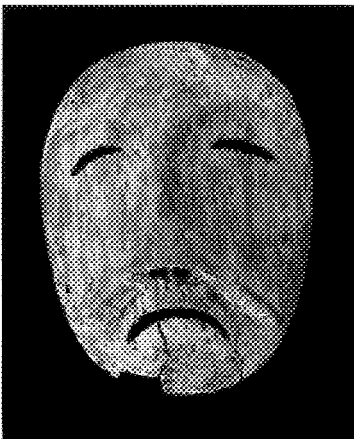


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Harmony in Variation:  
Form and Meaning in  
Native American Art





*Mask, n.d., Alaska*  
Collection of  
Cranbrook Institute of  
Science

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**FRONT AND BACK COVERS:**  
*House Post*, late 1800s, Kwakiutl  
Collection of Cranbrook Institute  
of Science  
*Chilkat Blanket*, 1890-1900,  
Tlingit  
Collection of Logan Museum of  
Anthropology, Beloit College  
The monumental house post,  
carved in the bold, deep-cut style  
of Kwakiutl sculptors, depicts a  
bear in stylized but recognizable  
form. Artists of the Northwest  
Coast working in two dimensions  
however, often radically distorted  
and rearranged animal anatomy.  
The Chilkat blanket shows a  
diving whale split down the  
middle and flattened across the  
blanket. Its individual body parts  
are spread symmetrically but  
dynamically to fill the entire space.

... Even without the people  
to move in them, magic resides in these objects.  
The vision of the makers informs the eye.  
— Gail Trembly, Onandoga (Iroquois) and Micmac

#### INTRODUCTION

Each work in this exhibition is the expression of an artist whose creative vision could remain true to a personal articulation, while being explored within a powerful cultural framework. Many works express a Native American worldview: a belief in the complementary aspects of harmony and variation, and in an equilibrium in oppositions.

The production of the exhibition, the culmination of an advanced seminar in art history, was a journey into the worldview of Native Americans as expressed through their art. It meant learning how their visual language spoke, their vocabulary of forms, the layers of meaning in abstraction. It was also a journey into the specialized world of exhibition design. The student curators learned new ways of seeing, new practical applications for theoretical knowledge, and how to compromise creatively. They had to work in ways that paralleled the creation of the art — each person's individual vision was expressed within an often restrictive framework, this time one of gallery and museum requirements, deadlines, financial considerations, and communal decision making. The students in this class were dedicated, responsible, creative, and sensitive. I would like to thank them for their enthusiasm, hard work and unflagging spirit.

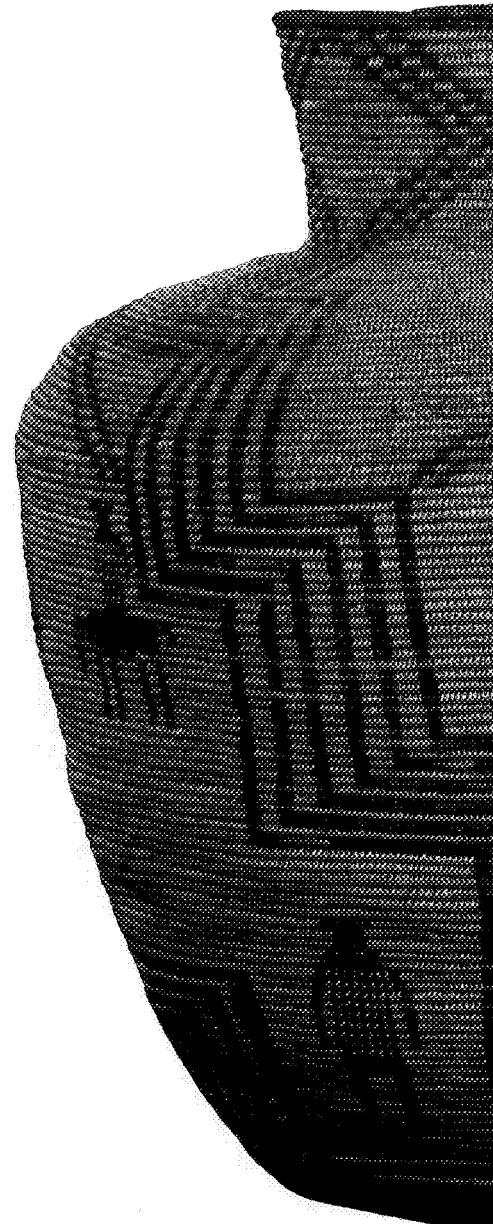
I would also like to thank, in particular, Michael Stafford of Cranbrook Institute of Science. It was his original suggestion of a collaborative Oakland University–Cranbrook project that sparked my development of the seminar, and his encouragement and generous sharing of his time and expertise that gave the first reality to the exhibition. Many other people, listed in the conclusion of this catalog, also deserve thanks for generously giving of their time and knowledge to this intense and complex project.

