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Native American Symbolism in the Classroom

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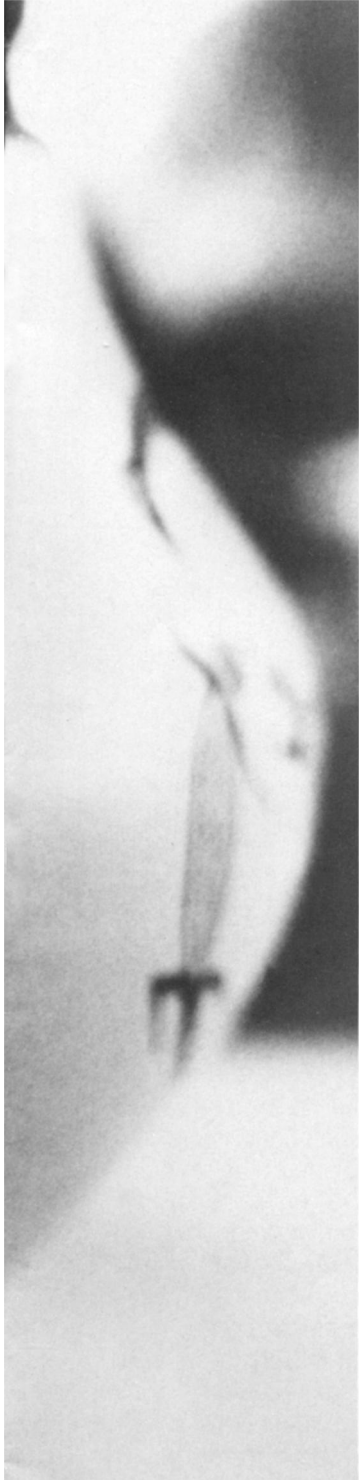


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10" Acoma vessel, by Dolores Lewis, daughter of Lucy Lewis, featuring deer with a heart line and corn symbols. Private collection.





Barbra L. Wardle

Native American Symbolism in the Classroom

In this exciting time of change and growth in art education, teaching art skills from the disciplines of aesthetics, art criticism, art history, and art production is receiving considerable emphasis. Educators are concerned with what to teach, how to teach it, and how to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts.

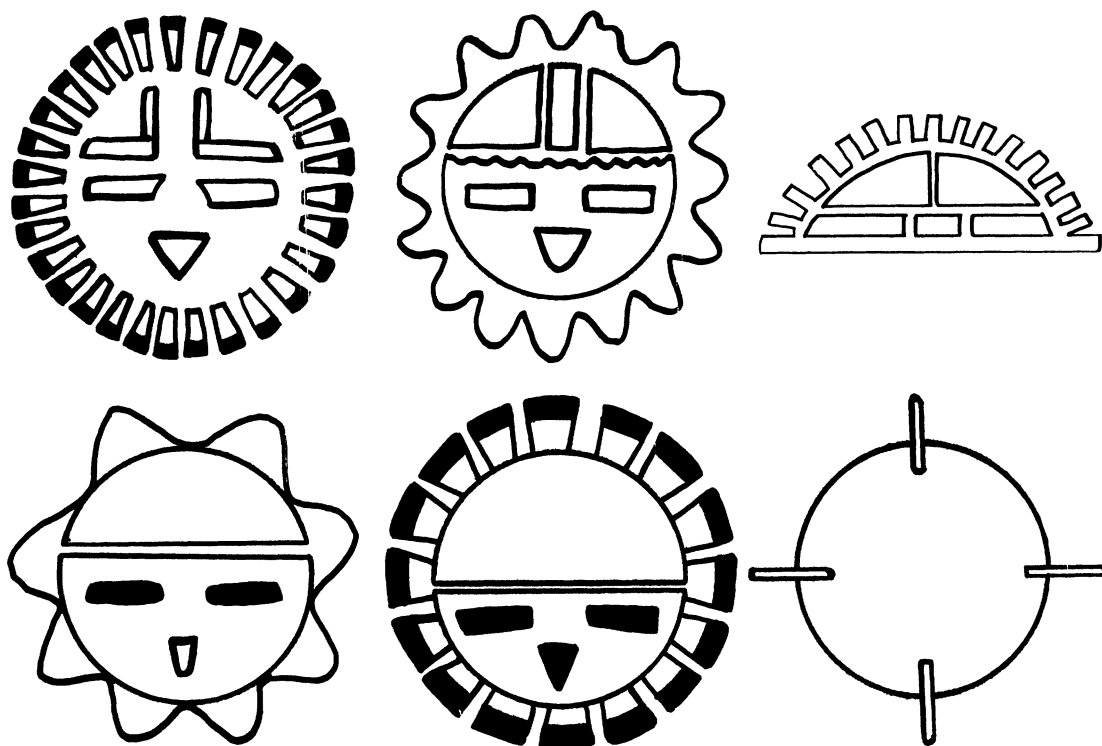
Much of the art that is taught today is either Western European by artists such as Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Monet, or Modern American by artists such as Homer, Hopper, Pollock, or Wyeth. Art from other cultures such as African, Japanese, Pre-Columbian, Native American, and Black American, has seldom been included as a regular part of the curriculum for art education. Many proponents of a discipline-based approach are very vocal in encouraging the inclusion of multi-cultural art works within the curriculum framework used (Clark, Day and Greer, 1987; Greer, 1977; Chapman, 1978, 1985; Hubbard, 1987).

