

Shield yourself from non-native art form

BY PAM PHILLIPS
Times Correspondent

At least every couple of weeks someone calls or comes in the gallery looking for a mandala. When explained that mandalas are not a Native American art form, there are two almost universal responses. One is they know it's Native American because they bought it out West and they were told it is a Native American art form, or the second response is that a Native American made it.

For the record Native American people make hamburgers too, but that doesn't make them a Native American art form.



Mandalas originally were used by Indians in India and others who follow the Hindu or Buddhist beliefs in the Far East, which is the primary definition according to Webster's dictionary. During the hippie phase of American culture, mandalas became a very popular item and some enterprising trader in the Southwest decided to hire Native Americans to make them and sell them to tourists. The idea spread as stores saw sales being generated by these usually vinyl or cloth circles adorned with sheep's wool, feathers, beads, etc.

What Native Americans do make and use as part of their culture, depending on the tribe, are shields. Shields are used in two forms; medicine shields and war shields. Medicine shields are made of tanned hides that are very soft and stretched over a circular frame and painted with clan symbols or healing symbols and are generally hung within the dwelling. War shields are made of thick hard rawhide meant to deflect arrows or knives and are decorated with images of horses and warriors in battle, protective symbols, and other images meant to protect a warrior from harm.

Either form of shield may be adorned with feathers from birds of prey such as an eagle, hawk or owl, and decorated with banners of trade cloth, prayer flags and small medicine bundles. Often the shield would be displayed from a tripod in front of the owner's tipi, making it easy to identify the owner.

Shields made for sale cannot be decorated with migratory or predatory feathers or songbird feathers, so most artists hand paint turkey feathers to resemble eagle feathers for use on shields, staffs or spears. The war shield pictured was made of elkhide by Lakota artist Webster Two Hawks.