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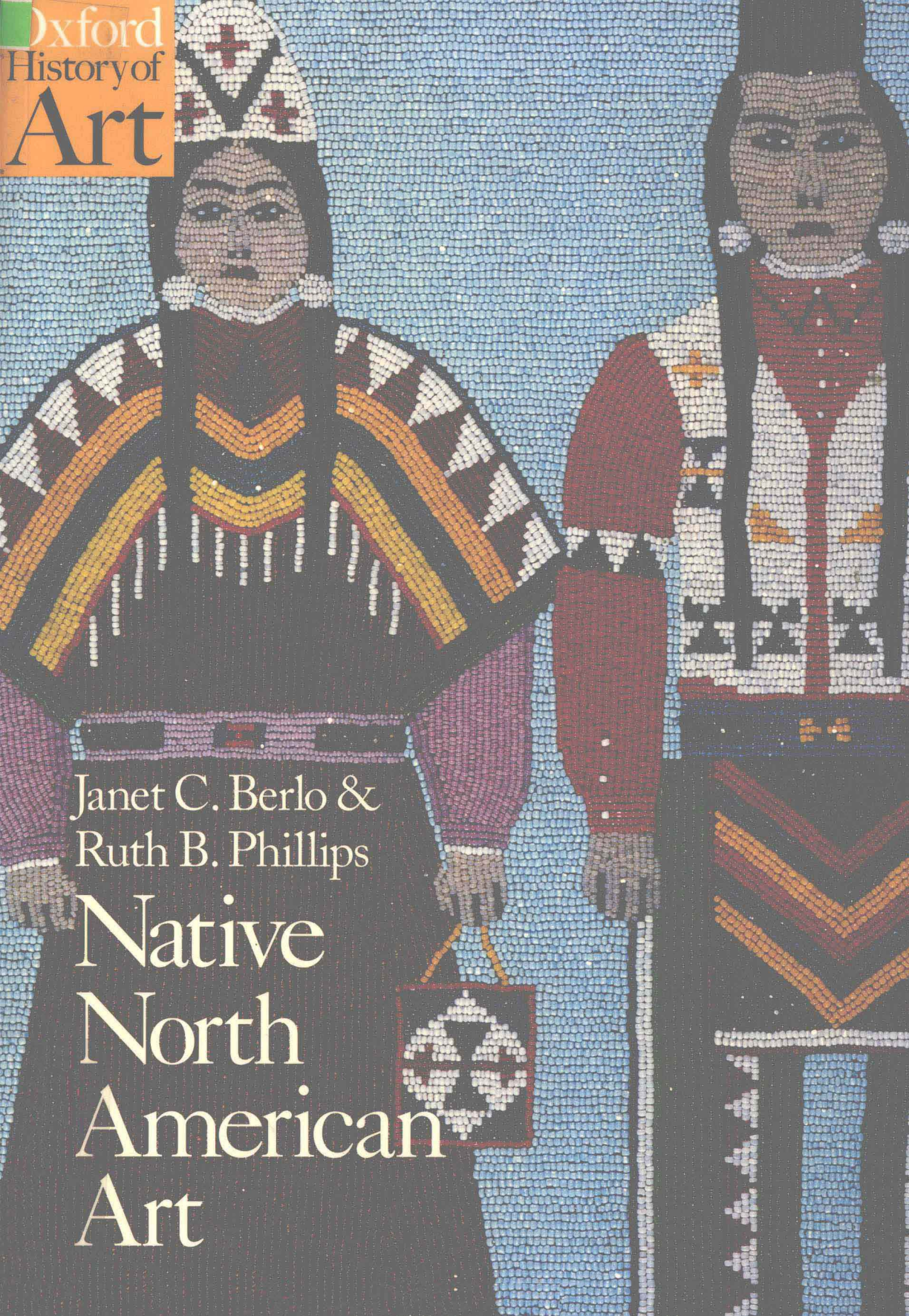

Janet C. Berlo &
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Janet Catherine Berlo
Ruth B. Phillips

