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### Author

Herr, Chelsea

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Marketing Native Objects, Visualizing Native Bodies:  
New Deal Photography and the Sherman Institute

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

Chelsea Marybeth Herr

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Jason Weems, Chairperson

Dr. Susan Laxton

Dr. Clifford Trafzer

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The Thesis of Chelsea Marybeth Herr is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside



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## Introduction

The era of the Great Depression in the United States was a time of significant change, not just in the political and economic spheres, but also in the social structure of the nation. As the vast majority of the American public faced the unfamiliar and unstable reality that characterized the period, people sought new definitions for what it meant to be American, and what was required to live in an age of such uncertainty. While unemployment and poverty escalated, the need for new social experiences surfaced; popular media became an outlet for both entertainment and information, as radio, film, and photographic publications provided the populace with a tangible record of facts when the future was undoubtedly precarious. In order to redefine the identity of what it was to be American, there needed to be boundaries of what was decidedly *not* American. The early 1930s saw a rise in immigration quotas, and Americanism became “equated... with Anglo-Saxon blood and institutions.”<sup>1</sup> Although the concept of aligning Americanness with Western European heritage was not a new development, the idea that Anglo-Saxon institutions could be a quality of American identity came to a head in Native American boarding schools during the early 20th century. Educators and political leaders sought to purge students

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Random House, 1978), 197.

of their Indianness, and effectively replace it with what they understood to be thoroughly American.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the continuing economic disparity, and consequentially President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's institution of New Deal programs in 1933, necessitated a broader inclusion of minority groups in order to bring the country out of the financial crisis. Political reformers such as John Collier sought for cultural pluralism as a means to unite and ameliorate the struggling nation. He saw the diversity of the population as a crucial component of the survival of the United States, both culturally and politically. Collier especially advocated for the acceptance of Native American cultures and traditions, which he believed maintained significant humanizing aspects that were lacking in modern white society, and which "offered a hope for the future of the world in spite of industrialism".<sup>3</sup> Collier's influence over New Deal policies significantly affected the national treatment of American Indian individuals and cultures, which will be the basis of discussion for this manuscript.

There are two main questions I aim to address in this thesis. First, how did New Deal legislation reflect and influence the American views of indigenous peoples and the visual materials they created? And more specifically, how do the

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the goal of federal boarding schools to assimilate Native students into white American culture began decades before the Great Depression. However, the significant aspect of this time period is the need for American citizens to find certainty in their own identity by defining the Other, or what was definitively not American, which impacted the function of Indian boarding schools during this era.

<sup>3</sup> Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*, 198.

photographs from the Sherman Institute, a Native American boarding school still in operation today, elucidate the changing representations of Indian art objects, as well as the Indian figure? I will argue that during this time period, Native art underwent commodification and serialization in tandem with the commodification and serialization of images of the Native body. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that in spite of the stringent regulations imposed by the federal government in regards to the creation of Native art objects and the education of Native students, Indian individuals were not merely passive participants in the representation of their own cultures, but in fact were actively involved in constructing a new indigenous identity.

The catalyst for the dramatic changes seen during the era of the New Deal was the Meriam Report of 1928, a thorough analysis completed by a group of researchers who aimed to uncover the underlying problems faced by tribal communities in their relations with the United States government. Chapter 1 will outline the changes that the Native art market experienced with the Meriam Report's harsh critique of federal policy towards Native Americans, which prompted the restructuring of the Bureau of Indian Affairs under Collier, and was followed by the establishment of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board in 1935. These policies attempted to regulate the creation and sale of Native artworks, which resulted in both positive and negative outcomes for Indian artists. By instituting criteria for determining the genuineness of Indian arts and crafts, such as seals of authenticity and requirements for materials used in production, the Indian Arts

and Crafts Board set higher standards for Native products. However, in doing so, they essentially took creative and entrepreneurial power away from the Native individual and placed it into the hands of federal employees. After this analysis, I will relate these changes to the instruction of traditional arts and crafts at Sherman in the subsequent decade, and argue that Indian students maintained some form of agency over their education in spite of the strict assimilatory policies that boarding schools upheld.

Next, chapter 2 will examine the use of photography to portray the Native body as one of usefulness and productivity. Starting with an analysis of the Federal Art Project and New Deal ideology, this chapter will investigate the role of photography on a national level. With this in mind, I will consider a set of images from Sherman that represent Native students as beneficial contributors to American society. These photographs are indicative of the residual effects of New Deal commodification of Native arts; they attempt to market the laboring body as a valuable tool for the American economy, and the single subjects serve as representations of Native Americans as a whole.

Previous scholarship on the visual representation of Native Americans has focused on the implications of stereotypes and racial relations between white artists and Native subjects. Most scholars focus on the evolving representation of Indian subjects from that of the noble savage, to the vanishing race, to the fully Americanized Native, with more recent studies analyzing the roles of Indian

subjects with agency and control over how they are depicted. Art historian Lucy Lippard published an anthology entitled *Partial Recall: with Essays on Photographs of Native North Americans*, in which she and twelve Indian authors and artists attempt to reconsider photographs of American Indians through the lens of Native viewers. Lippard introduces a crucial element to recent scholarship, which is the importance of recognizing the stereotypes and the romanticized history that is prevalent in readings of Native American imagery. She urges viewers to “talk more about what is *not* in these pictures than what *is*, because only through personal and historical contextualization can we fill in the blanks left by incomplete and mythologized histories.”<sup>4</sup>

In *Partial Recall*, American Indian scholar Rayna Green contributes an essay that emphasizes the need to avoid victimizing or objectifying Native figures in photography. Her point, which is inarguably apropos to the analysis of images from Sherman, is that a photographic image is not a veritable depiction of reality—a topic, which, in itself has a long and complicated history—nor is it a snapshot that renders the subject as a victim. Instead, Green reminds the viewer that “Indians aren’t weird, heartbroken exiles, or zoo animals for expositions, endangered species preserved forever in photographic gelatin... [rather] they are changed, but in control.”<sup>5</sup> This distinction is crucial for its acknowledgement of

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<sup>4</sup> Lucy Lippard, Introduction to *Partial Recall: with Essays on Photographs of Native North Americans* 20.

<sup>5</sup> Rayna Green, “Rosebuds of the Plateau,” in *Partial Recall*, 52.

the complex construction of Indian identity, in which Native individuals played a significant part.

Other scholars have broached the issues of classification, whether visual or textual, of American Indian groups. Philip Deloria, a historian of Yankton Sioux lineage, is one of the formative authors on the representation of Indian identity by both Native and non-Native individuals. His book *Playing Indian* examines the history of cultural appropriation by non-indigenous groups, especially in the formation of a national American identity that was distinctly different than the identities of European colonizers. Deloria posits that “the indeterminacy of American identities stems, in part, from the nation’s inability to deal with Indian people.”<sup>6</sup> This “indeterminacy” is due to the polarizing relationship that European peoples have had with Indians since colonization. Euro-Americans wanted to connect with and hold power over the landscape of North America, which they needed to learn from Native communities. And yet, to accomplish this goal of territorial control, “they had to destroy the original inhabitants.”<sup>7</sup> This dualistic nature continued well into the age of modernity, and will be considered in the examination of the Sherman Institute’s photograph archive.

Historian Alan Trachtenberg, whose seminal essays on photography also played an important role in the research for this manuscript, cites Deloria’s work

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

as a catalyst for his own book *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880-1930*. In this publication, Trachtenberg suggests that the development of an American identity is rooted in an era of mass immigration to the United States through Ellis Island, in conjunction with a national fascination with American Indian cultures. As droves of European immigrants came into the country in the first decades of the 20th century, the American public faced a crisis of identity directly related to the concept of native versus foreign. Trachtenberg argues that for the first time in American history, United States citizens were forced to confront the issue of Native existence, since those citizens were now the ones who felt the pressure of dealing with outsiders laying claim to their homeland.

In addition to the extensive analysis of the visual representation of American Indians, few art historians have explicitly addressed the photographs of Native students at federal boarding schools. Recently, scholar Hayes Peter Mauro published a book on the photographs taken at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, though few others have thoroughly explored the images from the Sherman Institute. Mauro, an art historian whose research is concerned with the intersection of the representation of race and the history of science, takes the images from Carlisle as a departure point for the study of how Native American individuals were depicted in terms of their physical appearances and the scientific reasoning behind these representations. Citing the common practice of phrenology during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mauro



claims that the majority of white Americans during this period viewed Native Americans as inherently inferior to the Anglo population, and used the study of their physical makeup, or more specifically the shapes and sizes of their skulls, as a means of rationalizing this point of view.

Mauro then analyzes how boarding school administrators justified their work to assimilate Native students into Euro-American culture; by providing a scientific basis for the indoctrination of their wards, school employees could treat students as blank slates to be shaped into the ideal American citizen. He argues that the images from Indian boarding schools were popularly received by the American public because “whites could vicariously consume the Other viewed in the photograph, and the Other could be made either more primitive or whiter, depending on the political exigencies of the moment,” thus reinforcing the concept that the fascination with the representation of American Indians reflected the need to define the Self, or what it meant to be a white American, by defining the Other.<sup>8</sup> Such a thorough analysis of Carlisle’s images is a promising step toward the treatment of boarding school photographs as art historical materials, and provides a basis for the study of similar materials at other federal schools such as Sherman Institute.

Many scholars have examined the implications and consequences of the Indian boarding school system, often through studying the historical impact on

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<sup>8</sup> Hayes Peter Mauro, *The Art of Americanization at the Carlisle Indian School* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 56.

tribes and tribal members, or through investigating the sociological effect that assimilatory institutions had on the development of both native and non-native societies. Historians including David Wallace Adams and Jean Keller have published work on the history of Indian boarding schools in the United States, specifically focusing on the effects these schools had on the students they served. Adams provides a broad overview of the boarding school system since its inception, while Keller's *Empty Beds: Indian Students Health at Sherman Institute* was the first book to be published on Sherman itself. Following Keller's publication, Clifford Trafzer, Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, and Lorene Sisquoc produced an anthology on the Sherman Institute, which comprehensively analyzes the school's policies, outcomes, and unique history. These works are vital to the research of federal boarding schools, and lay a solid foundation for the treatment of the visual materials from these schools in an art historical context.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States government founded a system of boarding schools aimed at assimilating Native American children into white American society. The first of these off-reservation, government-run schools, Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, was founded by Captain Richard Henry Pratt in 1879, and had the lofty goal of civilizing Indian students so that they could contribute as productive members of American society. The subsequent schools adopted the same goal, and over several decades, the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) removed Indian children

from their homes, took them to live in unfamiliar and often alienating environments, and instructed them in how to repudiate their traditional ways and espouse the culture of white Americans. The BIE founded twenty-five off-reservation boarding schools between 1879 and 1902, all of which were modeled after Pratt's assimilatory and military-like policies at Carlisle, which "established a system of limiting Indian culture by isolating Indian children from their parents, families, and tribes in an environment where white administrators and teachers could control nearly every aspect of the child's life."<sup>9</sup> Carlisle Indian Industrial School housed and educated over 10,000 students during its operation between 1879 and 1918, and its perceived efficacy by the United States government spawned twenty-four other schools modeled after Pratt's design.

In an effort to prove his worth as an educator and transformer of the Native American race, Pratt hired local photographer John Nicholas Choate to document the everyday life of the school's inhabitants. Choate's most recognizable, and arguably most controversial, images were before-and-after photographs of Carlisle students. One such image (fig. 1) is famous for its striking depiction of Navajo student Tom Torlino, who became a visual representation of the supposed potency of Pratt's educational approaches. This diptych illustrates the supposed transformation that Native students underwent during their time at Carlisle, as the frame on the left shows Torlino as he entered

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<sup>9</sup> Clifford Trafzer, Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, and Lorene Sisquoc, *The Indian School on Magnolia Avenue, Voices and Images from Sherman Institute* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2012), 21.

the school, while the right frame shows him after three years of education and Americanization. Pratt required male students to cut their hair into a short, military style, and to dress in popular American fashion. However, Torlino's photograph is evidence of the tainted success of Pratt's program; the high expectations of students to adopt white culture and abandon their own was rarely, if ever, completely realized.<sup>10</sup> The photograph of Torlino as an American, rather than an Indian, is indicative of this attempt at assimilation, as Choate manipulated the "after" image to lighten the appearance of Torlino's skin. Over his 23 year tenure at Carlisle, Choate established the convention of regularly documenting student life until the closure of the school in 1918. According to Hayes Peter Mauro, Pratt's partnership with Choate resulted in funding and attendance increases between 1880 and 1900, due to their use of photographs as promotional materials that Pratt saw as representations of "an unquestioned and unproblematic copy of physical reality."<sup>11</sup> The apparent success of Carlisle's photographic program later influenced Sherman Institute, whose archives contain images dating from the school's opening through its current operation today.

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<sup>10</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995). Adams provides statistics on the number of students who ran away from Carlisle, who never completed their education, and who returned to their homes instead of assimilating into white society. School and government officials often covered up or altered these bleak reports in an attempt to make Carlisle seem more successful than evidence suggested.

<sup>11</sup> Mauro, *The Art of Americanization*, 55-56.

Following in the steps of the Carlisle school, Sherman Institute opened its doors to Indian students in Riverside, California in 1902, following the closure of the nearby Perris Indian School after only ten years of operation. The school was named after James Schoolcraft Sherman, the Chairman of Indian Affairs in the House of Representatives, who approved funding for the school's construction in 1900. During the first 15 years of operation, the Sherman Institute housed, educated, and assimilated Native American students from first through eighth grade. By 1926, the school offered continuous coursework through high school, and enrollment soared to over 1,000 students on the campus grounds.<sup>12</sup> The primary goal of assimilatory education was to equip Native students with the tools needed to contribute to society upon graduation, whether they returned to their homes or not. Initially the Bureau of Indian Affairs designed the boarding school system to prevent students from returning home at all, in the hopes of integrating them into white society.

Educators at Sherman implemented a program of creating useful, productive members of society in several ways, including teaching students how to farm land and raise livestock, how to play American music, and how to lead a proper Christian life. Under the superintendency of Estelle Reel from 1898 until 1910, the Indian boarding school system adopted a program which focused on training students as laborers, particularly in agriculture, rather than training them

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<sup>12</sup> "Sherman Indian High School History," last modified June 26, 2011, [http://www.shermanindianmuseum.org/sherman\\_hist.htm](http://www.shermanindianmuseum.org/sherman_hist.htm).

solely in academics. Reel advocated education for Indians based on her belief that “the different races of humanity were imbued with different capacities, bred into the blood through centuries of civilization or barbarism.”<sup>13</sup> She believed that Native children were physiologically and psychologically inferior to white children, and as such, should be taught to be workers of the lands which they once occupied. Reel implemented a program in which half of the curriculum focused on academics and reading, while the other half of the curriculum focused on training students in labor and workforce skills.

