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Contemporary Tapestry in a Cross-Cultural Context and the Work of Janet Moore

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When I heard about the theme for this symposium of the Textile Society, Appropriation, Acculturation and Transformation, my thoughts turned immediately to the work of contemporary tapestry artist Janet Moore. Her work occupies that nexus between two cultures – Native American and the dominant European American. Other artists have crisscrossed this nexus in the last thirty years, from both sides and in different media.

To put it briefly: Jan Moore's image system derives symbols from both indigenous and settler cultures in the United States. She participates in both cultures and can talk about her position in each of them quite openly. She is aware of the issues that arise when working with craft media as art and has grappled with art criticisms, including Postmodernism and the positioning of such words as “appropriation.”

I have two purposes for presenting this paper. The first is to illuminate the growth and development of an individual artist working in tapestry as primary medium. Her imagery has developed unique characteristics that are based on a textile foundation. Looking closely at her work, as well as her path in life, will provide insight into the practices and issues faced by many artists working in fiber media. The second purpose of this paper is to discuss certain specific cultural issues.

Cultural issues and ideas attach themselves to people as they experience life. They are specific in time because of the daily life that frames them. These ideas may expand as time, travel and education permit. Moore grew up in the central plains and she feels rooted there, grounded within that cultural frame. Born in Stillwater, Oklahoma in 1948, to parents of Irish descent, she is the oldest of four children. Her parents met at Oklahoma State University and both are second-generation Oklahomans. The families were farmers and construction workers. Moore's grandmother taught her how to embroider at an early age. As a child, she went with her family to powwows and recalls the effect they had on her. She was five years old the first time they went to the Pawnee powwow where she watched her uncle's scout troop dance.

Here we see that cultural crossover was already taking place. The family of Irish descent goes to see the dances at a powwow as an extension of their own family's activities. Further, Jan writes: “I met another five year old girl who was wearing full regalia and begged her to take my doll. And she said she had plenty of dolls, but I pressed her so she accepted.” This cultural give-and-take comes with living a life at the simplest, most direct level without the weight of social constructs of appropriation or acculturation. This does not mean that these cultural issues do not exist – they do. I want to ask, for example, why the boy scouts danced, what they danced, how they were invited and by whom...but I will refrain.

For Moore, the border between these two cultures started off as a permeable one. The border was marked by the distance of travel, the special event qualities of powwows, and

the differences between her home and the homes on the reservation. The border existed but she could easily cross over it and through it, to experience a fuller sense of life.

During these young years, she had art lessons at the State Fairgrounds and she filled her sketchbooks with drawings of horses. By early adolescence she had learned to play the guitar and sing folk songs. She writes that her folk heroes were “Cochise, Gene Autry, the Cisco Kid, anyone who rode a horse, or played for the Yankees.” She adds, “I loved plaids. I fantasized about playing the bagpipes and growing popcorn.”¹ The world seemed open to many possibilities. In the melting pot of Middle America, we have access to a variety of cultural attributes all of which seem equally attractive without necessarily making one more valid than the next. The quantity of reading material available, the variety of programs developed on radio and television all expanded the accessibility of these cultural attributes.

In 1960, when she was 12, Moore's family moved to Kansas City, Missouri where, two years later, she attended a Catholic girls' school. Her father left when she was 14. The friends that she made came from other schools and with them she engaged even more in folk music, the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-Vietnam War Movement and the flowering of the Hippie lifestyle. After graduating from high school in 1966, Moore attended the University of Missouri Kansas City for two years and then took a break. She found that she could make a living largely through sewing things – crafts – that were sought by the counter-culture. Textiles became her focus within that context.

Between 1968 and 1974, she explored the fiber world. She spent a year apprenticed in the studio of Joy Rushfeldt, in 1972, helping with large commissions and developing her weaving skills. She spent some months in Mexico, traveling with a friend, and learned to love and appreciate the ethnographic textiles there. By 1974, Moore married, went back to school and quickly completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Missouri. She then applied and got accepted into the BFA fiber arts program at the Kansas City Art Institute.

