

Walking in Beauty at the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff.

33rd American Indian Workshop 2012, Zurich/Switzerland

"Presentation and Representation Revisited: Places, Media, Disciplines"

At the latest edition of the *Rendez-vous du cinema québécois*, a movie festival promoting francophone pictures that is held each year in Montreal, I met Kevin Bellefleur, Innu director of *Aitun*, a short film about his ancestral culture and ancestral heritage. While discussing the teachings of his grand-parents whom he filmed for several months, he told me with anger "I don't see the need for an Innu museum. Innu individuals are not dead as a people. I would not like to see objects that are meant to represent us in showcases and people looking at them and saying 'So that's how Innu used to live.' We are still alive (...) I want people to listen to what Innu say about their own culture. I want people to understand that there are several Innu cultures."

Kevin believes that museums might contribute to a commodification of culture. Kevin's reflections upon the sustainability of its own culture demonstrate his will to approach indigenous identity and way of life in terms of dynamic traditions that are enduring. When asked about his somewhat categorical rejection of museums as places for the promotion of Autochthonous culture, he objected that documentaries seem to him a more accurate medium to illustrate, without any bias, how a culture finds a way to be transmitted to younger generations despite the many political, economic or social changes that may affect its representatives or modes of expression. Cultural objects or productions that are presented in a setting from where the artist or creator is absent may well serve to entertain rather than inform or enlighten.

According to Hannah Arendt, "an object is cultural to the extent that it can endure; its durability is the very opposite of functionality, which is the quality

which makes it disappear again from the phenomenal world by being used and used up.”¹ In her essay about culture, Hannah Arendt described how a philistine society “which judged everything in terms of immediate usefulness and ‘material values’ and hence had no regard for such useless objects and occupations as are implied in culture and art” turned to purchasing and collecting cultural artifacts as a means to gain a greater social status or a “higher degree of self-esteem.” Because of the way the “cultural philistine”, as punned by Hannah Arendt, constructed culture, cultural objects were invested with monetary and exchange values. In “Culture Industry Reconsidered”, Theodore Adorno further states: “The cultural commodities of the industry are governed...by the principle of their realization as value, and not by their own specific content and harmonious formation.” Adorno also writes that “[e]ver since these cultural forms first began to earn a living for their creators as commodities in the market-place they had already possessed something of this quality.”² Bearing in mind Kevin Bellefleur’s remarks and Arendt or Adorno’s analysis, we will try to analyze to what extent the Navajo festival that has been performed each summer since 1948 at the Museum of Northern Arizona succeeds in presenting dynamic examples of Navajo culture today to tourists while at the same time helping Navajo artists to earn a living from their craft.

¹ Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance”, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, Penguin Books, 1993, page 204.

² Theodor Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered”, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, J.M. Bernstein, ed., Routledge, 1991, page 86.

- I. The origins of the Museum of Northern Arizona and the Navajo festival.
 - a) The influence of Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton and Harold S. Colton upon Hopi and Navajo arts and crafts.

The Navajo festival is held annually at the Museum of Northern Arizona which was founded on September 6th, 1928 by a young couple from Pennsylvania: zoologist Dr. Harold S. Colton and artist Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton. Both fell in love with picturesque Arizona and its mosaic of cultures while spending their honeymoon in the American Southwest in 1912. Doctor Harold S. Colton developed an interest in archeology after leading several explorations of the Colorado Plateau. After relocating to Flagstaff, at the crossroads of Navajo, Hopi and Pueblo cultures, they decided to create a Museum to preserve and exhibit their vast array of artifacts. They also established a series of Native American festivals that continue today. The Hopi Craftsman Exhibition was instituted in 1930 and the first Navajo annual fair was launched in 1942.³

The Coltons witnessed, with other explorers of the West such as Franciscan missionary Berard Haile or Unitarian minister Jacob Trapp, the different changes that affected and impaired the transmission of indigenous culture within the tribes. In a letter to the *Coconino Sun* on August 12, 1927, Mary pointed to the different reasons accounting for the necessity to create a museum in Flagstaff:

³ In her history of the museum, Evelyn Roat cited the first Navajo Craftsman Exhibition as 1942. See McGreevy, "Daughters of Affluence: Wealth, Collecting, and Southwestern Institutions," page 95. Photographs in the museum's collection dated 1946 depict a Navajo exhibition. However, the museum recognizes the first annual Western Navajo Arts and Crafts Exhibition in 1949.

