



NATIVE MODERNS

American Indian
Painting, 1940–1960

BILL ANTHES

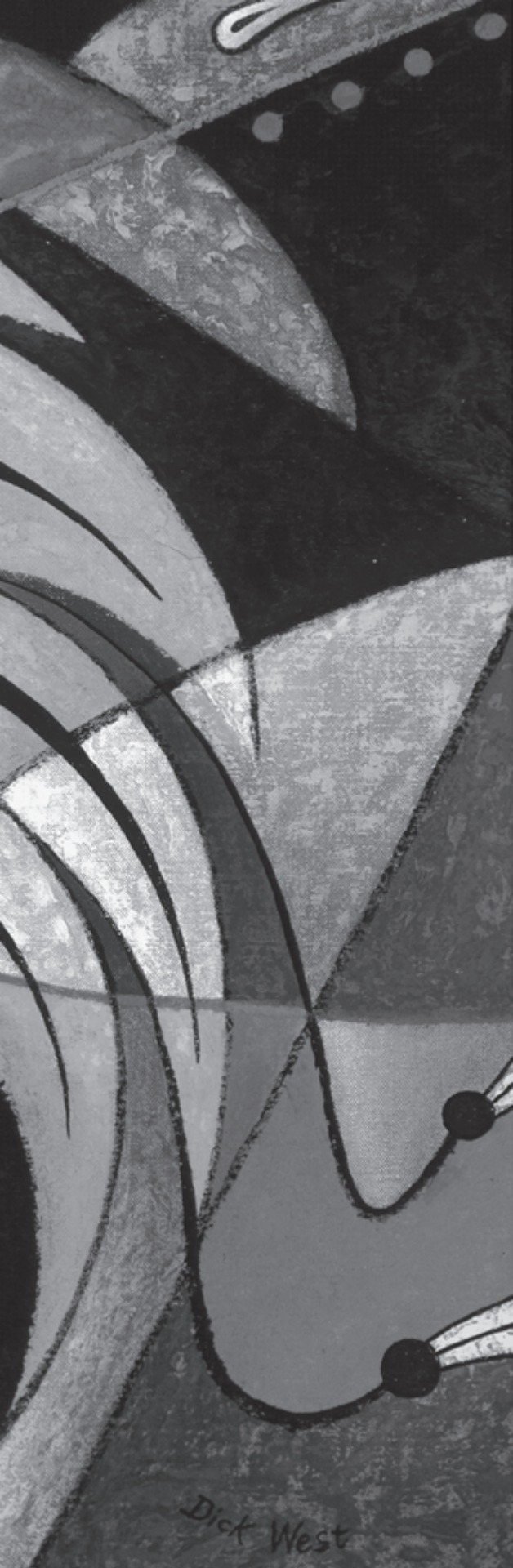
NATIVE MODERNS

**Objects/Histories:
Critical Perspectives on
Art, Material Culture,
and Representation**

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American Indian Painting,
1940–1960

Bill Anthes

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FOR KIM AND OLIVE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE PAINTINGS BY JOSÉ LENTE AND JIMMY BYRNES THAT ARE DISCUSSED in chapter 2 have not been reproduced. These images represent ceremonies that are sacred to the Pueblos. Lente's paintings are reproduced in Elsie Parsons, *Isleta Paintings*, edited by Esther Schiff Goldfrank (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1962), and are collected with Parsons's papers at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. Byrnes's paintings are collected at the School of American Research in Santa Fe.

PREFACE

IN 1958, OSCAR HOWE ENTERED AN ABSTRACT PAINTING IN THE ANNUAL Contemporary American Indian Painting Exhibition at the Philbrook Art Center (now the Philbrook Museum of Art) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In its bold degree of innovation, Howe's work departed from the conventions of "traditional-style" Native American painting. Titled *Umine Wacipi: War and Peace Dance*, the piece depicts five angular figures, in shades of blue, pink, and lavender, performing a ritual dance against a stark, abstract landscape [figure 1]. Needless to say, Howe was shocked when his painting was branded as inauthentic and disqualified from the competition. As explained by the panel of two white jurors and the Comanche painter Jesse E. Davis (a previous Philbrook grand prize winner), it was "a fine painting—but not Indian."¹ That is, the jurors argued, the painting was not an authentic expression of Howe's Indian heritage and identity. However, although the painting was excluded from consideration for prizes, it was kept on view with the work of nine other artists in the Plains region category at that year's exhibition.

Howe was born in 1915 on the Crow Creek Reservation in South Dakota as a descendant of Yankton Sioux chiefs. He graduated from Dorothy Dunn's famous art program at the Santa Fe Indian School, after which he served in the Second World War. He then went on to obtain a master's degree in art from the University of Oklahoma. In the course of his work, Howe became a well-known Native American painter whose paintings depicted aspects of Sioux life and culture. He was a prize winner at several Philbrook Indian Annuals, and he taught art at the Pierre, South Dakota, Indian School, at Dakota Wesleyan University, and at the University of South Dakota. How could his painting be anything other than Indian?

