Native American Art

Introduction

The art of any group of people includes the skills and techniques they use to make tools, implements and ornaments. This includes the way raw materials are gathered and prepared, and the way they are changed into items that are useful, decorative or ceremonial. Art also includes the techniques used to paint, carve, embroider or stamp items. The objects made are called artifacts and every artifact — whether it be a tool, an ornament, or a religious item— reflects the skills and techniques of the maker.

The first part of this discussion paper will discuss the arts of North American Indians as reflected in artifacts, particularly of the traditional sort that pre-date the arrival of Europeans to North America who brought with them different concepts of art including “fine” art.

The second part of the paper will discuss the work of a living American Indian Sculptor, Allan Houser, whose work is world-renowned and who is recognized as the foremost living American Sculptor.

The traditional art of the North American Indian people will be discussed in several broad categories: Pottery, basketry, weaving, leathermaking, decorative arts (quills, beads, applique, and feathers), woodwork, silver and jewelry making, and sand painting. It should be noted that members of a particular tribe may use certain techniques and create a particular style based on their tribal tradition so that while no two Navajo rugs are exactly the same, and each Apache basket is different, each artifact is distinctly the product of its particular tribe. There are about 300 distinct surviving tribes in the 48 contiguous states and about 200 separate Native Alaskan villages, each with its own traditions and particular art forms.

Pottery

Pottery is made by tribes throughout the United States, including the Southwest, the central and eastern areas and the prairie and plains. All pottery is made from clay and was traditionally made primarily for cooking and storing food. Pottery pieces are used by archaeologists to determine the dates of ancient cultures. The earliest pottery in North America dates from 2000 B.C. in the East and 3000 B.C. in the Southwest.

The potter must first crush the clay into a fine powder and clean any lumps or pebbles by sifting the clay through a basket. After the clay is fully dry and clean, the potter adds water and kneads the clay much like a baker kneads bread and cake. While the potter kneads, she will add tempering materials such as finely crushed limestone, shells, sand, or painted fibers. When the clay is ready the potter will model it. The ancient Pueblos of the southwest coil the clay and add layer on layer in a basket or other utensil and all layers are pinched together until the pot is built. Shaping the pot is slower since the walls must be dry as they are curved. A small bowl may be shaped in one sitting, but the base of large water jars must be set aside to harden before the top is added. The Cherokee and other eastern tribes use a modeling and paddling technique, as do Papago and Yuma tribes of Arizona. The clay is laid over the bottom of an inverted jar which serves as a mold and the potter turns the mold as she pats the clay, thinning and spreading it into an even layer. Then the potter uses a paddle while holding a smooth stone against the inside wall of the clay to thin and smooth the walls of the pot.

After a pot is molded, if it is to be decorated, it must be slipped. The slip is a creamy mixture of water and colored clay. The potter applies several coats to fill he pores of the clay and to give the pot a smooth finish for painting. The pot is then polished with a small, smooth stone and sometimes rubbed with fat. The pot is fired by inverting it on a rack and adding dried cakes of sheep and cow dung which urn slowly and evenly. After they are fired, the pots are rubbed with a greasy cloth to produce a sheen.

Pot may be decorated before or after the firing process. Techniques include painting, stenciling, stamping, or impressing designs using shells, reeds, or fingernails into soft clay and by scratching or engraving designs with wood or bone tools either before or after firing.

The five basic pottery regions are the Northern region of the Northeastern U.S. and north into Canada, the Central region of the middle Mississippi Valley, the Southeast U.S. where the Creek and Cherokee made their homes, the Gulf region, and the Southwest. With the Southwest being the most important pottery region of the U.S. today.

The northern region pots (including Iroquois, Huron, Delaware, Erie, Fox, Mandan and Arikara tribes) are characterized by angular incising, notched rims, cord marked bodies and tops made of cord wrapped sticks.

The Southeast potters of the Pamunkey Catawba, Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole tribes often used non-traditional shapes, complicated stamp designs, rough texture, and brushed finishes.

The pots of the Central region (Quapaw, Middle Mississippi culture, Shawnee, Missouri and Winnebago Tribes) were sometime of a teapot shape, and with distinctive geometric designs, sometimes using red-on-white paint. Effigy pots of men, women and animals were common.

The pots of the Gulf region (Natchez, Choctaw, Caddo and Chickasaw) show curved bands of incised parallel lines and smaller necks than other pots.