Sherman administrators actualized this labor-focused program by providing instruction on their 110-acre farm five miles west from the school’s location. Students learned how to operate tractors and equipment, raise livestock, and grow various crops, which were frequently used as a food source for the local community. From the opening of the school in 1902 until the sale of the farm land in 1946, Sherman educators trained their pupils in agricultural techniques, in the hopes of preparing them for their lives in American society after graduation.<sup>14</sup> Though the American government officially ceased its policy of forced assimilation in the first half of the twentieth century, the BIE still oversees 183 primary and secondary schools across the nation, 124 of which are

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<sup>13</sup> K. Tsianina Lomawaima, “Estelle Reel, Superintendent of Indian Schools, 1898-1910: Politics, Curriculum, and Land,” *Journal of American Indian Education* (Vol. 35 No. 3, May 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Though the farm was sold in 1946 to a private owner, the government still retains a portion of the land for the school’s cemetery, which was used for student burials until the mid-1950s.

tribally controlled under the oversight of the Bureau, including Sherman Indian High School, known as the Sherman Institute until 1970.<sup>15</sup> Over its 121-year existence, Sherman students and staff members have amassed an extensive collection of artworks, cultural artifacts, and photographs housed in the Sherman Indian Museum (fig. 2), all of which attest to the dynamic history of the school and its inhabitants.

The museum itself is notable for several reasons, including the fact that it is the only original building left standing on the Sherman campus. More importantly is what the museum itself stands for—the preservation of the physical objects, such as photographs, art objects, and student-published newsletters, which attest to the school’s dynamic history and its significant role in the evolution of Native American identity. Much like the substantial collection of photographs and visual material from Carlisle, the archive at Sherman speaks to the belief in the transformative power of the educational system. The sheer number of images in the Sherman collection relate to Choate’s project of attempting to prove the worth of Pratt’s assimilatory program. Both institutions relied on the visual, tangible evidence of photography to correlate the education at federal boarding schools with the betterment of American society as a whole.

From this extensive archive, my research focuses on a set of five photographs from the mid-1940s, one decade after the start of New Deal

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<sup>15</sup> “Bureau of Indian Education Schools,” last modified June 4, 2013, <http://www.bie.edu/Schools/index.htm>.

legislation. These images are unique for several reasons: one, their origin dates to the period of the Special Five Year Navajo Program, which was the BIE's attempt to counteract the policies of the New Deal and reassert the program of assimilation; two, the photographs suggest a link between the commodification of the Native art object and the representation of the laboring Native body; and three, these images raise questions about the somewhat atypical nature of Sherman Institute and its function within the larger system of federal boarding schools. What is at stake in this argument is the role of Native subjects in the creation of their own identities, and how the boarding school system both hindered and helped the formation of those identities.

## **Chapter One: Creating and Marketing the Native Art Object**

Since Sherman Institute opened its doors in 1902, the function of the school and its curriculum was to equip students with industrial and practical training, which would prepare them to live in the predominant white society outside of their tribal homes. Instruction was multifaceted, with boys learning skills in manual labor and technical skills such as construction, farming, and metalwork, and girls learning more domestic skills like housekeeping, cosmetology, and childcare. Sherman was unique in that students not only learned valuable trades, but school officials also encouraged them to participate



in artistic activities such as painting, sculpture, and creative writing, all of which were generally discouraged at other Indian schools.

In figure 3, a Sherman student attentively leans over a large piece of strikingly white paper and paints various geometric patterns on the surface. He grasps the paintbrush and palette, appearing to complete his unfinished, bold designs. The viewer is unable to see any paint on the artist's palette, and the paintbrush in his right hand seems relatively new, with only the tip of the white bristles dipped in dark pigment. With the light cast from the top right of the frame, the young man's arched figure becomes the brightest value in the image, however this focus is visually balanced by the inky, detailed forms beneath him. His paintbrush creates a visual link between himself and his creation, almost as though they are inextricably tied to one another. And yet the student seems somehow disconnected from his work; the conspicuous pristine appearance of the paintbrush and palette suggest a staged scene, and the designs themselves look to be already completed, as if he is posing for the photographer beside him.

The curious nature of this photograph from Sherman Institute is characteristic of the school's educational program following the reforms under New Deal legislation. When the federal government established the boarding school system in 1879, the primary objective was to inculcate Native students with white American ideals and cultural values at the expense of Indian heritage. And yet there are numerous photographs in the Sherman archive that suggest

this assimilatory ambition was met with resistance by both students and educators alike. The focus of this chapter is to investigate how the United States government treated Native arts and visual materials during the New Deal era, and to examine how Sherman Institute's curriculum and students responded to these drastic changes. Sherman's archive is abundant with photographs from this period, but there is little written evidence that specifically addresses the instruction of arts and how it may have changed over these two decades. For this reason, it is imperative to first consider the historical setting of New Deal reform, and how it shaped both Native arts and Native schools.

### ***The Meriam Report: Boarding School and Native Arts Reform***

In 1928, the Department of the Interior commissioned a comprehensive analysis of the living and social conditions of Native American tribes across the country. The result of this project, the Meriam Report, was a critical examination of the welfare of tribal groups, and the relationship between tribes and the United States government. Commissioned by the Institute for Government Research, Lewis Meriam headed a consortium of Indian advocates, economic specialists, health and welfare advisors, educators, and agricultural consultants. The team surveyed Indian communities in 23 states, and took seven months to complete their field work, and just over one year to compile and publish their findings. Ultimately criticizing federal policies regarding American Indians, particularly the practice of allotment, the report suggested a variety of solutions

to improve the living conditions of federally recognized tribes.<sup>16</sup> Meriam and his team submitted their published report to Hubert Work, the Secretary of the Interior, in the hopes of facilitating substantial change in federal legislation and Indian relation policies.

In its final form, the report advocated for the improvement of Native life through various forms of education, in the hopes of encouraging assimilation “into the dominant white civilization or be fitted to maintain themselves adequately in the presence of that civilization.”<sup>17</sup> However, rather than forcing assimilation upon all Indian groups, the Meriam Report asserted that those individuals who voluntarily chose to assimilate into white society “should be given all practicable aid and advice in making the necessary adjustments,” but those who wished “remain an Indian and live according to his old culture should be aided in doing so.”<sup>18</sup> Reforms in education were meant to include more than

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<sup>16</sup> The Meriam Report specifically identified the federal practice of allotment as one of the primary detriments to Indian well-being. Under the Dawes Act of 1887, the federal government seized over 90 million acres of tribal land and broke it up into smaller units, or allotments, to parcel out to individual Indians in an effort to break up tribes as social units. With the purported goal of encouraging Indians to farm and become self-reliant, allotment policies effectively gave control of profitable land to white settlers, while moving Native landholders to poor areas, further impoverishing Native communities. These negative effects were worsened after the passage of the Curtis Act of 1908, which allowed the federal government to no longer recognize tribal governments, and prohibited tribes from having autonomous jurisdiction over their lands. In the wake of the Meriam Report and New Deal reform, allotment was ended and the Dawes and Curtis Acts were reversed under the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis Meriam, *The problem of Indian administration; report of a survey made at the request of Hubert Work, Secretary of the Interior, and submitted to him, February 21, 1928* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1928), 106.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

just the schooling of Indian children; the report called for an educational program that would “extend to adults as well as to children” in order to “place special emphasis on the family and community.”<sup>19</sup>

The boarding school system was a primary point of contention to the authors of the report, as the living conditions and educational system were often detrimental to student progress and welfare. If the boarding schools were not eliminated entirely, then there needed to be substantial alterations in the goals and functioning of each school. Rather than continue to isolate Native children from their families and heritages, the Meriam authors believed boarding schools had the potential to prepare students to live in the “dominant civilization,” while still treating them as human individuals with various unique backgrounds. In order to best serve the students, the report urged boarding schools to abandon routinized curriculum and practices, and instead adopt material “from local Indian life... within the scope of the child’s experience.”<sup>20</sup>

Along with drastic changes in curriculum, the authors also called for more practical changes in the day-to-day operation of Indian education. They encouraged schools to include more technical and vocational training, so that students might be prepared to enter the workforce; they also decried the “gross overcrowding, deficient diets, substandard medical care, and... forced labor”

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<sup>19</sup> Meriam, *The problem of Indian administration*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

that were rampant in the Indian boarding school system.<sup>21</sup> One significant change the authors recommended was the instruction of traditional arts and crafts to preserve tribal culture, since “many of the handcrafts had died without the elders having passed on to the next generation the skills necessary to crafts’ production.”<sup>22</sup> Whereas previous policies maintained a strict proscription on students engaging in traditional song, dance, or arts practices, the authors of the Meriam Report saw the need for instruction in tribal material culture to both preserve endangered traditions, and to improve the quality of education within the boarding school system. The report condemned the convention of prohibiting students from returning home while school was not in session, and saw the inclusion of traditional arts and crafts in the curriculum as a means of further connecting the students to their homes and heritages while they were at school.

In conjunction with bolstering the practice of traditional arts and crafts in schools that served Native populations, the Meriam Report also recommended a large-scale restructuring of the Indian arts and crafts market. During the first decades of the 20th century, several factors led to a steady decline in the production of material culture and artisan goods. Younger tribal members, especially those who attended off-reservation schools, saw traditional handcrafts as old-fashioned and irrelevant in a rapidly modernizing white

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<sup>21</sup> Jennifer McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art: Indian Arts and Federal Policy, 1933-1943* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 67.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

society. As tribal religions and ceremonies began to wane, so did the need for the art objects that accompanied sacred practices. And with the combined effects of allotment, deteriorating land conditions, and government control of plant cultivation and other natural resources, the traditional materials used for production of tribal goods became more difficult to attain. Artisans and craftsmen began to rely on more readily available materials, and in some cases, the creation of these goods ceased entirely. This sharp decline in production posed a threat not only in the preservation of culture and tradition, but also in economic stability.

Arts and crafts were a vital element of income for many Native communities, especially in areas with high tourist trades. Tribes often relied on this income at times when other work was unavailable, since it “constituted a significant financial resource that could be depended on during times of crop failure and other emergencies.”<sup>23</sup> A tourist market for Native goods existed for decades before the publication of the Report, and was based on the desire not only for commercialized Indian culture, but also on the desire for artisanal, handmade objects “at a time when work in the United States was becoming increasingly industrialized and corporate.”<sup>24</sup> Entrepreneurs like Fred Harvey capitalized on marketing Indian arts and crafts as souvenirs for travelers, which

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<sup>23</sup> McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art*, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Leah Dilworth, *Imagining Indians in the Southwest: Persistent Visions of a Primitive Past* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 126.

he based on the model of trade posts in the Southwest that sold both authentic and imitation Native wares.

According to the Meriam Report, in order to improve the standard of living for tribal communities, there needed to be higher regulations for the production and consumption of Indian goods than was already established. For the most part, Native handcrafts were confined to a tourist market, since Indian artisans priced their items too low “due to their remote locations and lack of acquired business acumen.”<sup>25</sup> White capitalists were profiting off of Native culture, as Leah Dilworth notes:

*“...the spectacle of Indian artisanal labor, which was constructed by non-Indian ethnographers, writers and artists and reflected and reaffirmed American bourgeois values and identity, had lasting consequences for the Native American artisans of the Southwest. Represented as primitive craftspeople, bound by nature and tradition, they continued to be marginalized from the centers of cultural and economic power.”*<sup>26</sup>

The Meriam Report’s authors saw the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a mediator of the Indian art market, and suggested the agency serve to enforce market standards to ensure the highest quality goods and the highest possible sales. They outlined how the Indian Office should handle the products in the

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<sup>25</sup> McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Dilworth, *Imagining Indians*, 126. In this book, Dilworth argues that the popularity of Indian goods sold as tourist souvenirs stemmed from the implicit desire for whites to be close to Native culture, without actually engaging with that culture or interacting with the traditions from which the objects originated. She makes a similar argument in her book *The Culture of Tourism, the Tourism of Culture: Selling the Past to the Present in the American Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), in which she examines the relationship between her own souvenirs of katsina dolls and Navajo weavings. Dilworth argues that the novelty of such items is more a reflection of the consumer’s need to create a narrative of his or her own life, as opposed to a manifestation of the culture or tradition in which the item was made.

market, stating that “articles should be: (1) Characteristically Indian, (2) of good materials, (3) of good workmanship, (4) of good color and design, (5) usable unless intended merely for display, (6) unique or original so far as compatible with the other requisites, (7) tagged with the government’s guarantee of genuineness and quality, and (8) priced fairly.”<sup>27</sup> Whether these suggestions were actually beneficial to Native communities, or if they simply sought to impose more federal government control over tribes, the report did have the intention of reviving and preserving those traditions that benefited the cultural and social spheres of Indian life. The authors lauded the ability that arts and crafts production had over the general happiness of both individual and community, as well as the need for creative production in religious practices and social gatherings. More than just an economic tool, the report’s authors recognized arts and crafts as an essential component of Native life.

Though the Meriam Report contained detailed and potentially beneficial suggestions for improving the welfare of Indian communities and cultures, the implementation of these suggestions was not entirely successful. After the stock market crash and the election of Herbert Hoover as President in 1929, the federal government and bureaucratic agencies resisted many of the report’s suggested changes. Though Hoover supported many of these reforms and even went so far as to completely restructure the Bureau of Indian Affairs in an attempt to protect Indian rights, many detractors voiced their concerns over the

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<sup>27</sup> Meriam, *The problem of Indian administration*, 43.



far-reaching changes recommended in the report, as well as the amount of control that federal agencies would have over Native populations if those changes took effect. What is important to recognize in this shift is the mindset that white policymakers and educators now exhibited towards Native Americans – a mindset that sought more agency to Native individuals, and acknowledged the necessity to foster, rather than eliminate, the wide variety of tribal cultures that converged on boarding school campuses.

