

The Indian in his native dress is a thing of the past, but his art that is inborn shall endure. He may shed his outer skin, but his markings lie below that and should show up only the brighter.

Angel DeCora



Angel DeCora's Cultural Politics

In the fall of 1911, the Indian craze was publicly appropriated by Indian people when the Winnebago artist Angel DeCora addressed the first conference of the Society of American Indians.¹ DeCora and her audience, composed primarily of Indians who been immersed in non-Indian values at boarding schools, were familiar with the contemporary celebration of Indian art. Like the promoters of Indian corners and the art critics who celebrated Indian aesthetics, they felt Native American art could contribute to the revitalization and progress of American culture. They also wanted to use the popularity of Indian art to help Indian communities survive economically and culturally. However, they were conflicted about the form this survival should take.

The Society of American Indians was the first Indian-led Indian rights organization in the United States. The group directed its energies to agitating for government policies and social reform projects that would facilitate individual Native American autonomy and citizenship. DeCora was a professional illustrator and designer and the founder of a curriculum in Indian art for the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Her comment came from a talk entitled “Native Indian Art,” which argued for the centrality of artistic production to the economic and cultural survival of Native Americans in the

twentieth century. The society took for granted that Indians would be assimilated into European American society; as DeCora's talk demonstrates, however, they did not feel this required abandoning all tribal practices and beliefs.

DeCora's progressivism is typical of the membership of the Society of American Indians. Like other organizations of the day, the society was critical of the social problems that had arisen as a result of industrialization. Moreover, they felt themselves uniquely qualified to offer a critique, as these problems were identified with European, not Indian, racial development. Turning primitivism to their own advantage, members of the society proposed that Native Americans could pursue a model of development that avoided pollution, overcrowding, and child labor. The secret would be to preserve core values that were already part of Indian culture. Most of those present had been born and partially raised on reservations but had come to share the "universal" values of Christianity, education, science, and art during periods of off-reservation schooling. Most had received support from government and reform organizations. During these experiences, they had come to see themselves as belonging to a "race" that was in need of "advancement." At the same time, they were unable and unwilling to condemn all of the traditions they had learned in childhood, joining antimodernist European Americans in thinking that Indian culture was sometimes more healthy and sincere than urban American life.

DeCora was uniquely qualified to make the claim that Indian art could contribute to an integrated American cultural landscape. Native American artists of her generation, such as the Pomo basketmakers Mary and William Benson and the Hopi-Tewa potter Nampeyo, had achieved national name recognition. Other Indian people participated in the arts and crafts movement as craftspeople and even occasionally as critics.² But DeCora alone had the combination of training and desire to produce a systematic articulation of Indian aesthetics.³ In numerous lectures and articles and in her curriculum at Carlisle, she defined the distinctive quality of Indian art as an abstract, geometric sense of design that could be applied to both traditional and nontraditional materials. She utilized the terms of the mainstream art world in her creative work, pedagogy, and political activism. DeCora and her peers in the Society of American Indians shared many of the values of

non-Indians of the time, including a belief in education, hard work, and the power of art. At the same time, her experiences as an Indian woman artist working at the margins of turn-of-the-century European American culture made her aware that the incorporation of Indian people into an American economy and culture was not a simple matter.

Like most European Americans and an increasing number of Native Americans of her generation, DeCora accepted that Indian people belonged to a distinct *race*. Her politicized aesthetics were designed to simultaneously define and unify this race without locking the definition of Indian art into any specific unchanging tradition. She developed an understanding of Native art that would not only provide the opportunity to take pride in the Native American past but also allow Indian people to participate in the economic and artistic culture of the present. At the same time, she challenged the tendency of the discourse of Indian art to deculturize the objects it celebrated, always arguing that Indian art is defined as art made by Indian people.

As this chapter will show, DeCora's career was compromised by her own vulnerability to the romanticizing nostalgia that made mainstream critics continually define Indian art as a thing of the past. At the same time, she, more than any other participant in the discourse of Indian aesthetics, embraced the social-oriented aesthetic ideas of the time. DeCora's belief in the power of design to promote racial understanding resonates throughout her work. At the beginning of her career, DeCora tried to bridge Indian and non-Indian cultures through painting, putting her training at the hands of some of the best known European American art teachers of the day to use. Later, she moved away from illusionistic renderings of figures in space to abstract designs conceived of as constituting a pan-Indian iconography. It was only when she began to focus on the attitudes and objects of the arts and crafts movement that she found a definition of art that enabled her and other Indians to participate in the growing market for "Indian" creations without compromising their aesthetic ideals. In addition, it provided justification for Indian artists to build on their own artistic traditions without locking themselves out of participation in contemporary culture.

An assessment of DeCora's accomplishments is difficult to make because of the limited number of works by her that we have to study. Schol-

ars are restricted to discussing works that are extant, which consist of two illustrated stories in *Harper's Weekly* from 1899, illustrations and cover designs for five books, and a handful of illustrations for the *Indian Craftsman*, a publication of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and the Society of American Indians' *American Indian Magazine*. Only a small number of her presumably many paintings have been located.⁴ All of these have Indian subject matter, though it is unclear whether she would have always focused on overtly Native American themes if given commercial opportunities to do otherwise; for example, her letters describe making landscape paintings for her own pleasure. In addition to visual evidence for her aesthetic ideas, DeCora has left behind numerous writings, including lectures on Indian art, an autobiographical sketch, and a thick file of letters to Cora Mae Folsom, her former teacher.⁵ To assess DeCora's artistic vision we need to consider everything she produced; her illustrations and writings in particular provide a rich resource for the investigation of her politicized aesthetics.

Previous studies of DeCora's work have analyzed her work in relationship to other contemporary artistic representations of Indians.⁶ These analyses suggest that the fact that she spent her first nine years living with her Winnebago family in Nebraska enabled her to avoid perpetuating inaccurate popular stereotypes. I agree with these scholars that the grounding in Winnebago values and the strong sense of identity that DeCora received in her early childhood nourished and inspired her throughout her career. However, it is also important to understand the influence of her subsequent education on her aesthetic views. At nine, DeCora left home to attend school at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. Including a one-year hiatus spent with her family, she studied at Hampton for seven years, graduating in 1891. For the following decade, DeCora studied in European American institutions. After a brief stint at a girls academy in western Massachusetts, she enrolled in the art certificate program at Smith College, where she studied with Dwight Tryon. The four years at Smith were followed by two years at the Drexel Academy in Philadelphia and, finally, two years of study in Boston. During these years she began publishing illustrations and graphic designs. In 1905 she was lured away from her commercial career to teach Indian art at the Carlisle Indian school, a position she held until 1915. This position entailed not only teaching, but also theorizing and speaking publicly on Indian art. Although DeCora dreamed of returning to painting when she retired from

Carlisle, this stage of her career was cut short when she died in the influenza epidemic of 1918.

DeCora's work represents the modern Indian condition, characterized by experiences and attitudes that made Native Americans experts in European American as well as tribal cultures. An investigation of the hybrid nature of her art allows us to understand the degree to which DeCora embraced the European American politicized aesthetics of the time. DeCora's outlook was shaped by the sense of purpose she learned at the hands of European American women during seven years in the Indian program at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. DeCora received an education at the hands of the school's reform-oriented staff and on "outings" with the families of female reformers in western Massachusetts. As early as 1895, DeCora showed her commitment to the Indian reform community by addressing the conference of the Friends of the Indian at Lake Mohonk.⁷ Such women supported her emotionally and financially, and encouraged her to believe in her artistic ability. The encouragement to exercise her moral authority as a woman and an Indian she got from these women reformers was matched by lessons in the social value of art included in her artistic training. Dwight Tryon taught her to appreciate art's capacity to exert moral and spiritual influence. Her later teachers, Howard Pyle, Joseph DeCamp, Frank Benson and Edmund Tarbell, reinforced his emphasis on art's personal and social rewards.

DeCora's concept of racial aesthetics was inconsistent, sometimes even contradictory. It was the product of both her European American artistic education and her experience as a person whose race and gender continually shaped and delineated her opportunities. Though DeCora claimed she would have loved to have become a landscape painter, she took work where she could get it. Illness and professional biases continually impeded her career, and she frequently found herself resorting to dressmaking, making Christmas "gimcracks," and generally doing what she called "other people's work," in order to make money.⁸ The year she left Carlisle she earned extra money by painting Zuni, Navajo, Sioux, and Hopi designs on china pins. As she put it, "Foolish things sell better always."⁹ DeCora's interest in negotiating a place for Native American art within turn-of-the-century American culture was not without contradictions, but the fraught politics that inhabit her aesthetic position are an important part of the history of early modernism that we are wont to forget.

DeCora's earliest artworks utilize a strategy typical of educated colonized peoples: the use of Western representational forms to humanize and correct stereotypical imagery.¹⁰ DeCora's professional artistic career began in 1899, when *Harper's Monthly* published two stories that she wrote and illustrated about Indians from unidentified tribes. Their plots locate young Indian women in the kinds of emotional situations typical of European American magazine literature of the day. "The Sick Child" describes a girl's first experience of human powerlessness in the face of death. In "Gray Wolf's Daughter," the heroine decides to pursue her ambition—an education—despite her family's reservations.

The stories put the lessons of sentimental fiction to the work of describing the difficulty of transculturation. Although there is no indication that they are autobiographical, both show young Indian women seeking a balance between their own desires and their tribal traditions, an experience DeCora no doubt faced herself. In "The Sick Child," the heroine wavers in her commitment to the difficult requirements of a healing ritual. Charged with making an offering to the Great Spirit and asking for help, she doubts whether it will help. Though a medicine woman and a medicine man add their healing prayers to hers, the child dies. In the other story, Gray Wolf's daughter gives up her belongings and her role in tribal ceremonials when she leaves home to attend a government boarding school. Though her family is reluctant to let her go, she leaves willingly: "She herself had for a long time desired knowledge of the white man's ways, and now her family had given their consent to her going to school" (860).

