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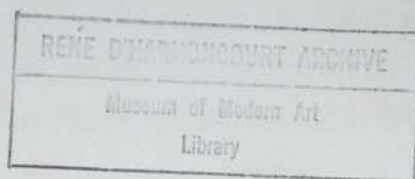
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UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
Indian Arts and Crafts Board
Washington

INDIAN ARTS AND CRAFTS
AND THEIR PLACE IN THE MODERN WORLD



Paper prepared for Inter-American Conference
on Indian Life, to be held at Patzcuaro,
Michoacan, Mexico, April 14-24, 1940.

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INDIAN ARTS AND CRAFTS

AND THEIR PLACE IN THE MODERN WORLD

Cooperation and interchange of experiences between the American Republics in the field of Indian arts and crafts is a matter of utmost importance for administrators as well as for students. All of those interested in the promotion of Indian arts and crafts know that the general inclination of the buying public to regard contemporary Indian products as souvenirs of little intrinsic value has made it difficult for the Indian craftsman to obtain adequate remuneration for his best efforts. Any agency occupied with the promotion of Indian art as a means to increase the income of the Indian craftsman must therefore attempt to create among the general public a better understanding and deeper appreciation for Indian products. It is true that the Indian arts of many of the American Republics are impressive in quality and variety, just seen by themselves, and yet, a full appreciation of the artistic genius of the Indian race can only be gained through a knowledge of its achievement throughout both the Americas.

To give Indian art its rightful place in the economic as well as in the cultural life of the contemporary world, it is necessary to present it to the world not only in its regional manifestations but as the aboriginal art of a continent that, in its amazing scope and virility, constitutes a major contribution to civilization.

Another reason for close cooperation of the American Republics in the field of Indian arts is the fact that the political boundaries of the various countries rarely correspond to the limits of the areas of aboriginal Indian culture, and often the very same articles are produced by the members of the same tribal group, but within the jurisdiction of two different countries.

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It goes without saying that, in both these countries, administrators interested in the production and the marketing of such artifacts would gain a great deal from comparing their methods with those of their neighbors. It is not necessary to deal with identical groups to gain from an interchange of knowledge. Comparative studies bring often valuable results, even if the affinities between the two groups are remote. The Indian arts of the Mesa Central in Mexico and those of the southwestern part of the United States are excellent illustrations of such a case.

For the casual observer, it may seem impossible at first to find a basis for fruitful work in the comparison of the arts of these two regions. The arts of the great pre-Columbian cultures of Central Mexico are today a subject for the archaeologist only. They disappeared with the conquest and were replaced centuries ago by the vital and flamboyant forms of the popular arts of modern Mexico. Born of the contacts of Indian and European elements and fused into a new homogenous entity, the popular arts of modern Mexico have but little to do with the traditional Indian arts flourishing today in New Mexico and Arizona.

Such comparisons may seem difficult even among the ancient products of these cultures. The arts of the great civilizations of the Mesa Central, with their urban refinement, their elaborate gold jewelry, picture writing, and decorative architecture, were far enough removed from the rural arts of the Pueblo and Hohokam cultures so that their affinities are often difficult to trace, and yet they can be found, especially in the general character of form and decorations.

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Due to the fact that many of the tribes of New Mexico and Arizona have preserved the identity of their cultural ancestry to an amazing degree, it is possible to see their craftsmen today create designs and forms that are more closely related to those produced in the Mesa Central five hundred years ago than to any manifestation of popular art in contemporary Mexico. While there are cases known where the inspiration for such traditional work can be traced to the discovery of archaeological specimens, the majority of the work carried on today is still done in the spirit of a living tradition and not as an antiquarian revival. This traditional art is neither static nor decadent. Within the limits of its style concept, it develops new forms with every piece that is produced. Here then is an opportunity for the student of the arts of ancient Mexico to have personal contact with artists whose form concepts are similar to those of the artists who created his museum specimens that lost their living soil centuries ago.

A study of the ancient and contemporary arts of Mexico, on the other hand, could give those interested in the Indian arts north of the border a far wider understanding of the process of transformation of an art through outside contacts and assimilation than could be found within the limits of the United States.

To be an effective stimulus to Indian arts and crafts, inter-American cooperation in this field must go beyond the interchange of knowledge as a means to gain and to promote better understanding of the subject itself. The future of Indian handicrafts, and what is even more important, the future of the Indian craftsman, calls above all else for the broadest investigation of the potential market for these Indian products.

