



Research Output Journal of Education 3(2):40-44, 2024

ROJE Publications

ISSN: 1115-6139

<https://rojournals.org/roj-education/>

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Exploring Indigenous Art and Its Role in Cultural Preservation

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous art forms are deeply embedded in the cultural identities, beliefs, and worldviews of Indigenous communities. Despite facing challenges such as assimilation, disconnection from traditional lands, and ongoing discrimination, Indigenous art continues to play a crucial role in preserving and regenerating Indigenous identities and cultural practices. This essay delves into the diversity of Indigenous art, examining both traditional and contemporary expressions and their significance in cultural preservation. It addresses the complexities of maintaining authenticity and self-determination in the modern art world and explores the role of Indigenous art in challenging eurocentric art histories and fostering ethical, accountable relationships. Through case studies, the essay highlights how Indigenous artists navigate contemporary concerns, emphasizing the potential of Indigenous art to bridge cultural divides and sustain cultural heritage.

Keywords: Indigenous art, Cultural preservation, Traditional art forms, Contemporary Indigenous art, Cultural identity.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous art is an integral part of Indigenous communities' identities, beliefs, and worldviews. Indigenous peoples have their own ways of knowing, feeling, and interpreting relationship systems with Country. These systems of knowledge, belief, and transformation are expressed through arts and practices that are complex, multifaceted, dynamic, and contextual. However, Indigenous artists are faced with challenges that threaten the sustainability of their practices, including assimilation and disconnection from Country, lack of access to materials, ongoing racism, censorship, and other forms of discrimination. This essay explores how arts practice can enable the survival and regeneration of Indigenous identities and worldviews in contemporary contexts. The first section discusses the diversity of Indigenous arts and the multiplicity of Indigeneity. It highlights the importance of cultural expressions and knowledges in the reproduction of cultural difference and identity. The second section focuses on the complexities of maintaining Indigenous authenticity and self-determination in the creation and dissemination of Indigenous art in contemporary contexts. It examines the pressures and consequences of engaging with Western commodification, value systems, and cultural politics. It also analyzes the possibilities and challenges of redistributing the power to own and control knowledge and cultural production in the context of post-colonialism. The third section presents case studies of Indigenous artists who are negotiating the unknown, recuperating cultural practices, and addressing contemporary concerns of declining languages and desecration of ancient lands, homelands, and sacred sites. It explores the negotiation of art and agency locally, nationally, and internationally and the emergence of an Indigenous contemporary art genre with artistic, institutional, and academic exemplars. The fourth section demonstrates the potential of Indigenous art to interrogate, confront, and bridge world systems, thereby revealing the inadequacies of eurocentric art histories, canons, and institutions. It affirms the capacity of Indigenous art to cultivate ethical, caring, and accountable relationships and open up new realms of possibilities and ultimates [1, 2, 3].

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UNDERSTANDING INDIGENOUS ART

This section delves into the concept of Indigenous art, exploring its traditional forms as well as contemporary expressions. By examining the evolution and diversity of Indigenous art, this section lays the foundation for a comprehensive understanding of its role in cultural preservation. It may highlight the techniques, materials, and cultural significance associated with traditional Indigenous art forms while also addressing the ways in which contemporary Indigenous art interacts with modern influences [4, 5]. The term Indigenous art refers to the artistic expressions and cultural practices of Indigenous peoples that have been passed down through generations. These works are often created using traditional materials and techniques and hold deep cultural, spiritual, and historical significance. Traditional Indigenous art forms include painting, carving, weaving, beadwork, and storytelling, each unique to specific Indigenous cultures. Examples include Aboriginal dot painting, Inuit sculpture, and Native American sandpainting. Traditional Indigenous art often reflects the close relationship between Indigenous peoples and their environment, depicting animals, landscapes, and spiritual beings [6, 7]. Despite the impacts of colonization and modernization, Indigenous art has evolved and diversified into contemporary works. Contemporary Indigenous art often combines traditional and modern influences, exploring new mediums such as photography, video, and installation. Contemporary Indigenous artists address issues such as social justice, land rights, and cultural identity. The diversity of Indigenous art reflects the resilience and creativity of Indigenous peoples in adapting to changing circumstances while maintaining their cultural identity [8, 9].

TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS ART FORMS

Traditional Indigenous art forms encompass a wide variety of artistic practices that are crucial for the survival of Indigenous culture. These global artistic practices run the gamut across and between the oral and the visual and soil's sensitive to taste and smell. They include postcards, paintings, carvings, textiles, drum-making, tepee-making, leather-good embroidery, and powwow dancing. Indian art can be modified or changed to accommodate social or cultural changes while still expressing traditional values within the art form itself. Constructing a drum, weaving a basket, or painting a tapestry, there are symbolic meanings beyond the images that can be conveyed through motion or sound because all of these art forms experience their own rhythm. This rhythmic element is necessary for cultural continuity while emphasizing the life-sustaining capacity of the art practice itself [10, 11]. Traditional Indigenous art forms have historical context based on cultural sensitivity. Most of them have spiritual meaning as gifts from the spirit world. Namely, these art forms emerge from dreams or visions of a people. In order to maintain continuity with the spirit world, ceremonial acts such as dances, songs, chants and prayers take place alongside the visual or tangible representation of the spirit in art. These acts draw upon the regenerative power of the spirituality embodied in the art, thus inspiring new life and enhancing community cohesion. In order to maintain this spirituality, the community must nurture, adopt, and modify the art form to accommodate new social or cultural conditions [12, 13].

CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS ART

Contemporary expressions of Australian Indigenous art are not an ill-formed vehicle for Indigenous expression 'hijacked' by Eurocentric notions of art, but, much like the aesthetic forms and vocabularies that underpinned traditional Indigenous art, they are a robust part of Indigenous people's attempts to articulate their world and their experience of it. These artworks are many-layered and deeply poetic constructions. Australian Indigenous art is not simply the careless pursuit of a momentary aesthetic but rather a deliberate and careful articulation of the intersection between the sacred and the mundane. Like traditional art, contemporary Indigenous art is a dynamic endeavour that engages old forms in responding to new ideas, circumstances, materials, and technologies. While this dynamism is sometimes misunderstood, it is the starting point for a more nuanced understanding of the role of contemporary Indigenous art-drama in Aboriginal culture. Historic and newer forms of Indigenous expression exist side-by-side in constantly evolving assemblages of old and new. Thus, they cannot be separated from the story of European colonization of Australia, nor from the material and social changes this colonization has wrought in the lives of Indigenous peoples. Contemporary Indigenous art-drama has its ancestry in 'traditional' art-drama-formations. Such formations provided frames of reference and vocabularies for the construction of new forms engaging contemporary experiences and understandings. Nevertheless, while 'traditional' art-drama formations have been widely appropriated and often misrepresented by non-Indigenous Australians, they are also actively reworked and repoliticized by Indigenous artists/performers. As such, current Aboriginal art is one of many sites framing/fining non-Indigenous understandings of Australian Indigenous culture/identity. Nonetheless, with the help of a handful of key Indigenous artists/performers, it is hoped some of the issues at stake will be contextualized here [14, 15].

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIGENOUS ART IN CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Indigenous art is fundamental to Indigenous cultures. Indeed, Indigenous people have used art for thousands of years to share their stories and understandings of the land and their wellbeing. Pre-colonization, the art was crafted in diverse forms using locally available mediums, such as rock and stone, clay, bark, wood, animal products, grass, shells, and more. The forms too were diverse as carvings, body art, weavings, ceremonial objects, jewellery, paintings, songs, and dances. With colonization came a complete shift in Indigenous lives, including their arts. Today, Indigenous art is often caught in neo-colonial frames that neither appreciate the Indigenous worldviews nor honour the Indigenous artists. Market forces usually dictate a model based on imitation underpinned by Eurocentric methodologies, such as defining Indigenous art through media-based categories or style/ethnic language interpretations. Attempting to achieve these frames of references has put Indigenous art in a constant threat of assimilation. At the same time, they simultaneously scrutinize Indigenous art with Eurocentric-bred tensions regarding appropriation, authenticity, sophistication, and race palettes. Disregarding colonial histories entwined with the Indigenous artworks, Indigenous art traditions and their worldviews remain invisible. Along with language, art is one of humankind's most important achievements. It nourishes humans through everyday life, understanding, and creating the culture. Cultural diversity is part of the public good. Only with the acknowledgement of the diversity of knowledge systems can the growing concerns regarding the quality of life, as well as world futures be addressed [16, 17]. According to Indigenous peoples around the world, including Australians, art is a vital arena where identity is continuously negotiated. Only its geographic parameters may differ. Traditionally, Indigenous art was a vessel for cultural knowledge as it terminated the supremacy of the colonial and western narrative of art. The embodiment of cultural knowledge in Indigenous art resides in the narrative role of the artworks regarding enacting kinship. This narrative ownership ensures that cultural knowledge remains stable over time and inter-generationally transferrable. However, following colonization, Indigenous art is often told and interpreted through the lens of colonial art narratives, jeopardizing the ownership of the artworks, the corporeality of Indigenous knowledge, and the ethics behind it. Thus, from an Indigenous point of view, art is more than decorative or aesthetic objects: it narrates the rules and cultural knowledge that enmesh the individual in the social and cultural life of the community. These rules concern diversity in all spheres of human life, such as land, kinship, fauna, flora, language, cultural practices, emotions, thoughts, and knowledge. Art is the primary means of access to cultural landscapes; it periodically enacts the distribution of roles and responsibilities of individuals and social groups; and it embodies community rules determining their ontological and geo-political unity and identity [18, 19].