The Southwest region is today the most important, productive and artistic of the Indian pottery regions. Pots are still made in the traditional way by native American potters. Pottery in this region dates back to 500 B.C. and each tribal group has its own distinctive styles, colors, finishes and motifs that are unique to the makers tribe or pueblo. The Pueblos include Sandia, Jemez, Isleta, Cochiti, Acoma, Santa Clara, Santo Domingo, San Juan, Santa Ana, Zia, and San ildefonso, each with a distinctive pottery tradition. Potters from the Zuni and Hopi tribes are equally distinctive and renowned. Other tribes of the region also have well-known potters, including the Navajo, Pima, Maricopa, Papago and Yuma.

VISUAL REFERENCE: The poster of Nempayo's work Hopi Tewa Vessels. Nempayo learned the art of pottery from her grandmother. Using wet yellow clay, Nempayo formed her pots using the insides of gourds or other natural forms. She made layers of coil to form the walls. When the vessels was almost dry, Nempayo thinned the walls with a pieces of gourd and polished them with a smooth stone. She applied a slip and then decorated her vessels using brushes made from a yucca plant and black and red mineral pigment and then baked them. Later when her eyesight diminished she had her daughters paint her pots for her. Nempayo (1860-1942) was a member of the Hopi-Tewa pueblo on First Mesa, Arizona

Basketry

North American Indian artists began making baskets about 9,000 years ago. Three major techniques are used in basketry: plaiting, twining and coiling. Baskets are created for serving food, winnowing and roasting seeds, carrying water, storing food and other household items, or as fish traps. The materials used include branches of shrubs, bundles of grass and rush stems, and the inner bark of cedar, spruce and fern roots. Also used are hemp, split wood and cane.

Plaiting is the simplest technique and involves crisscrossing two sets of elements in a checkerboard pattern.

Twining involves beginning the basket with a set of vertical "warps" with two or more horizontal "wefts" that twine around each other as they are woven in and out between the warps.

Coiled baskets are made with strips of fiber, wood or grass which are wrapped in a bundle that is coiled in a continuous spiral.

There are 11 major regions of the United States that are considered major areas for Native American baskets. Eight of the regions are west of the Rocky Mountains and most are along the California, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska coastal areas. Each area reflects different levels of sophistication based on the climate and the materials available to the artists. The Central California region, particularly the Pomo Indians, produced baskets that are superior in technique and decoration. Basketry was the supreme art of the Indian people of this area.

As with pottery, the tribal origin of the basket maker can usually be identified by the technique used and by the material and design employed in the basket. Within the Southwest region there are, for example, distinctive differences in the baskets of the Pueblo, Apaches, Havasupai, Yavapai, Walapai, Navajo and Chemehuevi. An experienced person can easily identify a basket as to its tribe of origin.

VISUAL REFERENCE: The poster, *From the Weaver's View*, shows baskets from 8 different tribes.

Weaving

Many items of Native American life were made of woven fabric, including headdresses, nets, blankets, clothing, mats, bags, and ceremonial sashes. There are several different kind s of weaving: finger weaving, twining and plaiting (as in basketry), netting, and looping, knitting and crocheting. Loom weaving was only done by tribes in the Southwest. Archaeologists have discovered that North American Indians wove mats and sandals at least 9,000 years ago.

The most famous weavers today are the Navajo and the Pueblos, again of the American southwest region. Navajo blankets are world famous for their designs and color. Nearly every traditional Navajo hogan (an eight-sided home f frame & mud) contains a loom and most traditional Navajo women learn the art of weaving when they are young girls. A traditional Navajo household also has sheep that are raised for their wool and their meat.

Fabric first appears in the Southwest in 1,000 B.C. Loom weaving began about 100 A.D. Native American weavers are known to have used both cotton and wool.

VISUAL REFERENCE: The poster, *Navajo Blanket* c. 1840-1860

Leathermaking

Animal skins have been used for centuries by Native Americans for clothing, teepees, blankets, shields, canoes, and as containers for paints, food and medicine. Furs were generally used for blankets and robes. In order to use animal skin, the skin had to be quickly treated or it began to dry hard and to rot. Women generally did all the work on animal skins to make leather. The flesh had to be removed from buffalo hides and then the hide was scraped with a blade to smooth the surface and to thin the hide. Then, if leather was the objective, the hair had to be removed. Deer hides involved a more complicated process since the hide had to be rubbed with oil and soaked in water, then stretched and dried. The hide was smoked or pulled to give it softness.

Paints were used to decorate hides used for clothing, teepees, shields, parfleches (carrying bags), masks, baby carriers, rattles, drums, boxes, toy dolls, moccasins, and so forth. Leather was also often decorated with beads, porcupine quills, and feathers.

