

Significance of Work

Bryan Crawford Akipa

I have started many of my projects by simply wanting or needing them for a cultural event or ceremony. Many of these items can not be bought, because not many people are making them at least not at the grassroots level.

I've had to research all of my projects. In most cases this is not easy because for about fifty years all traditional carving in the Dakotas has stopped. I start by asking relatives or friends who might know about what I am after. Because of acculturation and assimilation not everyone knows their culture today so even the smallest bit of oral history becomes important. Next I find examples of what I'm looking for the best comes from family or friends. Asking them is very special, they almost always go through their trunk reluctantly but when the memories start to come back and they relive moments of their youth. The stories as I listen create an image like watching distant hills. Also museums are of some help but most of the collections are undocumented or inaccurate, they are without a story, without life. Books are my last choice but if the photography is well done they can provide some information. I listen at every opportunity, it's interesting to share oral history, to compare, contrast, and cross reference. I have enjoyed thoroughly the knowledge that I've learned from my people. I believe in completing the circle. I've learned, developed, applied, and profited from this knowledge in return to come full circle I give a portion of my work back to the people this way keeps the art alive.

Sometimes when working on a new project one that is almost gone or lost in the case of traditional woodcarving it takes this process to get the work accepted in general by the people. I also work at dispelling inaccurate myths about Dakota Art. We didn't get our designs from Holland tapestry the flute didn't come from the Roman Renaissance. These were ours long before, given to our ancestors from nature, a divine inspiration. My work is functional Northern Plains style that is meant to be danced with, held, or played. In my work I try to retain from the old the esthetic feelings the emotional side of the piece. I can only do this by practicing the values and culture full realizing the integration and changes caused by the reservation period and multi-culturation of today. To me as I dance or sing a flute those esthetic feelings about the work seem to still be there, a living experience in the Traditional Arts.