EXCELLENCE THROUGH COGNIZANCE: NATIVE AMERICAN ART AND SPIRITUALITY

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A paper presented to the Annual conference of
the Florida Communication Association,
Trade Winds Sandpiper Hotel & Suites,
St. Peterborough, Florida, USA,
October 20, 2006

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They extended symbolic thinking to many everyday acts; for example, when a woman did some beadwork or painted a skin bag to beautify it, the designs she used were given names suggesting hidden meanings and sometimes ideas of deep religious import (Wissler, 1966: 110).

Prayer is back....After sitting on the sidelines for most of this century, prayer is moving toward center stage in modern medicine....Cover stories on prayer have appeared in several national news magazines, and talk shows buzz with accounts of healing and prayer. Even the conservative Wall Street Journal recently devoted a major article in its Market-place section to the scientific studies of prayer that are currently in progress (Larry Dossey, MD, 1997a: 1).

Cynthia Freeland, Professor of Philosophy of Art at the University of Houston, has published widely on topics in philosophy of art and film. Freeland (2001: xvii) suggests that there are many different art theories including ritual theory, formalist theory, imitation theory, expression theory, cognitive theory, and postmodern theory. Theories are intended to help things make sense rather than create obscurity through jargon and weighty words. A difficulty arises, however, when specific art forms cannot immediately be interpreted through the channels of a single theory. This is particularly true of the genre of contemporary Indigenous North

American art because its forms have been affected by a variety of influences from colonialism to postmodern developments. Traditional Indigenous art, however, while it may seem to be easier to categorize, no longer exists in puristic forms.

Specific Theories of Art

Gebhard (1974: 9) projects four possible embellishments or bases of art including: (i) technical; (ii) simple aesthetics; (iii) ideographic; and, (iv) sacred. The first two categories, technical and aesthetic, pertain to form; that is, they may be described as comprising art for artÕs sake. Ideographic art is viewed as a pictographic link emphasizing cultural beliefs and values. Hidden meanings behind artistic expressions vary in the sense that they may be representative of different cultural aspects. Pictographic art, a third form, is intended to tell a tale or relate an episode of history. This art form is therefore instrumental as an avenue of expression; it serves as an additional guidepost to cultural maintenance. Analyzing such an art form should assist viewers in gaining clarity or enhanced appreciation for specific cultural aspects. The fourth category, sacred art, which perhaps best describes traditional Native art, poses some difficulty unless it is understood that the original inhabitants of North America believed that every behavioral enactment, including art, had spiritual or theological implications. In fact, their works of art were often expressions of spiritual relation and obligation.

There is little or no evidence to indicate that First Nations artists traditionally categorized cultural obligations as different from spiritual obligations. Individual obligations were just that. The concept of interconnectedness, so deeply imbedded in Indigenous thought, mandated that individuals were spiritually accountable for their every thought and action. Creating art for artÕs sake or engaging in purely technical acts would clearly violate this belief. In this sense, although traditional Native art would generally to be considered representational, it was much more than that. All drawings and designs, and other forms of artistic expression, whether implanted on rocks, teepees, shirts, or war axes, were indicative of something, but also had spiritual implications. Artistic designs were traditionally placed on everyday items such as moccasins and positioned for the wearer to see, not others. The symbolism of the design was for the wearerÕs benefit and appreciation (Ewing, 1982: 20). This was true of decorated birchbark dishes, wooden bowls, effigy pipes and pipe bags, drums, woven bags, flutes, and other items. Among the Iroquois, self-directed effigies were often carved on pipes. Directed toward the smoker, these effigies represented the individualÕs guardian

spirit. Smoke was believed to be a kind of incense or intermediary avenue by which to connect with the spirit world. Therefore it behoved the smoker to maintain as close a connection as he could with the effigy. A contemporary interpretation might be that placing decorative symbols in any direction would be to display their beauty, but in fact artistic designs were not intended for the aesthetic enjoyment of others. Their symbolism was strictly intended as a reminder of deeper truths to the user. When the Europeans arrived they influenced the transfer of decorative designs on certain items to the viewerÕs direction so they could be admired for their aesthetics by them. This arrangement fit in better with their worldview.

