Chapter 6

IS THERE A WORD FOR ART?

The Legend of the Flute (Brule Sioux)

Many generations ago, the people had drums, gourd rattles, and bull-roarers, but no flutes. At that long-ago time a young man went out to hunt. Meat was scarce, and the people in his camp were hungry. He found the tracks of an elk and followed them for a long time. The elk, wise and swift, is the one who owns the love charm. If a man possesses elk medicine, the girl he likes can’t help sleeping with him. He will also be a lucky hunter. This young man I’m talking about had no elk medicine.

After many hours he finally sighted his game. He was skilled with bow and arrows, and had a fine new bow and quiver full of straight, well-feathered, flint-tipped arrows. Yet the elk always managed to stay just out of range, leading him on and on. The young man was so intent on following his prey that he hardly noticed where he went.

When night came, he found himself deep inside a thick forest. The tracks disappeared and so had the elk, and there was no moon. He realized he was lost and that it was too dark to find his way out. Luckily he came upon a stream with cool, clear water. And he had been careful enough to bring a bag of wasna—dried meat pounded with berries and kidney fat—strong food that will keep a man going for a few days. After he had drunk and eaten, he rolled himself into his fur robe, propped his back against a tree, and tried to rest. But he couldn’t sleep; the forest was full of strange noises, the cries of night animals, the hooting of owls, the groaning of trees in the wind. It was if he heard these sounds for the first time.
Suddenly there was an entirely new sound, of a kind neither he nor anyone else had ever heard before. It was mournful and ghost-like. It made him afraid, so that he drew his robe tightly about himself and reached for his bow to make sure that it was properly strung. On the other hand the sound was like a song, sad but beautiful, full of love, hope, and yearning. Then before he knew it, he was asleep. He dreamed that the bird called wagnuka, the redheaded woodpecker, appeared singing the strangely beautiful song and telling him: “Follow me and I will teach you.”

When the hunter awoke, the sun was already high. On a branch of the tree against which he was leaning, he saw a redheaded woodpecker. The bird flew away to another tree, and another, but never very far, looking back all the time at the young man as if to say: “Come on!” Then once more he heard that wonderful song, and his heart yearned to find the singer. Flying toward the sound, leading the hunter, the bird flitted through the trees, while its bright red top made it easier to follow. At last it alighted on a cedar tree and began hammering on a branch, making a noise like the fast beating of a small drum. Suddenly there was a gust of wind, and again the hunter heard that beautiful sound right above him.

Then he discovered that the song came from the dead branch that the woodpecker was tapping with his beak. He realized also that it was the wind that made the sound as it whistled through the holes the bird had drilled.

“Kola, friend,” said the hunter, “let me take this branch home. You can make yourself another.”

He took the branch, a hollow piece of wood full of woodpecker holes that was the length of his forearm. He walked back to his village bringing no meat, but happy all the same.

In his tipi the young man tried to make the branch sing for him. He blew on it, he waved it around; no sound came. It made him sad, he wanted so much to hear that wonderful sound. He purified himself in the sweat lodge and climbed to the top of a lonely hill. There, resting with his back against a large rock, he fasted, going without food or water for four days and nights, crying for a vision which would tell him how to make the branch sing. In the middle of the fourth night, wagnuka, the bird
with the bright-red top, appeared, saying, “Watch me,” turning himself into a man, showing the hunter how to make the branch sing, saying again and again: “Watch this, now.” And in his dream the young man watched and observed very carefully.

When he awoke, he found a cedar tree. He broke off a branch and, working many hours, hollowed it out with a bowstring drill, just as he had seen the woodpecker do it in his dream. He whittled the branch into the shape of a bird’s head with a long neck and an open beak. He painted the top of the bird’s head with washasha, the sacred red color. He prayed. He smoked the branch up with incense of burning sage, cedar and sweet grass. He fingered the holes as he had seen the man-bird do in his vision, meanwhile blowing softly into the mouthpiece. All at once there was the song, ghost-like and beautiful beyond words drifting all the way to the village, where the people were astounded and joyful to hear it. With the help of the wind and the woodpecker, the young man had brought them the first flute.

