

# The Native Art Continuum

by

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## Introduction

In the 22 years that I have been buying and selling items from the Native American community, a number of our customers have asked us why we call some items Native Made and others Native Assembled. There have also been questions about the authenticity of items we offer. In this essay, I do my best to explain my understanding of various levels of Native Authenticity and the relative purity of the arts and crafts in the marketplace.

## Pre-Contact Style Art Today

Contact refers to the arrival of Western Europeans in the Americas starting in 1492. Pre-Contact Style Art is the purest form of Native American art on the market today. This category includes arts and crafts that are made by modern artists using pre-contact designs, methods, materials, and tools. In order to qualify as pre-contact style art, the piece must be made using locally acquired materials and simple stone, flint, wood, antler, or bone tools that are locally produced using traditional methods.

Examples of this type of art include the following items:

- **Clay Pots or Figures** that are made with fire-based kilns, locally produced clays, locally produced dyes, and non-electric wheels.
- **Grass or Splint Baskets** that do not use modern threads or sinew or dyes.
- **Stone, Bone, Antler, or Ivory Carvings** that use locally acquired materials and are carved using traditional tools. No modern dyes or materials are used.
- **Paintings, Etchings, and Drawings** that use locally prepared hide parchments or hair-on hides and traditional dyes.

- **Birchbark Bitings** that consist of just bark with designs bitten into the bark.
- **Native Tanned Hides and Skins** that were killed using traditional bows and arrows and consist of just the raw hide that has been de-haired and scraped free of fat using traditional materials. These hides are then preserved with the brains from the animal and then smoked.

Very few items in the market today meet these stringent requirements. In fact, artists making the items above usually rely on modern tools to some degree, such as using modern shovels or picks to mine stone, piped water for preparing clay, knives for cutting materials for baskets, knives for fleshing hides, and brushes for paintings.

### Pure as Ivory Snow™\*

In this category, I include all items that are made by Native Americans who limit their use of Western technology or materials in preparing their arts and crafts.

Examples of this type of art that I have seen in my travels include the following items:

- **Ojibwa Porcupine Quills Boxes** that are made with locally harvested porcupine quills and locally harvested birchbark. The thread used to tie quills together comes from modern non-Native sources as do the dyes used to color the quills and the knives used to cut the quills or birchbark.
- **Micmac and Abenaki Ash Splint Baskets** are made with splint strippers made from wood with modern metal blades and modern knives to cut the strips. The artists often use modern dyes for coloring.
- **Attikamek Birchbark Baskets** (rogans) are made with locally harvested birchbark, spruce roots, and smoked moosehide straps. Artists use modern knives and saws to harvest the bark and utility knives to cut the bark and hide straps and to scrape images into the bark.
- **Ojibwa Full-Size Functional Birchbark Canoes** are made with locally harvested birch bark, spruce roots, and ash beams. Artists use modern knives and saws to harvest the bark and X-Acto™\*\* knives to cut the bark and straps and to scrape images into the bark.
- **Ojibwa Corn and Quill Necklaces** are made with locally acquired corn and porcupine quills that are dyed with modern dyes and are strung using modern thread.
- **Inuit Soapstone Carvings** are typically made with locally mined soapstone in the north. Many of the artists use non-traditional tools such as saws, axes, picks, Dremel™\*\*\* tools, files, and sandpaper to make the carvings and finish them off using a modern acrylic spray.

- **Innu (Montagnais) Tea Dolls** are typically made with some smoked moosehide, modern textiles, threads, beads, and buttons. The hides and cloth are cut and sewn with modern scissors, knives, and needles. The tea inside comes from countries such as China or India.
- **Inuit Antler Dolls** are made with caribou antler in the Arctic. The antler is cut with modern saws, and the arms and legs are attached using modern, commercial sinew.
- **Iroquois Masks** are typically made with locally acquired wood cut using modern saws and axes. Carvers often use a metal crooked knife from India. The horse hair used to trim the mask often comes from tanneries in countries such as Peru or Hungary. Copper, aluminum, or shell eyes usually come from modern commercial sources. Modern paints and brushes are used.
- **Ojibwa Totem Poles** use locally acquired wood that is cut and prepared with modern tools. The paints are typically modern as well. The totem pole designs have been appropriated from Native Americans on the West Coast of North America and are not local designs for this tribe.