We are also seeing an increase of students within the public school system from varied ethnic or cultural backgrounds. More Native American families are either moving from reservations or are sending

their children away for education. There are more children from Chicano, Cambodian, Laotian, Nisei, Afro-American, Central American, etc. populations in districts across the country. Ethnic populations that once remained tightly grouped in specific areas are moving into most districts, bringing their culture and art works with them. America once took great pride in being the "melting pot" of the world and welcomed immigrants from many countries. The first emphasis was to "Americanize" newcomers, or to help them to blend in. Often, in their efforts to become American, immigrants downgraded their traditions, language, culture, and arts in favor of those dominant in America. As educators, we can and should encourage the understanding and valuing of images and art works from such cultures by their inclusion within school curricula.

A discipline-based approach leads teachers naturally into substantive study of multi-cultural art; this can aid students in developing for both the arts and the cultures which produce them. For example, the study of Native American arts can assist students to gain meaning from the art works. Discussions of basic issues

Sun symbols.



about art can be raised from art activities derived from valid Native American art works and artists' attitudes and methods of creating art.

Since colonial times, Native American or Indian art works have been viewed as "primitive", less desirable or sophisticated than European artifacts. Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the creation and collection of "Indian" art works such as weavings, pottery, basketry, jewelry, etc. has been treated as a curiosity, rather than preservation of art traditions and objects (Maxwell, 1984; Waters, 1964, Bedinger, 1973). Native American cultures and artifacts are still viewed as "Indian," but are becoming more and more respected within our society today. These are not "immigrant arts" from other countries, but rather these are beautiful expressions of cultures that pre-date much of what is recognized as "fine art" today. There is a richness of expression in the symbolism used by Native American artists of both the past and the present that provides access to both meaning and feeling.

Many of the symbols inherent in Native American art can be traced to the earliest civilizations of the western hemisphere, and are often very similar to symbols used in earlier societies such as Sumerian, Greek, Egyptian, and others. Meaning

within Native American art is expressed through graphic symbolism of at least four types:

1. Symbols, such as people, spirits, corn, animals, water, whirling log, etc.
2. Color, with each color having specific meaning and assigned properties.
3. Use of natural materials, stone, bone, feather, wool, clay, or leather.
4. Materials from which and techniques through which the art work is made.

Although symbols are the visual representation, they are not the only factors to consider in developing an aesthetic awareness in Native American art, as there are many different versions of similar symbols. It is also the relationship of artist to culture versus the relationship of viewer to culture that can give rich aesthetic experience. Exposure to Native American artists' attitudes toward materials, environment, and self-expression is one of the rewards for discussion of Native American art and artists. For example, corn is a symbol for fertility, food, immortality, etc. in many tribal cultures. It is often the custom to give corn pollen or corn meal to another or to the earth itself in return for materials. So, not only is corn important as an artistic symbol, but the act of giving the meal or pollen is an important social event, expressing gratitude for the materials. Only as much

material as is needed is taken, and everything taken is used. Materials are scarce and obtained only through hard work or sacrifice, so are valued, expended carefully, never wasted.