Contents

An Introduction to the Indigenous Arts of North America

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Native North American art, after five centuries of contact and colonialism, is extraordinarily rich and diverse. Today, Native artists, male and female, trained in their communities and in professional art schools, and living in cities and on reserves, work in a broad range of media, conceptual modes and expressive styles. As the half millennium of contact drew to a close, Angelique Merasty (1924–96), a Cree artist from Western Canada, was practising the ancient art of birchbark biting, creating intricate designs in thin, folded sheets of birchbark that might later serve as patterns for a piece of beadwork or embroidery. At the same time Tony Hunt Jr, a Kwakwaka'wakw artist from British Columbia, might be carving a mask destined either for a non-Native collector or for use in a potlatch, its forms defined by an equally ancient and exigent set of techniques and stylistic rules [**1**]. And as they worked, James Luna, a Diegueño-Luiseño performance artist from southern California, might have been preparing his 'Artifact Piece', in which he transformed himself into a living artefact in order to critique the way that these and other Native arts and cultures have been represented in Western museums [**2**].

These three moments of art-making, chosen from many possible examples, encompass the sacred and the secular, the political and the domestic, the ceremonial and the commercial. The visual pleasure afforded by a Cree woman's bitten birchbark pattern captures the reality of her inner vision, and enhances daily life whether it lives on in the design of a pair of moccasins or remains the ephemeral experience of an afternoon. When used in a potlatch, a Northwest Coast mask, by displaying the image of a non-human being from whom its owners inherited valuable powers and prerogatives, makes an important statement about the location of political power. And, in the hands of Native American artists, contemporary Western art forms such as performance and installation have become powerful tools of cultural critique by which the representation of Native people and their arts in Western institutions is being challenged and changed. The contemporary vitality of Native American art is also evidence of an extraordinary story of survival. A century ago, most non-Natives (and many Native people as well) had become convinced that Aboriginal arts and cultures would

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soon disappear. Yet, today, these arts are thriving and receiving renewed attention, both within Aboriginal communities and from non-Native students, art-lovers and museums. The visual arts have long played a critical role as carriers of culture within Native American societies. They are also among the most eloquent and forceful articulations of the contemporary politics of identity.

1 Tony Hunt, Jr (b. 1942), Kwakwaka'wakw

Sea monster mask (red cedar, bark, copper, quartz crystal, cord), 1987

The mask represents a specific sea monster named *Namxxelagiyu*, one of the ancestors of the *'Namgis*, who came out of the sea to build a house, assisted by a thunderbird. Too large to be worn in the normal way, the mask is manipulated at potlatches by a dancer who emerges from behind a screen. The crystal incorporated into the mask signifies power, and the copper, wealth.

Art history and Native art

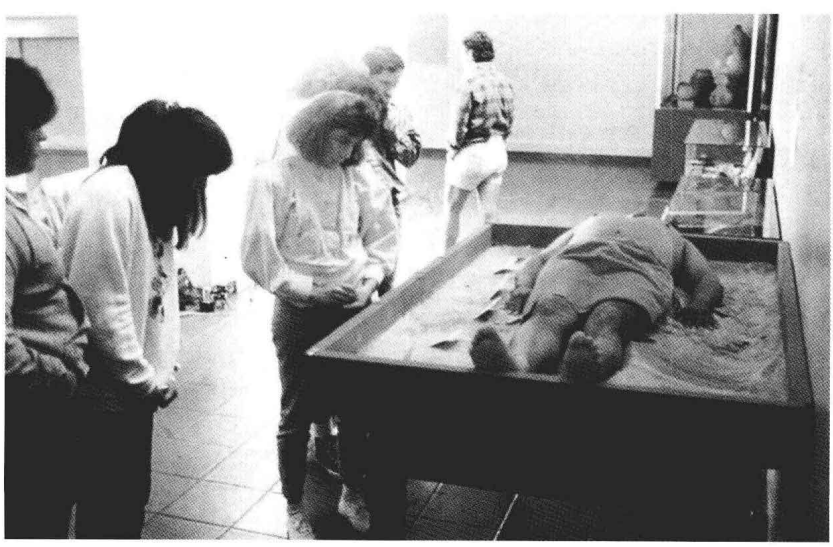
This book is intended to introduce readers to the richness of Native American art forms in all their temporal depth and regional diversity. It is also intended to make readers aware of the problems we now recognize in the way these arts have been represented in museums and scholarly writing. As art historians we approach this enormously challenging task in the belief that the comprehensive historical overview is a useful exercise, even though it must always be highly selective and can never be definitive. A continent-wide geographical scope encourages us to look for both unity and diversity, to recognize the many common beliefs and practices revealed in these arts at the same time as we savour the distinctiveness of local and regional artistic traditions. The temporal dimension of the historical survey complements this spatial breadth in its revelation of both change and continuity.

