

## **Why is the Customer Right?**

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\*(As an employee of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) I have been exposed to a different viewpoint regarding certain subjects below. It should not be assumed at any time that the following discussion is the position of the NMAI. The thoughts and opinions are my own and should be regarded as such. That being noted, it is my hope that the reader will formulate further opinions, discussion and research, as this subject certainly warrants all of the above.)

The artist does not control the art market; patrons with money control and drive the market. This simple statement is true for the art market in general. So why then, does the Native art market deserve special attention?

The Native art market is the subject here because art is a tangible, visible and physical means of sustaining a culture and its values. Natives have proven to be some of the most elastic and adaptable of people. Our cultural adaptability in the face of drastic change stems from the continuing practices of our ceremonies, lifeways and art. Imbedded within our artistic works are symbols and iconography that represent our unique individual communities, as well as imagery that resonates with other indigenous communities such as rain, land, water, animals and spirits. The process of creating Native art is also influenced by Native cosmologies, world view, and life philosophies. Native art contains oral traditions, represented in a visual format.

Native artists are influenced by major movements and mainstream trends in art as much as they are influenced by the traditional designs created by our predecessors. However, the market is not usually as receptive to Native artists creating non-traditionally styled Native art. When I refer to "art," I am referring to the contemporary creations of Native artisans; when I refer to "the market," I am referring to the patrons with money. These patrons can take the form of collectors, dealers and traders, and they have considerable power in deciding what representations of Native art will be viewed

by a larger audience, based on sales and potential sales. What artists and styles will be promoted with their gallery space and museum exhibitions is determined by a larger aesthetic, influenced by mainstream trends and sales potential.

Below, I will briefly explore some of the reasons why the relationship between Native artists and the patrons of Native art is more unbalanced than the ordinary artist/patron relationship. I will also examine the implications of the word "art" and how it has recently (in the last 30-40 years) been confused with "artifact" and how museums are helping to contribute to that confusion. Finally, I will illustrate how some patrons of Native art and artifacts have achieved some measure of balance and reciprocity with the communities they've spent decades (and millions) studying and collecting from, and how they might serve as a model for others.

### **On Sensitive Ground**

A codependency has been building since relations were first established between the colonizers and the Natives of the Americas. Regalia, ceremonial and utilitarian objects of Native workmanship were traded for food, metal products, cloth and beads, and Natives eagerly traded for the new technologies. The thirst for Native material culture was established early; Victorian notions of "the Noble Savage" and the need to preserve the artifacts of a vanishing race helped fuel the salvage archeological expeditions into Indian Country in an attempt to document the endangered Native cultures. Many of these items now comprise the collections of both museums and individuals. It is these historic works that are helping to recreate older designs and regalia, yet these same pieces help to influence the stereotypes we fight even to this day. We deal with these stereotypes on many different levels, one of which is the definition of

Native art.

If it holds true that the majority of artists create pieces that are invoked and inspired by their surroundings, personal experience and world view, then the art produced by Native artists is more likely to reflect the values, stories, lifeways and iconography of their Native communities and life experiences. Thus, the market surrounding contemporary Native artisans is especially assailable for several reasons.

The first reason is blood quantum. Being able to prove Native descendancy in the United States and First Nations Status in Canada is a major issue for both Natives and non-Natives. Artists lacking the proper "Indian documents" do not enjoy the same attention and favoritism shown to Natives who can prove indigenous family origins. Being acutely aware of the issues of authenticity generated by blood quantum leads to a hypersensitivity in ensuring that Natives are in fact Native. Blood quantum is a false security measure in determining if someone, and subsequently their art, is Indian enough. Stereotypes of what "good Indian art" is are a direct result of notions such as blood quantum and subsequently affect the sales of nontraditional pieces of Native art.

The second reason is percentages. According to the 2000 Census, approximately two million American Indian/Alaska Natives live in the United States. If we account for only 2% of the population, then the impact of our successes and failures is proportionately greater than any other racial group in the U.S. The failure of a Native artist choosing to share their culture through their art affects the entire home community. We come from "at-risk" communities; elevated levels of addiction, illness and poverty are a part of our daily lives. One reason our communities are at risk is because our internal means for economic sustainability have not yet been developed in a manner that would

support all of our tribal members who choose to live and work in the town in which they were born. The machine of capitalism dictates that a disenfranchised community is ripe for outside sources to assert capital strength and creative direction, as the community cannot look to itself for financial strength. These outside sources come in the form of traders and dealers, only two of the many forms the patrons of art can take.

The third reason the Native art market is vulnerable is misinterpretation. Although an exotic and fascinating subculture in the new world since European contact was made in the late 1400's, the material culture of the host populations were considered rudimentary, unsophisticated and simple—reflections of the childlike peoples who made them. While interesting as novelties, our creations were viewed as only that. In recent decades, these novelties have come close to meaning as much—monetarily—to collectors as they do—spiritually and culturally—to the people who made them.

