

Arts 2J / INTL 22: *Indigenous Arts of the World*

Sample essay - Midterm Exam

Note: Use of at least two examples of visual arts to support the argument

Why is oral history important in the study of indigenous arts? Using examples discussed in class or in assigned readings, demonstrate how oral history such as myth, tribal (community) history and storytelling can be used to better understand the value and meaning of indigenous art objects.

Oral history is one of the most important parts in the study of indigenous arts because it is a way for indigenous groups to learn about their individual identity, group identity, tell creation stories about the world, environment, and it is a helpful tool for younger generations to learn about family values, societal values, societal morals, and ceremonial practices.

In indigenous arts one common theme found around oral history is creation. It is important to understand that oral history is widely used amongst all indigenous groups around the world. Oral history in the arts can take or be represented in many different forms from the ancient rock art, sculpture, pottery, and even painting. Oral history helps bring together many indigenous peoples because scholars tend to view them pertaining to be part of different uncommon groups. One of the ways in which oral history unifies many indigenous groups is the theme of origin.

Amongst the indigenous groups of Africa, oral history not only shapes the art of the Bamana people, but it also shapes their way of life. The Bamana people of Mali tell their creation story about how they became farmers through the creation of wood carvings of the Chi Wara. The Chi Wara is a mythological antelope that told /taught the Bamana people how to plow the land in order to cultivate food. The tradition of making Chi Wara wood carvings is deeply embedded with family values because these carvers are self taught apprentices from parent to child. It also shows the ceremonial part of oral history because the Chi Wara sculptures are used as headdresses in a ceremony in which men wear the Chi Wara and plow the land in order to embody the mythological Chi Wara plowing the fields and teaching the Bamana men how to farm.

African indigenous art is not the only example that demonstrates the importance of oral history amongst indigenous groups. Rock art has been an ancient way of storytelling that has allowed many Native American groups to mark important/sacred space or help storytellers tell their people things about Nature. For example, the Mississippian woodlands people, who were renowned mound builders and are well known for one of the largest cities in the Americas (Cahokia) continue to render the oral history of Misshipeshu the under water panther, and one of the reptilian large creatures that once inhabited the Earth. Through the tale of Misshipeshu, descendants of the Mississippian groups tell the younger generation about seasonal changes and natural disasters that are caused by these mythological beings. The story of Misshipeshu and the other reptilians that once inhabited the earth also help to explain to younger generations the fossils that are found around their communities, who they belonged to, and how they got there. Misshipeshu appears in the iconography displayed on bags and in rock art from the Woodlands and Great Lakes regions.

Overall oral history is an important aspect to understand. Many contemporary artists use oral history examples to tell about their origin roots, they even help to identify how groups dress or maintain art traditions. For example, Herb Kane from Hawaii records the origin of Pele and the Hawaiian people in contemporary paintings that also show important objects of dress, such as the feather cloak. It is a way to gain back some of the history that has been erased and denied to indigenous groups after the destruction of colonialism.