



BEYOND TRADITION

Culture, Symbolism, and Practicality in American Indian Art

By Barbara Ellen Sorensen

Indigenous people have always created what colonial language labels art. Yet there is no Native word for “art” as defined in a Euro-American sense. Art, as the dominant culture envisions, is mostly ornamental. This is in sharp juxtaposition to a Native perspective, which sees art as integrative, inclusive, practical, and constantly evolving. There is no past or present terminology that can define tribal art.

In the Mohawk language, what “is pleasing to the eyes” exists along a continuum that encompasses creative writing, photography, performance art, storytelling, drawing, painting, basketry, bead-working, pottery, and many other manifestations. Integrated into all of this art are definitive individual and cultural symbols. The symbols are unique to each nation and sometimes, paradoxically, do not fully embody the perceptions of a tribe, but might resonate with an individual. Both collective and personal symbols within Indigenous communities can and often do play, simultaneously, a significant and understated role through differing expressions of art.

Erika T. Wurth (Apache/Chickasaw/Cherokee), a former visiting writer at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and author of the poetry collection *Indian Trains*, states that symbols can be examined from a semiotic point of view. As a poet and fiction writer, Wurth’s definition of symbols overlaps with metaphor. “What is symbolic in much of art, in some Native art/writing, is more actively metaphorical,” she says. “However, using the word symbol—I don’t really like it—and in fact, the whole point is that Native languages are not symboli—they’re active.”

Since Wurth’s world revolves around words, she is highly cognizant of the more nuanced elements of tribal languages. During her stint at IAIA, she made an interesting observation about metaphors, which some people might perceive as being interchangeable with symbols. Wurth pointed out that many Native languages are highly “verbed,” as opposed to European languages where the focus is on nouns, and so they are often more dynamic. Wurth noticed that many of the students whose first language was a Native language, had a natural ability with metaphor. Images would easily turn into other images, in a very active, dynamic way. A rock that might look like a horse’s head would turn quickly into one, in a metaphoric act.

Left page top: U.N. Peacemaker's Office
in downtown Santa Fe, New Mexico
(Jamison Chas. Banks' studio)

Left page bottom: “UNsurgent #2”
by Jamison Chas. Banks



Where Wurth recognizes metaphoric acts, rather than symbols, especially within the context of language, Stephen Fadden (Mohawk) sees the inextricable relationship between language, symbols, art, and culture. Academic technology and distance education resources coordinator for IAlA's College of Contemporary Native Arts, and an adjunct professor in museum studies and art history, Fadden asserts that Indigenous creative works and symbols often have been misunderstood and appropriated by Europeans and Euro-Americans. "At IAlA," says Fadden, "symbols are recognized as part of the visual literacy that expresses unique culture-bound traditions." He continues, "An example of the symbolic differences would be in seeing an owl. One tribe might perceive it as a symbol of death; to another tribe the owl signifies something good. We teach our students to explore their own cultural and personal symbols. What we do [at IAlA] is turn them [symbols] inside out."

At the same time, language related to creativity or ethnicity is sometimes created by the dominant culture to simplify complex and very different nations. Even the term "Native American" is used to make blanket policy about tribes who are culturally different from one another. Colonialists used terms like "Indian" and "Native American" as a way to make all Indigenous nations a monoculture. However, "There are times," Fadden emphasizes, "when we really do need to come together as 'Native American[s],' particularly when there is a need to speak with one voice in affecting U.S. policy about the tribes."