DeCora wrote "The Sick Child" and "Gray Wolf's Daughter" while studying at the Drexel Academy in Philadelphia with the premier illustrator of the time, Howard Pyle. Pyle specialized in making romantic and historical pictures of the medieval and colonial eras for magazines and for books of his own original adventure tales. DeCora's opportunity to create and publish these images has been described as the result of Pyle's encouraging her to spend the summer of 1897 with a former schoolmate on the Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa reservation at Fort Berthold, North Dakota, where he felt she could cultivate her "distinctly" Indian art by spending more time with "her own people."¹¹ Pyle's suggestion that she would find "her own

people” at Fort Berthold betrays his belief that all Indian cultures were the same. The illustrations for “The Sick Child” were prepared for the teacher’s summer illustration course in 1898 in Chadd’s Ford, Pennsylvania, to which DeCora had won a scholarship. Pyle admired one of them enough to hang it in the summer school’s exhibition at the Drexel Academy that fall.

DeCora’s illustrations use European American models of composition and style to bring the reader into an understanding of the characters’ situations. The dim light of one illustration for “The Sick Child” (figure 57) illuminates a quiet, touching scene consisting of two women and two girls gathered around a small child who has been taken out of its cradle board. They are surrounded by symbols of their femininity: empty vessels, baskets, and a doll lying in the background. The log-frame lodge in which they sit is lined with soft textiles that enhance the sense of security and comfort of this domestic space. Blankets and bundles hang from the wall beams; the floor is covered in woven mats. Pyle encouraged his students to be close observers of historical detail, and to fully flesh out their compositions so that viewers could imaginatively project themselves into the scene. The deep space of this illustration and the objects that occupy the background are consistent with this approach. As one of Pyle’s students later put it, “To be able to live in the scene one was depicting was as essential as being able to draw.”¹²

While clearly a Pyle-styled illustration, this one from “The Sick Child” also refers to older traditions of art. The arrangement of figures recalls Renaissance adoration scenes, particularly because of the soft light on the mother’s beatific face. The sentimental and religious allusions in this illustration are not accidental—they are consistent with the entire story’s attempt to link an Indian story to universal themes. The other illustrations support this connection. The opening image shows the narrator’s head, wrapped in a striped scarf, looking up into a darkening sky as if seeking help (figure 58). Though she is clearly dark-skinned, her modest attire and expression fit a long tradition of depictions of pious women. The final image shows the medicine man framed against a dramatic sky. Again, his skin and the band circling his head identify him as Indian, but the pose invokes biblical patriarchs from the Western painting tradition.

DeCora was not the first artist to use classical poses for Indian subjects; her use of this mode to humanize Indian life differs from her predecessors’ idealized visions of it. While Brush’s pictures of heroically nude Indian men



FIGURE 57 Angel DeCora, illustration from “The Sick Child,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 98 (February 1899): 447.



FIGURE 58 Angel DeCora, illustration from “The Sick Child,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 98 (February 1899): 446.

encourage viewers to contemplate the nobility of an Indian past, DeCora’s pictures are designed to draw attention to the pathos of the Indian present. It is not nudity or drama that attract our attention in “The Sick Child” but the emotion of an event all too common in nineteenth-century America. The women and girls are not dazzling, complicated figures that demonstrate the artist’s skill; they are modestly and uniformly dressed, their bodies hidden under loose dark dresses with long sleeves. Even the baby is swaddled in a white gown.

In their ennobling vision of tribal life, these illustrations argue for art’s

ability to communicate the artist's humanity to her viewers. Such an approach is consistent with the pedagogy of DeCora's first teacher, Dwight Tryon. DeCora studied with Tryon at Smith College from 1891 to 1895. At the time, Smith was one of the few places where women could study art on the college level. Although he followed a typical academic curriculum, moving from cast drawing to life drawing and lecturing on topics like art history and perspective, Tryon's pedagogy was infused with his personal aesthetic ideas. In his critiques, lectures on aesthetics, and the images he acquired or loaned to Smith's Hillyer Art Gallery, where DeCora worked as a custodian, he explained his understanding of art as a universal moral language. His celebration of originality and sincerity on the part of the artist formed the basis of DeCora's later aesthetic theories. He impressed on his students his view that art "was a humanizer" and the embodiment of "sincerity and truth" and argued for the importance of art in unifying and advancing American culture.¹³ DeCora told her former teachers that she found Tryon's criticism inspiring, and, indeed, she thrived in his classes, earning a departmental prize in her second year and receiving several commendations at her graduation in 1896.¹⁴ Tryon's ideas reinforced the understanding advanced by DeCora's Hampton Institute teachers of art as a civilizer and raiser. Her own experiences backed this lesson up. As she later related, the opportunity to express herself creatively was the only thing that soothed her frustrations and kept her from running away from boarding school.¹⁵

DeCora used the formal lessons she learned in Tryon's classes to bring the viewer into the scene physically and emotionally, as an illustration for the story "Gray Wolf's Daughter" demonstrates (see figure 59). The low point of view locates the viewer on the grass outside the circle of dancers, in a space set off by the stones and vessels in the foreground; she is a welcome visitor, a complement to the seated women and children behind the dancers. The style of the illustration also brings the viewer in. The soft light and murky background identify the artist with the contemporary style called tonalism, a style in which Tryon excelled.¹⁶ Indeed, the rounded lodge at the right of DeCora's composition could be read as an homage to Tryon's 1889 painting *The Rising Moon: Autumn* (figure 60), one of Tryon's favorites. Like Tryon's French scene, DeCora's picture is designed to capture a mood rather than to illustrate an event. The six figures depicted in her work, visually rhyming the same number of inanimate rocks and baskets in the foreground, don't



FIGURE 59 Angel DeCora, illustration from "Gray Wolf's Daughter," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 99 (November 1899): 861.



FIGURE 60 Dwight Tryon, *The Rising Moon: Autumn*, 1899. Oil on canvas. Inv. no. F1889.31, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Charles Lang Freer.

seem to be dancing, or indeed moving, at all. The active brushwork on the surface of this image does not enhance movement, instead it contributes a hazy quality that casts us at a distance from the scene, as if viewing it through time and space. The dim light makes the figures in the background literally hard to see, as if they were fleeting traces of memory, just beyond our grasp.

DeCora's nocturnes bear not only a formal but also an ideological resemblance to Tryon's work. Tryon encouraged his students to think independently and experiment with their own ways of painting. DeCora's use of his style aspires to both formal innovation and personal expression. Moreover, her early nocturnes display an antimodernist nostalgia for prereservation Indian life that would have appealed to both non-Indian and Indian viewers. Linda Merrill finds in Tryon's New England landscapes both an attempt to create an autonomous aesthetic object and a nostalgia for an idyllic Connecticut childhood that never existed.¹⁷ Tryon's mythic images of old New England fed not only his own personal memory but also a broader cultural longing for a simpler time among the elite whose cultural authority was threatened by industrialization and the social changes that came with it. Aestheticist artists like Tryon were concerned that American culture was becoming decadent in the face of expanding industrialization and commercialism, and they created works of art that would help inspire the nation's cultural ascent. Subtle, harmonious compositions like Tryon's provided the viewer with a chance to escape the dirty, crowded, workaday world of the city and find the repose necessary to dwell on higher things. As Kathleen Pyne has explained, this experience was geared toward the same kind of spiritual regeneration that artists and critics sought. In aestheticist paintings, "beauty is presented for the sake of the viewer; it offers personal delectation and the opportunity for self-culture."¹⁸

Significantly, Tryon believed that it wasn't every viewer who could appreciate his work. Writing to a patron, he explained: "The 'spirit of art' reveals itself to the ardent lover only."¹⁹ He told Charles Lang Freer that *The Rising Moon* was a picture in which "the average person will see nothing and at first sight will not reveal itself to even more cultured ones."²⁰ The artistic movement advanced by Tryon and his peers was elitist, but it was not without social goals. Aestheticist painters and critics hoped to provide moral leadership for the entire country, encouraging viewers to cultivate



FIGURE 61 Angel DeCora, untitled, n.d. Watercolor on paper. Hampton University's Archival and Museum Collection, Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia.

their own individual powers of aesthetic judgment. As Linda Dowling has explained, aestheticism and the more explicitly socially oriented arts and crafts movement have their roots in the same late eighteenth-century belief that art should provide social cohesion and moral authority in an age when other sources of moral authority (the nobility, the church, etc.) were beginning to break down.²¹ Without specifically articulating universal values, supporters of this idea put their faith in art's ability to help individuals transcend their own sense of isolation.

While Tryon and his peers saw their audience as the American cultural elite, DeCora's engagement with aestheticism proposes a different kind of insider audience, a specifically racial one. Though they engage universal themes, DeCora's early images dwell on subjects that she felt had particular meaning for Indians. DeCora's many nocturnes partake of Tryon's nostalgia (e.g., figure 61). The prereservation idyll they present fits a European American taste for imagery that romanticizes the Indian past while identifying Indian culture as inevitably doomed—an attitude Renato Rosaldo has described as "imperialist nostalgia."²² But rather than emphasize the heroic exploits usually associated with European American images of "the vanishing race," DeCora's nocturnes point to domestic moments of families gathered around the evening fire to reinforce a sense of community, fitting her own childhood memories. "About as early as I can remember," she wrote

later, “I was lulled to sleep night after night by my father’s or grandparent’s recital of laws and customs.”²³ The firelit tipi was a touchstone to which she could return to fuel her sense of identity, like Gray Wolf’s daughter, who is included in the evening dance even though she is about to leave to pursue nontraditional ambitions.

THE POLITICS OF DRESS

DeCora can be seen as akin to the *Wild West* performers who modeled for Käsebier: to obtain a livelihood, both perpetuated the romantic European American stereotype of Indians. Like other Native American culture brokers of the period, they also hoped to influence the consumers of these images to adopt more sympathetic attitudes toward Indian people. However, as Philip Deloria has pointed out, by “playing Indian,” Native Americans could inadvertently perpetuate the idea that Indian culture was a thing of the past and not the present.²⁴ In other words, by attempting to fight for cultural understanding and respect through idealized representations of the Indian past, DeCora risked reifying an identification of Indian culture with practices that were waning in the face of assimilationist federal policies, and thus suggesting that her culture itself was destined to die out. Already in 1898 DeCora seemed aware of the potential danger in presenting nostalgic images of her race. While some of her illustrations contribute to a nostalgic image of Native life, others confront stereotypes of Indians head-on. This can be seen in the first illustration of “Gray Wolf’s Daughter” (figure 62). The image shows a young girl dressed in beaded buckskins posed against a painted hide. The scene illustrates a moment from the story when the girl’s mother dresses her for her last dance. The moment of dressing in this regalia is drawn out in the story, giving the reader time to think about the material and symbolic weight of each object: “As she spoke, the mother drew out a basket from under the blankets and took from it a great pile of beads. These she hung around her daughter’s neck till they reached half way up to her ears. Then she hung in her ears silver ear-rings that jingled with every movement of her head. Silver rings and silver bracelets on her arms, and then she was ready to join her friends” (862).