Howe's reception indicates that the Philbrook jurors believed what many observers did in 1958—that an Indian painting and a modern painting were two different things. When innovative Native American artists such as Oscar Howe chose to depart from established conventions, their artwork was no longer accepted at "authentic." In response, Howe was quick to offer a virulent argument against the jurors' judgment. In a letter to Jeanne Snodgrass, the Philbrook curator of Native American art and herself a Cherokee, he wrote, "Who ever said . . . that my paintings are not

in traditional Indian style has poor knowledge of Indian art indeed. There is much more to Indian art than pretty, stylized pictures.” While the jurors had assumed that if *Umine Wacipe* looked like a modernist painting then it could not be authentically Indian, Howe insisted that “every bit in my paintings is a true studied fact of Indian painting.”²

In this book, I consider a generation of Native American painters who for the most part were born in the first decades of the twentieth century and developed as artists from the late 1930s through the late 1950s. Like Howe, the Native American modernists included here produced work that complicated simple distinctions between traditional and modern expression. Some, like Howe, were veterans of the Second World War. Many were trained in mainstream white institutions. Most came to see themselves as modern artists, valuing concepts of aesthetic innovation and individual expression, and imagined their work in relation to their Native communities in a variety of ways that departed from the traditional relationship between artist and tribe. Some of the artists I describe received little or no training and had little contact with mainstream modernist culture; rather, they made their own personal and aesthetic responses to the changed world they faced as modernization wrought radical changes in Indian country, communities were transformed, and Native Americans moved off reservations in massive numbers. As the historian Alison Bernstein describes, the Second World War was a key moment in twentieth-century Native American history. Before the war, Native Americans lived on Indian reservations and in the pueblos of the Southwest, physically isolated from mainstream American society. Wartime military service and home-front mobilization “unlocked the reservation[s],” as Bernstein writes, and accelerated Indian communities into the national mainstream. Thousands of Native Americans worked in the war industries or left home to serve overseas. Even those individuals who remained on reservations or in the pueblos of the Southwest faced a new intercultural dynamic as their communities became integrated into a modern national economy and the emerging world system.³

The crossing over and self-fashioning of twentieth-century Native American artists suggests a larger story of American modernism than is usually recounted in academic art history. Between the late 1930s and the late 1950s, these artists forged a hybrid modernity that challenged clear boundaries between Indian and white art and culture. They made innovative, highly individual, and often abstract artworks that were related stylistically to the European-American avant-garde yet also expressed their experiences as Native Americans in the twentieth century. They worked and exhibited not only in the U.S. West and Southwest, but also in New York at the

time when the city was emerging as the center of a global modern art world. The transformative work of these Native American artists should be recognized as one of many modernisms in a multicultural America. However, this volume is not merely a recovery project with the goal of adding a few neglected figures to the canon of American modernism. Native American modernism is crucial to our understanding of American modernism generally, because bringing Native American modernism to the foreground rewrites the canon and the key terms of American modernism. Ultimately, I argue here that shifting notions of identity—citizenship, cultural property, and sovereignty—are fundamental to an understanding of American culture in the postwar period.⁴

NATIVE/MODERN

The title of this volume, *Native Moderns*, brings together two terms that at first might appear to be mutually exclusive. I argue that these terms become increasingly connected in the experience of twentieth-century Native American artists. My use of this vocabulary, however, requires a brief note about terminology. The word “native” is used often interchangeably with “traditional” to refer to societies or cultural expressions that value stasis and continuity over change. From one perspective, the native/traditional has been valorized over the modern as the repository and expression of cultural values that have become lost in technological societies. This was the allure of Native American cultures for early-twentieth-century Indian enthusiasts and policy reformers, and it continues to be so for many present-day collectors and aficionados. The concept also invokes collective societies in which individual identity is subsumed under the identity of the group. As used by advocates of Indian assimilation or uplift, the term “native” can also imply “backward,” “irrational,” or “of another time.”⁵ But for both camps—the policy reformers and culture enthusiasts on the one hand, and the assimilationists on the other—native/traditional is the polar opposite of the concept of modern society, which places a high value on innovation (aesthetic and technological) and individual expression and creativity, and which presumes that a notion of individualism is an essential prerequisite for critical consciousness, competency, and citizenship in the modern state. Thus, for Native American art and culture generally, the distinction between tradition and modernity has been particularly charged politically. However, seemingly easy distinctions between tradition and modernity are complicated and politically motivated constructions.⁶ If the distinction between native and modern seems natural, discrete, and self-evident, it is because these terms have been invented and deployed (mostly

by European American interests since the earliest days of contact and colonization) to police the boundaries between the modern West and its “Primitive” other.⁷