Told by Henry Crow Dog in New York City, 1967 and recorded by Richard Erdoes (Erdoes and Ortiz)

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Western anthropologists and the general public frequently referred to non-Western societies as being in stages of savagery, barbarism, or civilization. Assumptions were made about societies based on elements such as religion, language (particularly having a written language), kinship organization, political and economic organization, how a society gathered or produced resources, and the arts, or expressive culture, of the society. Societies were ranked based on these elements and how they compared to Western societies. Nomadic societies were thought of as being in a state of savagery; horticultural and pastoral societies were seen as being in a state of barbarism; and the agricultural Western societies were seen as civilized. The defining attribute of a civilized society was agriculture, although non-Western agricultural societies were often categorized as barbaric. At this time in history, it was thought that agriculture made it possible for societies to develop mathematics, science, and the arts. In order to survive, all humans and their societies must have mathematical and scientific knowledge. To survive, humans have made observations about their surroundings and drawn conclusions from those observations. Today, scientists refer to
this process as the **scientific method**. Mathematics is necessary to determine when plants or animals will be available, if they are growing scarce in a particular area, and how much food is necessary to feed a group of people.

This concept of science and mathematics may be different than what we typically think of when we hear the words, but these kinds of observations, conclusions, and calculations are the basis of the mathematics and science of twenty-first century post-Industrial societies. The same can be said about the art of indigenous societies. Their works may not look like Western art, the society may not even have a word for “art,” but it is artistic expression nonetheless. In Native American societies, artistic expression was used in the making of utilitarian items such as blankets, pottery, weavings, pipes, jewelry, drums, cradleboards, clothing, shoes, and even skins used for housing. Artistic expression was also shown in music, dance, and storytelling. Anthropologists and archaeologists use the artistic artifacts found in contemporary societies and burial sites of others as a way to identify one Native American society from another. Different Native American societies used different artistic elements in their pottery, weaving, and beading designs. Stories, songs, chants, and dances can be considered the property of a particular society, and, in some cases, of a particular kin group. The elements of these art forms changed over time before the Europeans came, and continued to change after, just as European and American artistic styles have changed throughout time.

The oldest form of art is **storytelling**. Humans have been capable of speech for 100,000 years. Archaeologists have evidence of ritual behavior in human habitation and burial sites between 60,000 and 80,000 years ago. This is significant, because if humans were engaged in symbolic behavior, then they were also capable of symbolic language—language that told of the past and speculated about the future. Symbolic language would be part of the rituals and ceremonies performed and of the stories people told each other. These stories could be about ancestors and the history of the society, but could also be about questions such as: Where did we come from? Why are we here? Why do we perform ceremonies and rituals? What are our relationships with each other and other aspects of the world? Each chapter of this book has started
with an example from the oral tradition—the stories—of a different society, and each of these stories has addressed one or more of these questions.

Stories have been told by all societies throughout human history. Storytelling occurred when human societies were all nomadic and foragers and have continued to the present. There is evidence of very ancient stories in much of the folklore from societies through all parts of the world. Much of this ancient folklore is retold in what are now children’s fairy tales and stories of heroes. With the development of writing, stories started to be documented for others to read. The Greeks and Romans even wrote down plays that reflected their oral traditions; some that are still extant today. In the early part of the twentieth century motion pictures (movies) started telling stories, both old and new. But even the new stories had elements from the past. Today, some of us sit around campfires listening or telling stories, but most of us sit around our digital campfires—televisions and computers—watching stories. As with our books and movies, many of these stories reflect elements of our own and others’ oral traditions.

Think about the movies, television shows, or even plays that you’ve seen recently. Some of them are simply entertainment: to make you laugh, cry, or even scare you. But others can be of educational or inspirational value. An example is the movie Schindler’s List, the story of a man who saved many Jewish people from the Nazi Holocaust during World War II. The movie told people about a little-known man—one who should be known and remembered for his heroism. The movie will continue to educate people about the Holocaust for generations to come, much like the plays of Shakespeare continue to inform us about Elizabethan England. The film also inspires people. As one woman I know said after seeing the film, “I’ll never knowingly hurt anyone ever again.” The stories of pre-Industrial societies also informed and inspired the people who heard them. Oral traditions taught the origins and history of the society, illustrating what was important to them and how people should behave toward one another. Each chapter in this book begins with a story from the oral tradition of a Native American society that illustrates the topic being discussed in the chapter: the importance of kin groups, political organization, resource-getting, origin stories, and in this chapter, how the flute came to the Sioux people. What have you learned from these stories about the
Native societies from which they came? Based on these stories, what do you think was of importance to these societies? What similarities do you see about the different societies who tell these stories? What similarities do you see reflected in these stories with Euro-American or Canadian societies; what differences?

