

Reclaiming Narratives: Indigenous Sovereignty in Art and Media

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ABSTRACT: *This research delves into the depiction of communities in artistic expressions and media, shedding light on the historical inaccuracies and the endeavors of Native American artists to reclaim and redefine their stories. It documents the transition from portrayals to modern artworks, encapsulating their cultural heritage and resilience. By conducting an analysis, this study uncovers the effects of misrepresentation and cultural appropriation on Native American societies. Additionally, it showcases how Native American artists leverage art for preserving their culture advocating resistance and engaging in dialogues. The investigation is grounded in research and a detailed exploration of significant artworks that perpetuate stereotypes alongside initiatives aimed at reclaiming Native American narratives. At its core this research tackles the issue of misrepresenting communities in art and media which not only marginalizes these groups but also distorts their rich cultural heritage. It posits that achieving a respectful portrayal necessitates acknowledging these inaccuracies while amplifying the authentic voices and perspectives of Native American artists. Furthermore, it calls for art institutions and society at large to embrace approaches that amplify voices while recognizing art's transformative power in driving societal change. The paper advocates for supporting artists in reclaiming their identities. The paper highlights the significance of acknowledging the arts' capacity to drive transformation by advocating for the appreciation and comprehension of viewpoints in art and media, thereby fostering a more diverse and fairer cultural environment.*

KEY WORDS: indigenous art, reclamation, stereotyping, misappropriation, reconciliation

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Sovereignty in Art and Media explores the portrayal of Indigenous peoples in art and media, addressing the inaccuracies and stereotypes that have been prevalent throughout history. These misrepresentations distort Indigenous cultures and narratives, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and cultural injustice. The study employs a multi-faceted research methodology that integrates qualitative analysis of the literature review (Butler-Kisber, L. (2018); Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008)) and the artwork analysis (Knowles, J. G., & Cole, A. L. (2008); Pauwels, L. (2020)) of both primary and secondary sources. The study focuses on how Indigenous artists are reclaiming their narratives through art, emphasizing the transformative role of art in the Indigenous struggle for sovereignty. The paper argues for accurate and respectful representation, advocating for inclusive practices recognizing and celebrating Indigenous perspectives. The manuscript is structured into sections that discuss the historical context, contemporary reclamation of Indigenous stories, challenges and successes of Indigenous representation, and calls for improved inclusivity in cultural institutions. The conclusion reaffirms the significance of reclaiming Indigenous narratives through art for understanding, appreciation, and reconciliation.

LITERATURE AND ARTWORK ANALYSIS

Historical Characterizations of Indigenous People

For centuries, Indigenous peoples and their artistic expressions have been misrepresented and culturally appropriated, overshadowing their narratives. This disregard for Indigenous art has hurt the cultural practices that Indigenous artists and historians rely on to preserve and enrich their cultures. This study is significant not only for its academic contributions to art history but also for its broader implications regarding cultural justice and understanding. Throughout history, Indigenous people have been portrayed in a negative light from the perspective of colonizers. This portrayal has been primarily achieved through art and literature, from North America to Europe. Indigenous people have often been depicted in a mythical manner, making their Indigenous identities easily recognizable. Their stories have been stripped away, stolen, and retold from a white and Western perspective. These actions have shaped the perception of Indigenous peoples and have had a profound impact on their understanding of their own identities.

The historical portrayal of Indigenous peoples in art and literature in North America and Europe has perpetuated harmful stereotypes and erased authentic Indigenous identities. This paper will explore the historical contexts, challenges, contemporary movements, and stories of reclamation to trace the journey of Indigenous art from the margins to global recognition and appreciation. This reclamation of Indigenous art is a form of resistance and a crucial step towards truth and reconciliation in Canada. It paves the way for genuine understanding and appreciation of Indigenous cultures and identities.