Non-Western art has been greatly misunderstood through the lens of the “Primitive.” To be sure, the Western image of the cultural other has often been self-reflexive and ethnocentric. To paraphrase literary critic Edward Said, Primitivism constructs the Primitive as the modern West’s “surrogate and even underground self.”⁸ Primitivism, then, should be understood not as referring to any essential truth about its non-Western sources but as a projection of cultural desires and fantasies about the cultural other and about the West itself. Moreover, the very use of “the Primitive” and “Primitivism” is, to say the least, deeply problematic and politically suspect. To label a culture or people as “Primitive” is to employ the language and hierarchical models of nineteenth-century cultural evolutionism, which, as the historian of anthropology George Stocking demonstrated, propounded the mistaken belief that “the various societies existing in the contemporary world represented different stages in the progress of mankind . . . through a series of evolutionary stages which were often loosely referred to as savagery, barbarism, and civilization.”⁹ Cultural evolutionism had lost much of its explanatory power even by the early twentieth century, which makes the persistence of the use in art of the category of “the Primitive” all the more troublesome. In this book I use the terms Primitive and Primitivism much like the terms “Fauvism” or “Abstract Expressionism” — that is, they are capitalized to indicate their status as concepts with a specific historical currency despite their descriptive inadequacy.

Further, I use the word traditional (without quotation marks) throughout the book as a shorthand adjective for long-standing indigenous practices, especially when artists, such as Howe, consciously maintain or reference these practices in their work. I use “traditional” (in quotation marks) to denote those twentieth-century styles that were developed in collaboration with white patrons but that have gained the veneer of venerable cultural forms. Another key word closely related to “traditional” is “authentic,” which is universally understood as a positive term (unlike its opposite, “inauthentic”). In the context of Native American art and visual culture, authentic works of art have been understood as those cultural expressions made for the use of, consumption by, or to function within indigenous communities, thereby fulfilling Native needs that are uninfluenced by Western forms.¹⁰

To take a pertinent example, the style titled “Traditional Indian Painting” promoted by the Philbrook museum and other institutions in the early twentieth century in the Southwest and Oklahoma was formalized in the relationship between “Indian painters and white patrons,” as noted by the art historian J. J. Brody. As Brody further notes, however, it has been (mis)labeled as “traditional,” despite its re-

cent vintage and hybrid origins.¹¹ Since the publication of Brody's important *Indian Painters and White Patrons* in 1971, "Traditional Indian Painting" has been criticized as being neither traditional nor authentic and has been derided as the "Bambi School" in reference to the ubiquitous motif of the blue deer, which has become a kitschy cliché [figure 2]. Because easel painting and representational drawings are not, as the argument goes, traditional to Native American visual culture, they are not an authentic expression of Native American culture. The problem with this argument is that while it values Native American art and culture it also speaks of an inability to imagine or recognize an authentic Native American expression in the present. Native Americans are thus prized solely for their connection to the past, and as such they are imagined as timeless (and therefore ultimately lost to history and progress). This image of Native Americans was propounded in nineteenth-century doctrines of cultural evolutionism, as well as in the Primitivist antimodernism that characterized much of the early-twentieth-century non-Native interest in Indians as well as advocacy on their behalf. Because both positions are founded on an evolutionist understanding of Native American culture, both denied the agency of Indian people as political actors—historically and in the present.

Native Americans, then, have been caught in a cultural and political contradiction throughout much of the twentieth century—that is, they are perceived as insufficiently modern (or constitutionally incapable of modernity) while at the same time as being not authentically traditional by virtue of merely being alive in the modern world. Art historian Ruth Phillips has argued that evolutionist thought and avant-garde Primitivism erected a substantial impediment to Native self-representation, thereby producing "an empty space . . . in accounts of the history of native art during most of the modernist century." As Phillips writes, "in standard accounts, the production of 'authentic' and 'traditional' art is perceived to end in the reservation period, while a contemporary art employing Western fine art media did not begin until the early 1960s. The traditional native arts promoted by the Primitivists were defined as belonging to a tribal past, available for appropriation as a means of restoring authenticity to modernist Western art." Likewise, Native artists working in traditional forms in the twentieth century have been faulted as inauthentic when they incorporate contemporary ideas, materials, or other Western borrowings. As a result, Phillips writes, "art museum collections hold almost no examples of painting or sculpture made by aboriginal people during the first half of the twentieth century," because "the old linear and progressivist meta-narratives excluded native art on evolutionist and racist grounds."¹² But worse than Indian art history being written out of the standard art historical narratives is the matter of the cultural and political ramifications of evolutionist and Primitivist definitions of Native people. Indeed, the

invisibility of twentieth-century Native American art is a synecdoche for the social situation of Native peoples. How could Native Americans be modern—how could they present themselves fully as modern cultural and political agents—if their only value is in their pastness?