Although sacred in focus, traditional Indigenous art was not without technical awareness or embellishment. The cosmological principle of balancing antithetical elements was hinted at subtly in the asymmetrical use of colour in decorative designs on formal clothing. Contrasting colours could be used on either side of otherwise symmetrical designs, or pairs of designs might alternate colours (Penney, 2004: 67). Art traditionally implied a multiplicity of meanings among the First Peoples of Canada. Plains Indians, for example, artistically decorated garments symbolized community identity, but could be used to express individual personal wealth and accomplishment. Many designs were rooted in their cosmological beliefs using the principle of balancing antithetical forms. Interestingly, Blackfoot male artists, for example, usually painted life forms related to war or hunting exploits while women created geometric designs such as borders, boxes, hourglasses, or feathered circles.

In traditional First Nations societies the universe was viewed as an interrelated entity with all parts and processes closely intertwined. Its workings were to be honoured in all human activities. To interfere with one component would affect others. Obligations to one aspect could not be severed from obligations to the others. The earth was perceived as a unity in which the individual played only a small part. The role of individuals was to be good steward of the resources available to them and they were mandated to show respect and appreciation for them in every human enactment.

The Aboriginal concept of the God of the universe, the Creator or Great Spirit, did not provide for any notion of the Supreme Being as a personal friend, protector, or comforter; the Creator was traditionally regarded from a distance with awe. It is important to recognize that the Indigenous people saw the origins of all of their works of art and craft as the result of what they had been shown in dreams and visions and these

were somehow connected to the Supreme Being. Something about the form and decoration of each item always moved the owner to a point beyond its earthly purpose (Mails, 1997: 5). To understand Native art then, requires delving into their spiritual belief system.

Young Man (1992: 81) posits that it is virtually impossible to comprehend the meaning of Aboriginal art unless one understands the arguments that rage around it. He insists that when judging Aboriginal art, a Native perspective should be applied, rigidly and boldly, and made an integral part of the various critical, analytical, and historical instruments that make up the lexicon of art. This is particularly necessary whenever the edges of the Native American art world rub against that of dominant society. Some observers, for example, are reluctant to buy into the notion that Native cultures like any other, are apt to change with the times. Native artists, however, now face hard decisions about their role and opportunities as artists. Many of them, trained in modern art institutions, are as familiar with recent global art movements as anyone else. They feel an obligation to stick to the forms of their traditional culture, but are also attracted by postmodern developments (Freeland, 2001: 81). The perspective seems to be, ÒDominant society is expected to change, but Aboriginal cultures are best left as they are.Ó The reality is that Native cultures should be allowed to enjoy the right to change just as any other society does. Aboriginal people may add elements and meanings to their cultural repertoire or amend them at will, and their art will reflect these changes. Pen and ink drawings, for example, are now being used by Aboriginal artists to represent an art form that was traditionally accomplished with porcupine quills and birchbark. This evolution of change is a basic right, but western society does not always practice what it preaches. Too often the view is that classic forms of Indian culture should be maintained not only as a token of the past, but in order to provide perpetual subject matter for historians of the First Nations past. In this sense there is no such a phenomenon as ÒauthenticÓ Indigenous art because each example is only authentic in so far as it reflects a particular historical moment (Berlo, 1992:4).

Influences

The European invasion influenced a major transformation of Indigenous art. The introduction of new materials usually affects traditional styles, and the First Nations were no exception. The fur trade introduced brightly coloured glass beads, silk ribbons, rolled copper, tinned cones, and aniline dyes to replace more pastel colours of native pigments. Aboriginal women adopted European methods of weaving and

needle work and manipulated them to suit the needs of their people. The introduction of beadwork enabled a greater variety of art work because beads were easier to work with than native materials such as porcupine quills. Many changes occurred after 1800 due to the intensified contact experienced by First Nations with Europeans.