Yet the survey, like all forms of narrative, shapes the story it tells. Aboriginal conceptions of time are often organized around principles of cyclical rather than linear order. Western traditions of historical narrative which, in contrast, tend to privilege moments of change, are appropriate to a history of Native American art in the sense that much of the story of this art over the past five centuries tells of successive visual responses to crises such as epidemics, forced removals from homelands, repressive colonial regimes, religious conversion, and

2 James Luna (b. 1950), Diegueño/Luiseño

'The Artifact Piece', 1987–90

In a work that combined elements of installation and performance, Luna placed himself in an exhibition case in a San Diego Museum of Man hall containing a conventional ethnographic display about American Indians. Labels pointed to marks on his own body received in drinking and fighting incidents. The piece thus subverted the museum objectification and romantic stereotyping of Native people while drawing attention to their actual social problems.

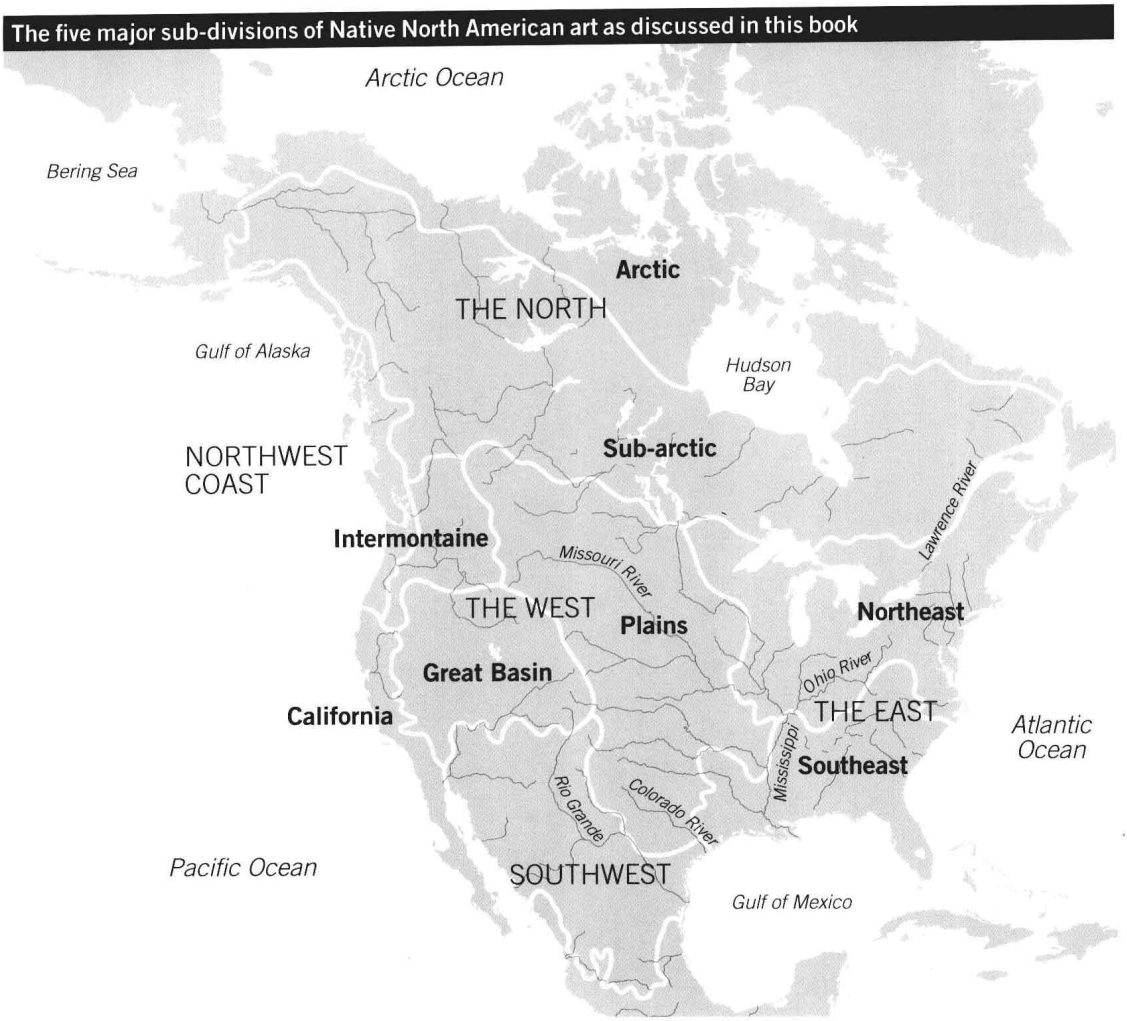


contact with foreign cultures and their arts. Yet it is also a story of the enduring strength of traditions. The many moments of transformation, rupture, and renewal in art contained in this story reveal the importance of visual arts in maintaining the integrity of spiritual, social, political, and economic systems.

Aboriginal oral traditions and Western scholarship account differently for the origin of the world and the human presence in it. Stories of creation are as various as the peoples of North America, although those of neighbouring peoples often share common features. They are 'histories' in the sense that they are chronological, eventful narratives that explain the origins of present realities, but they are posited on a different notion of authority, that of inherited, transmitted truth that has the force of moral explanation, rather than that of scientifically verifiable fact that has no moral force. In discussing the art of each region we provide an example of indigenous knowledge about Creation and a summary of Western archaeological knowledge.

