

---

## Indian Made: Reframing the Rhetorical Parameters of Indigenous Aesthetics

COURTNEY COTTRELL

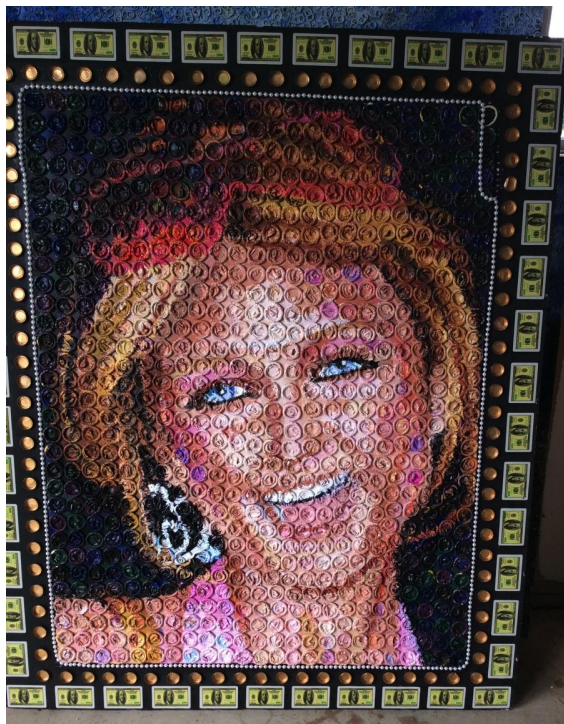
The Oneida Nation Museum (ONM) anticipates moving into a new building in 2021. This has been a long-awaited and hoped-for move, once postponed in favor of building a nursing home for tribal elders. The new building will be more accessible to tourists and have space for both exhibitions and collections storage under one roof. A large and daunting project for a small, dedicated staff, the ONM contracted me to prepare the collections for their physical move. Having worked with the ONM as an intern, volunteer, and consultant in the past, I was eager to help a museum that has helped build my career. Now as I stand in front of an extensive art collection recently acquired by the museum, swimming in options of how to best tackle packaging, tracking, and moving, I'm struck by a thought about art aesthetics.

The new collection is by Oneida artist, David Ninham. It was donated by Ninham's surviving parents and consists of roughly 200 pieces of art. Some Native artists are wary of placing their work in a tribal museum for fear of it being tagged solely as "Native art" rather than "art;" a niche that can be near impossible to get out of. However, by placing Ninham's art in the ONM collection, the family was ensuring that Oneida citizens would be able to see the evolving nature of contemporary art made by a fellow community member. The influence of his art on younger generations, and other Oneida artists could be invaluable.

As a prolific artist, David Ninham created works of art out of everyday objects he collected. He used thumbtacks, bottle caps, spools of thread, can tabs, and toy cars not only to create breathtaking landscapes but also to depict celebrities with stunning accuracy. One of my personal favorites depicts a naked man sitting on the American flag, holding his knees to his chest. His body language suggests he is trying to protect himself as streaks of color stream towards him from every direction. When you look closer, the man is made out of toy soldiers painted flesh color, and the streaks are painted bullets in various gauges. The title of this piece is *The War on Terror*. I imagine this piece can speak to the countless number of Native veterans who struggle with PTSD. The number of veterans that identify as Native American is

astounding. The Oneida Nation can boast that they have tribal members who have fought alongside other American soldiers in every single U.S. conflict.

Another one of Ninham’s pieces that is a staff favorite is titled *A Night in Paris*. It features a likeness of Paris Hilton, great-granddaughter of the hotel mogul. Hilton’s likeness is made by gluing painted condoms to a large piece of dense foam painted black with a border of small fake \$100 bills. From a distance, it looks like a portrait of Paris Hilton, but as you step closer, you realize what materials Ninham used. As viewers realize what the portrait is made out of, they understand that the title of the piece is playing off both the medium and the subject matter (Image 1).



(Image 1: *A Night in Paris*, photo courtesy of the Oneida Nation Museum)

*A Night in Paris* stands just over four feet tall. The other 200 or so pieces range in sizes from five feet to small picture frames. But it isn’t necessarily the size of the art that causes problems for the move. The 3-dimensional nature with varying depth of many of the pieces has slowed progress in storing these works on a small museum budget and with a lack of space. Ideally, I would be able to pack each piece in its own customized storage container with space

---

between each piece. But more striking than the collection management issues, is the seeming lack of an “Indigenous aesthetic” attached to these pieces. Having been acquired by a tribal museum dedicated to sharing and informing the public about their history and culture, the lack of visual cues to an Indigenous aesthetic was striking for possible future exhibits featuring David Ninham’s work.

Questioning the Indigenous aesthetics of Ninham’s art would not typically cross my mind. Ninham was an artist and a member of the Oneida Nation. He also clearly depicts topics discussed heavily in Native communities like veterans with PTSD and critiques on capitalism.<sup>1</sup> But a few years ago, I was mediating a possible acquisition for a sizeable ethnographic museum in Germany. I sent the curator of the Americas collection names and contact information of numerous Native artists who would be more than happy to sell the museum a piece of their art for display. I pushed for a particular artist because the art was truly exceptional and something I had not seen in my travels to dozens of museums in Germany. Unfortunately, there was a remark made by the museum to the artist that suggested their work was not “Indian enough,” an interesting phrase for a European museum to make about a Native artist from a list compiled by a Native American.

