Plains Indian Aesthetic Systems of the Pre-Modern Period

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Abstract

The focus of this overview is the artistic traditions that developed in the Plains region from the proto-historic period through the nineteenth century, the technical aspects of those traditions as regards materials and styles, and a general overview of the aesthetic systems that operated in the region. The time periods encompassed in this survey are the proto-historic, historic, and early reservation periods.

The North American Great Plains presents marked extremes in climate and, historically, cultures. The region's exact boundaries are somewhat arbitrary. Spanning the North American continent's mid-section from the Lower Pecos River Valley of Texas north to the arboreal forests of Canada, the western boundary is demarcated by the Rocky Mountains, while the eastern edge is more often defined in terms of annual precipitation averaging less than twenty inches, a point on or near the 90th meridian.[1]

This vast geographic expanse is subject to a wide range of climatic conditions ranging from semi-arid high plains in the west to lush, tall-grass prairies in the east, and was home to a variety of Native American cultures. In times past these cultures followed a number of subsistence economies, ranging from sedentary agriculturists to nomads specializing in bison hunting. Individual tribal cultures, such as the Kiowa, Caddo, and Assiniboine were as different from one another as are Germans, Italians, and Americans in spite of their proximity to one another. Because of the diversity presented by these differences, it is more appropriate to view the region as an environment area versus a culture area. During the proto-historic and historic periods there were certain well defined Plains traits that developed and were exhibited in part or in whole by the groups inhabiting the Plains. These 'typical' Plains traits included a nomadic lifestyle, first on foot and later by horse, conical skin dwellings, well developed hide working traditions, and subsistence economies based in part or entirely on bison hunting.

The latter tends to form the predominant image of Plains peoples in common culture perception as mounted buffalo hunters living year round in hide lodges, wearing feathers and decorating their clothing with beads. While these things were manifested in the arts traditions of many Plains peoples, they nevertheless foster misconceptions that have been repeatedly reinforced through film, literary romanticism, and a Euro-American penchant for the exotic, rather than presenting an accurate portrayal of the region's inhabitants. Although the classic horse cultures of the Great Plains were a relatively short-lived phenomenon which lasted at most for eighty years, the overall result of these influences has been a fixed image in the Euro-American psyche, especially when the word "Indian" is mentioned.

Archaeological evidence shows that people inhabited the Plains at least nine thousand years ago. Over the course of centuries the region became a continental melting pot as different populations moved in and out from peripheral areas to interact with or displace indigenous populations. This pattern has been well documented not only archaeologically but ethnographically, and was greatly accelerated with European colonization along the Atlantic coast and in the greater Southwestwith the subsequent introduction of horses, guns, and numerous articles of Euro-American manufacture.[2] This constant reconfiguration of peoples produced a rich variety of artistic traditions whose bases were rooted in both local and peripheral traditions. Interactions between different groups ultimately resulted in a body of artistic traditions that were separate and distinct from those of neighboring regions, and as such became distinctly Plains in character.Because of this an understanding and appreciation of Plains art requires a rethinking of aesthetic perceptions.

The prevailing aesthetic that Euro-Americans have historically applied to other cultures is a paradigm rooted in the dramatic shift that took place in European thought during the Renaissance, something radically different from most non-Western aesthetic systems.

Until fairly recently Euro-Americans have limited 'Art' to those things commonly viewed as the plastic arts, such as painting, drawing, sculpture, and architecture, sometimes including music and literary forms. Art, in the Western mind, became something to be contemplated for its formal values, while the expressive traditions embodied in utile objects, or artifacts, traditionally have been relegated to the category of craft.