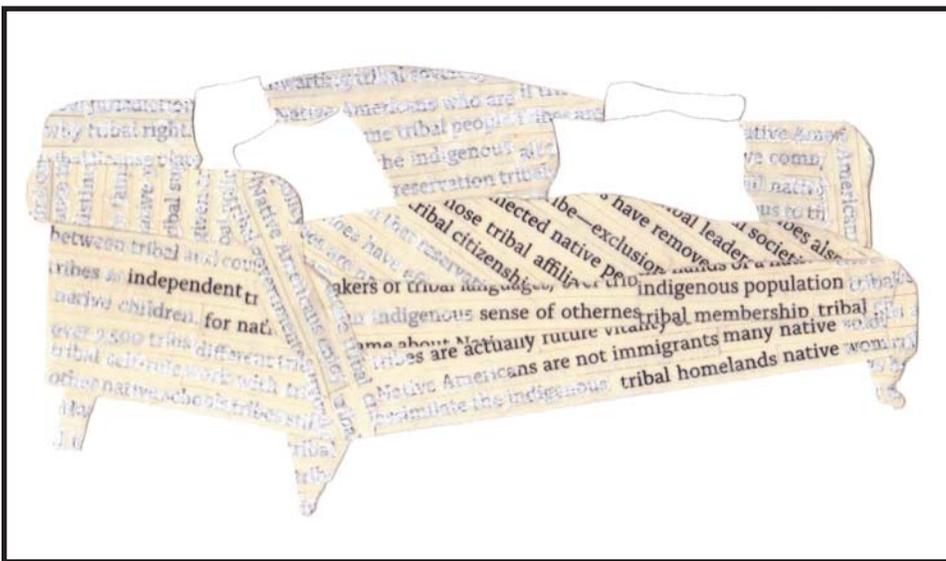
Fadden explains that in the past, art and its accompanying symbols served a purpose and were not meant to just be viewed passively. "From petroglyphs found on Chaco Canyon walls, to paint on leggings, art was everywhere," he says. Fadden believes that differentiation between fine art and craft came from a Eurocentric paradigm. In other words, for art to

"In the dominant culture, art is seen as 'high culture.' Art has become so precious, but in many Indigenous communities, art is still a very practical part of life."

be defined as art, the visual sense was really the most important aspect. "This was a foreign idea to tribes because it was not practical. Yes, art exists in a continuum, but the separation of creativity and pragmatism is something I don't accept," asserts Fadden. "European mind-sets often are grafted onto Native creativity and that includes what is considered 'tradition' or 'traditional art.'"

Fadden notes that "Traditions are bound in our thoughts and behaviors," and many objects created by America's Indigenous peoples are physical manifestations of those thoughts. He adds that the term "tradition" can be "a semantic booby trap." Fadden illustrates his point with the image of a Navajo weaver who might have been weaving a blanket in the 1850s. This weaver was not aware that she was making a traditional classic First Phase Ute-style chief's wearing blanket. She was aware that she was creating a blanket within a weaving tradition of adornment or attire. "Terms like 'classic' or 'First Phase' were grafted on by historians from a language that describes the people who are making up the terms rather than the culture-bound thought process of the people who are creating the work. Acoma or Zuni pots with painted parrot

designs were ceramic 'traditional' material items adorned with newly integrated symbols," Fadden asserts. "There were no parrots in the Zuni homelands." This is historical fact. Parrots, obtained through trade with Central American peoples, were simply absorbed into the Zuni symbolic imagery. The most important thing to understand is that nearly every piece of Indigenous art needed to have a utilitarian purpose. "This terminology of what is 'traditional art' is simply used to create a common language," Fadden notes. "Traditions are intact from long ago, but the media or symbolism used to express those traditions might change over time as a result of encounters with people from other cultures."



"About Indians But Were Afraid to Ask" by Donna R. Charging

Fadden says, “We are and always have been traditional, so in this way I do think that art exists along a continuum.”

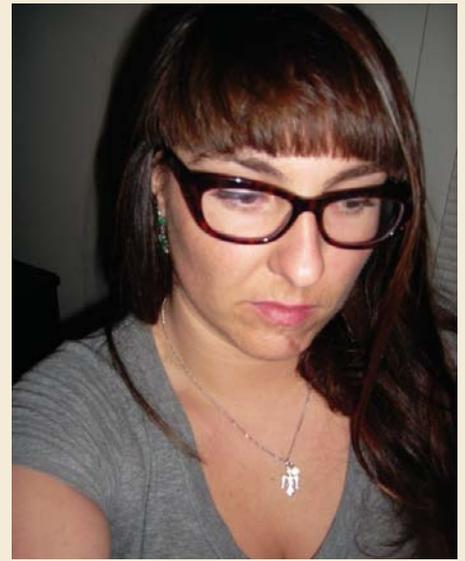
Fadden is eloquent when he expresses the timelessness of art, and so too is Wurth in explicating her frustration with the semantics of symbolism. However, artist Jamison Chas. Banks’ (Cherokee/Seneca-Cayuga) ideas fall in a completely different realm. An adjunct instructor and graduate of IAIA, Banks’ work incorporates pop culture and an edgy, disturbing symbolism that connects culture and history, but which exists distinctly in the present. Banks says, “The IAIA, in a single word, has given me definition. I say that because I have always been an artist first and foremost since I first started thinking. I am also Native American. I live in this time, not in the past, I cannot make artwork that seeks to simulate my Native ancestors’ work or designs.” Banks says that IAIA has facilitated his development as an artist, providing him with a support base and foundation. “They have been the ‘Mission Control’ to my endeavors,” he maintains.

