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“To me, Indigenous research means, methodical analysis conducted by, or engaged with Indigenous intellectuals to expand Indigenous wisdom, culture and knowledge.”

AESTHETICS OF A CULTURE: A DISCUSSION ON THE PRESERVATION OF A CULTURE THROUGH ART

Introduction

Creativity and self-expression have always been essential to our humanity; through art in its various forms, Indigenous peoples can continue to preserve their cultural identity. It is through their artistic abilities that Indigenous Peoples express their culture, identity, and connection to the land upon which they rely for survival. Indigenous societies have used various forms of Art to keep their culture alive, such as storytelling, architecture, tattoos and face painting, song and dance, even the blankets in which they wrap themselves. Each of these forms can be witnessed at various events held by Indigenous communities across North America. Some of these events are called powwows and are for Indigenous peoples to meet and socialize, and to express themselves through song and dance. Most importantly, they are places to practice culture and to strengthen its elements. This paper addresses the question of how these various forms of creativity and self-expression serve to preserve Indigenous cultural identity. I argue that through these artistic forms, a culture can survive and be strengthened. This paper expands the range of knowledge and understanding we have around the aesthetics of an Indigenous cul- ture. I begin with the art of storytelling. By forming lessons and historical events into a story, Indigenous tribes can continue to pass on their narratives through genera- tions. I then discuss the importance of man-made environmental heritage known as Indigenous architecture. North America’s varying cultural regions had distinctive forms of housing that reflected their respective regions, whether it be a land of snow or ice, or a hot climate on the open plains. Indigenous peoples’ traditional homes played a promi- nent role in cultural expression. In addition to tattoos and face paint, I discuss the aesthetic value that can be placed on cultural expression through song and dance. Music and dance are other forms of storytelling and are vital to keeping Indigenous culture alive. Finally, I touch upon blanket weaving. Although being a blanket weaver can have its economic advantages, I explore the emotional value that can be placed on a blanket. In each of these sections I argue that Art is not only valuable economically, but for the maintenance and retention of the culture of those who use the forms of expression. Each form also holds value in the sense that it provides Indigenous heritage and reminds us how those who came before us lived their lives. I conclude by suggesting that anybody who does not have knowledge of their own culture or is interested in other cultures can learn a lot through various forms of Art.

Storytelling

Indigenous tribes remembered the past by way of storytelling, before European contact. By word of mouth, stories containing history or valuable lessons are passed on through generations. In addition to the vocalized narrative, stories were expressed through other artistic mediums such as weavings, paintings, and pottery. Today, Indigenous peoples continue to share their stories and include expression through song and even dance. One of the ways of sharing amongst diverse Indigenous nations is with a celebration of Indigenous culture known as a powwow where Indigenous peoples gather to honour the traditions their ancestors fought so hard to keep alive. Such gatherings existed amongst tribal communities preceding the European invasion. These included cultural ceremonies, successful war-party homecoming celebrations, and alliances between tribes, with dancing and singing, sharing of stories, and a feast. By the 1800s the practices and meaning were changing with the influence of Europeans. Using a new meaning derived from a Narragansett word meaning “spiritual leader,” powwow came to be used by travelling medicine shows in the 1800s to describe their wares to facilitate the sales of their cure-all tonics. These medicine shows were touring acts that peddled miracle cure medicines between various entertainments, specifically “Indian Performances” (McNamara, 1971, p. 432). In addition the powwow also drew on concepts originating from a well-known entertainment show, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Cultural ceremony became ‘othered’ as entertainment and a display of Art among the non-familiar population. Non-Indigenous people would attend powwow. Some would go to hear the loud beating of the drums, some to see the beautiful regalia that the dancers wear, and some to see the performance of the traditional dances. Everyone who goes can witness the display and sharing of culture in the powwow circle. Arguably by sharing their stories and culture through these forms of Art, Indigenous groups can still strengthen cultural identities.

