

Commercializing Craft: Native American Artistry at Residential Schools Within the United States From the Late Nineteenth Century to the Early Twentieth Century

Jaden Schutt

Department of History

Abstract

Between 1869 and the 1960s, the United States Federal Government removed Native American children from their reservation homes and forced them into residential boarding schools. The Bureau of Indian Affairs sought to assimilate Native children into American society by stripping them of their indigenous identities and banning them from practicing any remnants of their cultures. To do so, residential schools enforced an industrial art program that focused on fine-tuning students to become skilled American laborers. However, contrary to the residential school's assimilation efforts, during the late nineteenth to early twentieth century the Federal Government promoted the inclusion of an indigenous art program into the residential school curriculum. The indigenous art curriculum involved the training of students to learn traditional cultural Native crafts such as basketry, weaving, and pottery.

This thesis claims that the Federal Government's primary motivation in incorporating an indigenous art program into the residential school curriculum was economically driven. To analyze the Federally enforced indigenous art program, this thesis studies the evolution of the indigenous art program at the Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma which operated from 1884-1980, and the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania which ran from 1879-1918. The thesis begins the study with an investigation of the monetary motivations behind the shift in prioritization of the industrial art program to the indigenous art program. Following that point, the thesis analyzes the Federally enforced guidelines that provided the framework for the program and revealed the economic intentions of the Federal Government. Then the thesis evaluates what the indigenous art curriculum consisted of within the classroom and the commercialization of indigenous crafts through the promotion of school advertisements. From this assessment, the thesis further claims that the sale of indigenous artistry prioritized the survival of traditional indigenous art over traditional Native children, and by doing so the Federal Government took artistic autonomy away from Native students within the classroom.

Currently, the academia in this discipline has made continuous efforts to discuss Native American art and residential schools but not always are these topics evaluated in conjunction with one another. For the small amount of literature that has assessed indigenous art in residential schools, there is a gap in studying the economic motivations behind the incorporation of indigenous art into residential schools and more importantly, what came from this shift. This thesis aspires to fill in the gap within the literature and further current scholarship in the field.