



Zuñi mask, Brooklyn Museum, New York.

The First Americans as Artists

Memories and questions about
the priceless heritage of
American Indian arts and crafts

by KATHARINE KUH

A FORTHCOMING book* on a subject of inimitable vitality set up a chain reaction in me. First came weariness at the thought of another primer-like survey that adds little to a field not yet fully explored. But then, slowly, as I leafed through its copious illustrations of Indian arts and crafts, buried memories and old questions took over.

Vivid remembrances surfaced for me, fanned by an extraordinary shot of a Klukwan community-house interior decorated with magnificently carved wall screen and house posts. In the foreground, elaborately outfitted Chilkat Indians pose proudly with other ritual objects, notably bentwood boxes and a giant potlatch vessel large enough to double as a dugout canoe. Years ago—in 1940, to be exact—I traveled from Juneau to the tiny Alaskan village of Klukwan via mail boat and government truck. Once arrived, I found a settlement of no more than a hundred Indians living primitively on a river jumping with salmon and surrounded by mountain scenery of indescribable grandeur.

In retrospect, I am still awed by the quantity and quality of art in that remote Alaskan town. Precisely because it was remote, the Indians there retained animistic clan beliefs and periodically used the masks, rattles, bowls, blankets, and many-tiered hats that

had earlier been created for ritual ceremonies, some of which at that time were already banned by our government. I stayed in Klukwan five days, living with a native family and waiting to see a hoard of magnificent painted, carved, and woven objects that were stashed away in the home of an ancient chief, who was hesitant about receiving me. Though the accommodations were hardly first-class, life in Klukwan was endlessly interesting. One evening, I discovered a neglected cemetery where several stone carvings (a rare sight in Alaska) of bear and porcupine likenesses were almost obliterated by dense northern growth. Because that same day I had witnessed a porcupine hunt interrupted frequently by marauding bears, I found the totemic creatures in the graveyard peculiarly relevant. It was clear why animals had assumed transcendental meaning in Alaska, for, only a brief thirty years ago, they were still an integral part of Chilkat life and still provided daily challenges.

I was finally received by the chief, but only because I learned he was a member of the Wolf clan and immediately sent word to him that my maiden name was Woolf. "Welcome, daughter," was his greeting, and to this day I am not sure whether it was guileless or ironic. From trunks and bentwood boxes, from under beds and dark corners, this debilitated old man in the last stages of tuberculosis dragged out a fabulous assortment of ritual objects, all of them connected with a hierarchy of animistic beings who protected, di-

rected, menaced, and enriched the life of his people. As to craftsmanship, this small community was celebrated for a refinement rarely equaled in our country. Today, most of its splendid objects have been lost, chiefly to fire. Klukwan is now all but deserted, its younger people off in a more progressive world.

As I continued to thumb through the book's illustrations, I found myself wondering why American Indians were so preoccupied with the idea of the isolated human hand as a symbol and questioned whether this image meant more than meets the eye. The symbol appears repeatedly from Yucatan to Alaska. Feder's book, which, by the way, deals only with Indian art of the United States, includes a variety of detached painted and carved hands created by the Winnebagos of Nebraska, the Prairie Potawatomi of Kansas, the Zuñis, the Osages, and the Eskimos. These short-hand condensations no doubt symbolized man much as a procession of paws represented bear. Modern painters, especially Miró and Klee, exploited the same device and in addition borrowed widely from primitive art.

That Northwest Coast Indian art technically and conceptually outstripped that of all other tribes in the United States is undeniable. The Tlingit and Haida produced wood carvings that at times can hold their own with the sculpture of Pre-Columbian Latin America, which is, to be sure, considerably better preserved, if only because it was made of stone. Alaskan and Mayan images have unexpected affini-

**American Indian Art* by Norman Feder (to be published in November by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.)



(Left) Cloth appliqué shirt with double-headed wolf, attributed to Haida, Royal Ontario Museum, University of Toronto. (Right) Chilkat painted leather shirt, University Museum, Philadelphia.

ties; they share the same contained violence, the same emphasis on interlocking animal and human forms, the same enigmatic and inexplicable Oriental overtones. Because thousands of miles and many centuries separated these cultures, it is unlikely they were in any way related; yet how then explain their stylistic parallels?

Two motifs thread through much of American Indian art. A constant identification with supernatural animals, birds, and fish is scarcely surprising in a primitive people who lived intimately with nature. But why this people also concentrated on abstract geometric designs is another matter. Probably most of the abstract designs found in their pottery, rugs, baskets, bags, and boxes grew out of such familiar experiences as rain, lightning, sunlight, and growth. Sometimes even animal and human forms were so stylized as to seem divorced from nature, but in reality nature was the point of departure for Indian art. Many older natives who recalled orally transmitted tribal myths are now dead, but not too long ago survivors in both the Southwest and Northwest were able to recount in minute detail the meaning of each element that distinguished the art of their region. The aboriginals' totemic carvings served as visual folk literature and left little to chance. Parts of bodies represented the whole; different attributes of animals were expressed by almost imperceptible variations; each line, angle, curve, and color was endowed with a specific definition, for, though the Indians were

accomplished designers, they rarely sacrificed meaning to esthetics. At their best, they could coordinate the two.

Take, for example, the sand paintings of the Navahos. And, incidentally, these were genuine "earthworks" and no less expendable though far less self-conscious than their chic present-day counterparts. The Navahos were at once pragmatists and mystics. Since they were chiefly nomadic, they rarely burdened themselves with unwieldy accouterments, but, undaunted, they created large ephemeral paintings that were predicated on eventual dissolution. Sifted directly onto dry desert land, these compositions of earth-colored sand seem abstract on first glance, but they are not. Related to various healing ceremonies, they were deliberately destroyed in the process of transferring their magic messages to ailing supplicants.

