The Hopi Craftsman Exhibition

The Creation of Authenticity

The relationship of the public with American Indians has always been uneasy, and museums are often seen in the complex process of negotiating and defining this dynamic. Even in the U.S. Southwest, where Indian groups maintain considerable group integrity and are numerically significant in the population, museums still serve as translators between Southwestern Euro-Americans and Native Americans who are quite literally their neighbors. The public believes museums portray an objective truth about Native American life and does not consider that this life could be affected or changed by the way it is interpreted. Because Indians are associated in the public mind with temporal as well as cultural "otherness," museums are cast as time machines, dealing both with some version of the real past and also the pseudo-past of modern Indian life. Museum shops bask in the reflected glow of this implied connection with the past and the attendant aura of "authenticity" for their wares.

These phenomena are even more powerfully mixed when a museum sells Native American art out of an exhibit, as in the annual Museum of Northern Arizona's Zuni, Hopi and Navajo art exhibitions. In these, artists, traders, dealers and the Museum's own shop enter original works by the members for judging and sale. Outside experts award ribbons and prize money, up to sixty categories per show, in 1981 sales totaled about a half-million dollars.

These events combine the prestige and implied selectivity of museum objects with the purchasing opportunities found in large market-style shows and fairs. Like other judged events, they are useful to collectors who are interested in acquiring ribbons and pieces for investment purposes or who seek a validation of taste and judgment. But they also have a very unusual feature. Much interest in these shows attaches to the fact that the staff conducts collecting trips to the reservations, bringing in entries from elderly and/or lesser-acclaimed artists seldom seen at market-style shows. The shows' perceived association with this full range of materials, emphasizing the most "traditional" (read "authentic"), is largely responsible for their popularity.

The perception of authenticity is ironic in the light of the history of the Hopi Craftsman exhibition. The show was begun in 1930 by Mary Russell Ferrell Colton (Fig. 1), co-founder with her husband, Harold S. Colton (see Fig. 10), of the Museum of Northern Arizona. She defined the Museum's responsibility as using its resources to "save and improve" (emphasis mine) Hopi art forms, and to encourage innovation with traditional Hopi designs in new uses. Although its pressures toward revivalism may be seen as species of traditionalism, the show has been in fact both a reflection of and a tool for great change.

To "Save and Improve"

Certainly, changes in the fundamental nature of Hopi arts had begun long before the Coltons' first visits to the Mesas, in work by Nampeyo and others for sale to outsiders. Nampeyo's emphasis was aesthetic, and it has been argued that she was consciously creating a new category, Hopi "art pottery." McKenney (1981:29) Colton's response to this change may be read in the early collections she made for the Museum, which were weighted heavily toward Nampeyo's innovative work.

But another new phenomenon in Hopi pottery was not represented in her collecting efforts. Thousands of pots were made in the early 20th century in response to the "low end" curio market. A quantity increased, quality declined, with pots exhibiting poorly applied, easily rubbed-off paint (Barlett 1978:16). Bunzel noted primarily small pieces, chronically undersized and underscaled, with paste soft enough to be easily scratched with a fingernail (1925:56-57).

The relationship of this "low end" ware to Hopi art pottery seems at first glance a tenuous one, but it, exactly like the art pottery, was a direct response to the pressures and desires of outsiders in the Hopi world.
According to Katharine Bartlett, a valued colleague of the Coltons (Fig. 31), potters were encouraged to send not just pieces of interest to the traders, but also fine old style decorated and undecorated ceramic vessels that they made for their own everyday use (1976:17). Although this could be interpreted to mean that the cowboy hat, which was so popular with the traders, was welcome, Colton's instructions to personnel taking these entities in 1931 make it clear that this was not the case.

If material is not of best quality, it is not to be accepted. Maker must be told that Museum agent feels sure that the maker can do better, as only the best stands a chance to win a prize. In such a case, the maker will almost always withdraw work and promise to have a better piece on the return of the expedition in June. (1931:8-9)

The Museum substantially defined that excellence. Employees took in most entities by going to the villages themselves (Fig. 4), often seeking out certain makers, a practice still followed today.

