ARGUMENTATION AND ADVOCACY
43 (Winter & Spring 2007): 152–163

VISUAL ARGUMENT IN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXTS: PERSPECTIVES ON FOLK/TRADITIONAL ART

Kathleen Glenister Roberts

This essay builds upon previous research in visual argument, further refuting objections through an examination of folk art theory. Folk art introduces unique perspectives on the role of art within and between communities, and establishes potential frames wherein folk artists assert communal identities and may refute colonial ones. Folk art thus presents a unique case in visual argument, grounded in contextual representation and significant for intercultural communication. As a case study explicating the role of folk art in visual argument, this essay traces the development of Blackfeet beadwork from 1895 to 1935. **Key words:** folk art, Blackfeet, beadwork, visual rhetoric, intercultural communication

In a germinal 1996 issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy*, communication scholars established that images can argue. Among the theoretical foundations put in place was the following:

> So far, we have suggested three prerequisites for a satisfactory account of visual argument: we must accept the possibility of visual meaning, we must make more of an effort to consider images in context, and we must recognize the argumentative aspects of representation and resemblance. (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, p. 8)

The 1996 debate on visual argument in *Argumentation and Advocacy* also generated multiple opportunities to consider visual argument in diverse fields of communication. The present essay brings together these initiatives, considering how visual argument fits within intercultural issues and also meditating on the specific qualities of visual argument as proposed by Birdsell and Groarke (1996). Their attention to context, in particular, informs the present essay. Context and identity issues may be addressed by any kind of visual or art form but are especially central to folk/traditional art. Within anthropology, folkloristics, and material culture, folk and traditional arts have been theorized deeply over the past 20 years. Contextual, communicative, and identity issues are particularly well defined. This essay examines folk art as a unique framework for visual argument, especially in intercultural contexts.

Ten years ago, Birdsell and Groarke (1996) and Blair (1996) effectively contested Fleming's (1996) misgivings about visual argument. Folk art theory and practice may further solidify visual argument's status. To this end, a secondary goal of this essay is to address Fleming's (1996) objections to visual argument. Folk art's lessons for intercultural communication also are explored.

My analysis proceeds in three stages. First, I explain what is meant by *folk art* and briefly review theories that inform current scholarship. These theories of folk art also are placed in dialogue with perspectives on visual argument. Once the relationship between folk art and visual argument is clear, a case study of Blackfeet beadwork from 1895 to1935 is undertaken.

Kathleen Glenister Roberts, Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies, Duquesne University. Initial research for this manuscript was presented to the American Folklore Society, Austin, TX, 1997. The author is grateful to Loretta Pepion at the Museum of the Plains Indian, to anonymous reviewers for *Argumentation and Advocacy*, and to the late Maria Sara Fisher of Browning, Montana, for their guidance in this project. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kathleen Glenister Roberts, Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15282. Email: robertskg@duq.edu

Finally, some concluding questions and possible implications of folk art and visual argument are offered.

Art, Communication, and Visual Argument: The Response of Folk Art

The title of this essay conflates folk and traditional arts because the term *folk art* may be misconstrued. By *folk art* I do not mean the American style of painting popularized by Grandma Moses. Nor do I mean so-called "outsider art" or the art of "peasants." By *folk/traditional art* I *do* mean the particular genre of human creativity that emphasizes artistic process, cultural tradition, and limited individualism. This definition derives from a body of literature in the disciplines of folklore, anthropology, and material culture. Like folklorists, folk/traditional arts scholars take as their unit of analysis the performative creativity that occurs on vernacular levels. Folk/traditional art often is the art of "everyday" and, although folk art's creation requires particularly gifted and talented individuals, it often is also the art of "everyone."

What does it mean to say that folk/traditional art emphasizes "artistic process, cultural tradition, and limited individualism"? Creativity's role in folk art is unique because it must engage certain limits of the art form. Theories of folk art explain the dialectic between creativity and limits within process, tradition, and community. I will consider each of these elements in turn.

The first element of folk art theory concerns process. A folk art object is easily identifiable because it belongs to a genre, and generic categories for folk art (beadwork, sweet grass basket, etc.) are established through *processes* of creation. Beadwork ceases to be "beadwork" if one uses a glue gun instead of needle and thread. A sweet grass basket will fail to *be* a basket if the would-be artist has not learned how to make the bottom first. The object ceases to be "folk" if an individual artist radically changes the process or form of the art.