Another highly evocative Indian convention, which appeared frequently in the North Pacific, was based on multi-tiered hats that were regarded as signs of prestige. And prestige as a stimulating force was immensely important. To achieve it, clans and families were known to ruin themselves by giving away the bulk of their possessions, usually at potlatch ceremonies, which may explain why these rites were eventually banned. The stacking of hats, sometimes five high, suggests the Jungian theory that pretentious headgear represents man's drive for social prominence.

My most poignant encounter in Indian territory took place at Kasaan, a

deserted Haida village on the southeast coast of Alaska. I had gone there hoping to study a group of old Haida poles still *in situ* on a nearby island. Only two white people lived in Kasaan, a schoolteacher "outside" for the summer and an elderly missionary lady who presided over a dirty two-room cabin and offered hospitality to rare white visitors. Dressed in hip boots, for it was raining as usual in Alaska's panhandle, she approached me suspiciously and asked, "Be you a teacher?" "No," I said. "Be you a missionary?" "No." "Be you a prostitute?" "No." "Well, then what be you?" When I tried to explain I had come to look at Indian art, she was stunned. For her these people among whom she lived were incapable of "art." They were heathen children whose ungodly carvings (she called them souvenirs) were better burned and forgotten. And, indeed, her whole effort was directed toward utterly destroying the very objects I had come to see. In place of majestic Haida sculpture encompassing some of the greatest wood carvings man has conceived, she offered penny reproductions of Christian homilies and the murderous music of an untuned pump organ.

Fire, negligence, and dry rot have hurried the disintegration of Indian monuments, but, alas, so too have American missionaries whose Puritan zeal and ignorance encouraged the destruction of a priceless heritage while at the same time discouraging any native pride that might have helped preserve it.

TV-Radio

Robert Lewis Shayon

Same Old Tunnel

Busted Dreams was the title of an aborted documentary that Gordon R. Watkins had hoped to write and produce for WCBS-TV, the network's owned and operated New York station. After Mr. Watkins had won critical acclaim for *Caught in the Middle*, a ninety-minute videotape drama shot entirely on location in Harlem (which WCBS-TV presented last December), the talented producer-writer-director proposed the *Busted Dreams* documentary to his employers. It would deal, he said, with the frustrated ambitions of several blacks with varied educational backgrounds. The CBS flagship station said no. Watkins now has his own production firm, the Toussaint Group, Inc., and is discussing new plans with the ABC Television network.

Watkins represents a small busted dream of my own. I saw *Caught in the Middle* recently when WCBS-TV repeated it. Suddenly a door seemed to open in television's house. The lives and problems of ethnic minorities in the United States were depicted with honesty and force. Watkins's protagonist, a black welfare worker, loses his fight to improve bad housing conditions in Harlem, after a courageous struggle against slumlords, city bureaucrats, and minions of organized crime. In a quick, somewhat unclear ending, the hero, after addressing a small crowd, throws himself violently onto a policeman.

I was astonished by the power of the climax. *Caught in the Middle* was an angry cry of protest. Its hero had been a neighborhood teen warlord; he had gone to college and returned to the streets to work rationally for change. Watkins's ending invited the inference that such change was not possible. I also was impressed by the truth and vigor of the characters. Here were no pleasantly modulated nor sensationally overstated ethnic stereotypes of blacks and Puerto Ricans. The people were convincing in their strengths and weaknesses; the dialogue and values were believable. Eager to learn the circumstances that had produced *Caught in the Middle* and given the gifted Watkins a chance, I called him and WCBS-TV the next morning.

It was then that my small summer dream was busted. The author had not intended his ending to symbolize violent action against the system. His hero should have been depicted "cracking up" under the pressure of his failure to

effect rational change, but the one good "take" that made this clear was technically flawed and unusable. Furthermore, Watkins had charged in a published article that the TV industry had cut back minority programming for fear of "fragmenting" its mass audiences (and also to express displeasure at ethnic groups that were challenging TV stations' license renewals). D. Thomas Miller, president of CBS Television Stations, had replied to Watkins's article, and there had been a counter-reply. The arguments revolved around the high cost of local production of TV dramas, the alleged "divisive" nature of ethnic vs. "broad appeal" programming, staff cutbacks, etc.

Watkins found himself faced not with the opening of a door but the same old dismal blocked tunnel. While prais-

ing WCBS-TV for removing "some of the horrendous inequities . . . in employment patterns," Watkins charged "that there are still no blacks or Puerto Ricans with the power to stimulate or originate programming." The same regrettably can be said about whites. It was not the color of the playwright's skin that tripped him up at WCBS-TV but the color of his ideas. If black employment ratios are slowly improving in TV, significant drama dealing with minorities remains scarce. Television has closed its doors to many gifted whites who have attempted, with equal lack of success, to challenge the same mass medium shibboleths of which Watkins fell afoul.

The TV industry may be in for some busted dreams of its own. It cannot forever hold its "broad appeal" fortress against the pounding of pluralism and robust, vigorous diversity. A recent U.S. Court of Appeals decision (*Business Executives' Move for Vietnam Peace v. FCC*) has given fresh impetus to that pounding. I will comment on that decision in my next column.



"If you throw me back in, I'll give you three wishes. On the other hand, if you eat me, you'll probably get mercury poisoning."