

Kay WalkingStick

Robin Cembalest, 'Native American Art: Pride and Prejudice',
ARTnews, February 1992



Kay WalkingStick, *Satyr's Garden*, 1982 (Detail)

“Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950 to Now,” currently on view at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, is billed as the first major survey of Native American contemporary art. With that exhibition in mind, below is Robin Cembalest’s article “Native American Art: Pride and Prejudice,” originally printed in the February 1992 issue of ARTnews, with a spotlight on a variety of indigenous artists in America and the many issues they face while trying to get their work into mainstream institutions. (The article makes use of the term “Indian,” a label used more often than “Native American” at the time.) During the ’90s, the story notes, contemporary Native American artists were faced with a decision: How much or how little should they rely on their heritage? For some, playing up their identity in their work was unavoidable. As the artist Kay WalkingStick told Cembalest, “I happen to be a native person. Of course it affects what I do.” — Alex Greenberger, November

2018. Outdated images of Indians abound in museums and the art market. As the Native American community fights to transcend those stereotypes, museum policy, scholarship, and Indian art itself are changing radically

In 1845 John Mix Stanley painted a ghastly scenario: a band of Indians attacking a white mother and child. Half naked, chaotically waving their weapons, they encircle their victims. One lone warrior raises his arm to protect them. But their probable fate is revealed by the title—Osage Scalp Dance.

This painting hangs in the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., part of the Smithsonian Institution. Similar works hang in museums across the country. They date from the era of westward expansion, when Indians were viewed as savages—dark-skinned, non-Christian primitives who practiced barbaric ceremonies and wore feathers and paint. Those

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images lingered on long after the West was “won,” especially in Hollywood.

They were very much on the mind of Jeffrey Thomas, a photographer from the Onandaga/Cayuga Nations, when he began his series “Strong Hearts: The Traditional Powwow Dancer” in 1979. “Native people hadn’t been shooting the powwows, so I had no predecessors,” he explains. “The problem was, ‘How do you photograph a stereotype?’ ”

To reflect his subjects’ self-esteem, he made sure they maintained eye contact with the camera. To establish a contemporary context, he photographed them in street clothes as well as costume. “It’s a monument to survival, and it’s getting stronger every year,” he explains. “I’m saying there’s a real sense of pride and history here that people don’t take account of.”

Thomas belongs to a large, diverse, and loosely knit community of Native American artists. Some live on reservations, some in cities. Some went to art school, some didn’t. Sometimes their works reflects Indian themes. Sometimes it doesn’t. Whatever they do, they describe a similar challenge—to make work that is contemporary, whether that means depicting modern Indian life or following avant-garde trends.

Several exhibitions now touring the country document the wide variety of solutions to that challenge. They range from the paintings in “Our Land/Ourselves,” which explores Native American approaches to the natural world, to the political, often caustic pieces in “The Submuloc Show” (intended to be read backwards), an Indian response to the Quincentenary of Columbus’ “discovery” of the Americas. That show is intended to counteract the “perception

of Indian artists as conservative and decorative,” says Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, a painter from the Flathead Nation who organized it. “We have a reputation for not being as cutting-edge, as political, as blacks or hispanics.” (Like most people interviewed for this story, she uses the term “Indian” interchangeably with others, including “native people,” “indigenous people,” and “Native Americans.”)

Quick-to-See Smith is one of a growing number of Native American artists who have “crossed over” into the mainstream art world while maintaining close ties with the Indian one. She shows at New York’s Bernice Steinbaum Gallery as well as LewAllen Gallery in Santa Fe; she lectures frequently on reservations and includes unknown artists she encounters there in shows she curates.

Many others, however, complain that like African Americans and Latinos, they suffer from “ghettoization”—they are included in Native American art exhibitions, or articles like this one, but are not considered for projects about photography, installation, video, abstraction, or the many other areas in which they are working. (Several artists declined to be interviewed for this article on those grounds.)

But the biggest problem, many say, is that the easiest art to sell is art depicting an image of the Indian that is frozen in the past. “Art should be a portrait of who people are,” says sculptor Bob Haouzous, a Chiricahua/Apache based outside Santa Fe. “Our people are the highest on the scale of pain, poverty, alcoholism, unemployment. You’d think their art would reflect it. Most Indian artists are portraying an image that doesn’t exist for this extremely naive audience that wants decorative art.”