NATIVE MODERN

As noted in Brody's writing, drawings and easel paintings by Native American artists are a comparatively recent development (dating to the last decade of the nineteenth century), and in terms of material, technique, function, and patronage they are the products of a budding non-Native market for paintings and an emergent, modern world system. Following Brody, authors have understood Native American art in the twentieth century in terms of the appropriation by Indians of established modernist (i.e., non-Native) styles, culled from European and Euro-American art history by Native artists. Indeed, Oscar Howe has been described by many writers as a follower of Cubism—a point that he would vigorously deny throughout his career. Other writers have focused on the adoption of Western media (oil-based paints, canvas, bronze) that do not have a history in traditional Native American visual culture. Others have cited the moment when Native artists began making work for non-Native audiences and purposes rather than for local, ceremonial contexts. Others identify the embrace by Native American artists of Western notions of the art object as such. Overall, such readings instill a reasonable skepticism regarding the authenticity of Native American art in the twentieth century. But while they are valuable (they point to the modern origins of Native American fine art), these definitions can tend to reinforce a rigid binary wherein artworks, artists, and individuals can only be Native or modern; they overemphasize issues of authentic style or subject matter (or the artist's legal identity—the ultimate trump card). The Indian and the modern artist are seen through (indeed constructed by) the metaphor of “two worlds” rather than understood as common inhabitants of a shared modernity. At best, Indians are seen as interlopers in the modern world; they remain the objects rather than the subjects of modernity.

More recently writers have addressed the hybrid nature of this complex art.¹³ For example, writings in anthropology recognize the historical dimensions, the dislocations, and the give and take that define intercultural relations. As the anthropologist Fred Myers has written of contemporary Australian aboriginal painting, the emergence and recognition of such complex art forms signal the end of the paradigm that imagined cultures as discrete systems—seeking to isolate and study the most pure (i.e., untouched) expressions to get at the “authentic.”¹⁴ Indeed, many forms

of Native American cultural expression have evolved since European contact and conquest. Originating in the shifting borderlands between Native American cultures and the reach of modern Euro-American expansionism, Native American painting served different purposes for artist and patrons.¹⁵ Rather than assume that the adoption of signature Western materials, techniques, and forms is evidence of Indian artists' passive acceptance of foreign forms and all that they stood for in the Euro-American context, we should recognize that this ground is inherently unstable—that Native artists eagerly adopted these new practices and from them produced new emblems of cultural identity. They then mobilized these emblems in a new context for their own purposes by producing paintings and drawings for complex reasons, while whites collected and consumed these artworks for their own reasons.

Brody develops a more-nuanced reading of this material in his 1997 study, *Pueblo Indian Painting: Tradition and Modernism in New Mexico, 1900–1930*, in which he describes Pueblo painters' early, tentative encounters with modern society at the beginning of the twentieth century and on through to the new art's institutionalization in the 1930s. As Brody describes them, the first generation of Pueblo easel painters inhabited the new intercultural spaces of modernity but remained integrated in their communities as full participants in traditional Pueblo life. Pueblo drawings and paintings were, to be sure, produced with materials that had arrived in the Southwest via a developing national network of rail and communication lines. But while making art for non-Native patrons bridged borders it did not erase them, nor did the artist or patron aspire to do so. At first, neither Indian artists nor their white patrons wanted to fundamentally transform their own communities or institutions. What both parties believed to be the essential differences between Pueblo and Euro-American identities remained intact. White patrons (at first, government ethnologists) sought out Pueblo artists as anthropological informants; Pueblo artists encountered their new patrons and negotiated a relationship that allowed them to gain what rewards there were to be had from the transaction, while maintaining their traditional place within the village. The drawings and paintings produced for their white patrons were distinct from the artworks produced for use within Native communities. Indeed, Brody writes that this first generation of Native artist-informants did not, in fact, produce "art" in the Euro-American sense at all. For the Pueblos, he writes, "art produced in isolation from daily life was philosophically disharmonious, for it reduced the art making to a private, ego-oriented act that was outside the range of traditional values."¹⁶

While the market for Native American paintings and drawings was almost assuredly entirely white, Indian artists did exercise a degree of agency and control in the making of the artworks themselves, and in determining the limits of the

representation. The art historians David Penney and Lisa Roberts have noted that early-twentieth-century Pueblo artists “attempt[ed] to illustrate, in a fashion organized for didactic purposes, what is normally only enacted.” Native American artist-informants may have been motivated to make their drawings out of a desire for cultural preservation. Traditionally, Pueblo ceremonies had never needed to be fixed in a permanent form because through practice they would be preserved for future generations. As white encroachment brought rapid and dramatic changes to Indian country, the drawings became necessary to preserve a culture that was threatened by the forces of progress and modernization.¹⁷ Moreover, Penney and Roberts argue that as the artworks circulated outside of Native American communities in the Southwest and traveled to New York and Europe, they played an important role by demystifying and aestheticizing Native traditional cultures and ceremonies at a time when government policy and official harassment by Bureau of Indian Affairs and local police still sought the destruction of Native cultural practices.¹⁸

ALTERNATIVE MODERNITIES

In this book I argue that twentieth-century Native American artists forged a uniquely Native American modernist art between the late 1930s and late 1950s. I argue that Native American modernist art embodied a consciously constructed response to cross-cultural encounter, clash, and accommodation as well as to the patterns and processes of societal modernization that swept Indian country in the twentieth century. My project is concerned with a uniquely Native American modernist consciousness that is embodied in hybrid artworks; with what it means to be a modern, to experience modernity, and to deliberately make oneself an agent and subject of modernity and not just modernity’s passive object.

