

# DENVER ART MUSEUM

1300 LOGAN STREET, DENVER, COLORADO

## DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

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### Symbolism in Indian Art and the Difficulties of its Interpretation

LEAFLET 61

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**1. INTRODUCTORY.** The average person who looks at objects made by Indians has a very lively curiosity about the meanings of the designs. Sentimentally misleading books, unscrupulous or ignorant dealers, and Indians striving to please the white man, have all played upon this curiosity and have contributed to building up the idea that all Indian designs are symbols and mean something.

In an endeavor to correct this notion this leaflet attempts to define symbolism; to indicate the varieties and extent of symbolism in Indian art; and to point out the difficulties of its interpretation. Readers must realize that the statements in this brief leaflet must necessarily be very broad and general and that many exceptions to them may be found.

**2. DEFINITION OF "SYMBOL".** Much of the misunderstanding about symbolism arises from the idea that "design" or "pattern" and "symbol" mean the same thing. This is most emphatically not true. In art, according to Webster, "a symbol is a design or design element which stands for an idea or quality or another object, by reason of natural aptness, of association, or of convention". In other words, a design is not a symbol unless its use is accompanied by the presence in the artist's mind of a definite idea which is to be expressed by the design.

It is incorrect to call a design or a design element a symbol unless it is accurately known to fit into the definition given above. A purely decorative design is not a symbol. The difficulties of determining whether a design is symbolic or decorative are discussed in the latter portion of this leaflet.

**3. REASON FOR SYMBOLISM.** Illiterate native peoples of every race and period of history have, because of their ignorance of letters, turned to the making of pictures and designs for the expression of their thoughts. Such people are also great story tellers and have much interest in the animate and inanimate manifestations of nature. To preserve the memory of notable events or scenes, they have always used pictures or symbolic designs.

The Indian race is one much inclined to thoughts about religion, philosophy, virtues and vices and other abstractions, and is equally fond of adventure and war. As writing was unknown before the white man came, designs were the only means available for the expression of abstract ideas in a lasting form. As abstractions have no outward form, they cannot be represented realistically, and so must be set forth through symbols arbitrarily selected. Those tribes which make records of events in many cases are inclined to use symbolism to indicate these events. Possibly this is because realistic pictures are beyond the technical powers of the native artist. Tribal convention may also prevent the making of accurate drawings.

Because of the wide spread distribution of these practices among Indians, symbolism has been and still is a prominent factor in Indian art. Its various types are outlined in the following section.

#### KINDS OF SYMBOLISM

**4. ABSTRACT.** In the purest sense of the word, symbolism is the representation of abstract ideas or qualities by signs arbitrarily selected. Among the Indians symbols of this kind are largely placed on religious or ceremonial objects. Thus the "Hiawatha" wampum belt of the Iroquois has a design of 4 hollow squares and a solid diamond. The symbolism of these designs and their color requires several hundred words of explanation which sum up the whole idea and organization of the Iroquois League. In this type of symbolism it is not necessary that the actual appearance of the designs suggest the abstractions for which they are made to stand. Sometimes they do and sometimes they do not.

**5. GEOGRAPHIC OR STORY TELLING.** Some tribes, especially those of the Plains, depict scenes in nature or tell stories by means of symbolic designs. Here again arbitrary selection of symbols is found, though the degree of resemblance between the design element and the object in mind is likely to be more carefully considered than in the abstract kind of symbolism. An example of story telling by symbols is a Sioux beaded bag. On a white background is a blue diamond with forked appendages at the corners and flanked by double ended forks. There are a few extremely simple geometric elements arranged around this central figure. This whole group of geometric elements depicts a battle scene in winter and tells much about the character of the hero.

**6. PART FOR WHOLE.** Where space, size or other limiting factors prevent the placing of a design representing an entire object on the article being decorated, an especially prominent or characteristic part of the object may be used to stand for the whole. Thus, on the Northwest coast two large teeth often stand for the beaver, while on certain Pueblo pottery the paw stands for the bear.

**7. GENEALOGICAL.** On the Northwest Pacific coast the tribes have a highly perfected system of family trees. The families are believed to be descended from mythical creatures,

usually animals, birds or fish. To show the lines of descent in a family, pictures or carvings suggesting these creatures are placed on many objects belonging to the family. Through this symbolic system an understanding observer may read the family tree. The totem pole is the best known example of this kind of symbolism. See Leaflet 79-80.

**8. POLITICAL.** Among the Abnaki group of Maine certain designs stand for various political offices and happenings, thus, a collar of white beads on black cloth symbolizes the mourning for a dead chief, the election of a new one, the tribes of the group and their officers.

**9. COLOR.** A widespread practice is to have colors stand for certain things. The points of the compass are more frequently symbolized in this manner than anything else, though war, death and the like are often indicated by this means. There is a wide variation in the color symbols of the tribes. One system is not used by all.

**10. MEMORY HELPS.** In reciting or performing the often very long ceremonies of some tribes it has been found necessary to develop a system of symbols to assist the memories of the participants. Among the Ojibwa this system had been carried almost to the point of true hieroglyphic or picture writing before the coming of the whites interrupted its development.

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**11. KINDS OF OBJECTS BEARING SYMBOLIC DESIGNS.** Abstract symbols of the purest type are almost entirely restricted to religious or ceremonial objects. Such objects and designs are likely to be simple, and this simplicity increases as the most central idea of the religion or ceremony is approached. Elaborate objects are not likely to show symbolism of this sort. Objects for everyday use, such as Navaho blankets, are not decorated with religious symbols. Some of the designs on non-ceremonial things may once have been religious symbols, but it is certain that such designs had lost their religious significance long before being used as decorative elements.