VISUAL REFERENCE: Series of Shields posters (*Bear Society, Crazy Horse, Thunder Horse and Wolf*) on the back of each shield poster there is a detailed description telling the story of the shield, the significance of symbols/colors used and materials used. There is also project idea relating to the shields.

Decorative Arts

Quillwork: porcupine quills were soaked first in water then used on birch bark for boxes, or added to skins to decorate pouches, belts, shoes, dresses, shirts and breastplates. A lot of quillwork is found among the tribes of the Great Lakes region, including the Chippewa, Ottawa, and Pottowatami tribes.

Beadwork: most famous beadwork is done by the Indians of the Plains, including the Sioux, Blackfeet, Crow and Chippewa. native Americans began beadwork about 1675 and decorate just about everything: hair combs, clothing, shoes bags, headdresses, and so forth. The designs are generally geometric, floral or animal.

Applique: ribbons and cloth are often applied generously to Indian clothing. The Sioux are famous for “ribbon shirts” and the Florida Indians (Seminoles and Miccosukees) are known for applique techniques particularly ric rac.
Feathers : bird feathers are used to decorate kachina dolls (Hopi and Zuni), ceremonial masks (Alaska and Northeast tribes), prayer sticks (Oklahoma, Great Lakes, and North east tribes), and headdresses (the beautiful feathered headdresses made famous by the Indians of the Plains and Oklahoma).

VISUALS: Catalog/magazines with Indian clothing.

Woodwork

Carved wood and treated bark was used for boxes, baby carriers, games, sleds, tools, needles, pins beads, jewelry, fishhooks, utensils, dishes, houses, bows, arrows, clubs, tobacco pipes, dugouts, canoes, oars, paddles, drums, flutes, whistles, rattles and much more. Often the objects were decorated by engraving, painting, or adding beads, bits of leather, feathers or other objects. The famous Hopi kachina dolls often have many objects added to the painted wood carving.

The Native American ceremonial wood carvings include fetishes (animal carvings that carry the spirit of the carver — birds, bears snakes, cats, etc.), as well as totem poles that depict supernatural and legendary characters, ancestors and animals. Wood is also used for ceremonial masks.

VISUALS: Kachina Doll Poster. There is a project idea for totem poles/ kachina dolls.

Silver and Jewelry Making

While Native Americans use copper and brass, silver has become the primary metalcraft of the Native American artist over the past 200 years. The artists used stamped designs and inlays, as well as turquoise and other stones to decorate the silver. The Navajo, Zuni and Hopi artists make the finest silver jewelry.

VISUALS: The Alaskan Natives be Counted Answer the Census poster depicts a piece of jewelry made by a Native Alaskan artist using silver, bone and stone. More jewelry in the Arizona Magazine.

Sand Painting

Sand painting is used for ceremonial purposes, primarily by the Navajo tribe of the Southwest. Sand paintings are believed to have magical healing powers. Real sand paintings are only made by the tribal medicine men who understand the religious purpose. The medicine men (also called singers) chant ceremonial songs as they create traditional designs from memory. Different sand paintings are made depending on the cure needed. These paintings can take several hours to produce.
The ceremonies take place on the floor of a Navajo hogan (house). The patient sits on the sand painting and is rubbed with the colored sand so that he or she will absorb the power of the Holy People in the painting. Once a ceremony is over and the purpose is completed, the painting is erased. To photograph one would mean that an image of the painting were to still exist, so no cameras are allowed

when a sand painting is made. Sometimes watercolor paintings that show a design may be made. Any copy of a sand painting must be made imperfect so as not to offend the "Holy People".

Some artists now make sand paintings where colored sand is applied to a variety of materials. These are sold for commercial purposes. The animals and people depicted in the sand paintings are the very traditional stick figures and the rest of the designs are geometric representations of the sun, moon, lightning, and other earthly and celestial drawings. These are not, however, real ceremonial sand paintings.

VISUALS: 3 Navajo sand paintings(1 is the traditional stick figure & 2 are more modern/stylized)
laminated copies of 4 sand paintings (2 sets)

Summary of Visuals Available

- Hopi Tewa Vessels
- Navajo Blanket
- From the Weaver's View
- Kachina Doll Poster
- The Alaskan Natives be Counted Answer the Census
- Series of Shields posters (Bear Society, Crazy Horse, Thunder Horse and Wolf)
- 3 Navajo sand paintings (1 is the traditional stick figure, 2 are more modern/stylized)
- laminated copies of 4 sand paintings (2 sets)
- Sacred Rain Arrow (sculpture by Allan Houser)
- Battle of Little Big Horn (Historical Narrative by Kicking Bear) detailed info on back of poster
- Chumash Rock Painting detailed info on back of poster
- Catalog/magazines with Indian clothing, jewelry, baskets

Native American Project Ideas

(NOTE: Detailed instructions are not saved with this write-up in digital format – a hard copy is kept in the master file and in the Native American Art folder and can be copied as needed for the volunteers).