This idea of process has other implications as well. Although it is not my purpose to contrast folk art with fine art per se, very often the artist's approach to process will place the artifact at some point on the artistic spectrum between "folk" and "fine." To study folk art, one prominent scholar says, one should "begin not with artifacts that are precious because we covet them but with a human being in the instant of creation" (Glassie, 1986, p. 269). Folk art is so named because of the value placed on human creation. The process should require skill, so that appreciating a folk art piece is to appreciate the artist as well as the art.

The idea of process also implies that the means of achieving the art form, and the means of passing on this knowledge, is more important than the artifact (Toelken, 2003, p. 202). In this sense, folk art eschews cultural preservation, recognizing instead that culture is always performed and always *lived.* Folk art emphasizes two processes: how folk art objects should be engaged by everyday life, and how their methods of creation should be taught and learned. This doesn't mean that some folk art isn't worthy of hanging on a museum wall, or that everyone can learn equally well how to make a beautiful folk art piece. But it does mean that folk arts are representations of long artistic traditions still very much alive in certain communities. As Glassie (1986) notes: "Art, like etiquette or language, must first be apprehended in terms of its own tradition" (pp. 272–273).

Indeed, tradition is folk art theory's second significant element. Tradition can be said to be a part of process because folk artists by definition value hand crafting over mass production. Traditional expectations regarding form also define folk art. *Tradition* refers to *conventions*

shared within a community. But, mostly, it means a sense of precedent. Folk art process and form can change somewhat: Creativity can bring new characteristics, until the art's boundaries have been eradicated. No longer the traditional folk art form from which it emerged, at this point it becomes a new genre.

This sense of tradition as convention helps connect folk art to visual argument, in which "there is no grammar, just signs and symbols: conventionalized images" (Blair, 1996, p. 25). For folk art to communicate and argue, it must remain confined within its traditional boundaries. Otherwise it is no longer conventional and, therefore, also no longer folk art. Because folk art *does* have boundaries and conventions, however, folk art and fine art have different relationships to visual argument. Blair (1996) doubted the argumentative potential of some images: A painter, for instance, cannot be certain that his audience will "get" the message in his visual argument (p. 28). Fleming (1996) posed this problem in even stronger form, as I will discuss momentarily. Folk art's third element–community–however, ameliorates their concerns.

Community is an apt synonym for *culture*, but both are imperfect terms. Community and culture are, obviously, equally significant for folk art and fine art. But folk art scholars emphasize that folk art forms "represent the shared tastes and experiences of living cultures more than they demonstrate the unique strides of particular brilliant artists" (Toelken, 2003, p. 196). In this sense, the community is more significant than individual artists. Artists' creations are accomplished through and for the community, which has borne the artistic tradition that enables them to create and which comprises an immediate audience for their creations. Individual *folk* artists will not cross the boundaries of meaning, taste, or experience that their community expects. Although artists certainly are free to cross these boundaries, in doing so they no longer create folk art; instead, they engage the *avant-garde* of modern art. In other words, "community values and aesthetics impinge upon the artist" rather than "the artist [impinging] upon the culture" (Toelken, 2003, p. 196).

This brings us to a particular aspect of folk art theory in which the limits of individual artistry might be set by worldview or sacred beliefs. Folk art is often read as more collective than personal, more spiritual than sacred (Glassie, 1986, p. 271). Even absent "sacred" elements, however, folk art's collective nature–its emphasis on community–again ameliorates some of the objections raised against the possibility of visual argument. Fleming (1996) contended: "If I oppose the 'position' you articulate in a picture, you can simply deny that your picture ever articulated that, or any other, position" (p. 13). But folk artists *would* have difficulty denying what their production articulates: The values and beliefs of their community, by definition, impinge upon artists. Their art *communicates* a definitive symbolic message. One may not hold the belief that the image represents but one cannot deny that the belief is represented. In addition, the very presence of the image is "arguing" about the validity of the artistic process. This argument seems irrefutable because the "proof" of the effectiveness of this process is provided by the work of art itself. Such proof exists for the community regardless of the terms of market consumption.