While oral tradition continues to be of great importance to Native American societies, many Native peoples have also adapted written and visual arts to tell stories. Contemporary Native American writers work within the forms of novels, short stories, essays, and poetry, as well as history and anthropology books. Like Euro-American and Canadian poets, many Native American poets participate in poetry slams and utilize the styles of spoken word, rap, and hip-hop. Native American writers such as Sherman Alexie (*Smoke Signals, The Fancy Dancer*), Greg Serris (*Grand Avenue*), and Tom King (*As Long as the Grass Grows and the River Runs, Medicine River*) have had their novels and short stories made into movies. Chris Eyres has directed many films, including *Smoke Signals* and the *We Shall Remain* series for PBS in the United States. In Canada and the United States, there are many Native filmmakers who have made films about their communities or issues important to Native peoples. For example, the Choctaw writer LeAnne Howe (*The Shell Shaker, The Miko Kings*) has written the scripts for films about Native American baseball including, *Playing for Time*, and a study of the Qualla Cherokee community in North Carolina, *Spiral of Fire*.

In contemporary Native American societies, some people use modern technology to tell stories. The Tewa musician and storyteller Robert Maribell uses performance to illustrate Tewa stories. He dresses puppets and actors in elaborate masks and costumes, and they perform stories on stage. Many of these have been filmed and can be bought or viewed online. The Akwesasne Mohawk artist and high school teacher Katsitsionni Fox video records her students performing the Haundenosaune origin stories in Mohawk. The Onondaga writer Eric Gansworth has filmed parts of the Haundenosaune oral tradition, but with some twists to reflect modern concerns, as has Mohawk multimedia artist Shelly Niro. Canadian author Thomas King writes contemporary novels and short stories that incorporate traditional elements like tricksters. Coyote, in one example, gets on an airplane.
and goes to Ottawa to straighten out Parliament. Across Indian Country, artists, writers and storytellers continue to tell the stories of their societies—both as they were and as they are.

The list of Native American authors is vast and ever-growing. There are a number of fairly up-to-date websites that list authors and their works. It has been harder for Native storytellers to break into movies and television, but some have succeeded. In Canada, for instance, in addition to movies like *Dance Me Outside* and *Medicine River*, there have been some television shows, such as *North of 60* and *Artic Air* that have primarily focused on contemporary indigenous communities. The important word in that sentence is “contemporary”. Literature, movies and television shows that have Native American influences are contemporary, taking place in the present, not the past.

Some recent movies from the United States also reflect contemporary Native American storytelling. For example, *Smoke Signals* was based on the stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, by the well-known Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie and also features a cast of Native American actors. *Smoke Signals* is a contemporary story about two young men on the Spokane Reservation. Unlike in Canada, the United States has no television shows that I am aware of that are focused on contemporary Native peoples. Native American appearances on U.S. television are scarce. Adam Beach, one of the stars of *Smoke Signals* and *Artic Air*, was briefly on *Law and Order, SVU*. The series *Longmire* takes place in a small town that is adjacent to a Cheyenne reservation. A number of episodes have focused on contemporary issues, such as the adoption of children away from the reservation and disenrollment of tribal members. Lou Diamond Phillips co-stars as Henry Standing Bear, a character that straddles both a contemporary and traditional role in his community. Other examples are few and far between, but let us hope that the United States follows Canada's example and that novels and television shows begin to feature more Native Americans.

Storytellers of all kinds will continue to tell and perform the oral traditions of their society. Please be aware of them, support them, and remember: the stories of one society are not reflective of all societies.
Masks were and are an important component of Native American storytelling, as were rituals and ceremonies. The nations of the Northwest coast, the Haundenosaune, the Zuni, and the Hopi are just a few examples of Native societies whose masks are desired by museums and individuals who collect Native American artifacts. Many masks are housed in museum collections to protect them. But for these Native American societies, masks have special religious purposes. For the Zuni and Hopi the masks represent spirits who visit their villages during religious festivals. It is an honor for an individual to wear a mask, which among the Zuni can encase the whole body, to take on the role of the god or spirit represented. Dances are often an important part of the spirits’ visit. After they leave the village, children are given small dolls called kachinas, which also represent the gods and spirits and will remind the children of the lessons they each teach to the society.

The Haundenosaune have False Face Masks that depict Flint, one of the twin sons of Sky Woman. His face is distorted because he was hit in the face by a tree while attempting to cheat his twin Sapling in a contest. Honored Haundenosaune men belong to False Face Societies. Each society has a Mistress of the Masks, a woman who takes care of the masks and sees they are regularly “fed” tobacco. The men of these societies use masks in healing ceremonies, particularly for ailments involving the face and neck. False Face Masks should only be seen during such ceremonies.

Some of the most elaborate masks are made by the societies of the Northwest coast. The masks are often referred to as spirit masks, because they represent the spirits and gods of these peoples. The masks also can reveal the spirits of individuals, particularly shamans. Some very special masks can open to reveal an inner mask, just as people may have an outer mask hiding an inner spirit.

