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A Perspective on South Dakota Women in Fine and Traditional Arts

Leda Cempellin

The steady increase of women's contribution to the visual arts in South Dakota, especially in recent decades, makes it impossible to celebrate all the individual accomplishments in the space of a chapter. Therefore, the following sections will limit the discourse to a choice of a few significant patterns of contribution to the arts and crafts in South Dakota. To begin, an historical overview of Lakota and European immigrant arts and influence are discussed, including women's key influences on arts education in the state. Then, the expansion of traditional arts through NEA apprenticeship programming is described through the work of current master-apprentice partnerships. The final section highlights works by contemporary South Dakota women artists blurring the boundaries between fine arts and crafts, both within the context of the Governor's biennials and beyond state boundaries.

Tradition among Lakota women: Crafts, kinship, and power

The earliest expressions of female artistic sensibility in South Dakota are undoubtedly Native American, as the Lakota people inhabited South Dakota prior to the arrival of European immigrants. These Native artistic products express some principles comparable to pre-Renaissance Europe: the predominance of anonymity over individual artistic stardom; the production of useful objects; an orientation towards cultural preservation by passing on the craft. Sioux women represent the first and most authentic expression of home-grown folk arts in rural South Dakota, in both display of fine craftsmanship skills, as well as in their capacity for building community and preserving the tribe's traditions. Through their products, caregiving functions are elevated and extended from the protection of the tribal nucleus to the preservation of the entire cultural and spiritual identity of a nation.

The first women mentioned in *The Art of South Dakota* by Joseph Stuart (1974) are indeed found among the Sioux tribes. They were responsible for decorating items of everyday use by a nomadic population: clothing, regalia, luggage pieces, skin lodges. By using porcupine quills, beads, and decorative paintwork, they created naturalistic and symbolic designs (p.12). Stuart's book illustrates a *parfleche* box with exquisite geometric patterns, a baby case with highly developed sense of textural variations, and a breastplate expressing a high sense of visual rhythm, all anonymous. Their function strongly suggests they have been made by Sioux women as expression and extension of their caregiving love.

Edmund B. Feldman (1995) points out that folk arts are practiced predominantly by people "living and working in remote settings, away from the cities" (p.34); folk practices go as far back as the Neolithic societies based on agriculture, in which a matriarchal social order could be established (Feldman, 1995:40). In this sense, it is not difficult to connect the scattered human geography and farming configuration in South Dakota, the flexibility of gender roles within European American households dictated by tough living conditions, and especially the matriarchal order within Native tribes, as having nourished the practice and appreciation of folk arts. These are the meeting point of nature (in terms of land) and female sensibility; craft products stemming from traditional folk arts are utilitarian objects, which can be seen as the extension of women's caregiving skills (Feldman, 1995:37). Moreover, by carrying on the traditions consolidated within a community, they preserve its social identity (Feldman, 1995:41). The association of woman' and nature' is the expression of Lakota's cultural sensibility; within Lakota feminism, the subjugation and discrimination of women in the modern capitalistic system is viewed as connected to environmental abuse, both representing a threat to human survival (Jaimes-Guerrero, 2003:67).

The concept of kinship is fully contained in the phrase *Mitak'oyas'in*, which translates as "all my relations" (Powers & Powers, 2001:1). Since "kinship retains its highest value in Lakota culture" (Powers & Powers, 2001:37), Lakota people address others not by their own names, as customary among the Euro-Americans, but rather through terms indicating their level of kinship (Powers & Powers, 2001:37). In this system, the parents' sisters and their brothers' wives are all considered by extension, mothers as well (Powers & Powers, 2001:8).