Banks takes symbols and turns them on their heads. He readily admits, “My art incorporates a multitude of symbols. In the end, everything can be maintained as a symbol. I often advance my own imagined personae into representing some other idea or thing, in that, the personae become symbols.” Banks says that symbolism “may have been the first real ‘ism’ in art history.” He goes on to assert that “symbols have continued to define and enrich cultures and traditions.” The Cherokee/Seneca artist exudes a certain optimism when he talks about what he perceives as a time of change: “We stand headstrong into a new arena of symbols and mythos, this is a time of renaissance and renewal.” It’s safe to assume that Banks is a part of this “renaissance” and that his work is tinged with a subversive hue. He states plainly, with a hint of sarcasm, “I would characterize my work as ‘Attempting to clean an American turkey with a J. Edgar Hoover vacuum cleaner.’ I seek to subvert histories and ‘re-codex’ the Americana imperial sphere.”

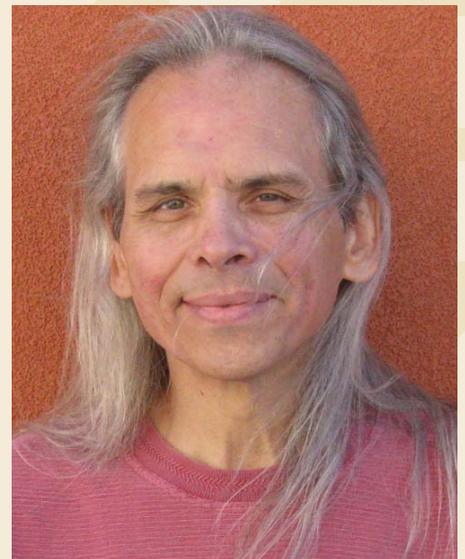
Also prevalent in Banks’ work is a military motif that is highly contemporary and relevant—while acknowledging the tradition and importance of military service that spans his family’s history. “Most men in my own family, have not only served in the military, but participated during active conflicts,” he explains. Yet, the paradoxical brilliance of his work comes through loud and clear: the “patriotic fervor of World War II,” was preceded by harrowing boarding school experiences which literally tore apart families.

When asked specifically what the word “tradition” conjures, Banks says without hesitation, “Tradition is a cycle of behavior or belief built up over generational lengths of time. Tradition can be seen as a colonial term, but so can ‘dog’ and ‘cat’ for that matter. I imagine now anything spoken in English can be seen as a colonial term. It’s a really loaded question because, I think, most art can be defined so differently, depending on who’s defining it. In my experience, there is nothing that can be absolute.”

Tradition and its legacy on artistic endeavors is what Daniel Wildcat fears is diminishing at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas. Wildcat, a Yuchi member of the Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma, is a professor at Haskell. A scholar who writes on Indigenous knowledge, technology, environment, and education, Wildcat also co-directs the Haskell Environmental Research Studies Center. “At Haskell,” he says, “we are cognizant of the urgency of cultural awareness, and I truly believe that the most powerful voices of the future will be artists. Unfortunately, our art programs are struggling, as [they are] in many academic institutions. This is basically a war of attrition. Art and art education are really at a point where we are trying to infuse [them] with life.” He notes that when he first started at Haskell there were a variety of art programs, including jewelry, basket-making, weaving, drawing, painting, and music. However, the university’s art program has declined recently.



ART AND METAPHOR. Erika T. Wurth believes that metaphor plays an important role in Native art.



CREATIVITY AND PRAGMATISM. Stephen Fadden sees Native art as historically practical and rejects the distinction between “fine art” and “craft.”