Indigenous Architecture

Another valuable way for people to learn about their culture is by examining the architecture of their past. Architecture is, in a way, human-made environmental heritage. Of course, there are sceptics regarding the aesthetics of architecture. Architecture can be viewed simply as the creation of solid structures built purely for the benefit of a society. In this view, a building is nothing more than a place to sleep, work, or worship. But if you take the buildings used for these acts, and allow them to survive through time and to be viewed beside contemporary architecture built for the same purposes, they can then be seen as historical pieces of culture where tourists flock to visit, giving such buildings emblematic status in the cities in which they stand. When debating the aesthetic appreciation of architecture, philosopher Edward Winters (2018) asserts that “its emblematic status is what concentrates the aesthetic of the city into the everyday experiences to be had” (p. 148).” Enjoying architecture is not about looking at a structure as one would gaze upon a painting. It is about being in the building and contemplating within the same walls as those who have stood before us. Modern people turn old buildings into new living spaces for profit and market them as having heritage flair and historical significance. Our appreciation of the aesthetics of a Victorian era house, “hacked into flats”, or New York warehouses converted to “loft-living,” or the beauty of a cantina, seen only through the eyes of its inebriated frequenters, is seen not as art, but as “being in the life of the (building) as we immerse ourselves, and in which we are rewarded by aesthetic fulfilment” (Winters, 2018, p. 148).

Apart from the 12th-century cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde, now preserved and protected within the Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado, the Indigenous people of North America do not have very many ancient architecture sites remaining today as tourist destinations. This does not mean that Indigenous people failed to have building traditions that would be considered aesthetic heritage. Before European arrival, the Indigenous peoples of North America’s various cultural regions, defined by their climatic, geographical

and ecological characteristics, had distinctive forms of housing that reflected the conditions of their respective regions. There are many different types of Indigenous homes but one of the most well-known is the tipi. Traditionally made of animal skins wrapped around a wooden pole structure, some tipi were even painted to depict noteworthy experiences such as a historical battle, or a dream or vision. Today, tipi also retain cultural significance and are sometimes con- structed for special functions as well as tourist attractions.

The longhouse, pit house, and plank house are examples of more permanent building forms. Of the permanent housing structures of Indigenous People pre-European influence, one of the most visually exquisite is the plank houses, found on the Northwestern Coast. Plank houses employed varying forms of post and beam construc- tion, often made of red cedar due to its large length and dimension. The houses expressed the ancestral heritage and social standing of the owners through elaborate imagery and vastly decorated house fronts with painted facades and brightly painted carved heraldic poles. These totem poles were to represent and commemorate ancestry, through crest animals marking a family's lineage. Such architectural designs can be seen in many museums today, indicating that there is a great deal of aesthetic value to the traditional homes of the Indige- nous peoples. The aesthetic form of Indigenous architecture is seen at powwow across North America. In celebration of heritage, tipi can be seen erected at powwow celebrations through- out North America.

Tattoo and Face Paint

Art, as communication and self-expression, can also involve the use of one's own human body as a canvas. Most tattoo canvases you see walking around your local shopping centre are purely decorative or pictorial. Tattoos can also be used as a form of identification. Sailors had their bodies tattooed so that, in the event of a shipwreck, their bodies could be identified. Tattoos can also be purely symbolic. In a case study, researcher Janet Fedorenko (1999) spoke with a female who had several tattoos on her body, each marking emotional times in her life that she wanted to commemorate; the research participant stated, "The tattoos I have are symbolic of changes and rites of passages, transitions I've outgrown. They represent growth that I arrived at through change, and I see them as scars of that process" (p. 111). In tattoo culture, tattoos, much like paintings on canvas, can provide emotional healing.

The earliest evidence of tattooing dates back to the Neolithic period, by the discovery of a tattooed frozen corpse that was trapped in a melting glacier in the Otztaler Alps in 1991. The earliest proof of tattooing indigenous to North America is in Cape Kialegak, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, where beach erosion revealed the frozen body of a 1600-year-old woman: "The body ha[d] extensive tattooing on the dorsal aspects of both the right and left forearms, hands and fingers," (Smith & Zimmerman, 1975, p. 433). As one would expect, tattoos held meaning for Indigenous people as well, varying depending on the tribe. Some warriors of a tribe would receive a tattoo upon returning from a battle, where other tribes' warriors would tattoo themselves to mark how many kills they had. Females would often have tattoos signifying defining moments in their life, such as arrival into womanhood. This mobile, symbolic form of self-identifica- tion and expression continues to be a popular art form in modern culture; although tattoos now may hold less meaning than they once did, they still represent expression and iden- tity for the bearer. In a less permanent form of expression, Indigenous People would paint their faces for various reasons. Before engag- ing in battle with an enemy, a warrior would paint their face with protective designs and prayers would be said during application. These prayers would protect the wearer. American anthropologist Frances Densmore (1918) described how the colours were made in the earlier years:

