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Symbol, Utility, and Aesthetics in the INDIAN FUR TRADE

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THE TERM "trade" is a deceptively simple word to describe a complex process. When Europeans first met Indians, the exchange of goods that took place bore almost no relation to the economic process with which we are familiar. The Indian tended to give generously of his material goods and his services without apparent demand for return, although he welcomed and expected such a return. The words of Christopher Columbus are significant testimony to this phenomenon: "They are so ingenuous and free with all they have, that no one would believe it who has not seen it; of anything that they possess, if it be asked of them, they never say no . . . and they are content with whatever trifle be given them."¹

Moreover, the Indian had no particular economic need for the products first offered by the European—items like beads, mirrors, bells, and caps—but received them gratefully for their decorative, aesthetic, magical, curiosity, or amusement "value." When he learned what pleased the European, the Indian generously offered his "products"—such as gold ornaments—in measure that astounded the European who thought in economic terms. This process continued, in some degree, until the Indian adopted white economic values and placed

on what he "gave" a price appropriate to the system of his European trading associate.

The subordination of the exchange of goods to noneconomic purposes in Indian society is demonstrated by the enormous significance of gifts. The bestowing of presents was used, for example, to establish rank and prestige, as well as to mark important occasions in the life of an individual. The ceremonial exchange of favors played an important part in intertribal diplomacy, where presents symbolized specific messages. While the exchange of such gifts can be interpreted cynically, such an explanation fails to perceive the many noneconomic purposes that the system encompassed. The term "Indian giver" implies this cynical Western reaction to Indian giving, while ignoring the cultural context of the act.

The important role of gifts in Indian-white relations has been analyzed by Wilbur R. Jacobs in *Diplomacy and Indian Gifts*. Numerous objects were made to "speak" as words, and such phrases as "bury the hatchet" and "smoke the pipe of peace" suggest the fundamental impact of these Indian practices. Jacobs, quoting Sir William John-

¹Quoted in Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*, 1:303 (Boston, 1942).



Catlin's portrait of Rotten Foot

son, goes so far as to attribute Pontiac's War in large measure to the "lack of presents from both the French and the English."²

IN INDIAN CULTURE the "object" possessed an extensive symbolic meaning that it lacked in European or American culture. The thing, whether a wampum belt, a calumet, or a hatchet, contained a message far beyond its material utility. George Catlin's portraits of leading Indian figures record the use of such objects to express dignity

² Wilbur R. Jacobs, *Diplomacy and Indian Gifts: Anglo-French Rivalry Along the Ohio and Northwest Frontiers, 1748-1763*, 161 (Stanford, California, 1950).

³ Arthur Woodward, "The Metal Tomahawk; Its Evolution and Distribution in North America," in *Fort Ticonderoga Museum Bulletin*, January, 1946, p. 2-42; Harold L. Peterson, *American Indian Tomahawks*, 33-39 (Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, *Contributions*, vol. 19—New York, 1965); George A. West, *Tobacco, Pipes and Smoking Customs of the American Indians*, 245, 267, 317-325 (Milwaukee Public Museum, *Bulletins*, vol. 17—Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1934).

and status. The pipe tomahawk of Rotten Foot, a noted Wichita warrior, is a symbol of status as well as an item of utility. Since white culture was strongly oriented to the material aspect of things, it is no surprise that misinterpretations of the object were prevalent on both sides and continue to weaken ethnohistorical analysis.

Let us consider for a moment one of the principal items used in the Indian fur trade. The pipe tomahawk is an object which allows us to study the problems both of symbolic value and of European adaptability to the requirements of Indian "demand." We are ignorant of who created this instrument, where he did so, and under what motives and conditions. We do know, however, that such tomahawks appear to have originated about the beginning of the eighteenth century, and that the pattern of their distribution favored the northeastern section of the United States. We also know, from written sources as well as from archaeological and other evidence, that they were tremendously popular.³

The pipe tomahawk might never have been developed at all and might never have played a role in relations with the Indians but for a historical accident. Perhaps an ingenious trader or blacksmith put two ideas (and objects) together in one form and created the revolution that followed. He may have been consciously combining utility and symbol, or perhaps utility and utility, or perhaps even symbol and symbol. Did he start with aesthetic intent also? Was the first pipe tomahawk a presentation piece with an inscribed message? We do not know.

If the development of the pipe tomahawk is a historical accident and not the result of the inevitable sweep of economic forces, then there is no reason it could not have been developed earlier. Nor is there any reason why other objects or techniques could not have been devised to serve the purposes of the European nations engaged in the "trade."

