I. Introduction

“Behind the present program of Indian administration in the United States and particularly Indian Education, there is an assumption that is new with us — that native life itself has values that urgently need to be maintained,” stated W. Carson Ryan Jr., director of Indian Education for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (hereafter abbreviated as BIA) in 1935.¹ The findings of a survey, directed by Lewis Meriam and published in 1928, laid the foundations for reforms in Native American education under the leadership of John Collier as Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the 1930s. In the opinion of these reformers, the previous policies had failed to acknowledge the cultural contribution of the indigenous population and to use the economic and cultural resources available in local indigenous communities.

Recognizing the cultural and economic values of indigenous cultures, the BIA made efforts to foster Native American arts and crafts nationwide and particularly in the Southwest. The federal initiative evolved into the introduction of indigenous art instruction in the schools operated by the BIA. The Santa Fe Indian School became nationally recognized as an art center by the mid-1930s. Although art instruction remained a minor component of the entire curriculum, it symbolized a change in assumptions concerning the place of native cultures in federal education policy.

This essay examines the reforms of Native American education in the 1920s and 1930s by focusing on native arts and schooling in the Southwest. What was the main role of native arts and crafts in the theory and practice of the reforms? What was the reaction of the native people to the programs that were involved in the implementation of the policy? By exploring these questions, the essay will analyze the accomplishments and limitations of the reforms with respect to art instruction in schools for Native Americans.

Before proceeding to the analysis, a note on the definition of the term “Indian” should be considered. Felix S. Cohen, an authority on federal Indian law, stated, “[i]n dealing with Indians, the federal government is dealing with members or descendants of political entities, that is, Indian tribes, not with persons of a particular race.”² Accordingly, in this essay, the term “Indian” is used in a legal and political sense, whereas the terms “Native American” and “indigenous people” are used in an ethnological sense.
II. Federal Policies and Practices before the 1930s

Shift in Policy

In 1905, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Francis E. Leupp officially proclaimed in his Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, “[t]he Indian is a natural warrior, a natural logician, a natural artist. ... We have room for all three in our highly organized social system.” However, little federal initiative in fostering native arts ensued, except for the appointment of Angel de Cora Dietz, a Winnebago, as an instructor of Indian art at the Carlisle Indian School. The ultimate objective of policy remained unchanged until the end of the 1920s, and an official ban on certain tribal dances was in effect. Largely at the instigation of missionaries and certain reform groups, Commissioner Charles Burke issued an order in 1923 prohibiting persons under the age of fifty from attending these dances. It was not until the late 1920s that the values of distinct native cultures were seriously considered as a matter of federal policy.

The defeat of the Bursum Bill of 1922 — a measure that would have relinquished the Pueblo Indian land grants — spearheaded a protest against federal policy toward Native Americans. The general trend of public opinion concerning the dispute seemed to go beyond politics and humanitarianism. There emerged a movement to appreciate and preserve the cultural life of Native Americans, centered in Santa Fe, New Mexico. This appreciation was based on non-Native American ideas of native cultures, ranging from the “scientific” viewpoints of anthropologists to the romantic perception of artists. Nevertheless, it represented, in the words of the poet Witter Bynner, “the first evidence of a cultural influence on American politics.”

In response to the increased demands for reform of federal policy toward Native Americans, Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work authorized the Brookings Institution to investigate Indian affairs. A final report titled The Problem of Indian Administration — commonly referred to as the Meriam Report — was published in 1928 after an extensive field investigation.

In 1929, Charles J. Rhodes accepted the nomination for the commissionership of the BIA when President Hoover affirmed his support for the reforms outlined in the Meriam Report. In the following year, Rhoads appointed W. Carson Ryan Jr. as director of Indian education. In his 1931 annual report, Rhoads asserted that the purpose of Native American education was to help native people “to adjust themselves to modern life, protecting and preserving as much of their own way of their contribution to modern civilization.” A former staff member of the Meriam investigation, Ryan steadily proceeded to put some of the recommendations of the Meriam Report into practice. These recommendations included the improvement of the living conditions at federal boarding schools and the concurrent reduction in the number of nonreservation boarding schools, which was achieved by transferring students to nearby public schools and by increasing the number of day schools on the reservations.