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The place of the handicrafts in the twentieth century has not yet been defined. For the last fifty years, the ever-increasing pressure of the low-priced but useful factory product has limited the market for handicrafts the world over. Mass production has made available thousands of articles that are cheaper and often more useful than those previously made by hand. In consequence, certain types of handicrafts have today almost gone out of existence. And yet it appears that the factory-made article does not satisfy the needs of that part of the buying public that demands individual design and individual workmanship. During the last few years, numerous efforts to establish new studios and shops devoted to the sale and production of hand-made objects have been made everywhere, especially in the larger cities. It seems that we are just now in a period of transition that will eventually lead to the establishment of a new position of the handicrafts in the world market where they will not attempt to compete with machine products, but will supplement them. Since the handicrafts in most countries have ceased to be of purely utilitarian value, and since their future functions can only be a matter of conjecture, it is necessary to examine their present status in the light of the existing demand. The present market for Indian arts and crafts can be roughly divided into the following main divisions:

- A. The market within the producer's group
- B. The collector's market
- C. The souvenir market
- D. The market for useful quality products

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A. The market within the producer's group is still far greater than is generally believed. It is true that machine products are today available at least to a certain extent in almost every region of the two Americas, but their local price increases in proportion with the remoteness and inaccessibility of the region, so that, in some places, the native hand-made article remains still more economical than the imported mass product. In other places, local tradition calls for certain shapes or designs for specific articles that can not be supplied by imported goods. Under such circumstances, the hand-made local product is usually found side by side with the importation and reserved for such purposes as are associated with religious or social customs. The local market for Indian handicrafts that is based purely on economic considerations is of course decreasing steadily with the opening of new means of transportation and the subsequent reduction in price of machine products, while the market based on the preference for Indian form and design for traditional purposes is declining only in places where tradition itself is on the decline. It is most encouraging to find that, in recent years, a new attitude towards tradition has appeared among some tribal groups who recognize tradition simply as an expression of tribal identity and not as an inflexible pattern opposed to progress. It is the desire of such groups to absorb rather than to copy foreign achievements; and their arts become enriched instead of being shattered by the impact of innovations. The importance of the existence of this Indian market for Indian products can not be stressed enough. It gives the craftsmen an irreplaceable sympathetic background and safeguards Indian production from the danger of losing its most valuable asset, its Indian identity.

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B. The collector's market, while it has no regard for the utilitarian values of the individual object, is nearest to the Indian's own market in its understanding of traditional merit.

The number of collectors of contemporary Indian art is still very limited, due to the widespread belief that the contemporary production is inferior to the work of former days, and also to the fact that Indian art as a whole is still but little known. The collector's market is international in character but offers a commercial outlet only for the most outstanding pieces, since on this market rareness is considered a definite asset. This market for Indian art has never been systematically developed, and intensive promotional work may well increase its demands. It would be unwise, however, to overestimate the financial benefits of such development. While the prices paid for individual pieces are far greater on this market than those obtainable through any other outlet, the benefits will always go to a relatively small number of craftsmen.

The main advantages to be expected from an increased collector's market are the promotional values of fine private and public collections that stimulate wider demands among the general public, and the fact that the existence of a discriminating and exacting group of buyers is an invaluable aid in maintaining high standards of workmanship.

C. The widest and best known market for Indian arts and crafts today is unquestionably the souvenir market. In spite of its extent and its large turnover, this market has often failed to bring the expected benefit to the maker, and is at present in many places seriously menaced through competition from machine-made imitations.

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The souvenir buyer, like the collector, does not look for utilitarian values; and, since he purchases an object not for its own merit but simply for the sake of its associations, he does not even care much about its workmanship or aesthetic value. The souvenir buyer is usually satisfied if the article serves to remind him of a pleasant trip or conveys to his friends the knowledge that he has been to far and picturesque places. He is therefore rarely willing to spend more on such a purchase than the price of a postal card or a colored photograph. Especially in countries with a relatively high cost of living, it is difficult to find hand-made articles that can be profitably produced at such low prices, and the desire to supply the demand just the same leads often to unbelievably low returns for the craftsmen and to the complete deterioration of individual workmanship. Wherever this happens, machine-made imitations appear and eventually crowd off the market, because, with the loss of individuality, his product can not compete with the lower prices of the factory-made article.

