

Commencement Address
Institute of American Indian Arts
Santa Fe, New Mexico
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By W. Richard West, Jr.

Mr. President, honored guests, and, most important, members of the IAIA's graduating classes of 2022, as well as 2020 and 2021. I am deeply – profoundly, in fact – honored to be the recipient of an honorary doctorate from the Institute of American Indian Arts. I also feel privileged to be among you today on what I know for you, your parents and relatives, and your communities is a marker in your life's journey.

I would like to offer two introductory observations before moving on to the main thought I want to leave with you this morning. First, my ties with this institution you have called home cannot help but move and touch me. They begin with IAIA's founder, Lloyd Kiva New, whom I first met in Phoenix as a three-year old. I thought for years he was a blood relative because he and my father were such close friends in the Native arts community. After World War II Dad succeeded Lloyd as the art instructor at the Phoenix Indian School. He also came very close to accepting Lloyd's invitation to join the IAIA faculty when the institution opened in 1962. Lloyd became a professional part of my life years later when he served as a key advisor to the

National Museum of the American Indian during the design process for its building on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. I am here today filled with genuine gratitude for IAIA and for all those who founded it, shaped it through time, and led it, including Lloyd's brilliant and thoughtful present day-successor, Bob Martin – as well as my favorite museum director in the whole world, Patsy Phillips.

My second introductory point is this. Whatever challenges your future as artists may hold, I am fundamentally optimistic, based upon my work as a museum director, about your role in the art world beyond IAIA. It is far different than it was for Native artists in my Dad's generation. He spent much of his professional life in the mid-twentieth century trying to get off the walls of natural history museums, where what he and his Native peers created was frequently categorized as "visual anthropology or ethnography", and into the galleries of art museums.

That battle has been done and won, thankfully, with much of the credit due to the work of the Institute of American Indian Arts in generating multiple generations of Native artists who, on their own terms, have intersected museums, collectors, and the international art market and community. Pioneering institutions

and museums such as Philbrook, the Gilcrease, the Heard, MoCNA, and the National Museum of the American Indian added momentum to this trend. At the moment, the doors of regional and national American art museums – even the Met in New York – are beginning to creak open with respect to the legitimacy of Native art.

As the beneficiaries of what I have just described, I want IAIA's classes of 2020, 2021, and 2022 to walk through those doors and any others you wish to. Most of all, I want you to do so on your terms and to determine and own the creative path you choose in achieving success and fulfillment as an artist.

Against this backdrop, let me now turn to another closely related issue that is much on my mind and on which I would like to focus this morning. I think of this presentation as a conversation between a recently retired Native museum director on the cusp of his 80th birthday and you, artists who, along with others, will hold the future of Native art in your very hearts, minds, and hands for the next half century or more.

And let me do so in a Cheyenne way – in large part through stories that make the points I hope to leave with you today. The first involves my father, W. Richard West, Sr., whose Tsis Tsis Tsas name was Wah-Pah-Nah-Yah, a highly respected, some would

say renowned, painter and sculptor for most of his 83 years. When I was a child, probably less than 10 and during one of Dad's many trips to the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma, he and I were standing in front of, as I recall, a Tlingit object from that institution's substantial Native collections. He wanted to explain it to me. Initially, he talked about the geography of the object and the Native community that made it. He then turned to its remarkable beauty as a matter of conventional Western art canons and aesthetics, including its material, the artist's technical skill as a carver and sculptor, its colors, and its composition and design lines. Then, with a slight chuckle, he added, "The only problem is - it means so much more than that to the artist who created it and the community where that artist lived."

Only now, some 70-75 years later do I fully appreciate what Dad was trying to tell me. And it is this: simply put, art created by Native peoples, from time immemorial, has never been the child of Europe's Enlightenment, Western rationalism, or Western art, with their binary division between "nature" and "culture" and the multiples of vertical disciplinary categories that are its offspring - "art", "science", "history", "ethnography", to name only a few. Native art comes, instead, from a far different

place that sees art and culture as parts of the same whole – with far different intended purposes and community impacts.

I would like to walk those different places and purposes with you for the next several minutes. Jacki Rand, a colleague of mine at the Smithsonian in the early days of the NMAI and now a distinguished professor of history, put it this way:

[T]he Native artist . . . [values] the creation [of art] . . . over the final product. Process speaks to historical or cultural significance because it is testimony to cultural continuity and change. It is the evidence of lost traditions, innovations, preserved cultural knowledge, historic perspective and vision of the future. . . . It takes into account a sort of 'spiritual evidence' that is integral to the creative process. The integrity of the creative process is foremost. The object is meaningless without it.

To move from the academic to real life, I am reminded of a story that makes this sometimes elusive point so at odds with the dictates of conventional Western art history. It is about a northern California basket-maker named Mrs. Matt, who was hired to teach basket-making at a local university. After three weeks, her students complained that all they had done was sing songs. When, they asked, were they going to learn to make baskets? Mrs. Matt, somewhat taken aback, replied that they were learning to make baskets. She explained that the process

starts with songs that are sung so as not to insult the plants when the materials for the baskets are picked. So her students learned the songs and went to pick the grasses and plants to make their baskets.