“The desirability of the establishment of a museum for the care of our geological, zoological and archaeological treasures is acknowledged by all; but has the great educational value of a continuity between the ancient and modern native arts been thoroughly considered? Our opportunity for this dual development is exceptional here, located as we are close to the Hopi and Navajo Indians whose people have instituted the very arts which we are about to go to so much pains to preserve today. Those peoples will soon have forgotten the secrets of their crafts, and when they vanish our country will have lost its only true Native American art.”

As a woman of arts who achieved notoriety and mastered her skills in the Southwest, Mary felt compelled to create a place whose purpose would be two-fold: to preserve the culture of the inhabitants of the Colorado Plateau and at the same time to express her gratitude to the cultural and natural environment from which she drew most of her inspiration. Thus, she wrote that the building itself should mirror the architectural style of the Pueblo dwellings:

“Now this museum should be built, unit by unit, of native *malpais* rock and roofed with stout spruce timbers, somewhat after the pueblo style of architecture and placed high upon a mesa top overlooking the city and facing the great Peaks; surely this would be appropriate to our magnificent setting here, and a tribute to the vision of our people.”⁴

However, Mary Russell Ferrel Colton’s will to preserve Native American’s heritage may also have been fostered by a more patronizing stance towards the Native-American artistic production whose worth rests, for most Anglo

⁴ Mary Russell Ferrel Colton, letter to the *Coconino Sun*, dated August 12, 1927.

settlers, solely upon its capability to sell. Some of the expressions she uses in her liminal letter might today be considered derogatory towards the Native Americans she claimed she wanted to help. Indeed, the painter called the Navajo and Hopi “our Indians” and she underlined the need to offer guidance to Native American artists. They should be encouraged to reproduce old designs from the blankets and baskets which are stored and exhibited in the museum:

“Encourage our Indians to produce only the best, using the beautiful old designs available in the museum, where they would bring their finest examples of modern Indian craftsmanship for exhibition and sale, side by side with the work of the ancient peoples.”

In the mid and late 1930’s, Mary was instrumental in convincing the Hopi silversmith to develop a distinctively Hopi style instead of producing jewelry very similar to that of the Navajo. She encouraged them to copy designs displayed on ancient baskets or potteries. The new Hopi style came to be known as *Hopi overlay*.

b) Reviving the tradition: how and what for?

The revival of old designs or the representation of sacramental motives, spurred by Anglo taste for Navajo lore, became an important feature of Navajo tapestry and sand painting. Nancy Parezo has shown how the white settlers’ interest in sand paintings created a market for them. In her book *Navajo sand paintings: from religious act to commercial art*, she described how several artists such as Hosteen Klah or Fred Stevens developed techniques to secularize Navajo sand paintings. While the prospect of securing a source of revenue through the marketing of their religious art might have seemed tempting to Navajo sand-painters, they were also frightened of the consequences of

misusing ritual objects or artifacts. In 1918, Hosteen Klah accepted to weave a rug with a ceremonial design from the *Yeibeichei* after he befriended Franc Newcomb an Anglo trade-woman who attended the ceremonies he held. Many elders and ceremonial practitioners protested and warned Klah that he might fall ill since portraying sandpaintings in permanent designs is deemed dangerous and contrary to the teachings of the *Yei*, or Holy People. According to Franc Newcomb, “after a few years had passed and neither Klah nor the girls had suffered ill effects, many weavers decided to make ‘figure blankets’ which were beautiful and brought high prices but no one else dared make an exact copy of a ceremonial sand painting.”⁵