In spite of the resistance and eventual disregard for many of the Meriam Report's proposals, the impact of the report was undeniable in the decades following its publication. A handful of Indian advocates, such as John Collier, proposed legislation that would give the government stringent control over the production and sale of Native-made objects, but the bill was eventually defeated in Congress because it took power away from tribal jurisdiction and gave the federal government too much authority over which products were deemed "authentically" Indian. Collier began his career as an advocate for Indian rights after visiting Taos Pueblo in New Mexico. After spending the next two years frequenting the Pueblo and its surrounding communities, he founded the American Indian Defense Association to lobby against Congressional legislation that he felt was inimical to Indian well-being. In light of his progressive work and his support of the Meriam Report, President Roosevelt appointed Collier as the head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1933.

Collier's tenure as head of the BIA marked a new era for the relationship between the federal government and Native American tribes, as he sought to enact a bill that would "supersede previous congressional legislation... to redirect self-determination of tribal affairs through home rule, and the extension of civic, religious, and cultural freedom to Indians, while transferring as many duties and services of the Indian Bureau to the hands of the Indians as possible."<sup>28</sup> He also fought for cultural pluralism and tribal autonomy, which would both protect and promote the traditions and civil rights of federally recognized tribes.<sup>29</sup>

As historian Robert F. Berkhofer notes, Collier's vision and passion were not enough to enact such dramatic changes; in 1934, his bill was passed by both houses as the Indian Reorganization Act, but "Congress greatly shortened the original bill by eliminating the rhetoric of self-determination and cultural perpetuation and by deleting several crucial parts of Collier's program and toning down others. ...if Collier hoped to revive old-time tribal community control and culture, Congress at best preferred to stabilize Indian acculturation

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<sup>28</sup> Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*, 182.

<sup>29</sup> Collier's legacy, seen as anti-assimilation and pro-cultural pluralism, has sparked debate over whether or not his work truly benefitted Indian groups. McLerran acknowledges Collier's good intentions when it came to preserving Native culture, but argues that his approach favored more government control over tribes than actual sovereignty. Additionally, she points out that he failed to recognize the crucial role that tourist arts played in the survival of Indian cultures in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which in turn denied the possibility for Native adaption to change. Contrarily, Elmer R. Rusco, an ethnic studies scholar, defends Collier's intentions, though the problem of implementing his ideas often outweighed those ambitions.

and assimilation as it was in 1934 without forcing change either forward or backward.”<sup>30</sup> In his analysis of the Indian Reorganization Act, American Indian historian and activist Vine Deloria, Jr. similarly observed that although Collier’s bill was not the first to attempt an overhaul of Indian policy, it was “the most comprehensive and far-reaching legislative vision ever offered to Congress.”<sup>31</sup>

Yet this comprehensive bill had technical flaws, especially in that it was largely unsupported by tribal leaders<sup>32</sup>, and in that it did not provide specific instruction on how the Bureau would cede control to the tribes themselves. The provisions for Indian education were especially disappointing to Native groups, as the act did not address the considerable problems that were scrutinized in the Meriam Report, and completely avoided dealing “with primary or secondary education or with the boarding schools or day schools on the reservations. It simply sought to open opportunities for a small number of Indians capable of entering college or attending an advanced trade school.”<sup>33</sup> In the end, the

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<sup>30</sup> Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian*, 196.

<sup>31</sup> Vine Deloria, Jr., *The Indian Reorganization Act: Congresses and Bills* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), xi.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, vii-viii. After Collier submitted his final bill to the House of Representatives in February of 1934, he held several small congresses with Indian representatives to take their concerns about the bill into consideration. He was met with strong opposition, since many tribes were wary of accepting ideas that they believed promoted “communism and segregation.” Indian leaders also expressed their communities “had adjusted to the allotment act... [and] they were reluctant to pool their resources and lands and try to revive the old tribal ways.” The main concern of these congresses was the long history of the United States government’s disregard for treaties they established with tribal groups, and many saw this bill as another attempt to gloss over the provisions that were promised and then breached in previous legislation.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

Indian Reorganization Act was heavily edited by Congress, though it was the most extensive legislation to reflect the downfalls of Indian administration as outlined in the Meriam Report.

Other proponents of the Meriam Report cited its analysis of the education system as a basis for the revision of boarding school curriculum under newly restructured Bureau of Indian Affairs. Most significantly, the Bureau adopted a method of progressive education, which focused on idiosyncratic courses of study that included instruction in tribal arts and traditions, technical and vocational instruction, and a more extensive range of course options available to students. The leading figure in progressive education was the social reformer John Dewey, who greatly influenced national education standards during the Great Depression, as well as the foundation of the Federal Art Project during the New Deal era.

Dewey was a proponent of education as a social experience, meaning the value of education was its ability to facilitate the interaction between individuals and the world around them. Rather than simply teaching or memorizing facts, Dewey argued that educators should aid students in becoming self-reliant, self-aware, and socially responsible through instruction in both academics and technical training.<sup>34</sup> In addition to experience as a vital component of education, Dewey viewed experience as the basis for the creation and consumption of art. Just as education had become separated from experience in everyday life, so

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<sup>34</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

too had art become separated from the rest of culture. His proposed solution for this disconnection was to widen the acceptance of what was considered “art,” in order to prevent division between upper and lower classes, labor and leisure, and form and function. By categorizing art as an experiential activity, Dewey hoped to remedy what he saw as a breakdown of communication within American society.

In her book *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*, historian Victoria Grieve attributes Dewey’s progressive philosophies to the formation of many New Deal policies that emphasized the importance of a highly democratic society that depended on the participation of all social classes, not just the white elite. He viewed “art as a form of knowledge and a way of experiencing the world, as a process rather than an object.”<sup>35</sup>

Pragmatism, a term later ascribed to Dewey’s doctrine, advocated for the use of all art forms and aesthetic values to improve social, political, and economic problems.<sup>36</sup> His influence over both the educational sphere and the art world had a profound impact on schools under the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ oversight. Boarding schools, including the Sherman Institute, began to treat Indian

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<sup>35</sup> Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. Dewey saw art as “any practice that unified the precarious and the stable aspects of life... [thus] he saw no distinction between the ‘fine’ and the ‘practical’ arts.” Grieve goes on to argue that this blurring of the lines between high and low art led to the establishment of an American “middlebrow culture” during the Great Depression, which made art more accessible to the masses, and emphasized both functionality and aesthetics in artistic production. The specific impact of middlebrow culture on the Sherman Institute will be discussed further in this chapter, and later in chapter two.

craftsmanship as a method of vocational training that would enable students to sell their goods once they finished school. Following the onset of the Great Depression in 1930, arts and music programs were cut from federally funded schools, which Dewey deemed a disservice to students and society as a whole, arguing that their return would ensure “a necessary response to... industrialized society.”<sup>37</sup> Arts instruction could potentially enable students to participate and recognize their stake in society, rather than feel as though they were merely cogs in the machine of a rapidly modernizing, industrializing world.

### ***Indian Art under the New Deal***

Following the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act, Collier organized a committee to advise on the regulation of Indian arts and crafts. The committee was meant to research the best means of producing and marketing “high-quality traditional arts and crafts” in order to create a viable economy amongst Native groups.<sup>38</sup> One of the most significant problems the committee addressed, which the Meriam Report cited as one of the detriments to Indian culture and tradition, was the tendency for Native artisans to create goods that appealed to tourist markets, which provided the steadiest income and consumer base. The question of whether or not these tourist goods were authentically Indian is still debated by many scholars, as noted in Jennifer McLerran’s work on the effects of New Deal policies on the Native art market. She argues that

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<sup>37</sup> Grieve, *The Federal Art Project*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art*, 78.

although the quality of Indian craftsmanship may have declined from the perspective of an Anglo-American consumer, the question of authenticity is not one for a white viewer to make. Several external factors contributed to the change in Native arts and crafts, including access to traditional materials and the demands of consumers, but the fact that these artisans were able to adapt to a rapidly changing environment and produce goods that were economically beneficial is a testament to the authenticity of American Indian workmanship in itself. McLerran goes on to claim that the work put forth by Collier's committee failed to consider the cultural implications of regulating an Indian art market:

*"What is striking in the Committee on Indian Arts and Crafts report is the lack of recognition of the culturally significant relationship of native arts and crafts to traditional ceremonial and religious practices... Passive recipients of Euro-American advice and supervision, the Indian craftworker's primary function seems to be providing Anglo consumers with affordable and durable consumer goods and tourists with charming reminders of their summer vacations."*<sup>39</sup>

The committee's report led to the formation of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board in 1935, whose stated purpose was "to promote the economic welfare of the Indian Tribes and the Indian wards of the government through the development of Indian arts and crafts and the expansion of the market for the products of Indian arts and craftsmanship."<sup>40</sup> To do this work, the Board set forth tasks which would be their perpetual responsibilities: to conduct market and technical research in the production of Indian goods; to serve as liaisons

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<sup>39</sup> McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art*, 84.

<sup>40</sup> "Indian Arts and Crafts Board," in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 229.

between varying government agencies that had interests in Native arts; to set up regulations and safeguards to ensure that all goods were genuinely Indian and were of high quality; and to provide employees to work with participating tribes. In its first two years of operation, the Indian Arts and Crafts Board set out to enact laws about the counterfeiting or unapproved sale of goods with the hope of preventing non-Indian individuals from profiting by selling purportedly Indian goods, and to divert consumer traffic to Native artisans. The director and sole employee of the Board, Louis C. West, conducted multiple surveys to determine items were the most profitable for various tribes, and which items were the most counterfeited by non-Native sellers. Though he began to implement government regulations and seals of approval, these measures eventually failed because most participants found them to require too much work for the value they provided.

In 1937, West stepped down as the head of the Board and was replaced by René d'Harnoncourt, an expert in indigenous art who had recently curated an exhibit of Mexican art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Based on his previous experience in Mexico, d'Harnoncourt firmly believed that the only means for the Indian Arts and Crafts Board to serve Native populations was to address each tribe's needs on an individual basis. Through his personal visits to several reservations over the next year, d'Harnoncourt concluded that in order for Indian goods to be the basis of an individual's or a community's income, the products must appeal to a Euro-American market. He encouraged a balance



between the authentically Native arts and crafts that were made for personal or ceremonial use within the tribe, and those made with low quality materials that were sold as purely tourist items. The most profitable items were high quality “clothing and accessories, as well as decorative items for the home,” rather than the items that appealed to the “souvenir and collectors’ markets.”<sup>41</sup> During his tenure as the head of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, d’Harnoncourt focused on displaying Native goods in financially and culturally beneficial venues, such as art fairs, museum exhibits, and Indian art markets.

Most notably, d’Harnoncourt organized the Indian Court at the Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939, which was one of the first large-scale exhibitions on Native art and culture in the United States that did not depict American Indians as frozen in the past, as seen at previous World’s Fairs.<sup>42</sup> The stated goal of this exhibition was to highlight the duality of Indian culture: that it existed before the formation of colonization by European powers, and that it would continue to exist and contribute to the betterment of American society. Both public and private collections lent over six hundred artifacts, artworks, and

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<sup>41</sup> McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art*, 99.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Fay Schrader, *The Indian Arts and Crafts Board: An Aspect of New Deal Indian Policy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983). d’Harnoncourt and other organizers of the Indian Court were insistent about the exclusion of Indian villages, which had been a staple of previous World’s Fair exhibitions. They saw these “living exhibits” as detrimental to the advancement of Native cultures, since they displayed outdated and culturally ignorant stereotypes of tribal communities.

handcrafts to the Indian Court, including four boarding school students who designed murals specifically for the Exposition.<sup>43</sup>

The exhibition not only included works inside the gallery, but the organizers also held a competition for Native artists to design posters which would be used to advertise the event (figs. 8-11). This campaign was d'Harnoncourt's way of showing the adaptability of Native artists to a contemporary market, and the artists were compensated by the Works Progress Administration. Each poster displayed an image originally designed by a Native artist, which was then adapted for print by Louis Siegriest, a painter employed under the Federal Art Project. The images, each indicative of the artists' respective tribes, advertised all eight sections of the Indian Court: "the Eskimo Hunters of the Arctic, the Fishermen of the Northwest Coast, the Seedgatherers of the Far West, the Buffalo Hunters of the Plains, the Woodsmen of the Eastern Forests, the Cornplanters of the Pueblos, the Navajo Shepherds, and the Desert Dwellers of the Southwest."<sup>44</sup> Rather than print the exact images created by the Indian artists, d'Harnoncourt and the exhibition organizers chose to have a well-known artist to recreate the work and sign his name to each poster. This decision was indicative of the entire Indian Court; with good intentions to exhibit

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<sup>43</sup> "Indian Youths Paint Murals for San Francisco Exhibition," in *Indians at Work* vol. VI, no. 8, April 1939. Three of the muralists, Calvin Larvie, Joseph Duran, and Ignacio Moquina, were graduates of Indian schools, while the fourth, Charles Loloma, was a current student in Santa Fe.

<sup>44</sup> "The Indian Court," Manuscript 4883, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

Native culture, the exposition in effect filtered Indian objects and society through a Euro-American lens in order to successfully appeal to a wider audience.

The success of the Indian Court led to a drastic increase in the sales of Indian arts and crafts over the next year, which McLerran attributes to the exhibition's strategic marketing, as well as "the increased public exposure of Indian [goods] accompanying the exhibit, and the highly positive evaluation of critics."<sup>45</sup> This public acclaim also led to d'Harnoncourt's curation of the Indian Art of the United States exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which garnered just as much attention as that of the Indian Court at the San Francisco World's Fair.

Sponsored by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board in 1941, Indian Art of the United States opened with nearly 1,000 indigenous items on display from across North America. In a press release from the Museum of Modern Art dated on the opening day, the exhibition was touted as bridging "a span of nearly 20,000 years" with an emphasis on "a cross section of the artistic achievements of the Indians of the United States during the last fifteen hundred years."<sup>46</sup> The curators, headed by d'Harnoncourt, emphasized the inextricable ties between Native cultures past and present, and even provided a section in the accompanying catalog entitled "Indian Art for Modern Living." Their goal

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<sup>45</sup> McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art*, 140. McLerran notes that the annual sales of goods under the supervision of the Indian Arts and Craft Board was \$863,267 in 1938, and after the World's Fair in 1939, that number increased to \$1,007,422.

