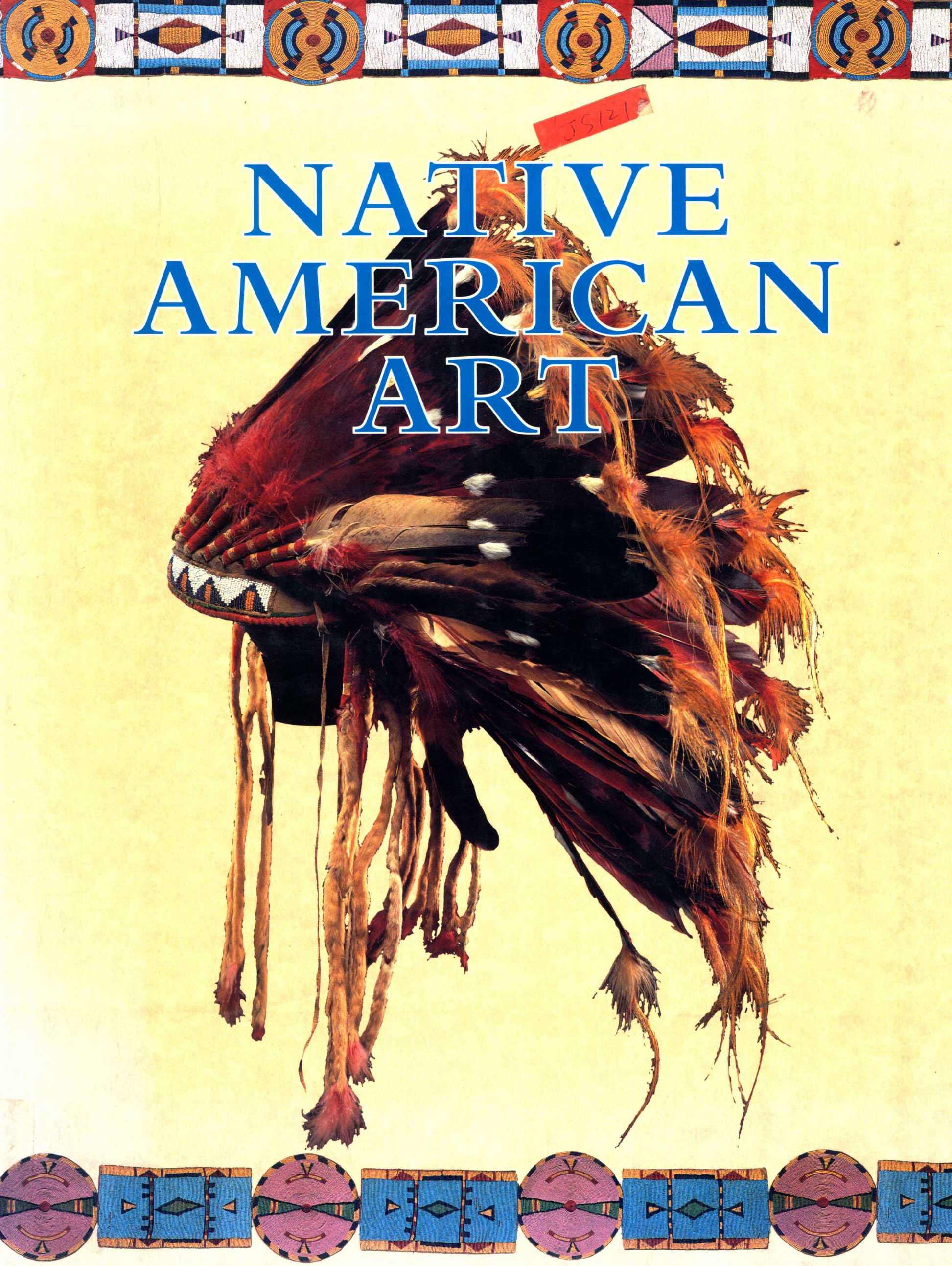
NATIVE AMERICAN ART



Native American Art

David W. Penney

George C. Longfish

Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, Inc.

Distributed by Publishers Group West

Design by Nai Chang
Photo research by Ellin Yassky Silberblatt
Editorial production by Deborah Teipel Zindell

I dedicate this book to my wife,
Jeanne Z. Penney,
whose love, patience, and support is fundamental to anything I do.
Thanks.

