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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Language
English
Information about traditional and contemporary Southwestern Native American arts and crafts with links to native artists from several tribes. Covers Southwest Indian art forms including pottery, basketry, weavings, jewelry and kachinas. If you’re looking for native arts and crafts that were actually made by Native Americans of the Southwest, either because it’s important to you to have the real thing or because you want to support native people with your purchase, then here is our list of American Indian artists whose work is available online. If you have a website of Southwestern Native American art to add to this list, let us know. The National Museum of the American Indian is the first national museum in the United States dedicated solely to Native American heritage. It highlights over 12,000 years of history across more than 1,200 indigenous tribes and cultures, and features one of the world’s most expansive collections of American Indian arts, artifacts, and photographic and media archives. The museum’s Mitsitam Native Foods Cafe provides visitors with the opportunity to enjoy the indigenous cuisines of the Americas and to explore the history of Native foods. Hours of operation: The Mitsitam Cafe is open daily 11 AM – 3 PM; closed December 25th. 2. Taos Pueblo, Taos, New Mexico. Attendees can also buy Native art from more than 800 Native American artisans and traditional Native foods.