

# Art Facilitating Contact: Discourse on Museums and Cultural Tourism

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## Abstract:

*Tourist arts are proof of native people's ability to adapt, survive, and prosper without assimilating. Contact does not imply impurity or inauthenticity, as has been previously thought by anthropologists. The perception of tourist arts and their representation in museums is slowly improving, with museums listening to native voices and acting as incubators for cultural preservation and economic development through sponsoring arts and crafts cooperatives*

## Art History and Anthropology Museums

Art history and anthropology treat objects in cultural contexts, one as art, the other as artifact. They are complimentary disciplines that symbiotically appropriate attributes of the other.

With the rise of anthropology in the late nineteenth century, a split between the aesthetic and the cultural occurred regarding material culture. Western art was relegated to art historians while material objects made by "primitive" people became the domain of anthropologists (Phillips 1994). Traditionally, fine or "high" art was displayed in art museums, while anthropological displays went into natural history museums next to dinosaur bones, geological specimens, and various plant and animal species.

Anthropologists place objects on a social level where the object is embedded in the culture. Art historians view the object as a representation of the essence of the culture. In art museums, the object exists on its own, out of context, as a representation of the society that created it. The "old" art museum was concerned with decontextualizing objects – masks were disassociated from their dancers just as fourteenth century icon paintings were removed from their altars and hung on the walls of art museums (Phillips 1994).

The division between art history and anthropology has been questioned, along with representations indigenous people in art and natural history museums. The "new" art history curiously resembles the "old" cultural anthropology. Each discipline is concerned with spatial issues of time and place, the contextualization of objects, and the use of oral histories. This hybrid discipline is discussed by Geertz as "interpretive anthropology" (Phillips 1994). Interpretive anthropology is holistic, drawing from

many sources of academia, literature, and critical theory. It acknowledges the value in the modern and contemporary over pre-contact, or seemingly authentic, pure, and therefore scientifically valuable, cultures.

The rise of postmodernism and post-colonial discourse contributed to a resonant appeal to museums by Native American cultures. Newly empowered and armed with legislation, economic stability, and political savvy, Native Americans demanded that their voice be heard and incorporated in the study and representation of their cultures. As art history and anthropology became increasingly interdisciplinary and non-linear in thought, they became open to native voices and acknowledging indigenous knowledge and authority.

## Notions of Authenticity and Tourist Art

To discuss tourist arts, the terms "authenticity," "traditional" and "pure" culture must be defined. "Authentic" is a broad term, usually thought of as rare, old, and pristine. "Authenticity" is linked to the mythic, nostalgic and escapist tendencies of the "other" (the tourist, anthropologist, etc.). A culture contaminated by modernity and western society is often seen by academics as having lost its purity through contact. However, authenticity – like culture – is not static. To deny change, history, or innovations, and label a culture purely authentic or traditional is naïve.

Post-colonial objects are often seen as inauthentic. Tourist art, or work specifically modified for a market, holds a negative stigma in the art historical realm. Tourist art is particularly despised by anthropologists, since it is viewed as a physical representation of a culture's assimilation into western society. Linnekin counters this opinion by stating that cultural invention is an ongoing human activity. Symbolic invention, in particular, is an avenue to "reflect contemporary

concerns and purposes rather than a passively inherited legacy” (Linnekin 1991, 447). The continued invention of authenticity and synthesis of identity keeps cultures healthy and alive. This statement is not intended to devalue or undercut indigenous authority or relevance concerning cultural identity or world view.

I understand tourist arts as hybrid forms of aesthetic expression. Tourist arts are a response to commodity culture, but still represent a traditional, and highly relevant, aspect of the culture’s identity. Tourist arts are acculturated objects (modified due to contact) but I do not see them as indicators of assimilation (one distinct culture absorbed by another prevailing group). Tourist arts are innovations of western style goods. The creation and economic viability of tourist art, according to Phillips, is one that involves a three-step cultural exchange: the transmission of the colonizing group’s constructs on the native group, the native selection and modification of those constructs, and the re-consumption of the reinterpreted images by the colonizing group in the form of tourist art (Phillips 1991, 21). The Native group, therefore, has control over what they choose to incorporate into their artwork, and continues to use culturally traditional craft techniques and methods.

Tourist art varies in quality from trinkets and souvenirs to works of art. Souvenirs are markers of touristic experiences and are rarely purchased by serious collectors. Collectors see multiple replicas of older or traditional objects as empty, devoid of meaning, and mere reminiscence of the original or authentic object. The souvenir—whether a basket, war club, beaded whimsy or miniature pot-rings hollow to the connoisseur of Indian arts, but is seen as highly desirable to tourists. Tourist arts blur the boundaries. They are too western or familiar for museums and collectors, yet exotic enough for tourists. Indian tourist art decorated, akin to trophies, ‘Indian Corners’ in the homes of the Victorian and Arts and Crafts eras. This type of display indicated the worldliness of the tourist purchaser, showing that they had encountered a ‘live Indian’. In this case, the one souvenir taken back to the home of the “other” symbolized the encounter for the tourist. The object was the substantive product of the encounter with the host culture.