Little if any information is known about the aesthetic systems of prehistoric peoples in the region, however, Plains aesthetic systems of the proto-historic and historic periods are well documented through a variety of sources. Because of their distinct differences in philosophical approach and conception, they necessitate a wider view and inclusion of what "Art" encompasses. While no word existed or exists now for art in any native North American language, both makers and consumers clearly understood the underlying principles of art, and its power to shape and reaffirm culture.[3] It has only been within the span of a very short time that Euro-American societies have begun to accept the art of non-Western peoples as viable forms of expression on a par with their own. Compounding the issue is the fact that many groups in North America operated within their own specific aesthetic which was often different from that of their neighbors. Where Euro-American aesthetics place a high value on the finished work, elevating it to a status of art, Plains peoples, while unquestionably valuing finished objects and the visualappeal of works in and of themselves, did not necessarily elevate the finished product to a place of art for art's sake, although this did sometimes occur. Other factors were requisite for 'good' art, including an object's form, function, and ability to express cultural values and world views. Physical objects, whether in the form of ledger book drawings, painted shields, lodges, hides, parfleche designs, sculptural forms, and articles of clothing evoked a host of concepts and associations that were routinely complemented through song, dance, performance, and oral tradition. Songs, stories and dances were inextricably linked with visual expression, and visual expression reciprocated in this interwoven relationship. Works created by Plains artists were woven into the fabric of life, and could not be separated from it without negating their function, importance, and impact on the viewer.

Ironically, a similar situation existed in pre-Renaissance Europe. Artisans routinely produced works that included coats of arms, tapestries, textiles, and utile objects such as goblets in addition to painted and sculptural works that reflected life. Sculptural additions to architecture, fresco, and mosaic, regarded today as art, had a utilitarian function. Many of these creations routinely provided a format for teaching illiterate masses complex theological tenets and expounded on cultural traditions and world views. It was only after artists began to specialize in specific genres catering to the needs and tastes of their patrons that art became segregated from everyday life.

In marked contrast Plains arts traditions operated on the premise that works were meant to be used, and would eventually wear out, or even be destroyed in the event of their owner's death. When the collecting of Native American works began in the sixteenth century, Euro-Americans placed objects in contexts far removed from those they were intended for, and sought to preserve what was never intended to be preserved. Edwin L. Wade refers to this as "art versus artifact".[4]

Powerful components of Native American aesthetic traditions were basic visual elements such as color, symbol, function, and by extension the context they occurred in. Colors and symbols are two of the most potent visual elements the artist has at their disposal. These elements operate in a variety of ways to influence mood, express emotion, and convey artists' impressions of the surrounding world. Because of color's ceaseless possibilities to elicit viewer reaction, the art of manipulating color is complex, bringing into play a variety of approaches. When coupled with visual symbols, the two elements together are capable of relaying dynamic statements. This dynamic is further heightened when the symbols, used in conjunction with color, function as statements of culture within specific contexts and speak of humanity's place within the universe. In such a context visual elements embody an entire corpus of iconographic meanings, and when supplemented by the addition of other elements, such as kinetics, music, and oral components, can communicate specific cultural and cosmological associations.

Exemplifying this are diagrams of the various color-directional associations and associated concepts connected with these according to context from the Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Pawnee peoples.

Massaum
Color-Directional Associations

Northeast
Black, turtle, fog
The unknown, Kit Foxes

North
White, snow, ice

East
Red, Eyophstah

Northwest
Yellow, 4 Old Men, *Voh'kis*(Kit Fox)
Dog Men

Southeast
White, Sirius, White Wolf,
thunder, lightening,
Elks

West
Blue, Maheo, Thunder, Rigel,
Voh'kis(Kit Fox)

South
Green, white, yellow, ripeness, beauty,
perfection

Southwest
Red, Aldebaran, tornadoes, cyclones,
Red Wolf, Bowstrings

Life Generator Lodge

Color-Directional Associations

North
White, snow, cold, ice, winter

West
Black, night-time, deep water, moon death

East
Red, sun, thunder, life force, warmth

South
Spring, hail, vovetos (dragonflies),
Thunderstorms, new vegetation, rain

Arrow Renewal Ceremony
Red-Black color pairing

Kiowa Color-Directional Associations
Kado

North
Red-Black, White
Southern Bands and Northern Bands Respectively;
Snow, cold, ice.

West
Red-BlueRed-Yellow
Authority, leadership

East
Martial Concepts

South
Yellow, Taime', Green, Regeneration

Pawnee Color-Directional Associations

North
North Star, North Star Village, cold, snow

Buffalo, breath of life

Northwest
Yellow Star, Northwest Village and Bundle,

Yellow corn, mountain lion, lightning, Spring,

youth, willow.