In addition to the BIA officials favorable to the reform, the BIA gradually enjoyed support from Congress. In spite of the economic depression and the strained budgets of other departments, BIA
appropriations for education, health, and welfare almost doubled from 1929 to 1933. Accordingly, the number of education positions in the BIA increased by eight hundred by 1931.8

Changes in Public Opinion

Regarding the development of native handicrafts, the Merian Report made the following observation:

Unfortunately, native industries have, with some exceptions, received little encouragement from government officers and missionary workers. This neglect in some cases springs from contempt for all that constitutes distinctive Indian life. More generally, however, the failure to foster these arts seems to be due to a lack of understanding of their economic possibilities.9

It then urged the BIA to launch a new program aimed at developing economic aspects of native handicrafts while allowing the dominant society to realize the distinctive contribution of native arts and crafts to the world.10

Incidentally, tourism had been a booming industry since the turn of the twentieth century, particularly in the Southwest. In 1904, for instance, sales of native handicrafts at stations along the Santa Fe Railroad increased by 1,000 percent over sales in the previous years. The tourist and hotel industry, and in particular the Fred Harvey Company, continued to lead the commercialization of native handiwork as tourist curios without standardization of quality or price. Statistics show that as of 1928, seventy four percent of handicraft sales were earned by the Native Americans of Arizona and New Mexico.11 In these regions, handicrafts constituted the principal source of income of the Native Americans, especially among the Navajo and Pueblo, while they often became stereotypes of “Indian arts” in the minds of tourists. In addition to the demand for tourist curios, an increased appreciation of native arts from an aesthetic viewpoint also began to unfold in Oklahoma and the Southwest from the late 1910s onward.

It is interesting to note that many scholars and art critics have mentioned the alliance between the work of native artists and that of the Orientals. Although the term “Oriental” remains rather obscure and inescapably multivalent, the following remarks by art critics illustrate the characteristics of native paintings in the 1910s and the 1920s as they were viewed from a non-native perspective. Edger L. Hewett, Director of the School of American Research and the Museum of New Mexico, began working with the Pueblo in the mid 1910s. Hewett once termed the art of Crescencio Martinez of the San Ildefonso Pueblo, “as distinctly racial as is Japanese art.”12 In 1922, Hewett stated:

[T]he Indian race may attain to a place equal to that the Orientals, whose art in many respects such as its flat, decorative character, absence of backgrounds and foregrounds, freedom from our system of
Referring to the work of Awa Tsireh (Alfonso Roybal) of the San Ildefonso Pueblo, Ananda Coomaraswamy, an artist and philosopher of India, stated that the horse in Tsireh’s paintings had the “alert vitality which only primitive artists, or Orientals, seem to be able to give to the drawing of animals.” These remarks were never free from cultural bias; however, these comparative views symbolized a change in attitude on the part of the dominant society toward native arts and crafts.

Unofficial Efforts in Schools

As the appreciation of native arts and crafts grew, a few day schools and boarding schools, mainly on and near the reservations in the Southwest, began integrating native arts into the regular curriculum. San Ildefonso Day School, for instance, began encouraging native painting as early as 1910. According to Quah Ah (Tonita Pena) from the Cochiti Pueblo, Ester B. Hoyt, a teacher at San Ildefonso, encouraged her and other students to paint familiar themes such as the dance in the pueblo. Later, a similar initiative in fostering native art expression was led by Superintendent and Mrs. John D. DeHuff of the Santa Fe Indian School. Even though DeHuff was inclined to have an idealistic view of “Indian art,” he asserted, as early as 1922, that it was “the duty of the Government Indian Schools to do something in the near future to prevent the dying out of the Indian art.” Mr. and Mrs. DeHuff personally encouraged several students, including Ma-Pe-Wi of the Zia Pueblo and Fred Kabotie and Otis Polelonema of the Hopi, to paint after school in the DuHuffs’ home. Lewis Meriam confirmed the newer trends among educators during his survey in 1926-27, observing, “a few progressive teachers had broken away from past principles and were letting the children practice their native arts.”

