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Rhode Island Native American artist Deborah Spears Moorehead: acknowledging the natural beauty of creation

In the late twentieth century, the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 was passed. This act states that it is against the law for anyone to make to sell Native American art if this person is not an authentic Native American.¹ To some people, this law may seem foolish. But to people of Native American descent, the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 is important and vital to their existence.



“Native American art is not Native American art unless it is made by Native Americans. There is not authenticity if it is not made by Native Americans. If people don’t have the sphere of traditional teachings that have come through the teaching of Native American teachers,” explained Deborah Spears Moorehead, a Native American artist based out of Rhode Island, in a *Wilderness House Literary Review* July 9, 2015 interview.

“I’m a Native American, so I paint pictures of Native Americans to assert our identity past, present, and future. I specialize in the Eastern Woodland Tribal Nations indigenous to [New England].”

Moorehead is a member of the Seaconke Pokanoket Wampanoag Tribal Nation of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. She received a Bachelor’s degree in Fine Arts from Swain School of Design, now part of the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, and a Master’s degree in Art specializing in Cultural and Traditional Sustainability from Goucher College. She studied Sculpture and Jewelry at the Rhode Island School of Design and writing at Brown University.

She creates oils on wood, colored pencil drawings, landscapes, and conceptual art. “[Conceptual art] means I have an idea and all of my art is based around that idea,” Moorehead said.

Her paintings include not simply oils and colored pencil drawings but she also does acrylics, ink, charcoal, and sculpture. She enjoys making artworks of contemporary people, animals, and seascapes. She may paint a realistic scene, an abstract scene, or even a surrealistic scene. But they all reflect her Native American background and her dedication to maintaining her ancestry, past, present, and future.

“I only paint the people who inspire. Approximately 75% of the pictures are of people I see dancing in a Pow Wow or come to my studio and sit while I teach and paint. And 25% of my images come from the beauty of life, nature, dreams, and traditional creation stories,” she said.

“Good Energy” is one of many artworks created by Moorehead. This piece was requested by Congressman David Cicilline to be displayed in his Rhode Island office from 2013 - 2014.

¹ U.S. Department of the Interior, “Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990”, July 14, 2015, p. 1. <http://www.iacb.doi.gov/act.html>

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“Two Hearted Wolf” is another Moorehead painting. It is a surrealist work that depicts cultural expression of the meaning of the Native American people’s clans. “In the Native American culture, the wolf means family and when two wolves come together that means family,” she stated.

Moorehead informed that she also painted a mural with 15 children in 2005 - 2006. She had won a Youth Mural Grant Award from the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian and Ford Foundation.

“The purpose of the mural was to teach children to live their lives with the knowledge that colonization techniques have been a negative impact on people who are indigenous to the land that has been colonized,” Moorehead said. “The mural’s lessons taught people to live the opposite effects of colonization technique. For example, a colonization technique is to not embrace your culture. The lesson would be to embrace your culture.



Another lesson would be to not speak your tribal nation’s name or language. The opposite would be to assert your name and speak your language.”

Moorehead focuses her artwork on the contemporary cultural existence of the Eastern Woodland Native American community who live in the traditional ways. Her paintings seek to validate the social injustices of Native American historic truths of the past that have been lost in obscurity, she explained.

Her artistic process is the acknowledgement of the natural beauty of creation. First, she acknowledges the beauty then observes what she wants to paint or sculpt or express in nature or mankind that inspired her to make the beauty of what she saw originally, she said.

After acknowledging, observing, and deciding what she would like to create, Moorehead chooses her medium – wood, canvas, paper, wampum (Quahog), silver, or even a wall. Then she figures out if she should make it two-dimensional, three-dimensional, jewelry, music, or a literary work. It is her decision on how to proceed to express her creative thought.

Moorehead is intrigued by the works of Native American artists Brenda Hill and Ramona Peters. These two artists capture the traditional past of clay pottery and tactfully introduce them to present-day audiences.

Robert Mayokok is admired by Moorehead, too. “He is an Alaskan Artist. I like Robert Mayokok’s artwork because, in a sense, Mayokok was an ethnographer of his Alaskan Native people. His pictures depict and document the authentic livelihood of Alaskans from the past. I would appreciate seeing a contemporary Alaskan Native artist whose art would show the changes in Alaskan Native people’s presence, livelihood and physical appearance,” Moorehead mused.

She added how Cubist Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973), Post - Impressionist Paul Cezanne (1839 – 1906), founding Impressionist Claude Monet (1840 – 1926), and most of the other Impressionists of their creative period are wonderful artists because “they capture the beauty of creation in a kinetic

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and not static way. I like the energy you get, the sense of movement in time in their works.”

The outlook for Native American art seems to be a positive one. “I think Native American art is headed into the future and out of the past,” Moorehead said. “What’s coming [to the world of Native American art] is the cultural expressions of Native people’s specific tribal style. The artists will have a collective unity of Native American symbolic expression yet specifically in a general manner and specifically to their tribe.”

Over the next several years, Native American art will probably show cultural images and collective thought will combine with traditional materials and images as well as modern images, she reasoned.

As for some advice to fellow artists, Moorehead said, “Never sell yourself or your artwork short.

Know your artwork’s value. Make reprints of your work to sell and keep your originals for your loved ones. And believe it is possible to thrive as an artist!”



Moorehead was the curator of The State Native American Art Exhibit, the first ever Native American Art Show of the Rhode Island Council of the Arts that took place in the Atrium Gallery in 2012. She has recently published FINDING BALANCE: The Genealogy of Massasoit’s People and the Oral and Written History of the Seaconke Pokanuket Wampanoag Tribal Nation, edited by Joanne Cadenazzi, with Blue Hand Books, 2013.

The State Native American Art Exhibit started in 2012; it was curated by Deborah Spears Moorehead as part of the New Visions/New Curators Series. Deborah is an internationally known artist from Wampanoag Tribal Nation. She is a descendant of Massasoit through his daughter Amie. She is also Narragansett, Pequot, Mohegan, Nipmuc and Mohawk.

<http://www.arts.ri.gov/community/atrium/exhibits.php>