On the Standing Rock Reservation is found a yellow ocherous substance which, after being reduced to a fine powder, is used by the Indians in making yellow paint. This substance, when treated by means of heat, yields the vermilion used on all ceremonial articles as well as in painting the bodies of the Indians. The baking of this ocherous substance – a process which requires skill – is done by the women. First, the substance

mixed with water is formed into a ball. A hole is dug in the ground in which a fire of oak bark is made. When the ground is baked the coals are removed, the ball is placed in the hole, and a fire is built above it. This fire is maintained at a gentle, even heat for about an hour, which is sufficient for the amount of the substance usually prepared at a time. The action of the heat changes the color of the substance to red. When the ball is cold, it is pounded to powder. In the old days this red powder was mixed with buffalo fat in making the paint, but at present time it is mixed with water. White, black and blue paints were obtained by mixing colored earthy substances with buffalo fat. The blue was found in Southern Minnesota (this required no treatment by heat), and the white and black in Dakota. (p. 116)

Today, powwow dancers paint their faces before dancing. Although some may do it for aesthetics, some dancers use face paint either to protect themselves, to honour a family's or clan's design, or to honour an Elder dancer they look up to by using (with permission) their face paint designs.

Dance

Over the years, artifacts that were illegitimately confiscated by government officials have ended up in museums. Of these objects, sacred dancing masks are easily found in museums. The ceremonial masks of the Northwest Coast depict various beings such as animals, humans, and even supernatural beings. Masks are used at elaborately staged theatrical events, to tell stories of the past while validating the honourable history of the family who owns the mask. Masks across First Nations of the Northwest Coast are all different and vary widely in their purposes and stories.

Cultural anthropologist Jennifer Kramer (2004) shares her research on the repatriation of a specific Nuxalk Echo mask. This case study is drawn from her field work in Bella Coola, British Columbia, home of the Nuxalk Nation. Kramer was fortunate enough to attend a ceremony in which the Nuxalk people shared the dance of the Echo mask, and the story from which it is birthed. It is said that Echo, a supernatural creature, was very clever at learning languages. Imitating the voices of those around him, Echo acted as herald to call people to dance. The dancer representing Echo uses a specific choreography of mouth changes; each mouth exhibits a different facial expression. The family who claimed ownership of Echo held the right to display Echo at ceremonial events as their crest figure. In October of 1995, this brightly painted piece of carved wood was sold by a Nuxalk elder to an Art dealer for $35,000 (Canadian). Without the mask, the family could not perform the dance. The dance being performed without the mask would be like a tap dancer performing without tap shoes; it simply does not work. This mask was so valuable to the family, it is probable that the Elder sold the mask to rid them of their inter-family squabbling. The Art dealer then attempted to sell it to a buyer in Chicago willing to pay approximately $250,000 (U.S.). Fortunately, those plans were suppressed when the Canadian Government "cit[ed] Canada's Cultural Property Export and Import Act (Canadian Stat- utes Chapter C-51). The board has jurisdiction to delay granting export permits to any object: of outstanding significance by reason of its close association with Canadian history or national life, its aesthetic qualities, or its value in the study of the arts or sciences; and is of such degree of national importance that its loss to Canada would significantly diminish the national heri- tage" (Walden, 1995, p. 205). Due to its rare status, the removal of this mask- which, an Art dealer would treat as just another piece of Art - would result in an irreplaceable loss of cultural heritage. With the help of the Canadian Government, and the cooperation of the art dealer, the Nuxalk people ultimately re-claimed ownership of the mask in November of 1997. What was once hidden out of sight and brought out only for winter ceremonials and potlatches is now on 24-hour display, remaining motionless under fixed glass in the foyer of the local Bella Coola bank. With its interchangeable mouths on display simultaneously beside the mask, it can no longer enact its various voices, and thus no longer fulfills its performance capa- bilities and intentions. It can be implied that the Nuxalk, once people of cultural perpetuation, now follow a Western contemporary style of conservation and preservation of valuable and historical objects.

This expression of acting out a story in the form of a dance has carried over into the modern Indigenous world. In powwow gatherings, a men's traditional dance is arguably one of the most popular dances. Due to the size of North America and the vast number of different tribes, the dance itself varies based on region, but most of the dances we see at powwows can trace their roots to established traditions of the Northern Plains. Most closely associated with 19th-century warrior society dances, these warrior dances were even being performed among the people before the forced advent of reservations. After a battle, warriors would return to their village and re-enact their conflict through expressive motions to the elders, women, and children of the village. These dances were not always related to war; sometimes, after a successful hunt, the dancers would act out the story of how they tracked their prey, often imi- tating an animal, like a buffalo, or a horse, or a bird. These expressive re-enactments were carried over through generational sharing and have become standardized in powwows today.

