

What the White Man Has Done to Indian Art

By MARJORIE MACDILL

The quantity production age in which automobiles are turned out in 100,000 lots daily has put on the hand-made a premium that has been a perfect lifesaver to the tribal arts of the original Americans. The handicrafts of the Indian and Eskimo which civilization has put in grave danger of extinction have come back to life again with a vengeance, as retired Babbit, not to mention his wife and daughter, turns collector. The modern craze for the hand-wrought antique, the bizarre and, less necessarily, the beautiful, augmented by the all-penetrating automobile, has convinced our precursors on this continent that they have something to sell.

The time when an Indian woman expended hours of painstaking effort modeling a beautiful clay jar that sold to a passing trader for twenty-five cents is past. Today she demands \$35 of the transient tourist and gets it; and very often it is worth even more. This ready market for Indian products has produced some surprising results that range from the cheap five-and-ten-cent-store art of the Indians of Southern Alaska to the beautiful pottery made in the Southwest.

In the Hopi pueblos there is an old woman called Nampeo who has staged a most amazing comeback of the ceramic art of her tribe. Ethnological experts on early American races tell us that the pottery of the Hopi reached its apex of excellence during the pre-history of the pueblos. Since this period the designs have degenerated steadily, though it still is the best native pottery made in the United States.

During some of the early investigations in the Southwest undertaken by the Smithsonian Institution under the direction of Dr. J. Walter Fewkes, some exceedingly fine specimens of early Hopi jars were brought to light. Nampeo, then a young girl, was so impressed with the beauty of the handiwork of her remote ancestors that she attempted to copy some of the designs in the jars that Hopi women make for household use. Since she was an artist of a caliber that occurs but rarely in any race, her attempts were successful. Her pottery, copied after samples 2,000 years old, approaches the excellence of her models.

When she had the opportunity to see any of the old specimens of the ancient Hopi jars and bowls she copied their designs down on paper



ONLY THREE VILLAGES are left on the upper reaches of the Rio Grande where black jars are made like the one balanced on the head of this young lady with the untrimmed bob. (Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.)

for future use. She hunted up the same sort of clay the old potters used and endeavored to emulate their technique, generally with highly satisfactory results. Thanks to Nampeo, Hopi pottery again approaches some of its pristine glory.

Black jars made in the Tewa villages near the upper Rio Grande bring large prices. There are only three villages left of this particular branch of the pueblo Indians and much of their pottery has degenerated to meet the demands of the tourist trade. Craftsmen of the past, however, have produced very fine jars of a beautiful highly polished black.

Skipping to the other end of the

continent we find that among the Eskimo, reindeer raising is quite substantially supplemented by ivory carving as a means of bringing extra pennies into the family igloo. The modern motorboat, that is beginning to replace the skin covered kayak in the more affluent circles of the Alaska Eskimo, is quite probably purchased with the proceeds of laboriously carved beads of fossilized ivory now adorning the neck of some Seattle debutante.

Scientists who have recently returned from expeditions to the Far North report the prevalence of ivory carving as the great indoor sport of the long Arctic night along the northern coast of Alaska. The aboriginal inhabitants of these regions displayed a well developed "feel" for perspective and considerable realism in their straight silhouette etchings of reindeer, seal, sharply pointed pine trees and bulky ice masses on the flattened side of walrus tusks. Early Eskimos once used so-called fossilized ivory showing beautiful mottlings of gray and cream to fashion bits of dog harness equipment, knife handles and amulets. Their descendants have grafted on to this primitive handicraft, however, modern ideas that contacts with white men have taught them. Beavers and reindeer are still carved on walrus tusks but there is a log cabin in the background and the whole tusk is elaborated to make a cribbage board! Napkin rings and paper knives are embellished in the same way, and hand carved beads of the fossilized ivory form necklaces that would certainly make a popular "number" with fair purchasers in any novelty shop to which they happened to find their way. Steel has replaced crude flints for etching instruments and to obtain the outline effect of black and white the native resorts to the simple expedient of rubbing the *objet d'art* from time to time over his greasy clothing filling the scratches in with dirt.

Eskimo art was originally so conventionalized that each region or village had its distinctive form. This was probably due in part to the isolation of the villages during the long dark winter when intercommunication was often impossible. This local individualized touch was so pronounced that when an arrowhead found implanted in the breastbone of a wild goose shot somewhere in the region around the Great Lakes, was sent in to the National Museum for identification, ex-

(Just turn the page)