The next years, 1975 to 1978, resulted in many changes and clarifications. As Moore writes, “At that time (1976), the women's studio art movement was in full swing, and word of the Feminist Studio Workshop in LA (Judy Chicago, Miriam Shapiro) had drawn several of the women in my circle to that experience. They helped to work on The Dinner Party, or attended the Feminist Studio Workshop and work[ed] on the Woman House project.” She read feminist literature, questioned male dominance, came out as a lesbian, and divorced her husband, all while producing her first weavings and completing her degree.

This period of study in higher education pinpoints a human activity far removed from trade or war, yet which has an incredible influence on the “production, aesthetics, materials, etc. of textiles”² which are the focus of this Symposium. Education plays a more important role in cultural transformation in contemporary textiles than large-scale events. Within the college classroom, artists in fiber gain permission and are expected to dip into textile history, other cultures and personal experience at the same time as they are asked to justify their reasons for doing so. Critiques involve an examination of your

¹Correspondence with the artist via email dated 9/28/04.

²Webpage description posted by the Textile Society of America for their 2004 Symposium.

findings, your conceptual development, your character and your intentions as an artist. And it gets more intense at the graduate level.

Early work

To start, while she begins her BFA studies at the Kansas City Art Institute, and probably due to her apprenticeship with Joy Rushfeldt, Moore completed a commission for the Sheraton Royal in Kansas City, 1975. This piece, characterized by a tapestry technique that is woven with heavy materials and a fair amount of weft looping, relies on textural effects to hold visual interest. Its shaped and organic qualities are in alignment with much of the work being done in the new and rapidly growing fiber art movement.

Moving from there, Moore shifts to a cleaner geometric style. With areas of heavy yarn contrasted to thinner ones, she sets up variety using the visual vocabulary of fiber. Complexity in the overall shape of each piece takes advantage of and emphasizes the cloth-like qualities of the work. She develops a confidence in handling strong contrast and deep color. She sticks with a rather De Stijlist or Bauhausian color palette, with black, white and the three primaries.

Following this, in 1977, she makes a series of gray works. Flat and rectangular, made up of individual strips, the pieces carry a distinct relationship to African strip weaving. Predominately gray, each tapestry feels somber and solid. Even though the yellows, rusts and reds echo their African counterparts, these pieces differ most noticeably by their massive almost stone-like qualities. Her ability to place weaverly marks such as stepped gradations, stripes, slits, triangles, and pick-and-pick, has reached a level of formal sophistication.

It is not surprising, however, that this somber mood finds an end by 1978, when she graduates with her BFA. She has studied textile history, learned from it, carried those forms into her work, and a great deal of personal change has taken place. She faces once again the prospect of making her living as a fiber artist, now with a fresh new degree.

The next piece, "Nile" from 1980, shifts from strictly textile language elements to landscape. This view of the Nile delta from above was made for a particular client in exchange for services rendered (her Rolffer). The discoveries that Moore came across while developing this piece stimulated several new ideas and affected many of her choices for subsequent visual themes. These discoveries include: the use of the landscape as seen from above to give real content to abstraction; a new color palette that increases her range to blues, greens, and a sandy or buff color; a different vocabulary of shapes; and a new reason to use stripes.

Within two years she produced at least four new works, from "Nebraska Patchwork" to "Nebraska Patchwork II" and "Nebraska Patchwork IV." Moore kept the dimensions of each piece the same, 48" x 48", so that they could work together as a one large piece, or could be sold or shown separately. With each one, she plays between an angular perspective of the land versus an overhead flat view, and she varies her materials and colors to convey the textile quality of the land and its cultivated fields.

By 1983, Jan has moved to San Francisco and found work as a dog handler. Two years later she shifted her residence slightly north up the coast to the small town of Bolinas, known as an artists' colony. It is here, in this somewhat Hippie-laden community with its

strong connections to the land, where she can settle in and explore what it means to know and care for the land you live on.