To evaluate the possibilities of a sound souvenir market for Indian crafts, it is necessary first of all to recognize the conflict in concepts of value that exist here between producer and consumer. In the long run, it is impossible to carry on a stable business with articles that are considered worthless trinkets by the purchaser and useful objects of value by their maker. There are many regions where the low cost of living and the sub-standard economic requirements of the craftsman make such an adjustment temporarily possible, because the price that seems adequate for a trinket to the buyer constitutes locally a relatively large amount of money.

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In such regions, it may be desirable to maintain or even to encourage production as an irreplaceable source of income for the time being; but, even in such cases, it should be realized that sooner or later the producer's demands are bound to increase, either through a rise in the local cost of living, or through an increase of his own standards that is often due to his contacts with this very consumer. As soon as this happens, the remuneration for the craftsman's work becomes insufficient, and he is forced either to sacrifice the quality of his workmanship or to seek new means to speed up and simplify his production methods.

If one is not to be satisfied to limit production to those few traditional products that can be made rapidly without loss of quality, such as certain small baskets and certain simple pottery vessels, the souvenir market offers little hope for the future. In a long-range program that is to take full advantage of the potentialities of Indian arts and crafts, there is, as has just been indicated, no way to reconcile the exigencies of traditional production and those of the souvenir market. But there are two possible solutions for the economic problems created by this conflict. These solutions lie either in the education of the buying public to an appreciation of the intrinsic values of Indian handicrafts, which actually would remove the customer from the class of souvenir buyers, or in the stimulation of an avowed souvenir industry that is mainly based on speed and volume of production, and leads therefore to the loss of individuality in design and workmanship characteristic of traditional crafts work. While it is obvious that such development does not fall within the scope of arts and crafts work proper, it must nevertheless be given consideration in certain regions as a matter of economic expediency.

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D. The market of useful quality products offers doubtlessly the best opportunities for a sound development of Indian crafts. If interpreted in its broadest sense, this market includes not only all types of practical household and clothing accessories such as furniture, sporting goods, fabrics, and jewelry, but also objects bought exclusively for the sake of their decorative function in the buyer's house. It includes the table center and the wall hanging that are bought to fill an aesthetic need in the home, but not the collector's item that is acquired only because it is ethnologically or technologically interesting, or the souvenir that is purchased on the strength of its associations.

The variety of products that fill the needs of this market is almost unlimited, and their prices can always be based on real values. Since their cost can be determined by their usefulness and the quality of their execution rather than by such intangibles as associations or rarity, the customer can always be sure that he receives his money's worth in any price range.

It is true that some Indian crafts can not take advantage of this market without adaptations, since the functions of traditional Indian products are not only more limited but often different from those demanded by the general public. However, such adaptations have taken place in the course of the production history of all crafts and are part of the normal development of any living art form.

Adaptations of a traditional art to ideas that come from outside its producers' own realm of experience are of course more difficult to make than

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those based on needs developed by the producers themselves. However, many of the great craft centers of the world have primarily served outside groups when the demand arose, and have been successful in doing so as long as the craftsman understood the need of the buyer, even if he did not share it.

It seems unbelievable that this market for well-made, useful Indian products, with its great potentialities, has so far been badly neglected in many places. It has developed here and there in response to a demand from the buying public, but has been given little encouragement by most of those interested in the production and sale of Indian arts and crafts.

In most sales outlets for Indian goods, the emphasis in display and promotion is still placed on quaintness and picturesqueness--in other words, on the souvenir values of the product. The creation of a romantic atmosphere in the sales premises is often considered more important than the presentation of such intrinsic values of the product as its usefulness, its workmanship, and its beauty. Stories that give a picturesque background to the articles, especially elaborate explanations of the symbolic meanings of Indian design, are widely considered the best inducement for the buyer to spend his money.

There are business enterprises that give away printed folders claiming to explain the meaning of all symbols of all tribes with every ten cent purchase, which gives the customer quite a bargain considering the fact that a medicine man usually needs a lifetime to understand true significance of the symbols used by his own immediate group.

