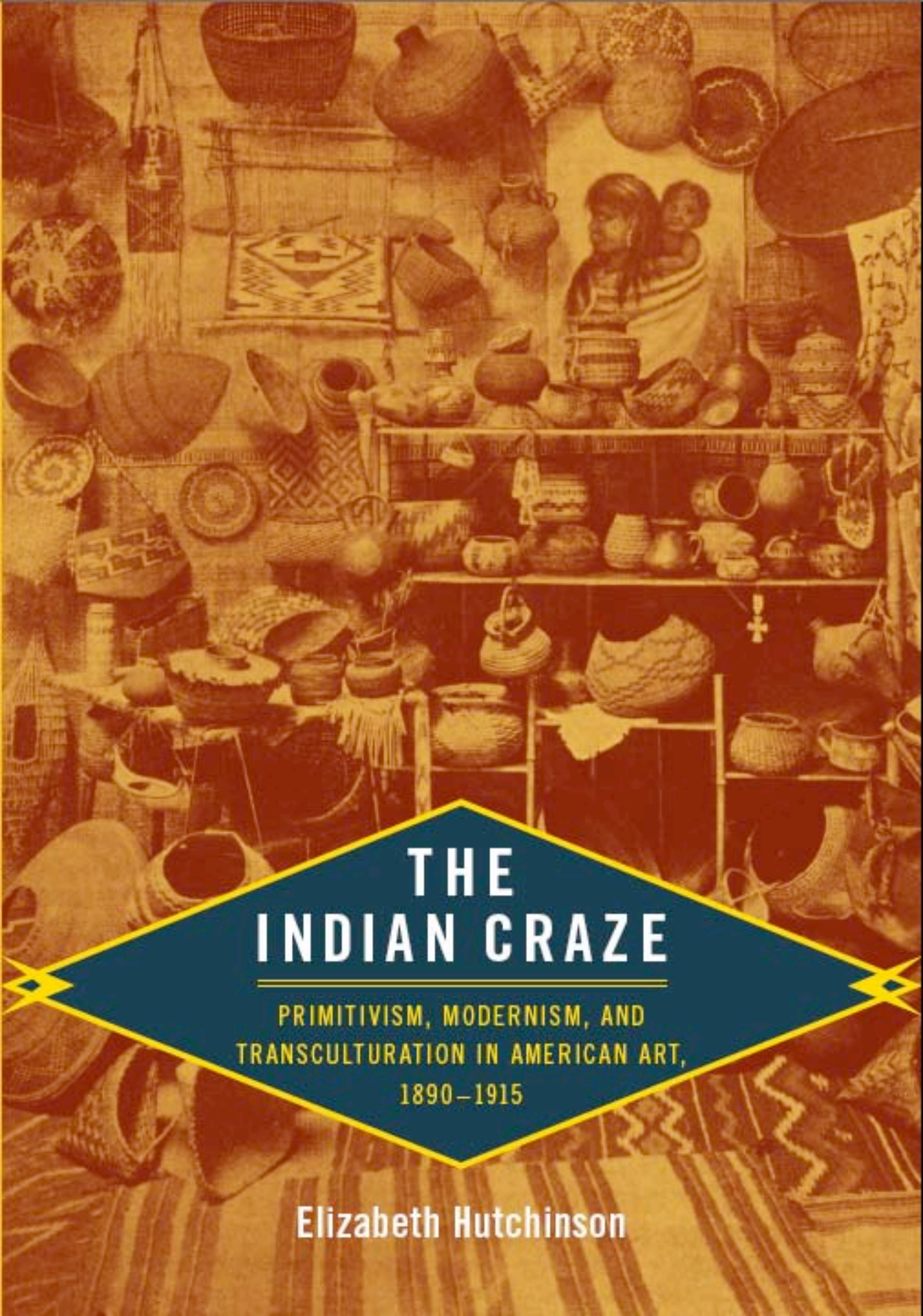

THE INDIAN CRAZE

PRIMITIVISM, MODERNISM, AND TRANSCULTURATION IN AMERICAN ART, 1890–1915

Elizabeth Hutchinson

The
Indian
Craze

◆ ◆ ◆ OBJECTS/HISTORIES

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The Indian Craze

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PRIMITIVISM, MODERNISM, AND TRANSCULTURATION IN AMERICAN ART, 1890–1915