\* Ivory Snow™ was supposed to be "99 and 44/100 pure." Ivory Snow™ is a trademark of the Procter & Gamble Company.

\*\* X-Acto™ is a brand name for a variety of cutting tools and office products owned by Elmer's Products, Inc.

\*\*\* Dremel™ is a registered trademark of the Robert Bosch Tool Corporation.

## “With a Little Help from My Friends...”

In this category, I include arts and crafts prepared with Native skills that have substantially non-Native materials or materials that have been prepared using non-Native tools.

Examples of this type of art that I have encountered include the following items:

**Iroquois Soapstone Carvings** for sale today are typically made with imported Brazilian talc (soapstone) and are made with modern tools. Three or four decades ago, much of the soapstone came from a mine in the United States. Today, most is imported from Brazil.

**Cree Moosehide Moccasins** are usually made using locally produced smoked moosehide, glass beads imported from India or the Czech Republic for trim, tanned rabbit skins imported from Europe or tanned beaver skins prepared in modern tanneries, and are sewn with modern needles and modern threads.

**Smoked Moosehide, Caribou Hide, or Deerhide** are nearly always come from animals shot with commercial rifles. Modern metal scrapers are used to remove the fat and hair. Detergents such as Sunlight™\* (a Canadian dish washing soap) and commercially prepared lard are used to de-grease and soften the hides. The hides are trimmed using a modern knife and sewn together

in preparation for smoking using a modern sewing machine and thread and are placed over a modern metal pot that contains the bark for smoking the hide. The fire is started using modern matches or a lighter.

**Micmac Moose Antler Keychains** are made with antler from moose killed by factory-produced bullets from modern rifles, are carved using modern tools, are painted using modern paint, and have a metal keyring attached that most likely comes from a factory in China.

**Huron Snowshoes** are made from wood cut and sanded with modern equipment. The hide is cut using modern hide splitters and the snowshoes are covered in modern varnish.

\* Sunlight™ is a registered trademark of the The Sun Products Canada Corporation.

## Contemporary Native American Art

Most Native American jewelry available today falls under this category. The materials are often sourced from overseas, and the primary contribution from the Native American community is labor and design. In some cases the designs are hideous—such as beadwork designs depicting Elvis or peace signs. We label most of these items as Native Assembled instead of Native Made, as they rely substantially on non-Native materials.

Examples of this category that I have seen include the following:

- **Mohawk Breastplate Chokers** are assembled with hairpipe from Vietnam, beads from India or the Czech Republic, abalone shell buttons from South Africa or elsewhere, modern artificial sinew from the United States or India, and leather from non-Native-owned commercial tanneries. How do we know this? The Mohawk artist who makes these buys the materials from us and is a good friend.
- **Huron Moosehide Zipper Change Pouches** are assembled with commercially tanned moosehide from a tannery in Quebec, modern metal zippers made in China or elsewhere, modern sewing machines to sew them, modern scissors to cut the material, modern dyes to stamp the images, and modern thread.
- **Iroquois Coyote Claw Necklaces** are assembled with commercially tanned deerskin, coyote claws purchased in bulk from coyotes killed by modern trappers using modern hunting equipment, and brass beads from India.
- **Ojibwa Beaded Knife Cases** are assembled using imported glass beads, commercially prepared leather, and commercially prepared thread.
- **Ojibwa Dreamcatchers** are typically assembled with imported steel rings from China, India, or Taiwan, artificial sinew from the U.S. or India, commercial leather from modern tanneries, glass or plastic beads from India, China, the Czech Republic, or the U.S. The feathers usually come from chicken hackle produced and sold commercially.

## International Indigenous Arts and Crafts

The desire for inexpensive arts and crafts to meet the demand of cost-conscious consumers for souvenirs has led to an active market in items produced by indigenous peoples in places such as Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. The materials used are often modern and imported and the designs are based on Native American designs from the U.S. or Canada. People who arrange for the production of the items or export are often non-indigenous who have access to capital, computers, Internet connections, bank accounts, and export skills. The importers and distributors in the U.S. and Canada are also often non-Native persons with access to capital, computers, Internet connections, bank accounts, and import skills.

