

ARTS 1694
Midterm Exam Discussion Question

**A Comparison of the Plains Indian
and Pueblo Indian Cultures**

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Although the Plains Indian tribes and the Southwestern Pueblo Indians are both considered to be Native Americans, sharing a continent and a common image in the eyes of outsiders, the two societies are actually very different in terms of their culture and their artistic expression. To group the two peoples together under a single "Indian" banner is quite misleading, despite certain similarities in attitude and philosophy.

Both cultures regarded artwork as a means of sacred expression and a form of communication with the spiritual world. In fact, the arts of both cultures were steeped in ritual and ceremony -- and the ceremonial aspects of life in both cultures were heavily expressed in their artifacts.

The Plains tribal society was, until late in the nineteenth century, based on a hunter-gatherer societal paradigm. These tribes were nomadic, moving from location to location following the herds of buffalo and other animals upon which their livelihood depended. Since they did not remain in one location for any extended length of time, the vast majority of their artwork was lightweight and therefore easily transportable. Items for personal adornment were for this culture, as other similar cultures, a primary means of artistic expression. Clothing was, of course, a necessity, but was easily made aesthetically pleasing as well as functional. These items, made of the skins of the animals upon which the Plains Indian depended for food, could be decorated with readily available pigments and found objects such as small bones and quills (later replaced by imported glass beads obtained through trade with the Anglo culture). This type of work required little in the way of specialized equipment, and what was required was small and easily replaced when necessary -- perfect for a nomadic lifestyle.

The Pueblo tribes, being a group of sedentary cultivating societies, were not nearly as mobile and thus were less concerned with transportability of possessions. The permanent settlements allowed, in particular, the craft of pottery to develop into a high art form among the Pueblos. Pottery by its very nature does not adapt well to a mobile lifestyle, thus it was not a specific part of the Plains culture. Metalworking, in the form of jewelry, is another art form for which Pueblo artists are renowned -- yet another form of artistic expression that requires a settled lifestyle.

Petroglyphs and pictographs, or "rock art," are forms of artistic expression that both cultures shared. The Pueblo tribes are well known for their rock art, still visible at many ancient sites such as Bandelier and Honanki-Palatki (both of which I have seen), through the Four Corners area of the United

States. Despite their nomadic lifestyle, the Plains Indians created their share of petroglyphs as well at especially important, probably sacred, sites to which they would return at appropriate seasons. The Southwestern art is, of course, better preserved to this date thanks to the cooperation of the climate in that area; hence when the Western world thinks of Native American rock art, they naturally think first of the Pueblo works.

Culturally, both groups share a willingness (reluctant though it may be) to adapt their art forms to changing times. As one form of material became less available, a substitute could be found and used, such as the substitution of woven cloth for animal hide in clothing. This is quite evident in the Plains culture, as their lifestyle underwent a much more drastic change in the late nineteenth century than did the Pueblo culture. On the other hand, the weaving of rugs and blankets for which today's Navajo tribe is so famed is a fairly recent innovation, having come from the Spanish culture that came northward from Mexico with the conquistadors. Both groups, though, have been forced to deal with the "commercialization" of their art for social and economic reasons. Both groups have ended up modifying their artistry in response to the potential sacrilege of making their sacred and ceremonial symbols accessible to outsiders who acquire the artifacts of a highly religious, but foreign, society. The Pueblo tribes in particular were eventually forced to create objects that modified, or distorted, or transformed the holy designs that they customarily used so that they could have a body of work for sale to the outside world.

While the specific means of expression differed between the two groups, the Plains Indians and the Pueblo Indians shared, and still share, a common use of art as an integral part of the spiritual and ceremonial center of their lives.