This mediation has haunted me ever since. I felt guilty for putting the artist through those interactions even though I was trying to promote their work to an international audience. Since learning about the museum’s comments about the authenticity of a Native artist, I cannot walk through a contemporary Native art exhibition without thinking about those comments. As I stand in front of this extensive collection of Ninham art, owned by a tribal museum, made by a tribal citizen, I wonder what Native art is? Are there Indigenous aesthetics that can readily pinpoint a work of art as Native? And who gets to decide what this aesthetic looks like?

By viewing Indigenous aesthetics as a process (Leuthold 2), we can trace ethnographic museum approaches to acquiring Native art historically. Looking at the history of collecting Native art illuminates how limited the examples of Native art are in most major museums. Had museums consulted with more Native voices, this narrow scope would have been avoidable. This article is doing just this—calling museums out for not utilizing Native participation in the discourses surrounding Indigenous aesthetics. It does so by looking at more Native-centric standards for recognizing and promoting numerous Indigenous aesthetics in the conclusion.<sup>2</sup> But in order to broaden our understandings of Indigenous aesthetics, we must first define it.

Steven Leuthold, a historian of art and design, characterizes an Indigenous aesthetics in his book *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art, Media, and Identity* (1998). For Leuthold, Indigenous aesthetics encompasses experiences as well as expressions held by Indigenous Peoples. Leuthold acknowledges the intercultural nature of contemporary Indigenous aesthetics due to long histories of contact, immigration, missionaries, and colonialism. However, the critical aspect of Leuthold's understanding of Indigenous aesthetics is that they are social processes interrelated with other social systems (politics, economics, spirituality, etc.) within Indigenous communities.

Leuthold takes inspiration from Hopi and Miwok writer/poet Wendy Rose and her understanding of art and the artists' role in society. Rose acknowledges the community-oriented focus of Indigenous aesthetics as well as their function and beauty (412). Leuthold takes Rose's social rules for Indigenous aesthetics and explicitly states that aesthetics must be continuously redefined through their interactions within social systems, shifting the focus away from individual artists to experiences and environmental emphases.

Art historian, David Penney, discusses a similar approach in his book *North American Indian Art* (2004). Penney recognizes that no single Indigenous aesthetic standard can be defined. Instead, Indigenous aesthetics are culturally based expressions. He suggests that representations of a group or community, even through art, have their own “cultural system of aesthetics” (Penney 10). Because they are culturally based, there is a need to identify and recognize Native participation in the discourse surrounding Native arts.<sup>3</sup>

This article takes Leuthold's, Rose's, and Penney's understandings of Indigenous aesthetics as culturally and historically relevant and intimately intermingled with other socio-political systems and applies this understanding to the collections held by the Oneida Nation Museum. It begins to urge ethnographic museums to recognize individual Native artists' contributions to Indigenous aesthetics as well as the community's involvement in art. By turning to the ONM's standards for acquiring art, I hope to add to the understandings of Indigenous aesthetics that avoid essentializing Indigenous aesthetics and Native art. This is especially important when we consider that essentialism is often linked to claims of authenticity. For Native artists, the consequences of essentialization of an identity, as we will see in this case, an Indigenous aesthetic, “risks drawing boundaries around authenticity that exclude people within [their] own community” (Onciul 165).<sup>4</sup>

---

## Brief History of Indigenous Aesthetics

The buzz around Indigenous aesthetics started in the 1960s and 70s when a perceived threat of non-conformist Native art started to pop up in the ethnic art market. Of course, Indigenous aesthetics far predates this time, but artists behind the works that started the buzz were finally being recognized in a larger arena. These artists wanted to explore their personalized sense of art and show that Native Americans were and are part of the present and not some mystic past (Bolz and König 18). Santa Fe, New Mexico in particular, is acknowledged as a place where contemporary Native art began to emerge through the Santa Fe Art Institute and the Institute of American Indian Art (IAIA). Most notable for revolutionizing contemporary Native art was Luiseño (Payómkawichum) artist, Fritz Scholder. Scholder (1937-2005) was not only an enrolled member of the Luiseño Tribe, located in California, but he was also of German descent.<sup>5</sup>

Although he may not have grown up in a Native lifestyle, his work holds great significance for fighting Native stereotypes and moving Native art in new directions that engaged not only Native traditions, environments, and teachings, but also had a political and activist edge (Steffen 2015). One style readily identifiable as Scholder's are his images of Native Americans wrapped or draped in American flags; a commentary on nationally held stereotypes about Native Americans. Along with his paintings, Scholder was also an accomplished sculptor. One of his most famous sculptures is displayed in the George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City. Titled *Future Clone*, the sculpture was featured in the 2010 film *Black Swan*.

Scholder's unfamiliar style caused quite a stir in the Native American art market and inspired many others. Some of Scholder's contemporaries and students include Tom Wayne 'T.C.' Cannon (Kiowa/Caddo), Kevin Red Star (Crow; <https://kevinredstar.com/>), Linda Lomahaftewa (Hopi-Choctaw; <https://lomahaftewa.weebly.com/>), and Billy Soza War Soldier (Cahuilla/Apache). Each of these artists' new, non-conformist art left gallery owners feeling uneasy (Bolz and König 19). Their Indigenous aesthetics spoke to social and political problems of Native Peoples, often at the hands of non-Natives. While the ethnic art market and gallery owners felt uncomfortable with these changes, the artists felt they were finally able to depict reality without displacing traditional artistic mediums. The artists found a coexistence between tradition and reality in their art.