Non-Native notions of the artwork and artist—embraced by Native American artists in the twentieth century—are the key to understanding Native expressions in the twentieth century, as art and artists took on new roles vis-à-vis Native communities, culture, and identity. As Brody notes, new notions of the artwork and artist entered the Pueblo world via early encounters with white patrons. This had the effect of transforming social relations, often severing the shared sense of purpose and close bonds between Native artists and their communities. As Brody writes, “Watercolor paintings did occasionally become agents of social disharmony when they depicted aspects of Pueblo life that many Pueblo people preferred not to share with outsiders.” Moreover, after 1917 or 1918 Pueblo artists began to engage in “ego-oriented” practices, such as signing artworks and entering competitive exhibitions.¹⁹ Janet Berlo

and Ruth Phillips similarly describe Native American modernism not only in terms of Western styles (although this is a key feature of much Native modernism), but also in terms of Western notions of the art object as such. The classic avant-gardist notion that modernist art stands in opposition to mainstream—or bourgeois—culture is an alien idea in most Native societies, which are more tightly integrated than the fragmented cultures of the industrial West. A crucial component of modernism is the notion of the art object as self-defining and independent of ceremonial or cultural contexts. Unlike the ethnographic object, critics have maintained, the modernist artwork requires no special pleading, thicket of verbal explanation, or other cultural baggage. European modernism aspired to the status of a universal language; to the extent that an artwork did require anthropological explanations, it failed. Berlo and Phillips write that Native modernists embraced these values and that they desired to make artworks that would “function as autonomous entities . . . experienced independently of community or ceremonial contexts.”²⁰

The radical nature of this new understanding of the art object for Native modernists cannot be overemphasized. It signaled both a new understanding of identity and a changed relationship to community (and indeed the larger world) that Native Americans faced in the twentieth century. This revolutionary transformation—from a practice of art making that was totally integrated in the life of the local community to a new understanding of the artwork as a portable object and carrier of culture and identity that would pass from the local to the wider world—is the hallmark of Native modernism that is examined in this book.

It should be made clear that in this volume I seek to offer an alternative to the standard narratives of European and American modernism, which for the most part have been defined around a narrowly conceived narrative of formalist development as formulated by the New York art critic Clement Greenberg and his academic followers. This narrative institutionalized a version of modernism that focused on individual expression and style, social alienation, and the notion that avant-garde artists are positioned ambivalently vis-à-vis modern, bourgeois culture, to which they are linked “by an umbilical cord of gold.”²¹ Greenberg’s vision cast the history of modernism in terms of the progressive refinement of abstraction and the separation of the autonomous aesthetic object from the social and political world and against the ascendant mass culture of the twentieth century. The limitations of Greenberg’s formalism—a willing blindness to the rise of late-capitalist consumer culture and the machinations of state power—have been addressed by a generation of revisionist readings of American modernism that emphasize the unremarked correspondences and important connections between the rise of the American avant-garde after the

Second World War and the rise of the United States as a global superpower during the same period.²²

But even those histories of modernism written as correctives to the limitations of academic formalism are restrained by a parochial focus on the metropolitan centers of the industrial West, in particular the New York art world. This is because modernity has been consistently defined as an urban phenomenon. The art historian Terry Smith, along with most historians of modernism, assumes that the city is the primary site of modernity. In *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America*, his well-received reading of the connections between modernist culture and capitalist industry in the twentieth century, Smith defines the modern vis-à-vis the “second industrial revolution” in the United States of the 1920s and 1930s. In so doing he focuses on the predominant aesthetic of the machine and streamlining and on a fundamental iconography of modernity: that is, “industry and workers, cities and crowds, products and consumers.”²³ While Smith acknowledges that the experience of modernity is global, he assumes that the experience of modernity is one of movement toward a convergent future that “recruited more and more people and places to its project of making over the world into the ‘only new,’” in keeping with a pervasive ideology of progress, valuing the “wholly, unimaginably new, a universal state both in and beyond time and place.”²⁴

Smith is not alone in assuming that the dynamics of the modern are universal, nor is he entirely incorrect in this assumption. However, his urban-industrial focus leaves unexamined the critical problems of identity—nationalism, race, and citizenship—in a period in which identity was very much at issue, and it further leaves unexamined the experience of those at modernity’s margins. Ultimately, even the most radical revisionist readings of modernity and modernism are limited by the same parochial focus that bedevils Greenberg’s formalism: that is, they reproduce the understanding of the urban West’s others as “victims of modernity” rather than its coauthors.²⁵