FRONTISPIECE: *Ghost Dance Dress.* Southern Arapaho. 1890s.
Region of the Fort Sill Agency, Oklahoma. Deerskin, feathers, paint. Length: 58 in.
Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The opportunity to work on this book came as an unexpected but most welcome treat. Hugh Lauter Levin is to be credited with the inspiration to conceive of this ambitious project and the commitment to see it to completion. At the onset, Hugh agreed that copies of the book would be donated to tribal colleges, libraries, and cultural centers all over the country. I think this is some measure of his vision and sensitivity. Throughout the process, the staff of his small but accomplished publications team dedicated their extraordinary talents and abilities: Deborah Zindell as editor, Michael Ruscoe as editorial assistant, Nai Chang as designer, and most of all, Ellin Silberblatt, without whose energy and hard work this volume would not be possible.

To prepare the entries, I am indebted to colleagues too numerous to mention, many of whom are my friends. Those who read this book will find the fruits of their research, although I am to be faulted with any errors of interpretation. In particular, I would like to mention Craig Bates, Jonathan Batkin, Ted Brasser, Steve Brown, Marvin Cahodas, Richard Conn, John C. Ewers, Diana Fane, William Fitzhugh, Bill Holm, George P. Horse Capture, Ira Jacknis, Ruth Phillips, Benson Lanford, Dennis Lessard, Richard Pohrt, Dorothy Ray, Allen Wardwell, Andrew Whiteford, and Robin Wright. I would also like to thank Tony Berlant, Gordon Hart, Toby Herbst, George Lois, Richard Manoogian, Jim and Kris Rutkowski, Eugene Thaw, and Jan and Bill Wetsman for making their collections available by providing splendid transparencies. Marianne Letasi provided an indispensable service in organizing the lion's share of illustrations for the volume. Although many photographers contributed to the visual impact of the book, and they are listed elsewhere, I want to acknowledge in particular the work of Dirk Bakker, Robert Hensleigh, and Jerry Jacka who made special efforts on behalf of this project.

DAVID W. PENNEY

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INTRODUCTION

ISSUES OF ART AND HISTORY

The traditions of making things and the issues of visual expression, symbolism, and metaphor involved with these traditions, developed in North America independent of any consciousness of the aesthetic philosophies of the Old World. Insulated from European "art history," it is fair to say that the peoples of North America possess their own art histories—separate, different, and based upon unique cultural and historical issues. And yet, even when one speaks the word "art," its very definition and frame of reference is rooted in European tradition. It is a linguistic issue, since there is no word in any Native American language that is an exact translation of the word "art."

So what is it we speak of when we use the word "art" to refer to things made by native North Americans? The matter is further complicated by the fact that the meaning of the European word has changed drastically over the last five hundred years since it came into use in North America. The distinction between the "high" and "low" arts in Europe, with all the race and class distinctions these categories implied, was obscured by the revolution of modernism. As the search for new forms of expression progressed, people of European descent began to use the word "art" to describe things made by Native Americans.

At that moment, as the twentieth century dawned, the separate art histories of North America and Europe began to merge. People of native descent began to train themselves as artists in the media and philosophies of their European counterparts. At the same time, people of European descent began to evaluate the traditional products of native people—ceramics, baskets, sculpture, and other media—according to the shifting definitions of art that were responding to a quickly changing modern world. In so doing, however, there was the danger of imposing upon native creativity an aesthetic viewpoint rooted in European-derived distinctions with regard to what was art and what was not. As a consequence, the unique and independent art histories of North America may be obscured in an effort to universalize the qualities of American Indian creations.

This process of conceptually unifying all the creative, visual traditions of the world as "art" is precisely the experience offered by modern art museums, as they "frame" art in galleries and cases; even art books like this one display art by evenly lit and neutrally situated color reproductions of isolated objects. This is how the modern world experiences art as we understand it. As a consequence, the unique and culturally rooted ways of thinking about visual expression are lost in favor of art's universal and "transcendent" qualities.

This book seeks to stretch the reader's perception beyond these modern conventions of publication and museum display to address the cultural matrix of art-making. In so doing, it may be better to put aside, for now, the word "art" with its roots in the sensibilities of the European world until we encounter that historical moment when Indian people began to call themselves artists and started to make art in the modern sense of the term.

In the following chapters, American Indian traditions of visual expression are discussed within regional and historical parameters up through the early twentieth century, when American Indian artists began to involve themselves in the "art system" of the larger, modern world. This is certainly not meant to imply that twentieth-century works are in any way less rooted in cultural tradition. The relationship between the importance of tradition and the impact of historical experience upon that heritage is a recurring theme throughout these texts. Throughout their history, native North American artists strived to create images, symbols, and visual metaphors that renewed tradition for their own time and place. This was no less true for the painters of Mimbres bowls at A.D. 1100 than it is for today's Native American painters, sculptors, photographers, print makers, and performance artists.

The experience of history conditions and defines the artist's perception of "tradition," and the artist, in turn, recreates "tradition" in his or her work. These pages reflect this concept as is evident in the extraordinary degree of innovation and change seen in the history of North American Indian art. The great regional diversity of form, media, and design is testimony to the inventiveness and creativity of North American visual traditions. Moreover, it becomes clear that each succeeding generation of artists found ways to enrich their visual culture with personal creativity.

