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Dorothy Dunn

American Indian Painting

Dorothy Dunn's book, American Indian Painting, was published by the University of New Mexico Press in April of this year. In it she describes and interprets American Indian painting as it evolved among the tribes of the Southwest and the Great Plains. These excerpts and the illustrations are from that book.

AMERICAN INDIAN PAINTING not only is the first painting the continent produced—it is the first American painting in which abstract style and certain other characteristics now commonly associated with contemporary art were developed to an advanced degree. Centuries before Columbus, America had such an art; and she has it now. Yet Indian painting remains comparatively unknown in its own land and among the arts of the world.

Indian painting is New World conceived. It is not an outgrowth of the mature arts of other countries. It contains a rich variety of symbols and forms that are peculiarly expressive of cultures slowly evolved within a vast new land. It reveals the aboriginal concept of man's relationship with the unique American environment—the soil and the gigantic terrain, the powerful natural forces, the indigenous substances and beings.

Within the primeval continent, each major area eventually produced a characteristic response to particular challenges and influences through its own functioning art. Thus, during the long course of time, numerous different arts emerged. They embodied, through peculiar symbols and motifs, the philosophies vital to regional peoples within a greatly diversified geographical setting.

In painting, the abbreviated rendering—the significant, concise abstraction—was summoned to convey meanings too immense for detailed statement. Symbols, concentrating and unifying complex ideas, became intelligible to all members within the respective tribes, and a predominately abstract art finally prevailed throughout Indian America.

Although the original symbols were designed to fulfill particular needs in those earlier times, they frequently were invested with such basic significance as to render them valid for intelligent appreciation far beyond the groups and periods for which they were created. Particularly is this evident in the modern painting of the Southwest and Plains areas of the United States. This art directly inherits ancient native motifs and projects them through acquired media into the present era where they have a surprising appropriateness.

Contemporary painting of the Southwest presents striking patterns conditioned by an arid, brilliantly lighted land. It is mainly an art of contrasts, without half tones; of frank, direct statements composed in pure, flat color. It retains the essence of reality through devices unassociated with the reproduction of superficial aspects of nature, but derived through centuries of selective observance of natural constructions and operations. Thus, earth and sky are represented in elemental forms and spare lines—terrace of mountain and arc of cloud; native plants and creatures are enlivened in graphic suggestion of their essential features; dance and drama are enacted in the conservatively ordered motifs of their performance in life; and symbols of fertility, germination, growth, and renewal are integrated withal. This art, maturely developed in its own traditions, produces an ingenious diversity of capricious and sedate improvisations upon its fundamental designs, and multifarious inventions within the genre.

Modern Plains painting is at once charged with the vitality of authoritative drawing and graced with the whimsical decorativeness of exotic color. Usually more objective than Southwest art, it displays dynamic portrayals of contests, hunts, ceremonials, and mythical emblems of the most spectacular days in Plains history. It perpetuates in new media much of the untamed spirit of Plains hide painting, the traditional art which depicted Plainsmen, horses, and buffalo with originality and conviction never equaled in any other painting inspired by the region. It recreates the wild aloofness of the unbounded western prairies and the proud sportsmanship of the men who rode and fought there, and it recalls obsolete customs in characteristic yet imaginative manner. In its forceful techniques and direct compositions, this painting, while manifestly modern, offers a remarkable interpretation of an American scene that is gone forever.

Since the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the modern developments in Indian art began, painting (and drawing) from both these areas has been making invaluable contributions to recent world art. Far more of it undoubtedly has been lost than has been preserved;

yet, such representative examples as are presented here indicate the quality and diversity of that which remains and continues to develop.

In accordance with the depth to which one wishes to appreciate this painting, he should become acquainted not only with the successive forms and styles through which it has evolved, but with American history not yet written in the texts, and American peoples rarely called by name, for it is these which have determined the nature and content of Indian painting.

* * * * *

THERE is a future for Indian painting in the art of the world and a peculiar need for the ideology of Indian art in its own land. As America awakes increasingly to her indigenous cultural riches, Indian painting will become more and more understood and appreciated. Its examples will augment permanent collections of art, and its fund of motifs and techniques will enrich the creative activities of artists in the several fields.

There are today, and for many years to come there will be, among the growing Indian populations, artists who possess both the willingness and the capability for contributing toward this important role which the art of the aboriginal peoples has already begun to play in America's art of the future. From the painters, such work as has been presented here is a splendid showing, yet much could be added before the time of the ultimate assimilation which seems inevitable for the American Indian people. It is the painters who are yet near enough to vast, rich stores of native traditions to understand them who could most effectively and happily develop and project Indian painting in full measure.

