

"BUT IS IT INDIAN?"--

INDIAN AND NON-INDIAN INTERPRETATION OF PLAINS INDIAN ART

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INTRODUCTION

For much of the twentieth Century, interpretation of Plains Indian material culture lay securely in the hands of non-Indian ethnologists and art historians. In recent years however, a re-evaluation of such interpretation has become necessary due to reinvigorated interest in their cultural past by the Indian people themselves. Dissension concerning the meaning and purpose of Plains artifacts has often revolved around issues of authenticity and age. Non-Indians are prone to ask whether an object is "really traditional," is "really Indian." This is particularly the case in situations where contemporary Indians are involved in traditional cultural performances.

This paper discusses the material culture of the contemporary powwow and examines the responses from Indian and non-Indian to those 'traditional' objects. The culture-based responses have important implications for the cross-cultural interpretation of material culture. Examples of cross-cultural perceptions of the Indian and his art abound. They exemplify the complicated nature of the influences acting upon us and on our conclusions as to the objects we perceive. Four separate instances may be used here to exemplify these complications.

Vignette One: Two European hobbyists stand in a corner of the Calgary Stampede Indian Village. Their appearance is closely modelled on the Missouri River Indians portrayed in the 1830s by the Swiss artist Karl Bodmer. In every way and by any standard the quality of the replication is fine. From time to time small groups of Indian youths come by, stop, look, comment, and pass on. The gist of these comments could be paraphrased as, "What are they supposed to be--Indians don't dress like that!" While one such group is around the visitors, two elders come upon the scene

and, hearing the comments, tell the youths, "Ah, but that's how we once looked."

Vignette Two: Three American hobbyists are proudly showing their Indian replication work to some Indian craftswomen in a handicrafts store on a reserve. The work they show is copied from quillworked material of the 1850s meticulously measured and colour-matched from a museum. They are anxious to see work of that nature. The ladies proudly produce their latest creations, in gleaming white buckskin and bright modern beads. At that moment both parties observe the reactions of each other. The American hobbyists perceive the others' handicraft as "new," and "modern," as not "traditional." They feel let down. The Indian craftswomen, sensing this, feel put down. The meeting listlessly continues for a time in the interests of courtesy, and then fades away.

Vignette Three: A University of Calgary education student writes an evaluation of a powwow he witnessed during the course of a multicultural education evening on a reserve. He is less than impressed. "The Powwow," he writes, "could have been better rehearsed. I noticed that besides the fact that the drummers drank pop in the intervals, several dancers wore swimming trunks under their costumes, and watches on their wrists" (emphasis added).

Vignette Four: An Indian and a Whiteman working for a cultural centre on a reserve are examining an artifact offered for sale to them by a dealer. The object is a finely quilled buffalo horn spoon, at least one hundred years old, in very fine condition. The Whiteman is very impressed and remarks that it would be a good addition to the centre's museum. The Indian responds that there is no need to purchase it as there "are still people on the reserve who can make them."

These examples all contain culture misconceptions and considered together provide the essential ingredients for this paper's discussion. All clearly emphasize the strong perceptions of a somehow correct image of the Indian and his material culture. Both the European and the American hobbyists wore or carried

Indian material which to them was the pure, unadulterated "real stuff." What they saw around them was "new" and somehow debased. The White University student knew what the performance should look like, but observed that the performance was flawed by careless infiltration of modern elements destroying the authenticity. The Whiteman saw the quilled buffalo horn as representative of a lost art, intrinsically more valuable than a modern version made by a contemporary Indian. In all the instances it was the non-Indian who had the concern of whether the object was really authentic for the particular tribe, or was a contemporary pan-Indian product. The replications worn and shown carried an implicit message that what was Indian prior to the 1880s was somehow pure and what was post-1880s was decadent, debased and not really "Indian." At its furthest extreme the old Indian culture was "dead." In discussing Indian traditional work with the Indian people, they were talking in much the same way one might talk to a Gucci shoe salesman in Rome about the footwear of the Roman centurions of Caesar's time. We expect the artist to make a choice to be "modern" or "traditional," forgetting that "stark purity is not the true nature of tradition's path."¹ Tradition cannot be measured. It simply exists within everything. It is an essence that tells us who we are.² For the Indian people, "tradition is the symbiosis between man and nature." Time is ignored in favour of continuity. We are not dealing with intellect but heart.³

A basic problem is that non-Indian society generally has become so enamoured of the past, with tradition, with the search for the ideal, that it has built up a resistance to accepting and appreciating the essential continuity of tribal art. For his part, the Indian, while admiring the interest and craftsmanship exhibited by the non-Indian in Indian art, sees no problem. All is equal in his eyes and deserving of equal attention. The museum artifact that the Indian observes touches him through its relationship to him and the signals it gives off. But he is of his time and using the materials and ideas of the 1980s. Why should he pretend that his work is otherwise? He sees little need to antique his work.