And finally, most importantly, I would like to thank the Native Americans artists who created the magnificent art in this exhibition. Their vision of a world in which beauty and creativity are integral to life itself is an example for us all.

Andrea IJis, Professor  
Department of Art and Art History  
Oakland University


*Olla*, 1900, Apache  
Collection of Gary and Melissa Lipton  
Basketmakers would almost always include a break in their design: a deliberate shying away from perfection, and an escape for the spirit, not trapped in a continuous line. The geometry of traditional zigzag and diamond forms is complemented by arrangements of figurative elements.

OAKLAND  
KRESO  
ROCHESTER



## Harmony in Variation: Form and Meaning in Native American Art

Meadow Brook Art Gallery  
January 11 – February 17, 2002



*Harmony in Variation: Form and Meaning in Native American Art* focuses on the rich history of Native American art, as well as celebrating the thriving contemporary art culture of Native Americans. This exhibition is the result of a collaborative effort of Native Americans, artists, students, academics, curators, and collectors, each with different backgrounds and areas of expertise.

The intent of this exhibition is to present Native American art from a variety of perspectives, from multiple viewpoints. Objects are presented neither geographically nor chronologically. Rather the focus is on the meanings of the art works, on interpreting the harmony and variation in their form.

It wasn't long ago that Native American art was exhibited in museums across the continent without ever asking Indians about the objects, their meaning and their use. Today, as a result of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, and such steps as the inclusion of Native Americans as full partners in the creation of the National Museum of the American Indian, Native Americans are being heard from on their own cultural heritage.

In this exhibit, we have tried to include Native American perspectives on the creation of their art, and Native American voices. In exhibition-related events, Native Americans are passing along their oral tradition in a performance and they are presenting their contemporary art and writing.

Many of the student curators, not having had extensive experience in the study of Native American art before starting the class, faced a challenge in organizing this exhibition. We resolved this through extensive research into the function, history and artistic meaning of the works to the people



*Tobacco Bag (front and back),  
c. 1880, Canadian Cree  
Collection of Cranbrook  
Institute of Science*

The floral design of the bag shown here displays a heterogeneous iconography of design. Native American women, when introduced to new ideas either through trade (glass beads) or acculturation (use of floral imagery), adapted the changes to their traditional work. The artist chose different but complementary designs for the two sides of the bag, creating harmony in the variation.

***Parfleche*, 1890-1910, Plains  
Collection of Ted Hadfield  
and Wendy MacGaw**

Plains women painted sturdy rawhide parfleches in colors and forms that were common to their tribe, but expressed their artistic individuality in the wide variety of their design combinations. Diamonds, rectangles, and triangles are arranged in a different manner on each uniquely designed parfleche, in ways that reference the symmetry, order and rhythmic variety of the world.



who made them. Though we initially chose the objects because of our personal response to form, by exploring the cultures, beliefs and traditions that influenced the art, a much richer understanding of the object's beauty emerged. Using the theme of harmony and variation to study these objects allowed us to make connections and learn the many different ways that form created meaning in the art we chose.

We began the curating process for this exhibition by choosing objects from the storage collections of the Cranbrook Institute of Science. As students of art history, we tended to view the objects using a traditional Western sense of aesthetics. It was hard, for instance, for us not to evaluate the painting on a drum or the sculptural qualities of a mask the same way we evaluate Western art like the Mona Lisa or The Thinker. Through our research however, we were able to learn about the art within its cultural framework, and how to evaluate it from a non-Eurocentric perspective.

It was important not to view the art in a purely historical context without ever considering aesthetic qualities. The cultural significance of each artist's aesthetic choices was also important. The form an object took and the way it was decorated were very deliberate and important to the meaning of the piece. Both form and style emerged from a shared social context. To look at the artist's choices without looking at the meaning behind them was to miss the point.