A European American viewer of “Gray Wolf’s Daughter” might note the model’s typical academic pose, and see the picture as an ennobled vision of traditional Indian life, similar to “The Sick Child.” Similarly, they might



FIGURE 62 Angel DeCora, illustration from “Gray Wolf’s Daughter,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 99 (November 1899): 86o.

recognize the stamp of her teacher in her use of graphic simplicity, dramatic lighting, and use of period costume and props to set the scene. But the image is also in dialogue with stereotypical representation of Indians, especially the image that Rayna Green has identified as the “Indian Princess.”²⁵ Promoted through advertisements, dime novels, and photographs, the Indian princess was young and beautiful, and wore elaborately decorated buckskin clothing and lots of jewelry and was often depicted looking out at the viewer. Modeled on Pocahontas, the Indian princess is young, attractive, and helpful, and serves to suggest Native American openness to, even interest in, European curiosity. Edward Curtis’s photograph of a Zuni woman, first published in 1903, exemplifies this type (see figure 63). The sitter looks at the viewer as she holds her necklaces up, seemingly offering her identity up for the viewer’s consumption. Despite superficial similarities, DeCora’s model reworks this image. Gray Wolf’s daughter holds up her beads and braid and examines them, as if questioning her relationship to them. The figure is pinned in place between our close gaze and the geometric patterns behind her which, in their imitation of the angles of her arms and head, threaten to absorb her, to overwhelm her with the material signs of her race.

Gray Wolf’s daughter seems to ask wherein Indian identity adheres—in external appearances or somewhere inside. In questioning the relationship of appearance and identity, DeCora was tapping into a significant American discourse of the day. As American culture became increasingly rich



FIGURE 63 Edward S. Curtis, “A Zuni Girl,” from the portfolio *The North American Indian*, 1903. Photogravure. Inv. no. 1988.5.12, States Marshall Service, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

in visual imagery—through photography, illustrations, advertisements—it also became increasingly interested in using the visual as a means of obtaining and circulating knowledge. DeCora’s interest in dress was part of a larger cultural obsession with the subject at the time. European Americans used similar criteria in evaluating each other, seeing dress as an index of social rank, as social theorist Thorstein Veblen observed in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, published the same year that DeCora’s story appeared.²⁶

The question of the relationship between appearance and identity was particularly relevant to an Indian woman like Gray Wolf’s daughter, who was about to leave for a tribally mixed, government-run boarding school. Boarding schools, in their effort to turn Indians into “Americans,” forbade the wearing of traditional clothing and cut off their pupils’ long hair. DeCora’s heroine is aware that these corporeal changes will take place. One of her last acts before leaving home is to give her ceremonial clothing to her sister-in-law. Going to school in her plainest dress gave a physical dimension

to the more internal identity transformation she would experience there. The story promotes the female protagonist's decision to follow her desires in a positive light, but it doesn't suggest that this will be easy.

Homi Bhabha has pointed out that racialism is an inherently visual attitude, based on the recognition of otherness.²⁷ "Gray Wolf's Daughter" suggests that DeCora was aware of this, that Indians already brought a high level of consideration to the impression their appearance would make. The decision whether or not to wear traditional dress was seen as a sign of an Indian's relationship to his or her cultural heritage. For Indian people, the question of making a respectable appearance was bound up with the question of how much to retain their tribal identities in the face of economic and cultural pressures to become "civilized" according to European American terms. Ceremonial clothing could be seen simultaneously as a sign of respect for tribal traditions and an indication of savagery. Confinement to reservations had stripped Indian tribes of most of their traditions, so clothing, which was portable and easily stored, took on increased symbolic importance for families trying to retain their cultural identities. Public celebrations like the Fourth of July became the occasion to cover one's body with heavily beaded clothing as a sign of cultural pride, in what Marsha Clift Bol has recognized as "an endeavor to fill the vacancy left by other lost social institutions."²⁸

While the wearing of ceremonial regalia was a way to demonstrate and consolidate status at tribal gatherings, Indian people of this period were learning from the kinds of texts discussed earlier in this study that such displays, in front of European Americans, contributed to their identification as primitive others; Indian people were aware that wearing traditional clothing appealed to European Americans' desire to see them as picturesque vestiges of an exotic and rapidly vanishing culture. Some, like the *Wild West* performers, chose to turn this non-Indian desire to their own economic advantage, whereas others, such as Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, worried about contributing to the ideology of the vanishing race.²⁹

DeCora's understanding of this situation drew on her own experiences of prejudice and her own vexed relationship to her appearance, which I will illustrate with two photographs made of DeCora by a photographer named Hensel sometime around 1908. The first photograph is a formal portrait of her wearing a beaded dress and long beaded earrings (figure 64). De-

Cora sent this photograph to her Hampton mentor Cora Mae Folsom with a letter explaining that she got a copy of the portrait in exchange for work done for the photographer.³⁰ We don't know the reason DeCora had her portrait made, but the date coincides with the year she began lecturing publicly on Native American art, and the photograph may have been used for publicity. DeCora presents herself as confident, proud, and comfortable in the beaded dress. She clearly regarded it as a good likeness, or she would not have shared it with a loved one. Another photograph showing DeCora and another Indian woman, likely taken on the same day, makes use of the artist and lecturer as a generic model of Indian womanhood wearing a less distinctive Plains dress (figure 65). DeCora appears on the left wearing a dress and belt similar to those in "Gray Wolf's Daughter." Her companion kneels beside her in the beaded top from the formal portrait. Animal skins covered with painting and quillwork create an "Indian" environment behind them and a beaded cradleboard resting on DeCora's thigh completes the scene.

Perhaps modeling was the "work" DeCora performed in exchange for the print she sent to Folsom. Hensel could have wanted to compete in the booming market for postcard pictures of Indians.³¹ This picture, which includes a glimpse of Hensel's studio props above the women's heads, exposes the artificiality of the pose, as does the lack of interest the women show in the cradle and its supposed occupant, but cropped differently, or taken from a different angle, most European American viewers would be willing to believe that the models were "wild Indians" and not college-educated artists. The photograph and another like it now form part of the Richard Henry Pratt Papers at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.³² Though DeCora was a friend of Pratt's, her name does not appear on the photographs, which are in an envelope marked "Indian women."

The references to both Western art and Indian experience in DeCora's *Harper's* illustrations become all the more significant when compared with advertisements showing illustrations of Indians published in the same volume of the magazine (see figure 66). A notice for Burnett's Vanilla Extract, for example, uses pictures of Mexican natives picking and carrying vanilla beans as a sign of the authenticity of their product. The Indians are shown semiclothed. The woman in the lower picture bares a breast and looks somewhat seductively out at the viewer as if to confirm the sexual availability of



FIGURE 64 Hensel Studio, "Angel DeCora," ca. 1908. Gelatin silver print. Hampton University's Archival and Museum Collection, Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia.



FIGURE 65 Hensel Studio (?), "Angel DeCora and an Unknown Woman," ca. 1908. Gelatin silver print. Richard Henry Pratt Papers, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut.



FIGURE 66 Advertisement for Burnett's Vanilla Extract, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 98 (February 1899): 93.

“primitive” women. Despite her extraordinary personal history, such stereotypes affected DeCora’s personal and professional opportunities. *Harper’s* exoticized DeCora just as this advertisement exoticizes Mexican Indians. Ignoring the college-educated twenty-three-year-old’s sophisticated approach to her work, it issued a press release celebrating these stories as those of a “naïve . . . Indian girl.”³³

Popular culture helped determine the way people responded to DeCora, and set up expectations for her to act “wild” while her friends and mentors pressured her to be an example of how Indians could become “civilized.” DeCora’s correspondence reveals her fear that even her closest friends might treat her as a symbol. Addressing Folsom about an article the latter was writing about her, DeCora wrote, “I hope you [and] . . . the editors won’t put me under the heading ‘prominent colored women.’”³⁴

DeCora’s supporters could also be disappointed that she fit the model of civilized femininity too well. Pyle saw DeCora’s artistic potential as deter-

mined by her race, not her skill, her experiences, or her imagination. Pyle demonstrated his idealized vision of the West when he said, "There is no more picturesque object in the world than the Western cow-puncher."³⁵ He shared his enthusiasm with several of his male pupils, most notably N. C. Wyeth. DeCora let him down. The West of Pyle and Wyeth was a romanticized place where masculine types could prove themselves physically and emotionally. As he said of DeCora, "Unfortunately she was a woman and still more unfortunately an American Indian. She was so retiring that she always kept in the background of my classes. When I tried to rouse her ambition by telling her how famous she might become, she answered: 'We Indian women are taught that modesty is a woman's chief virtue.'"³⁶

Sometimes DeCora used humor to take the sting out of racism. Parodying attitudes that would seem to use science to argue for the inferiority of an Indian intellect, she once asked Folsom, "Do you think it is too much for an Injun to read Darwin?"³⁷ The sophistication of this comment is typical of the way DeCora demonstrated her familiarity with both Indian and European American cultures, and how she put this familiarity to use as a cultural interlocutor.