---

Many of the museums I visited in both Germany and the U.S. display originals or prints of Scholder’s work. My methodology for understanding Native American representation in ethnographic museums included walking through exhibition halls with the curators who envisioned these halls and talking about their message. I would ask what they had hoped to accomplish and what they were able to accomplish. Two curators, one at the *Berlin Ethnologisches Museum* and the other at the *Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg*, boasted that their Scholder art was displayed prominently in their contemporary art sections. At Hamburg, there were only three pieces displayed in the contemporary Native art section, one of which was Scholder’s *Buckskin Indian*. Additionally, Scholder’s *Indian Portrait with Tomahawk* was used as the cover art for Berlin’s exhibition catalog, *Native American Modernism: Art from North America*, that supplemented the contemporary Native art exhibition written by the curator and museum director (Bolz and König 2012).

The popularity of Scholder’s work in Germany could be due to his German ancestry and the German fascination with Native North America. Germany hosts clubs dedicated to the fascination of Native American history, culture, and materials. Often referred to as German Indian Hobbyism, the hobby is over a century old and allows Germans and other Europeans to embody their interest in Native Americans.<sup>6</sup> But, specifically, Scholder’s popularity may also stem from a popular exhibition and accompanying catalog presented in Stuttgart called *Indianische Malerei in Nordamerika*, Indian Painting in North America, in which Scholder’s work was highlighted (Schulze-Thulin 1973; Bolz and König 2012). Now, Scholder’s work sits prominently in contemporary Native art exhibits alongside other politically charged paintings by Native artists, many of whom found inspiration through Scholder.

However, acquiring Scholder’s art and displaying it does not ensure the museum’s or the public’s understanding of Indigenous aesthetics. It does, however, suggest that museums seek out artists that have already been vetted and valued by other museums and art connoisseurs. This sharing of contemporary artists displayed across museums alludes to a cultural capital boost for the museum as a repository. It does not mean museums are actively trying to understand and promote Indigenous aesthetics, though this can also be the case.

An essential aspect of this cultural capital is visitor expectations and their influence on acquisitions. Visitor expectations are both fostered by and reinforced by ethnographic museums. When visitors enter the museum, their previous experiences in other museums have set up

---

standards by which to judge the current exhibit they are viewing. Exhibitions provide visitors with examples of how to judge and value quality and taste. They take these experiences and build upon them as they view more exhibits and judge more art.

When we begin to see exhibits as sites for manufacturing taste for visitors and swaying public discourse, we see that museums "configure particular ways of knowing and perceiving" (Macdonald 95). However, they are also conscious of the fact that visitor expectations drive interest and revenue. Therefore, some acquisition decisions consider visitor expectations, expectations that were already fostered by previous visits to other museums. This circular process of acquiring and displaying contemporary art that may interest visitors in order to interest more visitors can limit the scope of new art acquisitions in terms of imagery, type, and medium.

In other words, museums foster visitor taste in contemporary Native art, which then dictates the museums' acquisition policies that include the same or similar contemporary art/ists that visitors expect to see. Imparting taste on publics for what they can expect to see, judge, and value in Native North American exhibitions as something worthy of display is what anthropologist Corinne A. Kratz calls "rhetorics of value" (22). "Rhetorics of value" are communicated through the choices museums make in what they display, how they display it, and even how they determine what to acquire.

Every museum reserves the right to determine what to acquire for their collections based on collection need, exhibition narratives, and personal preferences held by curators, directors, and museum boards. I acknowledge that it is challenging to acquire new art and artifacts when prices are always on the rise and museum budgets are often shrinking. The determining factors, therefore, are based on things like visitor expectations and cultural capital.<sup>7</sup> Desirable purchases that may push the boundaries of what we consider contemporary Native art are too risky for museums which are forced to be more discriminatory in their acquisitions. Often times, a shared taste between museums looking to maintain their social and even political capital through the status of their collections becomes *the* distinguishing factor in deciding what art/artists to acquire.

By focusing on which contemporary artists other museums acquire, Native art continues to be valued through a Western connoisseur's gaze.<sup>8</sup> Analyzing Indigenous aesthetics through Western aesthetic standards only reinforces the priority Western aesthetics receives over

---

Indigenous art forms. The consequences of which include freezing Indigenous Peoples in a distant past, misrecognizing Indigenous representations, and limiting the type of art Native artists are recognized for. In this way, Western connoisseurship has assumed an early responsibility of defining, conserving, and marketing the future of the world’s arts and continues to maintain control over the definition of Indigenous aesthetics.

This does not mean that museums have not found new ways to incorporate Indigenous aesthetics into their exhibitions. John Paul Rangel explores how one museum, the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (MoCNA) in Santa Fe, NM, not only encourages the recognition of Indigenous perspectives of aesthetics but actively promotes these perspectives. They do so by first calling out dominant stereotypes and intervening through the promotion of Indigenous ways of knowing as a decolonial methodology.<sup>9</sup> Through the examples of art at MoCNA, Rangel argues they try to move beyond the label of "cultural art forms" as either contemporary or traditional and focus more on expressions of cosmologies, belief systems, values, traditions, and ideologies all mingled with language, community, and place (40).

A second example of museums trying new ways of incorporating Indigenous aesthetics can be found in the series of co-curated exhibitions by the Chicago Field Museum. Native artists were asked to co-curate an exhibit that featured not only their artwork but also the Field’s collections in some way. The first three artists the Field partnered with were: Bunky Echo-Hawk (Yakama and Pawnee), Chris Pappan (Kanza), and Rhonda Holy Bear (Lakota).