While museums or private collectors may think they are protecting such artifacts, for Native peoples these are sacred items that should be returned to Native communities according to laws such as the Native American Repatriation and Graves Protection Act, as discussed in the Introduction. While this process is slowly taking place with museums in the United States, Native communities have asked that artifacts such as masks and kachinas that have religious significance not be put on
public exhibition. Some museums are complying with these requests; others are not. You may notice I have not included any pictures of these items.

Art almost always has important significance for a society; and art can tell us much about that society. Art may provide an outsider with the only understanding they may have about another society. What do you think the average person knows about ancient societies like Greece or Rome? Is the average person knowledgeable about their political organization? What resources they depended on and how they were distributed? How their kin groups were organized? Most are unaware of any details regarding these areas, but they do recognize one thing: the art. Greek and Roman sculpture, architecture, surviving paintings and murals, and even stories and plays that continue to be told and performed in our societies are what most of us know and remember about these ancient societies. What do you think will be remembered about the contemporary United States or Canada centuries from now?

Both traditional and contemporary styles of music continue to be played by Native American musicians and singers. Traditional music is essential for the dancing at any pow-wow. Pow-wow music typically consists of chanting and drumming. The pow-wow tradition of dancing, chanting, and drumming that developed is largely inter-tribal—it incorporates elements from many tribes and is not specific to any one particular group. Within the overall tradition, the style of chants, as well as the structure of the drums, and the drumming styles, vary from society to society insofar as there are northern styles and southern styles. Men typically do the drumming and chanting, but as fewer men are able to go through the required training, women have started to take on these roles to ensure traditions will continue. The words and vocal styles—which range from high-pitched to low registers—of the chants vary from area to area. In pow-wow dance, the style of the dancing, drumming, and chanting will identify the society from which it originated. Chanting and drumming styles, as well as dancing styles, are also often borrowed, and guest drummers and dancers may participate in pow-wows, particularly in dances specifically called inter-tribal. Traditional chanting and drumming are also important to the healing ceremonies that are still conducted in many societies.
While traditional music continues to be of importance to Native societies, some artists have also adapted to modern styles. Robert Mirabell is such an artist; he presents music and stories in a way that makes them better understood by non-Native people. Perhaps one of the best-known Native musicians is the flutist R. Carlos Nakai. Nakai plays traditional southwestern flutes and music, but he also plays contemporary music on the flutes. Country music is typically very popular in Indian Country, so many musicians may play both traditional music and perform in a country band. Some write songs that reflect concerns of their Native communities, as do blues groups like Corn Bread. Some Native American musicians have adapted the musical styles of the dominant culture, including hip-hop (the Mohawk rapper Lightfoot), or have joined jazz, rock, blues, and other bands, or classical orchestras. Some musicians, for example, folk singer Buffy Saint-Marie, have become very well-known performing popular styles of music that include Native American issues (“Now That the Buffalo Are Gone”) as well American or Canadian standard styles of popular music. St. Marie wrote the song “Up Where We Belong” for the movie An Officer and a Gentleman, which is not a Native-themed movie. Native musicians may also sing songs in a contemporary style, but in their own languages, or translate popular American or Canadian songs into their languages. While driving through the Akwesasne Mohawk reservation one afternoon, I heard the popular country song “Jackson” being sung in Mohawk by a father/daughter duo. In this version of the song, Kahnawake, a Mohawk reserve in the province of Quebec, in Canada replaces the city of Jackson.

Dancing is another form of artistic expression that continues to be important in Native American societies. Dance was so important to Native communities that it is hard to list all the ways it was incorporated into daily life. Native peoples danced to celebrate births, marriages, successful harvest or hunts, to ask the spirits for a successful harvest or hunt, to mark a death, to prepare for war, to celebrate victory over enemies, or just because they wanted to dance. Dance was also an important part of special religious occasions like the Sun Dance. As people in the plains were striving to survive deaths and displacement in the 1870s, the Ghost Dance brought them hope that their society could be revitalized. The Sun Dance and the Ghost Dance are still regularly performed in many Native societies.
One of the most visible ways dance continues to be of importance to contemporary Native American societies is as part of a pow-wow.

Over time, pow-wows evolved into a much larger artistic expression. They are performed in most Native communities, and in cities that have a large number of Native residents, pow-wows are held by Native Cultural Centers. Many pow-wows welcome Native drummers (drumming is the only musical accompaniment to the dancing) and dancers from around the Americas. Societies have different dances and protocol, but during the twentieth century, many societies have borrowed from others. For example, a popular Haundenosaune social dance is the Alligator Dance, obviously borrowed from societies to the south. Generally social or tribal dances are done by women and men and are frequently open to anyone who would like to participate. There are men's and women's dances that have turned into competitions in the twentieth century, such as Shawl Dress dancing for women and Fancy Dance for men.