<sup>46</sup> The Museum of Modern Art, "Exhibition of Indian Art of the United States Opens at Museum of Modern Art," *MoMA Press Release* (January 22, 1941), 1.

seemed to advertise the place that Indian culture could hold in modern American society by displaying the “progress” that various tribes had undergone, as well as by inserting Native goods into white middle-class homes. The exhibition catalog also links American Indian culture to modern American society by including a foreword written by d’Harnoncourt and signed by Eleanor Roosevelt, undoubtedly a name that the reader would connect with her husband’s progressive New Deal policies. The foreword, which was printed directly in the four-page press release, lauds the inclusion of “age-old sources of ideas and forms that have never been fully appreciated,” while enabling the viewer to realize that Native “heritage constitutes part of the artistic and spiritual wealth of this country... [and] that the Indian people of today have a contribution to make toward the America of the future.”<sup>47</sup>

The exhibition was significant not only for its size and its emphasis on the relationship between Indians and modern society, but also for the attention to the distinct cultures that varied across the country. D’Harnoncourt and his team deliberately worked to counter the misconception that all Native Americans fit the stereotypes found in popular culture, such as the Indian with the eagle-feather headdress who visually stood in for every tribe in the United States. Instead, as stated in the exhibition catalog’s introduction, Indian Art in the United States highlighted the fact that “each area of Indian culture has an art of its own. Indian art always was and still is regional in the deepest sense of the

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<sup>47</sup> *MoMA Press Release*, 1-2.

word.”<sup>48</sup> It is disputable whether or not d’Harnoncourt’s exhibition successfully communicated its stated purpose of linking the traditional Native and the modern American. Several reviewers praised the curator for presenting the Indian works as *art*, as opposed to *artifacts*, although that was not entirely d’Harnoncourt’s intention.<sup>49</sup> Art historian W. Jackson Rushing cites a letter d’Harnoncourt wrote expressing his desire for viewers to appreciate “Indian culture through Indian art,” as opposed to viewing “Indian art as an end itself,” yet he did not want the exhibition to be seen as a display of ethnographic materials. The viewer was meant to recognize that Native art had a culturally significant purpose, and often even a functional purpose, but should still be treated and appreciated as a form of art.

What is indisputable about the Indian Art of the United States exhibition is d’Harnoncourt’s decontextualization and re-contextualization of Native American artworks. He was successful in his goal of situating traditional pieces in modern settings; the exhibition itself was a striking juxtaposition of the primitive and the contemporary, with objects such as Mimbres pottery or Haida totem poles displayed against the museum’s stark white wall. These displays “were marked by neutrality, austerity, and a lack of textual information that encouraged a

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<sup>48</sup> *MoMA Press Release*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> W. Jackson Rushing, “Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern,” in *The Early Years of Native American Art History: The Politics of Scholarship and Collecting*, ed. Janet Catherine Berlo (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 195.

purely aesthetic encounter” with the objects at hand.<sup>50</sup> The section of the exhibition entitled “Indian Art for Modern Living” included works by contemporary Native artists, and placed them in the context of modern society. One aspect of this section, which displayed Indian goods “as home furnishings,” and “suggested its used as personal adornment and fashion accessory,” was akin to the Indian Court at the World’s Fair in that it attempted to promote the sale of Native objects to American mass culture. This appropriation of Indian art was not a new concept, and is certainly still a controversial issue today, but the inclusion of such a concept in a modern art museum was unprecedented.

While there is little source material to suggest that the arts curriculum at Sherman changed due to the work of d’Harnoncourt or the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, there are several excerpts from the student publication, *Sherman Bulletin*, that illustrate the influence the New Deal had over student life. An article from 1937 announced the enrollment of Sherman students in the National Youth Administration, a New Deal agency focused on providing work study programs for underprivileged youths.<sup>51</sup> Other New Deal agencies were represented on campus, such as the Works Progress Administration, which sent workers to assist Sherman students in renovating the aging campus. In an article titled “Inter-tribal Council Formed” from the fall 1938 issue, students cited the Indian Reorganization Act and the federal government’s support of tribal

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<sup>50</sup> Rushing, “Marketing the Affinity,” 208.

<sup>51</sup> “NYA Students at Sherman,” *Sherman Bulletin* (Winter, 1937).

self-determination as the inspiration for the establishment of this campus council.<sup>52</sup> The role of this committee was to promote cultural respect for the various tribes represented at the school, though it is unclear exactly how this was achieved, or how long the council existed.

### ***The Indian New Deal at Sherman Institute***

Even though there is a lack of specific evidence in the Sherman archive that refers to instruction and appreciation for Native arts on campus under New Deal reform, there is an argument to be made for the changes the school experienced in its wake. Sherman Institute was uniquely positioned to promote Indian arts and crafts, inasmuch as its administration was more accepting of Native culture than other boarding schools.<sup>53</sup> Sherman's first superintendent, Harwood Hall, was adamant about the necessity for students to be self-sufficient and prepared for the workforce, as he stated in a letter dated in 1902 that the primary goal of Indian education was to have "one object in view, to make the pupils self supporting at once."<sup>54</sup>

Essentially, the school's day-to-day operations, outside of academics and administration, were largely supported by the students themselves. The usefulness of Sherman students could even be evidenced in the surrounding

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<sup>52</sup> "Inter-Tribal Council Formed," *Sherman Bulletin* (Fall, 1938).

<sup>53</sup> Marinella Lentis, "Art Education in American Indian Boarding Schools: Tool of Assimilation, Tool of Resistance" (PhD Dissertation, University of Arizona, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> Harwood Hall, Letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, April 23, 1902, Sherman Museum.

community, since they regularly worked in nearby citrus groves, at the Sunkist packing plant (fig. 12), in white households as maids or groundskeepers, and in local markets selling crops from the school's farm.

What was particularly unique about Sherman was not just its approach to the vocational and technical instruction of students; the Institute was evidentially the earliest Indian boarding school to prominently display and facilitate the creation of Native arts and visual culture. Whereas most other federally-run schools prohibited and severely punished participation in any activity that was associated with Indian culture, Sherman educators encouraged their students to draw, paint, and sculpt when it was germane to classroom learning, and only when it was supervised by a school employee.<sup>55</sup> As early as 1906, Hall allowed the performance of Hopi songs and dances on campus, which was antithetical to the federal government's stance on the role of the boarding schools as centers of assimilation. In his book *Education Beyond the Mesas: Hopi Students at Sherman Institute, 1902-1929*, Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert draws the conclusion that Hall intended Sherman to stand out from other Indian schools in its "tolerance" of Native culture. Gilbert claims that even though the federal government "instructed Hall to weaken American Indian cultures through

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<sup>55</sup> While these activities were acceptable when deemed relevant by a supervising teacher, students were still prohibited from engaging in any other activities that might deter their acculturation into white society. The primary goal of Indian boarding schools was still assimilation, but it is pertinent to note that Hall had a more liberal view of how to achieve this goal than other school administrators. Speaking tribal languages, dancing and singing traditional songs, and following any tribal religion was punishable until the mid-1970s when Sherman adopted a curriculum of cultural preservation, instead of cultural assimilation.



the boarding school,” the superintendent instead chose to participate in traditional song and dance in order “to promote Sherman Institute as a progressive and enlightened institution,” and to tout “himself as a visionary administrator who saw value in Native cultures.”<sup>56</sup>

Even more than advertising himself as a “visionary administrator,” Hall wished to promote the school so “that the patrons who witnessed the Hopi dances would contribute money and resources to the institution, or hire Indian students to work in their businesses, schools, or homes.”<sup>57</sup> This model of using student performances for fundraising purposes continued well after Hall’s tenure at Sherman, and reached its zenith during the late 1920s and early 1930s with traveling groups of students who would perform at community events to raise both money and awareness for the school. Several students even became local celebrities, and served as visual representations of the Sherman student body as a whole.

Photographs of two such students, John Nick and Martin Napa (figs. 13 and 14), comprise a relatively significant portion of the Sherman Museum archive, and nearly every image is captioned with the student’s name, date taken, and purpose for the photograph’s creation. For example, figure 14, in which Napa poses in a Plains Indian headdress and silver-detailed clothing, was distributed at events in which he performed, and served as a type of souvenir for

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<sup>56</sup> Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas: Hopi Students at Sherman Institute, 1902-1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 80.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

attendees. These images of Sherman students will be further discussed in chapter two, but it is significant to note here that the school was more than simply tolerant of certain forms of Native culture; these expressions of heritage and tradition were uniquely used for the benefit of the school and its students since its establishment in 1902.

Indian arts and crafts were prominent at Sherman Institute even before the drastic changes experienced under the New Deal, but the effects of the work by reformers such as Collier, d'Harnoncourt, and Dewey can be identified in the school's curricular shift during the 1940s. Courses continued in practical trades like farming, construction, and nursing in order to support the operation of the school, but also began to include specific instruction in traditional arts and crafts. Diana Meyers Bahr, a scholar in oral history and author of a recent publication on the student experience at Sherman, claims that the use of student-made craftwork was "not only... ironic, it ignored the cultural meanings of Native arts and crafts."<sup>58</sup> Bahr cites the implementation of "an Indian arts and crafts course to prepare Sherman boys to teach summer campers how to make imitation Indian pottery, basketry, and blankets" in 1936 as one of the sources of this irony, as it was the administration's way of "exploiting students, teaching them to imitate their culture to support the school financially."<sup>59</sup> Bahr deems it ironic that the school taught Indian students how to create their own traditional

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<sup>58</sup> Diana Meyers Bahr, *The Students of Sherman Indian School, Education and Native Identity since 1892* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 41.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

goods, but she does not address the fact that these traditions were disappearing on reservations for several reasons, including the federal regulation of materials needed to create traditional items, the modernization of reservation life, and the decline in ceremonial traditions and Native languages. In order to contend with this deterioration of indigenous cultures, Sherman encouraged students to blend their traditions with more modern, readily available techniques and materials that they could access on campus. This is not an “imitation” of Native culture as Bahr suggests, but instead an adaptation to ensure cultural survival.

While Bahr’s negative conclusion about the use of student arts and crafts as a means of exploitation is debatable, it is significant to note that this practice was analogous to Indian legislation under the New Deal.<sup>60</sup> The primary goal of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board was to create a viable and stable market for Native goods, and Sherman’s employment of Native students to teach Indian art forms was an example of the Board’s influence. There is no specific evidence to suggest that the students themselves made any money teaching these skills,

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<sup>60</sup> I suggest that Bahr’s view about the use of Indian arts at Sherman during this period as “exploitation” is debatable for several reasons. First, while the long history of the use of student work to benefit the school can be seen as negative because it was often free or underpaid labor, several firsthand accounts in the *Sherman Bulletin* or in letters found in the archive attest to the gratefulness that students expressed for learning valuable, marketable skills during their time in school. Second, I have been unable to find, and Bahr herself does not cite, any accounts of students or Native individuals denouncing the use or instruction of traditional art forms in boarding schools at the time. And third, according to McLerran, there was a precedent for using Native art as a means of financial income within tribal communities. Thus the fact that Sherman had students instructing summer campers was not out of the ordinary, nor was it necessarily exploitation of these students.

though there are other instances in which they were regularly paid for their services through Sherman's outing program. Therefore, it is possible that if the school administration considered these students as employees for their work at these summer camps, then they could have earned a nominal stipend.

The inclusion of arts and crafts at Sherman transformed during the 1940s. During the era of the New Deal, attendance at Indian boarding schools declined due to students staying at home to help their families during economic hardship, and eventually legislators regarded the goals expressed through progressive education and cultural preservation as failures. At the same time, living conditions on reservations were rapidly degenerating, especially for the Navajo (Diné) in the southwest, thus prompting officials at the Bureau of Indian Affairs to implement a special five-year program focused on the education of Navajo students.<sup>61</sup> In 1946, Sherman became the first boarding school to implement the Special Five Year Navajo Program, which was composed of three years of academic study followed by two years of vocational training. Until the cessation of the program in 1961, this period at Sherman saw a revived emphasis on the assimilation of Native students, since critics of the New Deal reforms

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<sup>61</sup> Jon A. Reyhner and Jeanne M. Oyawin Eder, *American Indian Education: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 237. The fact that attendance at federal boarding schools declined between 1930 and 1945 is not to say that Indian students stopped going to school altogether. Rather, as Reyhner and Eder conclude, students began attending day schools on the reservation so that they could support their families while they were not in school. This took a downward turn in 1946, when nineteen reservation schools were closed due to funding restrictions, which in turn left nearly fourteen thousand Navajo students without educational resources. Thus, the Navajo program was created to provide facilities for these students, and to encourage them to start lives off the reservations.

vehemently denigrated the effectiveness of Indian education as a site for cultural pluralism. These critics, along with legislators and agency officials, used the deteriorating welfare of Navajo communities as the basis for this return to assimilatory education; since it was apparent that tribes could not support themselves, then surely it was the American government's responsibility to intervene and provide the necessary tools to live according to the dominant society.

In his research on the Navajo program at Sherman, Jon Ille found that the assimilatory practices utilized by the Bureau of Indian Education were just as forceful, if not more so, than those used at the outset of the boarding school system. This Special Program introduced a curriculum that "aimed at breaking links to traditional work roles among young men and women, and replacing them with the skills required to participate in the modern urban economy," which "reflected the BIA's desire that students understand market forces and employment possibilities" in order to secure jobs and lead "successful" lives after their education.<sup>62</sup> For this program to be successful, students were required to not only study academic subjects and vocational skills, but also American social norms and cultural practices. However, according to Ille, the relative success of the Navajo program was found in its ability to equip students with vocational training, it failed in two significant ways: first, the program trained students in job areas that were not applicable to life on the reservation,

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<sup>62</sup> Jon Ille, "A Curriculum for Social Change: The Special Navajo Five Year Program," in *The Indian School on Magnolia Avenue*, 142.

and second, the goal of stripping away all remnants of tribal culture and replacing them with white American values was never fully achieved, much to the benefit of Native communities.

This failure to completely obliterate tribal culture is evidenced in the artistic practices that occurred at Sherman during the late 1940s, in which it appears that students were in some ways able to resist the domination of American culture over their Navajo heritage. As previously discussed in this chapter, the photograph of a Sherman student painting geometric designs (fig. 3) is a dichotomous representation of white American values and traditional Indian designs. The student appears in modern American fashion, dressed in a white button-up shirt, with his short hair slicked back against his head. Additionally, he uses non-Native materials—the thin paintbrush, plastic palette, and white butcher paper—to create his work, and yet the designs appear reminiscent of Navajo textile and painting designs (figs. 4-7). The bold, geometric shapes with thick, black outlines characterized many Navajo art forms, and the young artist's careful attention to detail suggests a familiarity with motifs and techniques similar to Diné art objects, but devoid of any ritualistic or ceremonial tradition that would have conventionally accompanied the production of works such as sand painting (fig. 4).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Sand painting was traditionally reserved for healing and other spiritual ceremonies, in which a specifically trained individual, such as a medicine man, would lead a ritual using the sand painting as a focal point of spiritual power.