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"We cannot romanticize our past through art," stresses Richard Hill, who directs the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, the nation's only Indian art college. "If Indian art is ever going to change or evolve, it has to get out of the commercial mode." When that happens, he believes, the stereotypes will change as well—one aim of the institute's new museum spotlighting Indian art from the last three decades, which opens later this year. "Through the arts people will get to see what Indians are saying, thinking. It's important for people to understand."

Art history, scholarship, and museum policy with respect to Indian art are already changing. The Indian art in most American museums was acquired by collectors and ethnologists who believed in Vanishing Red Man theory—that Indians were doomed to extinction in the face of westward expansion. They saved millions of objects—household utensils, hunting implements, masks, dolls, and games, but also bones dug up from sacred burial sites and objects necessary for religious ceremonies conducted by cultures very much alive.

A very different sensibility led the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh to return a Zuni war god to the Zuni pueblo last fall, knowing that it was to be placed in a shrine in order to deteriorate. "People are coming out of the woodwork to give them up," says Edmund Ladd, a member of the Zuni Nation and a curator at the Museum of New Mexico who has helped negotiate the return of 70 such objects. One impetus, certainly, has been a 1990 Federal law mandating the return of Native American skeletons and other sacred and ceremonial objects. But another reason, says Ladd, is that non-Indian curators have finally accepted a concept that was very foreign to them—"The

war gods cannot be owned by anyone, not even the people who make them."

The Smithsonian is planning three new facilities devoted exclusively to Indian art—and they will be run by Native Americans. One will open on the last available spot on the Mall in Washington, D.C., by 1999; another, containing more than one million objects gathered by the collector George Gustave Heye, will open next year in the U.S. Custom House in downtown Manhattan; and a state-of-the-art storage facility in Suitland, Maryland, is under construction. "We are interested in interpreting Indian culture as a dynamic, vital, evolving phenomenon," says W. Richard West, Jr., a Cheyenne/Arapaho who will oversee the institutions. "Not dead or dying."

While Native American lobbying was certainly responsible for the government's decision to create those museums, West points out, it was not the only reason. "The entire nation is coming to grips with its cultural diversity," he says. "Native peoples are right at the center of all of that." The effects are evident in many areas—from Congress, which recently voted to remove George Custer's name from the Little Bighorn battlefield, to Hollywood, where *Dances with Wolves* became the first major motion picture to present authentic, subtitled Indian dialogue.

But just how far respect for "minority" cultures should go has been a matter of debate. If non-Indians recognize that outdated stereotypes endure, should they feel guilt about doing the "tomahawk chop" to cheer on the Atlanta Braves?

What should we think when we encounter stereotypes in museums? What if some artists

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were—from the perspective of the politically correct 1990s—racists? Remington, for example, once described “Injuns” as “rubbish of the earth I hate.”

The curators of “The West as America,” a controversial exhibition at the National Museum of American Art last year, took such attitudes into account when they examined works by Remington, Charles Russell, and many other Western painters. Because prejudices against Indians, along with concepts such as Manifest Destiny, were nearly universal, the catalogue argues, those beliefs surfaced—sometimes unconsciously—in the art of the time.

For example, many whites opposed miscegenation, fearful that their blood would be polluted by inferior Indian stock. That dread, says the catalogue, was expressed by Irving Couse in *The Captive* (1892), which shows a shackled, bloody white woman sprawled on the ground in front of a solemn, cross-legged Indian. How do we know that? For one thing, there’s “cross-cultural touching”—the Indian’s foot nudges the girl’s shoulder. Besides, “the array of phallic objects pointing in her direction, together with the teepee’s open entry, further imply a sexual encounter.”

Such readings were frequently cited in the corrosive criticisms that appeared in the national media, which dismissed them as “contrived pictorial analysis.” The attacks were fiercer in Congress, where senators stood up and denounced the show as “perverted” and “distorted.” Most art historians, however, were unfazed by the outcry, pointing out that this kind of revisionist scholarship has been popular for a decade.

What’s important to remember, says Peter Hassrick, who directs the Buffalo Bill Center in Cody, Wyoming, is that when we look at the work of Western artists, we’re using our own sensibility to critique their sensibility. “Certain artists were perhaps more enlightened, in a 1990s fashion, than other artists,” he explains, citing the “noble savages” in the work of George Catlin, who visited more tribes than any other artist in his time.

“There’s a place for consciousness-raising, and it needs to be done by museums,” Hassrick adds. “But if you start slapping people on the face too hard with that kind of stuff, it gets between them and the art—it makes it too confrontational. It’s like telling them there’s no Santa Claus.”