Elizabeth Hutchinson

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· · · *For Jane Ames Hutchinson (1938–1990)* · · ·

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I am not the new Indian,
I am the old Indian adjusted to new conditions.
Laura Cornelius

Introduction

On Columbus Day in 1911, a Native American artist named Angel DeCora stepped up to a podium to tell an audience of other progressive, educated Indian people about the importance of art to their struggle for political and cultural recognition. As she told her listeners, "[The Indian's] art like himself is indigenous to the soil of his country, where, with the survival of his latent abilities, he bravely offers the best productions of his mind and hand which shall be a permanent record of the race." In her works and her writings, DeCora saw Native art made in both "traditional" and "nontraditional" genres as a means for Indian people to negotiate their relationship to their changing historical circumstances. Borrowing from the socially oriented aesthetics that dominated the American art world of the time, she also described art as a potentially rich site for transcultural exchange and national cultural development. As she said, "The Indian in his native dress is a thing of the past, but his art that is inborn shall endure. He may shed his outer skin, but his markings lie below that and should show up only the brighter."[1]

Americans have tended to see Native American culture as separate from mainstream culture, drawing its legitimacy from a commitment to timeless traditions that predate interaction with European Americans. This attitude

not only contradicts the rich histories of intercultural exchange that preceded European colonialism in many parts of the Americas; it also has resulted in a canon that rejects large bodies of art that were made for circulation outside Indian communities. DeCora grew up on the Winnebago reservation in Nebraska, and was later given a rigorous grounding in Euro-American culture at Smith College and other East Coast schools. Early in her career she lived a bohemian life in a New York City garret, where she played music and ate chop suey with other struggling artists. DeCora's attempts to retain a connection to traditional values while embracing the opportunities presented by modern society were not isolated. They echo those of countless Indian people who have responded to changing conditions through the exchange of goods and ideas with outsiders.

Despite her immersion in mainstream culture, however, DeCora's professional opportunities were limited by her ethnic identity. Indians and non-Indians alike expected the artist to use her talents to help her people, and she rarely turned down an opportunity to do so. DeCora's burgeoning career coincided with a time of tremendous stress in Native communities as Indians were subjected to unprecedented political and popular pressure to assimilate into mainstream American society. Reservations were blighted by poverty and corruption, and both supporters and critics of indigenous culture felt that traditional lifeways were destined to be lost. Like other educated Indian people of her generation, DeCora worked to ameliorate the situation of other, less-privileged Natives. Over the course of her career, she focused on illustrations of Native life in her own art work, collaborated with other Native artists on exhibition pieces, and nurtured a generation of students by designing and teaching in the Native Indian art program at the United States Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. DeCora brought to this work a desire to demonstrate the modernity of Indian people and their potential to contribute to American culture. She shared this ambition with many educated Indian people of her generation.

This book returns to that period to help understand DeCora's goals, particularly the idea that art could be a means by which both Indians and non-Indians could contribute to American modernity. DeCora's values built on the aesthetic ideas of the day, which promoted art as a solution to many of society's ills. Her belief that mainstream culture would take an interest in

the work of Native artists was the result of what I am calling "the Indian craze." The term comes from articles on the widespread passion for collecting Native American art, often in dense, dazzling domestic displays called "Indian corners." This collecting trend stemmed from the increased availability of Native American art at the time. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Native American art could be purchased from department stores, "Indian stores," and other commercial venues from New York to Chicago, from Boston to Los Angeles, that stocked Indian baskets, blankets, and bowls by prominent collectors and members of the general public. This was possible because of a dramatic increase in the production of art for sale, both on reservations and, surprisingly, in venues dedicated to the eradication of Native culture such as government boarding schools.

In 1904, *American Homes* ran a piece describing "the craze for using Indian ornaments."[2] The article called the phenomenon a "fad" and a "fancy," suggesting a taste for Native American home decorations was a passing fashion. This book proposes that, to the contrary, the Indian craze was a significant artistic phenomenon with lasting effects on both American art history and U.S. Indian policy. My argument is based in part on taking the private collecting of Native American art seriously. In doing this, I link collecting to other activities, including the inclusion of handmade Native American artifacts in exhibitions sponsored by museums, arts and crafts societies, and international expositions and the use of indigenous handicrafts as models for artists and craftspeople exploring new, formalist, aesthetic practices.