There are several unclear factors about this photograph that highlight gaps in scholarship on the importance of arts at boarding schools in the years following the New Deal. If the goal of the five-year Navajo program was to reassert the project of assimilation of Indian students, then why would this student be photographed painting forms that are clearly inspired by his Navajo upbringing? If, as Ille suggests, the ultimate goal of boarding schools from 1945 until 1961 was to train Navajo students on how to espouse an American way of living, then why would this student be pictured participating in a Native-influenced activity? Most research on the program does not specifically address Indian arts and crafts, and scholars provide contradictory accounts regarding the role of Navajo culture in Indian boarding schools during these fifteen years. As previously stated, Ille concludes that the Navajo program reinstated the goal of complete assimilation, and administrators viewed the espousal of Euro-American culture as the only means of survival for Indians.

In their work on the history of Indian education, Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Oyawin Eder contend that these assimilatory practices came with a caveat; Sherman Institute hired Navajo translators and courses were “taught in the Navajo language in the initial years so that students could immediately begin basic studies... The first principle of the program was that it was bilingual.”<sup>64</sup> Obviously the aim of this new assimilatory system was fundamentally different than seen before. If students were allowed to speak their Native language, and

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<sup>64</sup> Reyhner and Eder, *American Indian Education*, 238.

“were also encouraged to maintain their traditional culture” through respect for their parents and remembrance of their lives on the reservation,<sup>65</sup> then it is not implausible that the school allowed students to participate in activities such as painting that were reminiscent of traditional Navajo culture.

Given the fact that the Sherman was originally founded with Hall’s more liberal ideals regarding Indian identity, and that the national perspective on Indian arts and crafts dramatically shifted during the New Deal period, it seems that Sherman Institute was a unique repository of contradictory mindsets. Though still operating under the policy of forced assimilation, Sherman’s administrators to some extent valued the creative aspects of Native culture. The Indian art object during the 1930s and 1940s was one that provided a type of hybrid representation of Indian experience, a representation that expressed both tradition and modernity. What is most important to recognize during this era of rapid change and shifting attitudes is that the authenticity of artworks created by Indian students is not necessarily an issue of exploitation or loss of cultural values. As McLerran notes on the popularity of commercialized Indian art, “to deny the value of commoditized forms of native art... is to deny the native artist recognition as a fully modern subject capable of creative adaption to change.”<sup>66</sup> This adaptation is also evidenced in the materials of Sherman Institute’s museum, which attests to the ability of boarding school students to face the

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<sup>65</sup> Reyhner and Eder, *American Indian Education*, 239.

<sup>66</sup> McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art*, 227.



reality of removal and assimilation through a heterogenous approach to arts and culture during their time on campus.

In addition to the commoditized objects made by Native artists, the New Deal era also experienced a serialization and commodification of the Native body in photograph form. The tangibility of the printed image was akin to the physicality of the art object; both could be handled, sold, traded, moved, displayed, and interpreted. And, more importantly, both could be read by the viewer as evidence for the usefulness and productivity of Indian individuals.

## **Chapter Two: The Laboring Native Body at Sherman Institute**

The rhythmic rumble of the baler cuts through the cool morning air as machine-bound bundles systematically slide down the chute. A young man stands in front of the contraption, rigidly leaning towards a disheveled bale of hay, whose unkempt structure contrasts with the clean, geometric form of the bale protruding from the apparatus. The bale at the figure's feet seems to disappear into the ground on which he stands, as though he is reaching for something that is simultaneously present and absent as it blends into the ground beneath him. His stance appears awkward, perhaps even insincere, as he points to the cuboid form instead of taking it in his hands. With the simulation of productivity mirrored between the man and the machine, the idleness of both subjects creates distinct tension in the image. Man and

machine, humanity and technology, become the antithesis of one another, and yet are still mutually dependent in order to complete their respective tasks.

This photograph (fig. 15), taken in 1946 at the Sherman Institute in Riverside, California, is part of a unique collection that depicts the laboring Native body. These images provide not only a unique perspective into the cultural and social structures of American life during the era of the New Deal, they also suggest that the representation of the Native American body was undergoing significant change in the realm of the public imagination. No longer depicted as a vanishing race in need of ethnographic documentation for the sake of posterity, the Indian subject is equated with the development and changing identity of the nation in a time of severe economic distress. This position is especially evident in the images from the Sherman Institute, which portray students as useful contributors in American society, being trained to participate in the agrarian industry under the Farm Security Administration's (FSA) new policies and relief efforts. In many of the images to be considered in what follows, the figure of the Native American individual will be suggested as one that is both isolated from and subsumed in society and social progress.

A large number of the photographs at the Sherman museum come from the mid-twentieth century, with a significant portion taken during the 1930s and 1940s. During the period between 1902 and 1946, the year the school's farm was sold, Sherman Institute had thriving farming and livestock programs that provided students with practical experience to use after they left school. In

addition to experience, the agricultural program provided provisions for the school's population, as well as the surrounding community. Sherman administrators frequently sold portions of the school's fresh produce in nearby markets, bringing in extra revenue for the school on a regular basis.<sup>67</sup> The archives at the Sherman Museum thoroughly document the prosperity of this program, with an entire collection devoted solely to students working on the farm in the 1940s. The purpose of many of the early photographs in the Sherman archive was to document the school as a successful tool of assimilation and acculturation, especially in relation to the career training offered at the school. Between 1940 and 1946, the school administration hired Tommy Thomas Studio to take a multitude of images in order to promote Sherman's agricultural program to the Bureau of Indian Education and educational policymakers. In these four photographs from the Sherman Institute archive (figs. 15-18), images capture students in various states of agricultural labor, with the photographer paying little concern for the identity of the students, but to the appearance of productivity and progress towards assimilation into white American society.

In the photograph of a Sherman student atop a tractor in the school's agricultural fields (fig. 16), the photographer from Tommy Thomas Studio stages a scene of serene productivity. The composition is vertically divided into thirds, with the lush landscape of palms and cloudless sky in the background, the

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<sup>67</sup> Jean A Keller, *Empty Beds: Indian Student Health at Sherman Institute, 1902-1922* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 56.

student on the tractor precisely in the center of the frame, and the unfinished labor in the foreground, closest to the viewer. With the idyllic view of the landscape in the background, and the uncompleted work in the foreground, this image demonstrates the state of transition that is present in many of the photographs of Sherman students during this time period. If we view this student's education as the process of acculturation, then many implications arise in the photograph itself. The picturesque landscape just behind the student comes to signify the home and family he left behind when he came to Sherman, intently waiting for his return. With his back turned to the palms, he concentrates on the mechanistic task of agricultural education. In the middle of the frame, the student exhibits the field he has already tilled, looking into the foreground at what is still left to be done. He is not sitting in the seat of the vehicle, but instead stands to complete his work. His face is cast in shadow under his hat, and he does not acknowledge the presence of the camera or the viewer.

The photographer intentionally places the student and tractor in the center of the composition, emphasizing the inconsequentiality of the subject's identity. Had he or she chosen to identify the student or provide a close-up shot of his face, the photographer would have placed significance in the subject's identity. But for the purpose of this image, recognizing the student as an individual is not important, since the focus is on the tractor and the field, much like the synthesis of man and machine seen in the image of the student and the

hay baler. What is important is the student's work, and he is merely an interchangeable actor fulfilling a role for the photographer. It is precisely this loss of identity that attests to the significance of the image—if identity is associated with a sense of purpose and belonging in life, then a loss of identity leaves an individual fixed in a state of immobility, stuck between the past and the future. The landscape stretches seemingly endlessly beyond the picture plane, as if to suggest that there is no end to the farmland, and no end to the work required of the student.

Another photograph of the Sherman farming program portrays a young male student gently clutching two white ducks as he gazes towards a brace of ducks in the foreground (fig. 17). Though the young man's face is clearly visible to the viewer, and his expression seems to convey a sense of equanimity, the birds, rather than the student, appear to be the focus of the image. The wire fence behind him encloses the boy and the birds, partitioning them from the retreating landscape in the background. A dozen ducks huddle together in the photograph's foreground, and the stark contrast in value between them draws the viewer's attention away from the student behind them. His gaze creates an implied line to lead the viewer's own eye to the foreground, further reducing his prominence as the subject of the photograph. The vibrant white of the ducks' feathers create crisp outlines against the muted tone of the hay-covered dirt ground, with varying values of gray and black feathers speckling the cluster of white. This visual interest pulls the viewer's eye away from the student, as does

the camera's sharp focus on the ducks compared to the softer view of the boy himself. And although his posture suggests a certain comfort around the farm animals, he does not interact with them beyond the two in his loose grasp. The student stays in a separate space from the group of ducks and does not appear to be completing any sort of task or action; instead, he is an onlooker in the image which purports to capture the life of a student in the agricultural program at Sherman.

In a related photograph (fig. 18), taken during the same time and by the same studio, another male student appears to reach for a magazine, with his left hand resting on the wooden shelf, and his right arm hanging motionless at his side. Again, it appears as though the photographer deliberately stages this image to create the illusion of activity, and yet it is obvious that the young man is not truly mid-action. There are no blurred lines to suggest movement, and his motionless hand does not actually grasp the magazine in front of him. The photographer perfectly frames the parallel shelves of magazines within the picture plane, without a single magazine out of order. With the horizontal lines of the agriculture publications contrasting against the vertical lines of the wooden-slatted wall, the scene appears to be flawlessly organized, emphasizing further the subject's conspicuously static stance. The grid-like structure of the magazines seem to advertise the publications themselves, reducing the prominence of the student as a focal point.

Similar to the photograph of the student on the tractor, this image does not rely upon the subject's identity for visual interest. Instead, the photographer seeks to create the impression of productivity and competence, which in turn anchors the subject in a state of liminality between dynamism and immobility. The student's face is turned away from the photographer and the viewer, as his arm creates a diagonal line to the magazine in the exact center of the image. He reaches towards the magazines—whose covers reveal more about their contents than the face of the students reveals about himself—as though reaching towards the promise of a fulfilling, conventional American future.

Figures 15-17 were taken between in 1946, just before the school sold its farm land to a local businessman. Figure 18, which was taken by the same studio, was taken in 1947, shortly after the sale of the land. Though all of these images were produced nearly a decade after the official end of President Roosevelt's New Deal program, the influence of federal agricultural and Native American policies are apparent in the images themselves. All of the photographs' subjects are participating in activities which were used to show the merits and functionality of the school's instruction in vocational training of farming and animal husbandry. This theme of agricultural labor is directly related to the New Deal images created during the Farm Security Administration's photography program, which were used to document the plight of the middle class American worker, and to promote the establishment and the achievements of federal relief programs.

### ***Photography Under the New Deal***

The social role of photography in the United States underwent a monumental shift during the New Deal era, especially in terms of documentary work. Not only did photographic technology become more accessible to the American public during this period, but government agencies began to use photography as a tool for record keeping and as visual evidence of both the necessity and efficacy of various New Deal agencies. Many scholars attribute the rise in the photographic image's popularity during this period to many variables.<sup>68</sup> The democratization of photographic technology with wider availability to the public allowed the general population, rather than only trained professionals, to participate in the creation of photographs. Likewise, the popularization of magazines such as *Life*, which reproduced high-quality prints of important social and political events, promulgated photographic principles and aesthetic values to a national audience.

American historian Pete Daniel notes more specific changes that occurred during the Great Depression that contributed to the popularization of photography: during a time when material and even sentimental objects were lost for a large population of the nation due to economic hardship, people began to appreciate the objecthood of the photograph. In being able to view a permanent record of "facts," one could be comforted when there was no assurance or security about the future. Daniel notes that as both the viewing

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<sup>68</sup> Pete Daniel, Introduction to *Official Images* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), vii.



and taking of photographs increased in the years before World War II, “the appeal of photography contained contradictory impulses: to document *and* transform, to gain familiarity *and* distance.”<sup>69</sup> The photograph as physical object served to record the daily lives of American citizens, and in doing so, provided hope for change. And yet, as the tangible image could be held in the viewer’s hands, this connection with the subject also evoked a sense of distance, by which the viewer recognized that it was just an object, a piece of material that did not always represent an unaltered truth.

It is precisely this dichotomy of “contradictory impulses” which shaped the nature of photography, especially documentary and ethnographic photography, in the years following the stock market crash. The Great Depression in the United States saw both a present and a future of uncertainty, and photographs served as physical objects which people could possess, and objects from which they could garner knowledge. Not only did the photographic image become standard in popular media, it also became a tool for the government to visually record its relief programs under the New Deal, and to create publicity in order to “rally public support for ‘priming the pump’” to stimulate the national economy.<sup>70</sup> The most prominent federal program to use photography to this end was the Farm Security Administration (FSA), whose images demonstrated the need for government relief programs in the betterment

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<sup>69</sup> Pete Daniel, *Official Images*, viii.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

of daily life and living conditions for all social classes, not just government employees or the economic elite.

Under the supervision of politician and photographer Roy Stryker, the Information Division of the FSA acted as a collector and publicist of visual representations of rural America. Stryker's objective was two-fold: to raise public awareness of the persistent indigence in American farming communities, and to advertise the benefits of long-term New Deal policies. The project nostalgically called for a return to simpler times in which the farmer was highlighted as the backbone of America, but still acknowledged the need for modern customs and technology as a means of survival. Stryker saw the FSA photographs as a tool of "a progressive vision that welcomed modernization and technocratic efficiency as a way to 'uplift' standards of rural and urban American life,"<sup>71</sup> in the same way that Native American boarding schools were seen as tools used to "uplift" the lives of their students. By improving the lives of lower class citizens and restoring the land, the FSA could establish agriculture as an industrial impetus that would aid in the rehabilitation of the country as a whole.

Stryker employed eleven photographers to document the vernacular life of middle-class Americans during the Great Depression. He set high standard for his employees' images, and by hiring established photographers like Walker Evans, Stryker "aimed at more than producing file photographs for Washington bureaus or generating local publicity and good will for government relief

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<sup>71</sup> Daniel, *Official Images*, 2.

measures.”<sup>72</sup> Evans’ work went on to become iconic images of American rural life, and provide a remarkable comparison to the agricultural photographs from Sherman Institute. In his work *Bud Fields, Hale County, Alabama* (fig. 19), Evans captures the authoritative stance of a sharecropper amidst his work. The man is clad in tattered clothes, with holes throughout his hat and pants, and buttons undone on his bright white shirt. He stands directly facing the viewer, hands at his hips, and eyes looking straight into the camera’s lens. This direct recognition of the photographer, and consequentially the viewer, gives the farmer a sense of self-possession and agency in spite of his tattered appearance and the seemingly endless work behind him.