It is true that he has responded to White pressures to some degree. Some Navajos have returned to using vegetable dyes, as opposed to commercial ones, in their rug production. Some Plains people have attempted to return to using the smaller seed beads rather than the modern larger size ones. But the reason for doing this has nearly always been economic incentives from outside collectors.

Of course the dictation of what Indians should produce has been immensely aided by the fact that most books on Indian art have been written by non-Indian people. They have called the tune. Now, with the proliferation of cultural centres on reserves, and a generally renewed interest in the past traditions and tribal styles, more and more Indian voices can be heard re-evaluating written-in-stone pronouncements on Indian art by non-Indians. However, there is another, perhaps more interesting and stimulating, way in which we can learn more about the differences cross-culturally in the interpretation of Indian art. That is by observing material culture apart from the museum showcase and in its natural setting. Parades are one such possibility, affording as they do a view of the unbroken tradition of Indian and horse. But it is the powwow that above all permits a view and interpretation of the material culture of the Plains Indian to best advantage.⁴

The first thing to be said about the powwow is that it is far from being an artificial recreation of the past, a pageant, a performance of the heritage, requiring the sort of rehearsal which the university student thought was so badly needed and which of course is done at times. The powwow is truly a traditional affair which, though it has seen modifications and even innovations, still retains the essential central thread of culture that is totally authentic. For our purposes, the powwow, drawing as it does on a cross-section of the White and Indian public, all of whom express their responses to what they see, forms an ideal research base for cross-cultural aesthetics.

While the powwow contains dances which are acknowledged to be "new" or "modern," such as in the case of the girl's fancy

dance, it is the older style dances which provide us with the best answer to the question of what is "traditional," what is "really Indian." It is perhaps significant that Indian people themselves have resorted to the concept of "traditional" dance to distinguish it from other forms. A title or category like this would have been inconceivable in the nineteenth century but, as we approach more modern times, a distinction was needed between the invented dance styles of the time and the older forms.

The "traditional" dance form undoubtedly derives from the older Grass Dance Society.⁵ The literature on this early style is reasonably extensive and we have a good knowledge of the material culture used. In the accouterments of the modern "traditional" dancer may be observed old traditions, modified traditions, and invented traditions, and an example of each demonstrates the complexity of today's situation regarding what is authentic. From the outset, however, it should be noted that, as an overall philosophy, the traditional dancer tries to imply tradition in the way he dances and the way in which he presents his appearance. He wants to look "old-time," but in doing so he will use materials that he is well aware were not available in the old days. The traditional dancer, like the bride, carries something borrowed, something blue, something old and something new.

The roach, with its one or two feathers, is an example of unbroken tradition (Plate 1). Out of the original paraphernalia of the Grass Dance society, it comes down the years virtually unchanged from its original form, although its position on the head has varied somewhat over the years. Traditional dancers have often worn their roach on the back of the head, as indeed some of the early photographs of dancers tend to show. This seemingly trivial point, in fact, has something to tell us about perceptions of what is "old." Comments, such as "your roach is falling off," from both Indian and Whites demonstrate that being "traditional" has its drawbacks. At such times the necessity of displaying an unambiguous message takes precedent over tradition.



PLATE 1: Roach and Eagle Feather - unbroken tradition
[Museum of the American Indian, NY].



PLATE 2: Dog Feast Stick - unbroken tradition
[Calgary Exhibition and Stampede].

The dancer will often carry a stick used in the dog ceremony of the Grass Dance. This stick is always forked at the end and is commonly decorated (Plate 2). Originally, it was used by only certain officers in the dance society, but now it is more generally used and has become a secular dance implement that signifies the older practice and gives credibility to the bearer's traditional appearance. There are a number of other items the dancer carries or wears, such as hair pipe breastplates, loop necklaces, otters' and dentalia necklaces, that remain virtually unchanged in form. There are also items which have been reintroduced in recent years, and which appear in a form recognizable to anyone who cares to search out the relevant anthropological monograph. An example would be one of the older-style Cree headdresses, characterized by a cascade of feathers from the crown of the head. While the headdress has become secularized so that anyone caring to do so can wear one, the return of such an item signifies just how much more prevalent is pan-tribalism than pan-Indianism in the contemporary powwow. All such objects are the results of a search within tribal cultures to discover tribal styles and identity.