Examples of arts and crafts I have encountered include the following:

- **Dreamcatcher Necklaces, Chokers, and Bracelets** made by poor people using imported components and designs. The dreamcatcher image and design is not indigenous to Ecuador, Peru, Guatemala, or Bolivia, but the crafts coming out of the countries frequently use this theme as it is a very popular one. The typical unskilled worker in these countries makes one or two dollars per day. An item for which you pay US\$5.00 in a store may earn the craftsman in one of these countries somewhere between US\$0.10 to US\$0.50, often including the cost of materials. In nearly all cases, the store selling you these crafts will have made a conscious effort to beat down the importer or distributor on price in order to meet their own needs for a profit. Without the market for these crafts, many of the overseas artists literally risk starving.
- **Clay Tablets** are produced for an American museum using the museum's design and Ecuadorian labor and materials. The tablets are baked in wood-fired kilns and are similar to what was produced by Native Americans more than a thousand years ago. Each piece is unique and is made by hand. The discoloration from the wood fire is apparent in each piece.
- **Pan Flutes** are musical instruments made from bamboo using commercial dyes and acrylic poufs. Commercial twine is used to hold the pieces together. Modern equipment is used to saw the wood.
- **Imitation Shrunken Heads** are made with either goatskin or llama skin that has been wetted and dried in the shape of a human head with the hair removed from parts of the skin to resemble a face. Commercial jute trim is used as an accent piece to sew the eyes and lips shut.
- **Jewelry** of all sorts is frequently made with imported stones, metals, solders, chains, clasps, and other findings.

The World Bank defines poverty as income below US\$1.50 per day. In Ecuador, a supervisor at a textile mill makes as little as US\$0.70 per hour or US\$5.60 per day. Less skilled workers make even less and unskilled workers make a pittance.

In order to bring these items to market in North America, importers rely on foreign-exchange brokers, international banks, freight forwarders, expensive staff, and customs brokers.

## Beyond the Pale: Outright Fraud

There are far too many items produced in overseas factories and workshops using Native American designs and imagery that are imported into the United States and Canada and passed off as being of Native American origin. Just about every Native American art or craft has been copied and re-produced either by non-Natives in the United States or more often by factories in China, India, and Latin America.

Examples of these articles include the following items:

- **Dreamcatchers** that are made in China, have had the Made in China tags removed, and are passed off as being made by Native Americans.
- **Jewelry** of all sorts that is made in India, China, or elsewhere and is sold as being made in America by Native Americans.
- **Paintings or Prints** depicting Native settings that were produced overseas.
- **Dolls** that depict Native American imagery and are produced overseas.
- **Pottery** that is produced overseas using Native American designs.
- **Carvings in Stone, Bone, Antler, and Mammoth Ivory** that are produced overseas.

## Protecting Yourself from Fraud

Stringent legislation has been passed in the United States to punish individuals and companies who knowingly import or sell non-Native items as though they were Native American Made. To protect yourself from fraudulent sellers, ask questions and buy from reputable artists, craftspeople, dealers, or museum stores with a long track record in the business and an interest in promoting Native American artists and art.

Membership in the Indian Arts and Crafts Association ([www.iaca.com](http://www.iaca.com)) is a good sign that the artist, dealer, or museum is well informed and complies with the Association's ethics specifications for Native American art. If you come across obvious fraud, you can report this to the Indian Arts and Crafts Board in Washington, DC (<http://www.iacb.doi.gov/>).

If in doubt, do without.

## About the Author

Paul Crosby holds three passports (U.S., Canadian, and World Citizenship). He grew up in the United States, fell in love with Toronto while on his honeymoon, and moved to Canada when he was 27. His brother's fascination with all things Native resulted in Paul's buying Canadian Native art and sending it back to his brother Tom as gifts. In 1992, at Tom's instigation, Paul started a hobby business going to reservations in central Canada to buy arts and crafts directly from Native Americans and exporting these items to the United States. In 1995 he started pursuing this business full time and spent many years driving around with a car stuffed full of Native arts and crafts selling to museum shops, trading posts, and galleries, primarily in the eastern United States. He now owns and operates three corporations in New York state and Toronto, Canada that deal in indigenous crafts and exotic natural products from around the world. He has customers in every state in the United States, every province and territory in Canada, and has exported to more than 40 countries around the world—including items used in Antarctica. He may be reached at [paul.crosby@chichesterinc.com](mailto:paul.crosby@chichesterinc.com). His websites offering Native American items are [www.chichesterinc.com](http://www.chichesterinc.com), [www.chichestercanada.com](http://www.chichestercanada.com), and [www.naturalexotics.com](http://www.naturalexotics.com).