The Annual MNA Indian Art Exhibitions

Maintaining Traditions

DUFFIE WESTHEIMER

In 1984 I was sorting piles of Navajo rugs for the Museum of Northern Arizona's Navajo Artists Exhibition. I think it was then that I first became enthralled with the Museum's annual Indian art exhibitions. Not only did I find the artwork appealing, but the very people whose artifacts appeared in the ethnology galleries were alive within the Museum for at least a few days of each year. I decided to stay with the project.

Figure 1. Dr. Harold Sellers Colton and Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton, co-founders of Flagstaff's Museum of Northern Arizona (1928), talk to a visitor (left) at the 1959 Navajo Craftsman exhibition. The Coltons had spent most of their early lives in the Philadelphia area. Dr. Colton attended the University of Pennsylvania from 1900 to 1908, earning both his Bachelor degree and his Ph.D. in Zoology. He taught at the University and managed the vivarium in The University Museum Biological Hall (Miller 1991). Mary-Russell Ferrell Colton, a 1908 graduate of the Philadelphia School of Design for Women, was an artist and paintings restorer (H. Colton 1967). They moved to Flagstaff in 1926.

Courtesy Museum of Northern Arizona, neg. no. 2565. Photographer not known.
As I worked, I became aware that the methods for producing the exhibitions—Hopi, Navajo, and, later, Zuni—were very similar and that the consistency I sought did not end there. Not only have the production methods remained constant throughout the years, but the structure, the concepts, and the public presentation have also changed very little. Of course the exhibits were appealing, for in addition to displaying beautiful and interesting art, they fit neatly with my training as an American scholar. They were the art of a people who had been taught throughout my life. For the public presentation of Native American art at the Annuals and other exhibitions, the museum selected the best art/craft produced. The Annual exhibits were held in an annual collection of valuable data about the objects produced by these people. Indeed, the project was described by MNA personnel as a "scientific experiment, not a commercial enterprise" (M. Colton 1981:8).

As stated in the MNA journal Museum Notes (M. Colton 1981:8), the project had five objectives:

1. To encourage the manufacture of objects of artistic and commercial value which have fallen into disuse and are becoming rare.
2. To stimulate better craftsmanship.
3. To encourage the development of new forms of art of purely Indian design.
4. To create a wider market for Hopi goods of the finest type.

These objectives, which include two "encourages," one "stimulates," and one "create," were quite ambitious undertaking for the small new institution.

Mrs. Colton believed that the institution should be a model for other organizations, that it had a duty to communicate personally with the artisans. Together they discussed aesthetic attributes of individual projects and the process of teaching us to recognize the art we call "Indian" included much more than just learning about the artists and their work.

**Euro-American Concepts in Action**

Prior to the actual establishment of Flagstaff's Museum of Northern Arizona (MNA) in 1928, Mary Russell Ferrell Colton, one of its founders, formulated a project for the proposed institution. She envisioned the Museum working to promote the arts and crafts of those who lived in the vicinity of Flagstaff, Euro-Americans as well as Navajo and Hopi. She referred to the already established Santa Fe Project—what we now call Indian Art Market—as her model for working with native peoples and their art. Drawing on her own training as an art and applied art and that of her husband (Dr. Harold Colton) in science, the MNA project would revolve around the "high-quality" traditional Indian arts, create a reliable market and income source for the art, and at the same time amass scientific data (Fig. 1).

During the MNA's second year of operation (1929), Mrs. Colton, now Curator of the Arts and Crafts Division,
Figure 4 (opposite page). Navajo weaver at her loom at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis, 1904 (note "Exit" sign in background). Fairs and expositions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries helped shape the Santa Fe Indian Market, the Gallup Inter-tribal Indian Ceremonial, and the MNA Indian Art exhibitions in Flagstaff.

Figure 5. For many years visitors to the Museum of Northern Arizona were greeted with the institution's founding edict: "This Museum Displays Ideas Not Things." This small outdoor case is surrounded by handmade Hopi tiles.

Figure 6. Navajo basket display, 1950. Navajo Artists' Exhibition. All entries in the recent exhibitions must be for sale except for those in the Student Division (artists 18 years old, or younger). This covered patio has been used in the annual Indian art shows since the Museum moved into its new building in 1936.

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“Mutual interest in Indian Welfare”

Two years after initiating the project, Mrs. Colton described it to an audience with whom she shared a "mutual interest in Indian Welfare.”

As you are all aware, a gradual depersonalization in Indian Arts has been taking place over a long period. This is due in part to a series of complicated causes—chief of which are, lack of intelligent appreciation of the Indian as an artist and consequent cheap commercialization of his products. His markets have been extremely limited. The advertising which he has received...
has displayed him as a curiosity rather than a people possessing a folk art rich in drama and the creative arts.

Our western Indian is struggling through a distressing period of transition and readjustment in an attempt to rework the old and the new. He is hampered by poverty, disease, resulting in a bad “inferiority complex.” There is no “Cure all” but there are many ways in which we can assist him to regain his self respect, his pride of craftsmanship and his economic independence.

We have bitten off, what we consider to be a very small portion of this job and selected the Hopi on their isolated reservations for our first experiment... This exhibition is backed by three weeks of personal work in the pueblos each season. Its purpose is to stimulate the Indian to preserve and perpetuate the best in his arts and at the same time to put him directly in touch with the type of customer able to appreciate the quality of his craftsmanship. (M. Colton 1932:1.)

The Coltons and early MNA staff worked hard to successfully fuse compassion with the “objectivity” of science. The project eventually expanded to include the Navajo and the Zuni. In 1936 the Coltons assisted in the production of the Navajo Arts and Crafts Exhibition held at Wupatki National Monument.