A pow–wow generally starts at noon with a grand entry in which all the dancers, in their tribal regalia, dance to the drums into the pow-wow grounds. Most pow-wows have multiple drumming groups that will take turns throughout the day. A veteran and mother of a veteran, followed by the head woman and male dancers, lead the grand entry. They are followed by the male dancers, often in groups based on the type of dance they will do (Smoke Dance, Eagle Dance, Fancy Dance) and the women dancers, also in groups of Traditional, Shawl or Jingle Dress dancers, followed by children referred to as Tiny Tots. The regalia generally change to match the different styles of dancing. The regalia worn by women, men, and children are art forms in themselves, typically made by the dancers and their families. The regalia incorporate traditional and modern elements. A few years ago, old CDs were very popular on the male Fancy Dancers.

The women and men are also generally divided by age: seniors, adults, teens, and children under 12, although the Tiny Tots often dance with a parent. It is not unusual to see a baby, in regalia, carried by a parent during Grand Entry. An Honoring Dance, to mark the death of an individual, the success of community members, or to honor returning veterans, may follow the Grand Entry. One of the most moving Honoring Dances I have seen was on the Akwesasne Mohawk Reservation shortly after 9/11. The dance honored men who
had been working construction in New York City when the Twin Towers were destroyed. Many of these men rushed to the scene to help rescue people. Some of these men had worked to construct the towers years before.

During a pow-wow, which generally starts on Friday and goes through Sunday, there are social dances, in which anyone may participate, and the more competitive tribal dances. Competitive dancers, both men and women, have registered to compete; observers will see numbers on their regalia. There are referees on the dance grounds that judge the skill of the dancers and make sure protocols are followed. For example, a dancer will be disqualified if a part of his/her regalia falls to the ground. The falling of an eagle feather, used in the regalia for the men's Eagle Dance, requires that the dancing stop and the grounds be re-blessed. Dancers are awarded cash and other prizes for winning the competitive dances.

Pow-wows are now held around Canada and the United States during the summer. There are families who spend summer weekends on the “Pow-Wow Circuit,” traveling from Native community-to-community and camping at the pow-wow grounds for the weekend. Pow-wows have become a way for Native peoples to continue to participate in and demonstrate their culture, and to meet people from other Native communities. People who no longer live at their home
reservations will come home for the pow-wow. In urban areas it is an opportunity for Native peoples to come together and participate in their society’s music and dance traditions. Young people continue to look for possible marriage partners at pow-wows. But it is not just the drummers, dancers, and tourists who come to pow-wows; there are also native vendors who are selling other forms of expressive culture such as weavings, pottery, and baskets.