Symbols:

Various symbols have strong meaning in Native American art, which can be religious, power raising, medicinal, ceremonial, or simply personal to the artist. One responsibility that educators should be conscious of is that we teach students to respect symbols from other cultures as having special significance. The following are a few symbols used by many different tribes and the general meanings attached to them in such societies:

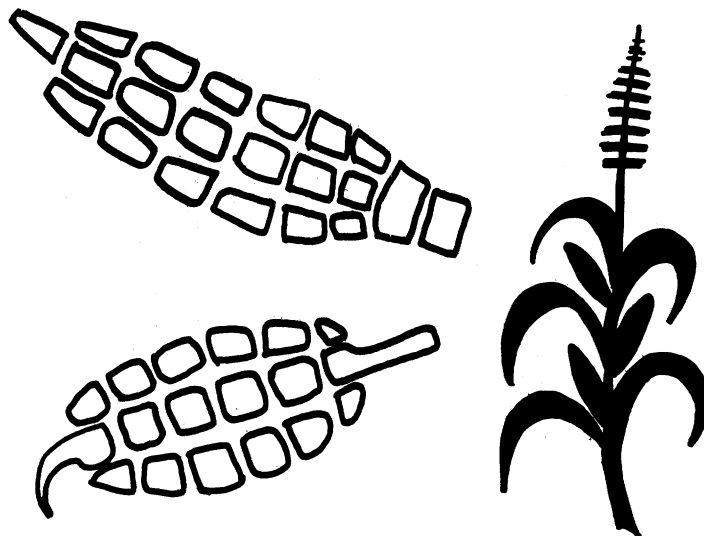
SUN

The sun symbol is considered one of the most powerful of all symbols; it is masculine, a symbol for life, for warmth, of rebirth and reawakening, the bringer of life. Many Plains tribes such as the Cheyenne, Crow, Dakota, Assiniboin, Ojibway, and Hidatsa perform a traditional Sun Dance to seek favors from the gods in the form of victories, life, good health, good hunting, repayment of debts, and other desired results (Highwater, 1984). They honor the sun in various ways, such as using the sun symbol on artifacts, for dances, songs, and poetry (Waters, 1964; Bennett, 1987). For example, the following excerpt is from a poem used by the Pawnee during the Hako Ceremony:

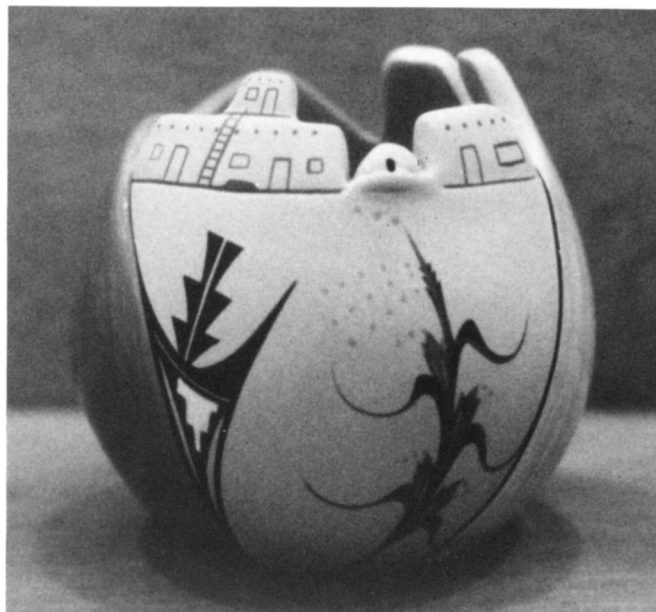
*Awake, O Mother, from slumber!
In the east comes dawn where all new life
begins.
The Mother awakens from sleep;
She rises, for the night is over;
And the dawn comes
In the east where comes new life.
Daylight has come! Day is here!
Now see, the ray of our father Sun come
upon us.
It comes over all the land, passing into the
lodge to touch us and to give us strength.*
Highwater, 1984

CORN

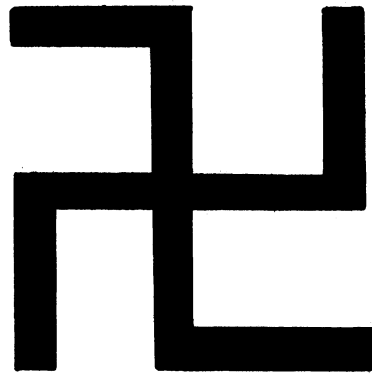
Among such tribes as Pawnee, Hopi, Navajo, and Pueblo, corn is richly symbolic. Blue corn meal is an especially spiritual gift with the Pueblo and Hopi customs. Such modern artists as Maria Martinez, San Ildefonso potter, scattered blue corn meal on the earth before she gathered clay (NPS, 1985); Marie Romero and her daughter, Laura Gachupin, Jemez potters who use corn symbols on their pottery, continue these customs. For the Navajo, the gift of corn or use of the corn symbol in silver or weaving is used to convey special gifts or powers.



