the “same crude looms that

---

[29] Wade, 182.
[30] Sylvia Escárcega, “Authenticating Strategic Essentialisms: The Politics of Indigenousness at the United Nations,” *Cultural Dynamics* 22, no. 1 (2010): 8.

were used long before the Pilgrims ever saw Plymouth Rock." This assertion likely got the exotica market salivating, but is of course plainly false. Reetta Humalajoki notes that "Navajo weavers adopted upright looms from Pueblo peoples and wool from Spanish colonists in the sixteenth century."[31] This, too, underlines the tension between branding products as authentic and the reality of an evolving craft culture. It also brings to mind the incorrect assumption -- seemingly shared with Thomas Keam -- that indigenous culture is unchanging.

These situations ultimately find these indigenous craftsmakers "playing a role" in perhaps similar ways to the tea-throwing Bostonians: perpetuating visual stereotypes to approximate an *image* of authenticity -- instrumentalized in identity-building and market sales -- all while playing with a sense of *inauthenticity*. The case of potters being pushed toward anachronism in unfamiliar ancient styles highlights a key issue in the "revivalist" conception of authenticity: neglecting the fact that indigenous cultures change and develop over time, rather than remain static across centuries, denies the existence of a living, breathing Native culture. Additionally, because markets reward novelty like Bowlby's colorful Navajo rugs and Nampeyo's innovative pottery techniques, they may pressure creators to step away from their own cultural practices and the very nature of community craft. Whether this is perceived as influenced by outside pressure, or as an opportunity to take a front seat in profiting from one's cultural inheritance would likely vary among individuals.

Kachina dolls, known to the Hopi people as *tithu* or *katsinam*, are miniature depictions of a deity, historically given to girls for use in ceremonies.[32] Thomas Keam saw value in their exoticism, selling commercial iterations of the ritual items as one of his "curiosities".[33] But as mere dolls, their basic authenticity is compromised as they become disconnected with their

[31] Humalajoki, 980-981.
[32] Ibid, 980.
[33] Adamson, 149.

original ritual function. Art historian Zena Pearlstone writes that "the time in Hopi history when katsina carvings had only one function, and their genuineness and trustworthiness were uncontested, has passed."[34] While the popularity of kachina dolls took off because of their perceived exoticism, they were also arguably inauthentic by nature: their role in consumerism saw them completely detached from their original cultural context.[35] Once objects of spiritual significance, they're now known best by non-Hopis as commercialized knick-knacks. Laura E. Donaldson explains that consumption of cultural objects driven by fetishism must naturally remove them from their place in another's tradition, perhaps even in a way that ignores the humanity of the other. She writes that "fetishization abducts objects from their original contexts and denudes them of any social identity so that they may become signs for the collector..."[36] Zena Pearlstone notes that many modern Hopi carvers are careful to differentiate items for ceremonial use from those sold to outsiders, tailoring the "authenticity" of tithu imagery to its given audience, and thus holding onto a degree of ownership.[37]

As indigenous craft proliferated in Euro-American markets, these issues of authenticity and ownership continued to play out in complex ways: by the 1930s, tourism and mass-consumption of cheap exotica were increasingly labeled as possible threats to the "purity" of Native craft items. As part of a string of New Deal acts in the 1930s, Congress passed the "truth-in-advertising" Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1934 (IACA) "to promote the economic

---

[34] Zena Pearlstone, "Mail-Order 'Katsinam' and the Issue of Authenticity," *Journal of the Southwest* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 801.
[35] Humalajoki, 980.
[36] Laura E. Donaldson, "On Medicine Women and White Shame-Ans: New Age Native Americanism and Commodity Fetishism as Pop Culture Feminism," *Signs* 24, no. 3 (1999): 686.
[37] Pearlstone, 807.

welfare of Indian tribes" by protecting the authenticity of goods from non-Native copycats who de-value legitimate work.[38]

The IACA additionally laid out the establishment of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board to enforce its goals; conducting research throughout the country and setting standards through which to evaluate and suggest improvements to Native craftsmakers. Humalajoki explains that while the board was seemingly interested in the idea of tribes' "self-sufficiency," it was paradoxically "largely run by wealthy Euro-American patrons".[39] The IACB was formulated by Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier and headed up by Rene d'Harnoncourt -- a wealthy indigenous-art enthusiast and museum curator who would later become director of the Museum of Modern Art. In her book on Indian art New Deal policies, Jennifer McLerran refers to Collier as a "romantic primitivist" -- valuing indigenous crafts as artifacts of a "primal," "premodern other" and seeking to preserve such items as remnants from the distant pre-contact past.[40] This philosophy, on one hand, seemingly presents a priority-shift in contrast to the ideas underpinning the harmful assimilationist policies of the century prior, commonly enacted to strip away all signs of indigenous life. On the other hand, much like Keam or Bowlby, it ignores the reality that Native peoples evolve over time and are capable of -- like Nampeyo -- taking on a "modern" sense of autonomy in the market economy.

McLerran writes that "recognition as modern would effectively have precluded the native makers and the objects they produced from serving as the last vestiges of a precontact past that romantic primitivists wished to preserve." In other words, this goal of "protecting" Native craftsmakers from change denies their agency in innovation and business. If the goal was truly to

[38] U.S. Department of the Interior, "Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1935," Last modified January 25, 2022, https://www.doi.gov/iacb/indian-arts-and-crafts-act-1935; Jennifer McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art: Indian Arts and Federal Policy, 1933–1943* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 2, 24; Humalajoki, 977-978.
[39] Humalajoki, 978
[40] McLerran, 2.

set tribes up for economic "self-sufficiency," McLerran argues, it doesn't help them to hold them to a standard that values unchangedness above all else. She goes on to explain that this logic ultimately led to the creation of a binary between "traditional and modern that precluded recognition of forms and practices that did not fall at either pole of this conceptual structure," and that this breed of primitivism "failed to accommodate objects and practices that, through centuries of intercultural contact and exchange, had achieved altered forms."[41]