This does not mean retardation for the Indian artists, for they are already abreast in the contemporary idiom; in fact Indian painters were "Modernists" in the days of the Awatovi murals and the classic Mimbres and Tusayan ceramics. Modern Indian paintings can continue to spring fresh and vital, entirely individual, from native sources.

The painters who wish to develop such art deserve understanding support from institutions, collectors, and the general public. In addition to such attention as has been given, juries could welcome Indian paintings for consideration in group shows, galleries outside the Indian areas might present Indian painting where it is little known as modern art, colleges could inaugurate studies in Indian art, and schools might hang paintings by Indians as well as paintings about them. Thereby, the artists would be given to feel that theirs is a significant art which it is



Plate I. HA-SO-DE, Navajo. *Children to the Day School*. 1940. Tempera. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma.

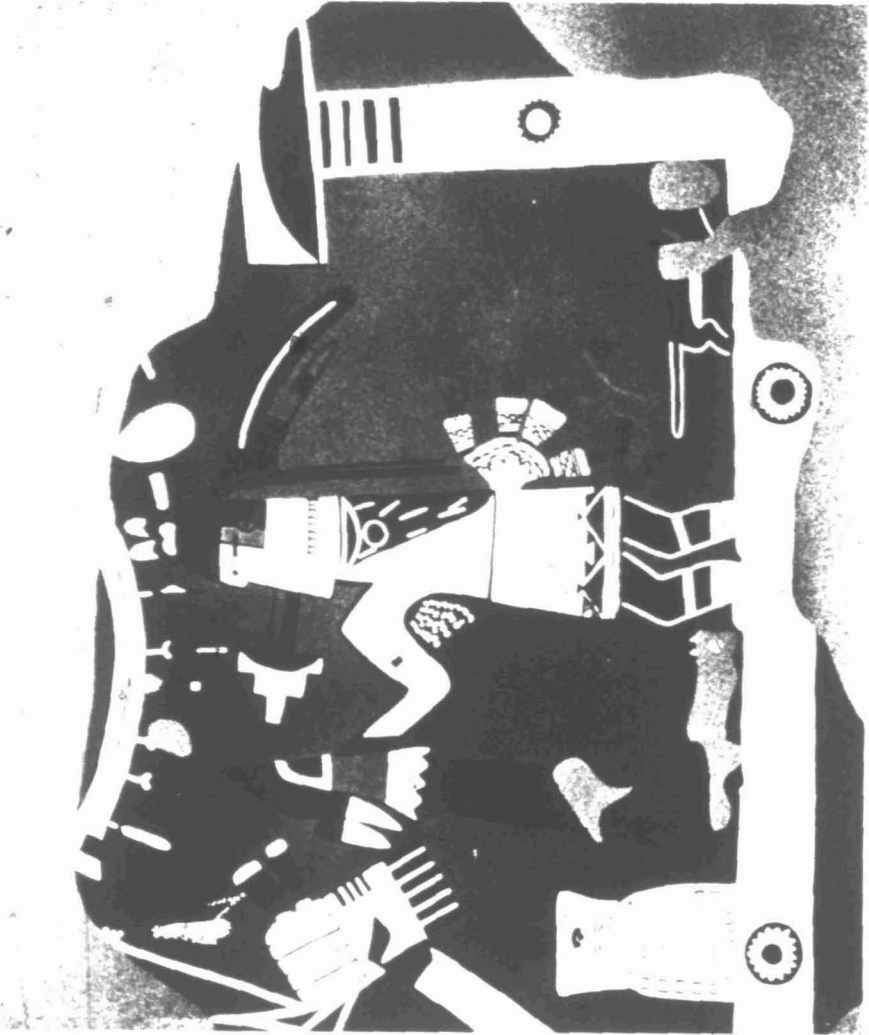


Plate II. Hopi. Mural. Ca. A.D. 1350. Awatovi Pueblo, Arizona. Painting in earth color on adobe plaster. (Reproduction.) Peabody Museum, Harvard University.



Plate III. RAYMOND NAHA, Hopi-Pahukonfi Ceremony, 1962. Tempera. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. James R. Dixon.



Plate IV. Quah Ah, Cochiti Pueblo. Corn Dance. Ca. 1930. Tempera. Museum of New Mexico.



Plate V. AWA TSIREII, San Ildefonso Pueblo. *Kossa and Bull*. Ca. 1935. Ink and gouache. William and Leslie Van Ness Denman Collection.