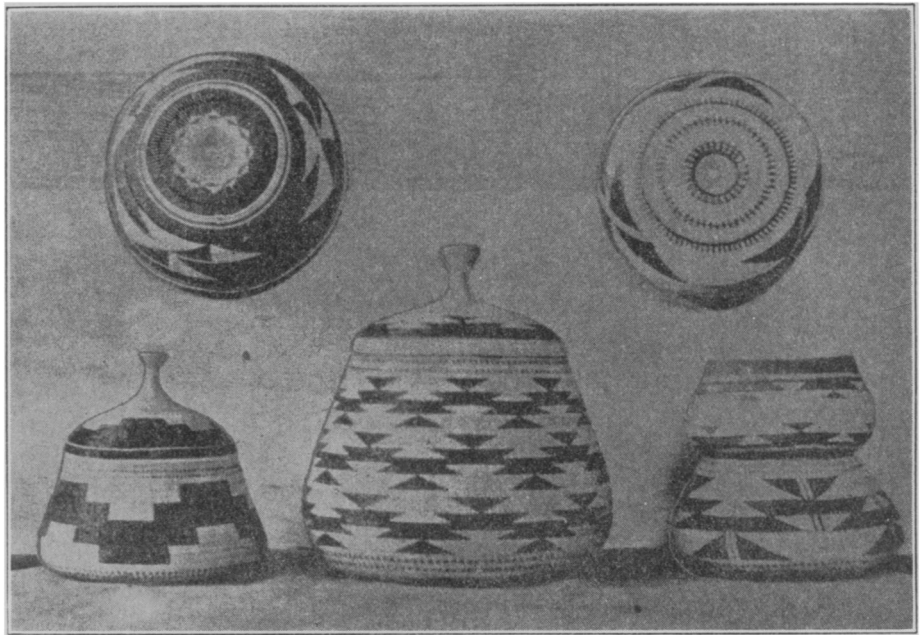
Indian Art

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perts were able to recognize it immediately. They could tell by comparison with a drawerful of specimens in just which Eskimo village it was made, so closely did it resemble the others from the same section.

This individual phase of Eskimo handicrafts is going fast as a result of the demands of the novelty trade. The Eskimo craftsman naturally makes the things for which he is paid money and these articles are pretty much the same; so Eskimo art is rapidly becoming generalized.

Though the art of the Eskimos has been contaminated from the artistic standpoint by modern influence, it still maintains a highly developed craftsmanship. Further south in Alaska Indian art has not fared so well, and had slid down to the ten-cent-store level mentioned above. At Ketchikan, largest city in Alaska and first port of call out of Seattle, Chief Johnson of the Tlingit tribe caters to the tourist traffic with examples of miniature totem poles and wood carving made while you wait. According to an ethnological expert of the U. S. National Museum, who has spent many



CALIFORNIA BASKETS, called by experts the most beautiful of the native American baskets. The art of making them may become lost for only a few families still continue to weave them. (Courtesy of Smithsonian Institution.)

summers in Alaska, Chief Johnson expresses stoic scorn for both the stuff he vends and its purchasers, but as he philosophically remarks, "One must make a living."

Wood and unsmelted copper ore were originally the media most used by the northwest coast Indians for the fantastic conventionalized animal carvings made familiar by totem poles. Copper is specially favored and with the coming of civilization ceremonial masks used in tribal ritual often have had culinary origin in the copper pots and kettle brought in by white men. As enterprising steamship and railway companies keep on boasting "See America First" and the resulting lucrative tourist market continues, the natives have turned to other materials to transmute into dollars. Slate has proved one of the most successful and is used extensively by the Haida Indians of the Queen Charlotte Islands. It is comparatively easily worked and, carved and polished into the grotesque, animalesque totem faces, it looks not unlike the Maori art of the natives of New Zealand.

Living on some of the tiny islands of the Aleutian group to the southwest of Alaska are the Attu Indians whose baskets are said by experts to be the finest made in America. There is a tradition that a native girl educated on the "outside" returned home and found that actual makers of the Attu baskets had dwindled down to a few individuals. Realizing their value she managed to stimulate sufficient interest in the industry to re-establish it on a firm basis. They are made of

exceedingly fine strands which are woven under water like Panama hats. Microscopic specimens in the U. S. National Museum are so minutely woven that they will fit inside a thimble.

The Chitimacha Indians of Southern Louisiana, once the best basket makers of the East, have likewise had their best tribal handicraft rescued from oblivion. Snake and alligator patterns occupy as favored a place in their designs as they do right now in milady's footwear. The Indians have been encouraged to revive the soft hued vegetable dyes and are now turning out beautiful baskets of sporting patterns that a diamond backed rattler would be proud to claim for his spring suit.

Though the art of making California baskets is confined at present to only a few families, Navajo blanket weaving, on the other hand, has continued to flourish lustily ever since the days of the Conquistadores. Every traveler on the Santa Fe who gets off to stretch his legs on the Albuquerque platform can see Indians supplying local color weaving gaudy blankets with designs more or less following the complicated symbolism of his forefathers. Unfortunately the old pastel shaded vegetable colors have been supplanted by the more easily obtained aniline dyes, but even so they still bring good money. The best of the present day products of the Navajo looms, artistically speaking, are the black, white and gray blankets made from natural undyed wools.

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