Music

There can be no dance without song. Powwow dances revolve around the beating of the drum. Traditionally, Indig- enous people used the materials at hand to make their instruments. The drum is made of a carved wooden frame and animal hide. Originally comprised entirely of vocables, or lexically meaningless syllables, the songs are sung without words and have a spiritual mean- ing and are a common part of Indigenous American traditions. A song alone, without the accompaniment of a dance, can mean so much as a form of expression. Philosopher Stephen Davies (2018) expresses that music by itself can facilitate the expression of emotions without the help of words or pictures. Words that accompany a song only help to solidify the emotions being expressed: "In song, it is appropriate to think of the music and words as joined to give expression to the feelings of the character represented by the singer" (Davies, 2018, p. 213). In regard to instrumental music, however, Davies acknowledges that while there are no distinct words being sung, and it may therefore be unclear which emotions are actually being expressed, it is agreed upon by all listeners that "we experience the music as emotionally expressive" (Davies, 2018, p. 213). Of course, the expressiveness is subjective in the sense that we each attribute different emotions to the song; where one listener might hear despair in a song, another might hear loneliness. Of course, this is just a small sample of emotions one can express in a traditional song. Indigenous music includes an array of song meanings including courtship, friendship, songs to celebrate the harvest, planting songs, and songs to honour specific people or events.

Indigenous American music is crucial in Indigenous history and education. It is how they pass stories and customs to new generations. The styles and purposes of music vary greatly between and among Indigenous tribes of America. However, the powwow style of song is one that can be shared amongst tribes across North America, reinforcing important cultural values and teachings. The drum, proclaimed by many as the "heartbeat of a Nation," plays an important role in keeping the culture alive.

Blankets

Anyone who attends a large powwow will marvel at the vast display of Native Arts and crafts. Artists from all over North America travel to powwows to sell and trade their crafts, and to share their expressions of culture. One of the most prominent examples of artistic ability seen at powwow is the blanket. Often enveloped with cultural designs, the blanket remains an integral part of Indigenous life. Today, blankets are associated with important events. They are given as gifts for important events in someone's life, such as graduations and weddings, or given to honour someone or as thank-you ges- tures at cultural events like powwows. They are also presented as gifts to commemorate births and deaths. In a clear illustration of the aesthetic cultural value of Indigenous-made blankets, the Navajo people are so internationally acclaimed for their hand-made and wool-woven blankets and rugs that in 2011, a Navajo blanket that was estimated to be made in the 1840s sold for $1.5 million (U.S.).

Of course, being a blanket or rug weaver can have its economic advantages, but weavers have remarked that the act of weaving offers them a chance to experience what they call "hozho," a

Navajo word typically translated into English as "beauty," or "harmony," a concept that expresses "the intellectual concept of order, the emotional state of happiness, the moral notion of good, the biological condition of health and well-being, and the aesthetic dimensions of balance, harmony, and beauty" (Witherspoon, 1977, p. 154). With a deeper understanding of the value of weaving, an appreciation for a blanket, or perhaps Native art in general, it is now possible to realize that "beauty" extends beyond the autonomous object.

Conclusion

Understanding the origins of a culture and its art can help us understand the arts in modern society. Learning how and why an artistic creation came to be is important in developing a deeper understanding of and respect for the people and their culture. It is worth acknowledging that the forms of expression discussed in this paper are forms we still see in modern Indigenous society. Forms of Art that have been with the Indigenous People before European arrival have survived, despite the hardships endured, in part due to the sharing of culture at a powwow. Anybody who attends a powwow, Indigenous or not, can experience the songs and the dance, the dance regalia, the tipis, and all the other forms of expression discussed herein. Anybody who lacks the knowledge or experience of their own culture would benefit greatly by attending a function where their culture is shared. Anybody who is Indigenous to North America, and is not familiar with their own native culture, could attend a powwow and learn a lot about themselves and their family and their tribe through the stories shared by the people they meet. When we hear the sound of a drum, we are hearing the soul of the drum as it calls to us, inviting us to preserve and celebrate our traditions. It is the drum which joins us all together as a unified Nation. It is through the drum that we can live together and share the land upon which we walk and dance. It is the sound of the drum that is the heartbeat of our Nation.

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