Twentieth-century Native American artists have been poorly understood by historians of both Native American art history and modernist art history alike, primarily because of the false binary of tradition and modernity that continues to inform the understanding of Native American cultural expression. While it is axiomatic that Native communities and cultural practices are always already endangered by the patterns and processes of societal modernization, my reading of Native modernism is illuminated by the broad definition of modernism offered by Marshall Berman in his *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Berman defines as modernist the cultural products of “any attempt by modern men

and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves home in it.”²⁶

Following Berman, I understand the artists studied in this book as individuals engaged in a struggle to understand, express, and ultimately transform their relationship to culture and community in a changed world. Fundamental to my reading of Native American modernism is the complexity and contradiction of American identity and experience in the twentieth century. Indeed, the tensions of modernity are nowhere more apparent than in the history of Native Americans.²⁷ Native Americans’ experience of modernization (aka Americanization) comprises the shocks of genocide, colonization, and displacement, followed by the shifting tides of federal and local policy, assimilation, and not least, commodification as icons of authenticity and Primitive vitality. Collectively, these experiences have defined Native Americans as objects of modernity, but the artistic strategies that I describe in this book offer a picture of Native American artists becoming (or striving to become) subjects of modernity. I understand Native American modernist art not as a degraded form of lost “authentic traditions” or as merely a new mode of cultural production or a weak echo of modern forms invented elsewhere and imposed from above. Rather, I read Native American modernism as an expression of a transformed consciousness, which constitutes a particular (not universal) modernity that is unique to Native American artists in the twentieth century. In this sense Native American modernism is, in important ways, an alternative modernism. Native American modernism will at times share some characteristics of Euro-American modernism, including specific visual idioms such as abstraction or a value placed on formal innovation and individualism. However, it will be seen as differently inflected from the beginning, starting from difference and ending in a different place; maintaining connections to traditional ideas about place and identity while also resolutely modern because it represents an engaged response to a changed world.²⁸

It is my hope that this volume enriches an understanding not only of Native American art in the twentieth century but also of American modernist culture generally. In fact, this study of Native American alternative modernism began many years ago as an investigation of Primitivism in the New York School of post–World War II modernist painters, including Barnett Newman (whom I address in chapter 3). Jackson Rushing has catalogued the influence of Native American art for the burgeoning New York avant-garde in the first half of the twentieth century, and as Stephen Polcari and Michael Leja have demonstrated, any number of conceptions of the “Primitive” were central to postwar American modernism.²⁹ However, in thinking about this work I began to suspect that to focus solely on Primitivism was, to paraphrase critic

Thomas McEvilley, to ask only half the question.³⁰ As McEvilley noted, modernist Primitivism “illustrates, without consciously intending to, the parochial limitations of our world view and the almost autistic reflexivity of Western civilization’s modes of relating to the culturally Other.”³¹ Moreover, as Ann Gibson’s work on artists of color and on women in the New York School demonstrated, a number of women and artists of color were also active in the postwar American art scene yet have remained invisible in most histories of the period.³²

In framing this project, then, I have been influenced by recent writers on the cultures of the African diaspora, who have identified African art as a key influence in the formation of modernist culture. As Sieglinde Lemke has suggested in *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*, the recognition of African art by European artists was an “intercultural encounter,” which “caused European artists to experiment, transform, and regenerate their own styles.”³³ In framing the origins of modernism in terms of Primitivist cultural dialectic, Lemke seeks to explain the multicultural heritage of modernism, which she argues is elided by accounts that deny or discount the importance of such points of contact with non-Western art in the history of modernism. Building on Lemke’s thesis, I argue that Native American cultures were formative for American modernists at a moment when earlier paradigms were in crisis. The reformer and future Indian commissioner John Collier described the Native American pueblos of New Mexico as a “Red Atlantis,” which provided a model of community living that integrated individual needs with the group identity, tradition, and continuity.³⁴ Primitivism based on Native American forms was crucial to the development of an American avant-garde. But as Lemke argues for the African diaspora artists of the black Atlantic, the native-modern interchange was mutually transformative. I argue that Primitivist artistic identification with Native American cultures initiated a cultural dialectic between the non-Native artists and critics of the American avant-garde and the Native American artists, who were never merely passive witnesses in this cultural exchange. In return, modernism bequeathed to Native artists an ambivalent legacy, the implications and ramifications of which are still being addressed by contemporary Native American artists.