Plate VI. Srwa, San Ildefonso Pueblo, *Stampede*, 1957, Cascan tempera. Southwestern at Memphis.

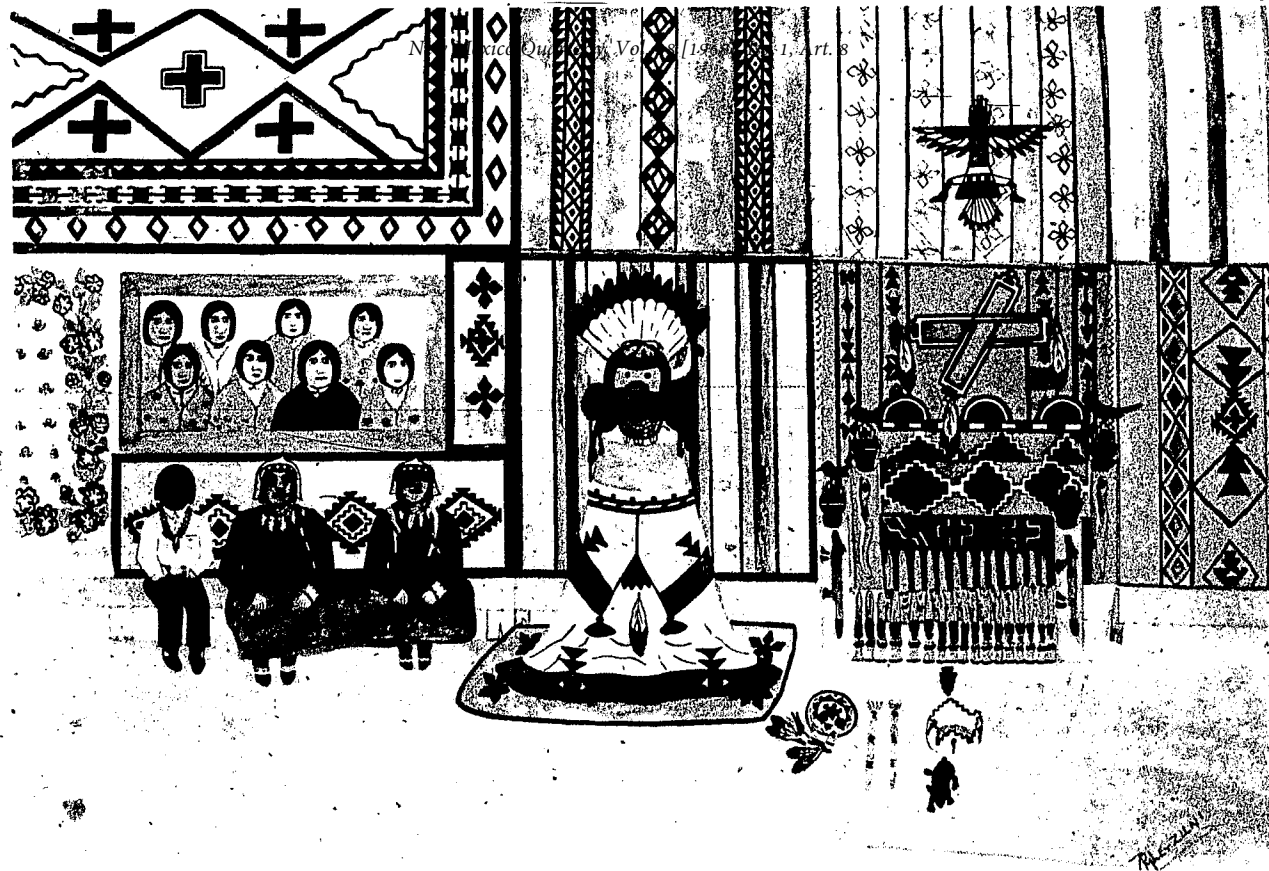


Plate VII. PYLER, Zuñi Pueblo. *Interior of Shalako House*. Ca. 1920. Watercolor. Bayou Bend Collection, Museum of Fine Arts of Houston.