Was there not a general poverty of imagination on the part of the European trader as

a result of which he often failed to perceive the true demand of the Indian? Was this not merely another example of the blindness that led early explorers to overlook the real riches of fur that they actually found in favor of the imagined riches of gold that they hoped to find? The prevalent mercantilistic assumptions under which the first trading ventures were organized, combined with European ignorance of Indian values, caused further distortion of the terms of trade, as we would understand those terms today.⁴

The existence of an unfulfilled demand is suggested by instances of Indians converting practical, utilitarian objects into decorative items. Thomas McCliesh, the chief of York Fort of the Hudson's Bay Company, wrote in 1728: "Concerning buying the Indians' old kettles, they always convert them in making fine handcuffs and pouches which is of greater value with them than twice the price of the kettle."⁵ One not infrequently finds in the early literature other examples of Indians converting utilitarian objects received from the whites into items of decoration.

THE USE of silver objects in the trade is another subject concerning which our understanding is incomplete. The term "silver trinkets," used in a comparatively recent study of the subject, reflects the rather condescending way in which such objects have been viewed.⁶ "Trinkets" is, of course, a perfectly appropriate term from the European point of view, but it masks the symbolic, religious, political, and aesthetic values that these things possessed for the red man. The word "ornament" is better but still fails to capture the full Indian meaning.

It is known that an immense quantity of crosses and brooches (valued at the sum of £4,000 in the four years from 1797 to 1801) were made by Montreal silversmiths for the fur traders James and Andrew McGill. An impressive number of silver pieces (worth £2,800) were made by three Philadelphia craftsmen in the 1760s for the

Pennsylvania trade and for presentation purposes.⁷ One of the research problems in this field is to determine how many of these silver objects were used in the exchange relationship of the trade, and how many were dispensed as gifts, favors, or political symbols.

An even greater problem, however, is the question of why such silver works were not used in the trade until the eighteenth century. Certainly the ability to produce them existed a hundred years earlier. Certainly the demand for them on the part of the Indians always existed — at least in latent form. Seventeenth-century observers noted that the Indians often wore ornaments of copper or brass and were exceedingly proud of them. Indeed, ornaments in these materials were made not only by the Indians, but by Europeans for the Indians.

⁴ For a discussion of the noneconomic role of the fur trade as an instrument of national policy, see Paul C. Phillips, *The Fur Trade*, 2:563–573 (Norman, Oklahoma, 1961). The relationship between the decline of the fur trade and the decline of mercantilism is a subject that deserves further study. It is possible that the trade, because of its nonutilitarian ramifications, required such a framework of governmental purpose.

⁵ Kenneth G. Davies, A. M. Johnson, and Richard Glover, eds., *Letters from Hudson Bay, 1703–40*, 134 (London, 1965).

⁶ Ramsay Traquair, "Montreal and the Indian Trade Silver," in *Canadian Historical Review*, 19:1–8 (March, 1938). On trade silver see also William M. Beauchamp, *Metallic Ornaments of the New York Indians*, 10 (New York State Museum, *Bulletins*, no. 73 — Albany, 1903); Arthur C. Parker, "The Origin of Iroquois Silversmithing," in *American Anthropologist*, new series, 12:349 (July–September, 1910); Marius Barbeau, "Indian Trade Silver," in Royal Society of Canada, *Transactions*, series 3, vol. 34, section 2, p. 30, 36 (1940); Barbeau, "Indian-Trade Silver," in *The Beaver*, December, 1942, p. 10–14; George I. Quimby, Jr., "Notes on Indian Trade Silver Ornaments in Michigan," in Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters, *Papers*, 22:15 (1937); and "European Trade Articles as Chronological Indicators for the Archaeology of the Historic Period in Michigan," in *Papers*, 24:29 (1938); Robert C. Alberts, "Trade Silver and Indian Silver Work in the Great Lakes Region," in *Wisconsin Archeologist*, new series, 34:1–121 (March, 1953).

⁷ Traquair, in *Canadian Historical Review*, 19:7; Harold E. Gillingham, *Indian Ornaments made by Philadelphia Silversmiths*, 25 (New York, 1936).

According to archaeological and documentary evidence, the production of such ornaments by Europeans in the early period was small. That silver objects were made as early as the 1660s, however, is indicated by two Indian badges, or medallic passports, in the Virginia Historical Society. An act of the General Assembly of Virginia of March 1661/62 provided for the manufacture of silver or copper plates engraved with the names of appropriate Indian towns to be given to all the nearby "kings" under English domination. After Bacon's Rebellion in 1677, a handsome silver medallion was prepared in England for the loyal Queen of Pamunkey and presented with appropriate ceremonies.⁸

Yet the practice of giving or trading silver objects did not really become "big business" until the late eighteenth century. Why? I suspect that a general lack of imagination on the part of Europeans is chiefly responsible. I suspect too that a few imaginative individuals eventually caught up, two centuries late, with the potential demand. Another factor may have been the increasing rivalry between the French and English, which created competition at that time in the production of attractive trade goods. Whatever the sequence of events, by 1829 an American official observed that Indian medals were not only "tokens of Friendship," but "badges of power to them, and trophies of renown."⁹

⁸ Virginia Historical Society, *An Occasion Bulletin*, no. 11, p. 79 (October, 1965).

⁹ Quoted by Francis Paul Prucha, "Early Indian Peace Medals," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 45:280 (Summer, 1962).

