

## ***The Empowering of Art and Spirituality***

***By Marilyn Russell, Ph.D.***

*View Dr. Russell's artwork at this URL:  
<http://www.iaia.edu/faculty-staffpages/mrussell/pages/art.html>*

I will preface this article by stating that I am of Native American heritage, an enrolled member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (also known as the Ojibwe) at Leech Lake Indian Reservation. I belong to the Pillager Band of the Chippewa Indians. Leech Lake Indian Reservation is located in the north-central Minnesota counties of Beltrami, Cass, Hubbard, and Itasca. According to the 2000 census, it had a population of 10,205, making it the largest Indian reservation in Minnesota. According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Labor Report of 2001, tribal enrollment numbered 8,294. (1)

The core areas of the Leech Lake Indian Reservation (Gaa-zagaskwaajimekaag in the Ojibwe language) were established according to the treaties of February 22, 1855 and May 1, 1867; and by Executive Orders of October 28, 1873 and May 26, 1874. Tribal lands included 677,099 acres. The original acreage was gradually reduced in size by congressional acts, including the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887. The majority of the reservation is owned by either the county, state, or federal government. In total these agencies own 332,804 acres.(2) Most of the reservation land is now taken up by the Chippewa National Forest and only a very small percentage is owned by tribal members. The headwaters of the Mississippi River at Lake Itasca are located within the reservation boundary but are also part of Itasca State Park.

I can trace my Ojibwe heritage back to 1827 when my Great-great Grandmother, Wah-je-way-quay, was born at Leech Lake. She had a daughter, my Great-Grandmother, Dudg-ge-gaw, who married Wah-kaince from the Red Lake Indian reservation. Dudg-ge-gaw and Wah-kaince had a daughter, Tah-ge-gah, who was born in 1886. She was later given the Anglo name of Catherine. Catherine was my maternal Grandmother. She married a Frenchman, Samuel Ridgley. Together they had a daughter, Waab Anangikwe or Morningstar, my Mother. Therefore, I am one-quarter Ojibwe, one-quarter French, and one-half English as my father was of English descent.

It was during the Great Depression that the Civilian Conservation Corps was formed in 1933 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. My Father was one of the young men sent to northern Minnesota to help build Itasca State Park. The CCC's planted trees, built roads and bridges, and built park buildings. Today, Itasca State Park has 32,000 acres and 100 lakes. The Mississippi River begins there and Itasca State Park is near Bemidji, Minnesota. It was there that my Father met my Mother. They eventually married and I was born in Bemidji, the first of four children. I inherited many characteristics from my parents but above all, I inherited the talent that allows one to create art.

There is an inspiring Ojibwa Prayer from an unknown author. "Oh Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds and whose breath gives life to everyone, Hear me. I come to you as one of your many children; I am weak, I am small, I need your wisdom and your strength. Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunsets. Make my hands respect the things you have made, and make my ears sharp so that I may hear your voice. Make me wise, so that I may understand what you have taught my people and the lessons you have hidden in each leaf and each rock. I ask for wisdom and strength, not to be superior to my sisters and brothers, but to be able to fight my greatest enemy, myself. Make me ever ready to come before you with clean hands and a straight eye. So as life fades away as a fading sunset; my spirit may come to you without shame."(3)

I offer this prayer because I have a heart for the Native American people. It has taken me many years to define my identity as an artist, scholar, librarian, and Native American. Developing a meaningful identity is a long process for anyone. It includes a realistic perception and an evaluation of one's journey through life. A search for identity is a continual listening to the heart and one's spirit.

I have been an artist all my life. I have only been a scholar and librarian for the past twenty-five years. I now work at a unique Art and Design college as the Director of Library Programs for the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. IAIA is a multi-tribal center of higher education dedicated to the preservation, study, creative application, and contemporary expression of American Indian and Alaska Native arts and culture. Lloyd Kiva New, one of the founders of IAIA, stated: "The primary role of the visual arts of Native Americans was to serve as the handmaiden for religion—providing colorful symbols for the visualization, teaching, and actualization of religious concepts. Integral to all phases of daily life, the arts also served extensively in the pure enjoyment of life. Dance, music, and creation myths come together in dramatization of the spirituality of Native Americans and their relationships with their universe."(4)

Much of the art created by Native American artists, both in the past and today, expresses a concern with the history, culture, and spirituality of the people. Native Americans infuse their art with a feeling for the earth – its colors, shapes, and materials. In the article, *Art as a Healing Force: Creativity, Healing, and Spirituality*, Terri Cohn states: "A profound change in attitudes toward organized religion in the modern world has prompted many in Western society to turn to Eastern ideologies and indigenous cultures for spiritual models that have remained more closely tied to the forces and cycles of nature and the earth."(5) It may be that for Native Americans the celebration of the sacred is considered the only legitimate intention of art making.