Through quillwork, beadwork, and quilt making, "women can gain high status along strictly traditional lines" (Powers, 1986:137). Therefore, as Lisa J Udel. (2001) claims, contemporary Native women who are political activists tend to offer resistance to the Euro-American feminist movements, by claiming their "responsibilities" towards society, defined as "motherwork," rather than individual "rights" (p.43). M. A. Jaimes Guerrero (2003) adds that the Native nationhood's sense of "communalism," founded "on matrilineal lines of kinship" could guarantee "respect and authority" to women; often outliving men, Native women would carry a role as "Clan Mothers" in the perpetuation of "collective cultural practices and reciprocal kinship traditions" (p.63), which included "communalism; egalitarianism; reciprocity with others and with nature; and a complementary relationship between women and men, with special respect granted to children and elders" (p.65). The craft, which is mostly a female domain and aims at producing objects associated with important moments in the life of relatives and community members, becomes a major expression of women's responsibilities in perpetuating Lakota traditions (Powers, 1986:140).

Early European immigrant women in South Dakota: Shaping communities through the fine arts, crafts, art criticism, education, and curatorship

Socially shaped gender roles in South Dakota have not always been as definitive as elsewhere. Pioneering American women entering the state in the late nineteenth century

had to face tough weather conditions and hard work. During the momentary absence of husbands to take care of business, women would often have to perform both female and male roles. Such was the case of Bersha, Harvey Dunn's mother, who in 1882 was left alone for three weeks in the prairie (Karolevitz, 1970:15). A former teacher, Bersha went against her husband Tom's take on creativity and taught sketching to the soon-to-be most famous artist in South Dakota (Karolevitz, 1970:19). As Sarah Elbert (1988) pointed out, "Despite Euro-American patriarchy, women, in a diversified agricultural society, produced and reproduced. They and their work were visible if not equally rewarded" (p.245). First generation European immigrant women embraced the role of preserving the traditions of their culture of origin through the crafts.

European-American women came to South Dakota from other states, bringing with them an outstanding artistic background acquired in the most prestigious institutions across the nation. In South Dakota, they found employment as faculty members in the visual arts, often carrying leadership roles within art departments. After studying at M.I.T. and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts School, Grace Ann French from New Hampshire moved to Rapid City in 1885, taking on a teaching position at the Black Hills College in Hot Springs (Stuart, 1974:40). With her sister Abbie, she is credited as having introduced still life painting in South Dakota (Stuart, 1974:19). Before becoming the Head of the Art Department at South Dakota Agricultural College (now South Dakota State University) from 1899 until 1936, Ohio-born Ada Caldwell enjoyed a remarkable educational background at the University of Nebraska, at the Chicago Art Institute, at Pratt Institute, at Columbia University and even under William Merritt Chase (Stuart, 1974:39). She is still most remembered for having mentored renowned South Dakota artist Harvey Dunn. In 1939, Harvey Dunn made a posthumous portrait of Caldwell; the light concentrates in the head as the true source of intellectual accomplishments, and then spreads abundantly to her bosom, emphasizing the deep connection between intelligence and heart in this unique female mentor. Also notable was her advisor role to the Art Committee of the South Dakota Federation of Womens's Clubs, as this group played an important role in fundraising efforts for the 1970 opening of the Memorial Art Center (Bibby et al., 1980: 3; Evenson and Evenson, 1980:12), later renamed the South Dakota Art Museum. Genevieve Dorney from Missouri, chairman of the art program at Dakota State College in Madison from 1923 to 1965, studied at the Kansas City Art Institute and at Columbia University in New York (Stuart, 1974:26, 39). Oklahoma-born Madeleine Ritz, who was head of the art department at South Dakota State University from 1945 to 1969, received her M.A. from Columbia University and her Ph.D. from Pennsylvania State University (Stuart, 1974:26, 47).

Women have also deeply affected artistic trends in South Dakota. Wisconsin-born Mar Gretta Cocking served as the head of the art department at Spearfish Normal (now, Black Hills State University) from 1935 until 1959 (Huseboe, 1989:231-232; Cocking, 1965:3, 21). Throughout her career, her educational role expanded to include criticism and curatorial

activities. She introduced art criticism as an academic discipline in the curriculum and contributed art reviews to the *Rapid City Journal* (Huseboe, 1989:235). She also founded the Black Hills Art Center in Spearfish in 1935 (Cocking, 1965:3), which became an important center for the support of local women artists (Cocking, 1965:26-27). However, it is through her involvement in numerous local art clubs and associations in founding or directing roles from the 1950s and early 60s, that Mar Gretta gave her most important contribution by building local artistic communities in Rapid City, Spearfish, Belle Fourche, Sturgis, and Buffalo.