Modern artists are expected to push boundaries, to raise (and often not answer) provocative questions. Folk art is much different. It carries much more symbolic weight and clearer artistic intentions, and engages context and community a great deal more (Moore, 1999, p. 73). Unlike fine art, therefore, folk art is a genre that resolves certain concerns about visual argument's possibilities. Fleming (1996) has written: "Because of their inherent richness, concreteness, and ineffability, visual artifacts actually *resist* assertion . . . pictures are too subtle to act as assertions" (p. 15). But folk art is different. Its symbolic meanings are more

apparent because they have been created in and for a particular community and because they respect its limits. Folk art is not *avant-garde* or subtle. Indeed, the syndetic quality of many folk art forms even may render their meanings somewhat "heavy handed."

I do not wish to conflate arguments with assertions. To say that an image "argues" is to say that it has both premises and a clear conclusion (Blair, 1996, p. 28). So, the symbolic qualities of some folk art forms will take visual argument only as far as assertion. We must be cognizant of the fact that "an argument exists ... in a specifiable context of debate, controversy, opposition, or doubt; its position is thus necessarily *contestable*" (Fleming, 1996, p. 13). I propose that folk art creates visual arguments when it is contested. Since folk art is traditional and based in community, contestation often happens in intercultural contexts.

In this essay, I have been pointing toward a theory of folk art and visual argument that will be particularly useful for intercultural communication. As Moeran's (1997) studies of Japanese folk potters suggest, we need a new anthropology of art that emphasizes values in addition to aesthetics and places folk art not just in its own cultural context but also into dialogue with other cultures. This is especially important in the current moment of increasing globalization. One way to bring folk art, visual argument, and intercultural communication together is to consider cases in which folk art has flourished in the face of difficult intercultural challenges. One such case occurred on the Blackfeet reservation.

Representations of the Sacred in Blackfeet Beadwork

This case study emerges from intercultural contact between the Blackfeet and Anglo missionaries on the Blackfeet reservation in Montana, from approximately 1895 to 1935. It examines the symbolic subversion and continuity of a premier Blackfeet expressive form: overlay beadwork embroidery on ritual objects and men's clothing. Studying this body of art, in this particular historical moment, may lend insight into the kinds of visual arguments that arise frequently during periods of intercultural contact and, especially, colonization. Two caveats are necessary. First, North American Indian beadwork does employ material obtained through Anglo contact. It is still considered a native art, however, because artists used the beads to develop native geometric designs on the same objects as earlier materials, such as porcupine quillwork. Second, although war between the Blackfeet and Anglos began long before 1895, the mid-1890s mark the time when reservation life became an absolute for the Blackfeet. The early reservation period witnessed the strongest and most direct response of Blackfeet folk art to this colonized context.

Beadwork may be described simply as

> material composed or adorned with beads, with units subordinate to the whole ... Beadwork is typically constructed of inexpensive glass microbeads, so it has always been valued more for its artistry and craftsmanship than for the intrinsic costliness of its components. (Dubin, 1992, p. 7)

To a point, this aptly describes Blackfeet beadwork. Beads are inexpensive and the aesthetics of Blackfeet beadwork are specific: The stitch is overlay, taking care to anchor at least every second bead to the material on which it is applied, and stitches are much tighter than those of other Plains Indian groups.

Blackfeet beadwork has exhibited continuity in cultural expression even to the present day. Like most artists working within a tradition, Blackfeet are most preoccupied with a *process* of creation that is slow to change. The cultural significance of any folk art stems from this process of working within a tradition of excellence. Blackfeet beadwork follows this

pattern, especially in the years 1895–1935. The examples presented here are typical of the evolution of Blackfeet beadwork; ample additional evidence can be found in museums and archives containing Blackfeet art from the same period.

Interestingly, floral designs became significant for the Blackfeet during this period, which thus marks the "flowering" of Blackfeet beadwork in more ways than one. Trading posts and general stores were firmly established on the reservations by this point, providing a wider selection of beads. Moreover, eradication of their nomadic life left Blackfeet women with the dubious benefit of "leisure" time, which many of them used to develop their skills as beadwork artists. This is not to say that art was not a priority for Blackfeet during the pre-reservation period. Still, the quantity and quality of beadwork increased markedly after Plains groups became more sedentary. The final factor in the "flowering" of Blackfeet beadwork is much more literal: With the close presence of missionaries and Catholic boarding schools, Blackfeet artists were urged to abandon their long-standing geometric designs in favor of floral motifs.

