Contemporary North American Indian Crafts

by William C. Sturtevant

Crafts as a specially recognized kind of activity are phenomena of industrial societies, as is the realization that the survival of traditional craft skills and knowledge may be endangered.

North American Indians have long been users of manufactured goods, which began to replace Indian handmade objects as soon as Europeans arrived in America as explorers, traders, settlers, and conquerors. With the increasing integration of Indian communities and Indian individuals into the general American economy and society—especially during the 20th century—the substitution of manufactured products for local handmade objects became more pervasive. Indians involved in the market economy usually found it preferable to buy rather than make the tools, implements, clothing, and other articles needed for daily life. When they continued to make objects for their own use, they usually incorporated some commercial materials such as cloth, thread, paints and dyes, metal and beads, and they nearly always shaped and worked the traditional raw materials as well as the newer materials with imported knives, needles, axes, and other manufactured tools.

Handicrafts of European origin were also taken up and became Indian, such as beadwork, silverwork, splint basketry, and some styles of cloth garments. Quilting, for example, is preserved in many Indian rural communities as it is in non-Indian ones, and the star quilt has become a particular specialty of the Sioux.

In early American history many Indian crafts were adopted by the settlers from across the Atlantic. Some modern American manufactured goods originated in this way but have lost their specific associations with Indians. Canoes, kayaks, snowshoes, pack baskets, lacrosse sticks, anoraks (pull-over windbreakers), and moccasins are examples. The borrowers introduced changes—birchbark canoes became aluminum canoes, moccasins had hard leather soles added and lost their beaded or quilled decoration. Craft products that continued to be made by Indians underwent similar changes. New materials, new forms, and new functions were adopted; traditional crafts are never completely impervious to change.

At present most material objects used by Indians are identical with those of non-Indians. Traditional crafts and handmade objects do remain for special purposes, particularly for occasions when Indian identity is significant, and some persist for sale to non-Indians. Indians, like non-Indians, also produce handmade objects for aesthetic reasons, as a form of recreation or a hobby. The do-it-yourself movement is old in Indian communities, and often has the added aim of preserving traditionally Indian skills and attitudes.

Objects continue to be made by hand when there are no appropriate factory-made substitutes for them. This is the case for some things needed for distinctively Indian uses, such as items required

William C. Sturtevant is Curator of North American Ethnology in the Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, and General Editor of the Handbook of North American Indians (1978-). Among his special interests are the cultures and history of eastern North American Indians, particularly the Seminole and Seneca.

Basketweaver Emma Taylor, a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, weaves a basket from oak splints in Cherokee, North Carolina, ca. 1970.
Photo courtesy U.S. Department of the Interior, Indian Arts and Crafts Board

Zuni water jar, collected 1884-1885.
National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, #111,700

Zuni water jar made by Randy Nahohai in 1986.
Photo courtesy Pueblo of Zuni Arts and Crafts

by Indian religions. Among southwestern Indians the Navajos still require sandpaintings for religious purposes and the Pueblos use special costumes, masks, altars, and other ritual objects made in traditional forms. The Native American Church, the so-called Peyote Religion, uses a special waterdrum, distinctive jewelry, beaded feather fans of a particular form, and other handmade objects. The Longhouse religion of the Iroquois requires wooden and cornhusk masks and special musical instruments.

Less religious, more social ceremonies in many Indian communities are responsible for the growth and persistence of particularly Indian crafts. Especially prominent are the finely made, often very elaborate costumes that are traditionally worn at pow-wow celebrations. Special musical instruments are required by many Indian rituals—waterdrums, whistles, rattles—and the songs for dances at Indian pow-wows are accompanied by a special drum (often a modified commercial bass drum).

Nearly everywhere Indian clothing for daily wear is indistinguishable from that worn by non-Indians. An exception is Florida, where Seminole women still ordinarily wear homemade long skirts decorated with one or more bands of fine, bright-colored patchwork made on a sewing machine. But many Indians, at least occasionally, wear some distinctively Indian ornaments or jewelry, such as a beaded neck ornament or a silver buckle or bracelet. And on special occasions where Indian identity becomes important, more elements of traditional Indian dress and ornament are often worn. The crafts of beadwork, featherwork, quillwork, silverwork, fingerweaving, and ribbon applique work are preserved to produce garments and ornaments for wear on such occasions as well as for sale.