The policing of authenticity within the craft market also seemingly implied a hierarchy even among legitimate Indian works, looking down upon those deemed too "nontraditional" and "low-class". While the expensive items made for wealthy patrons like rugs, pottery, and jewelry were treated as a respectable status symbol, cheap touristy items like ash trays, cigarette holders, and key chains represented the untrustworthiness of the independent Indian seller. This was an argument made by people like Thomas B. Lesure, a writer who described a "trashy hodge-podge of tawdry knickknacks" in his 1952 *Times Sunday Magazine* article "Hunting for Indian Bargains," noting, "The Indians have learned a few lessons from the white man."[42]

The same "preservationist" dynamic presented in romantic primitivist philosophy shows up in problematic ways in cases like the Philbrook Museum's 1958 Contemporary American Indian Painting competition. That year Yanktonai Dakota painter Oscar Howe was rejected from the competition after submitting his painting *Umini Wacipi (War and Peace Dance)*, a work that explored geometrically abstracted human forms and bold planes of color -- Native dancers stretched and shaped through curved intersecting lines to create a vibrant sense of movement. Although it was apparently a "fine painting" according to the judges, it was deemed "not

[41] Ibid, 2.
[42] Humalajoki, 979.

Indian."[43] According to David W. Penney, this was a common occurrence: in addition to the Philbrook, numerous art institutions, including Dorothy Dunn's Studio School, enforced "a narrow range of stylistic and subject conventions as visual signifiers of [Native] identity."[44] Oscar Howe fired back at the museum, writing,

> Who ever [sic] said, that my paintings are not in the traditional Indian style, has poor knowledge of Indian art indeed. There is much more to Indian Art, than pretty, stylized pictures… Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting, that is the most common way? We are to be herded like a bunch of sheep, with no right for individualism, dictated as the Indian has always been, put on reservations and treated like a child, and only the White Man knows what is best for him. Now, even in Art, "You little child do what we think is best for you, nothing different." Well, I am not going to stand for it...[45]

This demonstrates that despite Native artists being continuously pigeonholed into restrictive boxes, perpetual reinforcement of Euro-American control was not accepted passively. The restrictive expectations create a complex balancing act: on one hand craftspeople like Nampeyo found success while playing a type of "role," but on the other, Oscar Howe was kept down for not meeting preconceived ideas of "Indianness." Although true "authenticity" is the ultimate gold-standard for consumers of indigenous work, and painstaking efforts are made to preserve it, authenticity is a vague idea and difficult to pin down. Was Nampeyo's work authentic, while Howe's was not? Perhaps it's becoming clear that authenticity cannot be judged by a culture's adherence to stereotypes and false notions of cultural stasis. While Nampeyo and Howe's work

---

[43] Humalajoki, 982-983; Susannah Gardiner, "Who Gets to Define Native American Art?," *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 25, 2022, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/who-gets-to-define-native-american-art-180979968/.

[44] David W. Penney, "The Poetics of Museum Representations: Tropes of Recent American Indian Art Exhibitions," in *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures* ed. W. Richard West, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 51.

[45] Oscar Howe to Jeanne Snodgrass, April 18, 1958, in *Oscar Howe Papers* (Vermillion, SD: University of South Dakota: Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections).

both diverge from the "authenticity" of pre-colonial artifacts, they reflect the authentic reality that Native arts and crafts -- and cultures by extension -- do, in fact, change and innovate.

Primitivist Art in America: "Nativeness" as a Modernist Instrument

In the early-mid twentieth century, fiber artist and teacher Anni Albers began her deep interest in the arts and crafts of pre-Columbian cultures; taking more than fourteen trips to Mexico and South America with her husband painter Josef Albers over the span of two decades beginning in 1935, just two years after their emigration from Germany to the United States.[46] While the Alberses' discussions and writings on or relating to pre-Columbian art indicate a comparatively deeper knowledge of the subject than the general craft market, it does not negate the clear elements of primitivism concurrently demonstrated -- ideas that exoticize and sentimentalize indigenous cultures for their perceived unsophisticatedness.

Anni and Josef Albers first encountered "attention-grabbing" indigenous American artifacts in Berlin's Museum of Ethnology, prior to immigrating. In America, Anni -- and quickly both Alberses -- became enchanted with the visual forms of the ancient Andean and Mexican works of art and craft they encountered and soon began to collect.[47] The Alberses' collection of Mesoamerican and Andean art grew to include more than one thousand pieces; spanning ceramics, stone and jade works, and textiles.[48]

In a number of ways -- both conceptual and technical -- Anni Albers' own textile work began to draw influence from pre-Columbian cultures, with Albers referring to the weavers of ancient Peru as her "great teachers." She was interested in thread's ability to carry meaning, and saw the use of cultural symbols in indigenous work as proof of art's function as a visual

[46] Virginia Gardner Troy, "Thread as Text: The Woven Work of Anni Albers," in *Anni Albers*, ed. Nicholas Fox Weber and Pandora Tabatabai Asbaghi (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1999), 31.
[47] Nicholas Fox Weber, *Anni & Josef Albers: Equal and Unequal* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2020), 330.
[48] Troy, 30-31.

language.[49] In her 1936 wall hanging *Ancient Writing*, Albers groups textured woven squares into what art historian Virginia Gardner Troy compares to glyphs -- showing more of an interest in the general concept of ancient ideographs than in any specific iconography or its embedded meaning. *Ancient Writing*'s boxy strips of white woven ornaments stand out like written paragraphs on top of the black textile composing the work's middle vertical section. Albers also incorporated the common Andean "floating weft" technique, in which the weaver continues to work unused thread through the woven surface, and fascinated with the pre-Columbian lack of written language, she alluded to the knots on strands of traditional *quipu* record-keeping strings in her use of knotted thread.[50]

Josef Albers's interest in ceramic Chupícuaro figurines seems to have had a similar impact on his artistic work. Nicholas Fox Weber sees the slight variations between the figurines' generally uniform appearances as analogous to Josef's repetition-oriented artistic practice. In several series, including his well-known *Homage to the Square*, the artist used incredibly similar compositions to highlight the differences in works' color combinations.[51] And in a much more literal sense, Josef's 1944 woodcut *Tlaloc* seems to express his admiration of indigenous connections to natural processes. Weber understands this work, titled with the name of the Aztec rain god, as an indication of Albers's appreciation of the water cycle's cruciality for plant growth,[52] but also seemingly a sign of his broader interest in the spiritual traditions of indigenous American cultures.