But even the Buffalo Bill is doing its part for consciousness-raising. Its summer show is “Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts,” organized by Yale University Art Gallery. “Artists left out traces of Native American habitation if they wanted to depict untouched wilderness, or added Native Americans to add a picturesque element,” says Susan Schoelwer, a Yale graduate student who is coordinating the exhibition.

Native Americans are not as concerned with reinterpreting Western pictures, says Alfred Youngman, a Cree professor of Native American art and art history at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada. “I don’t say change the labels, take them down—I say tell the history right.”

The history of Indian art began thousands of years ago, when Indian culture emerged. The history of modern Indian art began early in this century, and it was taught by white instructors who encouraged Indians to

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work in the Western mode—on paper and for art's sake, not for ceremonial or practical purposes. "Shared Visions," an exhibition of 20th-century Indian art organized by the Heard Museum in Phoenix, traces the history of these representational paintings depicting traditional activities.

Though the years artists began to incorporate modernist imagery—Oscar Howe, Fritz Scholder, and Allan Houser, whose elegant biomorphic sculptures sometimes verge on abstraction and reflect the influence of Henry Moore. But it was not until the '60s that Indian art began to change radically.

One factor was the founding of the Institute of American Indian Arts in 1962. Another was the foundation of the American Indian Movement, a civil rights organization for Indians established in 1968. In 1973 the group occupied Wounded Knee, South Dakota, where U.S. troops killed several hundred Indians in 1890. Institute students became fascinated with symbols from Ghost Dance, the key rite of the messianic Indian religion, considered subversive by the government, that set off the massacre. They were also looking at works by Rauschenberg, Warhol, and other contemporary artists. The result was a genre known as Indian Protest Art.

Simultaneously, more Indians were attending university art schools. "With a university training, you're exposed to classic art and traditions from around the world," says Quick-to-See Smith, who studied at the University of New Mexico. "You wouldn't be true to yourself if you didn't incorporate what you were familiar with." Mixing abstraction with tribal motifs is hardly new, she points out—it's just that critics take the work more seriously if the artists

happen to be white Abstract Expressionists. "Contemporary native people, including myself, are doing the same thing that Pollock and Newman did in taking images from native cultures," she says.

George Longfish, a Seneca/Tuscarora artist, teacher, and curator based in Woodland, California, credits his use of Native American imagery in his colorful, lyrical paintings to the work of Arshile Gorky, which he encountered while studying at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. "Gorky goes back to his Armenian heritage. He became a role model, an advocate for using one's own cultural information." But that cultural information includes non-native imagery too, of course. Longfish entitled a 1989 work *Goodbye Norman Jean, the Chief Is Dead*.

On the other hand, Indian imagery can be misunderstood. "I happen to be a native person. Of course it affects what I do," says Kay WalkingStick, a painter of Cherokee/Winnebago heritage who shows her impastoed, abstract diptychs at New York's M-13 Gallery and Elaine Horwitch Galleries in Scottsdale and Santa Fe. "But as soon as you say, 'I'm a native person,' then they start seeing teepees. If I didn't use my maiden name, people would say, 'It's about tragedy, hope, balance, the natural world, the spiritual world.' "

"If Michael Tracy uses icons, he's part of the postmodern debate. If Jimmie does, he's considered primitive, ethnic, an 'Indian artist,' " says Jeanette Ingberman, who runs Exit Art, an alternative space in New York, referring to Jimmie Durham, an artist of Cherokee heritage who shows there. "When the so-called mainstream does the history of the found object, from Duchamp to Haim Steinbach, they don't

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include Jimmie.”

Durham responded to a request to be interviewed for this article with his own request—not to be mentioned in it. “He is a contemporary artist and should be discussed with the critical, conceptual, and intellectual dialogue being generated by issues surrounding international contemporary art,” a letter from his New York dealer, Nicole Klagsbrun, said.

Another artist who politely declined to be interviewed is Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, a Cheyenne/Arapaho based in Oklahoma. Some of his works are adjacent text panels that follow a modern tradition of “language art.” Many of them also happen to be scathing indictments of how white society has treated Indians. “Syphilis/Small Pox/Forced Baptisms/Mission Gifts/Ending Native Lives,” read the posters he did for the public bus system in San Jose, California, last year, as part of his one-man exhibition at the San Jose Museum of Art.