The arrival of various European groups such as explorers, fur traders, and settlers motivated many Native artisans to adapt their craft to meet the demands of trade and later tourism. Many introduced materials had no prototype in classic Indian culture. New products translated into art forms required new an often manufactured visions and interpretations to accompany them. Some new art forms were invented entirely devoid of tradition or spiritual overtones because they were simply copies or downgraded versions of traditional forms. The widespread use of whole animal skins as containers also disappeared from everyday Aboriginal use after the First Nations acquired steel pots and were exposed to a variety of European pouches and bags. Envelope-shaped pouches with triangular flaps became very popular among the Delaware, Shawnee, and Cherokee tribes. Beautifully decorated, these pouches (parfleches) were desirable items of exchange among Indian bands and were frequently found far from their place of origin. It was typical of casual visitors not to be able to differentiate between valid traditional forms and those that were invented and produced strictly for the emerging market.This trend comprised another indication of the creative genius of Aboriginal cultures although informed observers might interpret the move as a weakening rather than a shift of traditional belief systems.

The introduction of the reservation system also affected Native art because a sedentary lifestyle eliminated the need for many traditional forms of interaction. Warfare was virtually abolished, thereby affecting the decoration of weapons like shields and war clubs; hunting became a minor activity, and reduced pride in hunting tools. The vision quest also became less important. Military societies were disbanded, and what remained of their ceremonial life was transported underground.

The current need in the field of art is to encourage artists of Indigenous descent to infuse the contemporary scene with the fruit of their own visions, not too much bothered by the philosophies, language, dance, drama, and worldview of dominant society (Young Man, 1992: 86). Too often there is real conflict between the values of a conquering, consuming society and one that descended from a more naturalistic view. As Young Man (1992: 86) states, Ò...there is a deep-seated need in

Western and Native American thinking to resolve these conflicts to our mutual satisfaction.Ó

Recognizing Spirituality

Unlike the spiritually tumultuous decade of the 1960s, when many protesting groups defied all forms of social structure including organized religion, more recently it has become quite appropriate to discuss religious or spiritual matters because of a change in social perception and because religious beliefs are so often affiliated with topics on the world news. Many international sites of political unrest are connected to religious fanaticism of one kind or another, and television viewers are becoming more familiar with references to related underlying belief systems. Unfortunately, a deeper knowledge of the basic fundamentals of the represented belief systems is not often pursued.

A similar situation prevails with regard to Indigenous faith perspectives which in the past have often been construed by EuroCanadians as just another form of religious belief--heathen or superstitious at that. Historically, it was a EuroCanadian habit to describe alternative belief systems, such as that of Indigenous people, as heathen simply because the First Nations were not Christians. There was no middle ground; people were either categorized as Christians or heathen and the heathen had to be saved. This ingrained perspective obviously made it very difficult for the European newcomers to appreciate the intricacies of Aboriginal metaphysics. This narrow perspective also made it difficult for the European newcomers to understand other aspects of Indian culture.

Although some scholars still use the word religion when discussing traditional Aboriginal spirituality, it is fundamentally inaccurate to describe their belief systems as religious in the modern sense. Analysis of traditional Indigenous belief systems reveals that the word spiritual is much more appropriate since theirs was a perspective that pervaded all aspects of life. It was not a part-time occupation nor a Sunday obligation. This statement cannot easily be exaggerated because the ancients daily spent much time in spiritual activities. As Santee Sioux elder Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa) put it, ÒIn the life of the Indian there was only one inevitable duty--the duty of prayer, the daily recognition of the Unseen and the Eternal. His daily devotions were more necessary to him than daily foodÓ (Friesen, 1998: 21).

For Aboriginal people, spirituality has always been understood as an effort to participate in the mystic; the search represents a need to deal with the grand existential and metaphysical questions that we must all

face (Rushing, 1999: 170). As Tatanga Mani (Walking Buffalo) of the Stoney tribe (Nakoda First Nation) stated; ÒWe saw the Great SpiritÕs work in almost everything: sun, moon, trees, wind, and mountains. Sometimes we would approach the Great Spirit through these thingsÓ (Kaltreider, 1998: 138).

Among traditional Indigenous societies, the earth was regarded as a foundation for spiritual activities and even for being itself. Mother Earth was regarded as the Provider and Caregiver, the Sustainer of life itself. As Paula Gunn Allen (Houle, 1991: 61) describes it;

> The earth is the source and the being of the people, and we are equally the being of the earth. The land is not really a place, separate from ourselves, where we act out the drama of our total destinies; the witchery makes us believe that false idea. The earth is not a mere source of survival, distant from the creatures it nurtures and from the spirit that breathes in us, nor is it to be considered an inert resource on which we draw in order to keep our ideological self functioning, whether we perceive that self in sociological or personal terms.