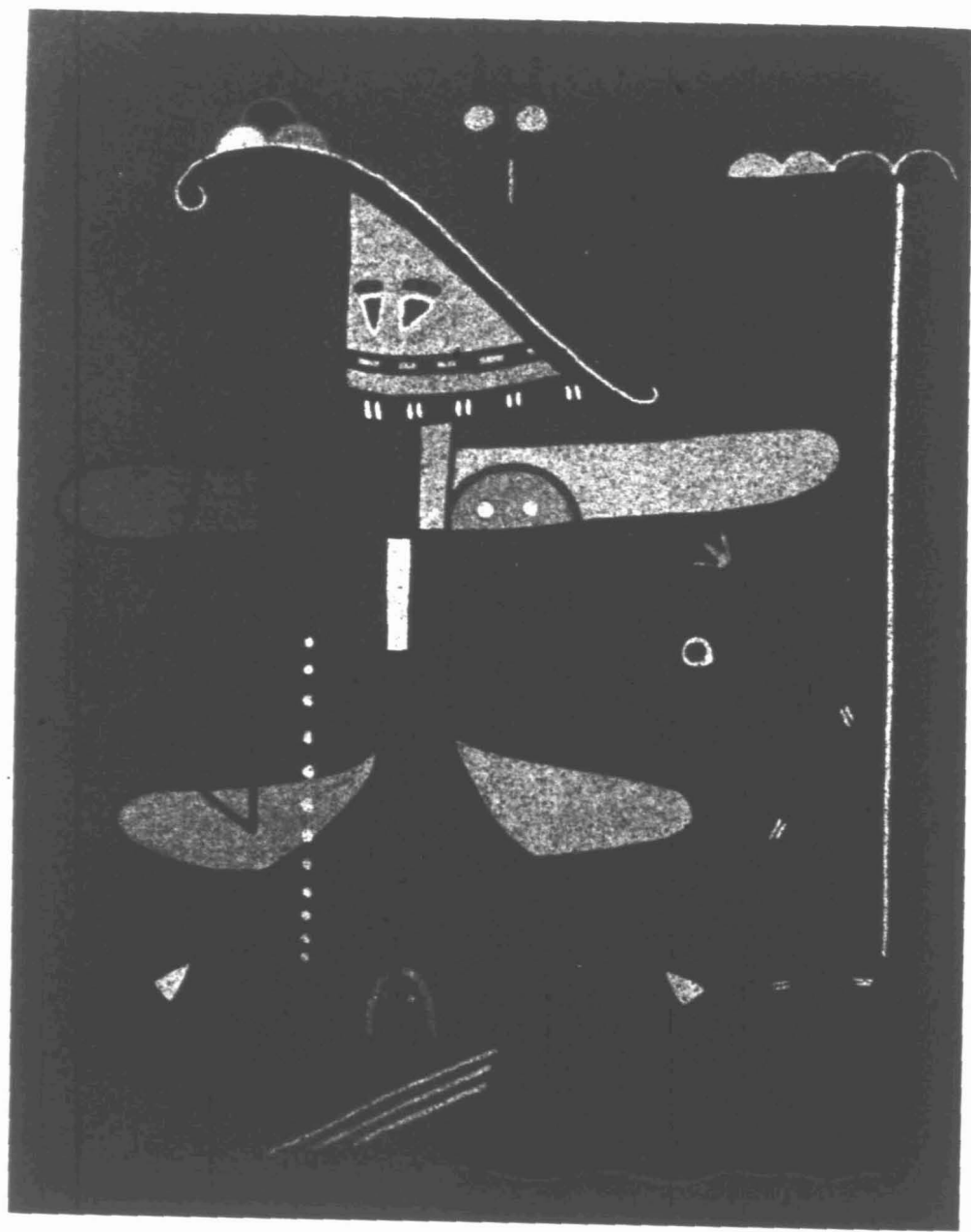


Plate VIII. JOE H. HERRERA, Cochiti Pueblo. *Hunter*. 1954. Casein tempera. Margretta S. Dietrich Collection.

very much worth their while to advance, from sources in its own tradition, within and part of the general advancement of America's whole culture.

Much has been said about the achievement of a national art in America, one which becomes free at last from Europe. It even has been suggested that Indian art might be strategic in such an art, as Mexican paintings of the temples and codices became determinant in the modern painting of Mexico. But, in the first place, America is still too young and yet "too many selves to know the one" to have arrived at significant art homogeneity. Perhaps the heterogeneous national character of America is to be reflected in the national art, lending it distinctive features from many arts and various stocks of mankind which merge in a diversified oneness that is characteristically American. In the second place, as compared to the population ratios of Mexico, the Indian populations of the United States constitute a small minority which, although capable of contributing a proportionately great richness to the national art, could not be representative in the measure the native peoples have been in Mexico. Here, rather, the strain of Indian art must somehow enter the flow of the many strains toward a national art expression, not losing its own identity but contributing identifying features to the whole.