Immigration of female talent from elsewhere has been counter-balanced by migration of original South Dakota talent to other states, and even other countries. Watertown-born Vera Way Marghab was a noted artistic entrepreneur, who in 1934 initiated with her husband the production of her designs for Marghab embroidery linens in Madeira, Portugal. Following her husband's death in 1947, she directed the worldwide operations of the business until 1984 (Cline, 1998:III).

Unquestionably, Vera Way Marghab was more than an artist designing beautiful table linen; she was also a business woman of international reputation, this at a time when no other female was functioning in a similar position in the textile business and very few on that level in the business world (Cline, 1998:IV).

Dividing part of her exquisite collection between the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the South Dakota Art Museum in Brookings, Vera Marghab demonstrated her commitment to high aesthetic standards in the world art capital, as well as her desire to give back to her native land.

Preserving multicultural traditions: The recently developed Apprenticeship Program

At a 1962 conference in Vermillion, Robert G. Hart, General Manager of The Indian Arts and Crafts Board of the United States Department of the Interior, was asked the following question:

An Indian woman was very skilled at making pottery. She made some beautiful things, and she went from place to place but nobody wanted to buy, or at least they wanted to buy at a very low price. She got so discouraged she came back to the reservation and quit. Now that's the trouble that these artists face. What kind of an organization is necessary to prevent that sort of thing, and to get a fair price for the person that actually makes the product? (As cited in Hurt & Brandon, 1962:12).

Since 1973, the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) has co-sponsored "statewide folk arts apprenticeship programs, which offer grants for master folk artists to teach promising students" (Nusbaum, 2004:200). The program reached most of the states "by the early 1980s" (Nusbaum, 2004:201). However, the NEA's endorsement of these anonymously and locally produced crafts has encountered some skepticism from the mainstream contemporary artists and curators supporting ever-innovating, individualized, and celebrity-focused forms of

artistic expression. Philip Nusbaum (2004) warns about such discrimination still prevalent among art conservatives between "Fine Arts" and "Crafts," by claiming that "others thought that the quality and standards of folk arts traditions were too low, or that much of folk arts was not really art, but 'craft'" (p.200). One main reason for this distinction is that "we often encounter the arts in academic or formally organized settings where the articulate voices of everyday living cultures are not readily heard" (Toelken, 2003:196).

Among the supporters of the folk arts in South Dakota is Michael F. Miller (1992), who claims that in contrast to the fine arts, folk arts are not the expression of an individual artist, but originate as the visual expression of an entire community: "Culture is a product of people, and can only be formed or created by people acting together. Folk arts are the expressions of these common experiences" (p. 5). Additionally, folk artists do not conform their work to standards decided by artistic authorities: "Culture is not just a word in library books, not just the paintings in the galleries and vaults of large-city museums, and not determined by some outside authority. We have a great influence in determining the direction of change of culture—it is something we own" (Miller, 1992: 5).

The folk arts apprenticeship program was systematically introduced in South Dakota in 2000, with the purpose of creating a form of focused mentorship between a master and a small number of apprentices, who share ethnic, professional, or geographical ties (South Dakota Arts Council, 2002). The apprenticeship program supports the transmission and survival of traditional and folk art forms from diverse cultures. Through these expressions and the sponsoring program, South Dakota transcends its geographical isolation, revealing the cultural richness and diversity of its population, a majority of which is composed of immigrants of northern European descent and Native American tribes. From 2000 to 2011, thirty-one Masters have trained apprentices; among them, thirteen women taught Native American and European art forms, including music and ceremony.