Anni's fascination with pre-Columbian "primitiveness" also manifested itself in her pedagogical practice as a foundational thought experiment: she explained in a 1968 interview,

---

[49] Ibid, 28.
[50] Ibid, 30-32; Anni Albers, *Ancient Writing*, 1936, woven fabric, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, accessed April 2023, library.artstor.org/asset/AMICO_SAAM_103811429.
[51] Weber, 330.
[52] Ibid, 413.

> I tried to put my students at the point of zero. I tried to have them imagine… that they are in a desert in Peru, no clothing, no nothing, no pottery… So what do you do? You wear the skin of some kind of animal, maybe, to protect yourself from too much sun or [wind]. And how do you gradually come to realize what a textile can be? [53]

This represents yet another instance of Albers utilizing conceptions of "primitive" indigenous culture in her thinking and methodology: though this time as a teaching tool.

While at times in his writing Nicholas Fox Weber, director of the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, embellishes the couple's passion for pre-Columbian objects in an unproblematic or even positive light -- seemingly attempting to separate them from the primitivism of other artists[54] -- he also writes of their idealization of "natural" and "[un]cultivated" people in ways that seem to greatly align them with broadly understood definitions of the term. Weber explains that while they existed happily in a refined lifestyle, the Alberses thought of "uneducated, unsophisticated cultures as embodying what was best in humanity."[55] The Alberses' co-optings may not be pointedly exploitative of any individual indigenous person, but their romanticism and utilization of what was perceived as "foreign" and "primitive" seems to clearly place them within the history of primitivism within the fine arts.

Abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock was also influenced by Native arts in a number of ways. By multiple accounts, including that of his wife Lee Krasner, Pollock drew inspiration for his now-famous technique of painting on the floor from seeing Navajo sand painters working on the ground in the 1941 exhibition of indigenous American works at the Museum of Modern Art.[56] But in the late 1930s- mid 40s -- years before ever endeavoring into

---

[53] Anni Albers, interviewed by Sevim Fesci, July 5, 1968, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-anni-albers-12134.
[54] Weber, 330.
[55] Ibid, 198.
[56] Robert Storr, "A Piece of the Action," in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 38.

"drip-painting" -- Pollock was borrowing imagery from Chavín ideographs themselves, as seen in the paintings *Male and Female* (1942) and *Mad Moon Woman* (1941).[57] The works show Pollock's use of traditional imagery as a means to experiment with abstracted forms -- *Male and Female* serves as Pollock's 20th-century spin on the Chavín *Tello Obelisk* carvings and the two caiman deities depicted.[58] The imagery also resonated with Pollock's spiritual interests: the perceived "wild" nature of the Chavín art style seemed to work with his goal of "autonomic action," tapping into the untamed "unconscious" to paint.[59]

Suzette Doyon-Bernard explains that Pollock would have had ample opportunity to witness indigenous art and craft work in person during this time period. In the twelve years prior to the creation of *Male and Female*, "at least ten shows mounted in the New York area were dedicated exclusively to ancient Peruvian art, and countless more were organized to promote pre-Columbian art or works by contemporary Latin American artists." Additionally, the Peruvian Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair prominently showcased pre-Columbian art, including a reproduction of the large *Raimondi Stele*.[60]

The primitivism seemingly exemplified in the work of Anni and Josef Albers, as well as Jackson Pollock, exists within the exoticism of Native culture in comparable ways to Thomas Keam and his "curiosities" through its fascination with foreign ancient cultures; in turn diminishing and simplifying the living, breathing people with whom it would otherwise seem to reflect. And by utilizing select bits and pieces of culture without their context, it clearly communicates greater interest in superficial appropriations than in any true sense of cultural

---

[57] Suzette Doyon-Bernard, "Jackson Pollock: A Twentieth-Century Chavín Shaman," *American Art* 11, no. 3 (1997): 9–31.
[58] Ibid, 12-16.
[59] Ibid, 26.
[60] Ibid, 18-20.

understanding or “appreciation”. It’s the colonizer piecing through and delineating the “noble” from the “savage.”

According to Nicholas Fox Weber, the Alberses’ Connecticut home had only one object from their huge collection of indigenous pieces on display: “a stone corn goddess that sat in front of the fireplace.” The rest of the thousand-plus cultural artifacts sat in a basement closet by their washer and dryer. They only unpacked the inventory on rare occasions; usually just in order to fit a new one in. It was not until after Josef Albers died that the works were given to the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History where they have been preserved since.[61] But even now, other than for occasional specific exhibitions, the indigenous works are kept in museum storage. Central and South American cultural objects hidden away in Connecticut; out of reach from living indigenous peoples who would want to engage with them.

Ethical Exhibition: Museum Interpretation & Repatriation

The dynamic demonstrated by the Albers’s collection -- quite literally “separating the art from the artist” -- is an unfortunately common circumstance in the realm of museums and private collections. There is much discussion about the status of indigenous-made objects in museums around the world and the often illegitimate and unethical ways works were acquired. In their postcolonial theoretical text *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin describe that during late-19th century’s colonial “scramble for Africa,” European museums received (as loot) “an alternative view of the world in the form of African masks, carvings, and jewellery,” all while forcibly subjugating the people and cultures from which the works originated. Much like Josef and Anni Albers’s laundry-room collection, they add that for the

[61] Weber, 331.

most part these looted works were just "stored away in the basements of the new museums of ethnology and anthropology."[62]

In addition to African works, American Indian arts and crafts, as well as objects from perceived "similar" indigenous cultures around the world, were together viewed as representative of cultures "preserved in time," and indicative of "primitive and aboriginal impulses common to all men."[63] These conceptions of indigeneity that the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* describe are some of the foundational perspectives that have underpinned and continue to drive many ethnographic museum exhibitions -- ideas that trace back as far as the early European collections of "curiosities" during the Age of Exploration.[64] Displaying a foreign culture in ways that rely on exoticization may be an attempt to feed the natural human inclination toward curiosity, but if the goal of a museum exhibition is to educate accurately and foster a spirit of respect and consideration to the peoples it depicts, this can end up proving problematic.