Nevertheless, these sporadic efforts to foster native arts remained unofficial throughout the 1920s; that is, they were in opposition to official policies. Conflicts in point of view among staff members were thus unavoidable, and they often resulted in a staff member’s demotion and transfer to another institution, as was the case with Superintendent DeHuff of the Santa Fe Indian School. As there were no references to native cultures in the curriculum, many young native students had no opportunity in school to appreciate the artwork of their elders. In fact, as late as the 1950s, native art expressions were discouraged in some Indian schools nationwide. The students were taught instead to imitate the cultural traits of Europeans and Euro-Americans.

Under the Rhodes administration, with a national climate that was favorable to reforms in federal Indian policy, school life became less militaristic and more enjoyable for native students. Military drilling and strict discipline were gradually abolished. At the Santa Fe Indian School, for instance, reforms were initially introduced by Superintendent Chester Faris, who was appointed by Commissioner Rhodes in 1930. Under the banner of “Build on a Cultural Heritage,” the militaristic rules including drilling, marching, and the strict
language policy faded away. The school enjoyed support from native people and a larger appropriation, which in turn facilitated further reforms.

III. Federal Policies and Practices in the 1930s

New Policies and Trends of Public Support

Even in 1934, many native people still believed that native religion and language were frowned upon, if not officially prohibited, by the federal government. Having constantly criticized federal policy concerning native cultures, Commissioner Collier issued a circular to the superintendents of local jurisdictions to implement his new policy. The objectives of the circular were threefold: no interference with Native American religious life, encouragement and support for native arts and crafts, and the desirability of bilingualism and of persons being fluent in both English and their native languages. This suggests that the cultural and religious liberty of Native Americans was in actuality restricted before the 1930s in spite of gradual changes in policies and public opinion.

The change in policy was followed by some legislative successes, even though Congress failed to appropriate adequate funds in some cases. The major legislative accomplishment was the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act (hereafter abbreviated as IRA) of 1934. The IRA was intended to provide a mechanism for the tribe to develop lands and resources. The Indian Arts and Crafts Board, created in the Department of the Interior by the Act of August 27, 1935, also reflected Collier’s policies, which included economic rehabilitation and cultural freedom and opportunity for Native Americans. During the first two years following the establishment of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, most of its projects were initiated in the Southwest, such as the standardization of genuineness and quality for Navajo and Pueblo silver products. Willard W. Beatty as Director of Indian Education also recognized the potential of native handicraft as a cultural and economic resource and encouraged a revival of native arts and crafts in Indian schools.

The appreciation of native arts and crafts from an aesthetic standpoint continued in the 1930s, leading to the success of the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago and the Golden Gate Exposition in San Francisco in 1939 featuring artwork by native pupils and artists. It culminated in the success of the Exposition of Indian Art of the United States at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941. In addition to the “scientific” interests in anthropological and ethnological terms that were so evident in the past, there emerged a realization of the fact that native art tradition had precious value in its own light and that the suppression of its expression was a violation of intrinsic human rights. Frederic H. Douglas, curator of Indian art at the Denver Art Museum, observed:

[T]he Indian service, after years of striving to kill the artistic hopes and expression of the Indian has swung full around to a policy of strong encouragement. It is impossible to speak too highly of the
teachers who, in the faces of determined and powerful opposition, have fought and won this battle for good art and for the Indian.22

Although there was a shift in the leading styles of Indian painting in the 1930s from realistic portrayals toward abstract decoration, many art critics continued to mention the similarities between the indigenous arts and the arts of the world. A critic who favorably reviewed the paintings at the San Francisco exhibition described them as “amazingly Oriental in treatment resembling Persian miniatures.”23 This phenomenon was best summarized by Edward Alden Jewell in the New York Times:

In his fidelity to tribal convention, the Indian artist seems closer to the Far East than to the Occident, where so much more stress has always been placed upon individual performance; where art fashions come and go with each generation, taking root in an ever lengthening perspective, yet at the time representing response to immediate social moods that often prove of fleeting significance.24

The assessment of the aesthetic values of “Indian paintings” illuminates a departure from conventional anthropological and economic interpretations of native arts. At the same time, however, this notion of racial aesthetics contributed toward strengthening the popular image of Native Americans, particularly those of the Southwest, as artists.25

Federally Sanctioned Efforts in Schools

How, then, did the change in policy and public opinion affect art instruction in schools? The Santa Fe Indian School was the logical choice for the encouragement of native arts in the federal Indian schools because of its location in the midst of surviving native cultures and the reform movement that was mainly led by local intellectuals, artists, and political organizations.

At the Santa Fe Indian School, a new arts and crafts building was opened and several crafts courses were introduced by 1931. The various activities at the school, which was chosen as headquarters of the Indian division of the 1934 Public Works of Art Project, represented some of the earliest officially sanctioned efforts by the federal government to foster native arts and crafts at federal Indian schools.

Symbolic of this innovation was the foundation of the studio for painting in 1932 by Dorothy Dunn as an art instructor. The new painting studio, popularly call the Studio, was founded unofficially; hence, it operated on an entirely extracurricular basis until December 1933, when Dunn received a civil service appointment as Teacher of Fine and Applied Arts. “In creating this position,” Dunn recalled, “the Office of Indian Affairs had done much more than to recognize the Studio, it had recognized Indian painting for the first time.”26

The main objectives of the Studio were as follows: to foster appreciation of Indian painting among
students and the public as one of the fine arts of the world, and to explore traditional art methods and productions in order to maintain established basic forms and evolve new styles and techniques. At the Studio, the students were exposed to traditional materials such as earth colors and excellent examples of native arts. Dunn and her colleagues also combined art with other subjects such as science and history, as was shown in earth color murals representing physics, astronomy, geology, and the history of New Mexico. Under the direction of Dunn, there emerged a typical Studio style of painting, characterized by disciplined brush work, the flat application of colors, and the lack of specific backgrounds.

Within a few years, the Studio became nationally recognized as the most influential institution in the early development of Southwestern painting. Since it was then one of a few federal institutions for painting, many native students who later made an outstanding career of art had initially studied at the Studio. These included Allan Houser of the Chiricahua Apache, Oscar Howe of the Yanktonai Sioux, Harrison Begay of the Navajo, Pablita Velarde of the Santa Clara Pueblo, and Joe H. Herrera of the Cochiti Pueblo. The Studio also won international acclaim such as the Medaille de Bronze at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques in Paris. In 1937, for instance, student work from the Santa Fe Indian School was exhibited in thirty seven locations in the U.S. and Europe including Paris, London, Venice, and Prague. Despite its notable success, Dorothy Dunn left the Studio in 1937, to be replaced as director by Geronima Montoya of the San Juan Pueblo. Apparently, there was occasional harassment and misunderstanding of the activities of the Studio on the part of some anti-reform employees at the school.

The Reaction of Native People

The new policies concerning native cultures were welcomed by many Native Americans. Miguel H. Trujillo from the Isleta Pueblo observed in 1937, “there has appeared a sympathetic attitude of the Government in the appreciation and acceptance of the Indians’ cultural contribution and non-interference in the religious life and expression of the Indians.” The Hopi Constitution, signed by the Secretary of the Interior in 1936, gave the tribal council the authority “to protect the arts, crafts, traditions and ceremonies of the Hopi Indians.” In reference to this clause, Otto Lomavitu, Chairman of the Hopi tribal council, stressed the importance of arts and crafts as “a potential element in our progress.