The folk arts promoted by the South Dakota Arts Council produce objects that consolidate such kinship values. Indeed, Marla N. Powers (1986) claims that the arts and crafts provide Oglala women not just with a way to earn a small income, but also with "a means of expressing relationships and values considered traditional" (p.137). Proficient bead workers or quilt makers are very valued by the community, as they provide things that can be worn by their relatives on special occasions (Powers, 1986:137). Since school and work now absorb the time of young Lakota women, these crafts are under the threat of extinction (Powers, 1986:137-138). Therefore, the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship program constitutes an attempt from the institution to preserve the Lakota cultural heritage.

One of the most significant craft objects carrying cultural traditions is Lakota star quilting, which Renee Turning Heart of Eagle Butte, who learned the technique from her grandmother, taught to two female apprentices in 2003-2004 and in 2007-2008. In 2006-2007, Pearl Colombe of Lower Brule taught star quilting to her daughter Elaine Kennedy from Pierre. Star quilting "was used as early as the mid-seventeenth century, mostly in New England," and

started to be adopted by Native Americans since the nineteenth century (Weagel, 2011:48). It is known either as the "Lone Star pattern," consisting of "one main, single star that is made up of numerous diamond patches" (Weagel, 2011:48-49), or as the "Star of Bethlehem design," with eight points (Powers, 1986:138). The star quilt "reflects a strong connection to nature" (Weagel, 2011:50) and is also one of the highest manifestations of kinship. It is commonly a key part of giveaway ceremonies. Both the object and the skills required in making it have been transmitted through generations (Weagel, 2011:53-54). As a piece of motherwork, it shows women's commitment "to assisting others in their journeys through life" (Weagel, 2011:60). Powers notes:

In effect the star quilt, though made from raw materials exclusively traded for and now bought from whites, has become the singular piece of craftwork that is the symbol of being Lakota in the modern world. Thus the traditional role of the woman as artist and craftsman is still important because all Oglalas require an abundance of star quilts over their lifetimes (Powers, 1986:139).

Philip Nusbaum (2004) claims that immigrants and minority groups are those predominantly accessing these grants, as part of the state folk arts programs' commitment towards cultural groups and artistic genres that are not reached by other artistic constituents (Nusbaum, 2004:201-202). Such cultural diversity should be celebrated: "When people migrate to a new land ... they leave physical belongings behind, but they carry along with them their culture, their language, their shared sense of values The traditions and expressions that remain will often become intensified. Some may even become icons of cultural identity" (Toelken, 2003: 198).

Defined by Toelken (2003) as "marginal" or "peripheral distribution" (p.199), traditions endangered by extinction in a country due to increased globalization are paradoxically carried by migrants into a different land, thus surviving and even becoming a powerful, specific and conservative "cultural heritage," defined as "the ongoing accumulation of expressive forms that represent the shared tastes and experiences of living cultures more than they demonstrate the unique strides of particular brilliant artists" (Toelken, 2003:196). As a consequence, "the United States, like no other nation, has become the artistic 'margin' for a multiplicity of culturally shaped arts" (Toelken, 2003:199). The preservation of this cultural heritage is the major purpose of the traditional apprenticeship programs "that enable members of a culture group to study a traditional art form with a master artist or craftsman in their community," thus perpetuating the transmission of cultural traditions at a local level (Wells, 2006:8-9). The artistic creation of a useful object, followed by sharing it with others, "is regarded as a highly valued indication of community membership" (Nusbaum, 2004:209).

Folk arts are seen in this light as instrumental in consolidating family relations and kinship bonds. Immigrant women sharing their crafts in South Dakota came predominantly from Northern and Eastern Europe, so that is where the efforts of the South Dakota Traditional Apprenticeship program focused the most. Leona Barthle of Sioux Falls, Master of Polish

