

Universal Circles related and connected to everything called life

INDIGENOUS AESTHETICS:

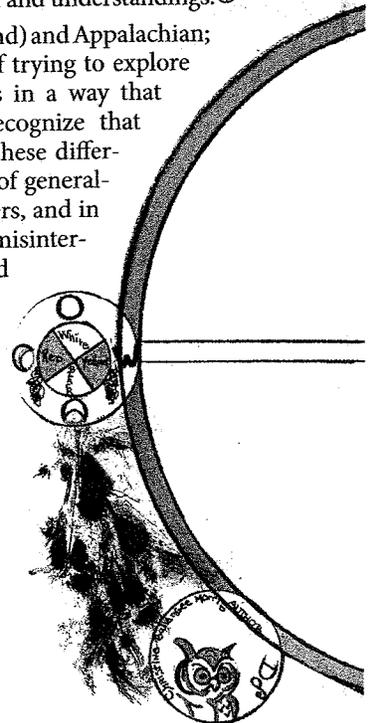
Dealing with diversity components when designing and implementing units can be challenging. How does one know if the approach is appropriate, or the images authentic, or the interpretations suitable? Some art educators propose to widen the scope to include curricula and approaches that are outside the traditional aesthetic-based art education (Desai, 2000; Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Taylor & Ballengee-Morris, 2003). This can be challenging when engaging with indigenous artforms because of the historical, generic, stereotypical identity, and non-Native approaches. Indigenous arts, historically, are either relegated to the field of anthropology or marginalized by dominant, European derived systems of aesthetics (Allen, 2006). "No other ethnic group in the United States had endured greater and more varied distortions of its cultural identity than American Indians" (Mihesuah, 1996, p. 22). Reactions to external political actions and social misinterpretations add a great deal of complexity to Native cultural formation and understandings. ⊕

I am Cherokee (Eastern Band) and Appalachian; therefore, I face the challenge of trying to explore indigenous constructs and theories in a way that non-Natives will understand. I also recognize that aesthetics differ within each tribe. In realizing these differences and in writing this for a mass audience, I recognize the possibility of generalizing. What may seem obvious and clear to me may seem foreign to others, and in an attempt to explain, there is a danger of simplifying and/or continuing misinterpretations and misrepresentations. In art education we must understand multiple identities, ⊕ understandings, aesthetics, complexities, and ambiguities. This is important to take into account when reading this article. I present my view and do not represent all Native Americans.

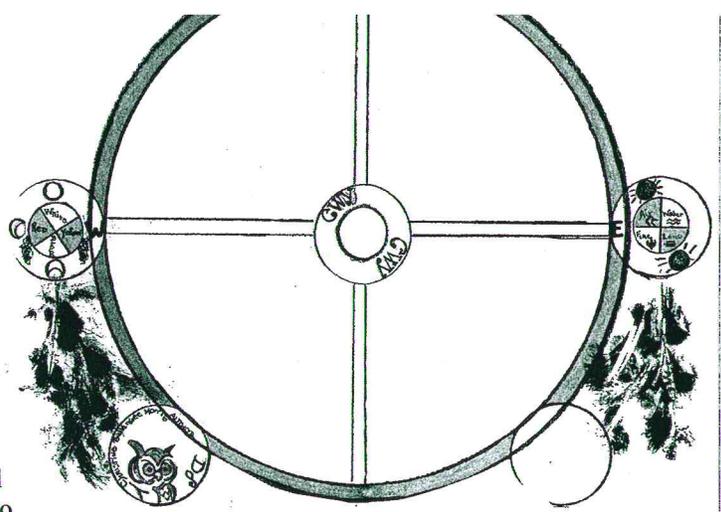
Spiraling

Early historians of Native American art privileged only artistic traditions that were seen as untainted by Western influences. Hybrid forms were dismissed as inauthentic, assimilations, but due to self-determination movements beginning in many American Indian communities in the