The evolution of floral forms in Blackfeet beadwork offers insight into Blackfeet women's communal visual arguments in the face of colonization. Among all Plains Indian groups, porcupine quill and beadwork designs during the pre-reservation period were comprised largely of geometric designs (Scriver, 1990; Wissler, 1927). Most tribes developed motifs using triangles, squares, and stripes. But the Blackfeet were unique in at least two ways. First, their stylized triangle was distinctive, involving a series of steps on the triangle's sides, often appliquéd in contrasting colors. Second, Blackfeet had a long tradition, even before the reservation period, of overlay technique, using two threads: one to string the beads, and one to anchor the stringing thread to the material. The Blackfeet were and are meticulous in these anchor stitches, taking time to anchor at least every second bead. Most other Plains tribes in this period used the so-called "lazy stitch," which anchored the stringing thread less frequently during the embroidery process. Crucially, unlike the lazy stitch, the Blackfeet overlay technique lent itself easily to the evolution of floral motifs in beadwork. Indeed, this technique was necessary to achieve the curves and circular stitching required for floral designs.

The evolution of Blackfeet beadwork from geometric to floral designs illustrates the role of folk art in visual argument, especially in intercultural contexts. Earlier I described theories of folk art that pertain to cultural communication and enthymematic representations of belief and worldview. In the pre-reservation period, geometric designs were symbols that held much spiritual significance for the Blackfeet. The myths collected by D. C. Duvall during the early twentieth century emphasized the importance of symbolic reminders depicted on everyday objects (Wissler & Duvall, 1908). Many geometric forms and sacred symbols evolved into floral designs. The "Morningstar cross," for example, often became a stylized quatrefoil. I will focus on the triangle as a helpful example of the different processes of symbolic representation in contemporary and traditional cultures.

Recent research has delineated the significance of landscape, space, and place for the Blackfeet (Carbaugh, 1999). In the pre-reservation period, the triangle symbolized the sacred space of the lodge, or tipi (Scriver, 1990; Wissler, 1927). The Blackfeet word for *lodge* is *Oyis*, which translates literally as "dwelling place" (Scriver, 1990, p. 135). First and most obviously, then, the lodge was a home. Ironically, of course, this traditional dwelling place was transient: it moved with the people, in constant pursuit of bison during the warm months. The lodge was polysemic: As a dwelling place, it was both temporary and ubiquitous. This oxymoronic dwelling place of nomads was not bereft of permanent visual argument. Lodges

Figure 1: Leggings with lodge and Morningstar beadwork (from Scriver, 1990). Used by permission of Lowell Press.

were decorated meticulously by painting. Objects inside were decorated with beadwork. The circles of stones left behind with each move retained a mysterious and permanent power (Wissler & Duvall, 1908). The lodge was marked by cultural restrictions, and yet it was also a spiritual place whose rituals and designs were revealed in dreams and visions (Scriver, 1990). In lodges, Blackfeet society was both governed and constructed: Lodges were created for men by women through an arduous process of skinning and tanning and also were recreated for men by women in the designs of their beadwork.

Indeed, most of the objects comprising Blackfeet beadwork from 1895 to1935 consist of men's clothing, men's accoutrements, and ritual objects (such as medicine bundles). Women's clothing during this period is marked by greater surface areas (skirts rather than leggings, for example) that lent themselves to decoration with larger, rarer objects, such as elk's teeth. Beadwork during this time was women's domain. It seems significant that women chose above all to embellish men's objects with sacred reminders in the form of symbolic triangles.