MODERN LIVES

This book is intended to present an argument rather than to provide a survey. The list of artists I describe is not exhaustive; instead I have chosen artists for their interest and for their explanatory power as examples in what I am describing as

a Native American engagement with modernity. Readers familiar with twentieth-century Native American art will notice the absence of extended discussions of familiar figures such as Acee Blue Eagle, Jimalee Burton, T. C. Cannon, “Princess” Wa Wa Chaw, Joe Herrera, Carl Gorman, Allan Houser, Horace Poolaw, Fritz Scholder, Leon Polk Smith, Pablita Velarde, and others. Indeed, any of these artists would have provided rich material for case studies and many have been treated elsewhere. Some readers may be surprised by some unusual choices that I have made. While some artists in this volume are well known (Patrick DesJarlait, Oscar Howe, George Morrison, and Dick West), others are mostly forgotten figures (Jimmy Byrnes) or individuals who have been treated as anthropological subjects rather than artists (José Lente). Other figures are not Native Americans (Yeffe Kimball and Barnett Newman), but built their careers around the idea that Native American culture was relevant to modern lives. The artists I examine hail from diverse geographical and tribal backgrounds—living and working not only in parts of New Mexico and Oklahoma, Minnesota and South Dakota, but also in California in the era of World War II and in the postwar avant-garde enclaves of New York City and Provincetown, Massachusetts.

This book highlights a period from the late 1930s to the early 1960s that has not received due attention. A number of notable books have studied the formative years of Native American painting from the late nineteenth century through the early 1930s, when “Traditional Indian Painting” was institutionalized in Dorothy Dunn’s famous studio at the Santa Fe Indian School and in Oscar Jacobson’s Native American art program at the University of Oklahoma. But most studies follow from Berlo and Phillips’s assertion that “contemporary art employing Western fine art media did not begin until the early 1960s,” when the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) was founded in Santa Fe in 1962 and thereafter recruited an influential Native American faculty including Scholder, Houser, Charles Loloma, and Lloyd Kiva New. Today, Native American and Canadian First Nations artists, including Carl Beam, Rebecca Belmore, Jimmie Durham, Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, Bob Haozous, Jaune Quick-to-See-Smith, Edward Poitras, and Kay Walkingstick, are recognized as major contemporary artists. Although there is no contradiction between their art world status and their connection to Native American communities when their work is exhibited internationally, from the late 1930s through the late 1950s Native American artists made bold departures from the institutionalized “traditional” style of Indian painting. During and after World War II, Native American artists forged the innovations and the modernist consciousness that would serve as the groundwork for the emergence of a contemporary Native American art on a world stage.

In chapter 1 of this volume I recount the changing perceptions of Native Ameri-

cans and the shifts in U.S. Indian policy from the beginning of the twentieth century through the early 1960s, as Native Americans were increasingly integrated into mainstream American society. These shifting popular and legalistic notions of Indian culture and identity have constituted the terrain against which twentieth-century Native American artists developed their innovative artwork. Here, I analyze these transformations in terms of their impact on notions of Indian culture, identity, and sovereignty in this crucial period. Native American art was initially appreciated in the context of salvage anthropology and Primitivism in the first half of the twentieth century, which understood Native American culture as imperiled in the modern world. The early white promoters of Native American art were key among the proponents of Progressive-era Indian policy reform, and the emergence of an appreciation of, and market for, Native American art in the early years of the twentieth century should be understood as one aspect of a larger antimodern and cosmopolitan project that sought the preservation of Indian cultures in a diverse and pluralistic America. The aesthetic validation of Native American art played a role in reversing federal Indian policy under Indian commissioner John Collier, whose Indian New Deal reversed the official policies of detribalization and assimilation and insisted that Native American art should be “prized, nourished, and honored” and that the spiritual values of the “Red Atlantis” might provide an anodyne for the crises of modernity. During the Second World War, however, Collier’s Indian policy was challenged, and in the postwar period it was ultimately undermined by the beginning of large-scale off-reservation migration and urbanization, by new federal government policies for the abrogation of Native Americans’ tribal status and treaty rights, and by the relocation of Native Americans to cities in the Midwest and West. Whereas African Americans sought the legal protection of “individual rights,” the attempts to bring Native Americans under the big tent of civil rights were incompatible with notions of tribal sovereignty and the traditional status of the tribes as nations (rather than individuals) in relation to the federal and state governments. These ill-founded policies to remanufacture Indians in the mold of consensus liberalism and competitive individualism provided the impetus for contemporary Native American struggles for rights and sovereignty in the postwar period as well as the increasingly militant actions of the American Indian Movement, which asserted the political agency of contemporary Native Americans.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the issues that have informed the work of Native American artists and white artists influenced by Native American art in the first half of the twentieth century. With this discussion as a backdrop I offer a series of case studies of both individual and paired artists. In chapter 2, I examine the role of a

