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## Meaning in Women's Arts of North America

The evidence for a traditional distinction between men's and women's arts in North America is widespread in both space and time.<sup>1</sup> Men's arts, made for specific ritual functions and often manufactured and used with a limited audience, are more localized (fig. 1). Women's arts were instead publically displayed and used, and frequently traded, leading to wide diffusion of technical and decorative traits (fig. 2). In visual terms, the similarity among women's arts across North America is far greater than the relationship between men's and women's styles within a single tribe. With such widespread similarities and evidence of intercommunication between tribes, it is possible to develop cross cultural comparisons of general traits in the function and decoration of women's arts.

The contrast between men's and women's arts is in part due to differences in use and context.<sup>2</sup> Men's arts are created primarily for use within a ritual context, and include not only sculpture and painting but also narrative arts such as dancodrama. In concrete or temporary form, men's arts rely on representational imagery to command the presence of specific spirit identities, to reenact some mythic event, describe some aspect of the natural world, or perform a ritual transformation. Through such representation or impersonation, male ritualists are able to contact and control supernaturals who have the power to transform and renew individual humans, a whole society, or the natural environment. Since each image represents an identifiable non-human personality, with known attributes, ritual functions, and often mythic history, the symbolism of men's arts is directly accessible to interpretation and understanding.

By contrast, women's arts fulfill utilitarian functions of clothing and container, and are fabricated primarily through the constructive techniques of weaving, embroidery (of quill, hair, beads), pottery, and basketry. Since decoration is developed for protection rather than transformation (see below), designs are based on simple geometric motifs arranged in abstract composi-



Figure 1. Haida, crest pole, 19 century, reproduction. British Columbia Provincial Museum, Victoria. Photograph M. Cohodas.

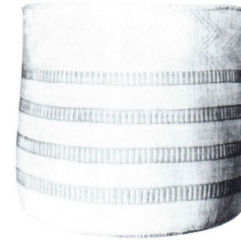


Figure 2. Haida, twined basket, ca. 1900. Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum, Seattle, 25.0/182. Photograph M. Cohodas.

tions. Valued as prestige objects by their owners, technical and aesthetic sophistication are often their most salient features.

The abstract nature of decoration on women's art makes it more difficult to interpret. Two opposing views have dominated such attempts. The view that these abstract decorations are devoid of symbolic meaning and are instead valued solely for aesthetic reasons, is represented by Kroeber's discussion of (Barrett's investigation into) Pomo basketry designs:

The Pomo in basket decoration are less inclined to symbolic or religious interpretation than we are in the ornamentation of our architecture, implements of household use, or display and dress. But in both cases there is no evidence that any decorative figure originated from a creative impulse. Symbolism can only interpret what is given.<sup>3</sup>

Other scholars believe that native women artists have transformed representational images into geometric designs and have translated mythic narrative content into abstract compositions.

Jill and Peter Furst write:

Unfortunately, by the time ethnographers began to study California basketry seriously, many of the original meanings had been forgotten. Most abstract geometric symbols in Pomo basketry represented animals or parts or tracks of animals, as well as phenomena of the environment and of the weather.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in discussing Plains beadwork, these same authors write that "every ornament bore a message, although many of their meanings have been forgotten or were never recorded by the whites."<sup>5</sup> In fact, ethnographers have been investigating the possibility of symbolic meaning in women's arts for as long as they have been studying men's arts. It is unlikely that while the symbolism of men's arts is still well remembered,

that of women's arts should have been forgotten before such investigations began, nearly a century ago.

Thus scholars have judged the designs on women's arts to be either meaningless but aesthetically pleasing, or meaningful but enigmatic. Both approaches involve a search for the kind of one-to-one correlations between figural images and specific personages, and between realistic compositions and narrative events, which are appropriate to men's representational arts. Neither treats women's abstract arts on their own terms.

In fact, the approach of Native American men and women to the use and interpretation of imagery in art appears to be profoundly different. For example, Kroeber's analysis suggests that male owners of moccasins give narrative interpretations for the abstract beadwork designs which the women beadworkers had never intended.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, when women incorporated representational imagery into their art (largely under the influence of the curio trade), they abstracted the forms and arranged them in symmetrical patterns of repetitions which deny any sense of a distinct identifiable spirit entity (fig. 3). If we are to interpret women's arts on their own terms, we must begin with the nature of this abstract approach to composition to which all individual motifs are subordinated.