By Christine Ballengee-Morris



'60s and nationally in the '70s, Native art is viewed according to trans-cultural conditions that define modern Native American experiences. Steven Leuthold's (1998) book, *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art, Media and Identity* provided multiple views with a common trans-cultural thread. There are many complexities and contradictions found in art and media of indigenous people today. "Transcultural" refers to the ways that Native American aesthetic experiences inform, enrich, and challenge non-Native cultures both politically and creatively.⊕



Aesthetics

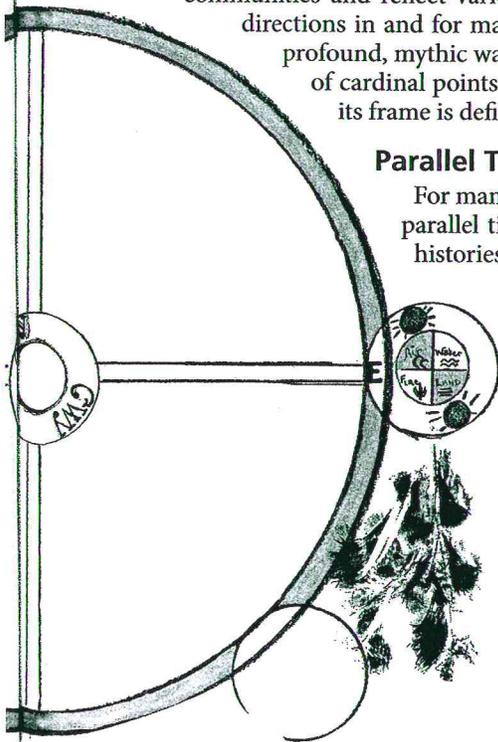
Although aesthetics' history developed from Western ideology, the transition and the need to communicate with [the] non-indigenous in ways that can be understood, requires appropriating and changing the term. Building on this, I suggest the possibility of an interpretation of indigenous arts that is informed by multiple, distinct systems of indigenous aesthetics *across* tribal, national, geographic, and cultural borders—analysis based in understandings of aestheticsthat are *trans*-indigenous. We must understand that tribes (Nations) have their own aesthetic systems. Engaging indigenous systems of aesthetics expands appreciation and refines understanding of how arts can produce meaning for multiple audiences. What I suggest is that there are some indigenous components that may be shared to inform viewer questioning and inquiry.⊕

Identities: Individual and Collective

Native art is closely related to cultural identity and development of individual identity within a collective-identity. Two major themes, religion and nature, shape the relationship between indigenous aesthetic/cultural expression and American Indian individual and collective identification(s). It is also how nature is expressed through indigenous art that connects space and spirituality, which provides the conceptual basis for understanding place and space within traditional Native cultures. Native spirituality is a way of life, which differs from non-Natives who compartmentalize (Leuthold, 1998). In other words, spaces, music, dance, or visual arts, is the celebration of human continuity with the earth and identity.⊕ Specific ties to the land unite communities and reflect various aspects of one's existence. As Leuthold (1998) stated, cardinal directions in and for many native worldviews locate humans in relation to the cosmos in a profound, mythic way. Mythic space is commonly arranged around a coordinated system of cardinal points and a central vertical axis. This construct may be called cosmic, for its frame is defined by events in the cosmos.

