

**Commentary on  
"Tradition in Native American Art"  
by J. C. H. King**

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According to J. C. H. King in the article "Tradition in Native American Art," the use of the term "tradition" is problematic at best. Tradition usually refers to the customary use of technique, material, form, or symbolism in a cultural body of work. As such, it tends to be viewed as a static expression of artistic messages. However, if we consider that living cultures constantly are shifting and mutating, then it is reasonable to expect that technique, material, form and symbolism are all subject to change as their cultural context changes.

In particular, that which is regarded as "traditional" Native American art is a mere snapshot, from a limited time period and a few not necessarily representative Native American cultures and is not likely to represent the full richness of the genre. Such examples as Navajo rugs, Lakota Sioux beaded costumes, and Northwest Coast basketry are actually evolutionary forms of ancient expressions rather than an ultimate art form.

Another problem is that Native American cultures are not isolated from the influences of one another, nor have they been isolated from European influence since the 1500s. Significant exchanges of materials, symbolism, and artifacts themselves occurred among tribes through barter, exchange, and warfare. Thus the Native American tribal cultures cross-pollinated, and it is unlikely that any culture, and therefore any culture's art, can be considered "pure." In addition, the European colonization of the continent from the 1500s to the 1800s had a significant influence in terms of changes in materials, in designs, and in techniques. One significant example is in beadwork, with the replacement of bones and quills with Venetian and Czech glass beads. Use of the latter expanded the design and color possibilities available to the artists, so of course these new materials were likely to be favored.

Finally, like in many cultures, the European interest in the Native American art form caused a type of schism in the creation of that art. As this interest developed, some works were intentionally produced specifically for the "outside" market, while others were intended for use within the culture or tribe itself. Both markets received work that clearly derived from the "traditional" works of earlier times, but which of the two can truly be said to be "traditional" now? If anything, the "outside" works may be truer to the old forms and designs, while the "inside" artifacts show change and evolution to a much greater extent.

Western European culture has a tendency to regard tradition as static rather than mutable, as can be witnessed by the splitting of Western European art into separate and discrete "movements," each with

their own characteristics and forms. This not only gives a misleading picture of Western art itself, but imposes a cultural bias on the art of other cultures which is all too likely to be invalid and lead to inappropriate conclusions about the validity of the art forms of those cultures.