

No such thing as typical American Indian

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No Photo Accompanied This Article

Usually this column is about how to distinguish authentic American Indian art items from imitations, but what about imitation people? How can an item of art reflect its maker's culture when the artist is not forthcoming about his or her heritage?

One definition of native or indigenous art is that it is made by native peoples according to their cultural beliefs and experiences. The 1990 Federal Indian Arts and Crafts Act states an item must be made by a member of a state or federally recognized tribe in order to describe the product as American Indian made. Legal action may be brought against a person who offers or displays for sale or sells a good in a manner that falsely suggests it is American Indian produced, an American Indian product, or the product of a particular American Indian or tribe.

The 1990 Federal Indian Arts and Crafts Act, modified as the 2000 Enforcement Act, was brought about by the influx of imitation and foreign-made goods being sold as American Indian made. The increasing sales of imitation goods was not only depriving American Indian people of their livelihood but was consumer fraud on a massive scale, which brought another problem to light. That was the problem of the "imitation Indian."

Due to the collectibility and increasing demand for American Indian arts many non-native people suddenly started claiming some degree of American Indian blood. The common theme of "my great-great-grandmother was an American Indian princess" echoed throughout the land. The polite printable description given these claimants by American Indian people is "wannabe" as in want to be American Indian.

Ironically after generations of deprivation, discrimination and attempts through genocide and assimilation to banish the American Indian people from existence there was a sudden interest in claiming American Indian heritage when it became economically attractive. Thus, we have today a number of artists of non-American Indian lineage taking advantage of native subjects and portrayals to make money. There also is a part of the general public, in their search for happiness and immediate gratification, who believe that American Indians hold some kind of magic that will make them happy, cure their ills, and in general change their lives. Surely if native people held all the magic answers they would have used them to their own benefit and alleviated much of the suffering encountered by their people.

As always, knowledge, insight, education and healing come through hard work, devoting time and energy over many years, and cannot be gained quickly through imitating a pipe ceremony or by buying crystals or other stones for their magic powers. There is no picture accompanying this week's article as there is no typical American Indian. Remember to buy authentic!