Parallel Time

For many American Indian tribes, the arts (Western term) are viewed from a parallel time; the past and future are in the present; therefore the items, the histories, and traditions are constant but at the same time in process (Jojola, 2004). This is very different from the traditional approaches that are commonly found in museums and schools in the United States, where reference is made to past being the past and the future yet to come. Viewing indigenous arts, practices, and places from this perspective, necessitates considering contemporary (historical), narratives (individuals/tribal), philosophies (spiritual/clan), and semiotics simultaneously (Pewewardy, 2002). Native arts are created and presented from a personal identity, as well as collective identity and its relationship with personal identityis within a parallel time construct that includes colonial histories and (post)colonial





Native Can and Opener, 2006, by Jeremy Meisel.

complexities.⊕ Parallel times bridge the living, the dead, and spiritual elements into a continuous flow that creates and maintains power. It is precisely this power derived from ancestors and ultimately from the god(s) that the viewer responds to emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Ancestors walk with us. All things that were, are. Everything that will happen is happening. To understand American Indian aesthetics requires exploring traditions, rituals, and transformation of these components as an individual relates to the group or clan (Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morris & Sessions, 2006). One can go beyond this myopic view and understand that there are multiple perspectives.

Wado (Thank you-the end-good bye)

The Indian Relocation Act of the 1950s, along with the federal policy of selective termination of tribal status, was a concerted attempt to break up the reservation system. Implementation of the Relocation program sent thousands of Native Americans to the city to face difficult challenges in an unfamiliar environment.

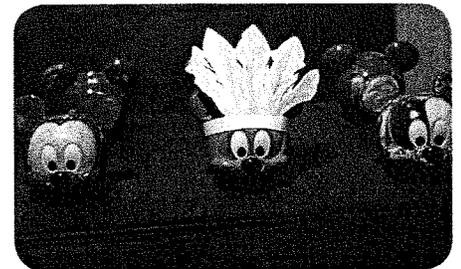
Many Native people are generations removed from homelands, as well as newer immigrants and those who claim to have always been there because they were able to avoid the historical round-ups. Indian artists work on several artistic levels: conceptual, realistic, and spiritual.⊕ It would only make sense that we view the works within those notions and not from colonial frameworks where the tensions and reactions of colonialism and post colonialism can be overlooked. It is the arts that provide common threads among the many

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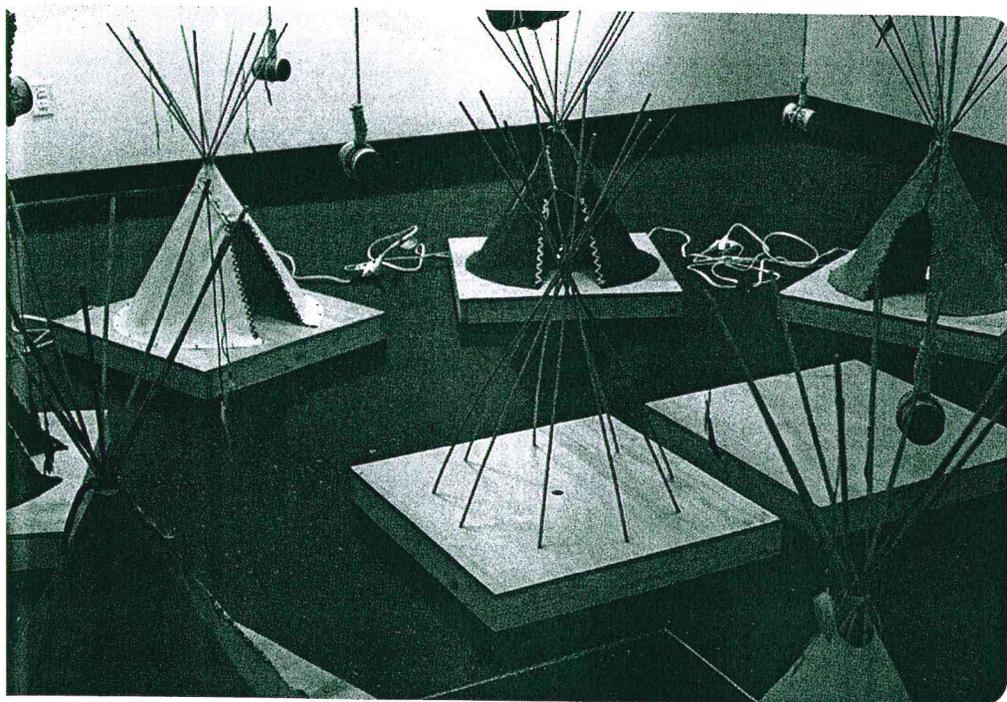
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tribes and a connection to the process of identity development and maintaining tribal affiliation. Identity, spirituality, and politics serve as trans-concepts within indigenous aesthetics. ■

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Warriors of another kind, 2005, by Jeremy Meisel.