I am an artist. To state that I am a Native American artist would be misleading. It would be more accurate to state that my spirituality has a profound effect upon the images I use in my artwork. And that the images I use express a distinct artistic language of their own. Whether or not my art can be defined as spiritual also is open to debate. I believe when I am creating my art that contemplation usually is part of my creative process. In fact, I believe that my inner spirit empowers my artwork. When one defines spirit, these words come to mind: vital essence, force, energy, life, living substance, and soul. Spirit also can be connected to a certain spiritual place where we are encouraged to have our inner spirit touched in a positive way by the sacred and the holy. There are two such spiritual places with meaning for me: the woods and lakes of Minnesota and the desert and mountains of New Mexico. These places offer solace and inspiration to me as an artist. Some of the symbols I use are based upon the land forms and rock petroglyphs found in Minnesota and New Mexico, petroglyphs being carved images found on rocks and canyon walls.

In my artwork, I have painted images based upon petroglyph images that are located in Arroyo Hondo, north of Taos. This is a site that is difficult to access as it is located high on a cliff above the Rio Grande River and one has to traverse a narrow ledge in order to see the petroglyphs. But in doing so, one is in awe and wonder of the rock art symbols found there.....spirals, circles, animals, figures, zigzag lines, dots, dot complexes, repetitious linear motifs, one-pole ladders. In Arroyo Hondo, the symbols date between 1000 and 1200 A.D. These petroglyphs are probably the work of the hunter-gathers of the region. There is no one interpretation to the meanings of rock art as they vary from tribe to tribe and place to place. Some even can be found in northern Minnesota on rocks located in the Boundary Waters; indeed, petroglyphs are found throughout the world.

Polly Schaafsma, in *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest*, states that "certain general interpretations have been arrived at by comparing elements in rock art with various aspects of shamanistic symbolism. A number of basic shamanistic beliefs recur throughout the world, and the elements of these beliefs are present in native religions of North America. In many instances, figure complexes and symbolism found in rock art of the Southwest seem to be explainable within the context of shamanistic beliefs and practices. In many cases, specific supernatural beings can be identified in rock art and some of the more abstract symbolism of ritual design can be interpreted with some degree of certainty."(6)

Other symbols that I use in my artwork are bird forms such as eagles, doves, loons, ravens, etc.; plant forms such as corn, sage, trees, cactus, flowers, etc; animal forms such as snakes, buffalo, horses, wolves, etc.; celestial forms such as the moon, sun, stars, cosmic circles, etc., and other natural forms such as mountains, desert, shells, rocks, water, earth, wind, fire, etc. Other forms used in my artwork may consist of the Virgin Mary and other religious figures, Christ figures, windows, doorways, ribbons, candles, shields, thorns, fetishes, pyramids, feathers, medicine bags, lodge houses, churches, Milagros, body parts such as eyes, arms, hearts; and more forms such as crowns, nests, and prayer bundles. All of these symbols and forms have special meaning to me but their beauty lies in the fact that they hold different meaning for different people.

Someone viewing my artwork might interpret it wholly different from my personal interpretation. Andy Ostheimer comments on the openness of artistic interpretation:

“When defining spiritual art, it is important to keep in mind the difference between the artist’s experience in making the work, the resulting object itself, and the viewer’s experience. The artist may have a transcendental experience in creating the work, but the viewer may not have a similar experience in viewing it. Making art can be contemplation, but viewing it may not be. The reverse is also true, of course.”(7)

In addition to the symbols mentioned, I would add that color is an important element in my artwork. Let’s take a moment explore the use of color. Ronald P. Koch described the importance of color when he shared: “Among some tribes, symbolic meaning was sometimes attached to particular colors, this symbolism varying from tribe to tribe. Red often referred to blood and, from this, to battle or to life itself. Yellow could symbolize the sun, and therefore, daytime. Light blue might be sky or a body of water, while dark blue might represent mountains or victory. Green most often symbolized vegetation, and brown, the earth, or animal life. Black might be thought of as the night or war; white might symbolize snow or winter, or purity or cleanliness.”(8) The use of color may or may not reflect these meanings, but, more often than not, artists intuitively use color to denote a particular meaning. For me, the colors in my artwork reflect feelings that I have about the subject matter or place in which the art was created. My current artwork is achieved by using mixed media, watercolor, and found objects to form collages.