FROM ILLUSTRATOR TO DESIGNER

Some time between August 1898 and August 1899 DeCora left Pyle's classes and Drexel Institute. As she later put it in an autobiographical essay, "I used to hear a great deal of discussion among the students, and instructors as well, on the sentiments of 'Commercial' art and 'Art for art's sake.' I was swayed back and forth by the conflicting views, and finally I left Philadelphia and went to Boston" (her decision suggests that she opted for art for art's sake).³⁸ A letter to her old Hampton mentor Cora Mae Folsom in September of 1899 suggests that the decision was driven more by personal concerns than her aestheticism: "I have made up my mind even as far back as last year that I would not return to Philadelphia even though the only other and only choice left me was killing myself."³⁹

Neither DeCora nor Pyle ever discussed her departure from his classes, but Pyle's attitude toward the kind of artistic idealism DeCora held may have also been a factor in this decision. The illustrator publicly disparaged the ideal of art for art's sake that DeCora aspired to. In 1902, he told an audience at the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts that "Art for Art's sake,"

is a high-sounding phrase, and it is imagined (especially in unsuccessful studios) to be rather a fine thing for a painter to paint obscurely, producing great works unrecognized by the vulgar world. From the standpoint of a practical worker, it would seem to be a very plain statement of fact, that, if a cobbler does not sell his shoes, it is because they do not fit the feet of other men, and it would seem an equally natural inference to suppose that the very general failure to sell American pictures is because they do not fit the ideals of American men and women.”⁴⁰ Given his critique of aestheticism, it is not hard to imagine that Pyle saw DeCora’s attempts to change the popular image of Indian life not as a sign of her innovation, but rather proof of her being out of touch with “the ideals of American men and women.”

As his regret that DeCora was an Indian woman shows, Pyle also saw DeCora’s gender as a detriment to her career. Though he had many women students, there is evidence that Pyle was insecure about the ability of women to succeed in art as well as men. As Michele Bogart has noticed, he offered his female students less encouragement and professional support than his male ones.⁴¹ As he became increasingly able to limit and control the enrollment in his classes, the proportion of male to female students grew dramatically. In the year DeCora left Drexel, Pyle lost 20 percent of his women students. When he broke away from Drexel to found his own school in 1900, he left most of the rest of them behind.

Whatever the reason, or combination of reasons, for DeCora’s departure from Philadelphia and a promising career in illustration, by September 1899, she had moved to Boston and enrolled in classes with Joseph DeCamp at Cowles Art School. In the late 1890s Boston was a capital of American high culture, boasting a new Beaux-Arts-style Museum of Fine Art, the nation’s leading symphony orchestra and musical conservatory, and the gloriously decorated Public Library, as well as several art schools and clubs.⁴² Though the city had a large and important mercantile class, its cultural institutions distanced themselves from the commercial world. In 1897, three of the city’s leading painters and painting instructors helped found the Ten American Painters, an exhibition group that seceded from the Society of American Artists because of that organization’s increasing commercialism.⁴³ Over the course of two years, DeCora studied with all three of these men: DeCamp at Cowles, and, later, Edmund Tarbell and Frank Benson at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. Her understanding of their values is demonstrated in

her success: as at her other schools, DeCora excelled as a student, receiving honorable mention in the Concours Scholarships for 1900 and 1901.⁴⁴

Despite her commitment to the aestheticism of her teachers, DeCora continued to do commercial work. Her interest in illustration may have been related to the fact that she felt other Indians would be more likely to see her work if it was mass-produced. In this, she is like the African American civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois, who two decades later encouraged Aaron Douglas to devote his talents to making illustrations because that was the only kind of art middle-class African Americans were likely to see.⁴⁵ The degree to which her work circulated within progressive Native American circles can be noted in the fact that Indians and Indian reformers provide nearly all of the contemporary criticism of her work.⁴⁶

Significantly, DeCora's commercial work in Boston provided her first opportunities to collaborate artistically with other Indian people, enabling her to see a potential to link personal and professional success with racial uplift. The importance of dress as a site of identity came up again with the commission to provide a frontispiece for an autobiographical book by the Omaha ethnologist Francis LaFlesche, titled *The Middle Five* (see plate 8). At the editor's suggestion, DeCora focused on a moment when the newly arrived LaFlesche (wearing traditional Omaha clothing) is being comforted by a bigger boy wearing a uniform. In DeCora's hands, the picture not only depicts a sympathetic interaction, but also thematizes how the boarding school experience transforms Indian identity. As a student, the young LaFlesche will shed some of his Omaha identity along with his buckskin outfit as he becomes more "Americanized." The school's rigid environment is symbolized by the interconnected lines and rectangles that dominate the right side of the composition. The schoolhouse is a blank, colorless building, with decaying walls and windows that neither reflect nature nor provide a peek into a cozy interior. As contrast, DeCora has included a strip of landscape at the left edge of the picture, a sunny field, and nearly cloudless sky that recede far into the distance. The boy hides his eyes, unable to face his past or his future. But he is comforted by a uniformed boy who, while he may not come from the same tribe, has undergone a similar experience himself. The painting is a reminder that Indian schools were places where Indian children came in contact not only with European American culture but also with other Indians. As Sally McBeth points out, it was in the schools

that “an inter-tribal, ‘Indian’ identity emerged as an important cohesive concept.”⁴⁷ DeCora had written to LaFlesche that she found his book an apt description of Indian school life.⁴⁸ As if to bear witness that she had also shared this experience, DeCora inscribed her initials in pale paint on the wall above the boy’s head.

DeCora tried to show her understanding of all that was involved in this transformation by making the boy’s Omaha clothing as authentic as possible. In the same letter to LaFlesche, DeCora asked the author for descriptions and photographs that would help her make a more accurate drawing, because she had been unable to find an example of the clothing in Boston. But DeCora’s need to work from models sometimes conflicted with her desire to be accurate, and she found herself using the same moccasins, for example, for several different illustrations.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, throughout her career she tried to obtain not only accurate clothing but actual members of the tribes she was consigned to depict to use as models for her work.⁵⁰ DeCora’s interest in tribal specificity might seem surprising in an Indian who was educated away from home as part of a tribally mixed school. But while the administrators of Indian schools were committed to assimilating their pupils into mainstream American culture, this project was impossible to accomplish completely, and students and personnel often reinforced and expanded concepts of tribal identity. Indeed, as K. Tsianina Lomawaima points out, Indians far outnumbered non-Indians at most boarding schools, and groups and gangs frequently formed along tribal lines.⁵¹

The frontisiece for *The Middle Five* exemplifies DeCora’s interest in appealing to the Native Americans in her audience. While most European American children would not notice the difference between an Arapaho and an Omaha shirt, Indian schoolchildren would appreciate her accuracy. DeCora’s Indian peers continually complained about the tendency of non-Indian artists to produce generalized representations of Indian culture, mixing and matching imagery from different traditions.⁵² DeCora was aware that other educated Indians were part of the audience for her work. Friends from school made up a significant portion of her acquaintance in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York.⁵³ Her audience also included many Indian people she had never met. Through the efforts of the government and reform organizations, the books and magazines DeCora worked for were regularly purchased for the libraries of Indian schools, and commented

on in school and reform publications.⁵⁴ Reporting of the appearance of Zitkala-Sa's *Old Indian Stories*, which DeCora also illustrated, the Carlisle school paper claimed, "Thus the Indian is entering into the highest and best places. We are not content to be mediocre."⁵⁵ The eventual founders of the Society of American Indians kept tabs on each other through such publications; and one of the society's first acts was to issue its own journal, *The American Indian Magazine*.

In the years following the *Middle Five* commission, DeCora continued to make representational illustrations and began exploring two- and three-dimensional design, a mode of expression that embodied rather than represented her transculturation. Illustration had allowed her to insert Indian characters into a Western artistic tradition, suggesting a need to use the dominant culture's representational forms in order to gain recognition of Indian experience. Design allowed her to suggest the value of the Native American artistic tradition, a value that she explicitly proposed had meaning for both Indian and non-Indian audiences. Significantly, this interest in design, like her interest in illustration, grew out of her involvement in European American artistic communities. While it is likely that DeCora understood that her commercial work had a better chance of reaching a Native American audience than panel paintings, at the same time, the world in which she circulated in Boston enabled her to see applied art as capable of demonstrating the same aesthetic value as fine art. She was able to adjust her commitment to art for art's sake to include a wider range of materials, eventually encompassing traditional Indian handicrafts. Without this shift in her aesthetic outlook at the beginning of the 1900s, DeCora could not have conceived of the racial aesthetic she promoted as a teacher and political activist a decade later.

DeCora's embrace of applied art allies her with the progressive aesthetics of design reformers. The artist's personal and professional connections put her at the center of communities exploring the possibilities of elevating applied art to the level of handicraft. Small, Maynard, the publishers DeCora worked for, were committed to high quality. Following the lead of William Morris's Kelmscott Press, they hoped to make the publication of artistic books profitable. Owners Herbert Small and Laurens Maynard, like many others in the Boston publishing community, had developed a commitment

to the principles of handicraft through the mentoring of Charles Eliot Norton, the Harvard fine arts professor and friend of Ruskin. Norton believed that art was defined by good design and technique regardless of medium, and that art could exert a moral force. He demonstrated this through his patronage of Boston's Society of Arts and Crafts, in whose 1899 exhibition DeCora's teachers Howard Pyle and Joseph DeCamp participated. It is unclear whether DeCora herself was in Boston early enough in the year to see the exhibit, which was open the first two weeks in April, but, according to Beverly Brandt, art students from all over New England flocked to it in such numbers that the society set special visiting hours just for them.⁵⁶ DeCora may have had the opportunity to study with Norton herself. In 1899 he offered a class in "Imagination in Art" at the School of the Museum of Fine Art.

DeCora's familiarity with these ideas came not only from her teachers, but also from her landlord and patron, Joseph Edgar Chamberlin. Chamberlin was an editor at *Youth's Companion*, a magazine edited by several of Boston's avant-garde book publishers. He was also the author of a regular column in the *Boston Evening Transcript*. DeCora's relationship with Chamberlin and his wife, Ida, became deep and long-lasting. How DeCora found Chamberlin is unknown, though she was probably led to him by Zitkala-Sa, an educated Sioux violinist photographed by Käsebier, who had moved to Boston to study at the conservatory and who was close to Chamberlin's fellow publisher, F. Holland Day.⁵⁷ A letter from Ida Chamberlin to Day in September 1899 notes that both Zitkala-Sa and DeCora were staying with them at their house in Wrentham.⁵⁸ She remained at their home until 1902, when both she and the Chamberlins moved to New York, where Joseph had accepted a job on the staff of the *Evening Mail*.

It was while living with the Chamberlins that DeCora received the bulk of her illustration commissions, which seem to have come through her Indian contacts rather than Chamberlin's friends. For example, the Boston-based ethnographer Alice Fletcher was responsible for giving DeCora the commission to illustrate *The Middle Five*. However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that these were discrete social circles. Boston intellectuals were connected to one another through the city's publications, universities, and churches. LaFlesche's contract with Small, Maynard was the result of such

an interconnection. It came about because of Fletcher's friendship with author and editor Bliss Carman, whose professional activities had nothing to do with ethnography or Indian reform.