Bunky Echo-Hawk, well known for his politically charged imagery, created an exhibit that showcased his work critiquing contemporary Native issues. Issues such as environmental pollution, endangerment of Native communities through chemical waste sites, and historical and modern genocidal practices were presented. Along with the exhibition, Echo-Hawk had a special seminar where he created art in front of and with the help of audience members.<sup>10</sup> A blog by Field curator, Alaka Wali, was also posted to the Field website discussing some of the topics raised by the exhibit in more depth.<sup>11</sup>

Chris Pappan’s co-curated exhibit also critiqued Western societal practices of representation, but more subtly than Echo-Hawk’s. Pappan is known for his ledger art, which is a Plains style of narrative art illustrating stories and events. Most notable about ledger art is its connection to the imprisonment of 72 Native men at Fort Marion following a series of uprisings between Plains tribes and the U.S. army in the mid 1780s. While imprisoned, these Native men



produced a large number of drawings on ledger paper. They were encouraged to draw by U.S. army Captain, Richard Pratt, which would be the foundation of Pratt's education plan to assimilate Native Americans by "kill[ing] the Indian in him, and sav[ing] the man" (Pratt 260).<sup>12</sup>

Pappan created ledger style art that interacted with the outdated displays at the Field Museum by printing them on semi-transparent laminate and laid them over display cases. For example, a buffalo hide commissioned by the Field Museum in 1904 depicts Cheyenne war stories by Kiowa artist Silver Horn titled *Tipi liner* (Image 2). The hide depicts U.S. soldiers riding horses in blue uniforms pointing guns at Native warriors both on horses and on foot. It also depicts Natives warring with other Natives and even a group of Native men on someone's trail. On the plexiglass that separates visitors from this Field artifact, Pappan placed a transparent rainbow above a group of Natives wearing robes in a semicircle. The display of Pappan's art was meant as a critique of traditional museum displays, which for the Field have not changed since the 1980s in half of the Americas exhibition.



(Image 2: *Tipi liner* with Pappan art overlay, photo by author)

Rhonda Holy Bear's art, unlike Echo-Hawk's and Pappan's, incorporated multiple mediums to make miniature figures of some of the most iconic looks to originate from Plains tribes. Her figures wear intricate beadwork, quillwork, and bone on their clothing while others wear miniature feather headdresses. Visitors can find life-size examples of Holy Bear's art in the

Field Museum’s collections allowing her art to meld well with the Field’s ethnographic displays. Visitors can shift their attention seamlessly from her contemporary artwork to the museum artifacts that have similar designs and materials to compare, contrast, and appreciate the delicacy of her work on a miniature scale.

Though these contemporary Native art exhibitions created an innovative way to bring a diverse set of voices and Indigenous aesthetics into the exhibition hall, there was a theme that emerged from these three temporary exhibits: each was overtly Native. Echo-Hawk’s art is overtly Native in its imagery, featuring Natives wearing large headdresses along with gas masks. Pappan’s ledger art is a continuation of a Plains artistic and narrative style readily identified as Native American. And Holy Bear recreated miniature versions of iconic fashion and artifacts from the Plains, also readily identifiable as Native American. Therefore, the incorporation of these three Native artists ensured that visitors could identify the art immediately as Native art. The art points to its Indianness and emphasizes the ethnic and racial difference of these three artists and their work on display.

However, as we have already seen in the first example from the Oneida Nation museum and as we will see in a second example from ONM, the art itself does not need to look Native to be incorporated and be recognized as an Indigenous aesthetic. Viewing Indigenous aesthetics as Indigenous rhetoric, we can see Native art as something that can be read, something that speaks about people and speaks to people as a strategy of and for rhetorical sovereignty (Lyons 449-450). By claiming one’s own identity through art by drawing on experience, worldview, and commitment to bettering one’s community, art becomes an act of sovereignty for Native artists no matter what form and imagery it takes.

In viewing contemporary Native art in this way, we can see how art is a mode by which Native Americans communicate self-determination to influence public discourse and educate audiences about their needs, values, and worldviews. This does not imply that all Native art needs to be political nor that Echo-Hawk’s, Pappan’s, and Holy Bear’s art does not do this. By broadening understandings of Indigenous aesthetics, I hope to force art enthusiasts to move beyond what is visually and therefore overtly Native. To instead look at and analyze what the artist themselves might have been thinking about, identifying with, and hoping to accomplish through their art.

Considering Indigenous aesthetics in this way means the pieces acquired and displayed as art may not look like what is expected, but they still speak to particular lifestyles and histories deemed essential not only to the artist but perhaps also to the community. They are narratives of survivance that speak directly to Indigenous rhetorics surrounding colonization and decolonization, kin networks, and sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> Above all, they are choices that speak directly to self-representation efforts. The next section looks at the Oneida Nation Museum's display practices for Native art, focusing closely on one exhibition about lace-making, the aesthetic beauty of lace, and its function for Oneida women at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Oneida Nation Museum**

The Oneida Nation Museum, located in Oneida, Wisconsin, serves the Oneida Nation, part of the Iroquois Confederacy or Haudenosaunee.<sup>14</sup> The current ONM building opened in 1989 with a small collection loaned and donated by tribal citizens.<sup>15</sup> It was among the first tribal museums to open, with only 25 tribal museums preceding it. Between 1994-95, the collection at the museum grew dramatically when the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin purchased a large collection from the Turtle Museum. The Native American Center for the Living Arts, or the Turtle Museum as it was dubbed because of its architectural design shaped to look like a turtle, was located in Niagara Falls, New York. Funded through a grant, the Turtle Museum had unforeseen budget problems after the grant trickled away, forcing it to close its doors in the mid-1990s. The majority of its collections were sent to auction.