As I stated earlier, an outsider might not view my artwork as spiritual, mystic, or contemplative. To me, it is not important for them to do so. What is important as an artist, scholar, and spiritual person is the significance to me of what I create. To be an artist today, I would state that one has to be willing to create images of meaning that come from one’s own spiritual life and world. There is a certain tension inherent in being an artist who works in an academic environment, lives in a materialistic country, and thinks and creates in a world that is largely spiritually empty. Through the years, I have begun to understand why my Native American heritage has so profoundly affected my life and my work as an artist. I continue to reflect upon this, and I have begun to see that some of my inner strength comes from my Indian heritage and my Christian background. My artwork is many things – a search for inner-self, a healing process, and a form of communication from my empowered spirit. I am telling my story in my art, and I am constantly looking for images to express my story.

In his article, *Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art*, Donald Kuspit ventures that “perhaps the biggest problem facing artists today is that they no longer believe that art is an element of spiritual life, let alone a mighty element—they no longer believe that to make art is a spiritual activity.”(9) I would argue with Mr. Kuspit’s statement and ask the question, “What is art if it doesn’t have a spiritual quality or life to it?” You see, to Native Americans, there is an intense belief in the supernatural and in mysticism. “If you remember nothing else about Native American spirituality, remember that to us everything is sacred.”(10) We look at the coherence of life and express the rhythms of life through art. Art, beauty, and spirituality are intertwined in a spiritual message contained within Native American artwork.

For the Ojibwe people, there is a harmony among the earth, nature, animals, people, and the Great Spirit Gichi-Manidoo. The many stories that are passed down from one generation to another are held deep in our hearts. They have been told in legends, seen

in visions and dreams, and written in symbols. They are performed in dances, ceremonies, and rituals. My Ojbiwe Grandmother danced in the pow-wows until she was ninety years old. When I was a child, she told me her stories and chanted her songs to me. The Grandmother sings to the child and in the web of family ties, stories, and memories, the child learns as she grows older. They form a story of the spirit, individual and collective. As a descendent of Wah-je-way-quay, Dudg-ge-gaw, Wah-kaince, Tah-ge-gah, and Waab Anangikwe (Morningstar) I continue to carry on some of their spiritual beliefs and weave them into my art. We are woven together, like a tapestry, by threads of life, mutual respect, love, and memories. Miigwetch. (11)

## Endnotes

1. Veronica E. Velarde Tiller. Tiller's Guide to Indian Country. (Albuquerque, NM: BowArrow Publishing Company, 2005): 612.
2. Ibid. 613
3. Indigenous Peoples Literature, <http://www.indians.org/welker/chippewa.htm> (November 3, 2006).
4. Lloyd Kiva New. "Defining Ourselves." Native Peoples, 13 (February/March 2000): 9-10.
5. Terri Cohn. "Art as a Healing Force: Creativity, Healing, and Spirituality." Artweek, 28 (January 1997): 15-17.
6. Polly Schaafsma. Indian Rock Art of the Southwest. (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 1980).
7. Andy Ostheimer. "Defining Spiritual Art: Object, Viewer, and Experience." Artweek, 28 (January 1997): 12-13.
8. Ronald P. Koch. Dress Clothing of the Plains Indians. (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977).
9. Donald Kuspit. "Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art." Art Criticism, 17 (no. 2, 2002): 55-69.
10. Introduction to Native American Spirituality. <http://www.spiritonline.com/natintro.html> (November 3, 2006).
11. Translation: "Thank you."

*Dr. Marilyn Russell has participated in more than twenty-five one-woman and group art exhibitions in the Mid-west and the Southwest and has presented more than thirty papers at conferences such as ARLIS/NA, the International Indigenous Librarians Forums, the Plains Indian Seminars, and the Tribal College Librarians Institutes. Dr. Russell received her doctorate in Visual Arts and Education for the University of Kansas, an M.L.S. in Library and Information Management from Emporia State University, a Master's degree in Education from the University of Kansas, and a B.F.A. in Design, also from the University of Kansas. She can be contacted using the following information: Marilyn Russell, Ph.D., Director of Library Programs, Institute of American Indian Arts, Library, 83 Avan Nu Po Road, Santa Fe, NM 87505. (Phone: 505-424-2397 / Fax: 505-424-3131).*