James D. Nason writes that while ethnographic and historical museums may strive to present objective truths about indigenous cultures in their display of art and craft objects, exhibitions are naturally both reflections and reinforcers of societal preconceptions. Exhibitions are successful at attracting "repeat customers" (and therefore deemed successful) through the extent to which they meet the expectations of their visitors, despite the fact that expectations may be "based upon ideological stereotypes or false notions."[65] Nason explains; "museums are the creatures of the communities that created them, and, in their own turn, they serve to create that

---

[62] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 156.
[63] Ibid, 157-158.
[64] Evan M. Maurer, "Presenting the American Indian: From Europe to America," in *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures* ed. W. Richard West, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 18-20.
[65] James D. Nason, "'Our' Indians: The Unidimensional Indian In the Disembodied Local Past," in *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures* ed. W. Richard West, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 33.

community."[66] If a museum presents misleading information or partial truths, visitors will leave with reinforced prejudices, which then impacts the shape of future exhibitions in an endless reflective feedback loop.

The "cabinets of curiosities" of the 17th and 18th centuries reflected Europe's fascination and excitement with the Age of Exploration, and often fundamentally disregarded the humanity of Native Americans. Collections of indigenous craft objects were often displayed alongside items from nature. In the 1630s, Danish naturalist Ole Worm mounted "natural curiosities" including a stuffed polar bear and armadillo alongside "artificial curiosities" like Inuit kayaks, bows, arrows, spears, and fur clothing -- the two categories all too easily perceivable as one.[67] Presented as specimens from studies of "natural history," indigenous peoples were understood to be a number of things: foremostly unhuman on a basic level, and by extension, culturally unchanging and voiceless. In his 2007 novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Spokane-Coeur d'Alene author Sherman Alexie wrote of white collectors of Native crafts, describing, "Those guys made Indians feel like insects pinned to a display board."[68] Alexie's unsettling metaphor so palpably illustrates the disturbing feeling of the receiving-end of fetishism, and the dehumanization of "frozen in time" exhibits characterized as scientific documentation.

Over the course of the several centuries following those first European collections of indigenous items, myriads of exhibitions popped up portraying exoticized views of American "savages" -- including many world's fairs, ever since the very first of its kind in 1851.[69] The Canadian section of the 1851 fair sensationalized the foreign "primitiveness" of Native Canadian

---

[66] Ibid, 40.
[67] Maurer, 19-20.
[68] Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 163.
[69] Maurer, 20-21.

craftwork, and by deliberately highlighting a contrast between the Natives and Euro-Canadians, as Evan M. Maurer explains, a "persistent colonialist attitude" was communicated that the indigenous people were "of less value than their European counterparts."[70] Beyond an ideological connection between the portrayals of Native Americans in world's fairs and modern museums, Maurer also describes a direct link between the two; that many of the cultural objects displayed in the international exhibitions were later donated to ethnographic museums -- establishing some of the first public museum collections to include American Indian art and craft.[71]

One of the primary goals in the foundation of these ethnographic museums was to allow visitors a chance to explore foreign lands and their cultures without leaving their own city -- what James Nason refers to as "the museum-visitor-as-tourist mode" of exhibitions. Another common version of this format allowed visitors to experience a point in history different than their own.[72] But on top of providing an exciting experience exploring another world, exhibitions of American Indian cultural objects were framed as a noble endeavor to preserve the last traces of a quickly "vanishing race." In 1888, George B. Goode of the Smithsonian Institution commented that he believed the American Historical Association's George Catlin Indian Gallery was "valuable beyond the possibility of appraisement, in that it is the sole record of the physical characters, the costumes, and the ceremonies of several tribes long extinct." While remarks such as this may come across as absurd and narrow-sighted today, Nason clarifies that this idea was a widely-held belief; that if not already gone, Native Americans would soon disappear altogether. This logic isn't completely behind us: even in subtle, unintentional ways, we continue to learn

[70] Ibid, 21.
[71] Ibid, 23.
[72] Nason, 36.

from many museums that indigenous culture is a phenomenon of the past.[73] Evan Maurer writes that the more he confronts the troubling histories of indigenous representation, the more he sees how actually "museum presentations of Native American cultural objects have not changed greatly during the past few hundred years."[74]

Perhaps many believe that rather than face down the harsh and troubling realities continuing to beset real, living Native peoples, it's easier to "disembody" their past from their present. It feels better and is therefore deemed more worthwhile to only look at pre-colonial history, allowing a museum visitor to gain a feeling of worldliness and wisdom while only seeing a partial truth. Nason and Maurer both note how displays that rely on historic photographs, posed mannequins, and frozen dioramas -- all preserved in static forms without reference to a modern existence -- fortify this impression of Indians as a piece of an unchanging, distant history.[75]

In addition to denying the continuity of indigenous communities on a broad scale, historical and ethnographic museums often demonstrate little effort to present objects from various tribal groups as coming from their own separate and unique cultures, rather than one homogenous "Native American" culture. Furthermore, there is often hardly any attempt to recognize (or even imagine) the personhood of the individual artists and craftspeople who made the exhibited work. Maurer writes that again this creates a superficial image of frozen Native cultures, bringing "no sense of Native American individuality to the visitor's consciousness, and [failing] to depict the development of Native peoples and show how they live today."[76] Nason adds; "Display pieces become not the works of the hands and hearts of real men and women, but simply what *they* did" -- *they* being nameless, faceless primitives whose exotica is valued today

[73] Ibid, 37-38.
[74] Maurer, 15.
[75] Nason, 37-38; Maurer, 23-24.
[76] Maurer, 25-26.

only through the extent to which it can teach us about “prehistory”. He explains that distancing “artifacts” from real people simply creates a distance from reality itself.[77] We know, of course, that all the works were in fact made by real people from real, distinct tribes -- many of which continue to participate in their traditional craftmaking practices through to present times.