For Wildcat there is no sound reason for the elimination of any art program. “Through art,” he says, “one can communicate emotions and ideas more powerfully than logic. Art is the medium through which we can speak to people about the planet, spirituality, community, even political rhetoric. In the dominant culture, art is seen as ‘high culture.’ Art has become so precious, but in many Indigenous communities, art is still a very practical part of life.” Wildcat echoes the thoughts of both Wurth and Fadden when he says, “In the Indigenous way of looking at the world, being an artist meant being very practical, and our lives were richer for it. Material things, such as a ribbon shirt, a basket, were viewed as art, and the symbolism in each piece was very specific to each tribe, society, and community. Symbols were/are iconic representations of tribes and are actually very common. For example, the artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Salish and Kootenai), incorporates images, ideas, and features of the modern world as symbols.”

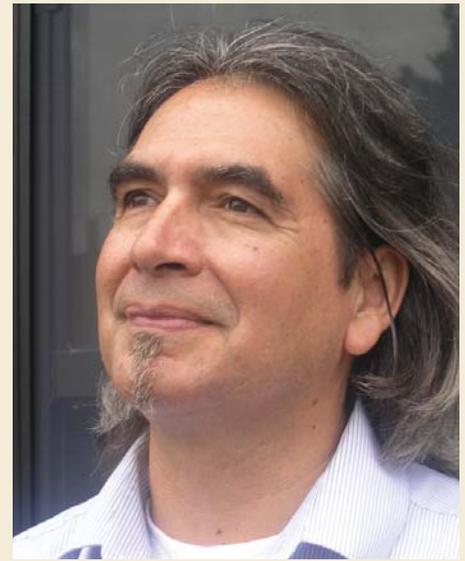
When asked if one can distinguish “traditional” art from contemporary Native art, Wildcat agrees with Fadden. Wildcat says, “When we start talking about tradition we are talking about something that happens every day. I think it’s a mistake to think that traditions don’t evolve. Art performed an expression of everyday life. So too does contemporary art. Contemporary Native artists are doing what they have always done: appropriate and incorporate everyday images into their art. When we draw a distinction, we are forgetting that once the traditional was contemporary. Those are terms that are external impositions.”

Donna R. Charging, an artist from the Wind River Reservation, seems to embody what Wildcat, Fadden, and Wurth envision as a Native American contemporary artist who utilizes “traditional” practices to confront and examine life. What is striking about Charging’s work is the presence of sparse, nearly transparent and unidentifiable figures. She recognizes the voyeurism that accompanies her work: “As Native people, we have always been the subject of curiosity.” Charging uses that to “intentionally tempt viewers into believing that a satisfactory interpretation can be reached.” The images and symbols that she uses are identifiable, but her works, she says, are “beyond the scope of references known to the mainstream.” Echoing Fadden and Wildcat’s point that “tradition” is created and always happening, Charging maintains, “The origami, chiyogami, yuzen, and washi [Japanese papers] I work with become compact, pseudo-cultural artifacts inasmuch as my drawings become cultural artifacts (as ‘Indian-made’ art objects).” She says, “I can’t wake up and not be Indian, whether or not my art deliberately manifests it.”

Charging describes the “implicit desire” in her artistic statements as a recognition that Native people are often subjects of a combination of both desire and control that stems from the ongoing struggle to locate authenticity using terms that favor the mainstream. “When I meet a person for the first time, a person who has had no contact with an actual Native person, I’ll sometimes encounter this sudden desire to solve all Indigenous problems—essentially to live my life—and a resistance to the truth that the sentiment is not only not helpful, it’s actually dangerous.”

For Charging, the creation and appreciation of art comes down to children. “It is so important,” she says, “that young people have a chance to explore their relationship with the world through hands-on experiences with artistic materials, no matter what you are teaching them to do. Ask yourself, ‘What are the kids taking away from all of this?’ And if they can just take one thing, one experience with them, you have accomplished something.” 

Barbara Ellen Sorensen served as the senior editor of Winds of Change magazine for 15 years. She now freelances and attends Regis University in Denver, where she is completing a Master of Arts degree in creative writing.



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE. Daniel Wildcat underscores how Native art is non-static and constantly incorporates new, everyday imagery.



LOCATING AUTHENTICITY. Donna R. Charging creates works that challenge mainstream assumptions about Native art. Photo by Mary Beth Flynn