Walters (1989: 18) adds;

> To the Indians, all life is sacred, part of the infinitely renewable cycle that permeates and defines their cosmology. A critical element in this cycle is their relationship with the land--their reverence for Mother Earth....they viewed themselves as caretakers of a realm that defied individual ownership and, more important, was beyond value.

Although scholars have reliably documented significant cultural differences among the various North American Aboriginal peoples at the time of European contact, their metaphysical systems also featured a degree of unanimity. Fundamentally, the daily spiritual activities of the First Nations of North America centuries ago overshadowed and completely absorbed their lifestyle. Arts and crafts were no exception because spirituality was perceived as an all-pervading phenomenon. By contrast, contemporary Canadian forms of religion may be defined as Òfulfilling a separate, innate category of the human consciousness that

issues certain insights and indisputable certainties, about a Superhuman PresenceÓ (Runes, 1967). There are other differences; formalized religion can generally be dichotomized, broken down, analyzed, and separated into parts, and it may be differentiated from other life concerns. Being religious means to be sincere about something; it could be an activity, a cause or campaign, or an enterprise, and it will absorb a great deal of devotion and energy. By contrast, Aboriginal spirituality does not target an activity or cause, it is not a separate component of life; in a very real sense, it constitutes life itself.

Typically in North America, people think of a religious individual as one who believes in the existence of a Superior Being (traditionally called God), and the way to connect with Him is through recipes or formulae originated by an organized religious form. To be religious is to be committed to and act in accordance with a code of ethics derived from sources outside and considered ÒgreaterÓ than oneself. The code may not necessarily incorporate a personalized theism, that is, belief in Almighty God per se. Melford Spiro (Banton, 1966) defined religion as consisting of some form of organized or patterned social behaviour, wherein religious adherents respond, both in daily activities and specific rituals, to the perceived will of some entity that is seen as having greater power than themselves. Durkheim suggested that the gods of religion may be nothing more than collective forces, incarnated, and hypostatized under a material form. Thus religion becomes a series of beliefs by means of which individuals represent the society in which they are members and the relationships, obscure but intimate, which they have with it (OÔToole, 1984).

A schematic of three components is sometimes employed to analyze religious systems including: (i) beliefs which inspire fear, awe or reverence; (ii) a prescribed or implied list of expected behaviours; and, (iii) a long-term promise of eventual respite perpetuated by hope (Hewitt, 1993; Friesen, 1995). If individuals have been raised in a particular environment with an explicit religious bent, they may contend that the attending code posits implicit mandatory expectations for the individual, and even for society as a whole. It will make little difference if the cultural milieu in question fosters alternative beliefs. An orientation without theistic implications would hold that the cosmos is a given and its origins, cycles, and mandates are not questioned because they are perceived as perpetual. They are because they are. However, there is an implied obligation on the part of the human race to care for the earth, keep its air and waters pure, and reprimand anyone who violates this

code.

The original peoples of North America had fairly definitive beliefs about the universe and their role within it, but these beliefs were rarely formally articulated nor mandated as individual obligations. Their creed could hardly be perceived as that. The universe, the earth, and all natural resources were perceived as gifts from the Creator, the Great Spirit. It was assumed that appreciative behaviour for these gifts would be a logical response on the part of recipients and expressed in various forms of ceremonial life. The expectations of appreciation were not explicitly spelled out; neither was any form of institutional membership required as one might expect in a Bahai, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or Sikh organization.

The First Nations traditionally built their cultures on a foundation of reverence for the universe and for all living things. They did not differentiate between material and nonmaterial phenomena or between humans and animals. The threads of ordinary life and spirituality were so tightly interwoven that the sacred and the secular were indistinguishable (Zimmerman and Molyneaux, 1996: 767). Theirs was an holistic perspective which meant that all living things, indeed every living entity should be perceived as having a connection to every other living entity including humans, animals, birds, fish, and plants. The universe was viewed as a complex unity, made up of variety and diversity, but still comprising a synthesized whole. The implied obligation of humankind, therefore, was to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature and respect its balance. For Indigenous people, this implied affording equal respect to all living entities.