In Florida during this century, Seminole women have developed sewing into an art, to make clothing both for Seminole wear and for sale to outsiders. Skirts, shirts, blouses, and aprons bearing decorative bands of complex patchwork are readily recognizable as typically Seminole. This is one of the few Indian crafts that has remained economically viable, producing a reasonable return for its makers. It

Hamatsa dancers wearing two Crooked Beak and a Raven mask at a Kwakiutl potlatch, Alert Bay, British Columbia, November 1, 1980. The masks, carved by the well-known contemporary Kwakiutl artist Tony Hunt, were donated by him to the U'mista Cultural Centre at Alert Bay. **Photo by William C. Sturtevant**

does not depend on non-Indian middlemen or dealers, and the local south Florida market absorbs nearly all the output. Yet commercial and non-Seminole imitations have failed to duplicate Seminole skills and do not compete with Seminole products. The craftworkers continually change and develop the designs, and new forms of garments have been invented to attract customers. Some of these changes have been adopted for Seminole wear.

The persistence and change of crafts has everywhere been affected by the economic situation. An instructive example is Navajo weaving. It first developed to produce garments for Navajo wear using a weaving technique originally learned from the neighboring Pueblo Indians and wool from Navajo sheep. Towards the end of the 19th century, home-woven garments were replaced by clothing made from commercial fabrics, while Navajo weavers began producing blankets and rugs for export. The craft was a major source of income for most Navajos until the mid-20th century, even though the returns per hour were well below the national minimum wage. With gradual improvement in the Navajo economy, weaving declined in importance. At the same time, the market shifted away from crafts towards art: much higher prices for far fewer examples of fine quality.

A similar change occurred with Pueblo pottery. Very little has been made for Indian use in recent decades, but the craft has persisted and developed in response to a changing but divided market: quickly-made examples continue to sell as inexpensive souvenirs, while excellent wares made by a few artists draw high prices from collectors. Some modern Acoma and Zuni pottery is among the very best art pottery in the world.

Indian paintings on paper and canvas and Indian sculpture are recognized as art—perhaps because these are the traditional media of the fine arts—with the specialized marketing, exhibiting, collecting, and formal instruction that normally accompany art. Northwest Coast sculptors continue to produce some masks for Indian use, at the same time as the tradition in which they work has gained recog-

nition as a distinctive and evolving fine art of world class.

The better known Indian market crafts have aroused competition from non-Indian makers. There are factory-made pseudo-Navajo rugs and silver jewelry and pseudo-Indian beaded moccasins, and non-Indian artists and printmakers have sometimes adopted Indian motifs and Indian forms.

Conservation of Indian crafts depends on several factors. Uses for the products must continue or develop. Indians will make things for their own use as long as manufactured goods are not adequate substitutes; the crafts will continue to be recognizably Indian as long as the uses are distinctively Indian. The non-Indian market is also important. The motives of consumers in this market are rarely practical, since manufactured goods are usually cheaper and easier to obtain. Craft products mainly serve decorative and aesthetic functions, as items of clothing and jewelry, as household furnishings, and as art to be collected and displayed.

Successful crafts require special skills not quickly acquired. Traditional methods of instruction, mostly informal and by imitation and long practice, can however be supplemented. Classes in Indian crafts have often been organized by teachers and community developers, sometimes soliciting assistance from tribal elders with traditional knowledge. Non-traditional sources of knowledge and inspiration may also be called on. Marketing and craft specialists can sometimes advise on changes that may make craft products more attractive to non-Indians, increasing sales and thus encouraging the learning and practicing of traditional skills. The forms and colors of Cherokee and Choctaw river-cane baskets were modified in this way during the 1960s; the outside specialists could not improve upon the skilled traditional twilling technique, but they did suggest replacing commercial dyes with vegetable dyes and changing the shapes of baskets to meet the standards of a wider and wealthier market. Similarly, the traditional commercial dyes of Navajo rugs were supplemented in the 1940s and 1950s by the introduction of new (but local) vegetable dyes and new patterns suited to changed tastes in interior decoration. However, such improvements must stay within the boundaries of consumer recognition of Indian products. Obviously non-Indian techniques, forms, and materials often do not succeed even when the makers are identified as Indian.

The maintenance and revival of recognizably Indian crafts now depend partly on museum collections of traditional Indian objects and on published descriptions and illustrations of them. Anthropologists have sometimes aided in the renewal and preservation of craft traditions. In recent years non-Indian artists and folklorists have also assisted in educating both Indians and non-Indians about traditional Indian arts, as have Indian professional anthropologists, artists, and folklorists interested in Indian crafts. Demonstrations and sales by Indians at fairs and festivals, and museum exhibits of modern as well as older Indian arts and crafts, have played a role as well. The survival and development of traditional Indian crafts will continue to be affected by the state of knowledge among Indians and non-Indians, as producers and consumers of crafts, and as participants in America's multi-ethnic society.

Suggested reading

American Indian Art Magazine, quarterly, from volume 1(1976).

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