Often, the process by which a piece of art was made was every bit as important as the finished piece itself. In Alaska, for instance, masks made of driftwood were often burned or discarded after they had been used once. Though the object still possessed all the same physical properties, to the *angutkuk* (a spiritual leader) who made it, the object had served its purpose and no longer held the value that it once had. By Western standards, objects often get more valuable with age, making the idea that artistic objects lose their value once they have performed a certain task difficult to understand.

We tend to think of art being at home in a gallery or museum, but traditional Native American art was never meant for museum walls. Native Americans have made art and everyday objects one and the same. Pomo baskets, decorated with hundreds of individually placed feathers, could take months to create, but these delicate vessels were not set on pedestals only to be looked at and never touched. Many were then used for everyday tasks such as storing and serving food, and even cooking, rather than being regarded as purely decorative. Upon the death of the owner, the most beautiful baskets were burned on her funeral pyre as an expression of grief and remembrance.

The works in this exhibition show the variety of ways that different tribes define their sense of beauty, as well as how these ideas continue to develop in contemporary art. The belief that everything, animate and inanimate, has a spirit within it gives beauty to every bowl, pipe and moccasin.

Native American art can be experienced, not merely observed. In the circles and dots on a Yanktonai drum or the lead inlay on a Winnebago flute, every element works with the form to make a truly harmonious whole. The visual adornment echoes the beauty of the instrument's sound. When an audience can experience both the visual and auditory components of these pieces, their artistic beauty can be fully appreciated.

Treating these artworks respectfully and displaying them with great care, we have also tried to give the exhibition a style that allows for emotional interaction with and reaction to the art. Though curated as knowledgeably and thoughtfully as possible, many of the objects were chosen because one of the student curators felt an immediate connection to the piece, even without knowing the particulars of its history or context.

We encourage you to view this work while listening to your heart. Let the Native American artists speak to you through these objects, and let this exhibition help give you a sense of the harmony intrinsic to the art's creation.

Rick Herron  
Senior, Oakland University  
AH490 Seminar in  
Native American Art



*Doll, 1870-1880, Teton Sioux*  
Collection of Gary and Melissa Lipton  
Designs and colors meticulously detailed in the tiny lanes of beadwork echo the tribal style in women's clothing. The elaborate care and fine quality of the work reflects the artist's love for the child to whom the doll was given.

*Jar, 1890-1910, Acoma, New Mexico*  
Collection of Cranbrook Institute of Science  
The making of art and beautifying of everyday objects was symbolic of honoring nature and the world. Beauty, here manifested through geometrically inspired design, was seen in all objects, regardless of their sacred or secular value. The process of creating beauty in the object was, in itself, a show of respect to the cosmos.







*Trays, 1900, Apache*  
Collection of Gary and Melissa Lipton  
The dark and light contrasts within the circles reflect a ceaselessly twisting cosmological cycle, referencing the sun in whirling bands, or lightning in jagged lines, or stars in equal armed crosses. Geometric arrangements dominate the designs as figures become repeated visual forms in the overall composition.

*Dance Shield Cover, n.d., Comanche, Texas*  
Collection of Logan Museum of Anthropology, Beloit College  
The quest for a vision begins with fasting, isolation, and sleep deprivation. The balance between physical and mental states can be furthered by meditations at the borders of earthly elements: at shorelines or cliffs. The trance yields a unique vision, which is then expressed visually on two-dimensional space, transforming the shield cover into an object of personal significance and spiritual power.

#### LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

Beloit College, Logan Museum of Anthropology  
Cranbrook Institute of Science  
Detroit Institute of Arts  
Flint Institute of Arts  
Ted Hadfield and Wendy MacGaw  
Gary and Melissa Lipton  
Jason Quigno

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David Penney, Chief Curator, Detroit Institute of Arts  
Nicolette Meister, Collections Manager, Logan Museum of  
Anthropology, Beloit College  
Kristi Zamora, Curator of Exhibitions, Flint Institute of Arts

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Mary Duenow	Jamie Karl
Ola Dlugosz	Andrea Porter
Jan Durecki	Chantel Shock
Brittmarie Graham	Carrie Smith
Monique Gunn	Professor Andrea Eis