In the 1960’s, many medicine men were concerned about finding ways to use new learning and memorization techniques in order to preserve Navajo chants, sand-paintings and stories without breaking the taboos associated to representation in the Navajo world. At the same time, Fred Stevens developed the gluing method that is used today by most Navajo artists who sell reproductions of sand-paintings. Craftsmen and weavers who use sacramental designs often include an opening or a deliberate mistake to counteract or ward off any ill effects. As Robert Johnson from the *Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department* told me:

“ - like my mother and grand ma told me, the rug pattern, you change it a little and you leave an opening,
- so that the spirit won’t be trapped...
- exactly. »⁶

⁵ Newcomb, Franc. *Hosteen Klah: Navaho Medicine Man and Sand Painter*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964, p. 162.

⁶ Johnson, Robert. Interview Nausica Zaballos, 27 juillet 2006.

The discrepancy between Anglo buyers' expectations and the Navajo artist's attitude of respect, fear or faith towards the religious aspects of his craft creates a tension. It illustrates how Market contingencies shape the relationship between maker and consumer but also influence production. Another issue that should be analyzed when examining the promotion of Indian craft and art by non-tribal institutions is which criteria are used to determine the worth of the object on sale. Is the object being evaluated in terms of labor, originality, talent or in terms of Indianess? In other words, are Native-American artists participating in fairs free to exhibiting personal works of art that truly reflect their sensitivity or are they encouraged to showcase and produce objects that will unmistakably be identified as Indian?

II. Is my art enough Indian?

a) Constructing Indianess from an Anglo consumer point of view:

According to Nora Naranjo Morse, a Tewa Pueblo Indian from Santa Clara Pueblo who is a sculptor, writer and film producer, tourists and buyers at Native-American festivals do not long to establish a truly meaningful bond with artists. They are not interested in learning about the artistic process that gave birth to the different objects presented. They want to recognize what they believe they already know about Indian culture. She wrote in a poem entitled "The living exhibit under the museum portal's":

"The Indian tribes represented, line quietly against the stark,
white museum wall, as each new day introduces
throng of tourists, filing past our blankets
fixed in orderly fashion upon red bricks.
Visitors looking for mementos to take home,
that will remind them of the curiously

silent Indians, wrapped tightly in colorful
shawls, just like in the postcards.”

In another poem, Nora Naranjo Morse explains that Indianess is racially constructed by Anglo collectors or gallery owners as an identity that is always inherited. Thus, the lineage of the artist is the certifying process that ensures the capacity to sell of the object:

“She unwrapped her clay figures,
unfolding the cloth each was nestled in,
carefully, almost with ceremony (...)
The owner cleared her throat, asking:
"First of all dear, do you have a résumé? You know,
something written that would identify you to the public.
Who is your family?
Are any of them well known in the Indian art world?"
Mud Woman hesitated, trying desperately to connect
this business woman's voice with her questions,
like a foreigner trying to comprehend
the innuendos of a new language (...)
Handling each piece, the merchant quickly judged
whether or not Mud Woman's work would be a profitable venture.
"Well," she began, "your work is
strangely different, certainly not traditional
Santa Clara pottery and I'm not
sure there is a market for
your particular style, especially
since no one knows who you are.
However, if for some reason you make it big,
I can be the first to say, 'I discovered you.'
So, I'll buy a few pieces and we'll see how it goes."

In *The Culture of Tourism: the Tourism of Culture: Selling the Past to the Present in the American Southwest*, Leah Dilworth shows in her article “Handmade by an American Indian” that “because tradition and culture are racialized in the markets for Indian arts and crafts, objects that circulate in those markets become less metonymic and more synecdochic, like trophies. Not only are Indian people objectified, but also Indian-crafted objects are subjectified or animated by ethnicity.”⁷ Did Navajo artists feel compelled to characterize their works in a traditional way? What if Navajo artists present at the market of the 62nd Navajo festival only featured productions which hinted at tradition and left aside works that expressed nonetheless a more intimate artistic process?

b) Deconstructing tradition to express the intimate.