By the late 1930s, some BIA schools no longer prohibited students from speaking their native languages. The change in language policy was significant because it inspired other cultural activities such as dancing, singing, and art expression in schools. At the same time, however, the new language policy generated mixed feelings among some native people. At a Senate hearing in August of 1936, Albert Martinez, a member of the governing body of the Taos Pueblo, stated that children were supposed to speak not their own native languages but English at school. Since children could speak their languages “all they want to after they leave Government ground,” Martinez wanted children to learn English at school. This suggests that some native
people took the disparity between school and community for granted, for schools had been foreign institutions to most native people.

The case of the Studio also illustrates the ambivalent response of native people to art instruction in school. Even before establishing the Studio, the art instruction at the schools was received by some native people with some reservations. Although there have been longstanding pictorial traditions in the Southwest such as those of petroglyphs and pictographs, painting with watercolors and tempera on paper was then viewed as a new venture from native perspectives. Naturally, a new medium caused tension among some native people as to its place in their artistic tradition. Kenneth Chapman of the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe related a suspicion from some of the Pueblo about painting pictures. In the mid-1920s, when Chapman was collecting pictures done at the Santa Fe Indian School, the boy who had made some of these pictures was called home and censured for making pictures at the school. Being uncertain about the purpose and function of these pictures, some members of the Pueblo were alarmed about the possibility that a certain theme, particularly of a religious nature, would be drawn. As a teacher at Santo Doming Day School, Dunn also recalled that she had to be cautious about “what we could do, how far we could go without overstepping” old traditions of the Pueblo.

Against these backdrops, the Studio met opposition from some native people for different reasons. Some opponents thought that the Studio did not provide the formal training that they had expected it to. Mainly due to instruction that reflected only Euro-American ideas of what constituted formal education, some native people came to conclude that nothing native had any place in the schools. Having lost respect for their native art, some of the students at the Santa Fe Indian School asked to be taught painting and design “like the American artists do.” They were dissatisfied with and even resentful of the activities of the Studio. Dunn blamed previous federal policies for the neglect of native cultural contributions in schools. In the opinion of Dunn, the native students came to believe that Native American art was “inferior to the motley mass of so-called art with which they have come in contact outside their homes.”

Other opponents supported the Studio as one of the few places for Native American students to study painting at that time, but disagreed with Dunn’s idea of what Indian painting should be. Dunn considered herself not as a teacher but as an artist-researcher and guide. In actuality, however, she was an able teacher with clear messages, which therefore met with both positive and negative responses from her students. Pablita Velarde of the Santa Clara Pueblo recalled that Dunn was a respected educator who stressed that students should paint what they know best of their own culture. Pop Chalee from the Taos Pueblo gave credit to Dunn for encouraging students to appreciate their heritage while introducing it to the world.

In contrast, other students objected to Dunn’s preconceived notion of “Indian painting.” The Studio did not want realistic painting such as landscapes from the students — they wanted the traditional style of “Indian painting” defined by Dunn. Allan Houser reflected on his only objection to Dunn:
She trained us all the same way. “You either paint like this, Mr. Houser, or it’s not Indian art.”...And what happened was that almost everybody was painting identically for a while.37

Having been overshadowed by the publicity of the Studio, such criticism suggests the limitations of the reform. The fact is that there were continuities with past practices even in the innovative programs, that is, little native initiative in the process of making and implementing new policies.

IV. Conclusion

Under the direction of Commissioner Collier, reforms in Native American education in the 1930s drew on a new theory regarding the cultural and religious liberty of native people. The greatest change in attitude on the part of the dominant society was the recognition that native people inherited distinct cultural assets and that the suppression of their artistic tradition was a violation of human rights. From the late 1920s onward, the assumption that native cultures had no place in schools began to be challenged. In addition to conventional notions of native craftworks as “scientific” specimens and tourist curios, a new trend to assess their aesthetic value emerged, led mainly by artists, museum curators, and patrons of fine arts. In recognition of the economic assets as well as the cultural assets of native arts and crafts, increased attention was given to technical and vocational aspects of art instruction.