There is a shallow, and perhaps widespread perception among outsiders that the best of American Indian art is conservative, firmly anchored in the past, and unchanging in its restatement of "traditional" form. Nothing could be further from the truth. Native ideas and values are ancient; ways and means of expressing them visually remained on the cutting edge of the historical present, from the earliest handworks dating to 3000 B.C. through to the striking images of the recent past. The visual arts, like the cultures they reflect, must change with the times in order to remain alive. The continuous record of invention, innovation, and creativity visible in American

Indian art affirms two related ideas: the central importance of the visual arts in the expression of culture in North America; and the ability of the visual arts to absorb and accommodate cultural change, even when that change is forced upon them from the outside world.

Art as it is experienced today occupies a fairly marginal position in life. Art consists of those objects isolated for aesthetic enjoyment and contemplation. At best, art today makes you think and makes you feel. Beyond that, it functions in life like a commodity—our society buys and sells it, we own it, display it in our homes, or see it in museums and in illustrated art books. When reading about the myriad ways in which the visual arts were involved in the very fabric of Native American society, one may perhaps begin to sense that the word "art" is an inadequate term to describe the remarkable objects created by a unique group of people.

Native American Art

EARLIEST TRADITIONS: THE ANCIENT WOODLANDS

The artistic traditions of Native Americans reflect a rich and diverse culture that reaches back to the earliest peoples who inhabited this continent. Differing theories exist concerning the origins of human life in North America. The Ojibwa of the Great Lakes recall how the great hero Minibozo formed the earth with mud that Muskrat scooped up from the sea bottom. The Great Manitos of the Underworld and Sky then fashioned the island's people out of clay. According to the Tewa of the southwestern pueblos, their ancestors once lived in a dark lake below the soft and unformed earth and were brought up to the present world by Father Sun.

Scientists look to archaeological evidence and geographic phenomena in an effort to pinpoint the earliest appearance of people in North America. Archaeologists have verified that ancestors of American Indians hunted mastodon and other extinct species of big game on the plains of North America at least fifteen thousand years ago. Scientists cannot say whether the region supported human life prior to that period. The emergence of the land bridge that joins present-day Alaska to Siberia resulted from geographic activity during the last Ice Age when much of the world's water was trapped in the frozen polar ice caps, causing the bottom of the shallow Bering Strait to become land mass. Dozens of species of animals traversed this intercontinental highway and, with them, people, dependent upon the animals for survival. Was this the beginning of human habitation in North America? Scientists think so; many Indian people disagree.

THE LATE ARCHAIC PERIOD

When the ice receded fifteen thousand years ago and the melt water drained away, sculpting the landscape in its present form, Indian people were in North America, fashioning their lives to fit comfortably with the changing environment. It was during these first several thousand years after the Pleistocene era that the great diversity of traditions represented among America's first peoples were formed and developed. Archaeologists refer to this long episode of slow and gradual diversification of early North American culture from approximately 8000 to 1000 B.C. as the Archaic period.

East of the Mississippi, people tended to settle near rivers and lakes. By the Late Archaïc period (3000–1000 B.C.) communities had established themselves in well-defined territories to harvest seasonally available wild plant foods and game. Many families might congregate in a summer village along the bottom-lands of a river valley or lake-shore fishing camp, but then disperse into smaller groups and move inland for fall and winter to gathering and hunting camps.

The most impressive manufactured objects that survive from these early Indian cultures were made of stone. Meticulously chipped and miraculously large stone blades made of colored chert, and ground and polished tools and ornaments made of speck-

OPPOSITE:
Mask with Antlers. Caddoan culture (Spiro phase), Mississippian period, A.D. 1200–1350. Craig Mound, Spiro site, LeFlore County, Oklahoma. Wood (possibly cedar). Height: 11½ in. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, New York.

The Craig Mound covered the remains of the ancient Caddoan elite—their chiefs, priests, and warriors. Their remains had been preserved in state inside a temple until the event when they were brought to this final resting place together with all the sacred contents of the temple, wooden effigies and idols, marine shell ornaments and cups, cut engraved copper plates, stone pipes, clubs, blades, and hundreds of additional categories of objects. The Craig Mound was never properly excavated: it was "mined" of its treasures commercially during the 1930s. It is one of the few archaeological sites of the Mississippian period where wood sculpture was preserved. This nearly life-size "mask" of wood has its eyes and mouth inlaid with marine shell. This mask and other small wooden heads in the mound may have been intended to serve as effigies of human relics, the preserved heads of sacred ancestors.