Another of Evans’ images (fig. 20), shows a contrasting scene of three black men posed against the slatted wall of a “New Deal Barbershop.” The worn paint and horizontal lines of the building create a notable complement to the men in the center of the frame, whose triangular composition and clean attire situate them as the focus of the piece. Again, the subjects stare directly at the Evans and at the viewer, recognizing the presence of an outside perspective. Unlike the photographs taken by Evans and other FSA employees, the figures in the Sherman images do not acknowledge the camera or the audience. Instead, it is their implied actions that demand the viewer’s attention, and the dynamic movement, staged as it may be, draws our attention to the productivity and efficacy of the school’s educational prowess.

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<sup>72</sup> Maren Stange, “‘The Record Itself’: Farm Security Administration Photography and the Transformation of Rural Life,” in *Official Images*, 1.

What is unique about the photographs from the Sherman Institute during and immediately following the New Deal is the representation of students as subjects that reconcile some aspects of their native past with the potential for an assimilated American future. Certain qualities seen as uniquely primitive, such as tribal art forms and a primal connection to the land, were pictured in tandem with modern technologies, such as a tractor or a hay baler used by Sherman students. By juxtaposing the primitive with the modern, these photographs complicate the national view of American Indians in the first half of the 20th century. Philip Deloria posits that modernity during this time period presented a duality of how white Americans viewed Native Americans, as either a foil to the concept of American industrial growth, or as an example of how the United States required a return to a more natural state that existed before the Civil War and Industrial Revolution, a state which relied more on the land and less on the machine.<sup>73</sup>

Rather than ascribing to either pole of this spectrum, the images from Sherman amalgamate the two views into one which shows the modern machine

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<sup>73</sup> Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 100. While Deloria's book is one of the most comprehensive works on the American expectations of Native Americans, he unfortunately circumvents the period of the New Deal. Akin to other scholarship on the visual representation of the Indian, his book jumps from the period just before the Great Depression to the World War II era, without noting any points of interest during the 1930s. Deloria also emphasizes the fact that the federal government gave Indian groups allotments in the late 19th century as a means of encouraging them to farm the land and create a sustainable living based on agriculture. He argues that this exemplifies the federal government's position on the primitive link between Indian and earth, and the idea that indigenous groups could be self-reliant (though this self-reliance is ironically dependent upon the federal government).

being used by the Native agrarian worker. This suggests the possibility of Indians contributing to the improvement of American life, much like the photographs from the Farm Security Administration. The images from Sherman speak to the Bureau of Indian Affairs' belief that the federal boarding school system was the only possible tool in fabricating the Native American as an integral member of society. Similarly, the FSA photography project set out to visualize the necessity for federal intervention and legislation to refashion and rehabilitate the lives of rural Americans so that the lives of all Americans could be improved. In effect, the idea and the image of the Native American, and arguably of the individuals in the FSA photographs, became commodities not only in the sense that the photographs were tangible objects that were used as a means of monetary gain and became publicly distributed, but also in the sense that these images became representations of how government programs could serve the American population.<sup>74</sup>

Much like those from the Sherman archive, New Deal photographs were not solely the products of experienced professionals. Their proficiency varied from novice to expert, largely due to “recent technological innovations—faster films, miniature cameras, portable synchronized flashlights—[which] permitted

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<sup>74</sup> It is important to note here that the term “commodity” does not merely signify a good to be sold and purchased; the term was originally used to denote a convenience, or product that was created and used to better the lives of a larger group (from the Latin *commodus*, meaning “suitable” or “convenient”). Native American students were treated as products to be created within the confines of the boarding school system, which would ultimately benefit the whole of American society.

rank amateurs as well as artists to quickly assume the role of photographer.”<sup>75</sup>

This inclusion of both the technically proficient and the relatively inexperienced was vital to the project’s ambition, since each revealed different aspects of American culture. In accordance with Grieve’s hypothesis on middlebrow art as discussed in chapter one, the definition and expectations of art and aesthetics underwent dramatic change during the New Deal, as a distinct visual culture began to emerge amongst the middle class.

Along with being technically untrained, the majority of the photographers working at the Sherman Institute in the first half of the twentieth century were members of the school community, and were largely anonymous in their work. The exception to this, however, is the work of Tommy Thomas Studio, who photographed the students on the school’s farm in the mid-1940s. For the most part, the images in the Sherman archive were taken by school employees, and much like the photographs taken by the FSA team, the images were both publicly disseminated and officially archived as visual evidence of the efficacy of the programs at hand. And also much like the FSA images, the photographs

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<sup>75</sup> Daniel, *Official Images*, x.

from Sherman were “intended to influence public policy and opinion.”<sup>76</sup> For Indian boarding schools, photographs of daily life and school programs were vital tools for fundraising, as well as documentation of the curriculum for overseeing agencies such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs. And, as with the FSA images, the photographs of Sherman students are not simply unbiased, objective representations of school life; many are intentionally staged, while still appearing to be intimate, yet unobtrusive. They allow the viewer to feel included in the scene and sympathize with the subject due to the photographer's formal and aesthetic choices.

### ***The Native Body as Physical Object at Sherman Institute***

As the demand for photographic images rose among the American public during the New Deal era, the modes and expectations of representation changed, as well. The Sherman Institute saw a gradual shift from representing the Native student as either distinctly exotic, such as the portraits of John Nick and Martin Napa, or entirely American, like those of the students in the

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<sup>76</sup> Daniel, *Official Images*, xi. One significant difference in the modes of collection and preservation of these images should be addressed—the images produced by New Deal agencies such as the FSA were and still are kept in federal government archives, and, more than just documentary images, they are considered to be examples of the traditionally artistic potential of photography. The works of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, both employed by the FSA, are studied today not just for their socio- historical significance, but for their role in the history of art, as well. As stated in the introduction of this manuscript, photographs from Native American boarding schools, especially those of Sherman, have been largely treated as historical documents, and have not been thoroughly addressed in art historical research and writing. No thorough visual analysis has been completed on the photograph archive at Sherman, and the only collection to receive any attention by art historians is the Carlisle Indian Industrial School archive in Pennsylvania.

agricultural program, to a representation of the Indian as both tribal and modern, as seen in the photograph of the student artist. In any instance, the tangible photograph of the Native body was one distinctly different from the Euro-American body, it was the Other, which could be owned, used, discarded, or ignored. But it was not until the policies of John Collier in the 1930s that the Native body took on an entirely unique possibility—that of the trained worker with the potential to benefit American society.

The image of the Indian as an object to be possessed had roots that reach far earlier than the start of the Great Depression, as paintings of Native Americans date back to the time of European contact. Centuries later, photographers such as Edward Curtis marketed and sold images of tribal individuals to the American public, thus widening the availability to possess a representation of the Indian. Native American boarding schools, especially Carlisle and Sherman, also used photographs as a means of financial gain, but also as a means of fashioning a vision of what they believed the Indian was meant to be. In figure 13, Sherman student John Nick is photographed in profile, his strong features striking against the dark background. Shrouded in a Pendleton blanket, Nick dons a Plains headdress, both items foreign to his Diné upbringing.<sup>77</sup> The blanket from Oregon—commonly traded with Indian tribes in the Pacific Northwest—and the eagle feather war bonnet are both iconic and

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<sup>77</sup> The Diné, an alternate term for the Navajo Nation, are situated in the southwest United States. Their culture is fundamentally different than that of the Pacific Northwest tribes, and the Plains tribes from the central region of the country.



stereotypically “Indian,” but are in no way associated with one another, or with Southwest Indian culture. Nick was staged, as were many Sherman students, to portray the archetypal Native American, one whose demeanor and ensemble would be recognizable to the public. Much like the diptych of Tom Torlino from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, Nick’s image from 1926 became a metonym for Sherman students.<sup>78</sup> His likeness represented the purpose for the institution of these boarding schools—that the Indianness, while novel and marketable, could be trained out of the students.<sup>79</sup> One of the most important details of this photograph is its date of origin, just three years before the crash of the American stock market, and seven years before the implementation of the New Deal.

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<sup>78</sup> Mauro, *Art of Americanization*, 152. Mauro relates the image of Torlino to the literary terms “synecdoche” and “metonym” to explain the function of his portraits. He argues that these “momentary photographic images stand in for ‘Tom Torlino’ the human being—his character, his life, his aspirations, his beliefs, his personal and ancestral histories. What is implied in the use of metonymy and synecdoche is that a relationship of contiguity exists between the fragment and the whole.” Mauro appropriates these terms from literary theory, and cites the definitions put forth by Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi in *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). In a similar vein, art historian Rosalind Krauss relates photography to a simulacrum, or a similarity or likeness that is meant to represent another object, or the “real” object. This is pertinent to the photograph of John Nick in that his image is simply that—an image—though it signifies more than is pictured.

<sup>79</sup> John Nick was often pictured in clichéd Indian regalia, but with pieces of American garb, such as a military uniform or marching band costume. Nick was part of a traveling group from Sherman who would perform a variety of approved productions, including American (as well as tribal) song and dance. The group raised money for the school with both their performances and their photographs, and Nick consequently became a well-known face throughout southern California. Although he is shown in recognizable Indian dress, it should be noted that these images were displayed alongside depictions of American culture in order to suggest the transformative power of the boarding school; one photograph of the stereotyped Native had to be justified by a photograph of a “changed” Indian.

Not only were the actual physical images of the Indian student commodities in their own right, but the image came to stand for the individual Indian as a commodity as well. Photographs like those of a Native student atop a tractor became synecdoches for the potentiality of all Indian individuals; if one could learn the necessary techniques of modern farming technology and combine that with the supposedly inherent interdependency with the land that all Natives possessed, then there was the possibility for every Indian individual to become a productive, beneficial American citizen. One could then view the depiction of an Indian farmer as a tool used much like the machines with which they are pictured. Though the actual body of the Native was not bought and sold as a good<sup>80</sup>, the idea and the visual presentation of the Native was publicized as an image of the capacity for bringing the country out of the Depression.

Several formal elements contribute to the portrayal of Sherman students as commodified goods. Most notably, they are often photographed in relation to

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<sup>80</sup> It could be argued that the physical body of the American Indian student *was* marketed and sold as a commodity when one takes into account the outing program used in many boarding schools, including the Sherman Institute. During the summer months when classes were not in session, school officials would send students to nearby white households as laborers and household attendants. There were several reasons for the popularity of the outing system: the school and the students were paid for their services (though the wages were often lower than the work warranted), the students learned valuable skills that they could use upon completing school and entering the workforce, and the students could not return home and regress back to tribal lifestyles. For further reading on the use of the outing program at the Sherman Institute, see Clifford Trafzer, Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, and Lorene Sisquoc, *The Indian School on Magnolia Avenue: Voices and Images from Sherman Institute* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2012).

actual physical commodities such as machinery, crops, livestock, and farming literature. By collocating the indigenous body and a laboring tool, Sherman's photographers create a visual link between subject and object, thus deemphasizing the subject's agency as a human individual. This objectification is also underlined by the lack of identifying features in the agricultural photographs at hand. Though the images are portrait-like in their presentation of each student, the individual identity of the student is not the focus. Rather, the focus is the apparent action they take in relation to the other objects in the frame.

The individual loss of identity of the photograph's subject is echoed in the lack of identity of an individual photographer for the majority of Sherman's images. In instances where the student is well-known and marketable, such as John Nick, the student's name and some apposite information may have been recorded on the back of the print. However, more often than not, the identity of the photographed student was unrecorded and seemingly unwarranted for the purpose of the image. Similarly, the authors of most of Sherman's photographs are undocumented, since they were school employees, and were not necessarily looking to be recognized as professional photographers. The rare exception to this standard is the group of images examined in this chapter, which depict students on the school's farm and are all stamped with the emblem of Tommy Thomas Studio in Riverside. Though it is unclear precisely who took each photograph, whether it was Tommy Thomas himself or an employee of the

studio, the fact that the school administrators hired a professional photographer at all is significant in itself.<sup>81</sup> These images are the only instances in which an individual not affiliated with the Sherman Institute, and an established photographer at that, is formally credited as author.

This group of photographs from Sherman portrays the Indian as a useful tool in their depictions of students without an authoritarian white figure in the frame. In his analysis of the photographs at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School archive in Pennsylvania, Mauro suggests that the trend of including a white school employee in the photographs with Native students was a means of asserting the authority of the school and of Euro-American culture, but it was also a way to reinforce the view of the Indian as Other.<sup>82</sup> By picturing the Sherman students without this authoritarian figure, the Tommy Thomas Studio photographer gives the subjects a sense of agency, but also underscores the aim of the school to recreate the Indian as a self-reliant, productive member of white society. The act of farming and the tools included in the images take on the responsibility of comparison instead of the Anglo employee. The student is visually linked to the tools he uses, and is presented as an equivalent to the

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<sup>81</sup> Lorene Sisquoc, personal interview with the author, April 16, 2013. There is no documentation to explain why a professional studio was hired to take the images on the school's farm, or to what end the images were ultimately used. However, it is important to note that at this time, school administrators were preparing to sell the farm land due to financial difficulties. Most likely, the official photographs were used to promote the value of the land itself, along with the typical reason for many of the school's photographs—to prove the transformative power the school had on its Native population.

<sup>82</sup> Mauro, *The Art of Americanization*, 58-59.

manmade machinery that facilitates his labor. Even the seemingly simple act of photographing an individual can be viewed as an act of objectification, as the image of the human subject serves to stand in for the actual individual, and the viewer is able to physically hold the person, making it tangible and capable of being owned.

These images from Sherman seem to mirror the relationship between the United States government and Native culture in the decade following the New Deal time period. Just as federal agencies like the Indian Arts and Crafts Board sought to improve Indian welfare through policing arts production, so too did the boarding school system seek to ameliorate the lives of Native students through education and assimilation. Thus there appears to be a distinct correlation between the American treatment of Indian culture and the American view of the Native body; the object and the objectified, the work of art and the working body, and the idea and the image of the Native suggest that there was equal importance between the *product* and the *producer*.

