



Smithsonian Institution
National Museum of Natural History

Images of Native Americans in Popular Culture 19th to 21st century

Victoria X. Danner and Dr. JoAllyn Archambault

Introduction

Native Americans have existed as part of the American popular culture since its mainstream introduction in the 19th century. As the imagery as been ingrained into the public imagination through media, art, and politics, stereotypical motifs have emerged as typological models for the Native American in the colonialist imagination which endure to this day. The purpose of this project is to trace the most common depictions of Native Americans in the past fifty years to their historic origins to further understand how ethnic stereotyping endures and reforms meaning in a society.

Noble

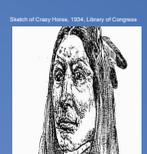
- Origins: late 1700s.
- Characteristics: tempestuous, pure-hearted, naive, gentle, one with nature, submissive.
- Symbolizes: nature worship, American romanticism and nostalgia for the Old West.



The Noble Savage is often portrayed in popular culture as a side-kick or aide to the White man, never a main character.



During the 1850s, a fascination with Native American medicine developed. Native American "home remedies" could cure everything from morning sickness to gas.



The Homell Brewing Co. meant for their Crazy Horse malt liquor to "celebrate the Americas and the life of Crazy Horse". They failed to recall alcohol's role in the decimation of Native American culture.

Why Native Americans?

After being sequestered onto reservations or forced into hiding, Native American representation was left up to the imaginations of the colonialists who conquered them. The Native American became an ethnic blank slate upon which colonialists imposed their own perceptions, values and ideals, using Native Americans as cautionary tales or exotic commodities. Native American stereotypical imagery can be divided into two main groups: Noble and Ignoble. The Noble Savage is a submissive friend to Whites, symbolizing the beauty and purity of nature, wise but ignorant of modernity, and easily assimilated. The Ignoble savage is animalistic, perverse, violent, corrupt and untamable. Native American stereotypical imagery is unique in that it is centered on a specific point in time – 19th century America.



Women were often used to symbolize a "tame" New World and the spread of Christianity to the 'pagan' peoples. They were innocent, virtuous and very eager to assimilate through marriage.



Native American usage of tobacco was very structured, used for social events and ceremonies. After European settlement, tobacco became a main commodity and the Native American was the face of the tobacco industry.



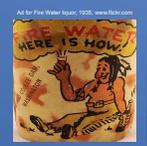
The tourist industry is probably the biggest proponent of stereotypical Native American images as public demand for Native American objects remains high. Tourists want their own piece of Native America with disregard to accuracy or cultural meaning.

Ignoble

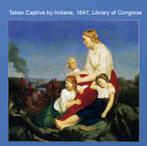
- Origin: early 1700s (or earlier).
- Characteristics: violent, devious, perverse, promiscuous, unintelligent, a threat to colonialism.
- Not as popular as Noble Savage, but still present in popular material culture into the 1970s.



Each European group that settled America had a relationship with one or two tribes. During the American Revolution, Indians were seen as cohorts of the British and threats to American freedom.



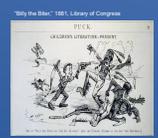
Depictions of drunk Indians were prevalent in early 20th century pop culture. Not as violent as other Ignoble Savages, the drunk Indian was lazy, perverted, and stupid.



Captivity narratives gained popularity in the late 1800s and spawned an entire genre known as Native American romances in the 1980s.

Approach

A total of 425 individual artifacts ranging in age from 1975 to 2009 were analyzed for this project. Each was examined for their portrayal of certain Native American archetypes that could be traced back at least 100 years. Each archetype had assigned core traits that each object was evaluated by. The pieces shown here as well as the historical images were chosen to exemplify the core attributes of the two main Native American motifs in popular culture.



Native Americans were symbols of the primitiveness of the New World and all its dangers. In shows like Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, Native Americans were indeed savage and threatened the innocent settlers. Native Americans were also portrayed as weak and cowardly in publications such as Puck. Violence towards Native Americans was romanticized and justified by the media.

Discussion

As seen from the historic references and their modern counterparts, stereotypical motifs of Native Americans continue in our modern society. Familiar archetypes of Native Americans still appear in popular culture. The Noble savage continues to be a prominently featured motif in popular culture as it changed mediums from documents to collectible objects. Modern popular culture follows the tradition of the Noble savage and its symbolism of nature oriented wisdom that highlights society's fascination with what they think of as a simpler happier time. The Ignoble savage on the other hand, has disappeared in popular culture, thanks to the Civil Rights movement and racial acceptance. Only small artifacts from the early 20th century can be found. Because modern Native Americans are not often featured in popular culture, these old types maintain their strength without new representations of modern Native Americans to counter or replace them.

Why is it still around?

Ethnic stereotyping becomes cultural when it is mass produced and released to the public. Native American stereotypical imagery continues to pervade our society through subtle depictions where the meaning has been forgotten, but not lost. These stereotypical images are instilled into the public imagination from an early age. Because of their subtlety and consistency in the media, they are no longer obvious. By default, people recall the Native Americans of 19th century America because that is what they are exposed to. Colonialist ideas of Native Americans persist in our society but their origin is so far removed that society rarely stops to question or notice them. They are simply taken for granted and the complex history behind them is overlooked.

References

Christine Ballagher-Morris "Cultures for Sale: Perspectives on Colonialism and Self-Determination and the Relationship to Authenticity and Tourism" 2002.
 Gretchen M. Battelle "Native American Representations: First Encounters, Distorted Images and Literary Appropriations" 2001. S. Elizabeth Bird "Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture" 1990. George Pierre-Caste "The Commodification of Indian Identity" 1989. Andre Douglas Pond Cummings "A Shining Wind? Media Stereotyping of American Indians and the Law" 2004. Leah Dilworth "Discovering Indians in Fred Harvey's Southwest" 1990. Rhynia Green "The Tribe Called Wannabes: Playing Indian in America and Europe" 1998. Rhynia Green "The Positively Peeples: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture" 1975. Michael Harkin "Staged Encounters: Postmodern Tourism and Aboriginal People" 2003. Orla Shee Kivell "Indian Women as Cultural Mediators" 1999. Molly Lee "Appropriating the Primitive: Turn-of-the-Century Collection and Display of Native Alaskan Art" 1991. Klaus Lubbers, "Born for the Shade: Stereotypes of the Native American in United States Literature and the Visual Arts 1776-1894" 1994. Victor Macaruso "Cowboys and Indians: The Image of the Indian in American Literature" 1984.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History for this research opportunity, the National Science Foundation for funding, the Library of Congress, St. Mary's College of Maryland and Dr. Julie King, the Department of Anthropology, my mentor, Dr. JoAllyn Archambault, for her insight and advice, and my family for their loving support and encouragement.