wycinanki, learned the technique while living in Granville, the only Polish settlement in South Dakota. Wycinanki is a Polish paper cutting technique, which requires paper, scissors, and glue to create patterns inspired by animals, plants, and flowers. "The trees in traditional Polish designs symbolize the tree of life; birds show love and caring; and flowers indicate happiness and money" (South Dakota Arts Council, 2002, n.p.). Lillian Namyniuk Hellickson from Brookings taught the art of Ukranian *pysanka*, or egg decoration. *Pysanka* is made by freehand drawing on an egg using beeswax. Then, the egg is dipped in a light color and left to dry. More decorations are added through an additional layer of beeswax, and the egg dipped in a darker color, and so on. After the coloring is complete, the egg is placed in an oven for a few minutes—the wax melts and the beautiful designs appear. Often, the designs have religious significance, and the colors applied add symbolic elements (South Dakota Arts Council, 2002). Diane Fields of Aberdeen is a Master of Scandinavian nalbinding, a rag rug technique learned"from her Finnish grandmother while growing up in Minnesota" (South Dakota Arts Council, 2003:6). It involves stitching by using old toothbrush handles as needles, so that the rug looks crocheted. The time-consuming nature of this technique (which can entail up to two years for a large rug) stands in clear contrast with the sense of immediacy and ephemerality of contemporary art.

Postmodern women artists: Conciliating nature and culture, consolidating memories and bonds

The progressive transformation of family farming into a "'modern' industrial model of agricultural production" (Elbert, 1988:251) resonated with the struggle between nature and culture of modern individual women artists raised or living in South Dakota. The passage from mere narration to conceptualization in the modern era opened infinite possibilities of experimentation; contemporary art "challenges us to break old habits of thinking and seeing" (Via 2006, n.p.). If visually successful, any materials in any combinations would be accepted for the representation of an idea. For these reasons, women would not have to worry about their physical limits, nor about expressing their own life experiences.

Artist Carol Hepper, born in McLaughlin but living in New York City since 1985, is emblematic of the South Dakota artist's entrance into the artistic mainstream. Her earlier mixed media work, such as *Whirlwind Dancing*, reveals those qualities that best represent the concept of being a South Dakota woman and living in contact with nature. The paradox of vulnerability and endurance is conveyed through the fragile look of a structure in willow branches upon which animal hides are stretched, as well as through the power of the wind, which acts as an implied negative space and seems to mold the piece's configuration. The aesthetic fluctuation between the organic and inorganic, between nature and artifice accompanied Hepper in her move to New York and the work produced there, like *Vertical Void*, metal organically spiraling and dancing around itself, which was one of Hillary Clinton's favorites (Kotz, 1998). Similarly, *A Part Together* unites the textural roughness of wood and smooth flat planes inhabited by psychedelic colors. About her work, Hepper describes this

fluctuation arising from her home state and her current residence:

In South Dakota, you see a rolling plain and an enormous amount of sky emphasizing a vast amount of space. Everything surrounding you, inside of that space, is the weather, and it is powerful. By contrast, in the city, you are surrounded by tall buildings and paved streets. Often, during construction work, I will see the skin of the street pulled back to expose plumbing, circulatory and electrical systems which, to my mind, create the invisible pulse of the city. Those are very powerful images that have a profound effect on me (C. Hepper, personal communication, September 23, 2010).

Since 2003, an initiative by Governor Rounds and common efforts by art museums, University galleries, and art centers across the State originated the Governor's Biennial fine arts exhibition. In the words of Mary Maxon, curator at the Dahl Arts Center in Rapid City and one of the original promoters, the purpose is:

To recognize and encourage South Dakota artists, to promote the artistic identity of South Dakota, to celebrate our artistic heritage and to recognize the importance of and proclaim support for the future of the visual arts and artists of South Dakota (As cited by Rounds, et al., 2003-2004, n.p.).