### **Conclusion: the Object and the Objectified**

The tumultuous time period of the 1930s and 1940s in the United States saw drastic changes in both the treatment and expectations of the Native American population. Under the auspices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, the political reformers such as John Collier

attempted to both regulate and promote the production of Native-made objects in the hopes of bolstering tribal economies. And yet, as McLerran notes, the good intentions of many federal policies were not always welcomed by Indian leaders, nor were they always beneficial for Indian communities.

Many scholars, such as Bahr, contend that the government's attempts to monitor Native culture and traditions was unequivocally damaging to Indian identity and society. Although most recent research focuses on the negative repercussions of policies enacted under the Bureau of Indian Affairs and New Deal agencies such as the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, it is essential to consider how indigenous individuals and communities adapted to a rapidly changing environment in order to ensure their cultural preservation. A significant nexus of this preservation was the Sherman Institute, a uniquely-positioned boarding school that was seemingly dualistic in nature; not only did Sherman educators adhere to the federal policy of assimilating Native students through instruction in practical and technical skill sets, but they also encouraged these same students to create and perform traditional art forms such as painting, pottery, weaving, and music.

The precise conditions that led to Sherman's unique disposition on the role of Indian arts and education is still unclear, and requires further research and attention from the academic community. Superintendent Hall, the first administrator at Sherman, undoubtedly laid the foundation that set Sherman apart from other Indian boarding schools in the early 20th century. And the

effects of the New Deal further distinguished Sherman as a dichotomous institution—with the rise of photography and middlebrow art across the nation, the visual culture and materials of the Institute reflected the drastic restructuring of the American mindset. The return to an agricultural society became an emphasis in media publications and federal policy, and photographers were tasked with depicting the benefits of this new agricultural revival. Thus the intriguing existence of the Tommy Thomas Studio photographs in the Sherman archive is directly related to the government's use of official photographers in the previous decade; just as the Farm Security Administration assembled a massive archive of images to represent the working class in rural America, so too did the Sherman Institute amass a substantial collection of images as evidence of the usefulness of their agricultural curriculum, as well as to promote the sale of the school's farmland.

In addition to the representation of the Native body as a productive, laboring figure, both the Sherman Institute and the country as a whole experienced a shift in the representation of Native material culture. Indigenous arts and crafts epitomized the conflicting nature of tribal and federal relations during the first half of the 20th century. Many reformers and politicians saw the government's role as one of a guiding authority, which would ensure the stability of both the national and tribal economies by regulating arts production and Indian education. However, there arose several negative responses to federal involvement in Native affairs, including the argument that the federal-tribal

relationship was inherently imbalanced, and treated Indian communities as though they were incapable of sustaining themselves without intervention.

These negative responses deserve more academic attention in order to better grasp how the images from boarding schools, including Sherman Institute, were affected by—or were adverse to—national trends under the New Deal. There are still several unanswered questions about the role of Native individuals and Native arts during the 1930s and 1940s, which should be addressed through more art historical research into the archives at Sherman and the Bureau of Indian Affairs: why did this particular school preserve such an extensive collection of photographs, and how do the images differ between each given photographer, time period, and subject matter? As the government adopted legislation to improve the quality of visual arts and to hire professional artists under New Deal policies, did Sherman administrators adapt the school's curriculum to reflect these policies? Who were the specific audiences for the images in Sherman's collection, and did any concrete changes come from the dissemination of these images? Who hired the Tommy Thomas Studio to photograph the school's agricultural program, and why did they rely on a professional photographer to take these images in particular?

While the academic community has given much attention to history of the federal boarding school system, as well as the New Deal and its role in the history of art, there is still a significant lack of research into the art historical importance of the visual materials from Indian boarding schools. The extensive



collections at schools such as Sherman provide unique insight into the history of the dynamic, and often tumultuous, relationship between the American government and Native American communities, which is still a contentious issue today in many respects. Not only do these rich archives deserve further scholarly attention, but they warrant attention from the viewpoint of art history and visual culture that surpasses their treatment as merely evidence of Native American history.



1. John Nicholas Choate, *Tom Torlino—Navajo*. As he entered the school in 1882. As he appeared three years later. 1882-1885, photograph, Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections. Image via Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center.



2. Unknown photographer, *Sherman Indian Museum*, unknown date, photograph, Sherman Indian Museum. Image via [www.ShermanIndianMuseum.org](http://www.ShermanIndianMuseum.org).



3. Unknown photographer, *Untitled*, unknown date, photograph, Sherman Indian Museum. Image courtesy Sherman Indian Museum.

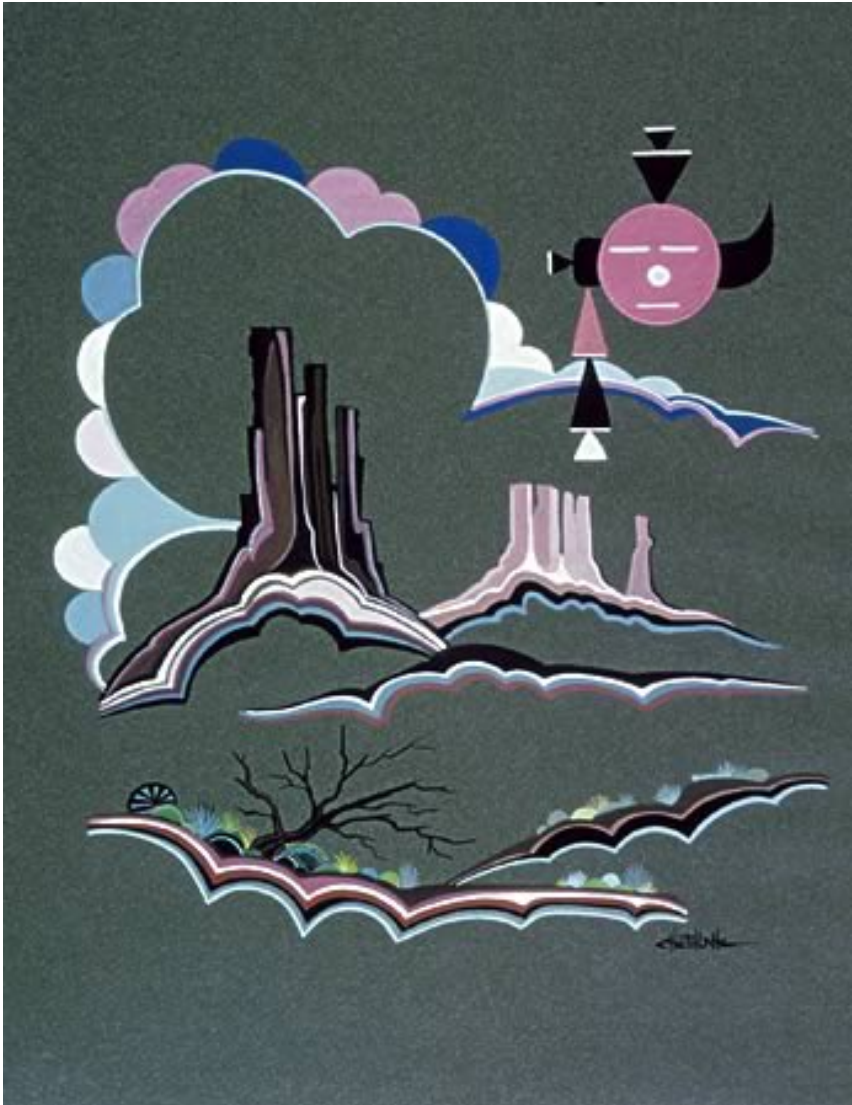


4. Eliot Elisofon, *Navajo Indian Sand Painting at the Exhibition "Indian Art of the United States,"* March 26, 2941, publicity photograph, Museum of Modern Art. Image via [www.artstor.org](http://www.artstor.org).



5. Unknown artist, *Navajo Teec Nos Pos Rug*, 1930-1940, sheep's wool, Arizona State Museum. Image via [www.statemuseum.arizona.edu](http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu).



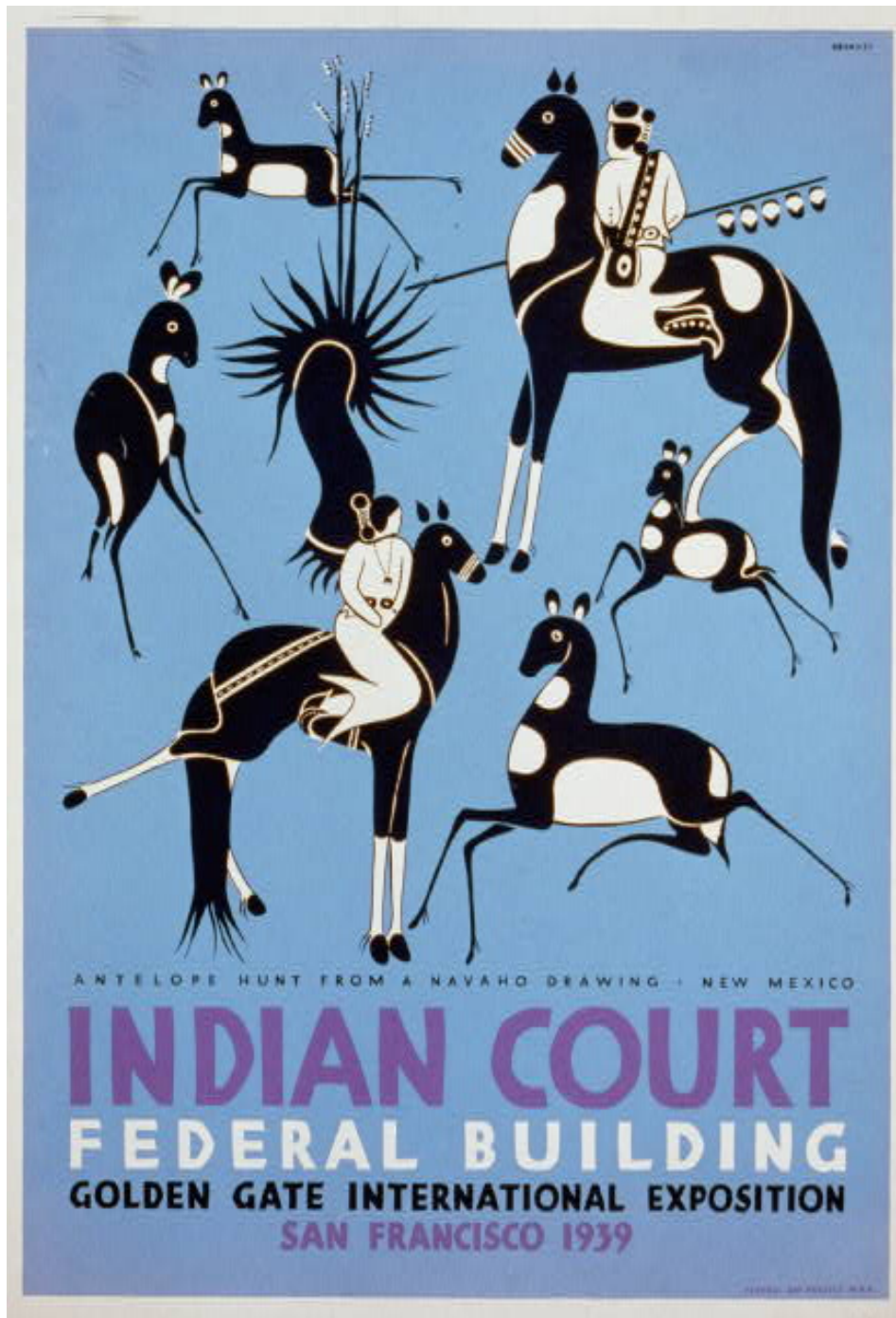


6. David Chethlahe Paladin, *Stylized Monument Valley*, 1950, tempera on paper, 9.65 in. x 12.69 in, Arizona State Museum. Image via [www.statemuseum.arizona.edu](http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu).

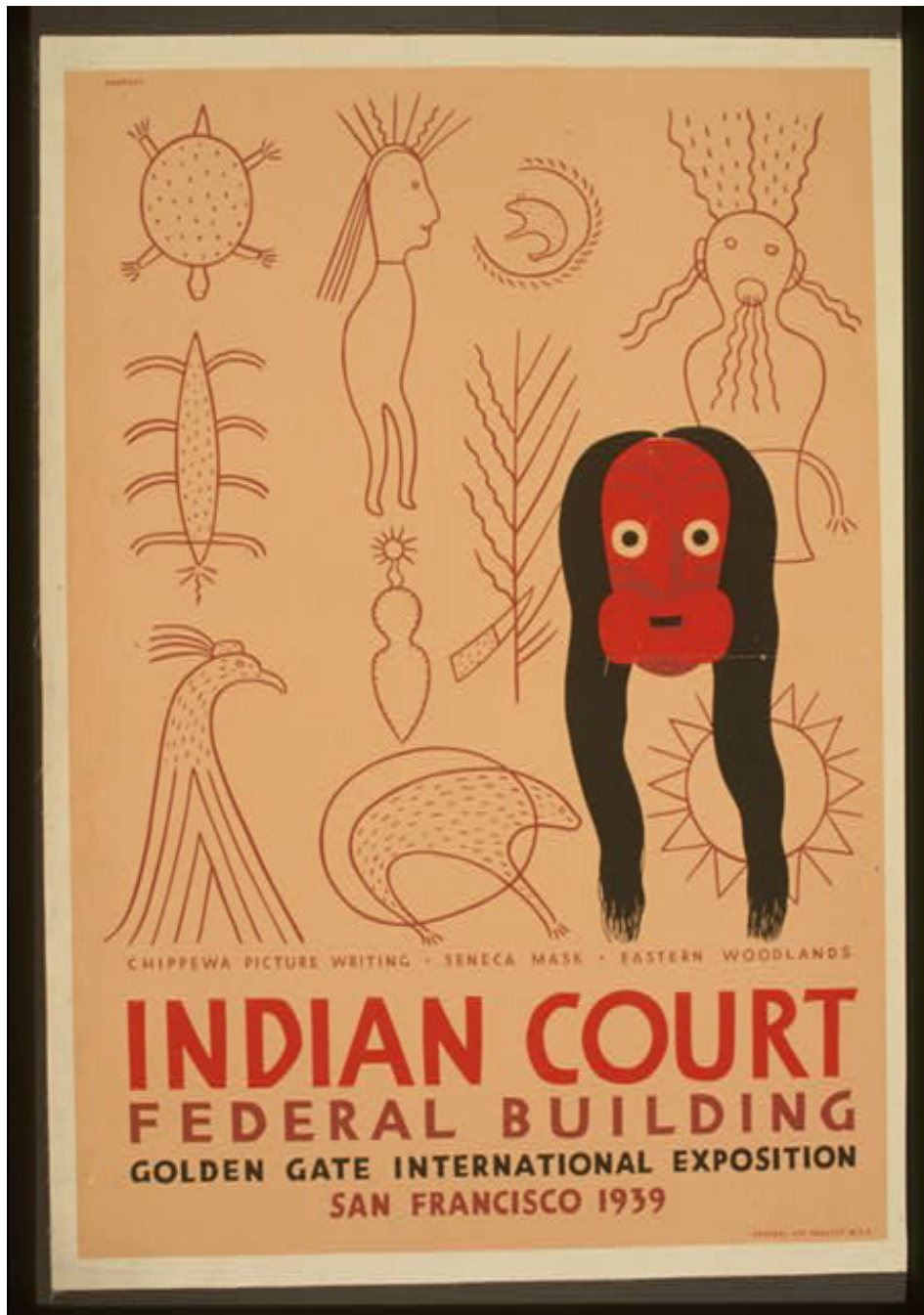


7. Unknown artist, *Katsinmana or Katsina Maiden Figure*, collected 1950, wood, feather, and string, Arizona State Museum. Image via [www.statemuseum.arizona.edu](http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu).

