

Along the Robeson Trail

by Dr. Stan Knick, Director, UNCP's Native American Resource Center

Where does art come from? We imagine the artist -- solitary; alone in a garret, or on an island, searching the soul for whatever feelings or dreams or memories may be hidden there, which may be pulled out through creative abandon pulled out by hard work and blistered hands, or stained hands, or crippled hands -- pulled out of stone, out of paint, out of beads, out of clay -- pulled out, given life, set free into the collective human consciousness -- set free from the solitary to a plane where everyone can see. Art can be a very private and personal thing.

But art also expresses more than the spirit & truth of any single artist -- it expresses a culture, an idea, a universe of symbols and shared meanings, a certain time, a particular place, a specific history. In a sense, everyone in that culture, in that time and place and history is responsible for creating that art -- everyone responsible for lending it whatever meaning or value or purpose it may have. If no one sees it as art, what is it then?

And what is Native American art?

Is it shell beads and bone and feather? Is it clay brought up from underground by loving, straining hands? Is it carved on the face of a rock, on a cliff, in a cave? Is it locked in time, only to live in the past when cowboys and Indians rode the Plains? That is Indian art, but is that all? Is that all the truth there is?

When the modern Native American takes up an airbrush, or computer graphics, or raku or batik, or silk-screen print, and tries to find in it some piece of himself or some peace for herself -- some expression of her spirit, some venting of his truth -- is that not Native American art too? I say it is.

If we bind Native American art into a narrow box where only certain things can fit -- maybe only teepees and feathers -- where only certain definitions of what art is can apply, who then gets to say which things are art and which are not?

Art must be like freedom, either free or chained -- either art or nothing. Does it express? Does it refine? Does it uplift? Does it make beautiful? Does it capture? *Did a Native American make it?* Then it is Native American art!

And what is the difference between art and craft? Craft is what we use -- art, what we enjoy. It seems so simple, but is that all? Is that all the truth there is? How if we enjoy what we use? Or use what we enjoy? How if we make a basket beautiful -- or make a painting instructive? How if the beaded moccasins have such a glow they almost dance without their feet? Are they not art? And if not art, what then is art that we should want to see it?

Webster tells us that art is "creative work; making or doing things that display form, beauty and unusual perception." Webster tells us "craft is distinguished from art in its application to a lesser skill, involving little or no creative thought." There, that's clear enough.

But be careful what you call a "lesser skill" or "creative thought," lest you find yourself back in that narrow box where art and freedom cannot live.

The ancient Aztec tell us: "The artist -- disciple, abundant, multiple, restless, capable, practicing, skillful; maintains dialogue with his heart, meets things with his mind; draws out all from his heart, works with delight, makes things with calm, with sagacity, works like a true Toltec, composes his objects,

works dexterously, invents, arranges materials, adorns them, makes them adjust."