Home fires lost?, 2005, by Jeremy Meisel.

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ENDNOTES

⊕ To include this article in *Art Education's* contemporary issue is significant. The purpose of placing a traditional-like image such as a medicine wheel against English text, as well as performatively disrupting the linear presentation to the text challenges THE aesthetic notion and visually presents a different ideology. The Cherokee language, the wheel, and the words are meant to further the textual meaning. Colonial, post colonial, and self-determined components are present and require looking at the text, as well as reading it to understand the many levels. Ultimately that is what is being suggested when exploring contemporary American Indian art. Why is the number 4 important? What is that language and what does it say? What is the significance of the owl and its placement? What is the significance of the circle and a medicine wheel?

⊕ James Luna's artworks such as *Half Indian/Half Mexican*, 1990 and *2 Worlds Burial Loafers*, 1990 are two examples that explore his identities and political positioning. His website, www.jamesluna.com is a combination of visual performance, music, and Indian logic. This is a wonderful teaching resource that could help students explore the complexities around identity, being multiracial, and notions of Indianess. Luna's work also actively engages his individual and tribal notions of Indigenous aesthetics. By connecting traditional ways and symbols to his needs and issues, the ancestral lineage contemporaneously continues.

⊕ Joanna Bigfeather is former director of IAIA Museum (Institute for American Indian Arts) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She is Western Cherokee and Mescalero Apache. She is often artistically driven by policies of the past as they relate to contemporary issues of today. Her works such as *Cultural Signs*, 1994 and *May I serve you? Cultural Artifacts*, 1994 explore the history of Native people with small pox, Christianity, alcohol, and consumerism. Her works can be found on various websites.

⊕ In Wilma Mankiller's (2004) book, *Every Day is a Good Day: Reflections by Contemporary Indigenous Women*, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith stated, "In my travels through Indian Country there are always stories describing the process and its import to the artists, whether college trained or tribally trained. The importance is in the process, not then final products. Like meditation or chanting or drumming or prayer, the process of making art is thankfulness, and it keeps the artist balanced and healthy" (p. 65). The stories of what was and is are transcultural. The need to remember. As she states about her work, "I am also interested in our traditional art from the past or the present and how it relates to our contemporary art. I find no difficult gaps between these various forms like anthropologists do. All of it is about expressing one's life experiences and thankfulness" (ibid). Her artwork serves as examples of how she translates her traditional knowledge into contemporary understandings.

⊕ HOCK E AYE VI (Edgar Heap of Birds) work includes multi-disciplinary forms, which range from public political messages, acrylic paintings, prints, and outdoor sculptures. One of most recent pieces, *Wheel*, is a circular porcelain enamel steel work at The Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado. The traditional Medicine Wheel located at the Big Horn Mountain of Wyoming inspired this work. That wheel and other medicine wheels combine the elements and cardinal directions within a metaphysical construct for the purpose of healing. HOCK E AYE VI's website is www.heapofbirds.com. It is also a wonderful classroom resource.

⊕ Above are well-established American Indian artists whose works are easy to access. I also encourage teachers to seek out the younger or less known artists whose works can be located in one's geographic or virtual communities. The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC and New York have helpful websites that include teaching resources online.

⊕ The following artist (and my son), Jeremy Meisel, explores contemporary issues within traditional constructs. He explores identity, stereotyping, and loss. He includes tribal, pan-Native, and non-Native images and symbols.