

SYMBOLISM IN THE ART FORMS  
of the  
INDIANS OF THE UNITED STATES

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Symbolism holds an important place in the world of advertising today. Symbolism held an important place in the world of the American Indian yesterday, as well as today. In this paper, which is a survey of symbolism in Indian Art, the writer is primarily concerned with the general scope of the topic. She believes that the art of the American Indian has been neglected and that through further exploration the recognition due this art form might someday be forthcoming.

A summary of the historical background of the American Indians is presented, as well as some attention to the past and present treatment of these immigrants from Asia. Included are the various tribal cultures and their areas of high development in artistic production. The position is taken that symbolism has always been an important part of the Indian culture and in the formulation of Indian design styles. The symbolism of the red man is not a necessary part of good design, but indicates his conquest of an imaginative and immaterial universe. Symbols were and still are used in most Indian civilizations to convey abstract concepts and to record facts. The meaning of given symbols is hardly ever the same in different tribes, and cannot be interpreted without a comprehensive knowledge of the circumstances under which they were used.

This traditional Indian art can best be considered as

a folk art because it is always an inextricable part of all social, economic, and ceremonial activities of a given society. It is creativity within a collectively established scope of forms and patterns and always serves a definite utilitarian or spiritual purpose that is accepted by the entire group.

In regard to design, the Indian quite generally knew his limitations and did not attempt to decorate by pictures, but instead through symbols. His conservatism led to a given style lasting for centuries and serving as models for the masses. It is due to past generations of continuous work that such arts almost invariably possess a genuine aesthetic merit no matter how limited they may be. The graphic and plastic art of the American Indian is rich in decorative quality and especially rich in symbolism.

Symbolism is shown to be related to specific cultural artifacts such as masks, pottery, costumes, basketry, beadwork and weaving. American Indian art and the use of symbolism still is considered of great importance in the cultural, social, religious, and economic lives of the Indians. Indian art will persist and the spirit it represents is not likely to be destroyed. If the Indian of the future is to prosper and to remain an important part of the American heritage, his societies whether ancient, regenerated or created anew, must continue to be given status, responsibility, and power. The Indian groups will need to keep their ancient democracy, but sometimes adapting it to the future tasks which they will take to themselves. Their ancient symbolism will

need to be supplemented with modern symbolic forms so they may remain abreast with the world.