Sand Painting

There are several methods to do this. See detailed instruction for three different techniques.
Sand will be in the Art Appreciation closet. If you do not want to use sand you can use salt or cornmeal from home. Please do not store salt or cornmeal in Art Appreciation closet.

Shields

Using paper plates or cardboard have children create their own shield that depicts something about them or an animals spirit they would like to have

Heavy paper plates and some decorative supplies have been stored in the art closet.

Totem Poles or Kachina Dolls*

Create totem poles using either paper towel tube or egg carton or a kachina doll using a paper towel

Kids will need to bring in paper towel tubes or egg cartons. Decorative supplies have been stored in the art closet.

**** Check with teacher regarding kachina doll -- some 2nd grade classes already do that.***

Allan Houser (Hao-Zous)

Mr. Allan Houser is a Chiricaua Apache, a tribe that originated in southwestern New Mexico. Born in 1914, Allan Houser is a direct descendant of the Apache Chief Mangas Coloradas. His father and mother met and married while held in captivity by the United States government at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Mr. Houser's father, Sam Haozous followed Geronimo on the warpath against the whites who had invaded the tribe's homelands and destroyed their way of life. Taken prisoner at age 14, he was not released until 1913, 27 years later. Given the choice of moving to the Mescalero Apache reservation in New Mexico or receiving a 160 acre farm near Fort Sill, Mr. Houser's father chose the farm. This is where Allan Houser was born and raised.

Mr. Houser first learned Apache ways from songs and stories told by his parents. At an early age he began to draw horses, cars and motorcycles, probably to impress his non-Indian friends. He later turned to Indian subjects and still later to sculpture, the work for which he is now world renowned.

Mr. Houser attended the Santa Fe Indian School from 1924 to 1938, where he studied art at the school's Painting Studio under Dorothy Dunn. She tried to discourage him from expanding beyond traditional Indian art — the 2-dimensional, outlined, flat art found on traditional Native American hide and wall paintings.

In 1940, Houser studied sculpture with Norwegian muralist Olle Nordmark at the Fort Sill Indian School. Nordmark encouraged Houser to explore his aptitude for sculpture. In 1941, however, his artistic career was interrupted when, with his wife and three children, he moved to Los Angeles to work as a pipe fitter's helper. When World War II ended, he returned to Oklahoma.

His first marble sculpture, completed in 1950, was commissioned by the Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas as a memorial to American Indians who fought in World War II. Made of 4.5 tons of Carrara marble, the monument "Comrade in Mourning" is 7.5 feet tall and is the first public monument in the United States done by a Native American artist. Mr. Houser taught at the Inter-Mountain Indian School in Utah and then at the Institute for American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, until his retirement in 1975.

Mr. Houser's awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Palmes d'Academique, an award from the French government, and the American indian Resources Institute Lifetime Achievement Award. His work is in the British Royal Collection and the Heard Museum, the Wheelwright Museum, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe. He has done murals for the United States Department of Interior.

His sculpture entitled "Offering of the Sacred Pipe" graces the United States Mission to the United Nations in New York City. This work was dedicated in 1985 and has become a worldwide symbol of peace. It depicts a medicine man giving a pipe to the Great Spirit and the stretching of his arms toward heaven conveys the universal yearning for peace, freedom and trust.

It is said that Mr. Houser's impact on Indian art is similar to that which Picasso had on European art. known variously as the "patriarch of Native American sculptors" or the "grandfather of Indian sculpture", he also plays several musical instruments, including the blues harmonica.

Influenced by modern sculptors Henry Moore, Constantin Brancusi, and Jean Arp, Mr. Houser believes that peace must begin with each individual, from whence it spreads to the family, the community, and then the world.

VISUAL: ***Sacred Arrow***

The poster depicts "Sacred Rain Arrow", a bronze sculpture of a kneeling Apache warrior. In April 1991, a casting of this work was placed in the United States Senate Russell Office Building where the select Committee on Indian Affairs holds its hearings. It is 10 feet high and weighs about 650 lbs. The statue derives from a story Houser heard as a child that when the weather was dry, the tribe would send a strong man to the mountain with an arrow that had been blessed by a medicine man. The man would shoot it up to the clouds to bring rain.

There are also a couple of xeroxed articles on Allan Houser in the Native American Indian Art folder.