

THE INDIAN CRAZE

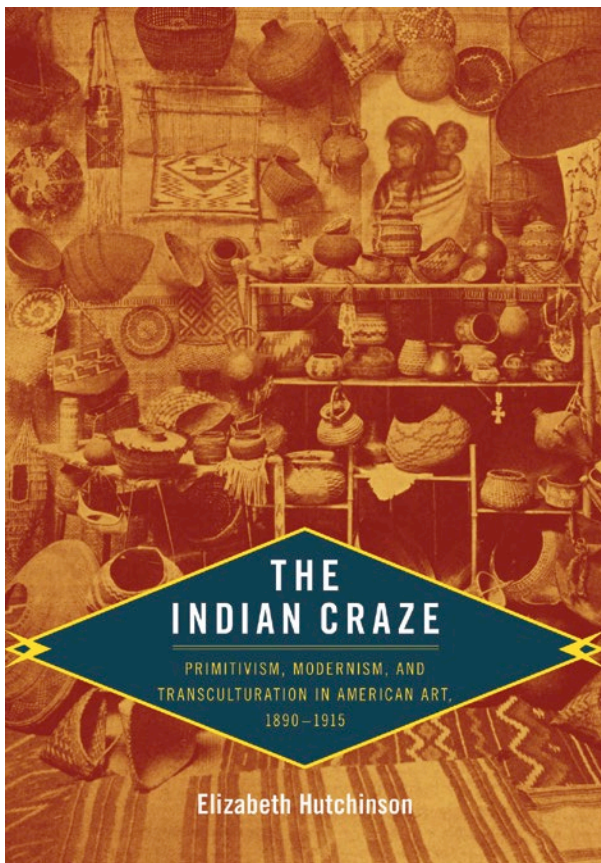
Primitivism, Modernism, Transculturation and American Art, 1890-1915



By Elizabeth Hutchinson. Duke University Press, 2009. 304 pages, 8 color and 80 black-and-white illustrations, \$27

Review by Steve Elmore

Elizabeth Hutchinson's *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, Transculturation in American Art, 1890-1915* shifts our current understanding of the role of Native American arts and culture in America, especially between 1890 and 1915 when the still young nation was busy creating its own national identity separate from Europe. Rather than viewing Native American art and culture as outside of, or tangential to, the American mainstream, she discovers that Native American art and culture was at the center of the creation of the new modern American identity. "The Indian Craze was a significant artistic phenomenon with lasting effects on American art history" she states in her introduction, and continues, "My discovery that Native art was displayed and collected



in urban contexts in the earliest years of the twentieth century allows me to show that indigenous handicrafts played a significant role in American explorations of modernity in art, legitimizing an interest in formal abstraction and contributing to emerging notions of artistic creativity."

Hutchinson begins her project to "comprehensively relate the Indian craze to the emergence of modernist aesthetic ideas" by detailing the creation of "Indian corners" and "Indian cabinets," which soon became de rigeur in modern homes where various Native American art objects were displayed.

She then presents information on the huge sales of Native American arts in American cities. New York City had no fewer than four major department stores with extensive offerings of Native American art. In addition, five private dealers offered choice specimens at private galleries in the city. She goes on to document this trend in other major American cities, emphasizing how Native American art

was extensively marketed to the American public right alongside other fine art, including painting and sculpture. In addition to department stores and private galleries, art fairs and special exhibitions promoted Native American arts to the public. To a considerable extent, Hutchinson finds that Native American art was modern art to the art buying public. Native was fashionable, chic and definitely considered modern.

While most contemporary art scholars view Native American Art as tangential to America's art history and culture, Hutchinson documents that Native American art was one of the first real pillars of modernism in America. First, she links it to the Arts and Crafts Movement, which originated in England in the 1850s as a rebellion against mass production. The Native American artist was lionized for her long hours of commitment to create stunning achievements in her area of expertise.

