

# *Considering Indigenous Aesthetics: a non-Western paradigm*

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Indigenous aesthetics is a field of study that is only just becoming understood. As a trained art historian, it has been a complex challenge to untangle why the creative products of our Indigenous cultural community members have remained so difficult to engage in meaningful discourse from within the field for so long. After two decades of the study of Native American art and a lifetime of being in the cultural community, it is my belief that Indigenous aesthetics remain indiscernible using Western cultural analysis systems. This is foundationally because the cultural paradigm of Western culture operates using a major binary that Indigenous cultures have reckoned with politically but resisted as a cultural paradigm. This binary imposes a philosophical blinder when using Western methodologies of analysis with Indigenous cultures or their expressive cultural materials.<sup>1</sup>

The binary to which I refer is the separation of spirit from the physical, a philosophical concept that is posited by Augustine of Hippo in *City of God*, through the argument that the City of God and the Earthly City are the origin of the separation of heaven and earth, what becomes the separation of church and state. This philosophical concept is advanced by Martin Luther during the Protestant Reformation and is incorporated into the understanding of the hierarchy of man in his translation of Genesis in the Bible. The separation of physical and spiritual becomes central to the advancement of ideas of democracy through the work of John Locke laying a foundation for the Age of Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> James Madison and Thomas Jefferson incorporate the separation of church and state as the first Amendment to the United States constitution.<sup>3</sup>

How can this separation be so critical to the analysis of Indigenous aesthetic materials? I have often given the example of the philosophical difference found in the moment of creation to explain why it is so critical. In the Bible, the foundation for Western culture as a Christian economy, Genesis accounts for creation, with man made by God on the sixth day, "after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."<sup>4</sup> There are many translations of this moment, but in general one sees the positioning of man over all else, living or otherwise, on the earth. In contrast, for Indigenous communities—each has its own genesis story, the arrival of the humans on the planet is often times placed within an existing sacred order guided by spiritual, metaphysical, and animate forces.<sup>5</sup> While hierarchy exists within Indigenous cultures as part of the sacred order, humans are not

placed above all else and are often assigned responsibilities for other life forms, animate and inanimate through relationships. These responsibilities are the guiding tenets that Indigenous cultures operate to fulfill, rather than the rights assigned by dominion.

One can immediately see the foundations within this Western cultural paradigm to cultivate the contemporary experiences of capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism, especially when Indigenous people remain part of the Greek concept of the Barbarian, the Other—often assigned a subhuman value. All of this merits further exploration and development and I hope that the opportunity presents itself. For this article, what I hope to suggest is that the difference in this foundational philosophical concept of the world order inhibits an understanding of Indigenous cultural materials and arts.

While our cultures have necessarily resisted these impacts in order to survive, many of our Indigenous communities and individuals have adopted Christianity, the establishment of political governments without carrying state-defined religious practices, and, as a result, have lost the capacity to hold our spiritual, political, and intellectual cultural practices in relationship to one another. The one area for which this has not been as strictly imposed upon us has been in our expressive culture. For Indigenous cultures, the separation of spiritual and physical, church and state, religion and science is an effect of Colonialism.

Within our customary cultural practices, spiritual and physical lifeways are in a constant relationship, contributing to a holistic state of being that is in constant flux as we navigate the human experience. Our knowledge about philosophy, science, humanities, and political strategies can be navigated using our cultures as a conduit between the past and the future. Many of our Indigenous cultures have been stressed from centuries of cultural assault. The arts have been a shield for us to remain culturally engaged beings, relying on our aesthetic systems to remember the world order we were divinely given at our own creation.

Tribally-specific aesthetic systems are grounded in epistemological cosmologies, rendering simple designs into complex cultural codes for ordering the world, a prominent source for understanding beauty. My own impatience for being able to bring these concepts into artistic discourse has been based on the understanding that these are not foreign ideas or knowledge for Indigenous communities. In fact, distinct aesthetic systems have been in use for millennia and remain part of our cultural practices by contemporary makers. However, if one were to ask a cultural practitioner about the aesthetics of their culture, they might humbly reply that they don't know. This reply is not a dismissal of their knowledge, but a response to the Western cultural system that regularly parses out aesthetics from ritual practice.

