

LEARNING, MAKING, TRANSFORMING: CONCLUSIONS ON *MAKING IT*

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In his recent work on visual culture, W. J. T. Mitchell (2002) asserts that culture constructs vision which is in turn influenced by factors such as history, politics, economics, and philosophy. Mitchell (2002:97) elaborates upon this concept by turning the tables on conventional perspectives on objects, claiming:

Works of art, media, figures and metaphors have “lives of their own,” and cannot be explained simply as rhetorical, communicative instruments or epistemological windows onto reality.... Vision is never a one-way street, but a multiple intersection teeming with dialectical images.... It makes it clear why the questions to ask about images are not just “what do they mean?” or “what do they do?” but “what is the secret of their vitality?” and “what do they want?”

These wonderful papers, which in their own ways describe efforts on the part of students of culture to participate in the creation of visual culture, offer intriguing insights into the vitality of masks and kayaks, tools and jewelry, baskets and wood. I suspect that as Hensel, Blackman, and Linn, under the guidance of Roosevelt Paneak, learned to make new things in new ways, they gained intriguing insights into what these creations want. As Alix and Brewster floated down the Yukon to collect data, they too, learned of the intentionality of driftwood; indeed, they were told by Nick Charles that wood has feelings, knowledge and emotions. The old ethnologies with drawings and descriptions of usage never would ask such a question.

Those of us in ethnographic art history try to focus on the dynamics of Native-non-Native interchanges from first contact to the present, analyze the endurance of Native culture during the process of colonization and its aftermath, interpret material culture’s role in cross-cultural understanding, misunderstanding and mutual ambivalence, and celebrate the mutability and constantly evol-

ing nature of culture. As Lee points out in her counterpoint to those who “make it,” earlier approaches to material culture, inspired by nostalgia and the imminent “disappearance” of both creations and creators, encouraged the development of the “hobbyist” who copied Native art. The “hobbyist’s” objective is not so much to discover cultural insights through the act of creation but instead to create an object difficult to distinguish from its Native prototype.

That hobbyist, firmly grounded in essentialism, ignores or resists the historical reality that, from first contact until the present, non-Natives have been integral to Native art history. This collection of papers takes that reality as a given. Acknowledging non-Native involvement in culture history does not diminish the centrality of Native people in the process, but to challenge essentialism and demonstrate how artworks emerged and continue to emerge as negotiations and involvements with, as well as reactions to, the intruders into their territories and expression of changing identity in a world consisting, for better or worse, of Natives and non-Natives.

Here, in an intriguing departure from scholarly convention, anthropologists contribute to art creation from the perspective of student, in an intriguing example of exemplifying how Natives and settlers together contribute to the ongoing history of culture. In their book on colonialism in New Guinea, Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles (2001:xix) acknowledge the involvement of both local and imperial participants in the colonial encounter:

Chemists make a distinction between a mixture and a reaction. A mixture is a solution in which different chemicals combine, but retain their original form, whereas a reaction creates something new out of its original constituent parts. Colonial New Guinea was a reaction to which all parties contributed, so that there can be no question that all had influence and agency.

Going on to criticize those who insist on an essentialist concept of culture, they assert “anthropologists have tried to undo or ignore the reaction and focus upon one part, New Guineans, creating a partial and static picture in the process” (Gosden and Knowles 2001). What I especially liked about these papers is how none limited its study to the Native creator – although implicit was the primacy of Native inventiveness and tradition – but included him or herself in the process of understanding. Each speaker and his or her teachers had, as Gosden and Knowles (2001) would put it, influence and agency in the creation of new works of art.

Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001) pose three more questions for a cultural biography of visual objects: What do images tell us about the cultures in which they are produced? How do viewers look at, utilize, understand and make meaning of images? How do images circulate between and among social arenas, different cultures, and around the world?

Cultural meaning is thus a highly fluid, ever-changing thing, the result of complex interactions among images, producers, cultural products, and readers/viewers/consumers. The meaning of images emerges through these processes of interpretation, engagement, and negotiation. Culture is a process, in a constant state of flux (Sturken and Cartwright 2001:69).

Hensel, Blackman, Paneak and Linn, as viewers, consumers and creators of culture, have contributed to that flux.

Some insights that emerge from the activities of these participant-observers could have come about only as a result of their experiences. From his Yup'ik instructors, Hensel learned truths about learning, and teaching, that have stayed with him forever. Especially interesting is his comment that the skills he learned over the decades have in some cases become almost obsolete, as culture change – the kind of “flux” to which Sturken and Cartwright refer – moved relentlessly ahead. Blackman, the highly successful academic, experienced a “leveling” process during which those who typically would be her consultants became her teachers, she exposing herself as someone not quite so competent. Balancing that was the true connection between two women that resulted from her apprenticeship in mask making. Linn, under the guidance of Paneak, had a different experience, for she herself did not “make it,” but instead helped make it possible for the kayak to be re-covered. She learned something about her own discipline, collections management,

first worrying about the ethics of subjecting an artifact to treatment well outside museum conventions, then reconciling its origin as a museum piece with its ongoing educational value. Even Lee, who resists the very idea of making the baskets she studied, admits reluctantly that learning techniques does enhance her understanding of the subject.

Perhaps the most striking feature of these papers is the experience they describe. There is far more activity in making a ladle than watching someone make one, or reading an ethnographic text describing the procedure. The anthropological process involves not just watching and listening, but feeling and doing. And it is profoundly social. Each of the authors describes how by participating in making something, he and she attained a new and different level of communication. Thus, “making it” becomes a transformational experience, of the raw materials at hand, of the scholar's understanding of material culture, of the relationships that solidify during the creative process. And it is through such transformations that new knowledge can emerge.

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