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Native Traces in the Art of the United States During the First Half of the Twentieth Century

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Native American art was a major source of inspiration for a large number of artists in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. The idea that this art could contribute positively to the development of contemporary artistic creation was not new in the United States, but it grew exponentially in the 1930s and became widespread among a generation of important artists.

Several factors contributed to this shift in perspective. First, throughout the 1930s several exhibitions of non-European art were organized in modern art galleries and museums, which often presented Native American works alongside those of prominent contemporary European and Latin American artists. The US public thus became familiar with the common practice of “primitivism” in modern art, thanks also to the many books and articles already available on the subject. The arrival of exiled artists from Europe, especially the Surrealists, reinforced this new appreciation of Native American art.

Furthermore, the context of international conflict and a spiritual crisis exacerbated by the rise of fascism and the loss of faith in the project of modernity also influenced artists. It helped to spread a kind of thought that advocated transcending the historical moment and seeking universal values in line with the primal essence of humanity. Along with other arts then considered “primitive,” Indigenous art was interpreted as an expression of a primordial universal consciousness that persisted in the unconscious of the modern subject. The idea that this Native American art could be a spiritual and aesthetic source for contemporary artists was thus popularized.

Finally, in a historical moment also marked by the proliferation of nationalist calls to produce a distinctly US art, native art was likewise interpreted as an effective counterweight to the cultural heritage of Europe, given its evident distance from European art. Many US artists began to study Indigenous art, helped by easy access to museum collections, publications, and even the possibility of visiting Indian reservations. They all sought inspiration in diverse aspects of native art and reworked and reinterpreted it in heterogeneous and original artistic creations.

Some of these artists were painters who used Indigenous art to develop a new abstraction. This was the case of Emil Bisttram, who looked to the art and traditions of the Pueblo cultures (the Hopi, the Zuni, and other groups native to the Southwest United States) to find a model for transcendental abstract painting. A devotee of Wassily Kandinsky, Bisttram believed that depicting forms based on native objects or rituals would endow his work with mystical meaning. In *Kachina Dancer* (1937) (fig. 1), for example, Bisttram invoked the transcendental by arranging geometric shapes—and choosing colors—that suggest a kachina dancer. In the Pueblo cultures, kachinas are supernatural spirits that can represent anything in the natural world or cosmos—from an ancestor to an element, a quality, or a natural phenomenon—and a kachina dancer is a member of the community who represents a kachina during ceremonial dances. In his painting Bisttram did not aim to illustrate the ceremony, but rather to express the transcendental forces that the dancer attracted and personified during the ritual. He used a geometric language because he considered it the most appropriate to evoke a cosmic

reality, but also because it allowed him to reproduce the geometric patterns that are present in Indigenous art, including the costumes, masks, and body paint that a kachina dancer wears during ceremonies.

Another artist who sought to create a new abstraction based on Native American art was George L. K. Morris. An artist and critic, Morris argued that it was necessary to move beyond Cubism because every work of art should be able to stand autonomously, and not rely on the link to a physical reality or a literary theme. As Western art had run out of steam—Morris thought—contemporary artists could look to native arts for inspiration. He did so himself in works like *Indian Concretion* (1938) (fig. 2), in which the abstract forms suggest meaningful elements from vernacular cultures, such as birds and their representation as totemic beings: here, the red shape at the top of the canvas can be read as the head and beak, and the black shape inside it as an eye, while the rest can be interpreted as the bird's body and wings. This way of simplifying an animal motif by segmenting and rearranging its parts is characteristic of the art of the peoples of the Northwest Coast (the Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, and Kwakiutl, among others). In his painting, as the title suggests, Morris consolidates an image that was originally native but ends up being emancipated from its Indigenous sources thanks to its ambiguous forms.

Meanwhile, some of the artists from the so-called New York School opted instead to create works that explicitly referenced Native American art, based on the idea that Indigenous art and cultures are an expression of a primordial unconscious. Specifically, Abstract Expressionists Richard Pousette-Dart and Jackson Pollock incorporated native elements into their work, in order to, in turn, introduce them into the consciousness of the contemporary subject. They believed that Indigenous art had a powerful and purposeful role to play in the transformation of modern experience. Following the ideas of the Surrealists and Carl Jung on the collective unconscious, these artists sought to use these references to transcend time and place, as a way of participating in the spiritual life of humanity. They saw themselves as manipulators of the symbols of America's Indigenous past, creating a myth for their own time.