Bolinas is considered sacred ground by several of the tribes of Northern California. A Cherokee medicine woman who practiced the Lakota Pipe Ways³ led drumming circles and sweat lodges and taught many people in that area in Native American spiritual practice. In her MFA thesis, Moore writes: "I learned from contact with her that many Native Americans want to share their ideas and spiritual practices with the dominant culture so that we can begin to work together to heal the earth and respond to the needs of our biosphere and communities." And she clarifies: "My exploration of the philosophy and life ways of Native Americans have helped me to satisfy my curiosity about their experience and given me access to greater understanding of them and myself." It was in this context that she made drums using deer hide stretched over steamed bent wood frames. These objects pleased her and the people who used them. A drum could act as a talisman to recall spiritual knowledge at the glance of an eye or the touch of a finger, but it would have far less effect on those not engaged in these traditions.

Transitional Works

In 1988 Moore returned to San Francisco and entered the graduate art program at San Francisco State University to study under Candace Crockett and Lillian Elliott. A return to the sole focus of weaving tapestries ensues. She decides to engage physically with the methods of Native American weavers, particularly the Navajo. The four pieces from this first year all carry overt visual symbols of indigenous cultures of North and Central America.

The first one, "Grandmother, I See You" (48"x48") captures Georgia O'Keefe's favorite mountain, El Pedernal, in New Mexico, as it sits against a night sky still glowing with the last bit of sunset. A few stars shine and the moon hovers near the mountain. The disc of the moon on the left echoes the small drum at the right. The colors of the drum's four quadrants represent the four directions in a traditional schema. Four bolts of lightning arc across the mountaintop and a curved ladder floats to the left. This scene, captured as if it were a painted drumhead, has another four corners around it filled with stepped interlocking patterns evocative of Navajo motifs.

Then came "Calling Down the Owl" (48"x72") with the sun as a huge drum setting at the horizon between yellow above and striped blue water below. At the bottom, small red stepped hogans sit quietly in this vast space. A red cord suspended above the horizon holds twelve striped feathers of an owl. Moore emulated the process of Navajo weaving. She spun the yarn, dyed it, and then wove it using a four-selvedge finish. Edging cords meet the warp cords at the corners in short braids.

Following on the success of "Calling Down the Owl," Moore wove "A Deer for the Directions." Here the drum has been lost, although the colors of the four vertically stretched deer retain a reference to the four directions of the horizon. The deer lie upon a woven cloth marked with sections of warp ikat apparently of Guatemalan origin. The figures seem stillborn, arranged solemnly as if for preservation and contemplation. The four braided cord ends and selvedge treatment of Navajo blankets are retained. An additional element appears – a vertical stripe of a deep a spectrum-like sequence.

³Moore, Janet. "Animal Guides" 1990, MFA thesis, San Francisco State University.

As if setting aside the struggles of “A Deer for the Directions,” the next piece, “Nightsky – Homage to Hosteen Klah” returned her to the drumhead picture plane. Here, the circle of the night sky holds the center ground, sprinkled with a few stars and symbols. The night sky is held in a field of dark golden browns – the land – similar to the desert sands of the “Nile” tapestry. Upon this earth she scatters symbols as an invocation of the woven sand paintings of Hosteen Klah. A hand grasps tries to capture a white thread that zigzags energetically up to the top edge. Two sets of three feathers flair in the upper quadrants. In the lower left, a black and white striped snake whips its own zigzag. At the right stands a tall coyote with front paws upraised. One last time she uses the four-selvedge weave and braided cord ends of Navajo blankets.

During this intense year Moore has studied and emulated the ways of indigenous cultures of North America within a textile context. She has tested the extent to which she can continue in this vein, at every turn touching upon the border where these cultures meet and finding it less permeable as time goes on and her own awareness changes. As she writes in her MFA thesis, “While thinking about cross-cultural art-making, I came upon the idea of the artist as a cultural bridge, the person through which this commerce of ideas moves. At some point the bridge also becomes a feed-back loop; the cultural information comes across, is absorbed and returns, or becomes amplified in the dominant culture.”

Amplified. She has attempted to bring into our dominant culture important qualities that she sees lacking. At what point does the amplification become distorted and the message not heard? She continues, “In a certain kind of analysis, I could be (and have been) criticized for taking images from another culture, and this has been called, quite negatively, cultural banditry. I myself do not see it that way. I approach the material with respect, try to understand it in its own context and try to learn from it what we as the dominant culture may need to do to reestablish a relationship of respect and care with nature.”

