Navajo Baskets and the American Indian Voice: Searching for the Contemporary Native American in the Trading Post, the Natural History Museum, and the Fine Art Museum

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Abstract
This thesis examines the display of Navajo baskets and examines some of the possible meanings Navajo baskets can reveal. Acknowledging that the meaning of a work of art changes when it is placed in different environments, the thesis explores what meanings are revealed and what meanings are concealed in basket displays in three venues: the trading post, the natural history museum, and the fine art museum. The study concludes that the fine art museum has the most potential to foster a dialogue about the contemporary Navajo, whose identity is a product of continuity and change. Chapter one discusses the basket's connotation as one of continuity and change, a meaning essential to understanding the contemporary Navajo. It becomes clear that when looking for the meaning of tradition and adaptation, the institutional utterance of an exhibition venue must be one that allows a complex modern Navajo identity to emerge. Chapter two examines the institutional utterance of the trading post. In such a setting, meanings of a mythical past emerge from the basket. The environment of the trading post reveals a romantic view of the Old West that hides the meaning of the contemporary Navajo from patrons and viewers. Chapter three focuses on the natural history museum and the effects of its institutional utterance on the Navajo basket's significance. In this learning environment, the Navajo basket acts as an artifact and meanings emerge about Navajo ritual and history. However, natural history museums often educate audiences through means like curiosity cabinets and living history displays that distance the contemporary Navajo. It is the fine art museum that has the most potential to reveal the adaptive, contemporary Navajo, discussed in chapter four. Art museums validate baskets as art objects when they exhibit them with Western painting and sculpture. Such displays can hide the contemporary Navajo in a discussion of formal elements. However, when an art museum exhibits a basket as a meaningful object, it allows the basket to reveal the Dine's desire for cultural continuity and the long Navajo history of adapting to changing environments.

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Native Americans' relationship to the natural world is the primary focus of the Alcoa Foundation Hall of American Indians in the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. To span across the US, Alcoa includes items from the Tlingit, Hopi, Lakota, and Iroquois. The exhibit primarily focuses on contemporary lives of Native Americans, mainly from the 19th and 20th centuries. One important item the museum features is a headdress that was likely Sitting Bull’s. The Heard Museum has over 40,000 pieces, which focus on the Southwest and contemporary art from North America. The museum’s stable exhibit, HOME: Native People in the Southwest combines objects and narratives to create a rich story, and it contains a number of cultural items, including jewelry and Hopi katsina dolls.