There are other traditional Indigenous beliefs worth noting, particularly the Indigenous concern about remaining spiritually in tune with the universe. In the First PeoplesÕ spiritual quest little emphasis was placed on activity per se because activity was always viewed as a means to an end, indeed a spiritual end. Being, not doing, was perceived as a higher virtue. Another highly valued axiom was looking after family members. Any band member in need or, for that matter, anyone who was even remotely related to an individual with resources (usually by kinship), could expect to have their needs attended to by that individual. These expectations were even more firmly cemented in tribes that featured clan systems. The biblical injunction, ÒIt is more blessed to give than to receiveÓ (Acts 20:35b KJV), was core to the essence of Indigenous faith. Anyone who had resources to share was expected to do so; it was never appropriate or necessary for anyone to beg for help. Community

meant just that.

Eschatology is the division of metaphysics that deals in final events, and its principal concerns have to do with the destiny of individuals and the final state of the universe. Related questions include, ÒWhat happens when people die? Is there life after death? What should individuals do to prepare for life in the hereafter (if there is one)? and, ÒWhat will be the future state of the universe?Ó There are no scientifically supportable answers to these questions, of course, but that reality has never stopped theologians and philosophers from speculating. Some have even dared to elaborate their suppositions in volumes of print. As time passes and their forecasts prove wrong, the originators sometimes had to scramble to recalculate and reinterpret their faulty prognostications.

Traditionally the Aboriginal peoples of North America were hardly practicing eschatologists. The First Nations of North America valued the Òperennial nowÓ (Couture, 1991) too much for that. Adherence to the oral tradition also precluded that possibility because life was viewed as a phenomenon of the here and now; it was to be lived with a perpetual appreciation of the present. That appreciation would be demonstrated in any and all forms of individual action. As Eastman (1980: 149) put it;

> The attitude of the Indian toward death, the test and background of life, is entirely consistent with his character and philosophy. Death has no terror for him; he meets it with simplicity and perfect calm, seeking only an honourable end as his last gift to his family and descendants.

Traditionally Aboriginal Shaman did not delineate a difference in kind between the spirit world of their existence and any possible future state. They perceived the human world as permeated by spirit beings who enter and leave the human domain. Traditional Aboriginal philosophy does not differentiate between human and animal spirits, but assumes that every living thing, soul or spirit possesses spirit as an animating and personifying principle (Berlo and Phillips, 1998: 24).

If the spirit world of the Indigenous people could be separated from Immanuel KantÕs perceived phenomenological realm, there have always been nonAboriginal individuals willing to try to make contact with it through various means. Traditionally the Indigenous people believed in an afterlife domain of the spirits, but procedures for making contact with that world were not specifically spelled out except perhaps for such

rituals as the vision question celebrated by Plains Indians. That there was a future state was never in dispute, but its precise specifications were not speculated nor elaborated. What mattered was how individuals lived out their daily lives in response to the design that the Creator had designated for them. They were expected to live life purposefully and try to understand life and its learning opportunities in terms of the process of becoming complete (Cajete, 1994: 148). This expectation included the world of art.

Spirituality and Art

Most religiously-inclined individuals are misinformed about the meaning of spirituality, because they have been influenced into thinking that its expressions are less valid than their own religious affiliation. Partly this happens because religiously-influenced individuals are not usually trained to investigate alternative ways of thinking or believing. They have probably been taught that spirituality implies belief in spirits (pantheism) rather than belief in monotheism. The notion of spiritualism has not fared well in organized religious circles because of the emphasis on the role of the ÒmediumÓ who allegedly serves as the contact between the seen and unseen worlds. Aboriginal spirituality was for several centuries classified as form of spiritualism because of the inherent belief that individuals could receive messages or learn lessons from any living entity including humans, animals, birds, fish, and even plants. The primary difference between contemporary forms of spirituality and traditional Aboriginal spirituality is that the latter does not mandate the necessity of mediation, but it can happen as a supplementary source of inspiration.