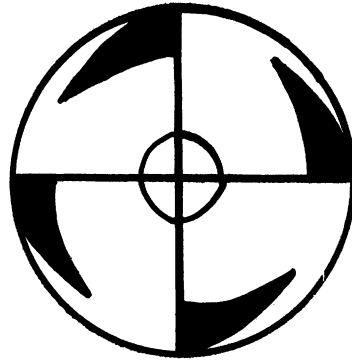
Corn symbols.



Pueblo pot, featuring Pueblo and corn designs by Laura Gauchupin, Jemez Potter, Jemez Pueblo. Private collection.



Whirling log or swastika symbols.

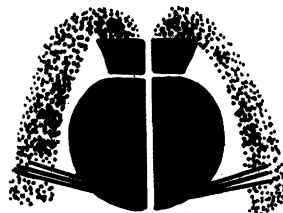


WHIRLING LOG or SWASTIKA

This symbol, long used by Native Americans, has gained a distorted meaning in the twentieth century because of its adoption as the predominant symbol of the Nazi party of Germany during World War II. The centuries-old meanings for the whirling log or swastika include prosperity, a sun symbol, immortality, and a representation of the four great travels undertaken by the Hopi before settling permanently in the Four Corners area of Arizona (Waters, 1963). The symbol was also used in antiquity by a variety of near Eastern and Asian cultures. There are two distinct symbols, one clockwise with tails bent backwards, which is the solar or good symbol. The other rotates counter-clockwise, is the black symbol of night, and became the Nazi symbol. The swastika is also a form of quadra-mandala, symbolizing four stages of life — childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age.



Water symbols.

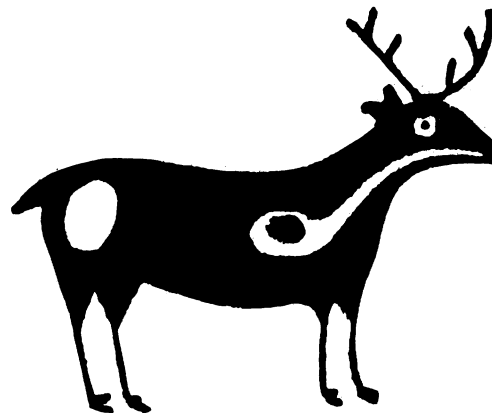
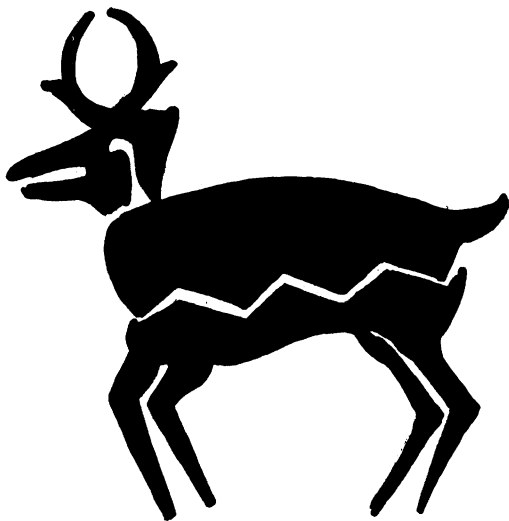


WATER

The various symbols for water mean giver of life, endurance, peace, plenty, and especially sustenance, and are often used as bands or borders of decoration. Water is used for purification and is very important in ceremonies by most tribes. Water is considered a gift from the spirits and is received by sacrifice, ceremony, or by gifts being offered. The Hopi have a tradition of the magic water jar that was carried with them on their various journeys. The water jar was buried in the ground to insure a good water supply as long as the clan remained on that site. The jar was the last possession removed when the clan left the area.