For Indigenous people in North America, art from the colonist world reinforced pervasive stereotypes. However, there is a growing movement towards inclusion, where Indigenous artists, writers, and filmmakers reclaim their real stories and contribute to the path of truth and reconciliation in Canada. Art has always been a powerful medium for recounting historical events, allowing us to visualize triumphs and setbacks in the new world. However, it is important to acknowledge that art often carries its own biases and provides only a single perspective on the past, sometimes based on second or third-hand accounts. According to Ryan (1990), a stereotype can gain significant influence with just one visual image, shaping myths and altering our perceptions of identity. One such myth perpetuated by art was the idea of Indigenous Canadians as a dying or vanishing race (Ryan, 1990, p. 139). For instance, Ryan discusses a painting by Lucius O'Brien, a colonist, called "Lords of the Forest" (1874) [<https://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/explore/online/osa/education.aspx>], which portrays an Indigenous Canadian surrounded by symbols of death, such as a fallen tree and a decaying stump (Ryan, 1990). Similar landscapes were the only representation of Native culture at the time, suggesting their inevitable decline at the hands of a supposedly superior race. In the post-colonial era, art was employed to "classify racial and cultural groups to explain the apparent superiority of white Europeans" (Ryan, 1990, p. 142). These destructive ideologies celebrated the notion that colonial contact and diseases would ultimately lead to the demise of the Native population as a whole (Ryan, 1990).

Another example of early Indigenous depictions in Western art can be seen in Benjamin West's painting, "General Johnson Saving a Wounded French Officer from the Tomahawk of a North American Indian" (1768) [<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/general-johnson-saving-a-wounded-french-officer-from-a-north-american-indian-61172>]. The painting shows Sir William Johnson preventing an Indigenous Mohawk warrior from scalping a defeated French soldier (Stevens, 2018). West presents an "idealized image of British chivalric civility on the battlefield" alongside a representation of "Native savagery" (Stevens, 2018, p. 490). West pays more attention to the Mohawk warrior's appearance, including tattoos and hooped ears, than to Johnson's uniform, emphasizing the depiction of savagery in the artwork. However, the most significant detail enhancing the perception of Indigenous savagery or "cruelty" is the tomahawk, which symbolizes fear (Stevens, 2018, p. 490). West's portrayal of the wild Indian wielding a tomahawk in Figure 2 instilled fear in the colonists' minds, representing a familiar weapon in their culture now reinterpreted as a symbol of war (Stevens, 2018, p. 507).

Historically, there has been a focus on the cultural bias and limited perspective of white artists concerning cultures outside their own. This is particularly evident regarding Indigenous culture (Reinhardt, 1998). Indigenous people were often portrayed as stereotypes, easily identifiable as "Indians" based on perpetuated depictions in paintings, literature, and film (Reinhardt, 1998, p. 1). For instance, West frequently emphasized the defining characteristics of Indigenous people, portraying them as either "noble savages" or "ignoble savages" (p. 1). These stereotypes failed to recognize the individuality and unique identity of Indigenous people. In stark contrast, during the

same era, white men were depicted as heroic figures with features and postures reminiscent of the portrayal of Jesus (Reinhardt, 1998). Art had the power to manipulate narratives and distort reality. This is illustrated in West's painting *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770) [<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-death-of-general-wolfe/MQGJPSKUj9ySHg?hl=en-GB>]. The artwork transformed General Wolfe's only marginally successful invasion of Quebec, which was led questionably, into martyrdom in England. While historians attribute this victory to sheer luck, West portrays General Wolfe as Christlike, admired by loyal allies - even an Indigenous warrior pauses to appreciate this European hero (Reinhardt, 1998).

The distortion of narratives can also be seen in literature written by these self-proclaimed "legends," which inspired artwork depicting their stories. This is the case with the story surrounding the death of General Custer in 1876. King (2022) discusses how American artists crafted the "Custer Myth" into a narrative. However, considering the absence of cellphone cameras, King argues that such artwork should be viewed as hearsay (p. 13). The art is purely speculative, an attempt to elevate Custer to the status of a hero by showing him triumphing over soldiers, Indians, and anyone who opposed him. Numerous paintings, including Paxson's *Custer's Last Stand* [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a4/Edgar_Samuel_Paxson_-_Custer%27s_Last_Stand.jpg], an oil painting completed in 1899, depict a heroic Custer surrounded by Native individuals who are either fleeing or dead. In reality, Custer could have fled from battle or perished among hidden corpses.