After integrating the Turtle Museum collection into the museum in Wisconsin, the ONM made a strategic plan to become the leading research archive for all things Onʌyote'a·ká· (Oneida) and to some extent, Haudenosaunee. The ONM is working towards this aim by creating an accessible and digital repository of the photograph and archive collections as well as a researchable database of all three-dimensional objects in the collection for safe and easy access by visitors, researchers, and tribal citizens. I have been collaborating on this project for over thirteen years, and we are taking the upcoming move as an opportunity to finish uploading all current collections to promote the new museum.

In conjunction with this large digitization project, the current ONM staff are busy updating the current exhibition space on a quarterly rotation. Every three months, a section of the exhibits are updated, and within 12 months, all the exhibit cases are changed. This curation plan

stems from the desire to continuously draw community members into the museum and is also due in part because of the small size of the museum (a 1500 square foot room, divided into sections by half-walls).

The ONM’s exhibition mission is to present Oneida culture and a broad history of the Oneida and Haudenosaunee through storytelling, visual engagement, and interactive activities. When visitors enter the exhibition, they are greeted by Skywoman and the Creation Story. They move counterclockwise through the museum, walking through a small replica of a longhouse with interactive stations and staged living conditions before entering themed portions of the exhibition. Currently, a contemporary cornhusk art section featuring community artists immediately follows the longhouse structure and moves seamlessly into Oneida history and politics.<sup>16</sup> These displays are focused on Oneida involvement in US military services, language revitalization, land loss, and sovereignty. The exhibition ends by bringing visitors’ attention back to community members’ accomplishments and talents with more contemporary art displays.

Each of the contemporary art sections in the ONM highlight local Oneida artists. Photos of the artists are displayed next to their artwork and narratives that are unique to the artists. Some of these narratives illustrate how the artist came to that particular type of artwork. Others showcase what inspires their artwork. While others portray personal details of the artists’ life, such as where they grew up in the community and even health concerns that are preventing them from continuing their art. But what ties each of these narratives together are stories of how the artist’s identity has driven their art.

When acquiring contemporary art collections, the ONM practices what could be construed as a lenient acquisition policy even while dealing with the same obstacles larger museums face such as lack of funding, lack of staff, and lack of space. For many museums, lack of funds, space, and staff means being selective when it comes to objects that do not meet the museum’s collection or educational missions. However, due to Native American mistrust of museums as colonial institutions, tribal museums receive less donations than non-Native ethnographic or regional museums. This lack of contributions (whether monetary or physical items for the collections) forces tribal museums to focus on creating trust and establishing a rapport with community members in ways that large ethnographic museums do not have to do. Because tribal museums welcome donations from the community through seemingly more

---

lenient acquisition policies, de-acquisition policies become just as crucial for maintaining a healthy collection.

The ONM's unit of measurement for determining what to acquire is based on current tribal citizenship and descendant standards that are determined by the tribal governing body and their constitution. Current citizenship requirements are based on blood quantum set at a fraction that took into consideration the (then) current make-up of Oneida citizens and considered future generations' ability to meet these standards.<sup>17</sup> Blood quantum requirements also took into consideration the resources the tribe had at the time, the rate in which the tribe would grow both in terms of citizenship and as a business, and how many citizens those future resources could accommodate. Descendants (those who do not meet the minimum blood quantum but are descendants of an individual who does) are tiered differently in terms of the social services and benefits they can receive but are still community members.

The ONM, as part of the Cultural Heritage area under the Governmental Services Division of the Oneida Nation's organization, uses these citizenship requirements to create a consistent standard for museum acquisitions. The acquisitions affected by these criteria are artifacts, art, and archives that do not directly illustrate or discuss Oneida history or culture.<sup>18</sup> Determinations for what to acquire is made on a case-by-case basis by a Collections Advisory Team. The Collections Advisory Team consists of the Business Committee secretary or appointee, manager of the Cultural Heritage area, Museum director and assistant director/collections manager, tribal historian, Records Management director, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO), tribal archivist, and cultural advisor(s). These individuals, who are all Oneida citizens, bring their expertise to the meeting, including knowledge about tribal history, culture, collections management, and preservation.

This small team suggests that only a few individuals determine what enters the museum and therefore, what represents the Oneida People. However, to say that they are setting precedents for what it means to be Oneida through the acquisition of certain items or collections into the museum does not mean that only a small group of people are determining what it means to be Oneida. Instead, these individuals were hired and placed on the Collections Advisory Team because of their expertise. They are individuals who know Oneida culture because of their commitment and upbringing in the community, they have been doing this work for a long time, and they are individuals who received graduate degrees in related fields and have decades of

training and experience. And most importantly, their expertise and experiences are based on communal standards and understandings of what it means to be Oneida.

In terms of an Indigenous aesthetic or taste, the museum leaves that to the artists’ discretion. The ONM does not discriminate based on what they think should represent Oneida art. Instead, they acknowledge the diverse and ever-changing nature of art, even by Native artists like David Ninham discussed in the introduction. Additionally, because the ONM is trying to brand themselves as a repository for Oneida and Haudenosaunee culture, lifeways, and history, they allow Oneida and Haudenosaunee artists to determine what this looks like artistically. In this way, the ONM is serving the Oneida community as it determines what it means to be Oneida for themselves.