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Colton said in 1933 that the objects were essentially judged in advance and that only prize-worthy material was accepted (1933:2). Even objects brought or produced by the crafts demonstrators had to be submitted for a level of judgment. "If anything is brought... which the Museum does not think fit and which is rejected by the Museum, then it is against the rules to sell such articles anywhere on the Museum property." (Colton 1931:2). Colton then asserts that the Indian maker will not resent the criticism of his/her work so long as the criticism is based on a true understanding of the material and the, in fact, such criticism will increase the Indian's opinion of the Museum's agent. In other words, Colton contended that the selectivity exercised in the early Hopi shows was in response to Hopi values, rather than to the dominant society's ideas of art and the market that grew out of them.

Shoes were judged by Museum chosen "experts" (Fig. 5). Cash awards and the increased Backlid that a ribbed

Mary-Russell Colton wrote of such pieces, "The characteristic Indian forms are disappearing in favor of pretty little candlesticks, Bauer baskets, etc. The beauty of design remains, but the product is only half Indian" (1930:2). It was to combat these "degenerated" creations that the Coltons started The Hopi Craftsman exhibition. Colton prepared the way with an article in a business magazine that emphasized the "half Indian" qualities of modern pieces, and stated her belief that the abilities and inclination to do "excellent" work were there in Indian artists. She attributed the then-current poor-quality work not to Indianness but to the American market.

The Southwestern Museum's Misstebey said of the project:

The Museum of Northern Arizona is an active factor in Hopi arts and crafts, members of its staff keeping in close touch with the villagers, encouraging them to adhere to the old sound canons of their native industries, to keep before their eyes the simple nobility of their own art forms and look out with covenous envy upon the sponges given-goes of the alien American. (1931:27)

But what Colton was doing was not merely encouraging Hopis to "keep before their eyes the simple nobility of their own art forms." When she defined the Museum's goal as to "save and improve" Hopi art, she meant to change the direction of the art with financial incentives for a desperately cash-poor people.

Colton herself consistently referred to The Hopi Craftsman exhibition as a "scientific experiment" in altering Hopi arts in particular directions by "educating" the Hopi and by educating the market (Fig. 1). Exhibits emphasizing pre-20th-century methods were prepared for Hopis to view before making their entries and for patrons to see during the exhibition (Colton 1931:15). Colton, and therefore the Museum, took the position that there was a "right" way for Hopi arts to be done and expounded on this idea at every opportunity.

Show procedures even included an autumn, post-show journey by Museum personnel to the Mesau.

I spend a week or so visiting practical-ly every worker in the twelve villages, individually and discussing with them the reasons for the awards which have been made during the exhibition. At this time work for the coming winter is talked over: market problems are discussed; possible improvements in the various types of work are discussed with the craftsmen and demonstrations are used wherever possible. (Colton 1933:3)
The Hopi Craftsman's Exhibition:

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The actual policy in the early Hopi shows seems to have been truly to accept the best of what was professed. The judging by Colton, and by the other judges she selected, rewarded an item's degree of closeness to her concept of "the best" in Hopi Art. Through the exhibits of old materials that accompanied the show and to other persons interested in Indian arts, and her own financial resources as a collector focused on Hopi Art. The exhibition helped her create an ongoing market for Hopi art shaped to her vision of what that art should be. Though it, she became a major art maker in the dominant society's appreciation of Hopi art.

Colton made numerous statements about changes she wanted to see in Hopi art. She was particularly interested in encouraging the manufacture of objects falling out of use; stimulating "better" workshops, often defined as using pre-20th century technologies; encouraging new items made using old techniques; and creating a wider market for Hopi goods "of the finest type" (Colton 1935:57). From the beginning she discussed these as both goals and faults of her work, a kind of "indicating victory," and her educational materials for the public clearly defined as "authentic" and most worthy of purchase those items that met her goals. She apparently saw no contradiction between her "management" of Hopi art and the idea of an art generated by Hopis realities, stating that "All art has a tendency to degenerate—to go downhill; it needs jack-up and practical encouragement" (1936b).

