

Lakota Views of "Art" and Artistic Expression

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Perhaps, we as anthropologists and art historians have spent too much time categorizing dimensions of Native art within a Euro-American context. With the current trend in attempting to get "insider" views, it may be more appropriate to consider how aboriginal peoples view artistic expressions of all sorts. In researching where the statement, "there is no Native word for Art," I can possibly attribute it to the ATLATL conference in the 1980s. I am grateful for Gloria Webster Cranmer, who, as discussant to the session at the 1999 NAASA conference stated she used it in a conference in 1973. However, this is a rather incomprehensible all encompassing statement, considering the more than one hundred Native languages and dialects which are still used in Native North America. Many of us have spent our life-times attempting to rid ourselves and yes, "Others" (Euro-Americans and Euro-Canadians) of the monolithic "North American Indian" which obliterates the tribal diversity which characterizes this continent.

It is this cultural diversity which is reflected in Native place, society, and individuals which must be examined in assessing aboriginal art in the present time. I prefer not to get involved at this time in the conundrum of "will the real Indian artist, please, stand up" syndrome, which seems to permeate many aspects of Native art today. Indeed, the American Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 attempts to confront this issue. It specifies that only federally recognized (enrolled on a reservation) Natives are considered "Indians." This has led to cries of "card-carrying" Natives, or pedigreed blood quantum.

In the interest of furthering the dialogue, I will concentrate upon the views of artistic expression among the Lakota people - mainly the Hunkpapa and Sihasapa bands. For within the linguistic dialect of this Siouan, language, there are subtle differences in the Lakota language - commonly referred to as the "L-speakers." Other dialects are Dakota and Nakota - which are mutually intelligible. The Dakota dialect is pervasive in the northern part of Standing Rock reservation

Philosophical and linguistic domains as it applies to art forms are functional according to the native people who use them. Another blanket statement plays into the essentializing of the many vibrant traditions in the artistic production of most indigenous groups. That is, all Indians are "artistically inclined." These types of statements seem to

contribute more to the homogenization of our peoples which seems to be occurring in the present emphasis on multicultural education in all fields. When anthropologists and art historians resort to such sloganizing statements, one may give to an observing majority audience in museums, galleries, tourist shops, and classrooms, a convenient handle to again place Native peoples in a subordinate position in contemporary society. Patronage seems predominant.

Originating from and returning to one's natal community has weaknesses and strengths. One does not have to worry about rapport and who might be a reliable "informant" - excuse me, the in-term is now "consultant." A weakness is that many people do not know what returnees have done in the "White" world. So, it is relatively easy to ask questions. More importantly, it is easier to listen and remember. Thus, in a discussion to delineate world views a male elder stated, and I translate - he said - "To know what WOLAKOTA means ... it means art, music, aesthetics, philosophy, and the way of life (FH). To him, way of life meant this definition indicates an inter-relationship of all intangibles of Lakota life. While the English word "ART" represents a compartmentalization of an aesthetic framework, Lakota world view represents an integration which is difficult to delineate into discrete entities.

I also asked an individual who might be viewed as a tradition bearer in my community. He defined art as taku gaxape na ohola pe. "What is made and cherished." This may include songs, beaded or quilted items, such mundane things as WASNA - (pemmican) which when used in special contexts - naming ceremonies, the Sun Dance and adoption ceremonies as Hunka (making of relatives). Thus an ordinary food of survival becomes wakan (sacred) in a sacramental context. These things are WOLAKOTA, (honored by the Lakota). In order to obtain gender equality in elicitation, a female elder stated: Taku waste'la ka pi na ga xapi - whatever we (Lakota) make and adn3ire. The integrative aspect of art in a Native perspective appears to negate segmentalized thinking in realms of arts and crafts.

One can say there is possibly no correlation between the English ART, and the sterile binary compartmentalization ART and CRAFT. There is, at least among the Lakota speakers and their world view a greater inclusiveness of the vitality of Native life - even in the supposed waste land of contemporary reservations. One must look to functional verbalization in communities and elicit linguistic terms of appreciation and appraisal to delineate Native aesthetic views. Many of us who have spent precious years

teaching about Native cultural diversity cringe at many all encompassing ideas in multicultural education and museum displays which are still tied to a "culture area" approach.

A word for ART is yu gla ke ke - "going across - to draw.
yu o swa ye - "going down" Basically, the process describes sketching and painting contemporarily.

This utterance is the one used for painting on parfleche (raw hide) containers. The term for this artistic expression is ae ba zu - to mark on surface. Since these designs tend to be geometric on rawhide containers, called phun the standard evoked here are straight lines, pleasing colors and symmetry especially in matched pairs. In some of the more newer shapes, which have added wool flannel binding, the color of desire is most commonly red wool, and neatness of attachment is important. Painting of men's shields were vision and/or dream-based, and only the maker can evaluate them. Recently, I was researching Clark Wissler's letters to Franz Boas in the archives of the American Museum of Natural History, New York City. His letter of 3 August 1902, written from Pine Ridge stated:

"The 'dream design' were the work of wakan (mystic) women chiefly; though shields were often carved and decorated according to dreams or visions experienced by men. No one was permitted to use plant designs except a few wakan women. This is said to be an "ancient custom."

Formerly, there were magic blankets supposed to have power in seducing women." Art was very realistic - warrior deeds on buffalo robes.

From the data I have on hand now, there are two kinds of "dream" or vision figures and a kind of "sign writing." The former is largely feminine, the latter masculine. That is, the women cannot, or will not explain the sign writing, for it belongs to the profession of a warrior.

Although Wissler refers to the Oglala, it is difficult to find "raw data" before an analysis, thus this quote seems significant. I am not aware of any assessment criteria for these in recent times. Indeed some Lakota ritualists do not want shields and pipes in exhibits.

Perhaps...there is no word for "art" in American-Indian languages it may be simply another dimension of deficit models by "Others" which have plagued American Indians/Alaska Native linguistic and philosophical systems for too long. It also appears to play into the simplification of the many vibrant traditions in the artistic production of

many nations of indigenous peoples in North America. It may also negate the rich linguistic variation in our cultures. The negation of linguistic terms does not take into account contemporary revitalization movements in the Plains Quill work and parfleche objects. What seems imperative is a concerted effort to elicit Native terms for any artistic expression.

Another greatly neglected area in Native art is gender variance. Lakota analysis must also consider Art of the winkte - "2 spirit" people. Some of whom still do artistic work, and have Native linguistic appraisals.

Oscar Howe, the well-known Dakota artist, viewed art and philosophy as ini "to live"-states "in art I have realized a part of a dream." The school gymnasium in a BIA school on Standing Rock reservation displays the wondrous drawings of Art Amiotte. He labels these as:

woyuonihan - honor/respect/responsibility
wo wa cin tanka - thoughtful, great thoughts, wise
wa on sila - compassion, humility
wok sape - intelligence
ohitika - brave, courageous

These are the four cardinal virtues that underlie Lakota life. Douglas Fast Horse of Rapid City states:

Wolanota ki means "art, music, aesthetics, a way of life."

Joe Flying By a Hunkpapa ritualist uses wiconi to include the above categories - the expressive elements of Lakota culture.