The worst aspect of such practices is that they are used mainly to disguise the poor quality of products made for the souvenir trade, and sometimes

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even to stimulate the sales of outright imitations. These methods naturally attract a large part of the buying public temporarily since they satisfy a widespread yearning for romance at bargain prices, but they are bound to undermine public confidence in the end. The customers of today are becoming increasingly aware that they are often being sold fairy tales instead of values, and therefore draw the conclusion that Indian art as a whole is as spurious as some of the promotion methods used in its sale.

This false emphasis so frequently found in the commercial presentation of Indian art, is the reason rather than the result of a lack of a widespread appreciative public. Many potential buyers who have had an opportunity to see Indian products of good quality have lost their initial interest when their demands for real value were met with fanciful pretensions. It should be said here that many of the salesmen who are most indiscriminating in their romantic sales talk are acting in good faith because their own knowledge of Indian lore is too limited to make them see the absurdity of their claims.

It is astonishing how little thought and effort has been given so far to the development of sound merchandising and promotion practices in this field. The intensive studies of adequate display and sales methods that are considered a basic necessity for all other types of merchandising have never been made for Indian crafts, and most present practices are just a continuation of the first fumbling efforts to meet the casual demands of early tourists in Indian country. Not only has the discriminating city market been neglected in favor of the local outlets, but even in the regional outlets quality merchandise, if it is handled at all, is carried only because a

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specific dealer personally happens to have good taste, and not because of a general recognition of the potentialities of the trade in better products. Even such simple devices to gain public confidence as the separation of quality work from poor work and from imitations are employed only in very exceptional sales outlets.

From all this it becomes apparent that a sound development of the trade in Indian arts and crafts along the lines of useful articles of quality can only be established if the agencies interested in the field are willing to undertake intensive research work that would enable them to act efficiently as advisors of production and merchandising.

1. Work with the producer. To give sound advice to the Indian craftsman, it is first of all necessary to realize that the Indian product will only be successful if it retains the basic merits of Indian form, design, and workmanship, and that no one can judge these qualities better than the Indian producer himself. At the same time, the advisor must be aware that whenever the Indian craftsman attempts to gain a wider market outside his own community he must be assisted to understand all those exigencies that are foreign to him before he can adapt his work to the new demand.

This means not only that he must be made acquainted with the functions his products are to fulfill in the hands of their prospective buyers, but it also means often that the craftsman has to learn to adapt his production habits to meet certain requirements of modern merchandising, such as standardized basic prices and timely delivery of finished products.

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The fact that the craftsman himself should make these adaptations does not mean that the advisor does not need to understand the traditional background of the product and his maker. In fact, such understanding is prerequisite for any successful cooperation, because, without a thorough knowledge of tribal tradition, the advisor may not even be able to see those conflicts between traditional methods and new demands that he is supposed to help the craftsman to bridge.

Many Indian craftsmen of today have already yielded to outside pressure and made adaptations that were not based on their own judgment but were made in accordance with directions given by their customers. Many of these imposed adaptations are unsuccessful economically as well as aesthetically. If the advisor is to be able to help such a craftsman to find himself again, he must first of all be familiar enough with the old regional style to detect such aberrations and must also be capable of differentiating between them and the sound adaptations that are part of any normal development.

The greatest responsibility falls on the advisor when it comes to the development of new production methods to fit the demands of the modern market, since the craftsman's lack of experience in this field makes him almost entirely dependent on outside council.

This is especially true of the introduction of labor-saving devices in Indian arts and crafts. It is impossible to establish fixed rules that would apply to all such adaptations, and the advisor will have to judge each case entirely on its own merit. The purist who wishes to bar all technical innovations forgets that there never was a living traditional craft in the world that did not adapt more efficient tools whenever they were made available.

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The desire of the purist to see the craftsmen go back to the original method of production is absurd, since it is impossible to decide what stage of technical development should be considered as the "original one". Any stage of technique is preceded by a more primitive one and continuous search for the "most original" method of production inevitably leads back to the formative period of the art when technique disappears into the vague background of rudimentary experimentation. Improvement of technique has always been the aim of every craftsman, and there are few, if any, among the traditional Indian art forms of today that have not taken advantage of technical devices developed outside their own group.

The invention and adaptation of new tools must therefore be considered as a necessity in the development of a living art, but one must also realize that it can lead to its destruction if it is done indiscriminately. There are devices that increase the speed of manufacture but impair function and appearance of the product, to such an extent that they lead eventually to the loss of its merit and appeal.