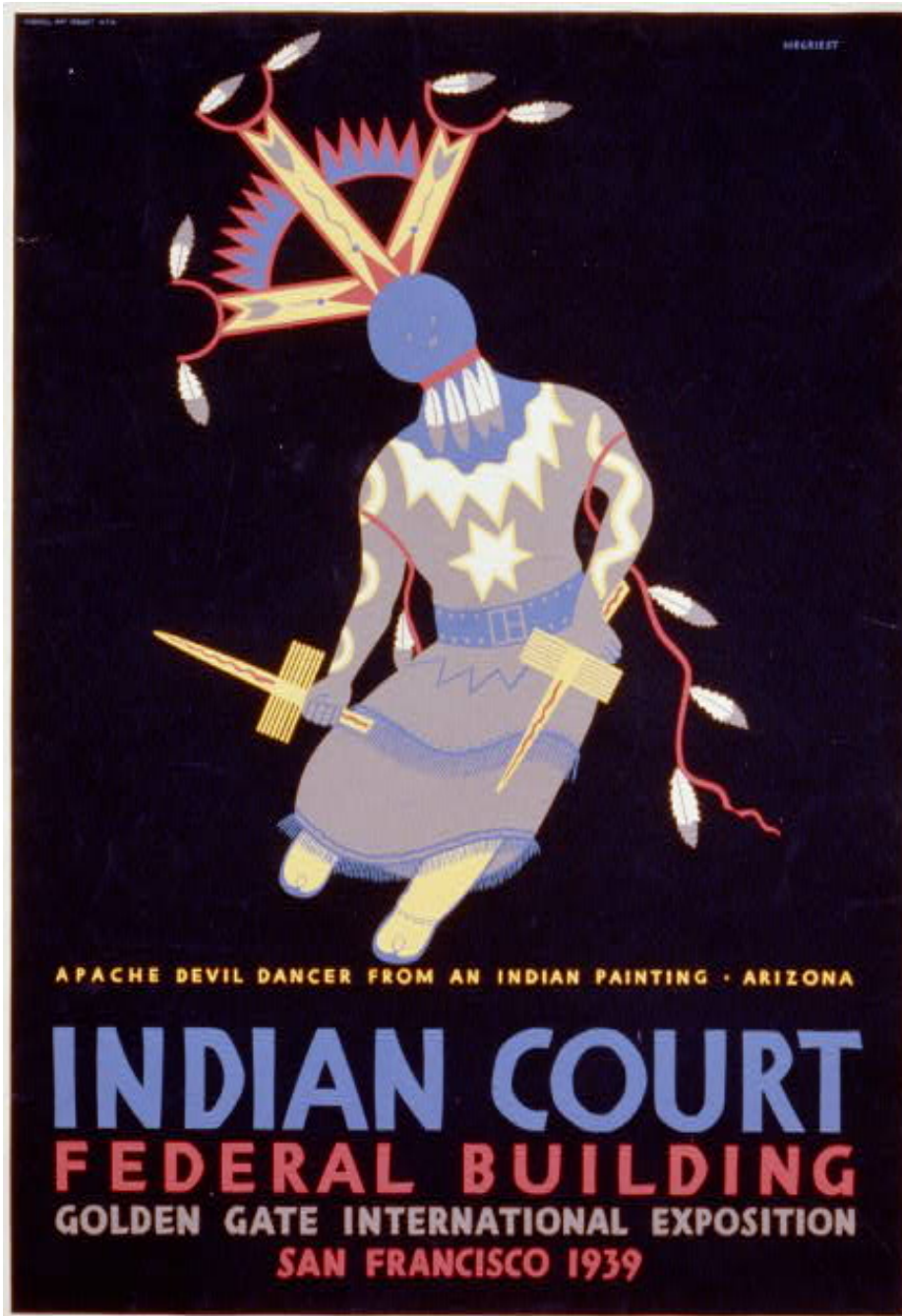




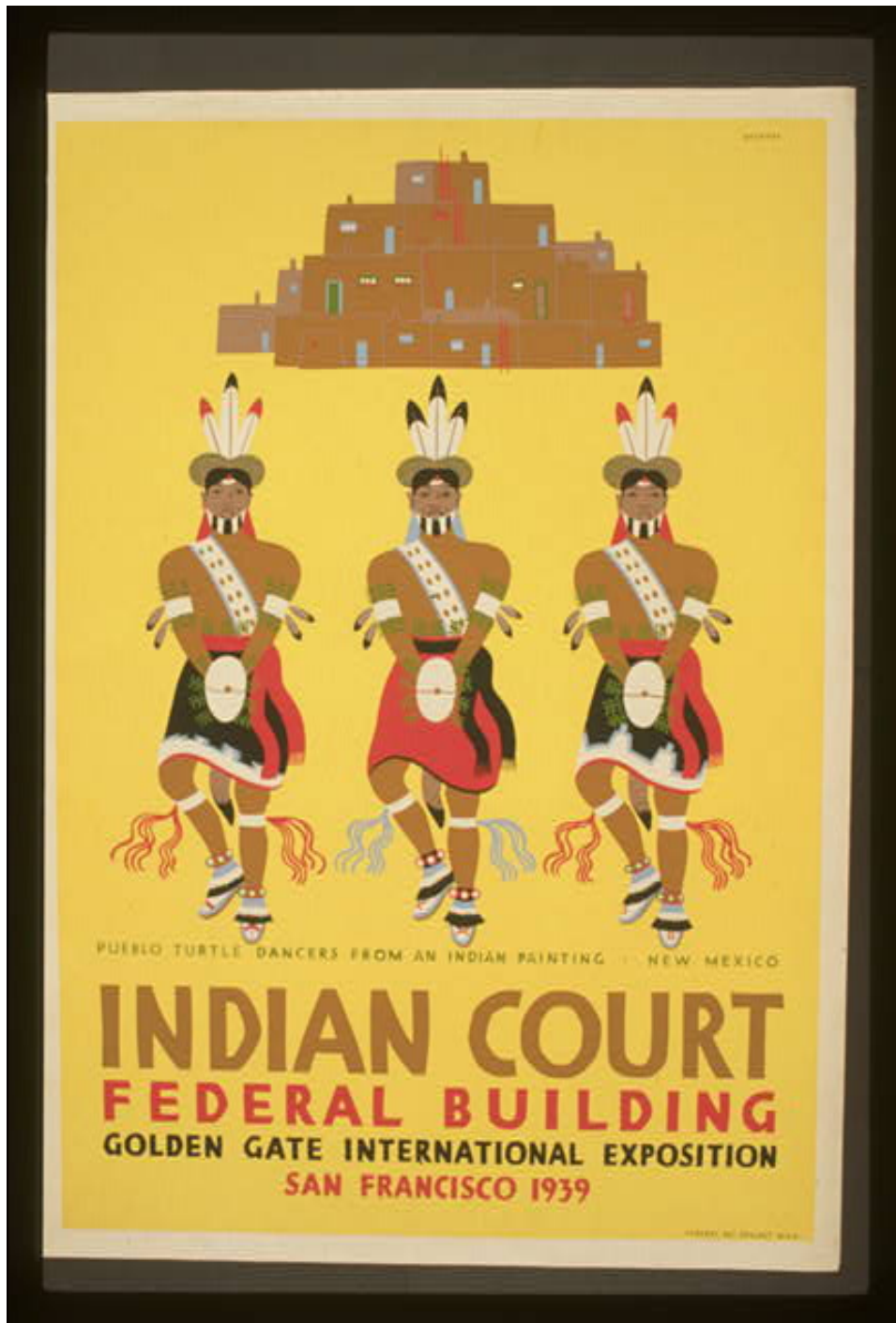
8. Siegrist, Louis B., *Indian Court, Federal Building, Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco, 1939: Antelope hunt from a Navaho drawing, New Mexico, 1939*, silkscreen print, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Image via [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).



9. Siegriest, Louis B., *Indian Court, Federal Building, Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco, 1939: Chippewa picture writing, Seneca Mask, Eastern Woodlands, 1939*, silkscreen print, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Image via [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).



10. Siegriest, Louis B., *Indian Court, Federal Building, Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco, 1939: Apache devil dancer from an Indian painting, Arizona, 1939*, silkscreen print, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Image via [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).



11. Siegriest, Louis B., *Indian Court, Federal Building, Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco, 1939: Pueblo turtle dancers from an Indian painting, New Mexico, 1939*, silkscreen print, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Image via [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).





12. Unknown photographer, *Sherman students at the Sunkist packing plant*, unknown date, photograph, Sherman Indian Museum. Image courtesy Sherman Indian Museum.



13. Unknown photographer, *John Nick*, class of 1926, 1925-1926, photograph, Sherman Indian Museum. Image courtesy Sherman Indian Museum.



14. Unknown photographer, *Martin Napa in uniform*, unknown date, photograph, Sherman Indian Museum. Image courtesy Sherman Indian Museum.



15. Tommy Thomas Studio, *Untitled*, 1946, photograph, Sherman Indian Museum. Image courtesy Sherman Indian Museum.





16. Tommy Thomas Studio, *Untitled*, 1946, photograph, Sherman Indian Museum. Image courtesy Sherman Indian Museum.



17. Tommy Thomas Studio, *Untitled*, 1946, photograph, Sherman Indian Museum. Image courtesy Sherman Indian Museum.

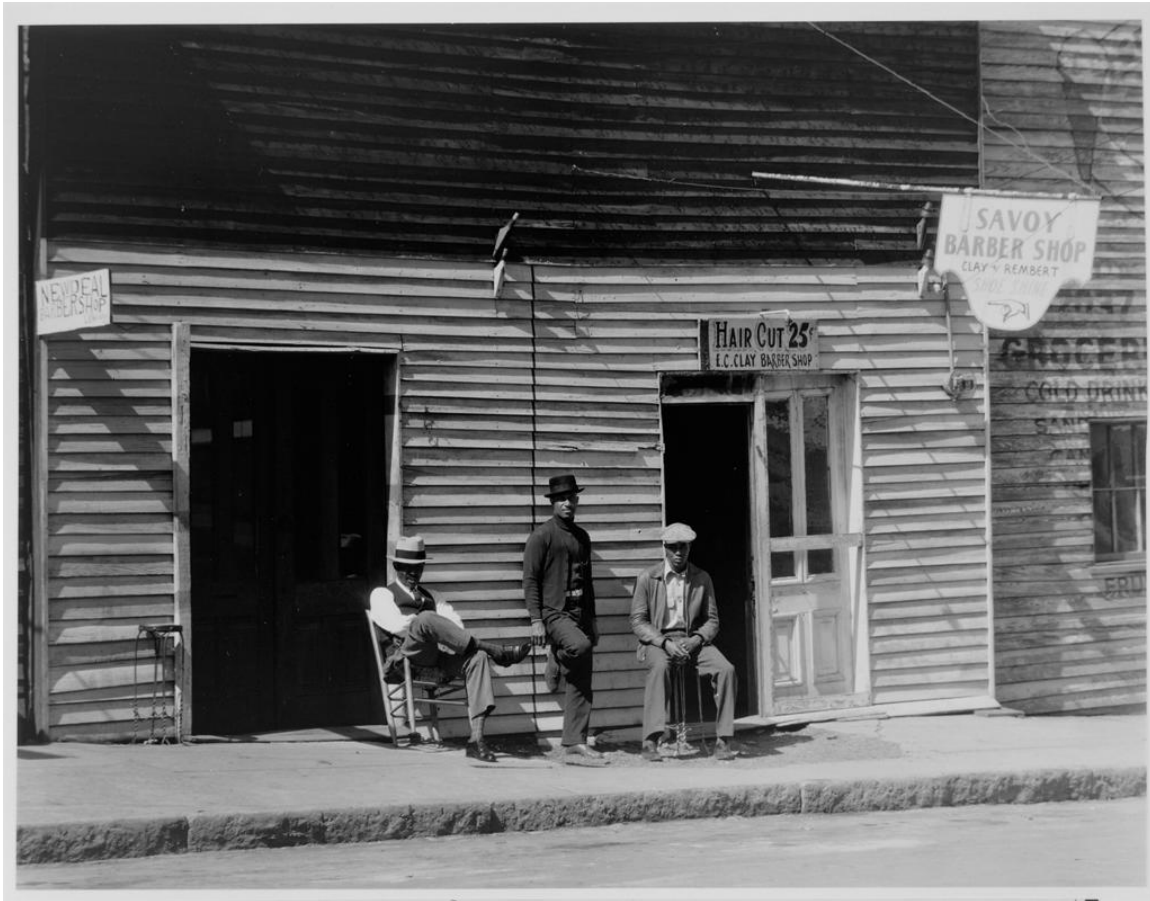




18. Tommy Thomas Studio, *Untitled*, 1947, photograph, Sherman Indian Museum. Image courtesy Sherman Indian Museum.



19. Walker Evans, *Bud Fields, Hale County, Alabama*, 1936, gelatin silver contact print, George Eastman House. Image via [www.artstor.org](http://www.artstor.org).



20. Walker Evans, *Street Scene, Vicksburg, Mississippi*, 1936, gelatin silver print, George Eastman House. Image via [www.artstor.org](http://www.artstor.org).

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