In the realm of art museums, the tricky question at hand can be how to appropriately highlight the aesthetic value in cultural objects -- elevating items to the high esteem of “artwork” -- while also thoughtfully communicating their cultural significance. While a show like MoMA’s 1941 exhibition *Indian Art of the United States* was regarded as a successful example of a museum appreciating and legitimizing Native arts -- installed “in the same type of environment they had developed for the exhibition of modern European and Euro-American art”[78] -- it is a careful balance to not trivialize work through decontextualization. By displaying items in a sterile “white cube” gallery space, and referring to pieces only by their medium (i.e. “painting,” or “stone sculpture”), a museum presents only the works’ aesthetic value, while removing crucial cultural context.[79] As James Nason explains, cultural objects are reflections of the complex and multifaceted realities that brought them into being, and are therefore “not simply *art*,” though they may be beautiful.[80]

The exhibition of items in a “display storage” -- a technique commonly used in both art and ethnographic museums -- is the most egregious way of stripping away context in presentation. “Display storage” cases store wide mixes of objects from various locations and time periods behind glass, often without much at all in the way of interpretation. This “interpretive void” fully separates objects from their context, with no opportunity to engage in

[77] Nason, 38.
[78] Maurer, 25.
[79] Penney, 53.
[80] Nason, 31.

any meaningful educational way beyond the possible inclusion of an accession number or a labeled utilitarian purpose (i.e. basket, bow, or knife).[81]

This disregard to cultural meaning returns us to the ethical questions regarding museums' acquisition and holding of works. In obtaining materials deeply tied with spiritual tradition or otherwise sensitive aspects of Indian life, a museum inevitably strips away pieces of an object's purpose. In this sense, cultural craft is not only a reflection of a broader context, but also inseparable from it while still remaining true craft. While this loss of original utilitarian purpose may apply to any craft or religious item in a museum, it becomes a question of ethics when tribal groups are not consenting. In many cases, tribes have communicated their sadness and disapproval of ritual objects and human remains sitting in museum collections, and often explicitly seek their repatriation. Former director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian W. Richard West Jr. comments how Native communities' desire for repatriation has been a "wake-up call for the American museum community," sending a clear message that "contemporary Native peoples do not believe they are cultural relics of a dead or dying past."[82]

Over the course of the last several centuries, museums and collectors have routinely collected human remains of indigenous Americans for both study and exhibition purposes.[83] Sabrina Agarwal, UC Berkeley professor of anthropology, explained to PBS News that "they only took certain people. There's not large collections of early pioneers; there's collections of people from marginalized communities… It is part of a larger context of scientific racism." This posthumous removal of individuals without their consent, putting them on display as curiosities, has for obvious reasons been a continuous topic of serious concern for Native communities.[84]

---

[81] Ibid, 37-38.
[82] W. Richard West, Jr., *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 99.
[83] Katie Stringer Clary, "Human Remains in Museums Today," *History News* 73, no. 4 (2018): 15.
[84] Jeffrey Brown, "University of California, Berkeley repatriates cultural artifacts to Indigenous tribe," PBS NewsHour, October 10, 2022, YouTube video, 8:07, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycgH4Pczk7Y.

In 1990, Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), codifying guidelines through which tribes can reclaim both ritual objects and human remains of ancestors, and requiring institutions to reassess their inventories -- sharing information about such sensitive holdings with relevant tribes. Although an important step in the right direction, as noted by *New York Times* reporter Zachary Small, the act's implementation was not entirely successful: a 2020 National Park Service report estimated that remains of more than "116,000 Native American individuals" were still held in collections around the country.

Institutions like Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (which still had over 6,400 individuals and 13,600 funerary objects as of 2021) claim that although they are "committed" to the return of remains, "identifying the cultural affiliation of remains can be difficult." With ample loopholes and ambiguous requirements, institutions are able to hold onto their "collections" as long as they lack specific tribal affiliations.[85] In other words, by perpetuating the myth of objects and individuals' "unknowability," museums skirt around NAGPRA compliance -- but to what end? While some may claim that following through on research is simply too costly,[86] it represents a fundamental failing of the intellectual missions of institutions like Harvard or UC Berkeley, and museums at large. Furthermore, it is disturbingly unethical for individuals and institutions to profit from the trafficking and storage of looted material culture and the unconsenting deceased. In reaction to a museum invoice's valuation of nineteen Indian skeletons at $3000, Hopi-Miwok poet Wendy Rose powerfully wrote in her 1980 piece "Three Thousand Dollar Death Song";

we watch our bones auctioned

[85] Zachary Small, "Push to Return 116,000 Native American Remains Is Long-Awaited," *The New York Times*, August 6, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/06/arts/design/native-american-remains-museums-nagpra.html; National Parks Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, "Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act," Last modified May 23, 2022, accessed March 2023, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/index.htm.
[86] Small.

with our careful quillwork,
beaded medicine bundles, even the bridles
of our shot-down horses. You who have priced us,
you who have removed us -- at what cost?[87]

W. Richard West Jr. writes that calls for repatriation should not present a threat to museums like the NMAI, but rather serve as an opportunity through which to enter important conversations with Native communities.[88] He also explains that continuous collaboration with "Native people themselves [is] an invaluable, essential, and authentic component" of forming effective and accurate exhibitions of American Indian culture in the 21st century.[89] Non-Indian museums will need to be open to the possibility of tribes' disapproval of certain exhibitions, and receptive to a process of improving interpretation and displays, or, through repatriation, even the collections themselves. To successfully educate the public and foster respect for indigenous cultures, museums must first confront problematic histories and thoughtfully incorporate the perspectives of the peoples from whom works were originally taken.