Book design was an important point of connection between the fine and applied art circles. This included not only illustrations but book cover design. Book covers had taken on new importance in the appearance-conscious culture of the turn of the century. In 1899, *The Studio*, a leading transatlantic art magazine, had devoted an entire issue to the subject.⁵⁹ Two years later an American publisher offered a book about cover designs.⁶⁰ While the revival of fine leather stamping and embossing was credited to the British Kelm-scott Press, even the British admitted that the American publishing community in Boston produced much of the leading work for trade publishing.⁶¹ Designs by Will Bradley, Bertram Grovesner Goodhue, and Sarah Wyman Whitman for Copeland and Day, John Lane, Houghton Mifflin, and Small, Maynard were featured in Arts and Crafts Society exhibitions and routinely praised in the press (see figure 67). DeCora had the opportunity to join this company when she won a competition to provide the cover design for *The Middle Five* (figure 68). Small and Maynard were so pleased with her composition of two tipis in a field framed by a bow and several conventionalized arrows that they explicitly mentioned "a frontispiece in color and a cover design by Angel DeCora" in advertisements for the book.⁶²

DeCora followed the success of *The Middle Five* by designing covers for four more books that she also illustrated: Zitkala-Sa's *Old Indian Legends* (1901), *Wigwam Stories* (1901), *The Indians' Book* (1907), and *Yellow Star: A Story of East and West* (1911). DeCora's designs seem to respond to the increasing interest in simplification and abstraction in book cover design in Boston in the early 1900s.⁶³ Like the background in "Gray Wolf's Daughter," *The Middle Five* design begins to explore the idea of an "Indian" style. The tipis are covered with abstract designs including a firebird, crescent moons, and large bands of zig-zagging lines. In contrast to the elegant, confident rendering of the bow and arrows that make up the borders of the cover, the tipi decorations are uneven and asymmetrical, perhaps as a way for DeCora to signal that while she appreciated Indian imagery, she was a master of European American methods. With her next two covers, her compositions became flatter and more abstract. In the cover of Mary Judd's *Wigwam Stories* (figure 69), she seems to be more able to recognize the deco-



FIGURE 67 Will Bradley, cover design for Richard LeGallienne, *The Romance of Zion Chapel* (New York: John Lane, Bodley Head, 1898). Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries, New York.



FIGURE 68 Angel DeCora, cover design for Francis LaFlesche, *The Middle Five* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1900).

rative qualities of Native American design. The simpler, unadorned tipi has itself become decorative. With this project DeCora extended her attempts at “Indian” style into the text field, writing the title in fanciful typography on a stylized stretched skin. The triangular pins that hold the skin in place make up a decorative pattern that spills into the top half of the composition, where a small landscape includes the by-now familiar motif of a tipi illuminated from within. *Old Indian Legends* is DeCora’s most “Indian” cover (see figure 70). The attempt to represent space is completely gone. Instead DeCora plays with the materiality of the book, belting it with a beaded garter with tassels that hang down the front.

It appears that DeCora felt more encouraged to explore an “Indian” style in her book covers than in her early illustrations. Book design was clearly located in the realm of applied arts, which was a voracious appropriator of non-European traditions. As one critic put it, “Never in the history of aesthetic expression was the work of past ages and all lands laid so widely under contribution to the work of to-day. From the Greek vase and the Egyptian papyrus to the Indian lotus and the bamboo of Japan, from the symbols of human passion to those of heavenly light and fire, there is hardly a decorative convention that has not been borrowed, adapted, degraded, and restored again in succeeding generations till neither the individual nor the age, if even the nation, can claim them as its own.”⁶⁴

DeCora later wrote that she was glad she had never taken advantage of the courses in design that were available at Drexel and the Museum School, which followed “the prescribed methods of European decoration, for then my aboriginal qualities could never have asserted themselves.” Nevertheless, she had studied historic ornament at Smith and Drexel.⁶⁵ I would suggest that it is not despite but *because* of this approach that her “aboriginal qualities” emerged. At Smith and Drexel she would have attended lectures on the arts of diverse nations, as well as the basic styles and motifs of the classical, medieval, and Moorish ages.⁶⁶ And when she moved to Boston, she studied painting with teachers who celebrated the decorative and moral value of Asian and other non-Western artistic traditions. Like the art students discussed in chapter 4, she was trained to think of the art of all cultures as a visual resource for the modern artist.

Transcultural artists like DeCora who saw the products of their own culture being collected and reproduced read in this interest a cultural rela-



FIGURE 69 Angel DeCora, cover design for Mary Catherine Judd, *Wigwam Stories* (Boston: Ginn, 1902).



FIGURE 70 Angel DeCora, cover design for Zitkala-Sa, *Old Indian Legends* (Boston: Ginn, 1901).

tivism that might be used to argue for the preservation of lifeways under attack by assimilationist policies. Anticipating a strategy used by Alain Locke to elevate the status of African art in the 1920s, DeCora singled out the popularity of Japanese art as a justification for paying attention to her own racial artistic traditions.⁶⁷ She repeatedly claimed that Indian people like herself “want to find a place for [their] art even as the Japanese have found a place for theirs throughout the civilized world.”⁶⁸ She offered this argument as much to Indian audiences as non-Indian, for she saw art not only as a place to communicate understanding of Indian experience but also to build a sense of pride and community.

INDIAN ARTS AND CRAFTS AND NATIVE INDIAN ART

At the same time that DeCora began exploring book decoration, she was invited to expand her exploration of applied art by designing furniture for the Bureau of Indian Affairs exhibition at the Buffalo Pan-American Exposition in 1901. The bureau’s exhibitions had been DeCora’s only consistent exhibition venue. She had contributed sketches and paintings to their displays at the Chicago and Omaha Expositions in 1893 and 1898. As a photograph of her paintings hanging in the background of the Bureau of Indian Affairs installation at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904 shows (figure 71), these exhibits were a jumble of artwork, documents, and models produced by people under the bureau’s care. For the 1901 exposition, however, the bureau attempted to create a more unified presentation by placing their objects in a “room” with furniture designed by DeCora and constructed by students at various boarding schools.

In 1900, the commissioner of Indian affairs, William A. Jones, asked DeCora to design a mantel, andirons, and a wooden settle with cushions and to supply a painting of her own to hang over the fireplace. Jones utilized the aesthetic language and implicit nationalism of the arts and crafts movement in his correspondence, telling DeCora to aim for a “harmonious” effect, and to limit herself to “native” materials.⁶⁹ The objects he chose were those being celebrated for their consonance with domestic comfort and old-fashioned values. Despite being quite busy with illustration and book cover commissions at the time and knowing little about furniture design, DeCora accepted without comment. Perhaps she was intrigued by the challenge. Certainly she, like Jones, was familiar with the vogue for Indian handicrafts



FIGURE 71 Bureau of Indian Affairs section, Interior Department exhibition, Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis, 1904. Record group 56, Records of World's Fairs, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

in contemporary house decoration. Both probably saw the potential for such an installation to focus the exhibition's visitors on the potential contributions Indians could make to modern American culture. The commentary on DeCora's installation illuminates how she used this opportunity to further explore making connections between European American and Native American artistic traditions: "Miss Decora [sic] has combined the native symbolism of fire with our own tradition of the fireside. Upon the space below the shelf, in low relief of red wood, is a conventionalized 'thunder bird,' the plumes of its wings flashing out into flames. On the side uprights, and in a band around the upper part of the mantel, making a frame for the central painting, are conventionalized forms of the sticks used in making the 'sacred fire' by friction."⁷⁰

The commission for the Pan-American Exposition is another turning point in DeCora's career, for it allowed her to participate in an artistic culture that included other Indian craftspeople. While her mature work had always been aimed at communicating with Indian audiences, suddenly she

was collaborating with Indian craftspeople, providing them with the opportunity to demonstrate their own talents. At the same time, she was seeking a way to use these talents in ways that would be understood by non-Indians. DeCora's correspondence from this period begins to suggest that she was developing a theory of a distinct Native American artistic sensibility. As she wrote to Jones, "I have tried to suggest something of the Indian art in my decorative designs and if it is to be done by Indian workmen they perhaps will have some sympathy with my efforts."⁷¹ DeCora's foray into this language is tentative and somewhat condescending; indeed, it is somewhat reminiscent of the way non-Indian reformers celebrated the products of underprivileged urban and rural communities. She writes that the craftspeople will *perhaps* respond to her ideas, as if she is not sure if innate Indian aesthetics actually exist, or, if they do, if she has mastered them.

Over the rest of her career, DeCora tried to isolate the qualities of Indian art and use them as a basis for her own production and in her pedagogy. She was given a unique opportunity to devote herself to this task when she began teaching at the Carlisle Indian school in 1905. Though hired to fill the position of drawing instructor, DeCora and her superiors understood her job as teaching and preserving Indian art. DeCora developed a two-pronged approach to the subject. First, she used her classes as a place where students could learn to value their tribal and cultural traditions. Then she encouraged them to develop individual creativities that drew on tribal traditions but also reflected their experience with other Indian and non-Indian cultures. As she proudly put it, she quickly saw "the members of the different tribes influence each other in their style of designing" in her classes, producing art of a "composite Indian character."⁷²

DeCora took the position at the invitation of the new commissioner of Indian affairs, Francis Leupp, who made it part of a concerted effort to increase the curricular focus on native culture. While Leupp did not envision Indian sovereignty, he was more accepting of tribal traditions than his predecessors, as his words demonstrate. He wrote, "The Indian is a natural warrior, a natural logician, a natural artist. We have room for all three in our highly organized social system. Let us not make the mistake, in the process of absorbing them, of washing out of them whatever is distinctly Indian. Our aboriginal brother brings, as his contribution to the common store of

character, a great deal which is admirable, and which needs only to be developed along the right line. Our proper work with him is improvement, not transformation.”⁷³

Leupp’s actions as commissioner support this view. One of his first efforts was to bulk up and expand Native industries projects.⁷⁴ Another was to hire DeCora. Leupp went to great efforts to place DeCora in the position, working against her reluctance to give up her illustration career and his superiors’ lack of interest in hiring Indians as full-time teachers.⁷⁵ Although the position DeCora filled was that of a teacher of drawing, Leupp gave her free reign to invent a curriculum to encourage the development of Indian design. She replaced the casts that usually were the first object of study with native designs from objects and books.⁷⁶ Working with the most basic materials—colored pencils and paper—she developed a curriculum designed to cultivate her students’ racial identities and provide them with skills they might later use to earn a livelihood. Self-esteem and self-sufficiency were what she perceived as being the greatest gifts she could give her students. As I will show, these goals did not demonstrate an abandonment of her aesthetic ideals, but a reformulation of them.