Nevertheless, the legends and heroes of the colonists could maintain their status as long as they emerged victorious over others (King, 2022). According to King (2022), European culture, religion, and art were considered superior to Native culture, religion, and art, with their military might serve as proof of that superiority (p.104). The artist George Catlin presented Indigenous culture and life in a tourist format, treating everyday objects used by Indigenous people, known as "quotidian," as rare and intriguing curiosities (Datta, 2018, p.312). Catlin often depicted Indigenous daily life and collected Indigenous art and ordinary items, which he organized into his *Gallery Unique*, providing viewers with a glimpse into the world of Indigenous life. While Catlin was admired for his realistic representations of Indigenous people, land, and traditions, his portrayal romanticized and commodified Indigenous culture. He amassed a collection of Indigenous goods from his interactions with Indigenous peoples during his explorations (Datta, 2018). This touristy and commodifying approach to Indigenous people made them appear exotic in the eyes of the colonists, and Catlin's museum became an unintended consequence of modernization, similar to the use of Native art and artifacts as sports mascots today (Datta, 2018, p.334).

Furthermore, in his work, Wentz (2022) explores the negative impact of spinning historical stories into fictional narratives on Indigenous people in Canada. He argues that storytellers played a crucial role in justifying and concealing the brutal treatment of the lands and people claimed by colonizers (Wentz, 2022, p.6). Although misrepresentation of Indigenous people is evident in

historical Hollywood films, this misrepresentation continues today when their stories are told solely from a "white lens" (Wente, 2022, p.15). The influence of Hollywoodization shapes our perception of Indigenous people and distorts their self-image. Before the film era, art, literature, and photography also perpetuated similar misconceptions (Wente, 2022). For instance, photography was often used to portray Indigenous people through an imperialistic lens, labelling them as "primitive, bizarre, barbaric, or simply picturesque" (Cronin, 2003, p. 81). Despite attempting to capture reality, photography still catered to Western expectations of exotic lands and promoted a fictionalized view (Cronin, 2003). However, historical photographs of Indigenous people have also served as a means for present-day Indigenous individuals to explore their ancestral roots, family connections, and cultural identity (Cronin, 2003). Historically, museums and art galleries were viewed as authoritative sources of history and culture. However, they now face the challenge of redefining their roles in society. These Euro-Canadian institutions have historically excluded voices other than those of the privileged (Cronin, 2003, p. 83). Despite efforts to incorporate more Indigenous perspectives within Canadian museums and galleries, the notion of the imaginary Indian remains deeply ingrained in the Euro-centric mindset (King, 2022).

Indigenous Artists Reclaiming Indigenous Stories

Stereotyping persists as Indigenous people continue to be depicted in art, literature, and film through a white perspective. However, Indigenous artists are reclaiming their art, stories, and identities by drawing from their Indigenous heritage. Martineau and Ritskes (2014) discuss how art is a political tool for Indigenous artists to resist and revive their ancestral traditions, finding their survival standards and individuality outside Eurocentrism.

“Art is the *generative* expression of creativity, not the violence of colonial domination, and it is in Indigenous art’s resistant motion to disavow the repetition of such violence that it recuperates the spirit of ancestral memory and place and forges new pathways of re-emergence and return” (Martineau & Ritskes, 2014, p. 10).

Indigenous filmmakers and artists reclaim their narratives using mediums like fine arts, literature, and film, which were once used against them (Wente, 2022). By creating and telling stories, Indigenous people assert their truths and decolonize (Wente, 2022, p. 182). Spears (2005) argues that Native art defies easy definition, just as colonizers categorize all Natives into a single identity. She emphasizes that Indigenous artists should not limit themselves to a singular definition based solely on their Native identity because every person has a unique story to tell, and every type of art is distinctive (Spears, 2005, p. 126). Indigenous culture and identity have been distorted by stereotypes, and the image of the "real Indian" wearing war paint and feathers conflicts with the authentic culture and lived experiences of Indigenous people seeking their own identity (Spears, 2005, p. 128).