Of this contribution, those who have long known of the values of Indian painting have already spoken; among them:

Frederic H. Douglas: ". . . a search for the means of building up a truly American art which stands on its own feet instead of aping the art of other lands without understanding them might well include a study and mastery of the forms of American Indian art."

Alice Corbin Henderson: "[The Indian is] a race whose art is itself the finest possible contribution to our national life."

Edgar L. Hewett: "The best we can do is to save what we can of that priceless heritage [Indian art] and make every effort to comprehend it; then . . . avail ourselves eagerly of this which came from our own soil."

Olive Rush: "We may well envy them their heritage, we may well protect and foster and encourage it, for it is precious to our civilization. We need its virility, its refreshing power."

Herbert J. Spinden: "In a world that grows mechanical he [the Indian artist] seems able to keep contact with illusion. And this is well because nations are made great by illusions which enrich the spirit and establish the interdependence of individuals in a social organism."

Walter Pach: "More than we realize, this soil has affected the character of the American people. . . . The art of the Indians, so eloquent of this land, is American art, and of the most important kind."

In another aspect, the Indian painters have something of timely pertinence to offer American art, and that is a view toward a wider concept of art. The Indian concept of art for life, art for everyone, art not apart in an exotic world might well be considered in America today much more than it is.

The modern American, as much as did his indigenous predecessor, needs art in his everyday life, for he needs art's insights in more fully realizing the peace and order that are in the designs of nature, and in comprehending something of the elements and functions of the gigantic and minute patterns in a universe which is comparatively as strange to him, with all his technology, as it was to the pre-Columbian American. Whereas the main function of art in primitive days was one of helping to keep man from being destroyed by nature, that of art in modern times may well be one concerned in some way with preventing nature, including man himself, from being destroyed by man.

Modern art certainly has the opportunity for as great a purpose as had any art before it, and artists are aware of the challenges of the contemporary world. Some painters are producing groping or chaotic or evasive work in the face of immense overpowering unknowns. Some remain purely decorative in their art while others are reaching toward the nonobjective. A number are seeing through superficial aspects to underlying vital elements and are seeking to clarify and interpret them. Few attempt a completely literal statement about anything, for they realize that the driving forces of the modern world have advanced beyond the things which are readily seen and understood. The largely representational painting of a past era seems inadequate for today's more complex needs, and much of the modern artist's work is again taking on many characteristics of primitive art. In fact, the modern painter has upon occasion frankly gone to the primordial artist for suggestion, and, in much of his most moving expression, there are indications of the imaginative approach, the meaningful abstraction, the direct, potent style of the true primitive, and a comparably functional quality.

Yet, much of contemporary painting is incomprehensible and unavailable to the average American—that same individual who eagerly accepts the most advanced design in material equipment. Something

is wrong in this situation. Perhaps it is due to both the frequent, although usually inadvertent, exclusiveness of the artist and to the inadequate system in which American art exists. The general public regards artists as extraordinary individuals and galleries as occasional places, art itself as unobtainable except in prints and photographs. As for becoming actively engaged in painting, Clyde Kluckhohn has so rightly said, "Americans usually are scared out of being artists."

This sort of situation does not exist in Indian society where everyone participates in art in some measure and painting is strange to no one. In every painting the inner significance is invariably conveyed by the artist to the beholder, for everyone understands and respects the purpose and language of art. Painting is not set aside to be seen only on holidays and special occasions, but is very much integrated with the daily life. It is this concept of art which deserves consideration not only by artists but by everyone who has anything to do with presenting painting to the American public.

Such a concept, which is akin to that of the Indian's in its inclusiveness, is already beginning to function in some localities. There are instances where painting is slowly moving out from the congestion of the art centers to people in other parts of the country, where unknown artists working in the hinterlands are being sought out for representation in certain of the major exhibitions, and where outlying communities are initiating distinguished art activities of their own. With such beginnings, it should be possible for individual participation in painting—both active and appreciative—to be extended through a knowledge of Indian art.

TO THE INDIAN HIMSELF, the advancing role of his painting in the art of America can mean much. Through it he may not only continue to grow esthetically, but he may at last have an opportunity to make statements of his own about his own culture, even to restore creatively in visual form many of its extinct aspects. Countless volumes have been written about the Indian, yet he has rarely written; his truest record is in his art, particularly his modern painting. Herein the record lives, and is growing, from his point of view. Yet it is far more than a record. Modern Indian painting is a way of sharing beauty and a philosophy of life, as the Indian knows it, in a form available to his fellow men. Through this art, the Indian bridges a cultural gap, for his contemporary painting relates to both the old traditions and the new. It is at once of America's primal heritage and of her most modern expression.