Richard Handler states that authenticity is a cultural construct created by western society (Handler 1986).

Preoccupation with possessing authentic objects, or viewing them in museums is a way for the other to “appropriate their authenticity, incorporating that magical proof of existence into what we call our ‘personal experience’. For those who cannot stomach art, or afford it, there is always the ethnic restaurant, where we can physically ingest the authenticity of others in order to renew our own” (Handler 1986, 4).

Confinement of native peoples to reservation land forced alternate forms of economic survival. Left with limited hunting and gathering opportunities and a need for money in a cash-based society, tourist arts were a natural entrepreneurial occupation for many tribes in the United States. Tourist arts are proof of native people’s ability to adapt, survive and prosper without assimilating. They assert, on a democratic level, the existence of a contemporary Native American culture.

Tourist art has been a pejorative term until recently. Hidden away in museum collections, the objects were rarely displayed or studied. Current research by Ruth Phillips, Erve Chambers, Betty Duggan, and Shelly Errington validates tourist art as a method of questioning contact and history. Detailing the Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual (the oldest Native American Co-op in the United States based in Cherokee, North Carolina), Betty Duggan documents the benefits of tourism to the Cherokee. “Although it is noted that local crafts are tailored to tourist tastes, the authenticity of these productions does not seem in doubt” (Duggan 1997, 31).

### **Cultural Tourism and Contact Zones**

Face-to-face contact between cultures is exclusive to cultural tourism. It brings people of differing ethnicity, class, religions, and cultures together. These intercultural encounters, coined “contact zones” by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* (1992) are small meetings across cultural boundaries that involve a host (indigenous) and other (tourist). Contact encourages diversity and allows the appropriation of ideas for alternative ways of living and innovative art forms.

Contact zones are further discussed through dialogic theory by Dean MacCannell in *Empty Meeting Grounds* (1992). The dialogic model infers that human interaction between two interlocutors takes place on equal footing. They both approach the encounter with a firm sense of integrity, but are able to interact,

converse, and exchange within the contact zone, or “empty meeting ground” (MacCannell 1992).

Contact is not always positive. Often, it exposes inequities between the host and other. While tourism has been held up as a non-polluting method of economic development, it is also viewed as a crass reconstruction of ethnicity for cash. Historic accounts of tourism document consequences such as the invention of “authentic” culture to engage tourists, environmental degradation, and people feeling as if they are on exhibit, or in a zoo. MacCannell suggests that tourism can actually create new cultural forms: “Institutions have been established . . . not just hotels, restaurants, and transportation systems, but restorations of ancient shrines, development of local handicrafts for sale to tourists, and rituals performed for tourists. In short, tourism is not just an aggregate of merely commercial activities, it is also an ideological framing of history, nature, and tradition; a framing that has the power to reshape culture and nature to its own needs” (MacCannell 1992, 1).

MacCannell calls this phenomenon ethnicity-for-tourism, where tourists flock to see folk or native costumes, dance, and craft; where, in an effort to satisfy tourist demands the locals “go native”. In a sense, this is pushing the indigenous back into the proverbial “primitive” box, or museum display case. Richard Kurin, known for his theories on culture brokerage, notes that ethnicity is packaged, marketed, and commodified for use in the cultural tourism industry (Kurin 1997).

Tourism and tourist arts, however, can create an arena for cultural conservation, historic preservation, and the continuation of a community’s heritage. Museums and cultural centers that incorporate indigenous curation acknowledge the relationship between native people and their cultural heritage. Indigenous people are given equal power and voice to represent themselves and the objects that portray their communities.

### **Community Development, Self Determination, and Cooperatives**

Community is a social process created over time by interaction with natural and sociocultural environments; it is not tied to settlement patterns, not static, and not a cultural construct. To contemplate

community development one must acknowledge community as a continuum and involve people on a local level (Plunkett 1984). The goals of community development are to organize and unite communities’ interests and commitments, enhance the quality of life, and give power of ownership and influence back to native groups (Hall 1984). Cooperatives help create power and economic stability for communities, allowing culturally appropriate economic development. Some successful cooperatives are documented below.

In Chiapas, Mexico, the Maya women’s weaving cooperative, Sna Jolobil, has flourished for over 20 years in the midst of political turmoil (Shwartz and Morris 1998). Remaining politically neutral, the co-op gives women the opportunity to make money through the preservation of their traditional art. Their success is attributed to factors inherent in cultural tourism: access to the community or market via trains or paved roads, publicity and marketing, and a high quality of artwork at affordable prices.

Sna Jolobil is unique since they sell products as art rather than craft. The co-op allows women to pool their resources on a social and economic level. They also receive education, and formerly illiterate women have taken courses in museum design and textile conservation so they can curate rotating exhibits in Sna Jolobil’s small gallery” (Shwartz and Morris 1998, 21). Women artists were given the tools to succeed economically, and in the process they have preserved the sacred activity of weaving in their culture.