The prominence of lodges in Blackfeet camps has caused some Blackfeet beadwork to be misinterpreted. On many pieces from this period, especially men's leggings, women beaded series of large triangles (see Figure 1). Some scholars view this recurring pattern as a pictorial representation of lodges against the landscape (Scriver, 1990). But as I have attempted to make clear, traditional art is rarely synthetic. Blackfeet beadwork exemplifies folk art's typical resistance to pictorial representations of elements featured in one's line of vision. The triangles most likely represent lodges and the rectangles within them are said to represent lodge entrances. But what of the crosses embroidered between each lodge? Blackfeet mythology makes clear that this cross represents Morningstar, a significant figure in Blackfeet cosmology. If this were a synthetic, pictorial representation of physical reality (a typical Blackfeet camp, for example), then why are *12* Morningstars depicted? Morningstar is only one deity; he is seen only occasionally in the physical landscape and certainly would not appear as 12 of himself. The artist is not depicting a group of lodges in a traditional camp but, instead, is making a visual argument concerning spiritual beliefs. The triangles beaded here comprise symbols that, taken as a whole argument, redouble the emotions connected with

the *idea* of the lodge. These repeating sacred symbols are meant to evoke two concepts in traditional Blackfeet cosmology: the lodge and the Morningstar. The lodge is not a feature of the landscape; it has been abstracted completely and remapped as a communal and spiritual concept. Rather than the synthesis of physical objects, this exemplifies the power of syndesis in traditional art (Armstrong, 1975).

The pair of leggings in Figure 1 is one of the final examples of Blackfeet beadwork that effect a syndesis of Blackfeet sacred concepts. With the advent of reservation life, the Blackfeet lost their freedom to communicate openly about the lodge and their deities. The lodge was no longer their literal dwelling place; they were expected to live in permanent structures on the reservation. Anglo missionaries and government agents also forbade religious rituals, such as at the Sun Dance, that customarily would have occurred in the lodge (Harrod, 1971; Scriver, 1990).

Christian missionaries, particularly the Ursuline sisters, also discouraged the use of triangles and other geometric designs in beadwork, encouraging Blackfeet women to embroider floral motifs instead. It is not entirely clear whether their primary motive was contempt for traditional Blackfeet religion. From the perspective of some folk art theories, there is a strong probability that teaching floral designs would have been part of the sisters' Christianizing agenda among the Blackfeet. In European and Anglo-American folk art, flowers often represent *saints* (Glassie, 1995). In these cultures, typically the flower is depicted in full bloom, growing out of the margins of the piece, with a round head and leaves reminiscent of arms uplifted in prayer. On the other hand, perhaps they simply thought the geometric art too primitive-looking. Possibly they were unaware of the geometric symbols' spiritual significance. But regardless of their motives, by discouraging geometric designs the sisters disrupted Blackfeet artists' ability to communicate publicly about basic Blackfeet beliefs and virtues. Even if the missionaries on the Blackfeet reservation during this period did not intend it, the use of floral designs was a form of cultural colonization: The Blackfeet women were to cease their traditional designs and adopt a European cultural form. This colonization certainly was not violent. Blackfeet artists readily adopted the floral motifs, as did nearly all the Plains groups.

But the Blackfeet style is different. I argue that it represents a kind of visual argument possible in folk art when artists work within a tradition in which excellence is attained within prescribed limits. Treating the evolution of Blackfeet beadwork within the rubric of folk art theory also attends to the cultural concepts that Blackfeet artists still wished to depict, in spite of the suppression of their traditional forms. Contrasting Blackfeet beadwork with three other sources of floral motifs during this period will support my argument.

Anglos on the reservation provided the first source of floral motifs in art. Floral fabrics and patterns were in vogue at the turn of the century and missionaries and teachers on the reservation decorated their spaces accordingly. The classroom pictured in Figure 2 is probably typical. The Christianization and Westernization of Blackfeet children are captured poignantly in this photograph. The floral decorations also seem typically Anglo in design: The depictions on the board and screen have visible stems, growing from somewhere outside the margins of the canvas.

This design contrasts sharply with a contemporaneous example of Blackfeet beadwork (see Figure 3). The beaded flowers on this object have very short, finite stems. They are growing out of nowhere. Instead, they repeat the syndetic pattern of the Lodge and the Morningstar, as seen in Figure 1. These Blackfeet flowers are rarely seen in European folk

Figure 2: Willow Creek School [638–124], [J. H. Sherburne Collection], Archives & Special Collections, University of Montana-Missoula. Used by permission.

art. Instead of rounded heads, the "faces of saints," the Blackfeet flowers are drastically different in their *triangularity.*

A second source of inspiration for Blackfeet beadworkers during this time would have been the natural environment. Indeed, some scholars speculate that the Blackfeet beaded flowers were important components of their folk medicine (Scriver, 1990, p. 34). Again, comparison of visual forms suggests that the Blackfeet continued to develop their own style despite these influences. Note that the flowers in Figure 3 are pointed and triangular. They

Figure 3: Blackfeet geometric floral motif (from Scriver, 1990). Used by permission of Lowell Press.