Consumption of Cultures: Popular Appropriations in the Last Half-century

In the decades following the second World War, the consumption of indigenous crafts boomed once again, shifting from items of elite collections to those that filled more commonplace roles in decor and fashion. This reflected widespread American trends: consumer spending increased dramatically, with the purchase of household goods rising by a whopping 240 percent. Researcher Reetta Humalajoki argues that 1950s consumerism played a role in developing an "imagined unity of American identity," mirroring similar goals as the continuing Indian termination policies that sought cultural assimilation of indigenous people in the

[87] Wendy Rose, *Bone Dance: New and Selected Poems, 1965-1993* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 21.
[88] West, 99.
[89] Ibid, 8.

postwar-era.[90] Again the glaring irony is particularly troubling: while the general Euro-American public increasingly adopted "Indian" arts and crafts objects into their lives, actual indigenous people were expected to give up their traditional cultures in the name of assimilation. The public displayed more interest in indigenous commodities than in the wellbeing of people who made them; typified by the fact that in 1956 the *New York Times* published at least nineteen articles about Native crafts, but only five explicitly addressing American Indian policies.[91]

The 1960s and '70s saw counterculturalists employ conceptions of "Indianness" in creating the recognizable "hippie" aesthetic. But unlike craftsmakers and salesmen of the past, they had no use in even attempting to approximate authenticity; instead relying on stereotypes and garish fashions that come across as playful costumes. Once again perceived as excitingly exotic while simultaneously an unmistakable symbol of American identity, appropriation of Native crafts grew to envelop pop culture trends, and become the target of kitschy mass-production. Droves of young people fascinated with Native cultures tapped into the ever-relevant tropes of "noble savagery." Buckskin, fringes, beads, and braids were all the rage.[92]

Bay Area artist Alexandra Jacopetti's 1974 book *Native Funk and Flash* documented the countercultural "folk art" trends of her time and place -- a platter of culturally appropriated influences.[93] The inclination toward appropriation is explained by Jacopetti, writing, "Many of us have hungered for a cultural identity strong enough to produce our own version of the native costumes of Afghanistan or Guatemala, for a community life rich enough for us to need our own totems comparable to African and Native American masks and ritual objects."[94] Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson emphasizes the fact that this excerpt is referring to an overwhelmingly white

[90] Humalajoki, 974.
[91] Ibid, 994, 976.
[92] Ibid, 988-989.
[93] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 54.
[94] Alexandra Jacopetti, *Native Funk and Flash: An Emerging Folk Art* (San Francisco: Scrimshaw, 1974), 5.

population of counterculturalists, who in their "hunger" for foreign inspirations, perpetuate ethnic stereotyping.[95] It all feels eerily similar to earlier historical examples of utilizing indigenous imagery in formulating a distinctive identity visually, like in the cases of the Boston Tea Party, Woodcraft Indians, and early 20th century elite "playacting" groups like the Cliff Dwellers Club who sought out Indian crafts and clothing.[96] The issue that arises is that their "unique" aesthetics are shallow rip-offs; Jacopetti's counterculturalists fetishized the perceived "otherness" of Native peoples and warped their image to support philosophical ideologies in ways indigenous communities didn't ask for, and often were not included in themselves.

Native American figures of the time, like Onondaga artist Tom Two Arrows, vocalized conflicted feelings: on one hand the consumerism brought increased interest to indigenous culture and crafts, while on the other, the ubiquity of inauthentic items meant an overshadowing of genuine cultural expressions, with Native craftspeople missing out on an economic opportunity.[97] In 1967, Cree folk singer Buffy Sainte-Marie articulated that hippies' "vampiric" emulation of Native American culture just simply didn't make sense to her, explaining, "The white people never seem to realize that they cannot suck the soul out of a race. The ones with the sweetest intentions are the worst soul suckers."[98] Furthermore, Reetta Humalajoki contends that the growth of "Indian" fashion trends seemed to have little overlap with the advocacy of the early 1970s Red Power activist movement anyway[99] -- representing yet another repetition of the ironies present in preceding Native craft booms that ignored the social-political issues facing contemporary tribes.

---

[95] Bryan-Wilson, 54-55.
[96] Adamson, 146-147.
[97] Humalajoki, 990-992.
[98] Sherry L. Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.
[99] Humalajoki, 988.

Emerging from counterculturalist movements of the 1970s, the loose spiritual and intellectual movement referred to as "New Age" took off in the 1980s, and persists as a phenomenon through to the present day.[100] According to scholar Lisa Aldred, "a significant number of white affluent suburban and urban middle-aged baby-boomers complain of feeling uprooted from cultural traditions, community belonging, and spiritual meaning. The New Age movement is one such response to these feelings."[101] In a similar-sounding way to the primitivists of the century-plus prior, "New Agers" -- dissatisfied with the perceived decadence of their modern world -- adorn their lives with some of the most "vampiric" assorted collages of cultural appropriation we'll come to see. Drawing selectively from a wide variety of cultures deemed more in touch with spirituality and the ancient world than their own, this breed of counterculturalists mixes elements of Zen Buddhism, Tantra, and paganism, and at times incorporating the likes of crystals, extraterrestrials, and clairvoyance. While there is surely a great deal of diversity among people engaged in the New Age, American Indian culture often represents a significant component of the "collage" -- both through the practice of "plastic" shamanistic spirituality and the widespread consumption of cultural crafts.[102]

Rather than a movement focused on political engagement or any tangible social reform, New Age is based in ideas of self-help and personal journeys of spiritual "transformation".[103] In romanticizing forms of indigenous American culture, Aldred posits, New Agers seek a deeper authenticity in an exotic tradition with the hopes that it can "save them from their own sense of malaise."[104] Much akin to earlier conceptions of the "noble savage," here in New Age we see again a wide simplification of indigenous peoples into an archetypical "primitive" hero; whose

[100] Deloria, 170
[101] Lisa Aldred, "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality," *The American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2000): 329.
[102] Aldred, 330-331; Deloria, 173.
[103] Aldred, 330; Deloria, 170.
[104] Aldred, 329.

culture (with the right amount of co-opting) is capable of symbolizing an alternative to modernity and the terrors of patriarchal capitalism.[105]