This heavy merchandizing was just the beginning of the Indian Craze. Hutchinson shows how the art world was saturated with influence from the Native American world. She argues that perceived virtues of Native Americans of the time, personal courage, strength, creativity and especially independence, are part of the fabric of early American modernism that was shaping the upcoming American artists. Hutchinson insists that the open spirit of Modernism welcomed and encouraged artistic contributions from Native America as equal, if not superior, to other influences.

Hutchinson's book establishes the importance of Native American art and culture in mainstream American culture during the formative years of 1890 to 1915. So why did Native American art fall out of favor with the art establishment, why has it, until very recently, been consistently shifted off to the side? The answers are complex, but Hutchinson, with her book, hopes to begin "a series of dialogues—between interconnected artistic communities, between the two frequently divided fields of Native American and 'American' art history, between 'art' and 'craft', and between scholarly disciplines—that can contribute to a decolonization of American art history."

As a Native American collector and dealer today, I am astonished at the sheer number of Native American art items around, either tucked away in the museums of America and Europe, or cherished in a private home by heirs and collectors. To a degree, this sheer quantity of items has powered the market.

Today's collector must wonder where all of these accomplished art items came from, especially in such perfect condition. If the Natives were settled on reservations and encouraged to farm and ranch, and work as blacksmiths and carpenters, why did the Native Americans continue to produce so many items of their culture which were mostly obsolete on the reservation? The answer is clear: production of most of the pottery, textiles, baskets and jewelry, was driven by an art market. Native artists, mostly women, became the new artists of this modern age.

I would emphasize that an Indian Craze of sorts has been part of American life since its founding as a country. An early Indian corner was at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, where he displayed items collected by Lewis and Clark from their 1804 to 1805 expedition. Indian art continued to be popular after 1915 with expositions at prominent venues in New York and San Francisco. European surrealists escaping World War II Europe passionately collected Indian art; abstract expressionist painters have also acknowledged their debt to the Native American artists.



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— Elizabeth Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze*

Yet today, Native art is rarely accepted as true art. We know this because Native American art has not been shown at the major U.S. museums. This is starting to change. The Charles and Valerie Diker Native American art collection is being accepted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art for exhibition. This change, I am told, was partially the result of the huge success of Gaylord Torrence's *The Plains Indians* show at the Met, which generated 35 percent more attendance than estimated. The Met's own surveys establish that many of their visitors are foreigners who expect to see masterpieces of Native American art at the nation's foremost museum. Hopefully, as goes the Met, so go the other national museums around the country. «

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Interview with Dr. Hutchinson by Steve Elmore

1. Could you tell us something about your background and how you became interested in Native American Arts? Who and what were your influences?

In terms of Native American art specifically, I had the opportunity to take a seminar with Janet Berlo, an important historian of Native American art, during my senior year at Yale College. At the time, I was working on a senior thesis about Annie Brigman, a woman photographer working in the American West, and I continued to pursue the study of Western landscape photography when I got to Stanford for graduate school. However, coursework with professors there, including Robert Warrior, helped me see the importance of taking up intercultural studies in Art History. However, I had been exposed to scholars working on questions of how cultural history could be undertaken in a more inclusive manner such as Bell Hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, even art historical pioneers such

as Linda Nochlin and Laura Mulvey. These were vital to my decision to commit to this kind of work.

2. Do you collect anything Native American?

As a college professor, I have little money for art collecting! But my mother was an art teacher and ceramist and she taught me to appreciate fine craftsmanship and innovation from an early age. We constantly went to craft fairs and art museums and my brothers and I had graphic, textile, or 3-d projects going all the time.