In *Primordial Moment* (1939) (fig. 3), Pousette-Dart creates forms that are highly abstract, but in which it is possible to make out rounded, mostly oval shapes, inside which there are other circles that can be interpreted as eyes. Similarly, some of Pousette-Dart's forms could be considered masks or zoomorphic heads, evoking the totemic beings of Native American cultures. All of these forms—both organic and geometric—are generally surrounded by a black outline and set up strong color contrasts (between white and red, for example). These strategies are characteristic of the Indigenous art of the Northwest Coast. They seek to emphasize the essential unity of all things seen and unseen, and thus affirm the identity of these Indigenous peoples with the physical and spiritual world. Pousette-Dart also sought to convey a transcendental vision in his paintings, and although he had previously seen many of these strategies in the work of Pablo Picasso, finding them in Indigenous art may have convinced him once and for all of their appropriateness for invoking the spiritual in art.

Jackson Pollock is another major artist who took an interest in Indigenous arts. In line with the ideas of Jung and the Surrealists, Pollock saw myth and "primitivism" as pathways to the unconscious mind, and he aspired to restore contact with the unconscious through his work. He thought that exorcizing the unconscious would be therapeutic for him, and that the native arts did indeed do that. So he decided to implement it in his works, such as *Studies, Number 11* (1939–40) (fig. 4), which is part of a set of drawings that he showed his Jungian psychoanalyst during his therapy sessions.

The scribbles and predominance of loose superimposed lines suggest that it is an image created by automatic gestures in an attempt to evoke different references, including Indigenous art. Although the elements lend themselves to multiple interpretations, it is possible to identify zoomorphic and abstract forms that bear a strong resemblance to Pueblo pottery motifs. The large vertical shape is also reminiscent of the totem poles of the Northwest Coast: it is not only elongated but also has a sense of monumentality thanks to the play of light and shadows that accentuate the sense of volume. The dense composition inside the vertical shape also connects a range of elements by means of interweaving: one possible head inside another head, and coils whose movement generates further spirals and circles. In the unconscious process of creating the work, Pollock may also have been inspired—at least partially—by the figure of the shaman, the intermediary between the human and spirit worlds, which is an important element of Native American cultures. Pollock-as-shaman may have been looking for an analogous way to explore the realm of myth, memory, and dreams—in other words, the unconscious—in order to achieve a transformation that, in his art, aspires to be simultaneously individual and collective.

In New York, another group of artists became interested in Native American art, in this case in an effort to develop a language that would go beyond Cubism in representing a non-illusionistic space. Known as the Indian Space Painters, these artists incorporated characteristics mostly from the art of the Northwest Coast, in particular the representation of two-dimensional space, “allover” design (encompassing all parts of the canvas), and the creation of simplified images in which flattened, fragmented, reconstructed figures generate other figures.

In Steve Wheeler's *Laughing Boy Rolling* (1946) (fig. 5), virtually the entire canvas is filled with shapes that leave little room for a background, thereby emphasizing the painting's two-dimensionality. Wheeler also distorts and fragments all the forms, so that only a few recognizable points of reference remain. There are, however, identifiable narrative elements: the rounded, often oval-shaped forms resemble masks or anthropomorphic heads because they contain shapes that recall parts of a face. Outstretched tongues suggest grimaces, and mouths appear to devour faces that contain other mouths devouring other faces. However, all the elements are expressed as simple shapes: concentric loops for eyes, for example, or commas for nostrils. Finally, the work also contains several geometric patterns that are very similar to the motifs of ancient Andean textiles. Wheeler's painting thus becomes a fabulously articulated mosaic of reds, blues, oranges, yellows, and sparkling greens, suggesting both the supernatural and playfulness, and referencing the ancient as well as the contemporary world.

In conclusion, the link with native art established by US artists in their own work in the 1930s and 1940s (cat. 424) shows that they used Indigenous art as a source of inspiration for developing new creative ideas. They took different approaches: some were mainly interested in formal aspects, while others focused on reworking certain cultural and aesthetic elements of Native peoples. The result was an art that managed to expand the modern paradigm beyond the European framework, and pioneered the merging of different Native American cultures and aesthetics.

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