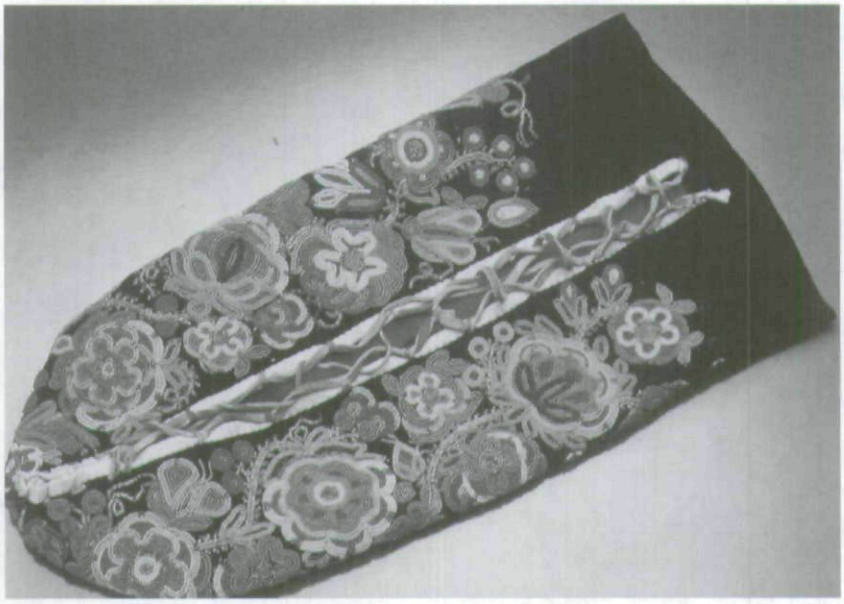

Figure 4: Métis beadwork. Bag © Canadian Museum of Civilization, VI-I-5, image number S84–5992. Used by permission.

resemble very few of the wildflowers of Montana, the most prolific of which would have been the bitterroot. Most Montana wildflowers have round flower heads and densely packed petals, in sharp contrast to the spare triangles that Blackfeet artists embroidered during the early reservation era. Had the Blackfeet taken nature as their inspiration, one would expect at least equal representation of rounded and triangular flowers in their beadwork. But round wildflowers do not appear in Blackfeet beadwork of this period. It seems that these pieces still are making visual arguments about the triangle.

Finally, like all artists, the Blackfeet did not live in a discrete community, hermetically sealed off from other societies. Through trade they would have seen and perhaps even owned examples of beadwork from neighboring groups. The Métis, now known as the "flower bead people," could have been an influence. Again, however, examination of surviving objects from this period suggests that the Blackfeet retained elements of their traditional style. Métis beadwork, seen in Figure 4, more closely resembles European and Anglo folk art styles. The flowers are "organic" and embroidered in a very dense, yet natural looking, pattern. They seem to "grow" across this cradleboard. In contrast, Blackfeet patterns emphasized bilateral symmetry (Glassie, 1995). Most importantly, the vest in Figure 5 shows another syndetic redoubling of the triangle spreading out from the central flower. Here the artist has created a series of triangular flowers that ultimately pays homage to the idea of the triangle (the lodge).

Continuity in geometric motifs is apparent in these examples. The relationships between motifs also exhibit elements of continuity: Beadwork remains prominent on men's clothing and accoutrements, and the motifs still are presented in patterned syndesis. To apply etic terms of aesthetics, one might describe the beaded objects from this time period as both sophisticated and understated. The use of negative space is outstanding, especially in contrast to Métis beadwork, in that the Blackfeet forms continue to "argue" for visual syndesis. Most

Figure 5: Blackfeet vest showing syndetic redoubling in triangular flowers (from Scriver, 1990). Used by permission of Lowell Press.