### **The Power of a Name**

Since European contact our artistically fashioned utilitarian artifacts have been increasingly categorized as "art". To have our objects labeled as "art" by collectors, auction houses and museums, belittles the objects' functions within our community. Although we can fully appreciate fine workmanship, expert manipulation of materials and culturally established aesthetics, we usually do not see our creations as purely art. During the last four hundred years African, Oceanic, Native and all other forms of non-Western material culture have been defined as "art" and have suffered a marginalization, being defined as a simplistic "craft" or as "outsider art". With it, outsider art carries pejorative connotations, categorizing the abnormal, those outside of the mainstream of society and, the mentally ill.

The titles of exhibits have an impact on public and private opinions. Museums are confusing the public and themselves when using the term "art" interchangeably with "artifact". It is here that one of the biggest divide exists between Native artists, their patrons and museums. Although we appreciate the skill, symmetry, and workmanship of a historic item, Native artists tend to understand that artifacts were not created "for art's sake". Each artifact had and has its own specific function in our respective societies. The fact that it is a beautiful piece of work shows that the creator of the piece had pride in their work, loved the person they were making it for and realized it would be a walking billboard (or disclaimer) for their teacher, their tribe, their family and themselves.

Using the word "art" in a major museum exhibition title defines the contents as such. This is problematic when the contents of those exhibits are comprised of artifacts. By defining historic works as "art," the museum curators, exhibit designers and the public are assuming that the maker chose and intended to create a thing of beauty, simply because that is what they would be left with. Many persons outside of a Native community do not understand that the pieces our ancestors and predecessors created don't have to be called "art" for us to respect them as things of high status. In an ever increasingly politically correct world, museums tried to make up for the centuries of disrespectful field notes and object collecting by elevating the status of our objects to the levels of "high art". Although it was in defense of Native cultures, to say that many of our objects were in fact "fine" or "high art," created by complex groups of diverse peoples, it may have been fueled by trends and sales in the newly developing Native artifact market, which categorizes the pieces as "art."

Museums and cultural institutions have considerable persuasive political power

when judging and confirming the validity of art forms and dispelling stereotypes. This is possible because of the accepted position museums have in our societies, as measures of culture. Because museums have an educational role in society, their visitors will in large part believe the assertions put forth by them. Both Native artists and collectors/patrons are eager to be involved with museums, hoping their intimate involvement with the museum will bring opportunities for wealth, prestige, accessions, purchases and publicity.

### **Lifting Heavy Weight**

Two museums come to mind when influence, respect, knowledge and patronage are discussed: The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). Both museums are viewed as authorities presenting accurate information and pride themselves on their vast collections and knowledgeable staff. Both institutions also have very influential patrons. The ways in which patrons interact with Native artists from whom they've collected, and the ways the patrons exert their influence and intentions upon the museums, can have very different outcomes and can serve as precautions or models for others. Following is a comparison of the ways Ralph T. Coe and Charles and Valerie Diker utilize their influence as patrons of Native art and as benefactors of major museums. Mr. Coe and Mr. and Mrs. Diker are not alone; a large number of individuals are patrons to a large number of museums and public institutions. These examples are brought forth because their situations can help to generate further discussion regarding this topic.

Ralph T. Coe has been collecting Native works for over fifty years. With a background in anthropology and conservation, Mr. Coe collected many of his pieces directly from the people who made them, along with their stories. Formerly a curator and

director in major museums including the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, Mr. Coe's historic and contemporary collections have been the subject of several major exhibitions of Native works which have traveled internationally. Mr. and Mrs. Diker, who are based in New York City, started collecting fine art paintings and made the switch to non-Western art. While they acknowledge cultural significance, their collection focuses on aesthetics. They have relied heavily on art dealers to inform their purchases. Both Mr. Coe and the Dikers are highly regarded as collectors of Native art and artifacts.

Renowned as a leader in curation for its prehistoric, historic and contemporary works, the Met is virtually unquestioned by its national and international audience when presenting masterworks from any part of the globe. Established in 1870, the Met has amassed over two million objects from every part of the world, yet its Native collection was thin compared to the rest of its holdings. That is, until Mr. Coe donated a large portion of his collection to the Met in the early 2000's, and promised his entire collection to the museum. Mr. Coe increased his status as a benefactor to the Met in a significantly greater way than money alone would accomplish. By donating his Native collection, Mr. Coe made it publicly available to the Native and non-Native public, academic researchers and to the curators within the Met. The exhibit "The Responsive Eye: Ralph T. Coe and the Collecting of American Indian Art" opened at the Met in the fall of 2003 featuring Native art and artifacts, all from the Coe collection.