Western scholars characteristically divide their historical narratives into two large epochs predating and following European contact. This fundamentally Eurocentric periodization is largely determined by the new kinds of record-keeping made available; post-contact history can make use of written texts, depictions, photographs and films, while pre-contact history usually relies on archaeological evidence and the Aboriginal oral traditions themselves. It is clear from these latter sources, however, that during the thousands of years that preceded the arrival of Europeans the cultures of indigenous peoples changed and adapted to new features of the environment. Communities traded with and were influenced by other indigenous peoples. The advent of the Europeans was the most violent and traumatic of the cross-cultural encounters and the most challenging to existing Aboriginal concepts and styles of art. However, the notion of the 'prehistoric' is misleading, because it implies a clear dividing line between eras of 'history' and 'before history' and appears to deny the momentous changes and developments that occurred prior to 1492. Although also Eurocentric, the term 'pre-contact' is preferable.

In the next five chapters, devoted to the historical arts of the five major regions of the continent, the Southwest, the East, the West, the Northwest Coast, and the North, we regularly interrupt our chronological accounts with examples of contemporary art. These interruptions are intended as interventions in the standard narrative of decline and revival in Native American art. They introduce the assertions made by many contemporary Aboriginal people of the continuities and the unity of traditions their cultures manifest against all the historical odds. This view is part of an emerging post-colonial re-presentation of Aboriginal history and culture that has important parallels with contemporary postmodernism, for both seek to disrupt linear perceptions



of historical time. The last chapter addresses contemporary art as a subject unto itself, looking at the engagement of Native artists with Western artistic movements including modernism and postmodernism. Together, these studies of Native art, whether historic or contemporary, offer insights into philosophies and historical experiences that can't be recovered from written sources. As Mohawk historian Deborah Doxtator has written: 'Visual metaphors impart meanings that sometimes do not have words to describe them.'[1]