For thousands of years, pottery and baskets have been utilitarian items found in all societies around the world. Pottery was used to carry water and to store seeds or wine and to cook. Baskets were also used to carry and store items. Weaving designs are found in clothing, rugs, blankets, and housing materials. People around the world have created such art, though those in Western societies often refer to these items as “crafts.” These were items to be used in day-to-day activities, not simply to put on the walls and shelves to be looked at and admired. While societies in Europe and Asia developed art forms to be admired and not used, these all evolved from earlier utilitarian art forms. Colors, designs, and techniques all continued to be used as people settled into permanent households and had the resources or wealth to create or buy items that had no utilitarian use or value. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when anthropologists or people in the general public said that indigenous peoples around the world did not have art, they were operating under the perception that art cannot be utilized in everyday life. But indigenous people around the world did have art that was expressed as part of utilitarian items. Imagine the commitment and care of a woman beading her children’s moccasins that she knows will soon be outgrown or worn out, and still taking the time to bead elaborate designs that have been handed down from mother to daughter for generations in her family. Imagine a potter taking the time to paint designs on a pot he knows may be broken the first time it is used to store corn kernels. Imagine the value people of the society would give to these items made with such care and attention by their family members.
Seed pot pottery from Acoma Pueblo.
It is difficult to write about the art of Native American societies from a general perspective, because artistic designs varied according to the communities who made them. If you have taken art history classes, you know the art of Renaissance Italy was very different than that of France or northern Europe. The same is true of Native American art. Examples of pottery, baskets, and sometimes weavings are found in archaeological sites. As in dance and chant styles, designs, and techniques pottery and weaving vary from society to society. These artifacts can be used to identify a society or those that might be related to or descended from one another (often called Mother and Daughter Cultures). These items can be useful to track the migrations of societies, whether those societies are migratory, or horticultural that migrated because of environmental factors. These artifacts can also illustrate how a society might expand. The Haundenosaune and Cherokees both grew to cover a vast territory in the Northeast and Southeast. Researchers today can tell a site is Iroquoian or Cherokee by the designs and techniques used in tools, weavings, and pottery. So while a particular artifact may be identified as belonging to a particular society, it by no means is indicative of all American Indian art.
In the nineteenth century, many Euro-Americans and Canadians thought those First Peoples caught inside their political boundaries would become extinct or assimilate into the dominant society. This belief, along with the rise of museums that sought to preserve the arts and crafts of lost societies, led to the collection of artifacts of indigenous societies around the world. Anthropologists, trading posts owners, missionaries, teachers, and many others started collecting artifacts from the Native societies with which they worked. Anthropologists generally collected for museums, while many others collected for their own private collections. Items were sometimes given as gifts by Native peoples, but more often were bought from people desperate for money. Items were taken from archaeological sites, and even from burial grounds. Museums in the United States and Canada (as well as in Europe) often had exhibit halls containing the artifacts and art of Native Americans. Typically the items were displayed by cultural-geographic area. Museum curators believed societies living in the same geographic area would share cultural traits, thus their artifacts would display commonalities. This thinking does not take into account that a given society might be a recent arrival to a geographic area, or that societies occupying an area might have very different languages, religious beliefs, and cultural histories. Indeed, some art forms may be found only in a few societies. The carving of soapstone and whalebone, for example, is generally only found in Arctic and Sub-Arctic societies.
Perhaps some of the earliest examples of visual art were also the most permanent: rock art. Centuries ago, people around the world painted or craved designs onto rock walls. These **pictographs** used symbols to convey information that would have been understood by the contemporaries of the people who made them, if not by researchers today. Rock art may have been used to indicate the location of a stored **cache** of food, may have given directions to where people had moved, may have told of a great battle or hunt, or may have simply stated that a group of people occupied that space. Many figures found in rock art may have had religious or other social proposes. Snakes (associated with the coming of rain), as well as rainbows, thunderbolts, and other illustrations of rain are found throughout the Southwest. As are human shapes with horns, often indicative of a shaman. Perhaps the best known of southwestern rock art figures is **Kokopelli**. Kokopelli is an obviously male figure often shown with a flute and also as a hunchback, though some interpretations are that he is carrying a bag of seeds on his back. Kokopelli has been associated with agricultural and fertility. He’s also sometimes known as a trickster. Whatever the people who originally carved his image into rock thought him to be, today Kokopelli’s image is found on jewelry and t-shirts, an example of the evolution of an art style.

![Kokopelli petroglyph in New Mexico, June 2009.](image-url)
While changes in expressive culture changed from society to society in the Americas before European contact, weavings, textiles, baskets, and pottery changed dramatically with the new introduction of new materials (for example, glass beads replacing porcupine quills) and designs brought by the settlers. Pre- and post-contact weavings and textiles deteriorate easily in most climates. Fortunately some were collected in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries and preserved in museums. Textiles would include the animal skins Native peoples would prepare to use as clothing, blankets, and, in some cases, the walls of their housing. The technology of preparing the skins is a long, labor-intensive process that was typically done by women. Native women knew that the skins of animals killed in the late spring and summer typically had been affected by parasites and would not last long, thus were good material for children who would soon outgrow their clothing. They knew how to make the skins waterproof, typically by rubbing the skins with animal brains, and they sewed stitches (with needles made from animal bones and thread made from animal sinew) that did not leak in water or snow. In addition to the time needed to prepare skins, women would also take the time to paint or bead elaborate designs on the materials. Vivid colors were typically used in the traditional designs of the society or a kin group. Thus, collectors can typically tell the society of the women who made the textiles.

Native women would also bead designs on clothing and footwear that are often called moccasins, although that is not a word used by all Native peoples. Before European contact, porcupine quills, often dyed different colors, were used as decorating materials. After contact, glass beads became important trade items for this purpose. Like the painted designs, beaded designs would also be handed down from mother to daughter in a society.
Sioux parfleche (saddle bag), circa 1900, Gilcrease Museum.