Native American women consistently employed certain modes of composition arrangement in creating these abstract designs. Repetition is the key mode of organization and compositional movement, which creates visual effects of order, homogeneity, and rhythm. The lack of compositional focus or emphasis, and often the lack of a single orientation to the design or object, create the homogeneous visual effect. Repetition causes the eye to scan the surface of the object in order to appreciate its decoration. Once the eye learns the pattern repeat, there are no visual surprises or incongruities. The consistent relationship of figure and ground furthers the sense of order produced by a repetitive design.

The rhythm of such abstract compositions arises from the manner in which the symmetry of the pattern repeat influences the movement of the eye in scanning the design. For example, serial repetition, as in the progression of elements in a band around the circumference of a pot or basket, sets up an orderly spacing of figure and ground which directs movement on the horizontal axis of the globular shape (fig. 3.). All-over repeats instead force the eye to either move with the hand in turning the vessel to perceive the repeat on both horizontal and vertical axes, or to read the entire object in one glance in order to appreciate the integration of



Figure 3. Zuni, polychrome ceramic, ca. 1900. Private collection. Photograph M. Cohodas.

Figure 4. Prehistoric Anasazi, Tularosa Style, black-on-white ceramic, 13 century. Private collection. Photograph M. Cohodas.



Figure 5. Pima, coiled basket tray, early 20 century. Private collection. Photograph M. Cohodas.

form and pattern (fig. 4). Rotationally symmetrical arrangements of motifs appear to spin around the central point of rotation (fig. 5). These rotational arrangements suggest an intellectual ordering of space not only through the prevalence of four-part repetition, but also through the rejection of the modes of symmetry (bilateral, radial, etc.) which are common in the natural environment. By directing the eye according to particular rhythms, all of these modes of arrangement create a sense of dynamic balance which animates the otherwise static nature of symmetrical repetition.

Binary opposition is a category of symmetrical repetition which is often used to create compositional order. For example, designs on painted pottery of the prehistoric southwest frequently involve reciprocal relationships between two elements that are similar in form but contrast in tone or hue. As in Colonial Hohokam and Classic Chaco ceramics, the most sophisticated examples of this approach involve the transformation of the figure-ground opposition into a reciprocal relationship of positive and negative elements. Pueblo III ceramics of the Cibola region illustrate the more common alternative in which a neutral background mediates between the opposed homologous elements, here the interlocked solid and hatched forms, (fig. 4). The same two modes of binary opposition appear in basketry design of the Southwest and California. The design in a single dark color may be interlocked with a lighter and often reciprocal background (Pima, Yavapai, Pomo), (fig. 6), or designs in two colors (usually red and black) may be contrasted on the neutral ground (Yokuts). In both types of binary opposition, the tense balance which holds the elements in opposition creates the effect of controlled energy.



Figure 6. Pomo, twined cooking basket, early 20 century. Private collection. Photograph M. Cohodas.

Binary opposition may also be employed to animate banded arrangements. Often, as in Tlingit basketry, a central band may be inserted as a foil for the two identical flanking bands (fig. 7). In Navajo blankets (fig. 8), the two flanking bands are related in bilateral symmetry across the central axis of the blanket, while the



Figure 7. Tlingit, twined basket, early 20 century. Private collection. Photograph M. Cohodas.

contrasting central band is also bilaterally symmetrical about the same axis. Such a pattern is simultaneously perceived both as a sequence of three bands (in an ABA pattern) and as the opposition of two bilaterally symmetrical halves. Recognizing its inherent visual ambiguity, Adams' employs the term "dyadictriadic" for this type of textile composition.

This emphasis on ordered patterning in the decoration of women's arts accords with their utilitarian functions. Whether as clothing, baby carriers, or vessels for the gathering, processing, storage, cooking, and serving of food, all of these objects function as containers designed to protect and nurture the members of a woman's family. Some of the most elaborately decorated examples, such as the war shirt and baby carrier of the Plains tribes (fig. 9), are created for protection at particularly vulnerable times in a person's life cycle. Since all potentially harmful or destructive forces operate through the principle of disorder, the abstractly ordered decoration of clothing and containers protects the wearer or contents through the counter-image of order.