All surveys are, of course, arbitrary in their selection of examples. In a book such as this, where strict limitations on length and illustration are imposed, we have been able to write only briefly about some individual artistic traditions and have had to omit many others of great interest and beauty. The specific examples and traditions we use to illustrate our thematic and regional discussions have, inevitably, been influenced by the state of the literature in the field, as well as by the areas of our own scholarship and research. Although, recently, this

3 Anasazi artist

Bi-lobed basket, *c.*1200 CE, Mogui Canyon, Utah

Basketry is perhaps the oldest indigenous American art; in many regions artists have produced works of enduring use and beauty out of coiled, twined, and wrapped plant fibres.

literature has grown rapidly, as the bibliographic essay at the end of the book indicates, much more study is needed, particularly by Native authors able to offer indigenous perspectives on the role of visual art within broader expressive systems.

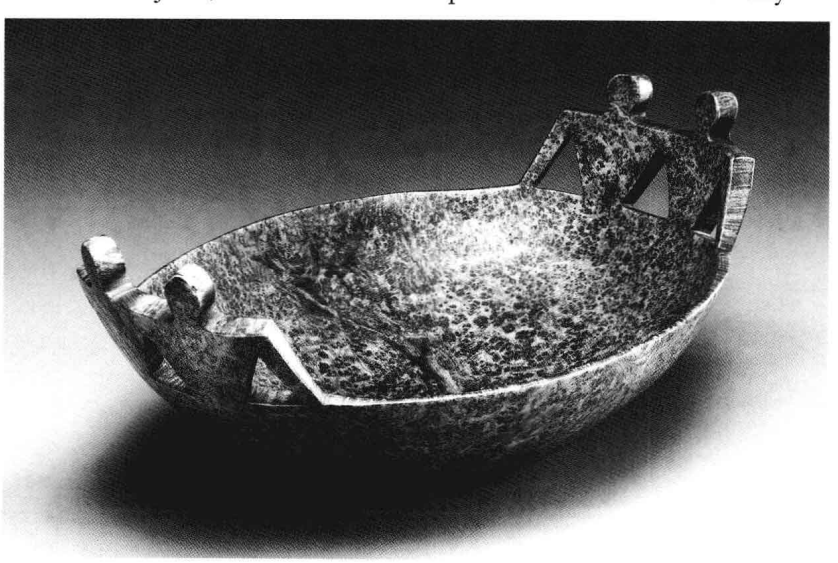
More importantly, our choices have been guided by our belief in the importance of addressing Native American arts in terms of a specific set of issues. Some of these—such as the role art plays in the expression of political power, group identity and cosmological belief, or in the presentation of the individual self—are long-standing concerns of art-historical work. Others, such as the impact of gender, colonialism or touristic commoditization on the production of art, represent more recent concerns within art history that have a particular resonance for the arts of indigenous peoples colonized by the West. Our current understanding of these arts, then, responds to another important thrust of recent post-structuralist and post-colonial theories: the 'de-

centring' of the representation of art, and the replacement of a unitary, Eurocentric history of the Western tradition with multiple histories of art, including those of women and marginalized peoples. Such a 'new' art history must, of course, attend carefully to recent interpretative work by Native American writers and scholars.

What is 'art'? Western discourses and Native American objects

It is important to have a working definition of the way we use the term 'art' in this book. In relation to historical (generally pre-twentieth-century) objects, where all acts of classification are retroactive, this volume uses the term 'art' to refer to an object whose form is elaborated (in its etymological sense of 'worked') to provide visual and tactile pleasure and to enhance its rhetorical power as a visual representation. The impulse and the capacity to elaborate form, as Franz Boas eloquently argued at the beginning of the twentieth century, appears to be universal in human beings. His stress on the importance of practised skill in achieving the control over materials and the regularity of form and pattern that are the necessary preconditions for the evocation of aesthetic responses is an essential corollary to his definition. The capacity for making art is also *useful*; an artfully made object will draw and hold the eye [**3**]. Skill, virtuosity and elaboration, therefore, confer what anthropologist Warren d'Azevedo has termed 'affective' power on an object, a capacity that can be exploited to focus attention on persons or things of importance, or to enhance the memorability or ritual efficacy of an occasion [**4**].[2]