Several art programs at the Santa Fe Indian School represented some of the first officially sanctioned efforts concerning the teaching of “Indian art” in government schools. Even though art instruction remained a minor aspect of the entire curriculum and commitments at school, by the mid-1930s the Santa Fe Indian School won national and even international acclaim as a center for “Indian arts.”

Of special note are the activities of the studio for painting at the Santa Fe Indian School that was founded by Dorothy Dunn in 1932. The development of “Indian painting” at the Studio illustrates well the accomplishments and limitations of the reform. In spite of its modest beginning, the studio attracted students from the Southwest and later from all over the country. Large exhibitions of work from the Studio in Europe as well as in the U.S. were indicative of a growing recognition of native arts and crafts.

In specific terms, however, there had been a conflict with native ideas of what the objectives and functions of painting should be. More importantly, there was little realization that the English word “art” had no exact equivalent in the native languages. In most native cultures, art was recognized not as a stand-alone activity but as an integral part of everyday life. The native idea of this activity could be better translated into English as “making” or “completing.”38

The more direct reason for opposition to the Studio was the impact of schooling since the late nineteenth century. Because the total exclusion of everything native from school activities had been a fact of life, some native people considered the Studio misguided. Others supported the Studio but opposed the notion of
“Indian art” held by non-native educators and supporters.

Viewed against the history of federal policies that had prohibited native languages and art expression in schools, several art programs at the Santa Fe Indian School symbolized a departure from previous practices. Nevertheless, a lack of native voice in reforms resulted in the emergence of idealized and often stereotyped “Indian arts” that were often isolated from their social context.

---

5 Alice Corbin Henderson, “A Plea for the Study of Indian Culture,” El Palacio 15, no. 6 (September 1923): 91.
7 Margaret Connell Szasz, Education and the American Indian: The Road to Self-determination since 1928, 3rd ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), chap. 3.
8 Kvasmeka and Viola, The Commissioners, 267.
9 Lewis Meriam and others, The Problem of Indian Administration (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1928; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1971), 532, 651 (page citations are to the reprint edition).
10 Ibid.
11 Schrader, The Board, 7, 22.
15 “How Shall We Educate the Indian?” (paper read by J. D. DeHuff, Supt. Santa Fe Indian School, at
Flagstaff, Arizona, July 11, 1922, before Round Table of Indian Service Teachers Summer Session of Northern Arizona Normal School and State University), El Palacio 8, no. 5 (September 1922): 62.

16 Ibid.; Dunn, Painting, 201, 203, 254.

17 DeHuff was demoted from superintendent to principal, and then transferred to Riverside, California, in spite of petitions from the Pueblo Council. See Jamake Highwater, Song From the Earth: American Indian Painting (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 140; Meriam, The Problem, 646.

18 Sally Hyer, One House, One Voice, One Heart: Native American Education at the Santa Fe Indian School (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1990), 32.


23 Dunn, Painting, 232.

24 Ibid., 239.

25 As Alfonso Ortiz suggests in the following articles, few scholarly surveys are available that deal with this stereotypical image of the Native Americans as artists. It would be sufficient to say that the emergence of that image can be attributed, in part, to the increased numbers of non-Native American artists and tourists in the Southwest in the 1920s-1930s. See Alfonso Ortiz, “The Dynamics of Pueblo Cultural Survival,” in Raymond J. Demallie and Alfonso Ortiz, eds., North American Indian Anthropology: Essays on Society and Culture (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 302; Alfonso Ortiz, “San Juan Pueblo,” in Alfonso Ortiz ed., Southwest, vol. 9 of Handbook of North American Indians (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1979), 282.

26 Dunn, Painting, 273; Yumiko Nakano, “Indian” to “Shimin” no hazamade (Between wardship and citizenship)(Nagoya: Nagoyadaigaku Shuppankai, 2007), 188-194.

27 Ibid., 252.

28 Hyer, One House, 46.


35 Dunn, *Painting*, 252.


37 Highwater, *Song*, 149.