The other kinds of symbolism may appear on nearly any sort of object. This does not mean that all other designs are symbols. The details of tribal customs in this regard vary greatly and are too lengthy for inclusion in this leaflet.

**12. DESIGNS.** As designs are the means by which symbolic ideas are expressed, some information about the Indian design system is necessary for an understanding of the symbolic system.

**13. DESIGN AREAS.** In North America there are areas which are characterized by special design types which are found in one form or another throughout them. The boundaries of these design areas differ from and often cut through the boundaries of tribal or sometimes culture areas. All of the tribes living in an area are familiar with and use its special design elements in their varying forms. See Leaflet 62.

**14. TRIBAL DESIGNS.** In addition to the large groups of design elements mentioned above, there may be small groups peculiar to each separate tribe in an area. All of the workers in a tribe are more or less familiar with this stock of design elements, which are the tools of the artist just as much as are looms, awls or knives.

**15. DESIGN NAMES.** The Indian artist commonly gives names to the design elements as well as to more tangible tools. This naming of designs and design elements is a purely practical action to make easy the discussion and description of the patterns. The Indian sees that it is easier to call a triangle the "arrowhead" design than it is to have to draw pictures or wave the hands everytime he wishes to discuss it.

Naming a design does not make it a symbol. Design names and design meanings are not the same. The names are usually either simple descriptive terms such as "square" or "pointed", or names taken from objects in nature, such as "flying geese" or "turtle". Often the designs of the second type are not supposed to be representations of the objects named, but because of a real or fancied resemblance to some natural object were given the names after they were first completed. In other words, a native artist often invents a design with no other idea than to create a beautiful thing. When the design is done it is seen to resemble more or less some natural object and is named for it for purely practical reasons. This is not true of every Indian design, but it certainly is a widespread practice. Design naming is not done at all by some tribes.

The designs common to a design area usually have different names applied to them by each tribe in the area. But within the tribe the design names are likely to be commonly accepted, though there is a tendency for each artist to give names to suit the individual fancy. The same names are applied in some cases to several design elements of varying character and shape.

**16. USES OF DESIGN ELEMENTS.** They may be either decorative or symbolic. Wissler concludes that designs were primarily decorative and that symbolism has in some cases been grafted onto the decorative function. It must be realized that purely decorative designs are very common among the Indians. They are made only to gratify an esthetic impulse and have absolutely no message to give or philosophy to expound. Symbolism and decoration exist side by side. This fact is one of the great barriers to interpretation which are discussed in the following section.

#### DIFFICULTIES OF INTERPRETATION

**17. DESIGNS COMMON TO SYMBOLISM AND DECORATION.** Among many tribes the design elements peculiar to each are the only ones known to them and therefore must be used for every purpose, be it decorative or symbolic. Plains beadwork design elements are notably of this type and must serve for both kinds of patterns. There are many other tribes which find themselves in the same position. In some cases a special set of ceremonial design elements exists, a fact which enables the expert to see the purpose of the designs with some ease. Thus the Navaho have a set of designs for ceremonial sand paintings and another set for their blankets.

**18. INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE.** Though all the artists in any tribe tend to use the same design elements and to arrange them into patterns more or less in accord with tribal tradition, the purpose for which they make the patterns is determined only by their individual wishes, unless, of course, the special sets of elements mentioned in section 17 exist. This widespread habit of individual practice is the chief barrier to interpretation. Unless the student receives from the maker of each design accurate information about it, it is impossible for him to know whether it is decorative, or, if symbolic, what its meaning may be. Information from another member of the tribe will be useless unless it is certain that he is passing on information received from the maker. If this is not the case, the interpretation he gives will be his own idea about the design.

A thorough knowledge of the habits and ideas of the tribes will often indicate the purpose of the design and possibly something of its detailed meaning. But at best this is only good guessing. In a very few cases there are symbols recognized by all Indians in a tribe and always used to express the same ideas. The student may learn these and read their message. But such symbols are only the tiniest percentage of the whole mass of Indian design. It must also be remembered that a symbol of this sort may appear in the art of another tribe in an identical form, but with either a decorative purpose or a very different symbolic meaning.

**19. SUMMARY.** The Indian tribes have a number of groups of design elements, to which names are usually given for convenience only, the names having no connection with symbolic practices. These elements may be used for decoration or to express several kinds of ideas through symbolism. The wish of the individual artist determines for which of these two purposes any design is made, and its meaning if it be symbolic. Accurate interpretation is impossible unless the actual maker explains each design, though quite good guesses may be sometimes made by experts. An extremely small number of symbols are universally recognized in some individual tribes.

As far as the average person who looks at objects of Indian manufacture is concerned, it is impossible to recognize or interpret Indian designs as symbols.

**Compiled from the following sources by F. H. Douglas:**

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1. *The American Indian*—Wissler. 2nd edition, 1922. Pages 97-101.

BUREAU OF AMERICAN ETHNOLOGY

2. Article on "Symbolism"—Boas. Volume 2 of Bulletin 30, the Handbook of American Indians, 1910.

EXPOSITION OF INDIAN TRIBAL ARTS, INC., NEW YORK

3. *Indian Symbolism*—Spinden, 1931.

A large number of other works by many authors have been consulted, but the list is too long for inclusion in this leaflet.

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