Northeast
Big Black Meteoric Star, Northeast Village and Bundle,

Black corn, Blue corn, bear, thunder, Autumn, adult life,

coming of night, elm.

West
Evening Star Village, sunset, female power,

Creation, conception of life, Garden of Life,

renewal of life, storms.

East
Morning Star Village, light, warmth, sunrise,

male power, dawn wind, planning of creation.

Southwest
White Star, Southwest Village and Bundle,

White corn, wildcat, wind, Winter, old age,

cottonwood.

Southeast
Red Star (Sirius), Southeast Village and Bundle,

Red corn, wolf, Coming of Day Cloud, summer, youth,

box elder.

When meanings and associations of colors and symbols have their bases within contexts outside the cultural experience of the viewer, there is a tendency to impose a biased perspective on the art in an effort to understand it, a natural tendency. All of us operate from the basis of that which is familiar to us. We as viewer are routinely faced with elements of pictorial and expressive systems that serve as vehicles perpetuating specific socio-cultural structures foreign to our own experience, and seek to make sense of them on the basis of what we know.

The way that colors and symbols operate in Euro-American culture often tempers perceptions about how these elements operate in an aesthetic system different from our own. Interpretations of the "Other's" art frequently do not coincide with the conceived purpose of the maker or user.Combinations of colors, visual symbols, and other forms of expression often share overlapping or multi-layered meanings depending on context, an individual's gender, and level of ritual knowledge.

An example of this is a blue bead and a red cord. In and of themselves they are nothing more than that, a blue bead and red cord. However, when these are used as part of a particular piece of regalia, clothing, or other item that is to be used in a specific context, they take own new and powerful meanings, eschewing associations with cosmological forces and literally, in the minds of viewers, become those very cosmological forces. Referencing the above diagram of Cheyenne color-directional associations, certain color parings mean different things in the Massaum than they do in the Life generator Lodge ceremony.

In the Life Generator Lodge ceremony a white-green color paring represents certain species of dragonflies and their molt, hail and thunderstorms that come in the spring, and water, an elemental and necessary life force. In the Massaum this color paring embodies concepts of spring, fecundity, the south, and new life in general. The beaded design a woman would create on a moccasin instep made for a male relative was interpreted differently as well.

In the maker's mind this could represent a point in the landscape where something momentous happened to her or someone in her family, or a lodge. Her male relative, on the other hand, would be more prone to interpret the form as an arrow or lance point. The addition of specific colors added still more differences in interpreting the form.Because of these multi-layered meanings and different contexts an item appeared or was used in, a resulting lack of understanding is commonly projected onto the art of non-Western peoples and becomes misperceptions about purpose. The net effect is a desire to force conformity of all art into a Euro-American paradigm, and an unconscious limiting of the expressive function of art to a Western model. Examples of this are evident in the formal qualities of Plains painting of the early twentieth century. Demands were placed on the art produced by Native American artists in an attempt to make it more attractive and palatable to the dominant culture market and aesthetic, with the result being the development of the Southern Plains and Studio styles of the early twentieth century. These two styles focused heavily on ceremonies, dances, "traditional" (read nineteenth-century) life and subsistence activities that embodied the dominant culture's concept of authentic "Indianness". The premises of these styles constituted the prevalent idea of what was "Indian" art well into the twentieth century, and went largely unchallenged until the establishment of the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the 1960s.[5]

Such forced conformity has been an historically demonstrated trait of Euro-American societies based in attempts to more fully grasp an understanding of who they themselves are. As Europeans embarked on missions of exploration and colonization in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they were redefining who they were as peoples and nations.[6] During the "age of discovery" Europe, composed of societies undergoing rapid and dramatic changes of a magnitude never before experienced, attempted to understand the diversity they were confronted with. Europeans routinely formulated identities for the exotic "Other" as distinctly non-European, casting Native peoples around the world in images that rarely if ever reflected a true reality.[7] An imposed cultural bias on the art of Native peoples, regardless of where they were encountered, rendered the art forms they created as something distinctly less than art in the Western mind.This type of bias, in relation to the art of Plains cultures, has been difficult to eradicate. The degree to which this has been exercised is important to an understanding of art and the manner in which it functions in other cultures. Does it conform to a similar set of rules as pertains to Western art, or does it operate under different rules? Evelyn Payne Hatcher has commented that:

> …the concept of art as being for purely aesthetic contemplation, art for art's sake, pure art, and the necessity of the usefulness of an object to be called "art"…is not a very useful concept for cross-cultural studies, even if one believes that such purity of motivations exists…Concentration on the aesthetic aspects of the art forms of other peoples has tended to be evaluative in our terms…[8]

It is easy for members of an alien culture to assume that the iconography of symbols and colors can be 'read', assuming that a particular culture's repertoire of symbols marginally resembles what they represent devoid of any secondary interpretations. This has frequently been the case regarding the art of North American Plains peoples.

Euro-American societies have routinely assigned meanings and interpretations to the art of Native American cultures based on points of reference based within a Euro-America aesthetic framework, rather than seeking to understand a foreign aesthetic. The art of non-European peoples is then made over into forms and contexts which appeal exclusively to the expectations and demands of the dominant culture. Wolfgang Haberland, writing in "Aesthetics in Native American Art" states:

> Our main obligation is, on the one hand, to convince…that art of aboriginal North American peoples is "Art with a capitol A." On the other hand, we should show that European, or mainstream, thought systems, categories, and values cannot be applied to North American Indian art, or to the art of any other non-European people, and that they are culturally biased and not universal truths, contrary to the opinion of many…critics.[9]

While a greater level of sensitivity and openness is exercised today, the misrepresentation of other cultures' art continues in some measure to the present. Today most members of Euro-American cultures indulge in and embrace misinterpretations and stereotypes of Native American peoples. A case in point is the mental image of feathers and beads that is frequently evoked in the minds of Euro-Americans when the word "Indian" is mentioned. Because of such entrenched stereotypes it is necessary to seek an understanding of the art and its constituent elements as they operated within Plains cultures. Doing so will aid in circumventing the erroneous misperceptions that have prevailed throughout the past.

The connection between art and the lived world is succinctly expressed in the words of a Laguna potter, and serves as an eloquent conclusion:

"Some people do not think that pottery is anything, but it means a great deal to me. It is something sacred. I try to paint all my thoughts on my pottery." What more could a European artist say about his work?[10]

Notes

[1] Waldo Wedel. *Prehistoric Man on the Great Plains.* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961). 6.
[2] See Joseph Jablow. *The Cheyenne Indians in Plains Indian Trade Relations 1795-1840.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994; Alvin M. Josephy. Jr., ed. *America in 1492: The World of Indian People Before the Arrival of Columbus.* New York: Vintage Books, 1993; Karl H. Schlesier, ed. *Plains Indians, A.D. 500-1500: the Archaeological Past of Historic Groups.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994.
[3] See Finson, "Art as a Reflection of the Created Environment." In *International Journal of Business, Humanities, and Technology* 2:2 (March 31, 2012)
[4] Edwin L. Wade. "What is Native American Art?" In Edwin L. Wade, ed. *The Arts of the North American Indian: Native Traditions in Evolution.* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986). 17.
[5] W. Jackson Rushing III, ed. *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century.* New York: Routledge, 1999.
[6]Arrell Morgan Gibson. *The American Indian: Prehistory to the Present.* (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1980). 92.
[7] Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. *The White Man's Indian.* (New York: Vantage Press, 1978). Xvi.
[8] Evelyn Payne Hatcher. *Art as Culture: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Art.* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, Inc., 1985). 8-9.
[9] Wolfgang Haberland. "Aesthetics in Native American Art." In Edwin L. Wade, ed. *The Arts of the North American Indian: Native Traditions in Evolution.* 131.
[10] Communication to Ruth Bunzel, in Wolfgang Haberland. "The Question of Universality in Aesthetic Systems." In Edwin Wade, ed. *The Arts of the North American Indian: Native traditions in Evolution.* New York: Hudson Hills, 1986. 131.