Besides David Ninham’s work and its acquisition by the ONM as an example, the ONM is broadening its own understanding of Indigenous aesthetics through a recent display in 2016-2017. It displayed some of the collection’s lace table runners alongside community members’ lace handkerchiefs. The exhibit case was titled "Extravagant Strings: The Story of Oneida Lace Makers" and it told the story of how lace-making became a lucrative art for Oneida women (Oneida Nation Museum 2016; Image 3).



(Image 3: “Extravagant Strings: The Story of Oneida Lace Makers,” ONM, photo by author)

---

The text panels for this display explained the interesting history of lace-making in Native communities and how it was not just a craft that was lucrative for Native women, but how it was historically acknowledged as an art form. The display credits Sybil Carter as the pioneer who brought lace-making to Native reservations. Carter was a missionary and a socialite from the east coast. She learned to make lace as a child but did not pick it back up until she was a missionary in Japan. While in Japan, Carter realized that lace was a profitable craft and also thought it would be an excellent way to continue her missionary work upon her return to the states. Eventually, the Sybil Carter Lace Association, which existed between 1904 and 1926, organized and paid for the lace-making supplies and classes that reached reservations across the United States.

Her first lace-making class was on the White Earth reservation in Minnesota in 1889. Within four years, she had opened new lace-making schools on Native reservations across Wisconsin into Minnesota, and as far west as California. By Carter's death in 1908, schools were operating in Wisconsin on the Oneida reservation, numerous Anishinaabe reservations, and on the Ho-Chunk reservation. East of Wisconsin, schools also ran on the Onondaga and Seneca reservations in New York, and west of Wisconsin, schools operated on Arapaho, Kiowa, and Paiute reservations, along with various Californian mission groups.

It was the Order of the Sisters of Holy Nativity in Fond du Lac, WI under the direction of Bishop Grafton who hired Sybil Carter and her fellow Hampton Institute teacher, Cora Bronson, to teach the Oneida of Wisconsin how to make lace (Jenson 1901).<sup>19</sup> History becomes hazy when crediting a specific individual with bringing lace-making classes to the Oneida outside the broad Episcopal missionary work. Besides Bishop Grafton, notable names include a Miss Hemingway and missionary Frank Wesley Merrill who traveled to New York to raise funds for the mission and helped transport some of the lace directly to the Sybil Carter Indian Lace Association for sale.

Lace-making classes began in August of 1898, and by September of 1899, the class had grown to 75 Oneida women. Initially, Sybil Carter's mission was to civilize Native women and make them "abandon traditional patterns of Indian life" by teaching them how to care for their homes.<sup>20</sup> The Sybil Carter Lace Association wanted classes to be held outside of Native homes for presumed cleanliness reasons, but there were no buildings suitable to teach the number of Oneida women who wished to make lace. Instead, the women were allowed to work on their lace from home, which enabled them to work on their own time and around their other

---

responsibilities. Even though they were allowed to bring their lace home, Betty McLester and Judy Skenandore recall "The women often repeated the phrase, 'Jiot Kout sa-tso-bulon' or 'Be always washing your hands'" to ensure the lace was clean and profitable (McLester and Skenandore 160).

Not only was it profitable through sales, the women did not have to purchase the materials to make more because the Sybil Carter Lace Association used the profits from the finished products to buy more materials. Most of the finished products were sold in a New York City office with small private lace events held in affluent households. Unfortunately, however, because white women only worked these sales, the Sybil Carter Lace Association was accused of underpaying the Native workers even when all proceeds went back into the industry, and Oneida women had control of their output.<sup>21</sup> Merely five years after the lace-making industry began in Oneida, Josephine Hill [Webster], a former student at Hampton Institute and daughter of Chief Cornelius Hill, took over the supervision of the work in Oneida, placing it firmly in the hands of Oneida women.

Lace-making brought in between fifty cents and a dollar per day. It is said that in Oneida alone between October 1900 and July 1901, the 150 women making lace made \$1125.<sup>22</sup> Amelia Wheelock Jordan reminisced to Ida Blackhawk in August of 1941, saying “we used to get a good price for our lace. I made about twelve to fifteen dollars a week” (Lewis 201). In an interview between Tillie Baird and Josephine Hill Webster, Webster recalled sending in “the finished work every two weeks, sometimes one to three hundred dollars’ worth of finished work in one sending” to distribute to the lace makers (Lewis 408n24).

It was no wonder women who made lace made more money than farmers, and one did not need to be an expert lacemaker. According to Kate Duncan, lace sales at the turn of the century were helped by the ethnic nature of the lace makers because “sentiment was strong towards helping the Indian” (34). This is surprising because the majority of the designs, which were generic European designs, did not visually suggest that they were made by Native women. Today, due to generic designs, it is hard to determine if existing lace in both private collections and museum collections are in fact Native-made without a complete provenance. However, there are still examples where Native women would incorporate everyday items like flowers, carpets, and even church windows along with Native motifs from beadwork, Native infants in cradleboards, canoes, and bows and arrows.



Even though many of the designs were duplicated from European lace, Native lace-making stood out across the globe and won many awards. Native lace won awards at the Paris Exposition in 1900; the Pan-American Expo in Buffalo, NY in 1901; at Liege in 1905; Milan in 1906; and the Australian Exposition in 1908. It even won the grand prize at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition. Native women's lace was so sought after that the Oneidas even presented an outstanding piece of alter lace to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City when it opened in 1911.