The standard history of the mainstream interest in Native American material culture as "art" focuses on the role of New York painters in the Southwest in the 1920s and 1930s. I show that this cross-cultural conversation occurred earlier and in fact spread across the nation, from west to east and from reservation to metropolis. My discovery that Native art was displayed and collected in urban contexts in the earliest years of the twentieth century allows me to show that indigenous handicrafts played a significant role in American explorations of modernity in art, legitimizing an interest in formal abstraction and contributing to emerging notions of artistic creativity. As I show, artists, teachers, and critics associated with the development of American modernism, including Arthur Wesley Dow, Charles Binns, and Gertrude Käsebier, were inspired by Native art, included Indian

handicrafts in their own exhibitions, and used them as models in courses in fine art and design. In limited ways, Native artists were also able to achieve recognition as modern artists.

As I explain in the following chapters, non-Native artists, critics, and collectors involved in the Indian craze comfortably mixed ideas about aesthetics and politics, private and public, and primitive and modern, confusions that typified the revolutionary social ambitions of the modernist movements then emerging. Supporters of the Indian craze shared their enthusiasm through exhibitions, lectures, books, and hundreds of articles in popular magazines; they praised both the formal qualities and the intellectual sensibilities they saw reflected in Native American art. Discussions of Native American art were used to help accommodate cultural changes in mainstream America, including increased immigration, rapid industrialization, and evolving concepts of subjectivity. Promoters of Native American art were supporters of what Jackson Lears has described as "antimodernism"—a cultural retreat from "overcivilized" urban industrial American and a turn to seemingly preindustrial cultures perceived as more physical, authentic, and direct.[3] Among other things, antimodernists responded to the disjunctures of modernity by arguing for an integration of art and life, which allowed for a new understanding of the value of well-crafted, useful handicrafts, including those from indigenous traditions. At the same time, the institutions promoting Native American art are those we consider to be extremely modern: department stores, settlement houses, world's fairs, and avant-garde artists' organizations. This forces a reexamination of the notion of primitivism, which is frequently understood as situating indigenous cultures *outside of* and *in opposition to* modern culture.[4] During the Indian craze, however, audiences assessed Native handicrafts alongside modern commodities and modernist works of art, enhancing the modernity of these supposedly primitive objects.

The Native presence in department stores, world's fairs, and settlement houses was not limited to mute objects. Native people of this generation moved through such spaces in the conduct of trade and the pursuit of employment, in the course of receiving a government-mandated education and in following their own desires to engage the modern world. The Indian craze influenced the curriculum of the Indian schools, which became important sites for the production and distribution of handicrafts. Reserva-

tion officials and social reformers seeking to build economic, religious, and cultural ties between Indian people and mainstream Americans also developed projects designed to capitalize on the popularity of Native American art. Significantly, these activities offered Native actors in each of these spheres an education in mainstream aesthetics. While few of these efforts were well documented by indigenous participants, I recover something of their experiences by analyzing photographs and written documents and by looking closely at the works themselves. I pay particular attention to the words of Native intellectuals of the time who used their education to seek a platform from which to comment on and ameliorate indigenous conditions. Like DeCora, several chose to fight these battles in the realm of culture, pointing to the accomplishments of Indian people in the arts as a sign of their value to mainstream America.