DEER WITH HEART LINE

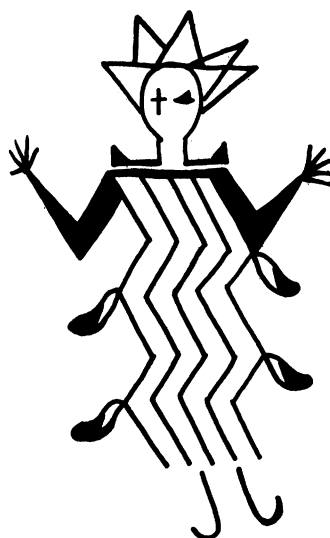
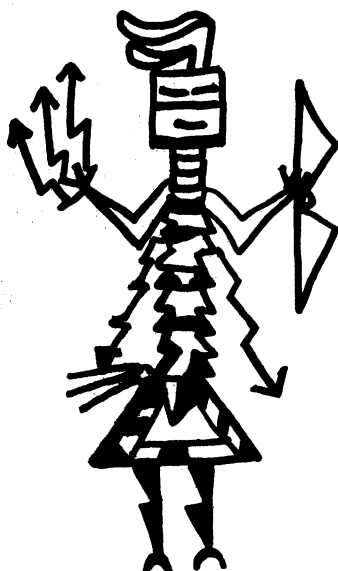
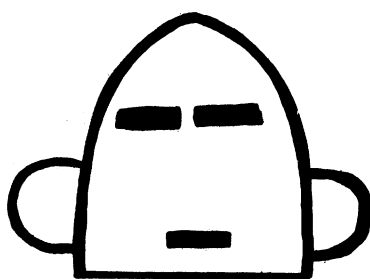
The symbol of a deer or other animal with a white and red arrow running from the mouth to the heart or center of the figure is used in most Pueblo, Navajo, Plains, and tribal art. Lucy Lewis, Acoma potter, traced the symbol back to early Mimbres and Anasazi pottery remnants and has used it extensively in her work. Meanings include a request to the spirits for a successful hunt, an apology to the animal, the wish for quick clean death with little suffering, for accuracy of the arrow or lance shot, and a promise that the meat, hide, etc. so gained will be used wisely and fully. This is a very powerful symbol, and was often given to wish the recipient well in hunting or other future endeavors. (Dittert, 1985).



Animal with a heart line symbols.

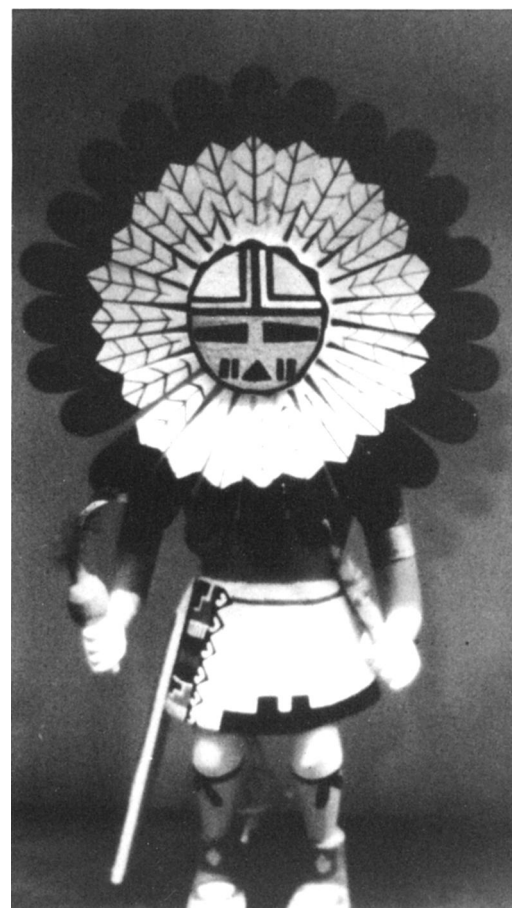


Yei symbols.



YEI, KACHINA, KATSINA, CACIQUE

These are some of the names used for the spirits in Native American mythology who created the world originally and still guide, protect, and assist the various cultures in their lives. Each of these spirits has different appearances, virtues, or characteristics, and each plays a different role in the lives of the people. They are sacred, and often their images are used to seek their help either in ceremonial or ritual ways. Some yei or kachina are good spirits and help, but others are mischievous or evil, and will cause harm if they can. (Waters, 1963)(Bennett, 1983).

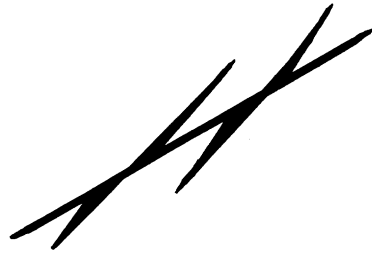


Hopi Kachina, circa 1920, Second Mesa, Arizona, unknown artist. Now in private collection.



LIGHTNING OR ZIG-ZAG LINE

The lightning or zig-zag symbol is sometimes used as a reference to the power of the spirits. It is sometimes used alone, as Lucy Lewis used it, or the spirit figure is shown holding lightning bolts. Also, the zig-zag line sometimes refers to water, especially as a border design.



Lightning symbols.



Pot with lightning symbols.



Color Symbolism

The use of color is also symbolic; for many tribes, colors have individual meanings, and color groupings also have import. Also, tribes have special colors, such as yellow and green for Sioux; red, white, and blue for Cherokee, etc.