Within the broader umbrella of New Age, certain sects of white-feminism engage in appropriative spirituality and consumerism. Through a belief in an inherent bond between femininity and nature,[106] and the framework of vague imaginings of indigenous people's connectedness with the natural world, New Age women's groups take part in such activities as drum circles, shield-making workshops, and "touch-the-earth ceremonies," while often taking on stereotypical "Indian-sounding" names. Like earlier examples seen in the hippies or the Boston Tea Party, these New Age feminists utilize the act of "playing Indian" as a means toward their philosophical goals; an achievement of empowering individual "transformations," outside of the restrictive patriarchies of monotheistic religions.[107] Self-professed "medicine woman" Lynn Andrews (decidedly white) wrote in her 1985 book *Jaguar Woman* that in discovering her calling as "the spirit woman of words," she had "stolen back" the ancient way of woman. While likely empowering to many women readers feeling disconnected from their sense of agency, Andrews's writing both ignores and participates in a history of imperialist pillaging for the "valuable" and "exotic" in indigenous cultures, while discarding the rest. Laura E. Donaldson asserts that neither New Age feminist writers, nor their broader movement, have engaged with Native American cultures respectfully, showing a lack of an "attentiveness to the ethics of context."[108] She furthermore points to the unfortunate irony of a women's movement engaging in these problematic dynamics, noting how the dehumanizing fetishism "recalls some of the most

---

[105] Donaldson, 683.
[106] Deloria, 173.
[107] Donaldson, 678.
[108] Ibid, 679.

oppressive social processes deployed against women by a masculinist society: their reduction to sexual objects, for instance, or their decontextualization as a group without history."[109]

In her article on New Age commercialization of Native spirituality, Lisa Aldred argues that the broader movement is founded primarily in consumerism. The intrinsic irony here can't be overlooked: this "counterculturalist" philosophy, at least theoretically at odds with consumer capitalism, seemingly thrives within it.[110] This is what Mohawk poet Beth Brant referred to in noting how the New Age "is merely the old-age -- capitalism cloaked in mystic terminology, dressed in robes and skins of ancient and Indigenous beliefs."[111] While many adherents actively incorporate New Age exotic spiritual practices and philosophy into their lives in intangible ways, Aldred explains that the majority "participate primarily through the purchase of texts and products targeted for the New Age market." She adds that one of the most popular and profitable categories among New Age products are those relating to Native American spiritual traditions.[112] This idea of consumption as an identity-builder serves as a fundamental notion in New Age appropriations: as Donaldson describes, "consumption" doesn't simply lie in the purchase of an item but rather in using it to imagine another life, perhaps one of "naive" authenticity or spiritual interconnectedness -- a representation of how "fantasy links consumption and desire."[113]

While the Indian Arts and Crafts Acts protect against dishonest non-Indian grifters misleading buyers about the authenticity of themselves and their goods, the success of often undisguised white salespeople in marketing Native spirituality to largely non-Native New Agers presents an ethical "gray-area" of sorts. The logic argued by some is that spirituality and religion are things that simply cannot possibly be "owned" -- with some white New Agers going so far as

[109] Ibid, 686.
[110] Aldred, 329-330.
[111] Donaldson, 680.
[112] Aldred, 330-331.
[113] Donaldson, 684.

to cite their religious liberties.[114] Because the harm is not always done through explicit fraud (although still a fair amount of focus is put on outing white "plastic shamans" pretending to be Native),[115] these broader questions about the commodification of indigenous spiritual practices and objects end up larger in scope than that of the IACA: rather than illegality, it brings to mind basic ethical questions of respect.

New Age products span from at-home sweat lodges (installed with a call to 1-800-36-SWEAT), to medicine shields fashioned as earrings, to deities made into kitschy wall clocks.[116] Aldred characterizes this kind of consumption as the "playful sampling" of Native traditions, pointing to the fact that it can just as quickly be tossed aside as "no longer useful." Furthermore, it simultaneously disregards the reality of actual Natives as "three-dimensional people set within historical, socioeconomic, and political relations of oppression."[117] It's a saddening irony that while plastic shamans rake in enormous sums from leading workshops and second-hand "rituals" (and a majority of New Agers are from middle- and upper-class backgrounds), scores of real Native people around the country live in poverty. These tough and often ugly realities seem to simply not fit into the romanticized primitivist conceptions of the "noble savage" that are foundational to New Age appropriations.[118]

Another ironic example underscoring a troubling out-of-touchness; a defense of appropriation that relies on citing New Agers' "religious freedoms" immediately displays a tone-deaf ignorance toward the longstanding battles for indigenous religious rights. The 1980s saw a series of Supreme Court decisions that, according to Philip Deloria, chipped away at an already weak American Indian Religious Freedom Act "in favor of federal environmental law,

[114] Aldred, 336.
[115] Donaldson, 679.
[116] Aldred, 334.
[117] Ibid, 339.
[118] Ibid, 330, 333.

tourism and hydropower production, Forest Service-supported logging operations, and state regulation of controlled substances."[119] It's ridiculous for one to argue religious discrimination in response to criticism of the New Age when they loot traditions from the real victims of religious oppression.

In response to Non-Indians continuing to profit from misappropriation, prominent Native American groups like the Southwestern American Indian Movement have spoken out, condemning the sale of "sacred ceremonies, such as the sweat lodge, and the vision quest," as well as traditional objects like "religious pipes, feathers and stones." In their proclamation, they went on to characterize this pattern as an "insult and disrespect for the wisdom of the ancients."[120] Aldred cites hors d'oeuvre-serving "sweat rituals" on cruise ships, and orgies advertised as traditional Cherokee ceremonial practice as notable examples of incidents denounced as offensive mockery.[121]

In order to attempt to "remedy" the issues at play, Laura E. Donaldson argues that one must "demystify" New Ageisms and recognize their origins in the "legacies of historical and neo-colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchal capitalism."[122] Through a jumbled blend of exotic mysticism, the fetishistic desires of Non-Indian New Agers are packaged as "self-help" and spirituality, but in reality have little connection to actual Native ways of life, and furthermore actively perpetuate troubling patterns of fetishization and cultural theft.