paradigmatically modern figure, the culture broker, whose work as an intermediary between his own Native American community and white audiences raises the modern issues of secrecy and cultural property, as well as the new notion of the Indian artist as an individual whose interests might become severed from those of the tribe. This chapter focuses on José Lente, an Isleta Pueblo Indian from New Mexico, who formed a working relationship with Elsie Clews Parsons, a pioneering feminist and cultural anthropologist working in the Pueblo communities of the Southwest in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Lente's "secret drawings" for Parsons depicted aspects of Isleta ritual and esoteric knowledge that were not intended to be viewed outside of a closed circle of Indian initiates. Thus, while the modernism of Lente's drawings might not be immediately apparent, his position as a figure willing to violate strict Pueblo rules of secrecy identify him as an ambivalent modern individual who sought to find a position of power amid a changing Pueblo world. Lente's story is compared to that of Jimmy Byrnes, a mixed-ethnicity urban Indian living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, who forged a working relationship with anthropologist and collector Byron Harvey (heir of the famous Fred Harvey Company, which held the concession franchise with the Santa Fe Railroad). Byrnes was typical of a generation of Native Americans living in the era of migration and assimilation after World War II who felt the need to reconstruct an identity and sense of Indianness out of modern urban experience. Byrnes's relationship with Harvey allowed the young Indian artist access to a realm of Native American knowledge into which he had not been directly socialized, and which was accessible to him only via the ethnographic record. As Byrnes became Harvey's informant and guide to the closed world of Indian ceremonies, Harvey became Byrnes's friend, patron, and partner in reconstructing the world of the Acoma-Laguna Katsina cult. The picture that emerged was collaborative—and thus by definition hybrid and impure—but for Byrnes it was crucial to a process of self-discovery (or rather, self-invention) and healing, and thus was authentic in the most meaningful sense of that word.

In chapter 3 I return to the question of Primitivism in the writings of the Jewish American painter and critic Barnett Newman. In his attempt to break from European tradition and found a new modernist art, Newman argued for the relevance of Native American traditions (specifically Northwest Coast and Pre-Columbian Mexican) to resolve modern crises of national and cultural identity. During the Second World War, Newman imagined that his cohort of New York School painters were the spiritual heirs to an "inter-American" (i.e., transnational) heritage that transcended the violence of modern nationalism and distinguished their work from a corrupt European tradition. Contemporary Native American artists and writers have pointed to

Newman as an early critic of Eurocentrism. However, I argue that for Newman the value of Native American art was found only in the distant past; he failed to see the work of twentieth-century Native American artists as relevant, and he could not imagine a modern Native American expression.

Chapter 4 examines the importance of place for Native American modernist artists, in particular the Ojibwe painters Patrick DesJarlait and George Morrison. In this chapter I look at ways in which Native artists appropriated the universal modes of modernism to embody distinctly Native American issues and experience. DesJarlait and Morrison developed individual modernist styles to embody deep connections to geography and regional identity, and in so doing they were among the first Native American modernists to break with the “traditional” styles of the 1930s. During and after the war, non-Native modernists broke from the narrative styles of Regionalism and American scene painting. However, I argue that the postwar break with representation and narrative in the American avant-garde cut differently for Native Americans who maintained relationships to place and identity even as they were abandoned by their white counterparts in the rapidly globalizing postwar culture of the mainstream.

In chapter 5, I consider patterns of Native American self-fashioning in the 1940s and 1950s in the career of painter Yeffe Kimball, who moved between the Euro-American modernist art world of New York and the emerging Native American art markets of Oklahoma and New Mexico, claiming to be an Osage from Oklahoma. Kimball’s identity, however, was a fabrication. If in fact Kimball had been of Native American ancestry, then her career would be significant; in studying in France and Italy under Fernand Léger, as well as at the Art Students League of New York, she would have been among the earliest of the Native American artists to cross over into the modernist “mainstream.” Her Indian act thus makes a striking case study in cultural appropriation, and it raises issues of cultural sovereignty and the rights to cultural property in the transnational milieu of the postwar era, as notions of Indian culture and identity underwent radical transformations. Indeed, Kimball’s story anticipates the recent battles for control of Native American identity and cultural property that have flared up around Native American artists beginning with their first contact with Euro-American patrons and collectors and then crystallizing around the Indian Arts and Crafts Act and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in the 1990s.

Chapter 6 examines issues of authenticity raised by individualism and innovation in Native American modernism. In this chapter I return to the example of Oscar Howe, whose modernist abstractions were criticized as “not Indian.” Howe’s ex-

ample is not merely a matter of a conflict over the definition of “authenticity,” but also points to the tensions during the era of Termination (legislation to end the traditional treaty-trust relationship) around notions of individualism and collectivism in Indian culture and politics. Howe’s understanding of his own modernist art is compared to that of Southern Cheyenne painter Dick West, who also experimented with abstraction and who deliberately mimicked Western styles and techniques. By the late 1950s, it was becoming clear that “traditionalism” was a stifling collar for younger, individualistic, and innovative Indian artists who aspired to an artistic identity such as that cultivated by the non-Native modernist mainstream. The work of these two artists is studied in relation to Termination-era debates among white lawmakers as well as in popular culture, which imagined Indians as individuals in relation to tribal cultures and the national mainstream and also sought to detribalize Indians and to liquidate the federal government’s traditional trust obligations and place individual Indians under state jurisdiction.

Finally, in a brief conclusion I recount a series of Rockefeller Foundation-funded seminars and workshops beginning in 1959, as well as the founding of the Institute of American Indian Arts in 1962 and the resulting Native American fine art movement, in which a Native American modernism — which claimed both Indianness and modernist consciousness — was most clearly articulated.

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