Upon their return to the classroom, however, the students again were dismayed when Mrs. Matt began to teach them yet more songs. This time she wanted them to learn the songs that must be sung as you soften the materials in your mouth before you start to weave. Exasperated, the students protested having to learn songs instead of learning to make baskets. Mrs. Matt, perhaps a bit exasperated herself at this point, thereupon patiently explained the obvious to them: "You're missing the point," she told them, "a basket is a song made visible."

I do not know whether Mrs. Matt's students went on to become exemplary basket-makers. What I do know is that her wonderfully poetic remark, which suggests the interconnectedness of everything, the symbiosis of who we are and what we do, embodies a whole philosophy of Native life and culture and speaks volumes about the relationship – and the relative order of importance – between process and object.

Native objects, in their most profound and ultimate dimension,

really were statements and reflections - and were intended to be so - of collective and communal values as much or more than they were individual creative statements of universal meaning. I remember visiting many years ago the Millicent Rogers Museum in Taos. I was gazing at a truly magnificent ceramic pot sculpted by the hand - and the spirit - of Popovi Da, the brilliant son of Julian and Maria Martinez of the San Ildefonso Pueblo, who were both good friends of my father. I was content to stand there, transfixed, for a very long time, simply lost in the work's mesmerizing aesthetic beauty.

My eye, however, finally wandered to a piece of text that had been placed next to the pot, and it turned out to be words written by Popovi Da himself. I have never forgotten them because they spoke volumes about Popovi Da's world and how his personal creativity related to - indeed, arguably was subsumed by - that world:

We do what comes from thinking, and
sometimes hours and even days are spent to
create an aesthetic scroll in design.

Our symbols and our representations are all
expressed as an endless cadence, and
beautifully organized in our art as well as
in our dance. . . .

There is design in living things; their
shapes, forms, the ability to live, all have
meaning. . . . Our values are indwelling and
dependent upon time and space unmeasured.

This in itself is beauty.

Here is where these comments and stories lead me. As the son of a Native artist and as a museum director, I reject all efforts to impose on Native artists and their creativity art canons from elsewhere that deny or diminish the holistic and dynamic linkages between Native art and Native cultural memory and continuance.

And I am not alone in this. Rick Hill, an artist, former director of MoCNA, and former member of the senior staff of the NMAI, puts the matter this way:

The main difference between Indian and non-Indian artists is that we are still community-driven. . . . Art is the cement that binds the Indian people together, uniting us with our ancestors and with generations yet to be born. Through art we can take a look at why language is important, why ritual is important, why land is important.

With his characteristic candor and truth-telling, Bob Haozous tells it like it is regarding the essential nature of Native art and his role as an artist:

I want to see people participating in my work. That's totally contrary to what we're taught in America - the artist as an individual, the genius. I don't want to see that in my work at all. I'd rather see, at the most, a cultural reflection of being an

Apache. I've been fighting those concepts of individualism, uniqueness, and universalism, concepts that are totally contrary to tribalism. Individualism denies a future or a past awareness. You claim it, you own it, but you're not a part of it.

In other words, through the millennia those Native people we now call "artists" were not so much in the business of producing "art objects" as they were in creating aesthetically remarkable material whose primal importance lay not in the object itself but in the fact that it reflected — indeed, embodied — the processes, ceremonial and ritualistic, that defined the very community culturally.

And all of what I have said brings me back to you, the class of 2022 at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and the valedictory thought I want to leave with you on your commencement. In your future journeys as artists, life hopefully will be full of numerous possibilities and opportunities, and I want you to enjoy the benefits of all of them.

But on those paths I urge you always to act on the profound Native cultural truth that I hope is now obvious in light of what I have said: as artists, you will be, as all those who have come before you, the defining and central culture bearers for Native America, collectively as well as within your own specific

Native community. What you create, and in whatever medium – visual art, film, ceramics, basketry, music, dance, theater, combinations thereof, and the list goes on and on – stand on the shoulders of Native artists before you who invoked a cultural past to preserve a cultural present that ensured a cultural future for all of us. I consider your taking that vow as our culture bearers an almost sacred act and responsibility.

I remember a conversation with my father not too long before he passed that has relevance in making this point. I was on the phone with him after a particularly trying and very bad day at the NMAI. It was so bad in fact that I said only half-jokingly something to the effect I had then been the director for a half decade and a lot had been accomplished, but that maybe it was time for me to dial back the stress and frustration level it inevitably involved and move on to something else.

There was only a slight pause, and then he said, "When I painted, did you think I was doing that for myself? Well, I wasn't. It was for the Cheyennes. They was my canvas. Your canvas is the Museum. So finish it up. And don't screw it up, Buck."

Dad used the word "Buck" when he was giving a command. You often

could not be certain whether it was part of a compliment or an admonishment. But whichever, what I had learned is that you better do it. So history will record that I remained at the National Museum of the American Indian for another decade and more – and, hopefully, did not “screw it up.” And I have every confidence, as I look at you this fine day in May, that you will not either as your journey continues.

Along the way, remember this wisdom of Simon Ortiz, the poet and storyteller from Acoma who once taught here at IAIA, as he spoke eloquently through art about Native cultural continuance and identity in a poem entitled “It Doesn’t End, of Course”:

It doesn’t end, of course.

In all growing from all earths
to all skies,

in all touching
all things,

in all soothing
the aches of all years,

it doesn’t end.

And I now dedicate these concluding words to you – in Cheyenne:
[spoken].

Thank you again, from the bottom of my heart, for the honor of being among you. Godspeed and good luck.