While the primary purpose of artistic self-expression and performance may not be education, resistance, or healing, they bring social benefits. Spears (2005, p. 126) believes that as artists, it is our role to engage with the world on a deeper level, strive for artistic excellence, and play beyond the ordinary. According to Morris (2019), Indigenous artists today incorporate art practices that reflect their Indigenous heritage and redefine their identities. These artists are moving away from mainstream and Euro-centric art-making approaches and reconnecting with their cultural roots. Through this process, they can establish a sense of belonging, connection, and understanding of their tribes and land (Morris, 2019).

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the return of Indigenous art from around the world to its original tribes or places of origin (Burack, 2023). Notable examples include the totem pole from the Nuxalk Nation in Bella Coola, now at the Royal B.C. Museum and a saddle and ceremonial pipe returned to the descendants of a Cree leader at the Royal Ontario Museum (Burack, 2023). These repatriations involve art, cultural objects, and human remains taken by explorers, colonizers, and other visitors over time (Burack, 2023). Anthropological museums also return Indigenous art and cultural objects (Kramer, 2004). However, Kramer (2004) argues that returning physical objects to their respective tribes can create ownership struggles. Despite being returned to the proper communities, these objects may still need to restore a sense of self-identity lost when they were originally taken (Kramer, 2004).

According to Kramer (2004), Indigenous people should take responsibility for their identities, separate from the laws that govern property ownership, which symbolize the control and cultural loss imposed upon them. While the physical repatriation of Indigenous art is important, Kramer (2004) emphasizes that figurative repatriation, or the moral reclaiming of Indigenous art, is even more crucial in rebuilding Indigenous identity through self-definition using cultural objects that remain on display.

Due to the close connection between Indigenous art and their identities and the significance of these art forms in preserving their rich cultures, it is essential for the Canadian government and galleries to implement stronger protections for Indigenous art (Coleman, 2016). Indigenous historical art has long been subject to theft, commercialization by non-Indigenous artists, mass production, and the sale of inauthentic works. These harmful practices lump Indigenous peoples together as a single entity, disregarding their individuality and unique Indigenous heritage (Coleman, 2016). To safeguard Indigenous artists' ability to reclaim their narratives, rebuild their identities, and connect with their culture through artistic expression, legislation must be implemented to protect against the appropriation of Indigenous art (Coleman, 2016). Indigenous authors utilize their storytelling abilities to create spaces for healthy Indigenous stories and myths (Spears, 2005). Every individual values their history, and our stories can transform into personal mythologies within a particular social context. By moving away from societal realms and the influence of Euro-centric ideologies, we can free our stories from mixing truth with myth and stereotype (Spears, 2005). Further, she argues that by "claiming our authentic stories and images...

we claim our power as storytellers and climb out of the myth to reveal ourselves as *whole human beings*" (Spears, 2005, p. 135).

The Calls for Representation

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada emphasizes preserving and celebrating Indigenous heritage and culture and promoting greater inclusivity in museum spaces. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), the Canada Council for the Arts is called upon "to establish a strategy for Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to undertake collaborative projects and produce works that contribute to the reconciliation process" (p. 9).

Inclusivity in curatorial spheres and self-representation of art and storytelling is crucial for reconciliation in Canada. However, much work must be done to achieve the call for the "Commemoration" of Indigenous heritage and cultural identity through art-making. Nakamura (2012) discusses the dominance of an "art/artifact binary" in Canadian art galleries, where only European art is considered "real" art (p. 417). This Euro-centric exclusivity marginalizes non-European Canadian artworks, especially Indigenous art, often relegating it to historical museums (Nakamura, 2012). This separation, based on ethnological roots rather than content, creates "spaces of exclusion in the representation of First Nations art" (Nakamura, 2012, p. 417).

