

Indigenous “Art” – Ritual Aesthetic: Inspiration and Application

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Among the Indigenous, it is the case that every person is a special kind of artist; it is not the case that every artist is a special kind of person!

[Stones, Masks and Amulets of the Inuit](#) (Eskimo; includes 5 min. and 3:30 min. video clips)

Background: Indigenous “Heart Knowledge” is the foundation for understanding the “arts” of Indigenous peoples. Heart Knowledge is premised on very different ontological principles from Euro-American views of the world and its epistemology. Among and essential to those principles are: 1) a spiritual animation permeating the world, expressed, for example, in the Apsáalooke (Crow Indian of Montana) concept of *baaxpée* or the Sch̓ṭṣu’umsh (Coeur d’Alene Indian of Idaho) concept of *summ̓esh*, and 2) a unified holism and kinship interconnecting all the participants of the world, expressed in the Apsáalooke phrase, *ashammaléaxia*, “as driftwood lodges,” the term for the matrilineal clan, and the Sch̓ṭṣu’umsh term *shnisteemilqwes* – “I am part of all” (see Frey 1987, 1995, 2001).

To use the local examples of the Apsáalooke and Sch̓ṭṣu’umsh, this is the story of an omnipresent Creator – *Akbaatatdía*, “the maker of all things first,” the *Am̓qt̓qn*, “sits on the mountain top,” and of a multitude of “Peoples,” “kinsmen” – human, animal, plant, rock and spirit, both of the present and the past – the “ancestors” and the “First Peoples” of the creation time. This is the story of Coyote and Crane, Rabbit and Jack Rabbit, Chief Child of the Yellow Root and Burnt Face, as the “Guardian’s of the Oral Traditions,” who prepare the world for the coming of the human peoples, overcoming “man-eaters” and other monsters, and inundating the landscape with “gifts” – gifts of foods, teachings – *mi’yep*, as well as spiritual power, *summ̓esh* and *baaxpée*, what the human peoples will need for life and to prosper. This is the

story of deer, camas and salmon, who are “brothers” to the hunter, the root digger and the fisherman, offering themselves up voluntarily when given “gifts” of respect and song, and then of sharing their nourishment with all those in need; the deer is never to be hunted without the consent of the deer.

The world and its landscape are thus embedded with meanings, significances, archetypal forms, what are called “teachings,” that are essential for life. You can glimpse something of this landscape as you view the particular rock formations along the slope of the Clearwater River, just as you enter the Nez Perce Reservation. They can be understood through a scientific understanding of geological processes occurring during a particular geochronological period in lineal time – a landscape full of “natural resources” to be acquired. But those same rock formations are understood as created through the actions of the First Peoples, the Animal Peoples, such as Coyote and Snake, occurring in time immemorial, and perpetuated and renewed each time their stories are retold – a landscape endowed with “gifts.” See [Landscape of the Nimípuu](#) (Nez Perce)

Then in the acts of re-telling, re-singing, re-dancing, re-creating the art of the perennial stories and archetypes of the creation, the world: 1) is revealed, unveiling what is most real and true; 2) offers teachings, the pragmatic and spiritual lessons needed for life; and 3) is re-created and perpetuated, the world renewed; the present moment is rendered one with the First Peoples of the creation time and place, the perennial time, the Dreamtime. As Cliff SiJohn (Schitsu’umsh elder and spiritual leader) has said, in telling the stories of the First Peoples, “they come *alive* . . . they *swirl around* you as the Turtle is saying his thing or as the Chipmunk is saying something . . . they *swirl around* you and you see the *Indian medicine* . . . this is Chipmunk talking to you . . . this is Coyote talking to you . . . all these things *suddenly come alive* . . . they are just as alive as they were a thousand years ago.”

Hence the Apsáalooke expression, *dasshússuua* (“breaking with the mouth”) and the phrase, “stories make the world.” That which comes through the mouth, be it spoken or sung, be it an Indian name or a creation story, has the efficacy to bring forth the world. In re-telling

Coyote's story of the Rock Monster, the blue in Lake Coeur d'Alene is perpetuated. In re-telling Burnt Face's story, a scar is removed and a face made new, as a "child's."

Heart knowledge reflects a transitory world co-created at the convergence of those participating, be they human, animal, plant or spirit Peoples, an event of converging relations, always in the making; no glass pane here to view a world as if made up of autonomous and independent objects, no Cartesian Dualism (mind vs. body distinction), no material reductionism, no quantification of reality here. It is a world unified through kinship, imbued with spirit. Contrasting ways of viewing, indeed, of knowing the world – very distinct epistemologies, for our own scientific, utilitarian way of knowing!

And given this Indigenous non-Cartesian, experiential nature of reality, in this sense, there are no "beliefs" compartmentalized from the world that attempt to conceptualize and hold convictions about the world, no "thinking" dichotomized from the world that attempt to reflect on that world, no "epistemology" distinct from the world that attempt to account for and know that world. All is an experiential unfolding event of those participating; "knowledge," per se, is deeply embedded within this experiential moment. Consider Owen Barfield's [Rainbow](#). Hence, the construct "art" itself cannot be extracted from the confluence of those participating, somehow isolated and compartmentalized from the act of bringing the perennial aesthetic forth into reality, alive and vibrant.

See following examples:

[Landscape, Dance and Ground Paintings of the Australian Aborigine](#)

[Dance and Wayang Puppets of the Balinese](#) (Indonesia; 7 min. video clip)

[Words, Landscape and Dry Painting of the Dine](#) (Navajo; 9 min. video clip)

So that in the interactive participatory acts of re-creating the perennial stories and archetypes of the creation time and place, in a ground painting and body painting, in the dance and the masks and regalia worn, in the personages embedded in stone or wood and allowed to

come forth, in the puppets in shadow play, in the songs sung and prayers spoken: 1) what is most true and meaningful, normally veiled in our mundane lives, is revealed and rendered accessible; 2) teachings and lessons on navigating life's journey, both pragmatic and transcendent, are offered to young and reiterated to old alike; 3) the world itself, all that is real, is re-created and perpetuated – a scar removed from a face, a lake continued blue, a world kept in balance – “art” that makes the world; and 4) every person is a special kind of “artist,” the aesthetic sensibilities infused and expressed among all participants, in all experiences.

Further Readings:

[*The World of the Crow Indians: As Driftwood Lodges.*](#) (University of Oklahoma Press 1987 and paper 1993).

[*Stories That Make the World: Oral Literature of the Indian Peoples of the Inland Northwest as Told by Lawrence Aripa, Tom Yellowtail and other Elders.*](#) (University of Oklahoma Press 1995 and paper 1999).

[*Landscape Traveled by Coyote and Crane: The World of the Schitsu'umsh - Coeur d'Alene Indians,*](#) in collaboration with the Schitsu'umsh (University of Washington Press 2001; 2005).