Flawed though they were, the social ambitions of early modernism appealed to Native intellectuals.[5] Modernist principles were attractive to members of many marginalized groups within the United States and beyond, who saw its principles as compatible with their goals of sexual equality, racial tolerance, and an end to colonial rule.[6] Aspects of the Native experience are comparable to those of other Americans, including blacks and urban immigrants, who faced, and sometimes spearheaded, similar attempts to use culture to define their place in society. The Indian craze was a transcultural phenomenon that brought Indians and non-Indians together. The concept of transculturation was developed by the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz early in his 1940 book *Cuban Counterpoint* to examine the cultural mixing—or hybridity—that characterized the indigenous and Afro-Cuban experience of colonialism.[7] As Ortiz explains, this involves more than the simple replacement of traditional beliefs with European ones; instead it led to the creation of new cultural forms that reflect marginalized peoples' diverse relationships to mainstream culture. Ortiz's emphasis on the variety and complexity of transcultural phenomena makes his theory particularly valuable for the investigation of Native American art, as it allows for individuality in artists' interactions with the values and institutions of tribal and mainstream cultures.[8] Transculturation also allows for the transformation of mainstream ideas through cultural contact, and this book traces the complexity of both sides of the artistic exchanges that made up the Indian craze.

Just as early twentieth-century viewers saw Indian and non-Indian objects side by side, in this book I look at Indian and non-Indian art worlds together. In so doing, I challenge the artificial division between mainstream and Native American art history. Today Native American art is conventionally exhibited in its own section of a museum, if not in a museum dedicated exclusively to indigenous materials. Contemporary artists exhibit in galleries and annual juried exhibitions that admit only enrolled tribal members. Scholars attend special conferences and teach distinctive courses that segregate Native art history from that of the United States and the rest of the world. The use of a special category for Native American art history can have its uses, but it must be understood as the product of a colonial culture that subordinated marginalized cultures by defining them as incompatible with modernity.[9] The economic value and aesthetic acceptance of Native American handicrafts for mainstream audiences encouraged policy makers to look upon art as an aspect of so-called traditional culture that might be perpetuated despite the official policy of assimilation. Telling this story not only illuminates the contradictions of federal Indian policy; it also puts Indian people back into history, situating their actions alongside those of others who experienced marginalization at the time.

It is not enough to identify the negative effects of racialist beliefs; we must also come up with new paradigms of analysis that permit new kind of questions about ethnicity and culture.[10] This book moves beyond identifying the racism of turn-of-the-century culture to ask how discussions about ethnicity and art illuminate a key debate within mainstream art history, that of the relationship between art and craft. The Indian craze was used by artists and critics interested in promoting the decorative arts as a means of bridging the gap between art and life. While the dominant history of modernism, advanced by Clement Greenberg and his followers in the mid-twentieth century, emphasized modernist art's self-referentiality and privileged painting and sculpture over mediums associated with utility and commerce, contemporary scholars have revealed the influence of decorative objects on the development and dissemination of modernist ideas.[11] Native American art was a component of the aesthetic worlds in which this history unfolded.

While several scholars have noted the arts and crafts movement's interest in select tribal arts, such as Navajo weaving or Washoe baskets, this book

is the first project to comprehensively relate the Indian craze to the emergence of modernist aesthetic ideas. I believe that the absence of any previous study of this interaction is due in part to the fact that Native American art history has unwittingly reinforced the distinction between art and craft advanced by mid-twentieth-century theorists. For much of the twentieth century Native American art has been separated into studies of mediums associated with Western academic traditions (often referred to as "modern" Native American art) and handicrafts (or "traditional" arts). Books exploring the relationship between Native American art and mainstream aesthetic trends have primarily addressed Indian painting.[12] They have also focused on art from the interwar years or later. Looking at an earlier period, when the hierarchy between art and craft in the mainstream art world was less stable, allows us to recognize the modernity of a wider variety of Native objects, including those made for pure aesthetic contemplation, those made for use, and those made for circulation outside indigenous communities.

To achieve these goals, the present volume maps the major sites of the interaction of Native American art and mainstream American aesthetic debates. Chapter 1, "Unpacking the Indian Corner," traces the increasing visibility of Native American art in the early twentieth century in Indian corners, the dense and vibrant installations of collections that typically appeared in dens, porches, or living rooms of the period. Using the collection of the New Yorker Joseph "Udo" Keppler as a centerpiece, I analyze the contents and display techniques used in such spaces in relationship to what Tony Bennett has identified as the "exhibitionary complex"—a visual aesthetic affecting commercial, artistic, and private spaces that reflects the increasing materialist orientation of commodity culture. Shifting to an analysis of the sale of Native art at Wanamaker's department store, I demonstrate the degree to which the commercialization of Native American art was accomplished by the use of aesthetic language, paving the way for indigenous material culture to be seen as art. Revealing that Wanamaker's employees included Native Americans, I explore the impact of the Indian corner on Native artists, paying particular attention to contemporary changes for Navajo weavers.