Onciul (2015) emphasizes the significance of fostering engagement in museums that empower Indigenous peoples by showcasing their artwork. Through recognition of Indigenous experiences and the enhancement of community knowledge, there is an opportunity to build more equitable relationships between Indigenous peoples and institutions such as museums and galleries (Onciul, 2015). Although tensions have existed between Indigenous peoples and these institutions, art can serve as a means to restore community pride in Indigenous culture and identity and foster reconciliation bonds.

Furthermore, Onciul (2015) highlights the importance of including Indigenous individuals in curatorial positions in museums that exhibit Indigenous art. Often dominated by a Euro-centric perspective, museums can unintentionally exclude underrepresented voices. Onciul (2015) examines how the Elders of the Blackfoot Confederacy in Alberta have collaborated with museums and heritage sites to amplify Blackfoot voices and culture. Bringing Indigenous voices into museums and cultural heritage sites takes a step towards self-representation and decolonization (Onciul, 2015).

Nakamura (2012) underscores the necessity of creating spaces for First Nations art to completely understand Canadian art history, as First Nations created art long before contact with Europeans. There existed a connection between Indigenous peoples and early colonists, where they mutually assisted one another. Nakamura (2012) states, "European women sometimes learned embroidery skills from First Nations works, which would not have been possible without the artistic sense and critical eye of the original Native artist" (p. 419). These artistic skills provided a livelihood for

Indigenous and European women, as they could sell or trade these works. Nakamura (2012) argues that by excluding these craft skills and interactions, we effectively erase the history of Indigenous peoples altogether. There has been criticism surrounding the focus on the Group of Seven's landscape artworks in Canadian museums, which depict a "vast and virgin wilderness while erasing the existence of Aboriginal people" (Nakamura, 2012, p. 429). For instance, the Art Gallery of Ontario includes over 50 pieces of art by artists of European descent that claim to represent Canadian history and landscape.

In contrast, Nakamura (2012, p. 420) found only three examples of Indigenous art. By focusing solely on the voices and artworks of Euro-Canadian artists, like the Group of Seven, and marginalizing or disregarding Indigenous artists, we are neglecting Canada's national history (Nakamura, 2012, pp. 420-421). Although recent changes have allowed for the inclusion of more contemporary Indigenous artists, such as Norval Morrisseau [<https://www.artgalleryofhamilton.com/the-four-rs-of-morrisseau/>] and Charles Edenshaw [<https://www.gallerieswest.ca/magazine/stories/charles-edenshaw-at-the-vancouver-art-gallery/>], Nakamura (2012, p. 434) argues that the recognition of Indigenous art remains limited because it is not considered an authentic representation of Canadian identity.

CONCLUSION

To displace the fictionalized and marginalized representation of Indigenous people in Canadian galleries, it is crucial to allocate more space for authentic Indigenous art, history, and identity. A panel has been assembled to bring together Indigenous artists, academics, and museum professionals to increase Indigenous inclusion in Canadian galleries and give their voices a strong influence over exhibit control (Cronin, 2003). As art viewers broaden their understanding of Indigenous art in Canadian spaces, Euro-centric art is being replaced as the centerpiece of Canadian representation, making room for the voices of Indigenous artists (Nakamura, 2012). By incorporating Indigenous voices, galleries and museums will become more inclusive spaces, and the supporting community will become more knowledgeable and accepting of Indigenous stories. This will allow Indigenous people to represent themselves and move closer to achieving a strong sense of cultural identity (Cronin, 2003).

This exploration of Indigenous art and its pivotal role in cultural identity and history reaffirms the significance of reclaiming Indigenous narratives through art. This paper has examined the journey from historical misrepresentations to contemporary movements, where Indigenous artists assert control over their stories, showcasing resilience and innovation. Such efforts challenge prevailing stereotypes and enhance our collective understanding of Indigenous cultures. The need for ongoing support and recognition of Indigenous art is evident, inviting further scholarly and public engagement. As we contemplate future research, the potential to deepen dialogues surrounding Indigenous sovereignty, resilience, and creativity looms large. Let us answer the call to action by actively participating in and advocating for spaces that honour and uplift Indigenous voices. In the

spirit of reconciliation and appreciation, we are reminded of the quote, "Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it" - Bertolt Brecht.

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