To Colton, one important aspect of this encouragement was apparently tied to maintaining traditional techniques. She repeatedly compared contemporary Hopi artists to the New World and said that their product was "in the raw" (1936b). As Colton pointed out in a letter to the editor of the Arizona Republic, "We are not making art for the present, but it is our business to produce art in the eternal sense..." (1936b). In fact, these new items should not be discouraged because it may be "desirable from an economic point of view. However, these new items should not be allowed to replace or become confused with the ancient or purely modern Indian types of work..." In order that the public may appreciate Indian art, it is necessary to show demonstrative material to explain these primitive methods of manufacturing which so greatly enhance the value of a handmade article to the eye of the public" (1934:21-22, emphasis mine). Her view of the connection between pre-20th century technologies and marketability is very clear.

The innovations she supported preserved pre-20th century Hopi technics and introduced new technologies in non-competing areas, while seeking new markets. For example, she promoted traditional Hopi fabrics and embroidery as upholstery materials, scarves, and pillows, and asked the Hopi artists and museum designers to create a new overlay style of blanket to be identified exclusively with Hopi. She favored signing works of art, and Museum staff specifically encouraged the practice from the very beginning.

Colton's approach to developing Hopi arts for sale to outsiders has been criticized for its stringency; some critics have asserted that strict exhibition rules excluded some art forms (Love 1986, Woyck 1986). In fact, actual prohibitions of forms and techniques were rare in the show's history. The blue ribbon pot Colton bought from the first Hopi show and later gave to the Museum (Fig. 3) violates many of its stated standards. It paints with bold, interesting, but the bowl has white spots, fire-blackening, unevenness, and occasional sloppiness in paint, its red is muddy and somewhat splitty, and the pot shows wear noteworthy in a pot moved first by a museum curator, then by a museum visitor. The 1931 directions to the show's personnel: shield light on this apparent contradiction. Having stressed that only the best pieces be accepted, Colton then introduced immense latitude by adding, "If the maker insists that it is his best work, and the piece is at all worthy, it is best to accept it. Judgement must be used" (1931:5-4, emphasis mine).

What Colton considered to be the "right" way of doing Hopi art is apparent from her writings, but early show rules suggest that she did not try to enforce these canons on individual Hopi artists. A heavy-handed attempt to enforce rapid change in objects important in Hopi life would almost certainly have been unsuccessful, regardless of the Hopis' need for cash. What Colton did was more subtle and far more powerful because of its real potential for success. In The Hopi Craftsmen, she combined the prestige of the Museum, her access to the press and to other persons interested in Indian arts, and her own financial resources as a collector focused on Hopi art. The exhibition helped her create an ongoing market for Hopi art shaped to her vision of what that art should be. Through it, she became a major art maker in the dominant society's appreciation of Hopi art.

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Although many early blue ribbon pieces were far from her ideals, time and patience produced a trajectory of change that placed Colton's stamp indelibly on Hopi art. The program also left flexibility for new ideas and directions to come from the Hopi artists themselves, which her statements tell us she wanted to protect those new ways were then judged by the shows and considered by the market in the normal course of events (always acknowledging her presence in that judging and market). While hardly constituting an abridgment of her intended..."
role in influencing change, in the end the program made that market, not herself (and not Hopis), the final authority in the changing of Hopi art. It created an influence that has long outlived her.

Keeping One's Distance

In looking at the history of the Hopi Craftsmen exhibition, it returns us to the concept of the collectible, the invisibility or managed visibility of the artist in this type of show. Because a wider than usual range of often less acclimated artists are represented, it provides for patrons a false sense of intimacy with Hopi life. But like the art itself, this accessibility is edited. Colton's preferred innovative uses of traditional technology—a Hopi-embroidered pillow, a cookie jar of Hopi-Tewa design—made Hopi objects, and perhaps Hopiessness itself, seem accessible on the terms utterly of the dominant society. They allowed a seemingly more intimate participation in Hopi life than did decorating one's mantel with a piece of Hopi "art pottery," but kept the real Hopi world at a considerable remove.

Colton's other preferred choice, "traditional" pieces which employed premodern technologies on alien Hopi forms such as wedding robes and flax basketwork plaques, exaggerated the cultural gap between the Hopis and the buyers by making it seem a gap in time as well, a distance willingly but carefully mediated through the years by the Museum.