At the 62nd edition of the Navajo festival, Virgil J. Nez’s artworks exemplified the Native American artist’s quest for a more personal vision of art. While still incorporating ritual designs that might be recognized as truly Indian by foreigners to the tribe, this Navajo painter takes some liberty with the representation of traditional figures featured in his artworks. When he was studying at Northern Arizona University, he wrote a short paper about the existence of *skinwalkers* or Navajo witches who have the power to change into animals. *Skinwalkers* are part of many Navajo sacred histories and they are revered for this aspect. But since they basically embody what is most evil in the Navajo world, they are also feared and representing them is avoided. Yet, Virgil J. Nez has made himself famous by realizing a series of oil paintings that show how a man can turn into a *skinwalker*. He writes: “In the past, I have done several paintings of shape-shifters. One of them won the Best of Painting

⁷ “Handmade by an American Indian”, Leah Dilworth in Rothman, Hal. *The Culture of Tourism: the Tourism of Culture: Selling the Past to the Present in the American Southwest*. University of New Mexico Press: 2003, page 112.

division at the Navajo Show, Museum of Northern Arizona in 1994, and was also published in the November '94 issue of *Arizona Highways*. My shape-shifter paintings usually show a man turning into an animal. The traditional people are scared of it because of its' bad medicine. If one deals with it, it will curse the individual. I wrote a short paper when I was at Northern Arizona University, about how the shape-shifters exist in our everyday lives. From that school project, I started painting the shape-shifters. I view it as a positive energy instead of evil and negative energy. Lastly, I believe the power is still out there.” Virgil’s personal view of the *skinwalker* is not a testimony against tradition. Virgil still pay respect to the *skinwalker* whom existence he does not challenge. Yet, influenced by his own reflections on art and religion and probably by the teachings he received at Northern Arizona University, Virgil J. Nez has succeeded in embedding the traditional *skinwalker* figure into a pictorial work that is not Navajo *per se* but tells the onlooker how he intimately lives and experience his Indianess.

Another Navajo artist featured at the festival, Randall J Wilson relies heavily on techniques he developed as a muralist. His paintings represent different aspects of Navajo social and spiritual life as shown by his series on the Emergence myth but Randall’s iconography is influenced by street art. Non-Navajo symbols or artistic references may also be deconstructed and appropriated by Navajo artists. For example, Wallace N. Begay revisits Munch’s most famous painting to denounce the dreary consequences of capitalism in the American Southwest.

Those artists have succeeded in overcoming the double-bind challenge of remaining faithful to tradition as a Navajo individual and being creative as an artist but others seem to have internalized the Anglo view on tradition.

- c) Internalizing the white discourse on tradition: how Indian blame Whites for not being enough Indians.

When writing about teaching art to Navajo youth in *Art for the Schools of the Southwest*, Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton wrote that “The Museum of Northern Arizona feels that it is extremely inadvisable to mix or confuse Indian Arts. In their purity of design and adherence to the old methods of manufacture and in their ethnological correctness of both production and type, lie their greatest charm (...) The introduction of new forms (...) by outside influence is extremely dangerous and should not be encouraged. Any such change should be the invention of the craftsman himself, for art, like other forms of human enterprise, is never static.”⁸

Colton insisted that the teaching of Native American craft should be the sole responsibility of tribal artists. She also denounced the increasing use of manufacturing methods in craftsmanship. Her conception of what Indian art should be stemmed from her vision of indigenous art as archaic, primitive, natural, hand-made and traditional. She further wrote: “The charm of a native art lies in (...) its wonderful primitive invention and utilization of the natural materials at hand.”⁹ If one considers art as an intimate integrative process or as the product of the artist’s cultural upbringing and exposition to external influences, Colton’s letters are reminiscent of an antiquated discourse that labelled Native-American craftsmen the representatives of a vanishing people who, in order to survive, should stick to what tradition mandated.

⁸ Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton, *Art for the Schools of the Southwest*, page 21.