MASCULINE COLORS

The domain above the earth belongs to Father Sky, so elements from there such as the sun, colors, lightning, etc. are all masculine. The sky colors — blue, purple, black and grey and yellow, are considered masculine colors in Hopi, Pueblo, and Navajo cultures; in some, such as Mohawk, green is also included as a masculine color; in other cultures, green is considered a feminine color.

FEMININE COLORS

The earth and its features are consid-

ered feminine, including all crops grown. Mother Earth is the feminine domain, so all earth tones, orange, red, tan, brown, and white are feminine colors.

The choice of colors used within a design convey differing amounts of power to the user or wearer of the artifact. Some designs will include both masculine and feminine colors, and are considered the most powerful designs of all.

INDIVIDUAL COLORS

There is some variation from tribe to tribe, but basic color characteristics are similar. Colors also have different meanings when used in different ways, or when combined with other colors, but overall meanings are still the same.

BLUE: most sacred, spiritual color, loyalty, purity, also used for water or sorrow, color of the South.

RED: anger, bravery, blood, courage, wealth, love, beauty, color of the East.

YELLOW: most sacred, warmth, love, bravery, plenty, color of the West.

GREEN: new life, growing, spiritual, also eternity.

BLACK: strength, death, night, enduring, very powerful.

BROWN: earth, strength, welcoming, warmth, rest.

ORANGE: hot, evening, fire, earth color, pride.

WHITE: purity, sacred, new birth, color of the North.

Inclusion of Natural Materials

The symbolism gained through the use of natural materials such as eagle feathers, bear claws, porcupine quills, or carved fetishes is varied. In most cases, the use of the material carries with it all of the characteristics of the animal it represents. For example, the use of eagle feathers conveys the superior eyesight, strength, and power of the eagle to the user. Bear claws or a small carving or fetish of a bear gives the user the strength, power, and ferocity of the bear. Each animal has characteristics such as these which are desirable for the user or creator of the particular art work, and thus are used as symbols of the wanted powers or abilities. Some animals have special significance to a tribe; for example, the bear to the Mohawk; the buffalo to the Cheyenne and Dakota, the deer to Ojibway, Nez Perce, Acoma, and Zuni; the panther to the Seminole, etc.

Methods and Materials Used

Most if not all authentic Native American art works are handcrafted, using traditional methods indigenous to the particular tribe or culture of the artist. Crafting a pot by handbuilding methods rather than a potter's wheel requires a different set of skills, creates different forms, and it demands much more time involvement. The inclusion of personally significant shapes, symbols, and design add to the beauty of the object. Objects can often be dated by the materials used, as the availability of materials changed through time. Glass beads, for example, were not available prior to the coming of the traders and fur trappers in 1823. They were traded for furs, food, and other valuables worth considerably more than their cost to the traders.

Teaching Suggestions

When using Native American symbols as shown in art works, it is important for students to understand the processes of creation used, the attitudes and beliefs of the artist, and especially that such objects often have a ceremonial or religious significance or meaning to their culture. Telling stories or myths of the use of the objects or development of the symbol are useful methods to involve students in exploration of the object or symbol. Placing the symbol in time or tracing the symbol through history and other cultures helps give meaning to both the symbols and the works using them. Showing ways the symbols are used in the different societies or are depicted in different materials can be an effective way of giving meaning to symbols.

Some of the best teaching strategies devised for developing aesthetic skills are questioning and discussion. Silverman (1987) recommends the use of questioning strategies to help students gain import from art works. These work especially well with symbols. He has suggested such questions as:

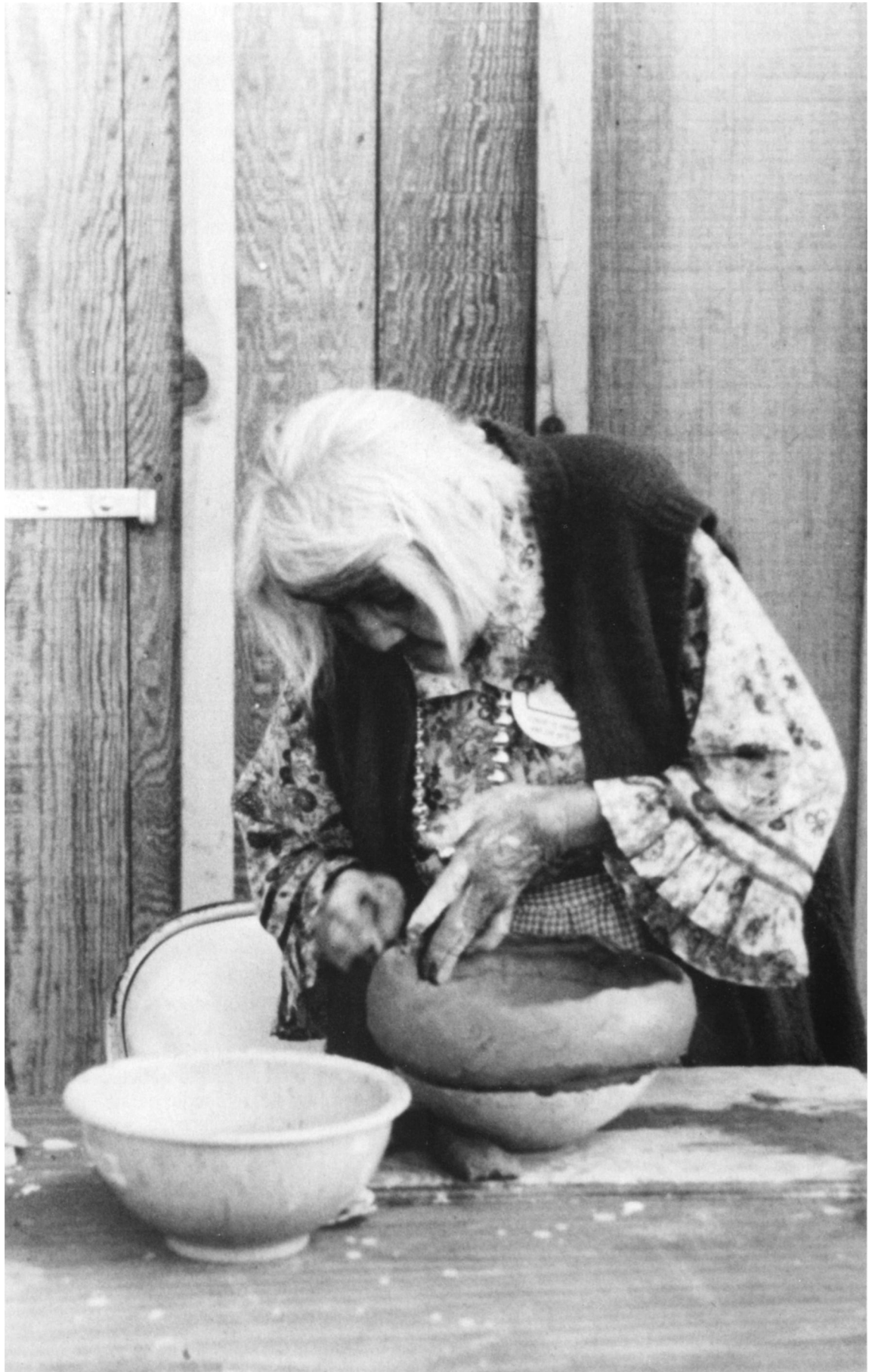
If an artist makes something, does that make it art? Must the object be recognizable? Can a useful object be a work of art? Is there a set of criteria that is shared by all works of art? If so, what are the criteria? Is all art beautiful? Can something that is ugly or primitive be art? Can we tell what the artist was trying to say? Is it important that we understand the message of the artist, or can we develop our own interpretation or meaning?

Such questions lead teachers and students into aesthetic discussions that deal with fundamental questions about art. By discussing the attitudes and beliefs of multi-cultural artists, a teacher can lead into a discussion of the students' beliefs, feelings, traditions, and symbols from their own lives.

Artist Example: Lucy Lewis

Specific questions about specific symbols or art modes can be useful in helping students gain meaning from such symbols. One way to develop specific questions would be to choose a particular artist and examine his/her works for symbolism. One

Lucy Lewis, Acoma Potter, at age 86, demonstrating coil building with clay during a workshop on Acoma Pottery at Idlewild, California.



Native American artist whose work is rich with symbolism is Lucy Lewis

Lucy was born in Acoma Pueblo, or Sky City, built on a high mesa in south central New Mexico. The Acoma have lived there since the 12th century A.D. The only access to Acoma for centuries was to climb a series of ladders up a 200-foot cliff. Such enemies as the Spanish conquistadors, the Apache, Yaqui, and even the U.S. Cavalry tried to conquer Acoma, but it was never captured and remains independent and self-governing even today. There is a road up the cliffs to Acoma now, but it is still very steep and winding, so the Pueblo is still isolated.