¹⁰ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 1:273 (New York, 1902). See also LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, 1:75-81 (Glendale, California, 1965).

¹¹ Ewers, "The Indian Trade of the Upper Missouri before Lewis and Clark: An Interpretation," in *Missouri Historical Society, Bulletin*, 10:431n. (July, 1954). See also Ewers, ed., *Adventures of Zenas Leonard, Fur Trader*, xiii (Norman, Oklahoma, 1959); Morgan, ed., *The West of William H. Ashley*, xxix, xlv, 94, 106, 108, 118, 145, 149, 168 (Denver, Colorado, 1964).

¹² Ewers, ed., *Zenas Leonard*, viii-xii.

ANOTHER vital aspect that must be probed more deeply before we can fully understand the fur trade is the setting or conditions under which the exchange took place. Here, as in the case of the pipe tomahawk, we have a historical example which throws significant light on the trade. I refer to the "trappers' rendezvous" which developed in the western United States in the period of the 1820s and 1830s. The invention of the trappers' spring rendezvous was attributed to General William H. Ashley by Hiram M. Chittenden in his study of the American fur trade.¹⁰ John C. Ewers has suggested that it is more probably an "adaptation of the pre-existing Shoshoni trading rendezvous, at the same season of the year and in the same region, to the advantage of white trappers." Ewers' contention is vigorously denied by Dale L. Morgan, who reasserts the priority of Ashley in initiating the custom.¹¹

Whatever the origins of the rendezvous, its method was a new one. It was not the manner in which the fur trade had been carried on previously, either in this area or in other parts of the continent. As a technique it succeeded, whereas previous attempts of the fur trader had run into persistent opposition and frustration from the Indian inhabitants. Certainly the shift from the territory of the Blackfoot to that of the friendly Crow and Shoshoni had a significant influence on the success which came to the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.¹² But may not the conditions under which the trade took place have been an influence more significant than we are prepared to realize? The rendezvous removed the trade from a purely commercial, military, or economic context to one more nearly resembling a social occasion, where an atmosphere of good will, equality, and good cheer predominated over economic considerations. The resulting synthesis was revolutionary in its implications. The furs still got to St. Louis. The trade goods still got to the Indian. But the emotional release for both white and Indian, the jubilant excesses, the liquor, the women, and the meeting in a context of equality re-

deemed a process which might otherwise have been merely a cold exchange of material goods.

The rendezvous was the ideal form by which the individualism of the American fur trade could succeed without the need for the elaborate controls which the Hudson's Bay Company, for example, imposed on its servants. Without this social outlet individual trappers might have outraged Indian nations and American national policy alike; instead they were renewed and revived in the rude "pleasure dome" of the rendezvous.

It is a curious coincidence that the United States Indian factory system expired about the same time that the private trappers' rendezvous was born. The reasons for the demise of the factory system are many and diverse, but I would suggest that it was organized on such an explicitly economic basis that it could not achieve even its economic purpose, to say nothing of its potential for noneconomic purposes.¹³ The reluctance or inability to utilize gifts, credit, or alcohol, and the failure of responsible officials to travel to the Indian country or to enter into the types of quasi-Indian cultural situations which distinguished other fur trade operations combined to prevent the over-all cultural adjustment necessary to win success in even the narrowest economic sense. I suspect also that more imagination and plentiful supplies of items of symbolic significance — whether as gifts or trade items — might well have won for the government houses, which were backed by the prestige and power of the United States itself, a success equal to or superior to that achieved by the private companies.

The close personal relations between responsible officials and Indians that developed in Canada may well have provided a more suitable philosophical and practical context for later relations with the Indians than was achieved farther south. As Harold A. Innis has pointed out, the "fur trade demanded a long apprenticeship on the part of its personnel in dealing with Indians."¹⁴ This frequently involved the most intimate

relationships of sex and family, creating bonds and sentiments which largely neutralized the impediments of ignorance and greed. One thinks of James Isham, the Hudson's Bay Company factor of the eighteenth century, the "Grand Old Man" of the fur trade, who influenced a generation of factors to the practice of kindness toward the Indians.¹⁵ The success of the Johnsons in New York owed much to a similar personal involvement with the Indians with whom they dealt. The significance of the personal relationship was, I am afraid, never fully understood by high-ranking administrators, and national and economic values suffered as a result.

The North American fur trade was much more than the simple exchange of economic values. It was a way of life for individuals and for nations, differing for the individuals and nations involved. It cannot be studied in isolation as an economic phenomenon. It must be studied in terms of the cultural totality in which it was involved and approached through all the strands of meaning which explicate a society and its actions.

¹³ See Ora Brooks Peake, *A History of the United States Indian Factory System, 1795-1822*, 204-256 (Denver, Colorado, 1954).

¹⁴ Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada*, 40 (New Haven, Connecticut, 1962).

¹⁵ E. E. Rich and A. M. Johnson, eds., *James Isham's Observations on Hudson's Bay, 1743*, cii (London and Toronto, 1949).



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