The use of glass beads in the textiles made by Native women is but one example of how Native peoples adapted to trade goods within the context of their own culture. A further example is how Native women used beaded goods (and blankets, baskets, and pottery) for economic survival. In the late nineteenth century, Euro-American and Canadian peoples started to acquire the “crafts” made by Native Americans as curios; not considered art, but as curiosities collected from a vanishing race. Native women soon learned that they could contribute to the economic resources of their families in a new way, by making beaded goods or baskets specifically for the tourist trade. Soon Native women started making non-utilitarian goods such as purses, pincushions, scissor holders, and “whimsies” specifically for this trade. Trips to trading posts, towns, and tourist destinations such as Niagara Falls were made by the women of families to sell their “crafts,” which became important sources of income to Native families.

Perhaps the best-known example of how the making of utilitarian items became an important economic resource for Native peoples is the making and selling of Navajo/Dine’ blankets. Native peoples around North America used various materials for weaving; including cotton in the Southeast, as well as milkweed and grass fibers. The Spanish brought southeastern cotton to the cultures of the Southwest and
forced the Native peoples there to plant and harvest it. Many peoples in the Southwest, especially the Dine, Zuni, and Hopis, quickly adapted cotton to weaving clothing and especially blankets. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the designs on the blankets were relatively simple, with a few colors and designs of horizontal lines. Over time, the use of color and design became much more complicated. Among the Dine’, these designs often incorporated images from their oral tradition: images of Father Sky, Mother Earth, snakes, and rainbows. Weavers, women among the Dine’, but men among the Hopi, showed their increasing skill in the use of colors and design. These types of blankets quickly became items sold at trading posts, and are now shown and sold in art galleries in cities in North America and Europe.

![Navajo blanket from Transitional Period.](image)

For centuries, Native peoples in the Americas used whatever resources were available to them to weave baskets. Pine needles, willow, sweet grass, tree bark, and wood splints have been and are all used to make baskets. The materials used depended on the society’s
environment. Sweet grass and black ash trees, commonly used in the Northeast are not found in Oklahoma, where willow strips are often used, or in the Great Basin where Native peoples will use pine needles. As with beading and weaving, the people of different societies will incorporate traditional designs into their baskets. Native peoples would use natural dyes made from berries or different soils to color strips that were woven into the baskets. Different materials and styles of weaving would also be used to create baskets. For example, among the Haundenosaune, sweet grass and black ash splints were the most common materials used in baskets. Baskets could be made with either or both the sweet grass and black ash, which could create designs and different textures in the baskets. Different weaving techniques were also used, along with designs of dyed strips of wood splints.

As with beaded work and blankets, baskets became important trade goods by which Native weavers contributed important economic resources to their families. In the twentieth century, baskets became larger and incorporated more and more different techniques and designs. For example, among many Haundenosaune basket makers the traditional wedding basket (a simple basket with a handle that carried the corn and dried fish and meat to be exchanged by the newlywed couple) started to look like the multi-tiered wedding cakes of Euro-Americans and Canadians.

Pottery is yet another example of how Native Americans developed technologies and utilized mud and natural dyes found in their environments to make necessary items, which then became tourist trade goods that contributed important economic resources to families and communities. Archaeologists and museum collectors know that one way pottery can be traced to a particular community is by the materials used. In the Arctic and Sub-Arctic, soapstone is shaped into bowels and lamps that hold oil that is lit to provide light. Soapstone would also be shaped and carved into animal, human, and spirit shapes. South of the Arctic, as humans around the world did, Native peoples learned how to shape and fire mud found in their areas to form pottery. The soil and techniques used to make the pottery and the designs all help determine who made the pottery.
Some of the most unique styles of pottery are the storytellers made by Pueblo peoples in the Southwest. Storytellers are female figures with open mouths covered with smaller, child-like figures sitting and climbing all over the mother-like storyteller.

While the various arts made by Native peoples became important sources of economic resources in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they also became an important way for Native peoples to maintain their indigenous identities. As a consequence of the colonization, forced assimilation, and termination discussed in other chapters, many Native peoples in Canada and the United States lost their homelands. As Native peoples became dispersed, they stopped speaking their indigenous languages and often converted to Christianity. Residential schools prohibited the speaking of Native languages, which contributed to the extinction of many languages. Governmental policy made it impossible for societies to maintain matrilineal kinship patterns and women’s involvement and power in the political organization of their societies. Traditional methods of obtaining or producing resources became more and more difficult. Often the one thing maintained by Native peoples from their
traditional culture was their expressive culture in storytelling, music, and dance, and economically important weavings, beadwork, baskets, and pottery. These art forms helped to maintain Native peoples both economically and culturally.