The next chapter, titled "The White Man's Indian Art: Teaching Aesthetics at the Indian Schools," analyzes how the United States government appropriated the mainstream aestheticization of Native art to serve its own

goals through the Native Indian arts program. Introduced in 1901 by Estelle Reel, the superintendent of Indian schools, the program sought to add work in traditional handicrafts to the other vocational curricula at both reservation-based and off-reservation schools. This curriculum departed from the Indian schools' earlier emphasis on "kill[ing] the Indian . . . [to] save the man," but it was no less assimilationist.[13] Through discussions of course materials, school exhibitions, and individual works of art, I show how the Indian craze contributed to the "modernization" of Native art, turning native students into workers producing for a mainstream market. My argument links the role of art in Indian education with its use by urban social reformers at settlement houses and manual training schools, strengthening the connection between my narrative and more familiar episodes in American cultural history. Analysis of photographs and student writing allows some insight into the student experience, which I present as very diverse. Using the notion of "survivance," as defined by the Anishinaabe literary theorist Gerald Vizenor, I explore how individual nations, particularly the Wisconsin Oneida, have come to see the art forms taught at the schools as part of their own constantly evolving tribal traditions.

My third chapter, "Playing Indian: Native American Art and Modern Aesthetics," traces the place of indigenous handicrafts in the American art world. Analyzing articles in art journals such as *Brush and Pencil* and *International Studio*, exhibitions at arts and crafts societies and the National Arts Club, and art schools from Boston to New York, I demonstrate how Native American art was seen as a model that could teach modern artists lessons about form and technique. The heart of this chapter is an exploration of the pedagogy of Arthur Wesley Dow, an early advocate of "pure design" who is remembered as the teacher of several members of the Stieglitz circle, including Georgia O'Keeffe and Max Weber. Alongside these familiar figures I look at some of the first Native artists to achieve name recognition, particularly the Pomo basket makers William and Mary Benson, and show how racism undermined their ability to be recognized as modern artists.

The book ends with close studies of two artists who applied a modern notion of "Native" aesthetics to their work: one Anglo and one Native. "The Indians in Käsebier's Studio," my fourth chapter, focuses on Gertrude Käsebier, a European American student of Dow. She became a leading member of Alfred Stieglitz's Photo-Secession, who embraced the principles of an

emerging American modernism. The chapter examines a series of portraits of Native American performers from *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* show who posed for the photographer between 1898 and 1901. Several of these sitters are shown in the act of drawing, and I relate the formal qualities of their work to the darkroom manipulations of pictorialist photographers. The chapter argues that Käsebier's models provided an ideal of primitive creativity that Käsebier used to resolve the contradictions of being a modern artist and a modern woman at the same time.

The final chapter, "Angel DeCora's Cultural Politics," explores the work of Angel DeCora, a Winnebago painter and teacher who was the most prominent Native artist of her generation and a vocal supporter of Indian civil rights. I trace DeCora's unusually rich artistic education, which began when she was still a child on the reservation and later included courses with the Anglo-American painters Dwight Tryon, Frank Benson, Edmund Tarbell, and Howard Pyle. DeCora worked as an illustrator for several years, but her career took a turn in 1905, when she was hired to establish a Native Indian art program at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. While Reel's Native Indian art program was primarily vocational, DeCora's had ambitious aesthetic and political goals. The chapter traces the influence of her diverse experiences in her art work and her teaching. It ends with an analysis of a series of lectures given toward the end of her life, in which DeCora argued that Indian artists were natural modernists positioned to contribute actively to the progress of mainstream American art.

World War I brought an increasing European focus to the mainstream art world while focusing Native intellectuals' energies toward other cultural battles, and with these changes, the Indian craze came to an end. I conclude the book with a discussion that relates the ideas and accomplishments of this period to the resurgence of interest in Native American art in the interwar years and examines the legacy of this period's mixture of aesthetics and cultural politics in our own time.