Apart from the straightforward continuing use of traditional items, there are a number of adapted traditions represented in the clothing of the traditional dancer. Most prominent would be the bustle which, along with the roach, belongs with the original Grass Dance tradition. The bustle today shows a marked development of elaboration from the earliest simplistic ones of the nineteenth century. The Grass Dance societies spoke of their bustles as Crow belts. This had nothing to do with the tribe of that name, but rather was a reference to the fact that at one time stuffed crow skins had been attached to their belts. As time progressed the skins were replaced by feathers (Plate 3). During the course of this century two differing styles of bustles have developed: the fancy dance style coming out of Oklahoma and the traditional dance style. The former is of course the more elaborate and flashy of the two, bearing colours and touches that make of it a spectacular burst of colour (Plate 4).



PLATE 3: Old Style Crow Belt.



PLATE 4: Fancy Dance Bustles - adapted tradition [F. Pakes].

The traditional form developing out of the Grass Dance has nearly always remained more subdued. The Oklahoma style has made use of a variety of feather sources, often without any resort to eagle feathers, while the latter has been almost exclusively of that bird. With a refinement in the techniques of attaching them, bustles now are approaching an "over-kill" in effect, their size virtually covering the entire back of a dancer. Despite the very obvious differences in the bustles of today, as compared with nineteenth-century ones, they are in no way seen as necessarily modern by wearers or observers. Even the fancy dance bustle, with the passing of time, has become perceived as traditional by some. Howard has noted that some of the young southern Poncas "lacking the perspective time gives, often do not realize that things have not always been so, and consider the . . . "feather" [fancy] outfit . . . to be the same costume their ancestors wore two or three hundred years ago."⁶ The basic reason for this, of course, is the nature of the material used. Eagle feathers have become the single most sacred objects of the powwow itself. The symbolism of the feathers, their scarcity, and the myths built around them ensure that their mere presence on the dancer is enough to stamp him as traditional. Dancers feel that they dance well because the eagle feathers make that happen. The feather has certainly moved from a position of being a medal, a symbol of warrior courage, to one of increasingly sacred nature. While it has always had that aura and reputation, it was once more covert than overt.⁷ Today the Master of Ceremonies and other speakers at powwows are likely to make a point of this at various stages of the powwow. Thus a tradition has undergone modification through time in keeping with the changed situation of Native culture.

The increased use of the eagle feather in the bustle is paralleled elsewhere in the dancer's outfit. For instance, a massive amount of fringing is commonly used today, far more than was ever seen before. As with the bustles, it is a sense of the past that is sought, and an emphasis on the use of natural materials as opposed to the synthetics and wool or cotton of the other dancers.

Shields have always been a part of the powwow dancer's outfit. The original dance variety of shield was always a smaller version of their owners' larger war shields. In the early nineteenth century the actual shields were more often carried but as the century progressed the lighter, usually canvas-covered, version came to predominate. The heraldic devices emblazoned on their fronts were often versions of the war records appearing on the war shields of the owners. Today some veterans carry shields with World War II experiences on them much in the way their grandfathers would have done in bygone times. However, today with the passing of the shields' original function, the door has been opened to more individual expression. Shields now may be found that carry more representational figures than traditionally found. While the majority revolve around the major spiritual animals of the Plains--bear, eagle, buffalo--some carry more contemporary motifs (Plate 5). Within the context of this paper one might ask, "But is it Indian?" One interpretation might be that there is a traditional element here. Originally it would have been unthinkable for anyone to paint a shield design without having some personal links to the design, preferably reflecting a personal vision. Again, only warriors might have shields, and in all cases the right to carry a shield was an important consideration. The dancer carrying a shield might be seen to be somehow acknowledging his lack of right to carry a shield by deliberately making it clear that the shield carries no intention of fooling the observer. The incongruity of the contemporary design and its relevance to another aspect of life is thus a signal itself of honesty. It has come from the hands of an Indian and so is Indian in that sense. It has a contemporary meaning that gives it value. It is the museum curator that will have to decide whether there is a place for it in the "Indian collection."⁸

The painting of stripes and tadpole figures on leggings was a recognized symbol system among many tribes of the nineteenth century. Again, while the relevance of what is overtly a military symbolism has now gone, such painting remains today in greatly modified form as a straightforward way of elaborating otherwise



PLATE 5: Traditional Dancer with Snoopy Shield
[F. Pakes].