In contemporary Native communities, whether on reservations or in rural, suburban, or urban communities, people continue to learn how to make items of expressive culture that is not always for sale to museums, galleries, or pow-wows. Young people learn how to create the art of their societies as a way to help maintain their Native identity within the dominant culture of the twenty-first century. Often the younger Natives will also learn the words associated with the materials and techniques used to make items, along with the name of the items themselves. This has helped keep some indigenous languages from becoming completely extinct. Expressive culture is also a way for young people to demonstrate the skills they have in their traditional societies. For example, communities across Indian Country, like Euro-American or Canadian communities, hold contests in which young women are named the “Princess” of their community. In such contests, the young women are expected to display some Native traditional skills in language, dance, and art in beadwork, basket-making, or pottery.

Some Native American artists have maintained or reclaimed the traditional methods of making items of expressive culture such as carving soapstone or making canoes, masks, baskets, or pottery. Perhaps the most famous are Maria and Julian Martinez of the San Ildefonso Pueblo, who were able to recreate traditional Puebloan methods of making pots. They first experimented with black-on-red and polychrome painting on pottery. After World War I, the archaeologist Edgar Hewitt asked them to try and recreate the black-on-black
pottery he was finding in Frijoles Canyon (Bandelier National Park). The black-on-black pottery had a highly polished background with matte designs. The Martinezes were successful in re-creating the technique, which they then taught to other members of their family, providing important economic resources to their community (Penny 2004). After the death of Julian, Maria Martinez would make pottery for tourists and even take special orders. The photographer Ansel Adams ordered a full set of dinnerware from her, which is now in the collection of the University of Arizona’s Museum of Anthropology. The Martinez potteries are now very valuable items in museum and private collections around the world.

Many contemporary Native American artists continue to incorporate traditional features into modern art techniques. For example, the Mohawk multimedia artist Shelley Niro has an instillation depicting the fall of Sky Woman at the First People’s Hall at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa.
Other artists use photography or computer generation. While some, like Niro, incorporate traditional elements into their art, others use it to make political statements about the history and present-day situation of Native peoples. Others make art for art’s sake and may not necessarily be identified as a Native American artist. The Mohawk artist Alex Jacobs, who is also a spoken-word poet, has many pieces that satirize the popular culture images of Native peoples, such as a series of very modern cigar store Indians. He also has a series of watercolors of the St. Lawrence River that contain no traits or elements of what would generally be considered Native American art.

Skywoman, an installation piece at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa by Shelley Niro
So what is Native American art? The cigar store Indians or the watercolors of the St. Lawrence River? The dinnerware pieces made by Maria Martinez? Beadwork, pottery, and baskets made for the tourist trade? The photography of Tuscarora artist and art professor Jolene Rickard or the sculpture of Alan Houser or Stan Hill? Must the art look “Indian” or have American Indian themes to be considered Native American Art? Who is considered a Native American artist? The investigation of those questions is very much a part of the story of the continued identity of Native peoples in the twenty-first century.

Suggested Questions

What does art tell us about a society?

What art do you think the United States or Canada will be remembered for 500 hundred years from now?

Non-Native authors have written about Native peoples and their societies. What do you think the differences are between a non-Native person and a Native person writing about American or Canadian indigenous culture?

Movies and television shows often depict stereotypes, sometimes very negative stereotypes, about Native peoples. Why do you think this is so?

What First Peoples writers or artists do you know about? How did you learn about them?
For more information about the role of artistic expression in indigenous societies, I recommend *Exploring World Art* by Eric Venbrux, Pamela Sheffield Rosi, and Robert Welsch, especially the essay “Do We Still Have No Word for Art?: A Contemporary Mohawk Question” by Morgan Perkins.

For those who need further convincing that indigenous people in “hostile” environments like the Arctic and Sub-Arctic have the time or imagination for artistic expression, I recommend *Inuit Art: An Anthology*. Additionally, if you are ever in Ottawa, Ontario, I recommend a visit to the Museum of Fine Arts and the Museum of Civilization, both of which have excellent collections of historical and contemporary pieces.

*North American Indian Art*, by David Penney, is an excellent introduction to both historical and contemporary examples of American Indian art.

There is a relatively new video available through Visionmaker Video and PBS about Dine’ (Navajo) weavers called *Weaving Two Worlds: Tradition and Economic Survival*. An older video, simply called *Maria Martinez*, may be available in your library, and there are a number of websites devoted to her art and life story.

Paul Chaat Smith’s *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* is an insightful collection of essays about American Indian stereotypes and Native American art and artists.

There are also a large number of websites devoted to Native American writers, both as groups and individually. There is no reason not to read about American Indians by American Indian writers.

A video about Native American dance styles called *Native American Men’s and Women’s Dance Styles* is available through Full Circle Videos at [www.fullcir.com](http://www.fullcir.com).