Almost as soon as she began teaching, DeCora was invited to give speeches about her work at various conferences of educators, ethnologists, and Indian reformers. These talks show her evolving pedagogical and aesthetic approach to Indian aesthetics. DeCora saw her first job as drawing out the racial and tribal qualities in her students that recent history had suppressed. Many of DeCora’s students came from homes where cultural identity had broken down in the face of poverty and corrupt reservation administration. She was appalled upon her arrival at Carlisle to see how little sense her students had of their culture. As she wrote in her first end-of-the-year report, “When I first introduced the subject—Indian art—to the Carlisle Indian students, I experienced a discouraging sensation that I was addressing members of an alien race. I realized that I must have an Indian audience if the subject was to continue. For a week, when each new class came to me, I appealed to their race pride, calling on them in mass and individually for Indian history, not as the white historian has pictured it in words, but as some of us have heard it from the Indian story-tellers by the light of the camp fire.”⁷⁷

Sometimes DeCora's appeals to race pride were not enough and she had to, as she put it, "manufacture my Indians." But rather than give them the training they might have received at home, she gave them an understanding of "Indian" identity as a racial designation in a modern and culturally complex society that subsumed tribal differences. When a student from Alaska couldn't tell her the name of his people, they looked through a book on Northwest Coast tribes by ethnologist Franz Boas until he recognized pictures of Haida blankets. "When encouraged to be themselves," she wrote, "my pupils are only too glad to become Indians again, and with just a little further work along these lines, I feel that we shall be ready to adapt our Indian talents to the daily needs and uses of modern life."⁷⁸ Similarly, DeCora gave her students regular opportunities to share their work with one another at weekly exhibitions, a technique she had learned at Smith. DeCora suggests that these exhibitions gave the students interest in each other's work and also "a feeling of competition" — a quality essential to European art training and one of the qualities of European American culture that Indian pupils were still seen as needing.⁷⁹

DeCora's formal approach to the teaching of Native American art stems in part from the materials she used, much of which came from anthropologists. Shortly after she accepted the job, William Henry Holmes of the Bureau of American Ethnology sent a letter to Leupp confirming that he had sent DeCora numerous volumes and offprints relevant to the study of Indian art from the bureau's *Annual Reports* and the *Report of the United States National Museum*.⁸⁰ While it is unclear from this letter whether or not the materials were requested by DeCora herself, her correspondence with Franz Boas indicates that she did use ethnological writings in her classroom.⁸¹ We also see that she used Alfred L. Kroeber's 1902 study of the Arapaho, which included several charts of geometric symbols;⁸² the designs on the blackboard shown in a photograph of her classroom printed in the 1909 *Carlisle Annual Report* are drawn directly from Kroeber's plates (see figure 72). The photograph also demonstrates the hybrid nature of her pedagogy. In stark contrast with the rank uniformity of students and artworks in photographs from art programs under Estelle Reel's control, the photograph seems designed to emphasize the individuality of each pupil. Neat rows of children seated in front of blackboards filled with diagrams of symbols focus intently on their diverse projects. While some students produce "traditional" Indian

art—weaving on a Navajo loom—others are engaged in applying Indian aesthetics to new media. The seated girls appear to be engaged in making abstract designs in needlework—embroidery or needlepoint. The seated boys are using paintbrushes. DeCora's students applied their design skills to baskets, beadwork, and weaving and also to graphic design, upholstery, and pyrography.⁸³

As soon as she was able, DeCora augmented the knowledge obtained from books by studying directly from craftspeople on reservations. She often used her speeches as an excuse to conduct primary research.⁸⁴ On her way home from the 1907 National Education Association annual meeting in Los Angeles, for example, she visited Albuquerque and the Omaha and Winnebago reservations in Nebraska.⁸⁵ DeCora also brought Native American artists into her classroom. In 1906, for example, she petitioned and received money to bring Navajo weavers to the school to help set up a rug-making project. But a close examination of her curriculum shows that, despite this interest in tribal artistic traditions, DeCora remained committed to developing a composite, aesthetically up-to-date, racial school of art. Significantly, as she moved from producing art that was the product of an *individual* who was an Indian to proposing a collective Indian aesthetic, she moved even farther away from the painting and drawing that had been her first love and closer to reformist aesthetics. By embracing an aesthetic position that had long validated Indian art, as well as publicly embracing the identity of a Native American artist, she helped shape this discourse to the advantage of her people.

DeCora capitalized on the increasing interest in Native American art within the art world by annexing its language for her own projects. The baldest example of this is her introduction of a magazine called *The Indian Craftsman* in 1909. The publication took its name from Stickley's *Craftsman*, the journal that outstripped all others in its interest in Indian art and Indian reform. The covers of the magazine showed celebratory images of potters, weavers, and basket makers while the initial letters, borders, and illustrations inside were made by the next generation of Indian artists. The covers featured mottoes drawn from Ruskin and Morris. DeCora's speeches similarly borrowed the therapeutic language from the arts and crafts movement to explain the value of Indian art. The strong colors in Indian art, she explained in one talk, come from the fact that the artists work outdoors in the

FIGURE 72 (PAGES 206–207) Native Indian art classroom. From Richard Henry Pratt, *The Indian Industrial School, Carlisle, Pa.: Its Origin, Purposes, Progress and the Difficulties Surmounted* (Carlisle, Pa.: Hamilton Library Association, 1908), 98.

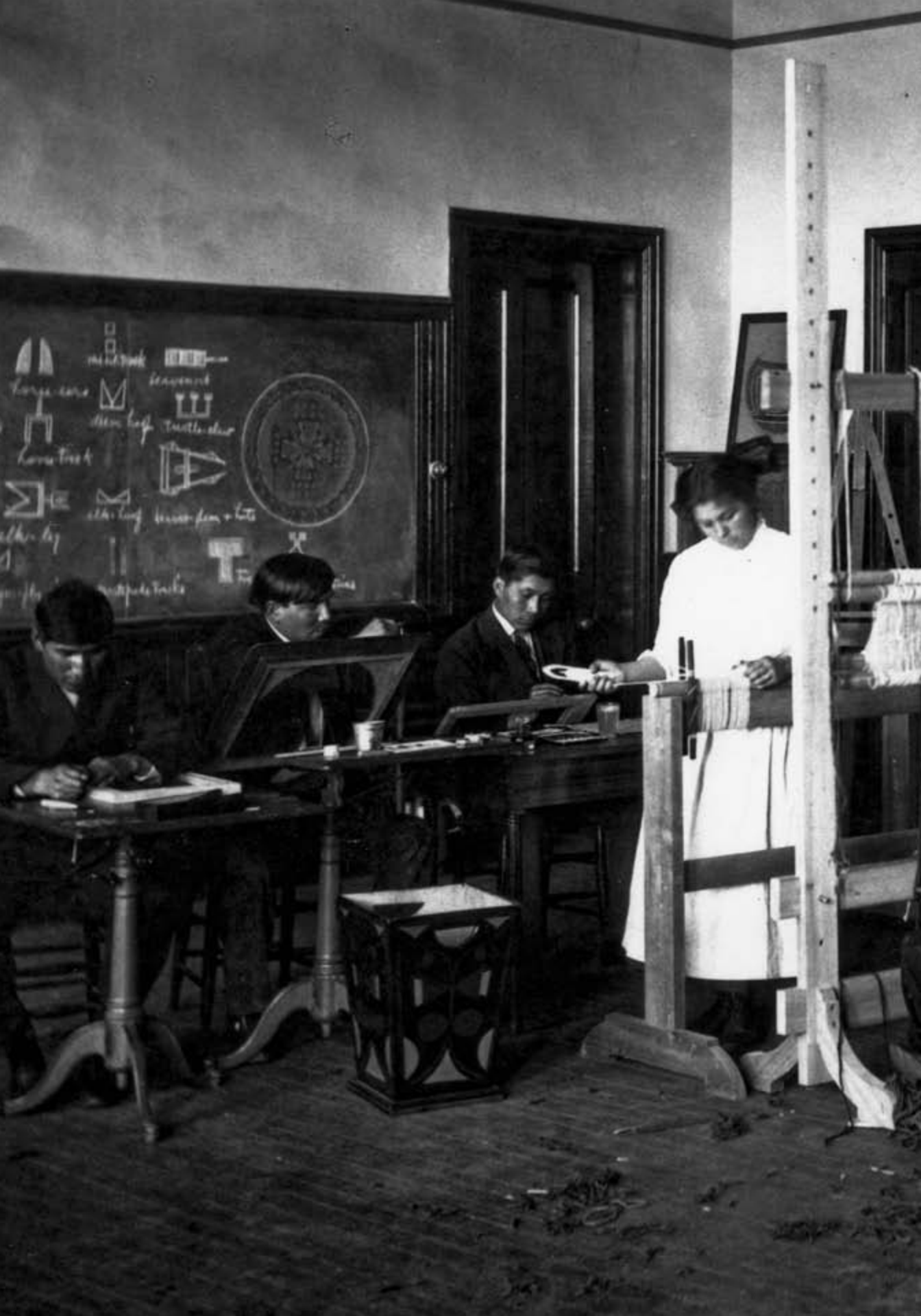






FIGURE 73 Leupp Art Studio, Carlisle Indian Industrial School, ca. 1909. Record group 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

sun. Their artwork “shocks the sensitive whiteman, whose perception has grown softened and perverted thro’ artificial living, and he calls the Indian’s color scheme barbaric and crude.”⁸⁶

Another aspect of DeCora’s contribution was her use of the market to garner support for her efforts toward education and self-support. In imitation of settlement house work, she established a Native Indian art department salesroom in 1909. The shop used mission-style furniture to appeal to the owner of an Indian corner (see figure 73). As an advertisement in *The Indian Craftsman* put it, the shop was designed to be “a medium for distributing some of the handwork of our students and the products of the older Indians on the reservation . . . at a price which will be a fair remuneration to the worker as well as a reasonable price to the buyer.”⁸⁷ The advertisement drew connections between the readers’ interest in art and their social goals, noting the trend I have discussed throughout this study: “People who are

interested in the Indian usually have a liking for the Arts and Crafts — desire something which has been made by these people.”