However carefully we distinguish certain objects as 'art' (and, by implication, relegate others to the realm of 'non-art'), we enter inevitably into a cross-cultural morass. As a judgement made in relation to historical objects, the distinction imposes a Western dichotomy on



4 Chippewa artist

Feast bowl (ash wood), nineteenth century

In the Great Lakes, individuals brought beautifully carved bowls to communal feasts, often carved from the tight-grained and durable wood burl. Rims often display highly stylized animal motifs that transform the bowl into the body of an animal that was probably of special spiritual significance to its owner. The representation of anthropomorphic figures on bowls is less common; here they extend out from the slanting sides of the bowl, creating a dramatic visual tension.

things made by people who do not make the same categorical distinction and whose own criteria for evaluating objects have often differed considerably. In relation to contemporary Native art the use of Western categories is less problematic, for many contemporary artists were trained in Western art schools and work in full cognizance of the discourses and debates current in New York or Santa Fe, Vancouver or Toronto—although they often contest aspects of the integrated system of scholarship, collecting, museum display and market value that James Clifford has called the Western 'art and culture system'.

5 T. C. Cannon (1946–78), Caddo/Kiowa/Choctaw

'Osage With Vincent van Gogh' or 'Collector #5' (woodcut), 1980

In a woodcut version of a much larger oil and acrylic painting of the same name, an Osage man in late nineteenth-century tribal finery is seated in front of Vincent van Gogh's 'Wheatfield', subverting the expected ethnicities of who is the collector and who is the collected.

When speaking of historical Native objects, the statement is often made that Native languages have no exact equivalent for the post-Renaissance Western term 'art'. The implication of this statement—that Native artists in the past were unreflexive about their own art-making and lacked clear criteria of value or aesthetic quality—is manifestly untrue, as scholars have repeatedly demonstrated.[3] Though specific criteria vary, Native Americans, like people everywhere, value the visual pleasure afforded by things made well and imaginatively. They also value many of the same attributes that make up the Western notion of 'art', such as skill in the handling of materials, the practised manipulation of established stylistic conventions, and individual powers of invention and conceptualization. There is also ample evidence, however, that in Native traditions the purely material and visual features of an object are not necessarily the most important in establishing its relative value, as they have come to be in the West. Other qualities or associations, not knowable from a strictly visual inspection, may be more important. These may include soundness of construction to ensure functional utility, or ritual correctness in the gathering of raw materials, or powers that inhere because of the object's original conception in a dream experience, or the number of times it was used in a ceremony.

Modes of appreciation: curiosity, specimen, artefact, and art

An art history is always contingent on a corpus of known works, however accidental their survival and however arbitrary (from the producers' vantage point) the reasons they became prized by collectors. Native criteria of value were rarely taken into account in collecting and preservation and are still not well enough understood. Rather, the majority of the objects that survive today were selected because they appealed to Western collectors' criteria of value and beauty. It is, therefore, important to look reflexively at the ways that Western ideas of the object have affected the circulation, preservation, study and display of things made by Native Americans, and how these criteria have changed over time. Such an enquiry also helps us to understand the ethical issues that arise today in relation to the ownership and display of many Native objects, because these problems are often linked to the circumstances in which they were collected [**5**].

The oldest objects we know of that fit the criteria for 'art' outlined above date back more than 5,000 years and were recovered archaeologically. Several kinds of issues arise in relation to this material [**6**]. The first has to do with its incompleteness as a representative sample of visual aesthetic expression; since organic materials survive only in unusual circumstances, most of what exists today from the pre-contact period is made of stone, metal or pottery. Whole categories of visual art—almost everything that was made of wood, fibre or hide—can