Ironically, says Bob Haozous, it is easier to show work with political themes outside the Indian market than inside it. “There’s no market for Indian people looking at themselves honestly,” he comments. Haozous, who exhibits at Rettig y Martínez Gallery in Santa Fe and has had several museum shows, makes up to as much as \$200,000 for a monumental, public sculpture. While some of his pieces contain grim images—skulls, barbed wire—many are irreverent, like his “Apache Pull-toys,” riddled with bullet holes. “My statement is tempered with humor so people can accept living with it,” he remarks.

Such prices are still rare for works by Indian artists. The only artist who consistently commands even more than that—up to

\$500,000 for a large, public sculpture commission—is Haozous’ father, Houser, who shows at the Glenn Green Galleries in Santa Fe and Scottsdale. Paintings generally sell for much less. Quick-to-See Smith’s medium-sized works cost about \$7,000; WalkingStick’s, \$6,000.

Some of the costliest items in the Indian market include works that in other contexts could be called crafts, though many artists and dealers find that word pejorative. Major pieces by Maria Martinez, an early-20th-century ceramist, sell for \$35,000 to \$80,000 at Santa Fe’s Dewey Galleries. Works by contemporary ceramists such as Jody Falwell, who has explored such innovations as asymmetry, sell for between \$8,000 and \$12,000, at Gallery 10, based in Scottsdale and Santa Fe.

Most Santa Fe galleries do a chunk of their annual sales during the Santa Fe Indian Market, which will be held on August 22 and 23 this year. More than 70,000 visitors, including collectors, artists, and dealers from all over the country, are expected to peruse more than 400 booths displaying pottery, jewelry, painting, sculpture, textiles, and work in other mediums. All are reviewed by a jury that verifies that whatever the medium, the works are made by Indians.

The reason is that the Indian art market has been flooded with fakes, knockoffs manufactured in places like Hong Kong and Santa Fe. The money spent on these knockoffs, say advocates for Indian art, is like the limited number of scholarships available to Indians—it should go to the people who so desperately need it. In 1990 Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a Colorado representative who is the only Native American in Congress, as well as a prestigious jewelry maker, sponsored the Arts and Crafts Act, a

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bill requiring that art sold as "Indian art" must be made by Indians who are certified by their tribes. The penalty for noncompliance can be five years in jail or a \$250,000 fine.

Although the act was written to apply only to art for sale, it has drastically limited nonregistered artists' exhibition opportunities. They can forget about showing in Santa Fe's new museum, in the Smithsonian museums, or in others that often feature Indian art, such as the Heard. Last year American Indian Contemporary Arts, a nonprofit space in San Francisco, canceled a show of work by Durham—who is not registered—on the advice of its lawyers. The Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, also nonprofit, "postponed" Durham's show until he could "produce documentation." David Bradley, an instructor at the Institute in Santa Fe, has filed complaints with the New Mexico attorney general's office about nonregistered artists. "If a certain person has been advertised as Mister Bigshot American Indian Artist," he explains, he checks if the artist is registered. If not, "I can seek civil damages as well as personal damages."

But the law's opponents say that being registered is not as simple as it seems. Artists can be nonregistered because they lack documentation; their ancestors left their tribes to get jobs; or their tribes are not officially recognized by the federal government. "We've always been inclusive, philosophically," says Youngman. "For anyone to assume that you can identify Indians by what the law says about them is foolish. If you say you're a native person, you are a native person."

Longfish calls the law's implications "a witch hunt." Other artists, who compared the law's supporters to "vigilantes" and the Ku Klux Klan,

asked not to be quoted, citing fears of inflaming the matter further. Several nonregistered artists did not return calls and one, reached by telephone, begged not to be mentioned, making veiled references to a career in jeopardy and callers who made threatening remarks.

Bob Hart, director of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, an agency of the Department of the Interior, admits that the issue of registration is "a problem. There are so many variations about people who have not been enrolled. The question is, How are they going to be accommodated?" That question, and the other crucial one—whether or not fine art was even meant to be included—will not be resolved until regulations are written. But that won't happen until Congress grants the funds, and the process, Hart speculates, should take about a year.

Many artists consider this controversy particularly unfortunate because it confuses issues of ethnic identity with those of artistic identity. The way a Native American who chooses to be known should not necessarily be based on ethnic pride, points out Bill Soza War Soldier, a Cahuilla/Apache painter from Denver.

The artist was an originator of American Indian Protest Art, is active in the American Indian Movement, and lobbies for Native American prisoners' rights. But when it comes to describing what he does, he says something else. "I really consider myself an American painter, although I am an Indian," he explains. "No one calls Picasso or Dalí Spanish painters."