Figure 7. Aaron Sheche spent the days of the 1962 MNA Zuni Artists Exhibition demonstrating how he makes traditional fetishes. Artists who work at the three annual Indian art exhibitions are available for answering visitors’ questions.

Photograph courtesy of Carol Lees

Figure 8 (left). Judging rug entries in the Museum galleries for the 1964 Navajo Craftsman exhibition. The show records do hold some information about culture change when the entry information is compared through time. For example, few kachina dolls were entered into the first Hopi Craftsman exhibition in 1930, but by 1962 there was a Kachina Doll division with five categories. And, although Zunis once made baskets and textiles, by 1987 MNA organizers felt there was no call for those divisions.

Courtesy Museum of Northern Arizona, 1964. Photograph by Paul Lang

Figure 9. De Colton and Kathryn Sikorski sorting out the many Hopi kachina doll entries in the 1950 Hopi Craftsman exhibition. De Colton applied his scientific skills in classification to the study of these dolls late 1949 book Hopi Kachina Dolls: With a Key to Their Identification is still in print.

Courtesy Museum of Northern Arizona, 1949. Photograph by Parker Hamilton
1936 WUPATKI NATIONAL MONUMENT NAVAJO ARTS AND CRAFTS EXHIBITION
(Goodwin Sun 1936:1)

- Plain weaving
- Vegetable dye
- Tufted weave
- Traditional types
- Tapestry weave (delt)
- Old silver
- Children's work
- Rugs

1949 MNA FIRST ANNUAL WESTERN NAVAJO ARTS AND CRAFTS EXHIBITION
(Arizona Daily Sun 1949:1)

- Large plain weave bordered rugs, online colors
- Med. plain weave bordered rugs, online colors
- Small plain weave bordered rugs, online colors
- Mohair rugs
- Diamond & diagonal twist weaves
- Miscellaneous fancy weaves
- Two-faced blankets
- Vegetable dye rugs
- Large natural colored rugs
- Small natural colored rugs
- Weavers' dress
- Chief blankets
- Belts, women's
- Moccasins
- Basket & water bags
- Medicine baskets
- Pottery or cooking pot
- Plain silver branch
- Table ware
- Bracelets
- Buckles
- Baskets
- Concho belts
- Necklace sets

From Tamala to Types

In texts accompanying the earliest MNA Hopi Craftsmen exhibitions the Hopi word *tamala* (translated as "work") was used in reference to all Hopi products, and Hopi terms were used in concert with English words. But within only a few years Hopi words were dropped. With few exceptions English words for object types were used exclusively in the organizational framework of categories (divisions were a later addition to the taxonomic structure). After more than a decade of producing MNA Hopi Craftsmen exhibition and participating in similar efforts elsewhere in the region, Dr. Colton outlined MNA's guiding principles for organizing materials (1940). Believing in their value for other Indian art projects, MNA made these principles available to anyone upon receipt of ten cents to cover costs.
### Table 2: 1992 NBA Artists Exhibition Divisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hopi</th>
<th>Navajo</th>
<th>Zuni</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pottery</td>
<td>Pottery</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Basketry</td>
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Kachina Dolls

| Feathers |

Mutually exclusive classes of characteristic types would, through the awarding of the prizes, compensate to both consumers and artists who were the preferred materials. "Such lists should be compiled so that any one type of object cannot be entered in two classes..." Technique and function should not be confused through large classes based on technique may be subdivided on the basis of use." (H. Colton 1940:62-65.) According to Dr. Colton, the size of an item, the manufacturing technique, and the tribal affiliation of the maker were additional attributes by which classes could be further subdivided, if necessary (Fig. 9).

These principles brought to the usual "subjective" task of judging "art" the scientific principles of objectivity, and to some extent inclined the results would be valid and reliable. These often-used principles may seem "objective" or innocuous to us, yet they can, and often do, influence our understanding of the associated concept or object.

### Categories and Cultures

The cultures of the artists who enter the three annual shows (Hopi, Navajo, and Zuni) are different, from the description of cultural groups of material used for the exhibitions are very similar. The Hopi artists had the Navajo Shows seven, and the Zuni Shows six. All three exhibitions share five of these: pottery, jewelry, fine arts, student, and general. The Hopi and Navajo Shows have an additional two in common textiles and basketry. The Hopi show adds a Kachina Doll division, and the Zuni show adds a Fetish Doll division (Fig. 10).

In reality there are many more differences between the cultures of these shows: a tradition of concepts and production methods based on Euro-American commercial practice. Whether our own culture may seem invisible to us and we must work hard to recognize it, this may not be the case for people who are bicultural or have other cultural training. It seems informally added a Hopi artist if the Hopi people had ever organized an exhibition project like MNA's (without urging by Euro-American groups). Because he said a word he cracked a smile and chuckled softly.

![Figure 11. Museum visitors look at jewelry in the 1959 Navajo Indian Arts exhibition. The treasured table and easel placed at Hopi were used in the first Hopi Craftsman exhibition, (1930), as well as in recent exhibitions. Note the mirror on the wall between the two Navajo territories. As these are sales exhibitions, a mirror is indispensable for people who want to see how jewelry is being a popular piece of jewelry.](image)

![Figure 12. The Museum of Northern Arizona annual Indian art exhibitions have a history of being enjoyed by people with local Flagstaff residents and people from afar. Thousands of people attend each exhibition every year. Each annual display at members' prizes and public openings make it hard to see the objects.](image)

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**Bibliography**


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**Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff, Arizona:**