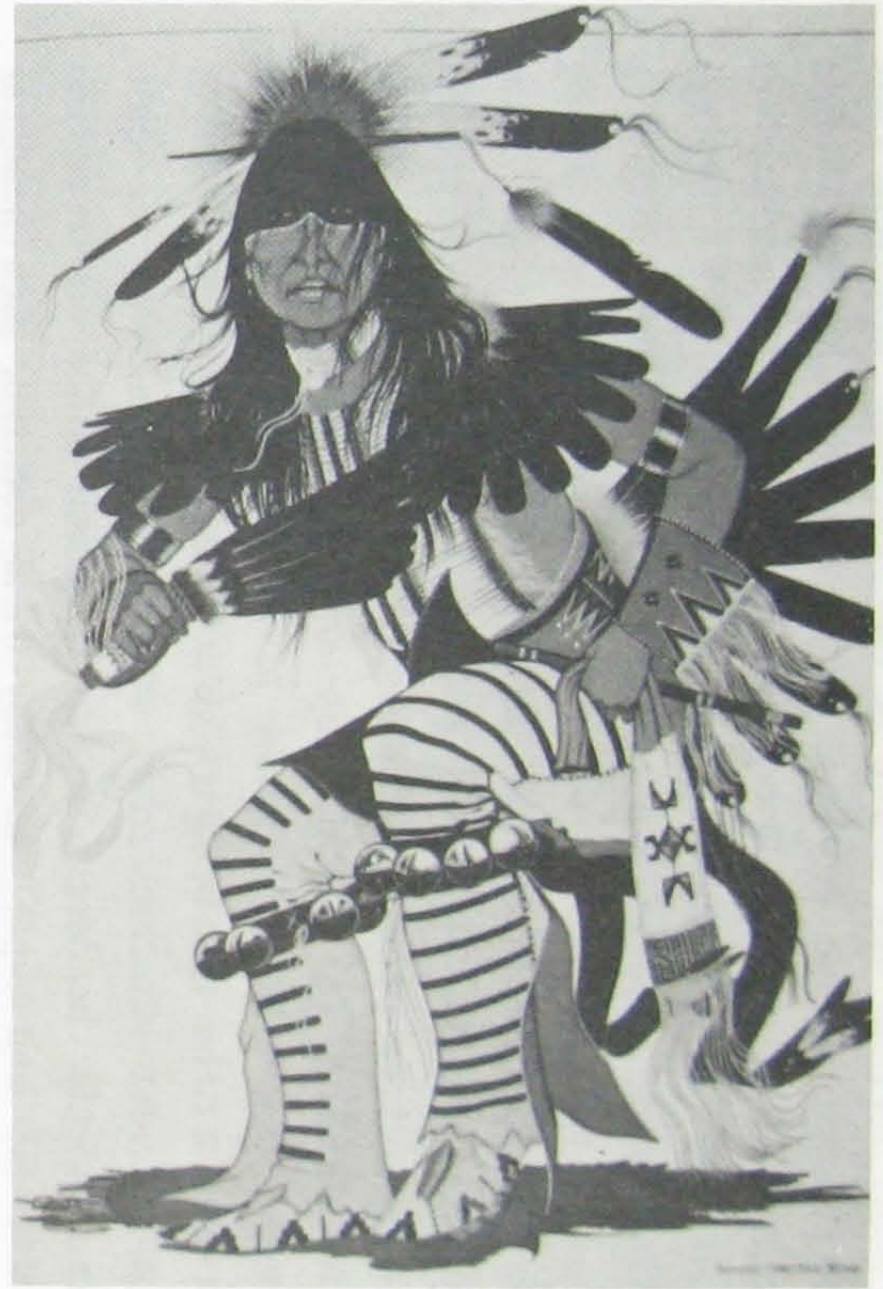


PLATE 6: Western Art - mirror of tradition
or influence on tradition, [Four Winds].

plain dance leggings and adding to that "old time" look (see Plate 6). A feature of the old style leggings is that they were often asymmetrical in the stripe layout and in the varying thicknesses of the stripes, quite apart from the fact that the leggings themselves were often of two different colours. Here we have a problem in the present day when the necessary knowledge among the wider public may be lacking, with the result that misconceptions arise. Dancers possessing such items of apparel are likely to have people commiserating on the fact that they had obvious problems in matching up the leggings! It sometimes becomes a case where conformity to the mainstream often is the easiest way out rather than being a stickler for authenticity.