Sybil Carter died in 1908, a year that marks the beginning of the decline in lace sales. Partly due to Carter's connections, but also because fashion changed frequently, lace became all but obsolete by 1926. In Oneida, a recent attempt was made by Elizabeth Benson McLester who tried to bring the craft back. She was relatively successful by making a crafting circle that got together weekly to do various crafts, including lace-making, beadwork, basket making, knitting, and cornhusk dolls, among others.<sup>23</sup>

Although lace-making is not typically a craft associated with Native American artistry, it is being recognized as such in a tribal museum and was acknowledged in a world arena through the Paris Exposition. This speaks to the recognition of a seemingly non-Native art form that is being presented as having an impact on the local community and therefore being adopted as an art form. For Oneida community members who have grown up knowing the history of the community and the work of the local Episcopal Church in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, lace as an art form is not out of the everyday ordinary. Lace was appreciated for its beauty and became a staple for producing economic independence not only for the women who made lace but for the Oneida community they served.

Contemporary art displays like the lace exhibition at ONM are impactful for their role in promoting survivance narratives of groups coming together and thriving through lace-making. Contemporary art displays at ONM are upholding the ideals and beliefs of the Oneida in and of Wisconsin (Ackley 259). Whether lacework, beadwork, cornhusk dolls, sculptures, or paintings, the displays at the ONM are meant for an audience who understands, appreciates, and upholds the diversity of Oneida talents and expressions of their identity. The role of the museum is to help visitors celebrate those Oneida accomplishments and diversity past, present, and future through an ever-evolving Oneida aesthetic.

**Rhetorical Sovereignty and Indigenous Aesthetics**

The various examples used in this article illustrate different aesthetic standards for acquiring and displaying Native art. The difference between the ONM and the non-tribal museums is an exercise in what Native scholar Scott Lyons calls rhetorical sovereignty. Lyons writes about rhetorical sovereignty as a response to the historical mistrust Natives have towards the written word, mainly English writing. The distrust stems from a large number of dishonored treaties written in English and forced assimilation through writing, reading, and speaking English in boarding schools. Lyons then defines rhetorical sovereignty as “the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449-450). We can apply rhetorical sovereignty to the ONM as it broadens what an Indigenous aesthetic for the Oneida community and individual Oneida artists looks like, who the audience is, and what the message might be.

When Indigenous aesthetics are determined by the Native artist, it allows the artist to express their own beliefs, identities, and even critiques of non-Native society through their art. They are able to experiment with mediums and imagery. And they are free to explore their beliefs and opinions through their art. This allows places like the ONM to promote Indigenous aesthetics by using the sovereign nations’ (Oneida Nation) citizenship standards which determines who is and who is not Oneida (e.g., David Ninham’s work) and to display historical moments that have impacted the community (e.g., lace-making at the turn of the century).

In this way, the ONM and their artists are better equipped to decolonize their museum and use it in ways that benefit the Oneida community. By incorporating an Indigenous aesthetic, tribal museums like ONM are already “sabotag[ing] colonial systems of thought and power for the purpose of liberatory alternatives” (Martineau ii). Native scholar and all-around artist, Jarrett Martineau, calls this fugitive Indigeneity. And the ONM is practicing their own fugitive Indigeneity by using colonial institutions (i.e., museums) and decolonizing them by determining what and how to represent their community, image, and Native identity.

---

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Veterans in Oneida are highly respected, and at one point, the ONM had three displays honoring those who served. There is also a large memorial that sits off a county highway

between Green Bay and Oneida that remembers those who served, those who are serving, and those who will serve.

<sup>2</sup> For more examples of Indigenous centric understandings of aesthetics see heather ahtone, “Designed to Last: Striving Toward an Indigenous American Aesthetic,” in *International Journal of Arts in Society* 4, no. 2 (2009): 373-385, “Reading Beneath the Surface: Joe Feddersen’s Parking Lot,” in *Wicazo Sa Review* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 73-84; Michael M. Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992); Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes, “Fugitive Indigeneity: Reclaiming the Terrain of Decolonial Struggle through Indigenous Art,” in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 1 (2014): I-XII; John Paul Rangel, “Moving Beyond the Expected: Representation and Presence in a Contemporary Native Arts Museum,” in *Wicazo Sa Review* 27, no. 1 (2012): 31-46.

<sup>3</sup> For more examples of scholars calling for more Native involvement in defining and identifying Indigenous aesthetics see Jane Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, second edition (Oxford University Press, 2014); Edwin L. Wade and Rennard Strickland, *Magic Images: Contemporary Native American Art* (Norman: Philbrook Art Center and University of Oklahoma Press, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> The same claims can be made for the exoticization of Indigenous aesthetics. For further reading see Ivan Karp, “Culture and Representation,” *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Lisa Chandler, “'Journey without Maps': Unsettling Curatorship in Cross-Cultural Contexts,” in *Museum and Society* 7, no. 2(2009): 74-91.

<sup>5</sup> Scholder himself often said he was “not Indian” because of his upbringing away from Luiseño life. See <http://fritzscholder.com/index.php>

<sup>6</sup> For further reading see (ed.) Colin Calloway, Gerd Gemünden, Susanne Zantop, *Germans & Indians: Fantasies, Encounters, Projections* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); Petra Kalshoven, *Crafting “the Indian”: Knowledge, Desire & Play in Indianist Reenactment* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); H. Glenn Penny, *Kindred by Choice: Germans and American Indians since 1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> This sentiment was reinforced during an interview with Karl May Museum curator Robin Leipold (2 June 2015).

<sup>8</sup> For more information, see Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> For more information of decolonizing methodologies, see Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books LTD, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> For the full video see <https://vimeo.com/127636118>

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.fieldmuseum.org/blog/beyond-labels-bunky-echo-hawk-modern-warrior>

<sup>12</sup> Pratt’s educational programming would later focus on children during the Boarding School era; a period that continues to have ill effects on Native individuals and communities.