While this development of an art through adaptations has been part of the history of traditional arts through the ages, the need for careful investigation of the merits of each innovation has become apparent only in recent years. The control of their market by outsiders has deprived many craftsmen of the opportunity to freely reject such innovations as do not fit their own basic concepts; and since this control is often exercised by people who themselves are incapable of judging the desirability of a new development in terms of the craftsman's interest, it is the task of the advisor to help the Indian producer to find his own solution.

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Lack of space prevents a discussion of all the aspects of the advisory work that needs to be done in the field of production of Indian crafts, but the given examples make it clear that the field is almost unlimited and needs to be studied with utmost care if satisfactory results are to be expected.

2. Work with the consumer. Most Indian craftsmen live miles away from any large trade center serving the type of public that constitutes the market for useful quality objects. Their only direct sales are therefore to tourists, who happen to visit the region; and many tribes, who live in places seldom visited by tourists, are barred even from this type of direct sales.

Most Indian craftsmen sell their wares, therefore, to a trader, who acts as their retailer or wholesaler. This arrangement is often very effective, but there are cases where the Indian product passes through the hands of four to five middlemen before it reaches the ultimate consumer. Strangely enough, even with such intricate sales channels, the ultimate destination of the Indian product is still usually a souvenir market, and articles made in one region are frequently sold as local souvenirs thousands of miles from the homes of their makers.

To help the craftsman establish himself on the market for useful quality products, it is necessary therefore not only to introduce new methods of presentation and promotion, but also to widen the geographic scope of the market to include those regions that contain the best consumer's groups, and to reorganize some of the existing trade channels to eliminate unnecessary overhead expenses.

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(a). The introduction of new display and promotion methods must be regarded not only as an effort to present the individual object in such way as to emphasize its intrinsic values and its appeal, but also as a means to overcome existing prejudices among the more discriminating buying public. Surveys of the modern methods used in the trade with other articles of quality should be the basis for all such endeavors. This does not mean that display and promotion methods for Indian products should be copied from department stores: It simply means that a study of the carefully worked out schemes employed in modern trade will stimulate thought and lead to the discovery of more adequate measures to promote the sales of Indian craft work.

(b). The opening of new markets, especially in larger population centers, where the majority of buyers for quality goods live, is one of the major problems in this field. This market can be reached either through specialized enterprises organized solely for the sale of Indian products, or through the introduction of Indian crafts in existing sales outlets for quality merchandise.

In both cases, a careful study of the problems of distribution and merchandising cost must be made before any attempts to realize such project can be undertaken. In the case of the introduction of Indian products in existing establishments, it is also important to ascertain whether the merchandising principles of the particular outlet are compatible with the nature of Indian production. The relative slow developments of new Indian styles, for example, make it very dangerous to introduce Indian products in stores that function on the basis of rapid and complete style changes.

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Such stores must feature their current merchandise as the "fashion" of the season and give their public new styles every year. It seems probable that Indian quality goods will be handled most profitably in enterprises that carry less volume but aim to create a more permanent demand for their merchandise. The slowness of developing the volume of Indian crafts work is another factor that needs serious consideration. The premature creation of a demand that can only be partially filled has often caused disappointment among retailers and led to their abandonment of that particular line of Indian products.

(c). Improvement of existing trade channels is another aspect of the problem that needs attention. The Indian artist, like most craftsmen, has only rarely shown much interest in the merchandising of his product. His lack of resources and his remoteness from the best outlets make his effective participation in the retailing of his own products often impossible. There are, however, many groups that could gain considerably through the establishment of producer's cooperatives or wholesale enterprises within their tribal or village group.

The scope of the work with the consumer, as outlined here, is almost staggering, since it includes everything from the establishment of small tribal wholesale centers to national and international promotion campaigns; yet, every one of these problems will have to be given due attention, if Indian arts and crafts are to gain their place in the modern world.

We have just arrived to recognize the magnitude of the task we are facing; we just begin to see the basic difficulties that have kept Indian art

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from finding its rightful place, and are making the first steps toward its rehabilitation in terms of the needs of the contemporary world. Every one of the American Republics has within its borders some of this wealth that is waiting to be developed, and only cooperation and interchange of knowledge by all will make it possible to release in its entirety one of the great contributions that this continent has to offer to civilization--the artistic genius of the Indian of the two Americas.

René d'Harnoncourt
General Manager

April 5, 1940

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