3. Do you have any personal experience with Native Americans?

I had only known a few Native people before taking up the position of Assistant Professor in the Art Department at the University of New Mexico in 1998, most of them art history scholars or curators. During the two years I spend there, I worked with Native colleagues and students from many Nations, many of whom were artists. Upon coming to New York in 2002, I have expanded my ties with the Native art community and have established close relationships with a few scholars, curators and artists through connections to institutions such as the NMAI, the American Indian Community House, and Amerinda as well as through other museums, galleries, and cultural centers. The Barnard and Columbia University community includes a number of extraordinary Indigenous students, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to have worked with some of them as part of a group of faculty dedicated to cultivating Indigenous studies on campus. I have also worked with some Native students as advisees in the Art History BA, MA and Ph.D programs.

4. How do you feel your book has been received?

I'm pleased with the reception my book has received. I meet young scholars who are familiar with the argument and are taking my tentative steps toward a different kind of story about Native American art further. Several curators have told me that the book was influential on their re-installation of collections of Native art, so I think some of my ideas are reaching a non-academic audience as well.

5. Your research indicates that Native American art played a larger role in American culture around 1900. Could you elaborate on this a little more and why do you think that changed?

As I argue in the book, American openness to valuing Native American art at that time was linked to an international aesthetic engagement with the decorative arts. This engagement began as a response to the industrial revolution and in the context of the opening of Japan to international trade in the mid-nineteenth century and by the turn of the twentieth century was integrated into emerging discourses of modernism that focused on design and attention to materials as a route to collapsing the perceived separation of art and life. The Arts and Crafts, Aestheticist and many Secession movements can be linked to this development. At the same

time, and paired with these aesthetic discussions, were arguments about the moral value of making, purchasing, and living with good design as a means of alleviating social problems (such as the Arts and Crafts movement's interest in creating meaningful work as an alternative to factory labor). Many of these arguments were framed within a nationalist context, encouraging the production or consumption of American (or British, etc.) objects. Collectors saw Native American art as meeting these needs. Few understood the ways in which removal, reservations, boarding schools and other aspects of U.S. Indian policy had impacted Native art traditions. But, as Ruth Phillips has explained in the related history of Woodlands art made for mainstream Canadian consumption, this complicated history should not prevent us from seeing the beauty of the works collected or from assuming that the collectors were blind to it.

I think things changed because the art world discussion of design and materials moved on. In my epilogue, I say that mainstream America has consistently taken an interest in Native American art when the art world turned its attention from "fine art" to "craft." I see a similar, if less expansive, "craze" for Native art emerging in the 1930s, when the Indian Arts and Crafts Board was created, and in the late 60s and early 70s, evidenced by the leadership of the IAIA by designers such as Lloyd Kiva New and Charles Loloma.

6. Do you think Native American art played a role in developing the American nationalism and individual identity as opposed to Europeans? Could you speak about that some?

This question has been explored by a large number of writers dealing with the emergence of an interest in an American "usable past" beginning in the early twentieth century. This was, of course, a time of growth in American economic and political power and of war and conflict in Europe that caused the United States to assert its distinctiveness.

Native American art played a role, but this history also played out through the problematic mainstream embrace of aspects of African-American, Latinx, immigrant and rural White cultures. Though the narratives that emerged were usually reductive and exploitative, there is something lasting about the way this period located the uniqueness of the United States in its recognition of the diversity of its population and the aspiration of its stated principles toward equality.

7. What impact did Native American art have on early American Modernism?

Native American art was included in exhibitions, classes, and textbooks that were essential for the emergence of modernism in America. Many important modernists had their own collections of baskets or pottery; others studied with teachers such as Arthur Wesley Dow, who actively encouraged students turn to Indigenous art for ideas about design and construction. Put most simply, early modernists were seeking ways of moving beyond representation toward abstraction and to center their work with materials in the production of works of art. Engaging with Native American art was one of the ways they did this.