The Museum of the American Indian (MAI) was founded by collector George Gustav Heye in 1916 and was absorbed by the Smithsonian Institution in 1989. The majority of the NMAI's 800,000-plus objects have been created by Native peoples. The

NMAI is known for its mission of disseminating knowledge about and promoting the present day lifeways, cultures and art of the indigenous peoples of the western hemisphere. Although the NMAI has various benefactors, Charles and Valerie Diker are benefactors with special circumstances. They have contributed undisclosed sums of money toward the completion of the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall in Washington D.C.; they now have a vote on the Board of Trustees for NMAI; and they were elected co-chairs of the board of the NMAI's George Gustav Heye Center (GGHC) in New York City.

The exhibition "First American Art: Selections from the Charles and Valerie Diker Collection" opened at the GGHC during the summer of 2004. "First American Art" exclusively features the Dikers' private collection of Native artifacts; almost all on exhibit are historic, ethnographic pieces. The fact that the NMAI has such a large collection of Native art and artifacts, yet chose to host an exhibit comprised entirely of an outside collection, is fascinating.

The main difference between Mr. Coe and the Dikers is that while the Coe collection started as a private one, a large portion of the collection has already been donated to the Met by Mr. Coe, and the entire collection has been promised as a gift to the museum. To my knowledge, the majority of the Diker collection remains private. Another difference is that "Responsive Eye" featured contemporary works alongside historic works. This illustrated the continuity of forms and methods of creation as well as the adaptation of iconography employed by present-day Native artists. A similarity between the shows is that they both featured the word "art" in their titles. This problematic term, discussed above, continues to lead to confusion both within and outside

the museum.

It should be said that the NMAI would not exist today if it was not for the collecting efforts of George Gustav Heye. Regardless of his dismal outlook for the continuance of Native peoples, their cultures and lifeways, his actions positively impacted both the museum and Native world. This helps to illustrate the fact that collectors and patrons are a necessary component in the art market and have always had close relationships with museums. Private interests and funds provide the means for collections such as the one started by Mr. Heye, which now are very favorably looked upon by the NMAI and its constituents. Whether or not contemporary relationships have questionable ethics is a subject for another discussion and will have varying answers, depending on which angle one approaches the question from.

### **Community Give-Back**

Speculation suggests that collectors such as the Dikers and Mr. Coe are interested in furthering the value, prestige and press surrounding their collections of Native art and artifacts. Having their names in the exhibition titles was not a mistake. However, Mr. Coe has ensured that his collection of art, artifacts and ethnographic research is shared with the world and available to the public and for the communities from which they came, permanently. The exhibit provided a window into Native material culture and art, but the largest advantage Mr. Coe provided is entrusting his collection to the Met where it is publicly available. He can serve as a model of how a collector of Native art can provide for some reciprocity in the Native art/patron relationship. It is helpful to remember that large museums are not the only museums that accept donations. If a goal of "First American Art" was to illustrate the intimacy between the maker and the intended user of

the art, it seems a natural solution would be for private collectors to donate their collection to tribal museums.

The Native communities would experience reconciliation with their material culture and works created by their ancestors. The Natives would also be able to preserve the integrity of their art, being able to *choose* to reintroduce visual elements into new pieces and thus sustain the continuum Native iconography is famous for. Cultural pride is a natural outcome of seeing the extraordinary works of one's own people, and it would abound in the communities experiencing this reconciliation.

The collectors would receive massive press coverage and become wildly famous in Indian Country and in the museum world. Such an unprecedented step would cement the collector and any section of their donated collection as a major feature for tribes in every corner of the United States and Canada. This would be the case even if they did not donate their entire collection. Because many tribal museums are non-profit organizations, a donation of any kind is shielded from federal taxes. The alleviation of the cost of insurance alone would financially benefit collectors interested in protecting their wealth.

The donation of such a large collection would ultimately free up pressures for museum and galleries to exhibit the works, making the spaces available for future exhibitions. These exhibits could feature contemporary artisans and their new works. Whether these new works are based on the images, styles and techniques of our ancestors is up to the artist. But the fact remains that the space would now be available for the emerging artist. This would be entirely possible at a museum such as the NMAI, which would be fulfilling its mission to "...protect and foster [their] cultures by reaffirming traditions and beliefs, encouraging contemporary artistic expression, and empowering the

Indian voice."

Despite creating culturally meaningful and diverse works of art in every medium, the Native artist does not have control over the trends of the art market. This does not have to mean despair should run rampant in the minds and aspirations of Native artists. It does provide Native artists with an opportunity to present a stronger voice about what contemporary artistic Native art is, and to show how it is currently being expressed. Conversely, just because the Native artist does not control the market does not mean that collectors and patrons of Native art should abuse their persuasive powers within the Native art market. After all, it is a reciprocal relationship; each side exists because the other is willing.