Conclusion

I don't argue that museums should stop attempting to reflect indigenous life and culture, nor that artists should close themselves off from foreign inspirations, nor that white people

---

[119] Deloria, 171.
[120] Aldred, 335.
[121] Ibid, 333.
[122] Donaldson, 694.

should stop buying Indian arts and crafts from legitimate sellers. Instead, I argue we should focus on ethical consumption and practices that acknowledge the troubling history of colonialism, as well as the continuity and agency of Native cultures and craftspeople. The issue is that in fetishizing a culture, one offensively reduces it to exotic and romanticized stereotypes without fully understanding or respecting complex nuances. And in cherry-picking certain elements of a culture in order to use them for one's own pleasure or enjoyment, there is a disengagement with the culture as a whole -- neglecting the historical and cultural context in which elements have developed and continue to exist.

While Indian art and crafts may be perceived as charmingly exotic or primitively "naive", they in reality -- like the craft of every other culture -- come from rich, complex histories and must be treated as so. Change over time is normal and authenticity may mean different things to Native craftspeople at different times. Today primitivism still manifests in many forms in our consumption of art and culture, and we can grapple with it ethically only by confronting its dehumanizing colonialist roots, while appreciating real-life indigenous cultures in a truer sense: as real people with real, multi-dimensional experiences. Rather than *fetishize* the perceived "other", we need to instead approach different cultures with recognition of their humanity and complexity, and learn to value them in more meaningful and nuanced ways.

References

Adamson, Glenn. *Craft: An American History*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022.

Albers, Anni. 1936. *Ancient Writing*. Woven fabric. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Accessed April 2023. library.artstor.org/asset/AMICO_SAAM_103811429.

Albers, Anni. Interviewed by Sevim Fesci, July 5, 1968. Transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-anni-albers-12134.

Aldred, Lisa. "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality." *The American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2000): 329–352.

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2007.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989.

Brown, Jeffrey. "University of California, Berkeley repatriates cultural artifacts to Indigenous tribe." PBS NewsHour. October 10, 2022. YouTube video, 8:07. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycgH4Pczk7Y.

Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Clary, Katie Stringer. "Human Remains in Museums Today." *History News* 73, no. 4 (2018): 12–19.

Deloria, Philip. *Playing Indian*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Donaldson, Laura E. "On Medicine Women and White Shame-Ans: New Age Native Americanism and Commodity Fetishism as Pop Culture Feminism." *Signs* 24, no. 3 (1999): 677–96.

Doyon-Bernard, Suzette. "Jackson Pollock: A Twentieth-Century Chavín Shaman." *American Art* 11, no. 3 (1997): 9–31.

Escárcega, Sylvia. "Authenticating Strategic Essentialisms: The Politics of Indigenousness at the United Nations." *Cultural Dynamics* 22, no. 1 (2010): 3–28.

Gardiner, Susannah. "Who Gets to Define Native American Art?" *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 25, 2022. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/who-gets-to-define-native-american-art-180979968/.

Harrison, Charles, Francis Frascina, and Gillian Perry. *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

Howe, Oscar to Jeanne Snodgrass. April 18, 1958. In archive *Oscar Howe Papers*. Vermillion, SD: University of South Dakota: Richardson Collection, Archives and Special Collections.

Humalajoki, Reetta. "Consumption as Assimilation: New York Times Reporting on Native American Art and Commodities, 1950-1970." *Journal of American Studies* 53 (2019): 972–996.

Jacopetti, Alexandra. *Native Funk and Flash: An Emerging Folk Art*. San Francisco: Scrimshaw, 1974.

Maurer, Evan M. "Presenting the American Indian: From Europe to America." In *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures*, edited by W. Richard West, Jr., 15–28. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.

McLerran, Jennifer. *A New Deal for Native Art: Indian Arts and Federal Policy, 1933–1943*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009.

Nampeyo. 1895-1910. *Seed Jar with Sikyatki Motifs*. Ceramic and pigment. Art Institute of Chicago. Accessed April 2023. artic.edu/artworks/180751/seed-jar-with-sikyatki-motifs.

Nason, James D. "'Our' Indians: The Unidimensional Indian In the Disembodied Local Past." In *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures*, edited by W. Richard West, Jr., 29–46. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.

National Parks Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. "Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act." Accessed March 2023. https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/index.htm.

Pearlstone, Zena. "Mail-Order 'Katsinam' and the Issue of Authenticity." *Journal of the Southwest* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 801–832.

Penney, David W. "The Poetics of Museum Representations: Tropes of Recent American Indian Art Exhibitions." In *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures*, edited by W. Richard West, Jr., 47–65. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.

Pueblo. *Sikyatki polychrome pottery jar*. Ceramic vessel. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge. Accessed April 2023. library.artstor.org/asset/AHARVARDIG_10313515206.

Pueblo. *Restored pottery jar-sikyatki*. Ceramic vessel. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge. Accessed April 2023. library.artstor.org/asset/AHARVARDIG_10313531745.

Rose, Wendy. *Bone Dance: New and Selected Poems, 1965-1993*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994.

Shales, Ezra. *The Shape of Craft*. London: Reaktion Books, 2018.

Small, Zachary. “Push to Return 116,000 Native American Remains Is Long-Awaited.” *The New York Times*, August 6, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/06/arts/design/native-american-remains-museums-nagpra.html.

Smith, Sherry L. *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. “Going Native.” In *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism And Art History*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, 312–329. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Storr, Robert. “A Piece of the Action.” In *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, edited by Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, 33–69. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999.

Troy, Virginia Gardner. “Thread as Text: The Woven Work of Anni Albers.” In *Anni Albers*, edited by Nicholas Fox Weber and Pandora Tabatabai Asbaghi, 28–39. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1999.

U.S. Department of the Interior. “Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1935.” Accessed February 2023. https://www.doi.gov/iacb/indian-arts-and-crafts-act-1935.

Vroman, Adam Clark. 1901. *Nampeyo, famous Hopi Potter*. Photography. University of California, San Diego. Accessed April 2023. library.artstor.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001271376.

Wade, Edwin L. *The Arts of the North American Indian: Native Traditions in Evolution*. New York: Hudson Hills Press/Philbrook Art Center, 1986.

Weber, Nicholas Fox. *Anni & Josef Albers: Equal and Unequal*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2020.

West, W. Richard, Jr. *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.