Lucy started making pottery as a young girl. She would dig and prepare her own clay, make and fire her pots, carry them down the hill, and sell them from a small stand beside the highway. She studied the designs on ancient shards and pots from her village and from other areas such as Chaco Canyon, to pattern her work after that of her ancestors. Lucy traced the origin for these designs to the Mimbres and Anasazi cultures of southern New Mexico and Arizona which flourished centuries ago. Her craftsmanship and beautiful design have made her works increasingly more valuable. Her pots are beautifully symmetrical in both shape and design. The background for her designs is polished white slip on a buff-colored, coil built clay. She has concentrated on two

Acoma vase by Lucy Lewis, featuring deer with a heart line design, private collection.



basic types of design, painted with hand-made yucca brushes and natural pigments.

1. Fine Line Black on White Design:

The fine line black on white decorations utilize mostly geometric pattern filled with very fine black lines, emulating ancient Anasazi patterns. These often contain lightning or zig-zag patterns that become almost optical illusions. Lucy's daughter Dolores quotes her mother, "The lightning patterns came from the ruins at Chaco Canyon (in New Mexico). These are very powerful designs, reminding us of the spirits of sky and rain (most important dieties in the dry desert land of the Acoma)." (Otero, 1986.)

2. Deer With a Heart Line

Polychrome animal or bird designs such as the deer with a heart line, or birds, are the second major design used by Lucy Lewis in her work. These designs also are painted with yucca brushes and natural pigments, using black, red, and ochre on white backgrounds. The particular animal or bird is chosen with care, because the use of the image carries the wish for the user or owner of the pot to also receive the power or characteristics of the chosen image.

Lucy said, "Our pots are very important. They are used for religious ceremonies and in our lives. It is a must that we save our patterns (used on pots), because you can never tell when you are going to leave this earth" (Otero, 1986).

The crisp line work and flat stylization of the forms of Lucy's work are as recognizable as a signature, setting her work apart from the ancient pieces that were her inspiration as well as from works by other Native American artists using similar designs. The quality of her craftsmanship is evident in the clean lines and shapes of her pots as well as the beautiful painting. The symbolic meanings denoted by these designs make the works even more significant.

Referring to Silverman's questions, (1987) can these designs be analyzed according to the use of the elements and principles of design in such areas as use of color, composition, positive and negative shape, etc.? For example, how important is the white border around the heart line or arrow? Would the design be less effective without this? Is the design an accurate

rendering of a real deer or a symbol that represents a deer? If Lucy had painted a realistic portrait of a deer, would it change the feeling or impact of the design?

If students were asked to create designs from their own cultural heritage, what kinds of designs would they make? What type of art was important to their ancestors? What symbol could they design to reflect their own lives and culture today? If future archaeologists found art from our time, what information would the art work give them about our lives? Clay pots can be meant to be useful objects, for storing seeds, food, etc.; they can have religious significance, or can be art objects. Could these pots be used? Does the painted design make them more useful? Without knowing the origin and techniques of their creation, would they be classified as primitive art? Contemporary art? Is the implied texture of the design pleasing? Discussion could follow about how groupings of lines create implied texture on a surface. Does knowledge of the meaning and history of the design make the pot more interesting?

Lucy Lewis is one of the most important Native American artists today for the beauty of her work, but more importantly, for her efforts to preserve the traditions of her people in teaching the methods and aesthetic attitudes of Pueblo pottery to others. She and her children, especially Emma and Dolores, are strongly involved in teaching and preserving these skills for the future.

Each of the four disciplines, aesthetics, art criticism, art history, and art production, is involved when exploring art works from a culture such as Native American. As teachers and students become more aware of the art works, methods, and derivation, there can be an enriched awareness of the culture and people involved as well. Relationships and attitudes can be compared with the students' own cultural heritage, attitudes, and environment.

As a method of developing further awareness, students can be encouraged to develop their own symbols that have meaning from their lives for use in art work. These symbols could be expressed in different media, either replicating some of the Native American arts, or developing the symbols into their own works.

Most of the examples used in this article are from the American Southwest tribes, but every region of the Americas has indigenous Native American cultures with symbols, traditions, and artifacts of their own. Study the tribes nearby, learn of their culture, invite artists to visit, ask students to bring their own cultures into the classroom, invite parents or other relatives to share traditions and symbols with your students.

As educators, we can provide students with images and information of cultures such as Native American to increase their awareness of the value and beauty of customs, artifacts, and symbols from those societies. In addition, we can encourage students to explore various cultures, traditions, and symbols of their own to share with other students and to enrich their own lives.

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