⁹ *Ibid*, page 22.

Faced with the changes brought by acculturation and the different globalization processes, some Navajo artists featured at the 62nd Navajo festival have endorsed a discourse that blames the whites for the mitigation or disappearance of Navajo culture but also espouses the white man's vision of tradition as it was stated by Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton in her letters. Thus, Albert Brent Chase, master of ceremony at the 2011 *Intertribal Indian Ceremonial* and featured dancer and flutist at the Navajo festival in Flagstaff addressed the crowd in those terms: "We're honoring the day when *Wallmark* was not coming in our lives. People were strong (...) We did not have so many social ills. We worked hard those days. I honored those times. My grandparents told me about these stories and I decided to create dances to tell these stories (...) Navajo dancers will tell you the stories of when our grandparents went hunting with a bow and arrow (...) If you like what you see, we have DVDs that show where we come from with the panoramic views (...) When I was schooling outside the rez, I studied classical music and the piano. I thought 'one day, I'll play piano in a traditional outfit but (...) the flute is much more easy to carry on the rez. Blame it on fry bread: I eat too much fry bread!"

Albert Brent Chase establishes a direct filiation between his grandparents' teachings and the dances he revived. Yet, the act of performing translates into a bitter tribute: Albert and his troop are honoring a time which belongs to the past and can only be recreated through entertainment. The original meaning and purpose of the dances is lost forever. According to Albert, the white man's oppressive power accounts for the disruption of Navajo traditional life and the resulting appearance of "social ills" unknown to the Dine before. The etiology of the social ills Albert Brent Chase alludes to is rooted in a criticism of market laws and mass-consumption as shown by the hint at Wall-Mart stores. The Navajo world is contaminated by useless objects and junk food. Ultimately,

dances are stripped of their ritual and social meaning, attesting of the reification of the spiritual into the folkloric.

Albert's declaration that he wanted to play the piano in a traditional Navajo band but gave up his idea could also be interpreted as the confession of a somewhat acculturated Navajo (he was schooled outside the rez) who, contrary to Virgil J Nez, did not dare express his own personal Navajo artistic style but embraced the role of the performing traditional Native-American that was assigned to him in order to meet the tourist need for a stereotyped representation of Indianess. His joke on being fat because of eating too much fry-bread does not help non-Navajo to apprehend the obesity issue in terms of acculturation (fry-bread is considered by some Navajo as an importation from Spanish settlers and thus a non-Native food) but instead contribute to put the blame on Navajo people solely.

Conclusion:

The Flagstaff Navajo festival could well be considered as another attempt to meet the needs of Anglo audiences willing to immerge themselves in folkloric entertaining experiences that mirror their representation of Indianess.

Indeed, some of the bands that perform there each year discuss the Navajo way of life in terms of a traditional culture that belongs to the past.

However, meetings with Navajo young directors or artists using multimedia techniques serve to remind the visitor that the Navajo culture may be comprehended in terms of mitigation, transformation, and most important creation in the making.

Walks with Navajo ethno-botanists give proof that Navajo herbal medicine today can find modern applications.

Talks with Code Talkers' relatives also contribute to understand Navajo history and its depiction by Anglo media from the point of view of an individual who is a Navajo but first and foremost a person affected by war and the fear to lose his/her loved one.

More important, the presence of potters, weavers and painters who share with their audience their intimate vision of art disqualifies or subverts an Anglo appreciation of Native-American art solely constructed in terms of respect of tradition or inherited identity.

While Native-American artists (be they Navajo, Hopi or Pueblo) should seek to escape the label of the true Native craftsman by exhibiting outside the tourist circuit of the Southwest, thus reaching a broader audience and meeting artists whose art and persona are not ethnically constructed, the Navajo festival remains faithful to its educational and fraternal principles. By offering the opportunity for non-Navajo and Navajo to meet in a beautiful setting at the foot of the San Francisco Peaks which are sacred to the Navajo nation, it helps each other to bind and create links that may go beyond the mercantile relationship.