The protective function of women's arts applies also to ritual contexts. In general, highly decorated containers made by women for ritual use are designed to hold materials in a spiritually potent, volatile, or vulnerable state. Throughout the Southwest, bowls and trays are used in ritual to hold materials such as water or corn pollen which are associated with the positive aspects of renewal and blessing. Since the ritual transformation or rite of passage involves the destruction of the old order for the creation of a new order, the designs on women's art objects may also assist in the ritual transformation. Operating under the principle of sympathetic magic, that like produces like, these ordered designs may actually function to create order, and thus aid in renewal or rebirth. Among the prehistoric Mimbres people, the ceramic bowl which is placed over the head of the deceased has a hole knocked in the bottom, so that it may serve not only as a container for the individual spirit



Figure 8. Navajo, child's blanket, mid. 19 century. *Fine American Indian Art*, Sotheby's, York Avenue Galleries, April 24, 1982, number 80.

Figure 9. Central Plains, beaded baby carrier, ca. 1900. Private Collection. Photograph M. Cohodas.



force but also as a pathway or passageway towards rebirth.

In addition to these utilitarian and protective functions, women's art objects often serve to articulate social relationships. Clothing designs may identify status, affiliation, or occasion. Baskets are offered or exchanged in rites of passage such as puberty, marriage, and death. Since the display or exchange of clothing and containers serves to both express and enhance prestige, great stress is laid on technical virtuosity, aesthetic quality, and often richness of materials (fig. 10). The use of bright colors, reflective surfaces, or bold contrasts of figure and ground, enhance their prestige and integrative functions by making the objects more highly visible.



Figure 10. Pomo, coiled basket with feathers and shell, early 20 century. Private collection. Photograph M. Cohodas.

All of the traits of style and function which have been shown to characterize women's arts in North America occur in contrast to the arts of men. The two varieties of objects constitute a dualism which determines the opposition of qualities. Thus women's arts is abstract *because* men's art is representational; women's art depicts balance and order *because* men's art depicts transformation and change; and *vice versa*. Such contrasts partake of the general dualistic outlook in which the opposition of female and male aspects of humanity are projected on society (as in the moiety system) and on the whole universe.

The nature of the contrasts between men's and women's arts arises from the expression of this dualistic world view as an opposition of sacred and profane. Men's arts are associated with the sacred sphere, whose role is to transform, through the medium of ritual. All ritual transformations involve a process of change from death or destruction (of the old order or state of being). Representational images in men's art are involved in the sacred sphere, since they ensure the presence of the spirit entities who work this transformation. All representational images are thus associated with the process of change, whether or not they appear in a narrative format. The ritualist also belongs to the sacred sphere.

Indeed, some practise for the opposite moiety or for a different community, since to be outside the profane world of (one's own) culture is to be in the sacred realm of nature.

By contrast, women's arts are more related to the profane sphere. Social relationships bind the makers and users of women's art objects, who are most often members of the same family. Rather than suggesting change and disorder, the abstract symmetrical designs on women's art objects suggest permanence through timelessness and harmony through balance. Whether in the passive role of protection, or the more active role of renewing order, these designs function autonomously, without the intervention of any specific spirit entity.

The association of men's art with transformation and change, and women's with permanence and order, also involves different methods of communicating meaning. For example, in both men's and women's arts, four-part compositions carry the obvious connotation of the four directions. However, whereas in men's art the symbols used would refer to transformational spirit powers called upon in ritual contexts, in women's art they refer to a timeless state of being — in quadripartite organization which orders perceived space. Similarly, binary oppositions occur in both media. In men's art, they involve specific personages or qualities animistically identified with such opposing forces as sky and underworld, mountain and sea, summer and winter, or possession and protection. In women's art, the abstract quality of binary opposition would refer directly to the basic duality of the universe, without the intervention of specific symbols. Furthermore, the holding of opposed design elements in tense balance is perceived as consonant with the cyclic oscillation and reciprocity between opposing forces with animates the universe.

In conclusion, men's arts depend on the identification of specific motifs, while composition is a secondary factor that is largely dependent on local tradition. By contrast, women's art depends primarily on widespread modes of composition, while the form of the component motifs is irrelevant to the meaning. The temporal nature of men's arts is in part related to the process of symbolic interpretation through step-by-step deciphering of component motifs, while the timelessness of women's art is in part due to the intuitive understanding of meaning through instantaneous perception of the structure of the composition as a whole. Felt rather than analyzed, women's art expresses meaning without symbolism.