A different situation arises with other items from the past. A recent popular headdress in the traditional dance has been the wolf skin cap and cape. In many tribal societies, such headgear could only be used by certain individuals as a mark of honour among the wolves or scouts or war parties. It carried great prestige and was worn only by the selected. Over the years, however, usage has become secularized and there is a free-for-all in its use. While some older people will maintain that a dancer should not wear it without a right to do so, others shrug and say it has now lost its original meaning.⁹ A further problem is that such headgear has become popular recently in Indian paintings and films. Indian people observing these and, being attracted by what they see, have copied objects of this sort as well as the face paintings they have noticed (Plate 6). White observers at powwows familiar with such paintings and films equally accept what they see; consequently, use is sanctioned and accepted.

What is perhaps more a concern by Indian people is the fact that there is a good deal of imitation of other dancers on the powwow circuit. It is thought ethically wrong for someone to become a "look-alike" without the agreement of the innovator of the style. It is acceptable to adapt what is seen but it has to be changed to something slightly different to make it personal to the adaptor. It has to be made one's own, by whatever characteristic embellishment is decided upon. Once more our shield example

clearly fits this concept. The great problem for replicators, as far as their work being acceptable to Indian people is concerned, is that their replication is often too close to the original. For instance, European hobbyists have been criticized for reproducing medicine items, such as Blackfoot bundle tipis, to which they have no right. While it is true that Indian craftsmen and women themselves are involved in replication--the Lakota Project is one such example--the aim is to recreate the spirit more than a mirror copy. However close to the original, the finished product always shows some personal touch of the maker. Craftworkers who engage on a regular basis in the production of moccasins, necklaces and rosettes are often pleased to work on commission to replicate something special, especially when normal labour costs would otherwise make the task prohibitive.

The attitudes of dancers towards the care and maintenance of clothing and artifacts generally follow old traditions. The items are cared for but they have to be functional and useable. Consequently, fine work gradually wears and is damaged by constant packing and unpacking at powwows and by the rugged activity on the dance floor. While the collectors may wince, to the Indian people it is right that man-made things do not last forever. Things should decay and vanish. It is part of the whole natural life process. Museums have had obvious difficulties with this concept. The preservation of items, especially those of medicinal function and which normally would deteriorate in time, is often looked upon in the same way as the artificial extension of life forces to an otherwise "dead" person.

As far as invented tradition is concerned,¹⁰ perhaps the most striking example in recent years has been the introduction of the eagle talon dance stick (Plate 7). Everything about this stick says "old." It has an appearance about it that readily seems to lend itself to things traditional. Yet no early specimens exist in museums. The sticks became noticeable in Canada in the early 1980s. Now they have become de rigueur for the traditional dancer and are seen everywhere. If we consider that it has taken the beaded gauntlet and the beaded vest (Plate 8) just 110