For DeCora, this strategy not only enhanced the marketability of her students’ work; it linked the immediate cultural and economic goals of her courses with the system of aesthetic beliefs that she had been taught. By making connections with the mainstream art world, DeCora began to envision how Native American art could not merely participate in broader American artistic culture, but could make a unique contribution to it. But though she borrowed heavily from the racialized language of the arts and crafts movement, it is never clear whether DeCora actually believed in an essential racial sensibility. She usually described specific imagery and techniques as “Indian” by tradition and history rather than by inspiration. At the same time, she also suggested that Native creativity was somehow innate. Her writings and speeches identify all Indians as particularly talented artists. Similarly, her understanding of the importance of tribal identity is unclear. She told one audience, “For me no two Indian drawings are alike, and every one is original work.”⁸⁸ But she also wrote, in 1906, that she thought that, if left alone to draw on the imagery in their own minds, Indian artists would stay “true to [their] tribal method of symbolic design.”⁸⁹

A group of rug designs from her class illustrate her pedagogy (figure 74). Students began their work by drawing designs on paper, which is not part of the Navajo tradition. The designs all conform to one basic layout, suggesting that they were made in response to a specific assignment. Moreover, this design problem was not necessarily posed as requiring a distinctly Navajo solution. Much of the imagery is Navajo, and is appropriate to rugs being made at the time, including swastikas, crosses, lozenge (diamond) shapes, and stepped triangles, but other motifs are of more ambiguous origin — the arrows, for example, or the shapes in the end triangles of the two rugs on the right. In fact, while the arrangement of the design in four quadrants divided by crossing bands that is seen in all five is not unheard-of in Navajo weaving, this layout is also typical of Plains *parfleche* decoration as it is illustrated in Kroeber’s essay on the symbolism of the Arapaho Indians.⁹⁰

DeCora may have also felt that she needed to downplay tribal aesthetics in order to maximize her students’ opportunities. She didn’t want to advance any idea that might limit the kinds of work Indians were allowed to do in

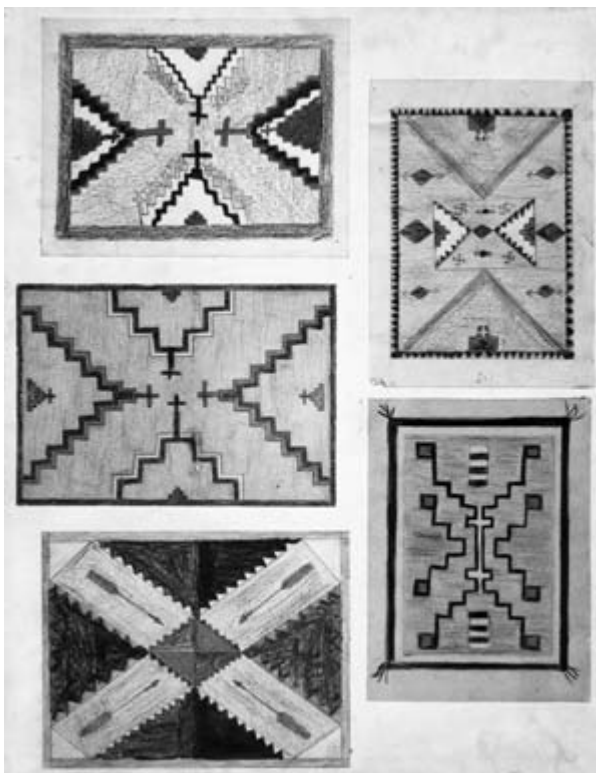


FIGURE 74 Rug designs produced in Angel DeCora's classes at Carlisle Indian Industrial School, ca. 1909. Record group 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

terms of medium, style, or technique. Students were encouraged to draw on tribal and racial traditions, but they were not limited to them. DeCora's rug-making project demonstrates how she came to understand "Native Indian art" as a sensibility rather than any specific material practice. Following the contemporary vogue for both rugs in Indian and rural industrial reform projects, DeCora wrote to Leupp at the end of her first year asking for funds to purchase supplies and build looms for her students.⁹¹ Significantly, her students learned both Navajo and Persian weaving techniques.⁹² While DeCora understood the spiritual importance of weaving within Navajo culture, she saw no reason that all Indians should feel comfortable using that technique. Indeed, she found that the Persian style "allows more freedom to carry out the more intricate designs" than the Navajo.⁹³ Given that most of her students were not Navajo themselves, she may have reasoned, it seemed logical that they would explore a variety of means of bringing their racial artistic sensibilities to their rugs.

DeCora's teaching also disregarded tribal traditions dictating the gender

of people using specific symbolism or materials. In the photograph of her classroom, it is clear that both boys and girls made rugs despite the fact that among the Navajo, weaving is an almost exclusively female activity. DeCora did not discuss gender as a significant factor in Indian art in her critical writings, either. Her silence on the issue of gender in Indian art is intriguing, given the clear impact that her own gender had on her educational and professional opportunities. It was only because of art's association with social goals defined as specifically female that her female mentors encouraged her to pursue her career. Art's relationship to social uplift made it a more acceptable female pursuit than many other fields. DeCora's artistic education occurred only because of the dramatic increase in training opportunities for women of her generation. Perhaps being part of the first generation of American women attending art school gave her an optimism about the eventual acceptance of women as male artists' equals. Perhaps her familiarity with the way the discourse of Indian art celebrated Indian women's creativity led her to see Indian women and men as equally capable of producing modern Indian art.⁹⁴ Such an outlook would not be inconsistent with her embrace of other progressive aspects of contemporary aesthetics.

Despite her commitment to Indian art as an expanding and evolving artistic category, DeCora was herself conflicted about the degradation of traditional forms. Occasionally she even claimed for herself the authority to decide what did and didn't count as Indian art. While she found Persian weaving techniques acceptable in her classroom, for example, she forbade her students to use floral designs that had been originally adapted from European folk art, even though they had been a vital part of Woodlands art for over a century: "I discourage any floral designs such as are seen in Ojibway beadwork. Indian art seldom made any use of the details of plant forms, but typified nature in its broader aspects, using also animal forms and symbols of human life."⁹⁵ Despite her interest in finding ways to apply Indian aesthetics to turn-of-the-century needs, her very definition of the qualities of Indian art reify an idea of "Indian art" as having an authentic history that was interrupted by contact with European Americans at the same time that she proposes Indian aesthetics as ongoing.

Like the theorists from whom she borrowed the idea of cultural aesthetics, DeCora was never able to describe the exact mechanism by which racial qualities were supposed to manifest themselves in art. DeCora's ideas seem

designed to maximize opportunities for the economic and cultural validation of art made by Indian people. The belief in Indian aesthetics gave Indian artists a positive self-image and enhanced the marketability of their products.

PAN-INDIAN ICONOGRAPHY

When her Carlisle responsibilities allowed her the time, DeCora continued to explore the application of “Indian” aesthetics to modern art in her own work. This imagery shows her own pursuit of a pan-Indian iconography that would draw on America’s diverse tribal traditions, providing an illustration of the “composite Indian character” she described to Leupp. A significant project during these years was providing the titles for *The Indians’ Book*, an anthology of Native American history, story, and song compiled by Natalie Curtis and published in 1907. Curtis had gathered the contents from Indians of different regions, culture areas, and ages, attempting to alter their words as little as possible. At every stop, she asked one of her informants to provide a drawing that would head up each tribal section. DeCora was initially asked only for an image for the Winnebago title page (see figure 75). But her fanciful lettering so charmed the compiler and her publishers that they hired her to design the title page and cover and to add lettering to each of the drawings. DeCora matched the diverse tribal sensibilities in her letters without disavowing her artistic training. The lettering in *The Indians’ Book* demonstrates not only her comfort with graphic media, but also a familiarity with the vogue for figurative letters—“allusive typography”—that dominated magazine covers and lithographed posters of the period.⁹⁶ Sometimes this has an unintended effect, when the artist’s confident lines often overwhelm the accompanying illustrations, drawn in crayon by people used to using other tools. The drawings by a Zuni child, Ema-liya, for example, look coarse next to DeCora’s elegant professional calligraphy (see figure 76).

On the title page, DeCora attempted to create a visual analog to this lingua franca by selecting symbols that she believed would be easily understood by all Native American readers (see figure 77). Using a geometric style that is sparer and more linear than her previous book designs, she presents a visual metaphor of the book itself. At the top and bottom of the border that frames the type are two large, stylized birds with stepped lines emanating



FIGURE 75 Angel DeCora, "Lake Indians Winnebago." Design for Natalie Curtis, *The Indians' Book* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907).



FIGURE 76 Angel DeCora and Ema-liya, "Zuni Indians." Design for Natalie Curtis, *The Indians' Book* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907).

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FIGURE 77 Angel DeCora, title
page design for Natalie Curtis,
The Indians' Book (New York:
Harper and Brothers, 1907).

from their beaks. Along the sides, six smaller versions of the same bird are shown facing the top and bottom of the page. According to an explanation printed on the following page, the lines represent a song spreading in four directions from the beaks of eagles, metaphorical stand-ins for the Indians themselves.⁹⁷ While this imagery seems to participate in the same problematic relationship to traditional Indian culture that infiltrated her early illustrations, DeCora promoted it as a way to facilitate an Indian entrée into the *modern* world, a world in which ideas were communicated not only around the fire in a tipi at night, but on the pages of books written in English and shared over great geographic expanses. The dramatic graphic simplicity of this design and the interest in pan-Indian iconography that it demonstrates are reminiscent of the emblem DeCora would later create for the Society of American Indians. In this work, she appears to be saying that while it was



FIGURE 79 Angel DeCora, design for the emblem of the Society of American Indians. Detail of an illustration in *Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians* 1.1 (April 1913): 87.