Several contemporary women artists have found multiple ways to conciliate the sense of tradition in South Dakota and the mandate of individualist expression within the mainstream art world by choosing to express their sense of memory and bonds through innovative media and unusual perspectives. Doris Rudel's mixed media Endless Journey incorporates pieces of fabric and beads to express the idea of friendly relations across diverse cultures and eras. Solace III by Yale- and New York-educated Krista Scholten wraps up small cotton pieces to give the feeling of comfort within native family and community. Gloria Easterby Aspinall removed the quilt from the traditional association with walls and folded it in Harmony (Rounds, et al., 2003-2004:19, 28, 32). Grete Bodøgaard weaved a conceptual piece with the admonition My Future is in My Hands, reminding us of our responsibilities towards our own life. Jeannie French created an assemblage of fruits whose awkward positioning plays with the notions of familiarity and instability (Rounds, et al., 2005-2006:13, 22). Lady Jeanette-The Gipsy Angel by Jean Selvy-Wyss, featuring an assemblage of her personal collection of jewels, buttons, fabrics, and tools, seems to speak about cultural barriers and fears of losing one's identity, as embodied through personal memories carried by objects. With the exquisite beauty of Vi Colombe's Modoc Sunset exhibited at the 2008 Biennial, the lone star quilt has finally entered mainstream art (Rounds, et al., 2008-2009:12, 58). Lynda K. Clark represented human and animal interaction through paths running across a multicolored mosaic. Donna Kjonaas's The Prairie Sings in Spring unites fabric pieces into a pocket quilt, which symbolically collects everyday memories and reflections to inspire future visions (Rounds, et al., 2010-2011:11, 28).

The most recent Governor's Biennial of 2012-2013 salutes an increased presence and

recognition of women artists, expressing themselves through an impressive variety of techniques and outcomes. Artist Lynn Thorpe received the jurors' award with *Homeless in Marginal Terrain* (Daugaard et al., 2012-2013:60). By reviving the triptych format traditional to the Middle Ages, Thorpe applies ambitions to graphic drawing that are comparable to the best painting. In this artwork, an unsettling sense of instability is established by pieces of furniture suspended in wire above high rocks, with pieces of daily life (a book, a house, a cup, a shoe, two empty dress hangers) in free fall; content is paralleled by technique, where an aggressive gesture overlaps delicately nuanced tonal areas. The audience can find in this piece anything dealing with transitional states, from an echo of his/her existential fragility, to a moment that requires exiting one's comfort zone, to danger ahead, etc.

Becky Grismer received an honorable mention for *Roots*, a sculpture that unites natural wood and synthetic polyurethane in a metamorphosis of woman and tree that echoes the myth of Daphne (Daugaard et al., 2002-2013:25). Another recipient of an honorable mention, Patti Roberts-Pizzuto created an intriguing nocturne by densely juxtaposing minute ink and acrylic circles that look like precious pearls. In this way, an obsessive craftsmanship-centered piece is defined by the artist as a slow-paced working attitude turning into a meditative act (Roberts-Pizzuto in Daugaard et al., 2002-2013:53) at the encounter between the motives of folk and fine arts.

Roberts-Pizzuto's thick wavy paper, slightly rising above the frame's background, seems to play with the third dimension, similarly to Molly Wicks' *Map #1* (Daugaard et al., 2012-2013:63). Echoing Clyfford Still's sudden appearance of irregularly shaped areas of color, Wick's organic shapes cut across the board to involve the third dimension normally excluded by the picture plane; brighter colors, applied in the board's thick inner contours excavated by the holes, project shadows in the wall behind the piece, thus showing how contemporary painting can potentially evolve into a sculpture. Another honorable mention went to Ariadne Albright's painting, presenting an eclectic mixture of figures and abstract patterns, volumes and flatness, with images coming from memories associated to her many roles of "woman; mother; educator; and painter" (Albright in Daugaard et al., 2012-2013:6).

Deborah Mitchell revives the ancient wax-based encaustic technique and combines juicy colors with a found photograph. The monochrome nostalgic image of a woman looking at herself in the mirror is surrounded by color brushes like fragmented bits of various memories that seem to emerge from a deep layered background (Daugaard et al., 2002-2013:42). The miniature feeling of this work is similar to that of Camille Riner, who has created an accordion-shaped work uniting the visual and poetic components in the paper image of a person finding peace in becoming one among the sea waves (Daugaard et al., 2002-2013:52).

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, space limitations make a more thorough identification of all women who have contributed to South Dakota's fine and traditional arts impossible. Nonetheless, in recent years the remarkable work and creative contributions of women are on the rise, along

with their recognition, and we should all look forward with great anticipation to the next generation of visual artists within and arising from our state.

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