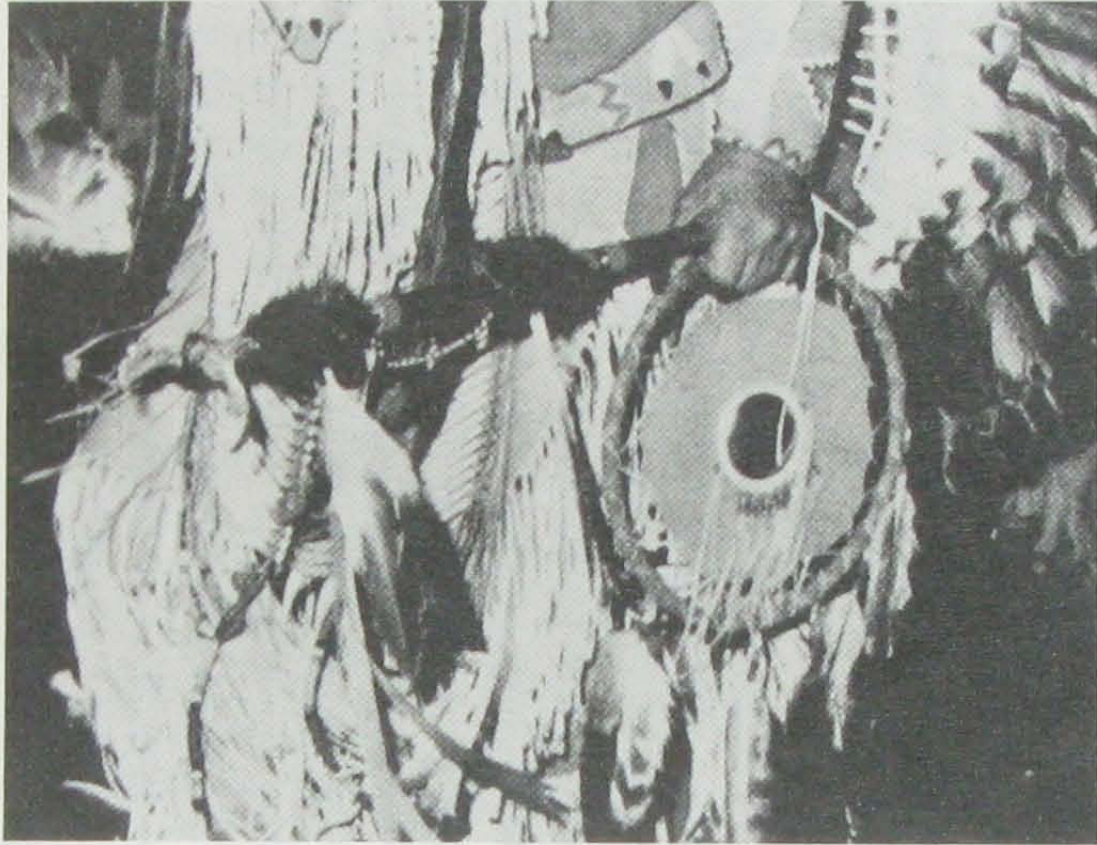


PLATE 7: Eagle Talon Stick - invented tradition
[Calgary Exhibition and Stampede].