I hope this book begins a series of dialogues—between interconnected artistic communities, between the too frequently divided fields of Native American and "American" art history, between "art" and "craft," and between scholarly disciplines—that can contribute to a decolonization of American art history. This concept of give and take offers a useful step out of some of the problems that confront scholars of marginalized traditions.

While much of the feminist and postcolonial scholarship that has come out in recent years focuses on the relationship between isolated disempowered groups and a dominant center, it is also vital to engage in studies that investigate the complex relationships *among* diverse communities and between these groups and the aesthetic challenges of the modern world, revealing a more nuanced understanding of modern visual culture as a field in which multiple participants have a stake as makers, critics, and consumers.

CHAPTER ONE

An Indian Corner in your home adds to the artistic effect.

Advertisement for the Hyde Exploring Expedition, 1902

Unpacking the Indian Corner

In 1903, the magazine *The Papoose* published seven photographs of the "Indian corner" installed by the cartoonist and publisher Joseph "Udo" Keppler in his Manhattan home (figure 1). The photographs reveal three connected spaces: a large "den" that includes a desk and seating area, a small alcove with a day bed, and a connecting hall dominated by a glass case (figure 2). Each space teems with Native American artifacts accented by simple furnishings. Keppler's collection was not unique. The Indian corner was a widespread home decoration fad that was promoted by illustrated magazines, Indian traders, and urban marketers, including department stores. Owners of Indian corners ranged from people of modest means who kept a few items on a shelf to large-scale collectors such as Keppler, many of whom accumulated valuable and important pieces that later became the core of museum collections across the country.

While many photographs of Indian corners were published at the turn of the century, the *Papoose* photographs of Keppler's display offer an unusually rich document of such a space. They show objects drawn from a wide variety of Native American nations. On one wall of the study, the rounded forms of southwestern basket plaques mingle with dangling beaded bags gathered from Plains tribes.

THE PAPOOSE

MARCH, 1903

A UNIQUE CHANDELIER COMPOSED OF MOOSE ANTLERS DESIGNED BY MR. JOSEPH KEPPLER FOR HIS INDIAN ROOM

FIGURE 1 Joseph "Udo" Keppler's study, from *The Papoose*, March 1903, 1.

FIGURE 2 Alcove in Joseph "Udo" Keppler's home, from *The Papoose*, March 1903, 6.

The other wall bears a collection of Iroquois false-face masks. Navajo blankets cover the floor and several pieces of furniture, their contrasting geometric patterns providing a dazzling display. A print portraying a Sioux warrior is wedged into the corner. In other photographs, we can see a hearth surrounded by clubs, arrows, masks, and Hopi trays; a standing case filled with more plains beadwork; and an alcove appointed in a similar fashion to the main room.

Photographs of other Indian corners from contemporary publications reveal Keppler's collection as elaborate but typical (see figure 3). Indian corners routinely included handicrafts of diverse materials and cultural origins. Such diversity is reflected in a 1904 article on this decorating "fad," which described a room thus: "a Winnebago curtain drapes an ample doorway, an Iroquois blanket stains the wall with brilliant color, and one of Navajo weave conceals a couch."[1] As in Keppler's home, collectors clustered objects made of the same materials together, sometimes in a special case or set of

FIGURE 3 "Part of One of the Earliest California Collections," from *The Basket* 2.1 (1904), 20.

shelves. Even if the collector focused on a single kind of object, such as baskets or weavings, the display generally juxtaposed examples of the medium from different tribes and areas resulting in an array of diverse shapes, patterns, and ornaments. A graphic representation of an Indian—a calendar or a photograph or, perhaps, a framed print—usually accompanied the handicrafts.

Such pictures were known as "Indian portraits." They came in a variety of mediums and sizes. They could also conform to different styles. The Sioux man on Keppler's wall resembles the straightforward, almost ethnographic, busts of nationally known Indian painter Elbridge Ayer Burbank (figure 4). In 1898, the Chicago-based magazine *Brush and Pencil* published an article on Burbank that included copies of his portraits that could be cut out and framed.[2] The magazine published other Burbanks in subsequent issues and also offered copies via mail order.[3] Prints weren't the only form of Indian portraiture—photographers such as Frank A. Rinehart vended their wares