Why is this type of aesthetic knowledge so difficult to access for Indigenous art? I believe that it is because Indigenous knowledge remains holistic and that beauty is couched in the whole of a ceremonial or ritual experience, valuing all aspects including

immeasurable metaphysical components. This is difficult for Western knowledge paradigms and vocabularies to define and document within the philosophical systems that keep them separate. When Western cultures have an extended history in treating aesthetics, science, and religion as exclusive bodies of knowledge, the vocabulary to address them holistically is limited. In fact, the study of any one of these fields within Western culture would not inherently require any training or elementary readings in another. Philosophically, this is foundationally different, and merits consideration. For Indigenous community members, practicing their cultures, speaking their language, and honoring the rituals and orders of their cultural paradigm keep these bodies of knowledge bound together, indiscernible as distinct from one another.

Within this system, the arts become the expression of science, philosophy, and spiritual knowledge. Mnemonic devices register levels of knowledge acquisition that remain static visually, but whose meaning becomes compounded as one grows in their levels of initiation. Some of these initiations are part of ceremonial practices, others are the result of gaining life experience, and still others are the product of transference through informal processes. Each a valued human experience and provides for a truly equilateral sharing and access of knowledge. Rather than becoming an “expert” in a distinct field, knowledge keepers are valued for their collective understanding and spiritual capacity.

However it is that one acquires the knowledge, the visual coding of our cultures through aesthetic systems is an important part of cultural practice. Though some artistic practices remain gendered, for many of our Indigenous communities, the willful learning of using our customary cultural practices, making beautiful objects using clay or hide and adorning them with the symbols of each distinct cultural group remains an important act of cultural sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> The claiming of the identity, the language, the designs, and the related stories and philosophies is at the heart of our capacity to remain culturally distinct peoples. The arts have been part of who we are, as much as how we have remained culturally distinct peoples.

In order to fully learn about how Indigenous aesthetic systems work, one must recognize that each cultural community has its own system and that these systems are not mutually informing.<sup>7</sup> This system relies on the integration of knowledge about the world’s order, often assigning colors to cardinal directions, or world quarters. In Indigenous American cultures, these world quarters are relational to ordering systems for different types of meteorological forces, life stages, spiritual realms, and other types of animated forces (flora and fauna). Through these integrated relationships, each is accounted to the others and kept in balance as part of the flow of the earth’s energy. All of this is a generalized and shallow summary of the complexity of these systems. But I hope that it provides a glimpse into the work that remains to be done for the formal analysis of Indigenous aesthetics.

Finally, while I make these observations about how important Indigenous philosophies are to our aesthetic systems and why these are difficult to access from a Western philosophical foundation, it is my belief and contention that not all Indigenous aesthetic knowledge can or should be documented. I believe that there is a barrier that must remain in force keeping knowledge that is spiritually taught from becoming materialized within scholarship. Respectfully, it may be an influence of Augustinian teaching that there be a divide between spiritual and material. It is also a recognition that Western ideology, which cultivates the concepts of capitalism and commodification of fictions (i.e. land and money), cannot be expected to self-regulate or behave according to Indigenous cultural conduct standards. Not everything should be commodified and Indigenous agents must actively protect what is at the heart of our identities and cultures in order to prevent these from becoming measured, bought and sold.

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<sup>1</sup> There is the immediate recognition that not having Indigenous people engaged in the field as active agents of the work, not simply as advisors or informants, has been a critical shift and the benefits of greater Indigenous voices in the field is immediately visible. However, there have been many allies who have worked in the field of art history and in anthropology; both fields have an interest in our cultural materials, so why have Indigenous aesthetics remained so elusive?

<sup>2</sup> Additional readings to explore this separation are to be found in the works of René Descartes, especially *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), and Francis Bacon, particularly *The Great Instauration* (1620).

<sup>3</sup> For many, their view of the world order is fundamentally grounded in this philosophy and informs how and what they understand about art and aesthetics as statements of taste and beauty. I would contend that the criticisms levied against contemporary art for being disconnected from social mores and of any spiritual value is legitimately made for these very reasons.

<sup>4</sup> *The Open Bible: With Verse Translations and Cross-References, Cyclopedic Index, Christian Life Outlines and Study Notes, Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub, 1975, p 2.

<sup>5</sup> Each Indigenous culture has its own beginning and order, conveyed across generations through the creation stories that are at the nexus of the oral traditions.

<sup>6</sup> For many Indigenous communities, certain creative practices were gendered according to their philosophy of the world order. As an example, for some Mississippian cultural communities, the practice of basket weaving was done primarily by women because the grasses and reeds were seen as extensions of the earth, a feminine life force. It is very important to keep in mind that the gender-binary is commonly bendable within Indigenous communities. This, also, merits further development within the arts discourse.

<sup>7</sup> It is critical for anyone reading this to understand that each Indigenous culture is hegemonic and cannot be used to extrapolate some kind of useless and generalized definition for an Indigenous aesthetic system.