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN PRESERVING INDIGENOUS ART

Indigenous art not only has direct economic benefits to the wealth of indigenous peoples, but most importantly, the sale of indigenous arts and crafts often acts as a means of cultural preservation. Many indigenous peoples in diverse countries such as Indonesia, Taiwan, and many other Asia-Pacific countries have handed down their artistic skills from generation to generation. Unfortunately, some face difficulties in preserving arts and other unique cultural characteristics due to the impact of political marginalization, economic constraints, and pressure from the international pool of culture through interaction. In some cases, these arts are declining or even dying out due to various dilemmas, such as the lack of a good art market, poverty, the development of modern creations, and access to new creative ideas. However, the indigenous art and design markets are also encountering opportunities and challenges for cultural identity preservation [20, 21]. In their pursuit of cultural identity, indigenous artisans and craft people have often been mobilized to serve as visual ambassadors for their people. In doing so, they benefit in a number of ways. They gain access to a global market through trade in eco-tourism, multinational jewelry and handicraft companies, as well as through new middle-class consumers who seek slick global items. The practice also ensures that ancient crafts continue to be handed down through the generations, providing employment, maintaining local traditions, and sustaining environmentally sound craft practices. Additionally, the strengthening of indigenous skills, which are being expressed under a modern contemporary context idea, is contributing to a new, commercial but non-traditional, body of world digital design that influences the international design market. Apart from that, many international non-profit organizations have been formed in response to supplying fair-trade and/or monitoring authentic indigenous crafts, which help to protect indigenous arts and crafts worldwide [22, 23].

CASE STUDIES AND BEST PRACTICES

This section explores best practices and lessons learned related to the application of digital technologies in Indigenous art preservation. It examines two case studies: the 3D Collection of the Musqueam Tsleil-Waututh Stəłə (museum/gallery) of the University of British Columbia (UBC) and the Digital

Repatriation of Ancestor Hardwood Whaling and Seal Hunting Collection of the Tsimshian First Nations. Each case study provides an overview of the associated research project, as well as the challenges and digital solutions contributing to both the creative, technical effort and ethical and legal considerations throughout the process. Finally, the section provides a list of best practices to assist with future community-based heritage and relationship-specific partnerships and curation strategies to help educate and engage a wider audience. This case study provides an overview of the 3D digital collection at the Musqueam Tsleil-Waututh Stələ of the UBC Museum of Anthropology (Moa) and how the Stələ technology and philosophy offers guidance in cultural preservation in other facets of the visual arts. It explores the integration of 3D imaging and virtual exhibit technologies into the museum/gallery of the University of British Columbia, a process which resulted in the first sustained hands-on community-driven, commercialization-oriented project of its kind in the field of cultural heritage preservation. The Stələ and this related research project have unique features. It transitions the Indigenous art objects to hand-modeled 3D virtual representations providing precise data for metal cultures and contemporary media while employing Musqueam traditional multimedia support scaffolding compressive almost 3D.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous art is more than an aesthetic endeavor; it is a vessel for cultural knowledge, a means of expressing identity, and a tool for social and political commentary. Through both traditional and contemporary forms, Indigenous art helps maintain cultural continuity and fosters resilience in the face of ongoing challenges. It serves as a powerful medium for Indigenous communities to assert their presence, challenge dominant narratives, and educate broader audiences about their histories and worldviews. By acknowledging and supporting the diversity and dynamism of Indigenous art, we can contribute to the preservation and celebration of Indigenous cultures, ensuring that their rich artistic traditions continue to thrive in contemporary contexts.

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CITATION: Baluku Ayebare D. Exploring Indigenous Art and Its Role in Cultural Preservation. *Research Output Journal of Education*, 2024 3(2):40-44.