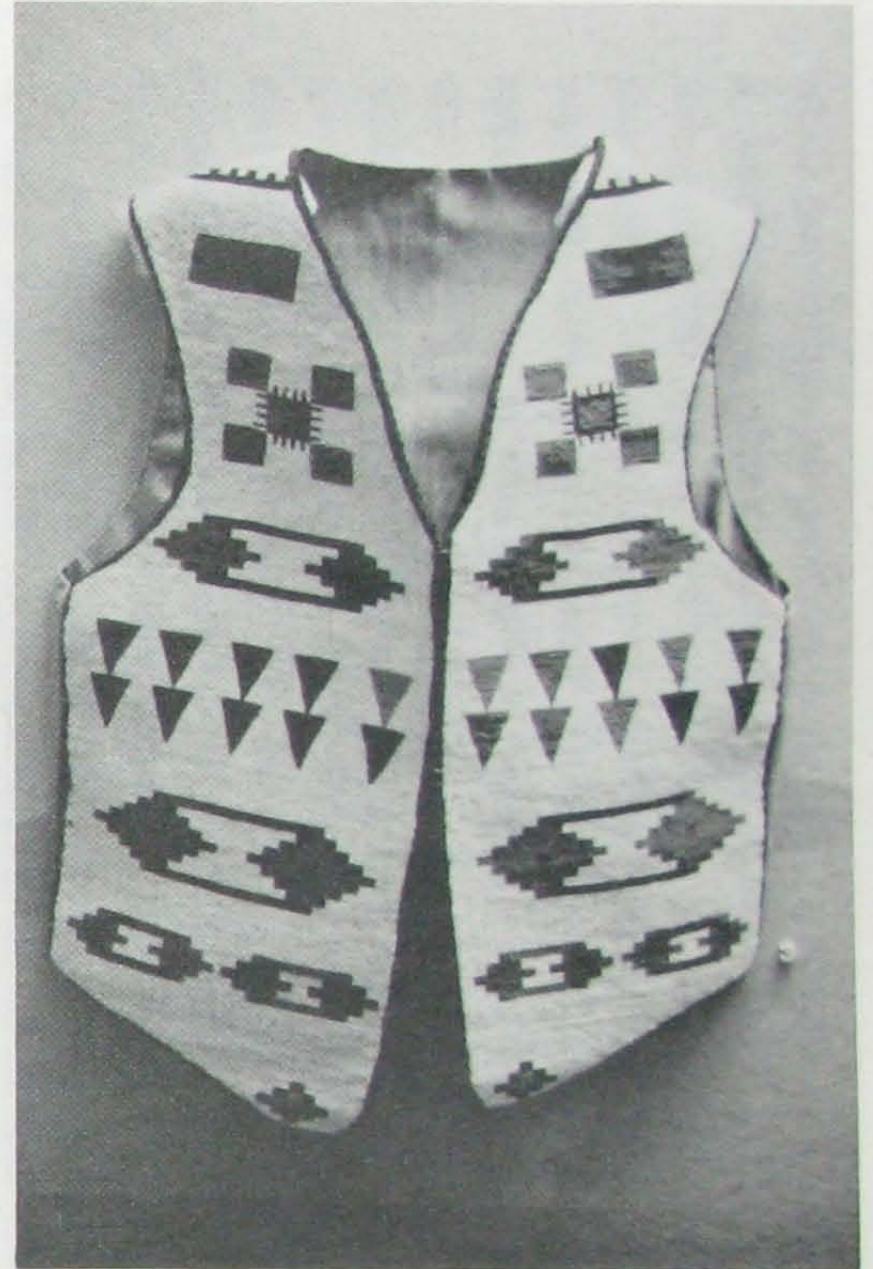


PLATE 8: Beaded Vest - 'traditional' garment
[F. Pakes].

years to become firmly entrenched as "traditional" wear, we may well see the stick take half that time to reach such a reputation. The same thing applies to claws and talons as applies to the eagle feather. They are readily acceptable as representing the old times and, as such, become instant tradition. My own impression of the White people's response to this artifact is that its traditional status is unquestioned. Under the normal conditions of pervasive questioning by White observers as to its origin, we may well expect an origin myth to develop shortly!

In cases where trade goods have been owned by Indian people, we have had a long history of adaptation to Indian life. Beaded spoons, telescope cases, walking canes, valises, and western saddles are just some of the many items that have been possessed and elaborated by the Indian. It would seem that attractive objects have held a special appeal through their exotic nature and have usually been given artistic attention by being displayed as treasured items. Totally covering an object with beadwork has long been a traditional thing to do, as is exemplified by the beaded sole moccasins. "We have this urge to decorate everything, to take something ordinary and make it ours and this is one form it takes today."¹¹

But how are we to take an object of White manufacture that is not elaborated to any great extent? The sword carried in the Grass Dance is an example. While some swords have been found with decorations, many appear unaltered (Plate 9). Out of context there is little to tell of its Indian "life." It has not been unknown, of course, for dealers and collectors to add Indian decoration to such objects in order to make them look more "Indian" and consequently enhance their value in the marketplace. White society still insists that Indian artifacts conform to non-Indian views of what should be there. An assembly of a Crow Indian traditional dance outfit on a museum mannequin that was really representative of its genre might entail, beside the more "Indian" items, a pair of basketball socks (preferably with two strips at the top) which at one time or another has been a regular part of the outfit. Yet unless the display was prepared by Crows



PLATE 9: Cavalry Sword - "But is it Indian?"
[National Anthropological Archives, Washington DC].



PLATE 10: Bodmer's Hidatsa Dog Dancer
- researching the roots.

it is difficult to imagine the standard city museum including such clothing in a display. Neither might we expect to see there the punk studded bracelets and gloves that are often worn by younger dancers today. We are increasingly faced with the issue of what is appearing at the powwow and we have to remind ourselves that basketball socks and punk bracelets may well be as much of tomorrow's museum collections as Grass Dance swords and beaded spoons are today. They are tomorrow's artifacts.¹²

In all of this it should be noted that White society does not have a monopoly on misinformation and bias. Indian people themselves, for so long exposed to the stereotypical Indian through comics, books, sculptures and paintings and, of course, Hollywood and television, have become somewhat hazy at times about the exact source of what they wear and carry. Indian militants of the seventies might have been disconcerted to learn that the beaded headbands they often sported in the interests of Indianness were an invention of Hollywood necessitated by the need to keep wigs on the heads of Whites pretending to be Indian and galloping along on horseback. This type of circular influence in which the Whiteman has vaguely observed Indian tradition, "improved" upon it and provided it with Madison-Avenue type promotion, so that Indian people have internalized it, become its best proponents, and put the stamp of approval of "Indianness" on it, has been a constant problem to the student of the authentic. In recent years some younger dancers have been clearly influenced by Indian westerns, such as "Winterhawk," as well as the work of modern western artists. Face paint and dress imitations have often originated from such worldly, as opposed to spiritual, sources. Conversely, and at its best, attention to media for inspiration has also led some to re-examine or discover for the first time the works of nineteenth-century artists, such as Bodmer and Catlin. The exposure that Bodmer's justly famous Hidatsa dog dancer has received has had inevitable results (Plate 10). (One observer wryly noted that no major exhibition of German Indian artifacts is considered complete without the mandatory use of this picture.) At least two examples of the headdress portrayed by