The Zapotec of Teotitlan, Mexico, have also started a weaving cooperative. Stephens states that by the 1980s over half of the farmers had no land and turned to weaving as a way to make money. Weaving was traditionally a male activity but has transposed the gender-gap. Most weavers in Zapotec today are women, since men are usually busy working as farm laborers. Since the 1970s, weaving has been part of every girl’s education. Weaving is an avenue for women to share their identity, language, and ritual practices. Craft production today in Teotitlan is the axis of the economy and most households depend on weaving for sole economic support. Tourists visit Teotitlan, but the majority of sales are exported to the United States (Stephens 1992).

The Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, Inc., in Cherokee, North Carolina, is perhaps one of the best

examples of a co-op that has become a cultural institution. The Cherokee have reaped the benefits of tourism without sacrificing cultural integrity. According to Betty Duggan, the Cherokee started Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, Inc. with federal funds in 1946. They took over management from the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the 1960s and have consistently run a profit. The co-op has set authenticity standards for artworks but allows varying levels of quality, from inexpensive souvenirs to works of art. The co-op is based on democratic rule and runs on consensus. They pool resources for members of the community, pay annual dividends to members, support retired members with equity payments, aid with funeral or hospital costs, and have built a reliable economic marketplace for traditional and innovative arts (Duggan 1997). Many anthropologists saw the Cherokee as assimilated due to their long contact with whites, but Duggan notes, "The Cherokee experienced several centuries of acculturation and external trade in their crafts traditions before incipient mass tourism began for them . . . this earlier experience in producing crafts for a non-Cherokee market gained over many generations, when combined with the [Indian] New Deal initiative and increased regional tourism, inspired a revival in Eastern Cherokee arts and crafts, including the formation of a tribal cooperative" (Duggan 1997, 47).

### **Museums, Cultural Centers, and Tourism**

Standard museum representation of Native Americans is often "pure," "authentic," and stereotypical. Formal collecting for museums and universities by anthropologists purposefully excluded tourist arts, which were viewed as modern, acculturated, and marginalized. However, tourist arts have been collected by individuals and donated to museums over the last century. These objects are often orphaned in museum collections and have little or no data associated with them.

The attempt by institutions to force Native Americans into a linear and historic "pure" past has been met in current times with an outcry from indigenous people world-wide. They assert that they are still here, active, and ready to exert power over the representation of their culture and the objects in control of museums.

Native Americans often perceive museums as a dead place, focusing on the past and decontextualizing

objects. When artifacts are placed in cases, they lose significance. Museums are sometimes seen by Native communities as places that scientifically study and cannibalize cultures. An example of this thought is the painting, *And Then Comes the Smiling Mortician*, by Cree artist Joane Cardinal Schubert. In this work, Schubert portrays a curator, "in the guise of a Nazi death camp officer interring an Objjibwa drum . . . in a coffin-shaped glass display case" (Phillips 1995, 117).

The struggle for control over objects and the articulation of identity in museums is hotly debated. Exhibits in museums and cultural centers present images that are read as truth by visitors. Collaboration, or a team approach, in exhibitory between a curator and the culture represented is imperative. In this way museums act as a culture brokerage between culture, museum, and visitor. Curators are responsible for representing someone's culture to a non-specialized "other." Tribes are working to place their voice in museums, and museums today are finally listening.

Cultural centers focus on the perpetuation of cultural heritage and revitalization of community. Cultural centers are usually run by Indigenous people and add to a tribe's self-determination, strengthening the community through their arts, language, and dance. Jean LaMarr, a Paiute and Pit River artist, notes the importance of museums and cultural centers in Native American communities, ". . . we would like to have a museum some day, but that is probably a long way off. It is important that we have one, because it would show the non-Indian community and our own Indian community how rich in Indian heritage we are. They need to know what has happened in the past, how it affects our present, and how we will determine our future" (LaMarr 1992, 33).

Tourism factors largely in the support of museums and cultural centers. Like museums, tourism engages in the representation and exhibition of cultures, relies on visitors, and depends on an audience (Bruner 1993). They both communicate knowledge, are generally the result of travel, and sell souvenirs. Museums have been credited with spurring tourism and the production of tourist arts through collection activities during the era of salvage anthropology. Today, museums appear to discredit tourism and tourist arts. I believe that museums and related institutions will not continue to exist in the twenty-first century if they do not acknowledge the power of tourism and contact, as well

as the anthropological and art historical value of tourist arts.

### Conclusion

Cultures are dynamic. Appropriation of aspects of western society, called tourist art, is a part of the flux and change of cultures. Contact does not imply impurity, assimilation, or inauthenticity, as has been previously thought by anthropologists. The representation of tourist art in museums has historically been absent, or merely shown as an indication of acculturation.

Museums are one of the most important venues in representing cultures. Museums are a legitimizing factor for communities and are the institution that gives a culture visual public relevance. The institution of museums is important; that is not disputed. Now we must continue to work in collaboration with Native communities, ensuring proper representation and voice.

### Notes

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