Both types of objects effectively sealed Hopi artists in part time, asking them to continue technologies no longer economically feasible in the outside world, to embody and enact a living past through this museum exhibition. Colton herself wrote about it in just that way: "the stage is going up, light effects and backgrounds are being placed to display our native craft demonstrations... Each worker in his setting is a correct and colorful picture—a living habitat group..."

(Colton 1938:2). The demonstrators of these "part-time" arts were often advertised by kin-terms, such as potter "Grandmother Polk" (Fig. 5), allowing the show visitor to imagine a privileged and familiar relationship with these individuals. Accompanying descriptive literature, however, emphasized their differences and their exoticism, and press releases were sprinkled with references to ceremonies and the esoteric kachina religion. The experience was, and still is, a dizzying exercise in compromise and contradiction, all carefully controlled by the museum.

The Hopi Craftsmen exhibition was not, therefore, an attempt to represent then-current Hopi art or to preserve the art as Colton found it on her arrival in the Southwest. When she set out to "save and improve" Hopi art, she meant "save" in the sense of "rescue," not "preserve." The art was not intended to remain the same. It was an attempt to present a version of Hopi life and art to the world that allowed the Hopi to capitalize literally on the romantic fascination with the "noble savage." While Mary-Russell Colton pored home to the public the exotically marketable theme of Hopi conservatism in arts and crafts, she created a steady pressure toward the change she saw as needed to build a corpus of art saleable to American consumers. During those early Hopi Craftsmen exhibitions the show-going

Figure 5. This bowl by Charlotte Polk won the first Hopi Craftsmen blue ribbon for pottery in 1929. It was purchased by Colton herself and is now in the Museum of Northern Arizona collection. Its Salado kachina design is interesting and innovative, but the technical execution of even this award-winning pot violated many of Colton's stated standards. It is unlikely that it would be considered ribbon-quality in today's Hopi Artist exhibition.

Courtesy Museum of Northern Arizona, neg. no. 12397. Photograph by Matt Gondek.

Figure 8 (opposite page). This 1937 scene shows "Grandmother Polk," who demonstrated the making of pottery at the early Hopi Craftsmen exhibitions. The demonstrators added color and exoticism but also concealed a time-pass quality about Indian life and art.

Courtesy Museum of Northern Arizona, neg. no. 12390. Photograph not known.
public developed the ability to believe in this conservatism and buy change in its guise, an ability that many of those attending the show retain to this day.

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The current Hopi Artist exhibition continues to be dominated by Colton’s version of traditional forms. Her attempts to introduce new products were far less successful. Of the innovations she fostered, only overlay jewelry is now important.

But the results of her education of the Hopi art market remain with us. Her marketable fantasy of Indian life as little changed from the previous century is strong in show visitors, who ignore or disparage obviously new technologies. Collectors acquire conservative arts like textiles and basketry from a source halloved by its museum setting, while the show’s procedures spare both artists and buyers the experience of the collector watching a basketmaker work by the light of a swag-lamp over her dinette set with the added flicker of “The Young and the Restless,” or picking up pottery entries helpfully wrapped for transport in the pages of The National Enquirer. Confronted with the present diversity of the show, buyers seize upon the familiar, what seems “authentic,” and that concept of authenticity is rooteded in images of the past.

This view of Hopi as locked in past time with the museum as doorkeeper is remarkably resistant to change, despite the fact that it portrays a Hopi that in many ways never was. Efforts in 1989 to change overly paternalistic show procedures met great resistance among Hopis and non-Hopis alike, a large enough group to carry the day. The truth of the matter seems to be that the myth serves everyone well. The artists and collectors have the bulwark of the Museum, playing the now-familiar part it took up in 1930, acting as an unbreachable screen to protect the artists’ privacy and still satisfy the buyers with its seemingly unimpeachable ability to pass truth through unaltered, thereby “guaranteeing the authenticity” of the object.

Bibliography


Figure 10. Harold S. Colton, Katharine Bartlett, and Mary-Russell F. Colton, three important shapers of The Hopi Craftsman exhibition. Throughout their careers all remained major figures in bringing an understanding of Hopi art and culture to the general public.