Bodmer have been observed recently at powwows, albeit in one case it appeared on the head of a dancer from an entirely foreign tribal background to the piece in question. It may be noted in passing that in one instance the headdress was discarded by the dancer during the course of the powwow due to feathers becoming detached from it. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that it was difficult to return the flawed article to Germany where it had been made in the first place!

The problem of the White replicator of Indian artifacts is one that affects the question of what is Indian, of course. Not a few artifakes made by White replicators pass into Indian hands, turn up years later in his estate, and are acquired by collectors or museums and displayed as being "Indian." Much concern has been voiced in certain American museums that unwittingly their Indian collections may include some prime results of the Boy Scouts of America activities in the Indian craft area.

Plains material culture, in summary, has seen examples of all types of traditions within the performance of its cultures. Adaptation has been the key word and the fact that there is an unbroken line of its success bodes well for the future. As Coe notes, "traditions have always been capacious enough to absorb much from the outside without losing their integrity."¹³ If there is a "problem" at the present time it is one that seems to lie squarely with White society. While the Indian is enjoying himself at the dance the White observer sits worried about whether he is watching the real thing or a performance polluted by modernity. The Indian seems to be implicitly aware that tradition does not subscribe to hard and fast rules.¹⁴ While there is no exact translation of "tradition" into Indian languages there is a sense of "doing it right" or "Keeping up the old ways."

It is to Ralph Coe, quoted frequently here, that we owe a great debt. One has to look twice at the title of his book, Lost and Found Traditions: Native American Art 1965-1985 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986). We are still so unused to considering Indian art in that period of time. But to read it is to read some basic truths. "Almost every type of tribal art of the

nineteenth century is either being made or is still capable of being made,"¹⁵ he says. As Carl Ponca, a contemporary craftworker, has commented: "Traditions fluctuate. They stop and start, go away and come back, and are even neglected. They can be resumed at any point in the circle."¹⁶

The powwow is a living example of the concepts put forward by Coe. Overall it is this dance ceremony that provides us in the 1980s with the most vigorous expression of Indian traditional life. Faced by "old" and "new," "traditional" and "modern," the observer can only marvel at the way the Indian is able to harmoniously put it all together so that we do not see the "joins." To the question "Is it Indian?" one can only answer that in the performance of the powwow we are witnessing a reconciliation of what being "Indian" ought to mean now.

NOTES

¹Ralph Coe, Lost and Found Traditions: Native American Art 1965-1985 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), p. 29.

²Ibid., p. 46.

³Ibid., p. 49.

⁴Ibid., p. 24.

⁵Fraser Pakes, "Tradition and the Contemporary Powwow." Unpublished paper presented at the Canadian Ethnology Society Conference, May, 1986.

⁶James A. Howard, "The Ponca Tribe," Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin, No. 165. (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1965), p. 160.

⁷Powers has noted that "there is today (1966) more religious symbolism involved than was true . . . in 1949. In general an attitude prevails today that whatever is old time is similarly religious. Because of this attitude, revived secular events may assume a new religious significance." "Contemporary Oglala Music and Dancers: Pan-Indianism versus Pan-Tetanism" Ethnomusicology (September, 1968), p. 287.

⁸An added complication in this example of a contemporary shield design is the fact that the traditional dancer carrying it is female!

⁹Sue N. Roark-Calnek, "Indian Way in Oklahoma," Ph.D. Diss. Bryn Mawr College 1977. This writer notes on page 777 that in terms of rights to wear it is not clear that "permission is ever

refused or that any effective sanctions other than gossip or public opinion and respect for tribal distinction" are brought to bear.

¹⁰Invented tradition has been defined as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms or behaviour by repetition which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past." Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.) The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 1.

¹¹Coe, p. 44, quoting Jaune Quick-to-See Smith.

¹²Ibid., p. 29.

¹³Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 45.