8. Where did you find the term The Indian Craze? Give us an idea of the extent of that craze in America.

In my research for the book, I read over 400 articles about Native American art that were published in mainstream newspapers, magazines and art journals between 1890 and 1915. The title came from that archive. These publications, like the venues promoting the production and sale of Native American art, stretched far beyond what we think of as Indian Country. To name just one example, I found ads for Indigenous art for sale in Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, Washington, D.C., Seattle, L.A. and New York. Of course, Indian people could be found in all of these places, too. Unfortunately, because this was a time when Indigenous lifeways were under profound assault by federal policy, too often such relocation was the result of forced enrollment in boarding schools or the result of economic necessity.

9. What impact did Native American Native art have on American culture and society at the time of the Craze? Do you feel this impact has continued into the present?

There is a wonderful exhibition that just opened at the National Museum of the American Indian called “Americans.” It argues that Native Americans are an essential aspect of American culture and America’s vision of itself, though usually in a manner that does not examine how and why this came to be, and how they myths that have replaced the historical facts around such events as Pocahontas’ diplomatic work, Cherokee Removal, and the Battle of Little Big Horn have contributed to an ongoing problematic relationship between Indians and non-Indians in the United States. I think the Indian Craze, and the subsequent acceptance of pottery, weaving, carving and other Indigenous artistic traditions, might be seen as another site of entanglement.

10. What caused the separation between Native American Native arts and the mainstream art world? When do you think this occurred?

Answered above, I believe. That said, I think there have always been several art worlds in the United States. If by “mainstream” you mean one centered in New York (and perhaps in recent decades, LA), I’d say that artists of color and women artists have always had only fleeting purchase on success, and their success has often come with them marked by their identities as if they are an exception to the rule (noting them as Black or women artists). Some progress is being made in these spaces to be sure, but it is also notable that alternative art worlds in the present and in the past are getting more attention. These are valuable sites for thoughtful consideration though it is unlikely they will ever carry as much economic value or prestige as the mainstream.

11. Is it desirable to bring the two worlds closer together? What can be done to create respect and understanding between Native American artists and the modern art establishment?

I think it is vital in answering a question like this one to ask Indigenous artists and curators. Certainly, permanent collections are working to expand their collections of Native art and are

considering how and where to install them. The most responsible ones are collaborating with Indigenous artists and curators in this work and, where possible, working with the communities connected to the objects. But it is also the case that some Indigenous artists, curators and communities support the creation of separate art spaces that are more responsive to their values than mainstream venues can be.

12. What are you working on now?

I'm working on a book about Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of the Pacific Coast in the mid-nineteenth century.

13. Any favorite books you'd like to recommend to our readers?

I have been very excited about the exhibitions of Native American art coming out of the Peabody Essex Museum. The new show on T.C. Cannon raises a lot of issues related to this discussion.

14. As an educator, how do your contemporary students react to their exposure to Native American Art?

I have both Native and non-Native students and both hail from around the country. I would say most may only know a few historic indigenous art forms, and they really appreciate learning more about the aesthetics, craftsmanship, and history of the things I teach. We are lucky to be in New York City, which has so many excellent collections. When possible, I try to create opportunities for students to see pieces in person, outside of cases or displays, which helps them begin to develop the skills to seeing and interpreting what they are seeing.

15. How do you view the interplay today between Native American art and American European artists?

This takes too many forms to offer a meaningful answer. But I also think that this entire interview has been framed as if an American art world exists independent of a global art world. If the mainstream art world has opened up in the past 50 years, this has happened in conjunction with the emergence of challenges to Eurocentrism in a global context. Many Indigenous artists and curators have vital, generative connections to artists from around the world and don't necessarily see their practice as driven by their place in and American art world. I imagine this is equally true for artists of color from other backgrounds and Euro-American artists.

16. Do you think that Racism is a reason Native American art has been neglected by the mainstream art world?

Yes

17. What do you think the future holds for Native American Art?

Native American artists have made amazing work across the centuries in ways that responded to individual inspiration, community values, and changing contexts. This will continue and, because Native American art is more visible in more venues and formats than ever before, I think new audiences will continue to be created for it.