Nicholas Thomas writes, in his book *Possessions: Indigenous Art/ Colonial Culture*, 1999:

We could attempt to theorize the practice of appropriation, and thereby establish whether cross-cultural borrowings are to be construed as legitimate exchange and productive mutual acknowledgement, or rather the rip-off of colonized peoples by exploitative European and settler cultures. But the political meanings of appropriations are not susceptible to this generalized measuring. [...] If appropriations do have a general character, it is surely that of unstable duality. In some proportion, they always combine taking and acknowledgment, appropriation and homage, a critique of colonial exclusions, and collusion in imbalanced exchange.

Moore's explorations here have not strayed terribly far from her BFA work except with one notable addition: imagery. Whereas appropriating techniques and marks from African strip weaving did not meet with criticism, perhaps because she did so with Bauhausian constraint, working with an even deeper emulation and respect for American Indian woven traditions resulted in accusations of outright thievery. Working with imagery as opposed to technique and form puts the artist into contested cultural terrain. Tapestry and all image-conveying textiles occupy this borderland. Imagery is tapestry's main event and technique disappears offstage as the artist gains mastery.

When she starts her second year in the graduate program, it is clear she has made a decision. None of the subsequent works are four-selvedge weaves with braided cord ends. The textile references in the new pieces float freely in the composition, no longer restricted to weaving-as-they-would-have-been-woven. Some clear personal symbols develop, based in the work of the previous years.

“Looking for the Mystery” A floating carpet, casts a shadow upon a non-descript plane carrying dream-like symbols. Two kivas (one with a ladder) cut into the imaginary surface. Five feathers hang vertically from the top ends of five angled lines transmuted into abstracted pipes. The footprints of a deer leave multicolored tracks in a snaky zigzag. A red “x” marks the spot in the upper corner. A few crows-feet also leave traces in the sand. A hexagram from the *I Ching* appears near them. Three notable changes have occurred. First, the piece is no longer rectilinear but takes on the shape of the flying rug. Second, her color palette has opened up to a full spectrum of hues. Third, she has added an element of serious play to the way she uses these symbols.

“Hekolas,” a goddess of the Miwok tribe of the Bolinas area, stands with her arms upraised, much as coyote did in the piece for Hosteen Klah. This Egyptian-like deer-headed woman holds one hand open while the other closes on the end of a snaking black and white thread. The previous piece reappears behind her, a clear celebration of its success. Hekolas wears a blanket skirt in a pattern indicative of Navajo design with bold alternating stripes and stepped diamonds. The purple hue of the goddess's skin, her large stylized red heart, and the unusual greens in her skirt take us deliberately away from realism and into the realm of the mythical.

“Bo Makes It Personal.” With this piece, Moore goes back to the struggles and gains of the first year with traditional Navajo blankets and adds her dog, Bo. Her confidence with shaped tapestry lets her approach design as collage. She can have the rug be a rug and put Bo at its corner without needing any further elements. The Navajo style rug holds the center field. The peach ground color we now recognize as the tone of sand. At the lower right, Bo sits and regards the viewer with a look of concern. To the left, a shadow or ghost dog partly emerges from behind the rug. It is as if she is making it clear: the two cultures can coexist. They need not rob or destroy each other.

In a re-working of this breakthrough, Moore makes the shadow dog clearer in content. He is Coyote, the trickster. His stance has become more assertive and aggressive, with a mask-like face that turns to Bo who still sits with that look of concern. The dynamic between these two animals suddenly overtakes the rug that now simply acts as a screen or divider between these two, between the real and the mythical.

Bo does make it personal. More than that, the subliminal content of the animal familiar as guide has a chance to come forward. Looking back now at the deer images, I can posit that the deer is another animal that that guides her and in some respects stands for the artist herself.