<sup>13</sup> For more reading about survivance, see Gerald Vizenor, *Aesthetics of Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008). For more reading about Indigenous rhetorics see Resa Crane Bizzaro, “Foreword: Alliances and Community Building: Teaching Indigenous Rhetorics and Rhetorical Practices,” *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story: Teaching American Indian Rhetorics* (University Press of Colorado, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Oneida is one of six nations that make up the Haudenosaunee. The others are Cayuga, Seneca, Tuscarora, Mohawk, and Onondaga.

<sup>15</sup> There is a discrepancy in the dates for the opening of the ONM. Kristina Ackley states it opened in 1989 (Ackley 257). However, museum personnel, including a previous director, said the opening of the museum occurred in 1976. This could be explained through a series of restructurings the museum has undergone. Currently, ONM is placed under a broader area called Cultural Heritage. Cultural Heritage currently oversees the museum, the library, the history department, and the language department.

<sup>16</sup> Until recently (2019), a six-foot-tall cornhusk man, the only one of its kind, was standing in the middle of this cornhusk exhibit. He has recently been taken down for some much-needed rest.

<sup>17</sup> For more information about citizenship standards and blood quantum see Norbert S. Hill, Jr. and Kathleen Ratteree, *The Great Vanishing Act: Blood Quantum and the Future of Native Nations* (Fulcrum Publishing, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> The ONM is not the only records repository for the Oneida Nation. There is also a Records Management Department, which archives historical documents like correspondences, minutes of meetings, books, etc. The Records Management department, which has many of these documents available electronically for employees throughout the Oneida organization and public access is forthcoming as well as History and Library departments which have their own archival collections. The acquisition process, as it is outlined here, is for ONM acquisitions only.

<sup>19</sup> For more information from numerous Oneida women's standpoints about their lace-making experiences see ed. Herbert S. Lewis, *Oneida Lives: Long-Lost Voices of the Wisconsin Oneidas* (University of Nebraska, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/organisations-and-movements/charities/sybil-carter-indian-lace-association>

<sup>21</sup> See <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Newspaper/BA14787> and <http://www.mnopedia.org/group/sybil-carter-indian-lace-association>

<sup>22</sup> For more information about what Oneida lace-makers were earning from their lace, see Frank Wesley Merrill, *The Church's Mission to the Oneida* (Library of Congress, 1902).

<sup>23</sup> For more information about the contemporary revival of lace-making in Oneida see Betty McLester and Judy Skenandore “Ten Contemporary Oneidas Reminisce in Nine Accounts About the Holy Apostles Episcopal Church and the Episcopal Mission,” *The Wisconsin Oneidas and the Episcopal Church A Chain Linking Two Traditions*. ed. Gordon L. McLester, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

### *Works Cited*

Ackley, Kristina. “Tsi?niyukwaliho?ta, the Oneida Nation Museum: Creating a Space for Haudenosaunee Kinship and Identity,” *Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

Bolz, Peter and Viola König. *Native American Modernism: Art from North America*. Ethnologisches Museum Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2012.

- 
- Duncan, Kate C. "American Indian Lace Making," in *American Indian Art Magazine* 5(3): 28-55, Summer 1980.
- Jenison, E. M. "Oneida Indian women rival Europe in lace making" in *Milwaukee Sentinel*. October 27, 1901.
- Kratz, Corinne A. "Rhetorics of Value: Constituting Worth and Meaning through Cultural Display," in *Visual Anthropology Review* 27(1): 21-48, 2011.
- Leuthold, Steven. *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art, Media, and Identity*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998.
- Lewis, Herbert S. and L. Gordon McLester III eds. *Oneida Lives: Long-Lost Voices of the Wisconsin Oneidas*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005.
- Lyons, Scott. "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?," in *College Composition and Communication* 51(3): 447-468, 2000.
- Macdonald, Sharon. "Collecting Practices," *A Companion to Museum Studies*. Ed. Sharon Macdonald. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Martineau, Jarrett. "Fugitive Indigeneity: Reclaiming the Terrain of Decolonial Struggle through Indigenous Art," in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3(1): i-xii, 2014.
- McLester, Betty and Judy Skenandore. "Ten Contemporary Oneidas Reminisce in Nine Accounts About the Holy Apostles Episcopal Church and the Episcopal Mission," *The Wisconsin Oneidas and the Episcopal Church: Chain Linking two traditions*. Ed. Gordon McLester III, Laurence M. Hauptman, Judy Cornelius-Hawk and Kenneth Hoya House. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019.
- Onciul, Bryony. *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonizing Engagement*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Penney, David W. *North American Indian Art*. Thames and Hudson, 2004.
- Pratt, Richard H. "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites," *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the "Friends of the Indian" 1880-1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973.
- Rangel, John Paul. "Moving Beyond the Expected: Representation and Presence in a Contemporary Native Arts Museum," in *Wicazo Sa Review* 27(1): 31-46, Spring 2012.
- Rose, Wendy. "The Great Pretenders: Further Reflections on Whiteshamanism," *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*. South End Press, 1992.

Schulze-Thulin, Axel. *Indianische Malerei in Nordamerika, 1830-1970: Prärie und Plains, Südwesten, neue Indianer*. Stuttgart: Linden Museum, 1973.

Steffen, Jordan. “How Native American Artist Fritz Scholder Forever Changed the Art World,” in *Smithsonian.com*. Smithsonian, 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/fritz-scholder-native-american-artist-art-world-180957655/>.