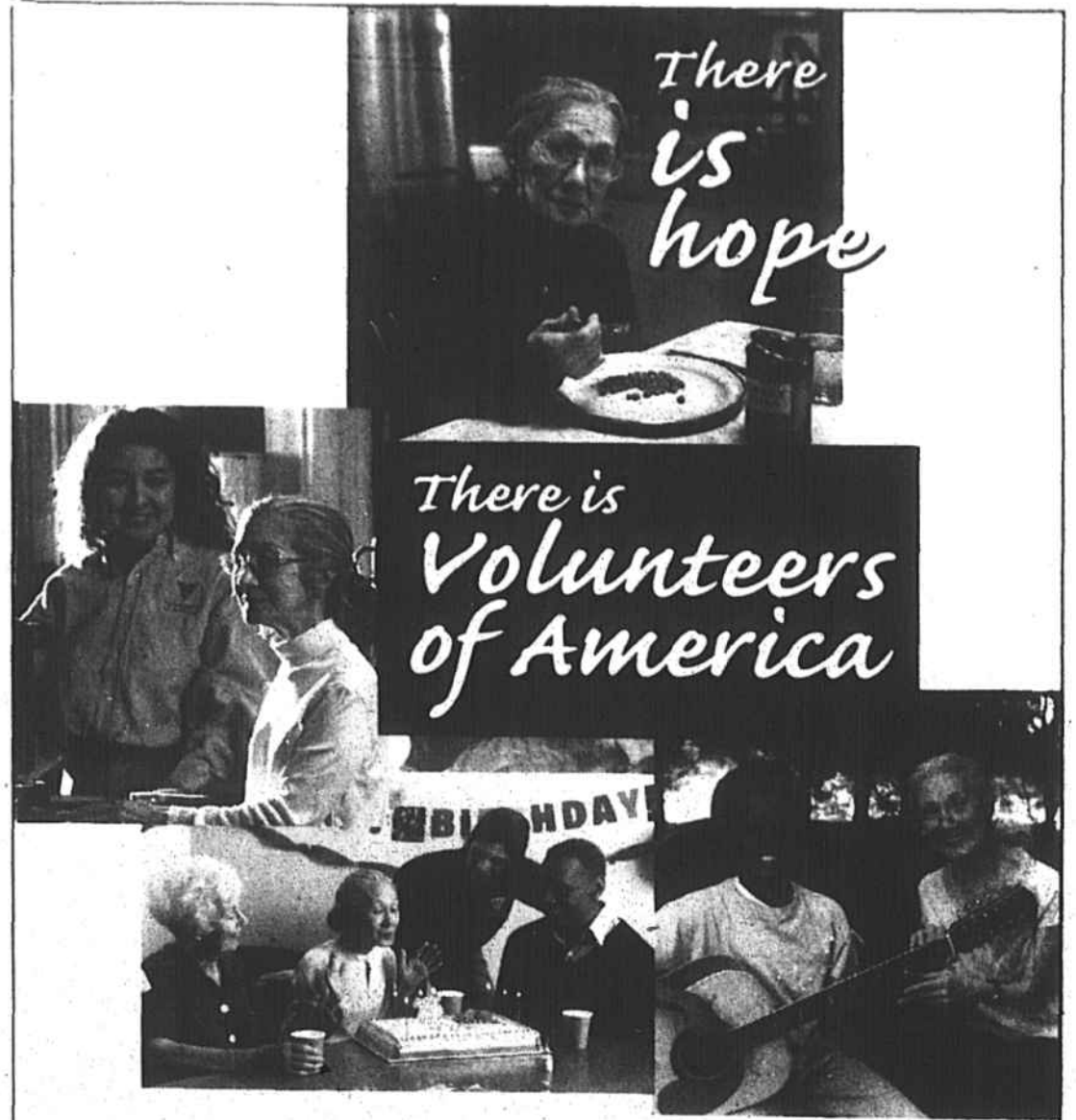
So, what is art? The art of any culture tells us stories. It tells about the past, what kind of world they come from, and how what happened in that past has shaped the present. It tells what is important -- what symbols they uphold, what they cherish, what means something to them. It shows how they feel.

Native American art is a vast and mysterious mosaic. In it we see the patterns of what is, and of what is yet to be. It is a vision of a culture, or at least a glimpse of their collective vision of the world within them and around them. It is a vision as old as the land itself. Native American art is a window into the room of culture. It is a window with many panels, representing the many media and styles used by the artists. The vision gained -- into that room of culture -- is a vision of many angles, of different points of view.

These many perspectives must be seen as a whole in order to illuminate much of that inner, cultural, room. For no one person, no single point of view, can adequately describe everything within that room. Each of us is left to make his or her own final interpretation. Art holds a light beside the window, and calls people of vision to look inside.

Where does art come from? The spirit. What is Native American art? The spirit. What is the difference between art and craft? The spirit. What do we see in art? The spirit.

For more information, call or visit the Native American Resource Center in historic Old Main Building, on the campus of The University of North Carolina at Pembroke (910-521-6282; Internet address www.uncp.edu/nativemuseum).



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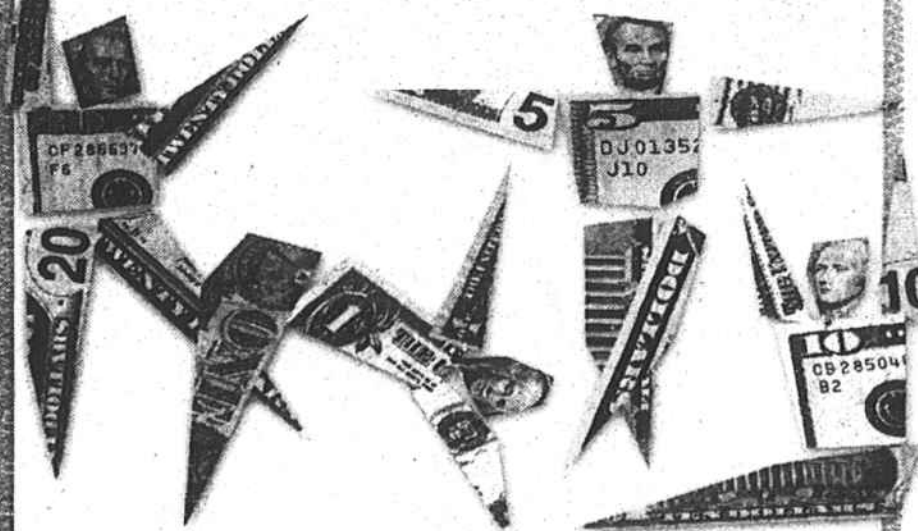
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