Mature Works

In 1991, having completed her graduate degree, Moore produces the piece, "Soulful Dress," 46"x60". The bodice of the dress is minimized and acts only to signify *dress* in its simplest form, its large skirt spread out to tell the story. The dominant dark blue sets up the arc of the night sky, speckled with a scattering of stars on the right. In the center, two shadow figures in black form a circle, a human female on the right who tumbles down headfirst, on the left a bird flying upwards. In an overlay, red birds rise, increasing in tonality to yellow before they transform at the top into a small human form. From the top the human then falls, evolving into green at the bottom right. It is not clear whether this cycle can repeat itself. The shadow figures underneath seem caught in a dance that whirls endlessly but the overlay conveys a one-way transformation from bird to human. Around this central cycle, a winding thread traces a curving line that ends in a spiral of black. Along this path run the tortoise and two hares as if to remind us that going slowly, as in a medium such as tapestry, can in the end win out over faster methods.

"The Other Conversation," 1992. Here the rug that grounds the piece does not float. Instead, it acts as the stage upon which a human and a dog converse. This rug does not refer to Navajo traditions, deriving its deep color and patterning from knotted pile carpets of the Middle East. On the right, the dog, with a humanized gesture of hand waving in mid-air, looks eye-to-eye at his counterpart. His coat carries the world on his skin, from nose- to tail-tip. In contrast, the human wears nothing but bold black and white stripes. This is the first appearance of the *koshare* in Moore's work. *Koshares* are sacred clowns in Pueblo culture who turn the world upside down, do things outside the bounds of normal behavior, and entertain with their antics, simultaneously revealing the truth hidden behind everyday facades.

This piece was followed in the same year by "It's not Easy..." a fragment of the phrase "It's not easy being green." Here the form of the flying carpet has returned with its field of sandy hue. The coyote reappears in a fiery red-orange coat, splendidly wild and defiant. He guards a green figure that crouches in self-defense. Playful marks scatter across the rug: arrows, patterned triangles and windowed squares, all in various color sequences. Most of the arrows point to the lower right along the length of the rug as if to force the direction the figures should take. Does the future they see cause their reactions of alarm? Do they sense that the rug might let them slide off? Or does the act of crossing the border of the rug in itself present the danger?

"The Spinster," of 1994, two years later, now places the rug on the wall. This repositioning allows the textile to visually transform into the landscape. The star in the blanket at upper left becomes a star in the night sky at upper right. *Hekolas* comes to sit and spin a tale, shedding her purple skin and revealing herself as a living being. A symbol of the *I Ching* is her sole decorative mark. The tale that she spins draws its energy directly from the landscape, from this view of a bay and gentle hills that recalls Bolinas, her spiritual homeland. Owl feathers drift down and mark the passage of the wise bird of the night. Beside her on the small weaver's bench lie a key and a basket of persimmons. This basket gives us a re-presentation of a Pomo basket, woven in rafia. This emphasis on its object qualities separates it from illusion and makes it as real as it be can within this woven context.

The basket, the rug and the persimmons return again in this piece, “Self-portrait with Sharon,” 1998. One braided cord-end remains as an indicator of authenticity. The markings of this blanket form a strange composite. A repeated border motif of a cross-within-a-cross in green, gold, and white is held between red stripes that traverse the flesh-toned field. Around the edge runs a simple green border. Sharon's portrait floats up from the interior of the left basket, while a small blonde-headed child emerges, as if from a womb, from the basket on the right. As a Native American, Sharon fits comfortably as an adult within the Pomo basket, whereas Jan-the-child, her basket marked by yellow and green zigzags, twists and turns to fit in this cradle-container. The deep green and bright red, although evocative of Christmas celebrations and its gift-giving ritual, perhaps hints at her growing desire to include her Irish side.

And finally, with the “X Series,” Moore moves away almost entirely from a textile base. There are three pieces in the series, of which I show only one, “It Was a Very Good Year,” 2003. Rotating the cross-shape of the border in the previous piece, we have the X that marked the spot on the land, the treasure map of “Looking for the Mystery.” Included in this layering of images are the guitar, the Celtic cross, and her own youth in her own un-striped skin.

No culture is monolithic or free of borrowings. Cultures get built. They take time and many generations of people living their daily lives. The history of textiles provides us with a detailed array of cultural development and it documents the interchange of symbols and techniques that take place. Historically contested times have been beautifully documented at this Symposium. I have also had the opportunity to document Jan Moore's work as one that engages with contemporary artistic practices within a textile frame and within a politically charged and contested territory.