Having been so long bypassed as a ÒlegitimateÓ way of believing, Aboriginal spirituality offers a great deal of intrigue. Harrod (1995: 30) emphasizes that religious beliefs have always been central to the Indian way of life. Harrod unfortunately uses the term religion when the word spirituality would be more accurate in this context. Harrod (1995: 30) states;

> Religion was an essential ingredient in the creation and maintenance of the social identities of all these peoples, and religious energies were foundational in the construction of new social relations as they responded to either improved or chosen alterations in their environment.

TodayÕs openness to appreciating the wider parameters of both spirituality and art is encouraging. Some students of Aboriginal culture and spirituality are beginning to realize that the propensity of First Nations past and present, to link spirituality to every human activity could have implications for modern life. Some scientists and philosophers have come to the conclusion that metaphysical notions such as nihilism and postmodernism tend to ignore the important sector of ontological meaning. The increased interest in spirituality is most fortuitous because it would be very limiting to ignore the study of promising alternative belief systems. If the Indigenous worldview had been explored and appreciated a bit more a few centuries ago, the realms of philosophy and art would have been richer for it. It may not be too late to make up for this deficiency.

Conclusion: The Cost of Neglect

Not every philosopher, academic, or even art critic might be in agreement with the proposal that contemporary society could benefit from incorporating elements of a traditional Indigenous worldview. Nor would these individuals necessarily be convinced of the merits of its hidden meanings or degree of sophistication. It would be easier to dismiss it as belonging to an earlier, more primitive stage in the evolution of civilization. Dissanayake (1990: 92, 95), for example, raises doubts about the claims of individuals who intimate that their personal actions may be influenced by a Divine connection (shamans, for example). No doubt Dissanayake would have the company of academics who refuse to accept the premise that otherworldly beliefs mandate sacred obligations.

Assuming a more positive stance, however, one that holds promise in terms of furthering pedagogical excellence through better, fuller understanding, could provide intriguing benefits. To begin with, serious study of Aboriginal philosophy (or any alternative worldview) can open up new vistas of learning and offer expansive ideas for consideration. Second, Aboriginal thought is uniquely focussed on spirituality, a quality that heretofore has not played a significant role in the scientific community. Perhaps this ÒobjectiveÓ attitude needs to be changed and, like true scientists, we ought to consider every possible resource in learning about, analyzing, and perhaps resolving global issues.

In the traditional world of the Aboriginal, prayer was a vital component of spirituality. Today, spirituality, particularly the dimension of prayer may be making a comeback. A contemporary proponent of the need to explore the spiritual domain, Larry Dossey is a medical doctor who gave up practicing medicine to study prayer (Dossey, 1997b).

Overwhelmed by the mounting evidence of hundreds of studies that proved the efficacy of prayer in hospital settings, Dossey quickly discovered that the medical community was reluctant to buy into the phenomenon of prayer for at least a dozen reasons including the following: (i) the notion that spiritual healing is often equated with mysticism; (ii) healing power is believed to be possessed only by individuals who are strange or different; (iii) lack of replicability; and, (iv) the fact that healing has laws that appear to be different from those of other sciences (Dossey, 1997b: 278).

It may now be the time to reevaluate the rather slipshod way in which spirituality has been dismissed as a legitimate avenue of research.. In traditional Aboriginal societies the perception of spiritual power was not limited to human beings. It was believed that spirits infused all animate and inanimate phenomena. Animal, birds, fish, and plants were all considered to possess spirits with which humans could communicate. Individuals did not regard lightly the divergency of creation because the interrelationships of these various entities were considered complex. The First Nations of Canada believed that art may be utilized to make visible the spiritual elements of a way of life. They viewed the arts as an avenue by which to express oneÕs respect for and understanding of the spiritual mysteries of the universe.

Perhaps American Indian Commissioner John Collier was correct when he urged a reconsideration of the traditional Indigenous worldview, particularly their respect for the earth, indeed the universe and its spiritual workings. As Collier observed: ÒThey [the First Nations] had what the world has lost. They have it now. What the world has lost the world must have again, lest it dieÓ (Bordewich, 1976: 71). For the Aboriginal people of the past, art was one avenue by which to express earth respect. That belief in modified form still exists today. To ignore this unique worldview is to neglect a significant component in the search for academic, scientific, and pedagogical excellence.

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