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##### DESIGN

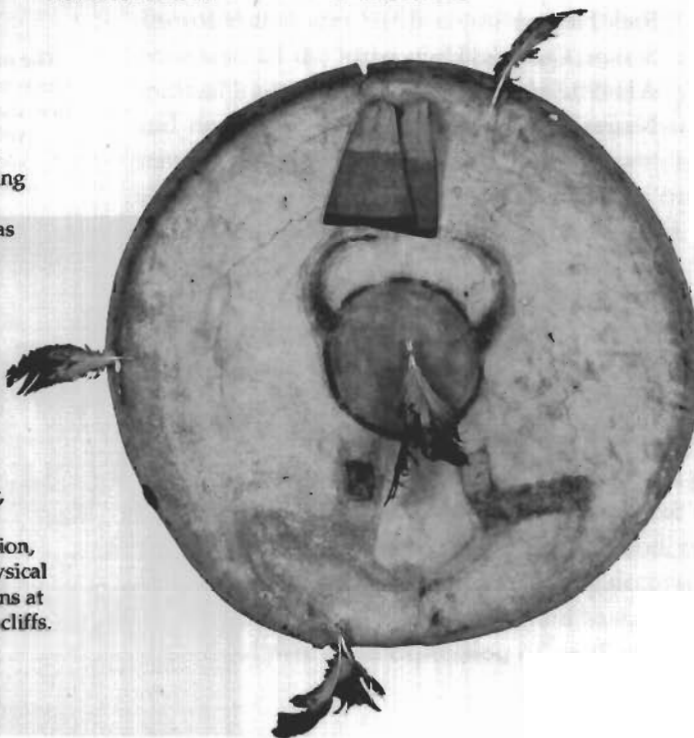
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Rick Herron  
Jamie Karl  
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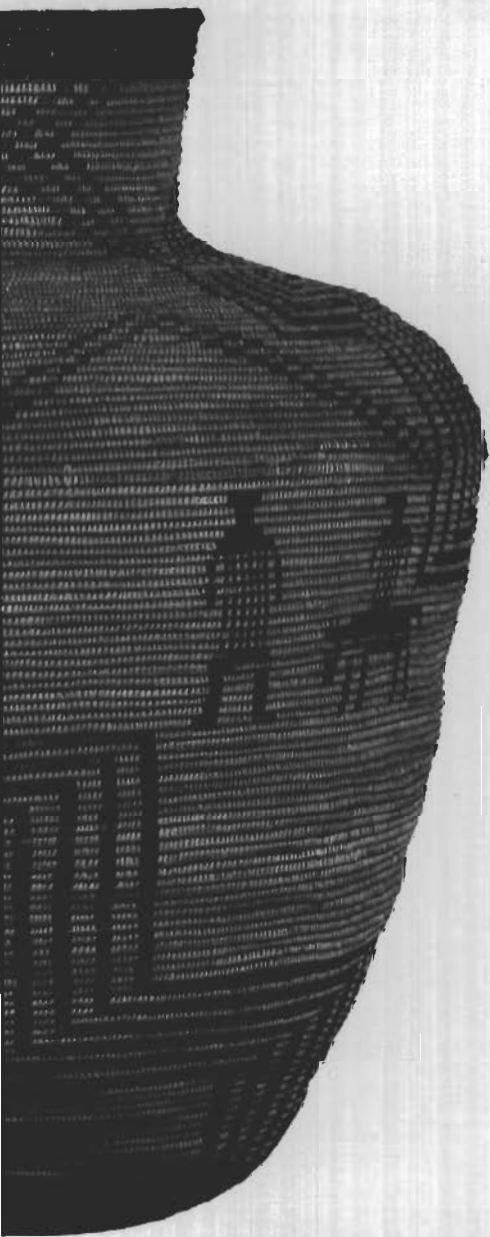
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**Mask, n.d., Alaska**  
**Collection of**  
**Cranbrook Institute of Science**  
The symbolic shamanic masks communicate with and appease the spirit of an animal, allowing its energy to enter the dancer wearing the mask. Arctic masks combine the human and animal aspects, intertwine the abstract and the real, symbolically and physically creating a union between man and nature. Resemblance to the animal is not influenced by nature or a preexisting method, but by a vision or dream of the shaman carver.



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