American Indians conference helps bring out the importance of geometric simplicity and modernity of the logo. As DeCora presents it, Indian art followed racial aesthetic principles that could provide a model for American cultural development. For while the contemporary art world was only beginning to grope its way through abstraction, Indian art had been interested in geometric design from the beginning. Moreover, Native American art's symbolic content was derived from distinctly American subjects: its landscape and original inhabitants. She argued that Native Americans were consummate designers, ready to lead American design into the new century. This rhetoric not only enhanced the economic value of DeCora's students' work; it also linked the cultural and economic goals of her courses with the system of aesthetic beliefs in which she had been immersed—beliefs directed, ultimately, toward cultural pluralism. DeCora began to envision how Native American art could not merely participate in broader American artistic culture, but could make a unique contribution to it.

DeCora's assumption that integration into European American art systems and the advance of national artistic culture were the goal of Native American artists demonstrates the degree to which she had embraced a Western attitude toward art. Her attitude was unrealistic for artists working on reservations with no sense of the aesthetic goals to which she aspired; it was even unappealing to other educated Indians, including fellow members of the Society of American Indians, as the reception of her 1911 talk illustrates.

While DeCora oriented Native American aesthetics toward the future,

good to value the cultural traditions of the Indian past, it was in the future that Indian people had their greatest contribution to make.

This project put DeCora's artistic training to work less in technique than in the formation of her understanding of the definition and role of art. Gone were the subtle tonalities of Tryon and the historical stage sets of Pyle. What remained was the importance of art as a site of individual and racial development. Much like the European American women who saw their involvement with Indian art as a way to simultaneously cultivate their own power and contribute to social welfare, DeCora was excited about what Indian art could offer both the artists and the American public. By stressing the application of racial talents, including her own, to everyday objects, she endorsed the idea of improving American society through the dissemination of good design. The identification of geometry and conventionality as the heart of Indian design helped her argue that Indian aesthetics were distinct from European American ones, and therefore had something unique to contribute.⁹⁸

DeCora further honed her definition of this racial style and iconography in her work for the Society of American Indians. In 1911, she had served on a committee convened to design an emblem for the society. In collaboration with the Seneca archeologist Arthur C. Parker and John M. Oskinson, a part-Cherokee editor of *Colliers* magazine, she settled on an eagle copied from a sheet-copper ornament unearthed from a burial mound in southern Illinois (figure 78). Identified as an eagle produced by a pre-Columbian civilization, the object had the racial associations the committee desired without being linked to any specific tribe. Moreover, the age of the artifact supported the society's claims to a lengthy and sophisticated Indian cultural heritage. In addition, Parker believed that the eagle was universally revered by all American Indians.⁹⁹

DeCora had already turned to the eagle as a unifying symbol in *The Indians' Book*, and she supported the choice of an ancient symbol over a hybrid of contemporary motifs for the Society of American Indians emblem, as she was familiar with the frustration Indian people felt with the way non-Indians frequently mixed up images from different tribal traditions. As her design shows, the image fit her definition of Indian formal aesthetics (see figure 79). It was graphically simple and bold, using conventionalized geo-

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FIGURE 78 “Sheet-Copper Eagle,” from Frederick Webb Hodge, “Handbook of The American Indians North of Mexico,” *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 30.1 (1910): 346.

metric design.¹⁰⁰ As Parker put it, the ornament was “of good proportion and [a] good example of Indian conventional art.”¹⁰¹

One of DeCora’s most simple works of art *visually*, the emblem is *conceptually* very complex. In turning an ancient object into a modern graphic design, DeCora altered few details. She kept the rough edge at the bottom lefthand side of the eagle’s tail as an index of the original object’s age. But she has simplified the relief designs into crisp lines that give the symbol a boldness that looks very modern. Though little changed, the very transition of the symbol from a unique bronze sculpture to a mass-produced graphic design marks a dramatic reconfiguration of its visual significance. The simplification of the ancient eagle’s lines helped it in its modern uses. From an elaborate three-dimensional object made of several different materials, it became a clean, eminently reproducible graphic design, one that would be easily legible on the pamphlets and magazines that were the primary means for building support for their movement among geographically dispersed educated Indians.

The definition of Indian aesthetics in DeCora’s address at the Society of

the lively discussion that followed her talk showed that her peers were unable to shift their idea of Indian art from specific tribal material practices to a racial design sense. Some felt art should be a site of cultural preservation, that Indians should maintain the traditional media and uses of art and avoid the market for Indian handicrafts entirely. DeCora's friend Charles Eastman, who had written several articles on Indian art for *The Craftsman*, led the call for a conservative approach, saying, "We have been drifting away from our old distinctive art. . . . [O]ur teachers who are white people . . . have mixed the different characteristics of the different tribes, so that you cannot tell an Arapaho from a Sioux now, and cannot tell a Cheyenne from a Crow. I hope that in this gathering we will come to some realization of these things in the proper sense; that we may take a backward step, if you please, in art, not in the sense of lowering our standard, but returning to the old ideas that are really uplifting."¹⁰² Eastman and his supporters confirmed DeCora's interest in exploring tribal traditions as a means of cultural affirmation, but were unwilling to follow her call for a progressive "pan-Indian" aesthetic.

Others were anxious about being able to maintain control over the economic potential of Indian art. Laura Cornelius, for example, suggested the formation of an organization designed to "place a censorship on that manufacture, to prevent the use of these deteriorated forms, and to insist upon the manufacture of the real article."¹⁰³ Her concern was echoed by Thomas Doxon, who worried that European American firms reaping economic gain by copying Indian designs.¹⁰⁴ Cornelius built on the desire to maintain control over the capital spent on Indian art by enforcing strict definitions over the people who could make it, and the forms it could take had been manifest in the non-Indian reform efforts of Estelle Reel and the Sequoya League.

Other commentators on DeCora's speech found Indian art incommensurate with modernization. Carlos Montezuma criticized the movement to teach "Indian basketry, Indian blanketry, Indian pottery, Indian art, Indian music and other general industries of a past generation. . . . Where does this help Indian children into the ways of civilization?"¹⁰⁵ Horton Elm took a more moderate view. While he was not the wholesale assimilationist Montezuma was, he worried about feeding stereotypes that would characterize Indians as purely anything. "Nobody appreciates more than I do [that] this matter of Indian art is important, yet at the same time, we as a race cannot

all be artists.” Elm proposed Indian rights based on human rights, not on innate racial talents: “The Indian race is like any other race if they are subject to the same environments. There are good Indians and there are bad Indians; there are good white people and there are bad white people; there are good mechanics among the Indians and there are bad mechanics among the Indians; there are intelligent Indians and there are others who are not so intelligent, just as it is with other races. . . . We all belong to the human family and we are subject to the same natural laws; we are subject to the same civil laws; we are subject to the same government, and I want you to identify yourselves with every interest and phase of American life.”¹⁰⁶

DeCora was unprepared for the different agendas her audience brought to Indian art. She had made the assumption, not uncommon among artists of the time, that the values they placed on design and craftsmanship were natural and universal. She expanded the idea of art’s value for individual expression and cultural affirmation to include commercial art, and her aesthetic approach assumed a level of participation in cosmopolitan American culture beyond what most Indian people could experience. Her attitude is similar to other ways in which some middle-class members of the Society of American Indians alienated Indian people who did not share their belief in the rewards of education, hard work, and the transcendent value of art, as was demonstrated, among other examples, in their condemnation of the peyotism of the Native American church.¹⁰⁷

DeCora attempted to bridge the poles of purely traditional Indian art and culturally blind formalism by advancing the importance of racial aesthetic sensibilities as opposed to discrete and unchanging tribal practices. Her conception of Indian art belongs to the Progressive aesthetics of the time. The point of panracial imagery was to provide language to facilitate and recognize Indian contributions of her racialized culture to the larger national culture. In the twenty-first century we are accustomed to think of aestheticism as an elitist attitude toward art that reifies exclusionary cultural hierarchies. But DeCora saw in this position a potentially liberating relativism. For her, an emphasis on “the sensuous pleasure of form” provided an opportunity to sidestep an evolutionary mindset that would keep Indian people from participating in contemporary American culture until they had moved through the stages of civilization. Though she was blinded to the ways in which she reproduced many of the contradictions embedded

in the progressive, middle-class values with which she'd been educated, her career allows us to examine the vexed interaction of cultural and economic concerns Native Americans confronted when they tried to participate in the discourse of Indian aesthetics.

While the Society of American Indians never explicitly rejected DeCora's political aesthetics, art did not remain an important part of their political platform. Though the organization lasted until 1919, DeCora's involvement waned. She spent the years leading up to her untimely death in the 1918 flu epidemic distancing herself from her public career, including resigning from Carlisle and not seeking any offices in the society after 1912. Meanwhile, after its first conference, the society increasingly focused its attention on specifically legislative issues, including Native American citizenship, the codification of Indian law, and access to the U.S. Court of Claims.¹⁰⁸ The growing lack of interest in the question of art reflects not only DeCora's limited authority, but also the waning centrality of aesthetics to political discussions of the years between 1910 and 1920. As Eileen Boris has observed, the progressive spirit of the aesthetic reform movement had largely dissipated by 1915; while handicrafts retained a therapeutic association, aesthetics became less associated with political struggle.¹⁰⁹

At the same time, discussions of modernism within mainstream circles became increasingly dominated by an interest in the European avant-garde. Americans with connections to dealers and collectors such as Alfred Stieglitz and Gertrude Stein had already started to become familiar with post-impressionist movements during the height of the Indian craze, but the flood of European artists into America that attended World War I and the display of avant-garde works in major exhibitions of this time introduced fauvism, cubism, and futurism into popular discussion. In this context, Native American art came to stand for tradition rather than progress, as when Theodore Roosevelt famously said he appreciated the artistic merits of the Navajo rug in his bathroom to the pretensions of Marcel Duchamp's notorious cubist contribution to the 1913 Armory show, *Nude Descending the Staircase, No. 2*.¹¹⁰ While Native American art *did* continue to figure in modern art exhibitions, for example at the 1920 Society of Independent Artists exhibition in New York City, it has not been seen as an essential factor in American modernism.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, the ideas and strategies of the Indian craze remain with us, as I will explore in the epilogue.