of all, Blackfeet beadwork is rhetorical: Across the boundaries and limits of reservation life (Farr, 1984, p. 139), Blackfeet beadwork artists crossed and recrossed their identities. They patiently invoked the *Nit Oyis*, the sacred lodge, even as they were forced to endure dramatic cultural upheaval. Even as the lodge's actual presence was declining, triangular forms and other elements of traditional Blackfeet style would have communicated enthymematically about Blackfeet beliefs and identity. The triangle is just one part of the argument; other geometric sacred symbols also survived in Blackfeet floral designs. Although folk art by definition eschews verbal clarity, the Blackfeet seem to have been arguing for a continued assertion of their nationhood and sacred beliefs, particularly as these pertained to the sacred space of the lodge.

Conclusion

What makes these symbolic beadwork representations "arguments" is not merely their enthymematic qualities, but also the fact that they persisted in spite of negative responses from colonial powers. The context of intercultural communication provides the impetus for *argument* in folk art. This seems particularly likely because no verbal *discourse* about the suppression of symbolic representations in Blackfeet beadwork, from anyone on either side of the conflict, survives. When the triangle as symbol of the lodge was suppressed, Blackfeet folk artists "argued" through their beadwork in two clear ways. First, they refused to adopt fully the floral designs of another, more powerful culture. Second, by continuing to employ the motif of the triangle, they utilized argument's ability to negate: Their beaded flowers were *more* triangular, *less* flowery. Their choice of design could imply what the design *was not* because of the intercultural context in which these choices were made. This may be a unique quality of folk art in intercultural (especially colonial) contexts. One of the objections to

visual argument goes like this: "We can use language to indicate what a picture is not, but there is no *pictorial* way of doing this" (Fleming, 1996, p. 17). Because it is embedded in multiple contexts (sacred belief, tradition, prescribed limits, and multiculturalism/colonization), folk art not only can argue but can argue the point of negatability. Context, in other words, can "anchor" an image in meaning just as effectively as words can.

Of course, there probably are as many subversions of folk art, and of visual arguments contained in folk art, as there are historical moments of intercultural contact. Resistance to colonization also has manifested in other art forms, such as dance (Gump, 1997). In communication, crucial work is being done on visual rhetoric in pressing intercultural crises. O'Shaughnessy's (2002) work on terrorism and visual rhetoric is a good example.

This essay takes as foundational the 1996 essays in *Argumentation and Advocacy* that examined whether visual argument can take place. In writing this essay, I have been conscious of the irony that images have been necessary to my own arguments. Images make assertions and they provide proof. Anchored in a particular context, especially a cultural-intercultural one, they can be arguments in themselves.

The images that accompany this essay may strike the reader as old. Undertaking a case study whose events began over 100 years ago is challenging and risky. So it is important to emphasize that, although folk art theory tends to privilege the community over the individual artist and tradition over the *avant-garde*, this is not to say that "the folk" are trapped hopelessly in the past. Folk art engages changing cultures in a cosmopolitan context. It does not expect folk artists to reject creativity in the name of limits, as I have taken pains to explain. Nor will the dynamics of intercultural contact *always* result in visual argument through a confirmation of the status quo. Indeed, the case of Blackfeet beadwork indicates that folk artists display remarkable creativity in innovating on the past in order to reify it, when doing so is necessary for their community, for the continued process of their art, and for the flourishing of their traditions.

Continuing this dialogue on intercultural communication, folk art, and visual argument will require that communication scholars consider other biases toward our very terms, not just *tradition*. For instance, Fleming (1996) pointed out that "the belief that an argument has two parts–'claim' and 'support'–is a cornerstone of Western thought" (p. 13). Applying this very Western sense of argument to non-Western folk art traditions may be problematic. Nonetheless, it seems plausible that intercultural contact is a site of visual argument for art and folk art. For the Blackfeet women who continue to bead–and especially to bead triangles and other geometric designs–the folk art argument was really no contest.

References

Armstrong, R. P. (1975). *Wellspring: On the myth and source of culture.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Birdsell, D. S., & Groarke, L. (1996). Toward a theory of visual argument. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 33,* 1–10.

Blair, J. A. (1996). The possibility and actuality of visual arguments. *Argumentation and Advocacy, 33,* 23–39.

Carbaugh, D. (1999). "Just listen": "Listening" and landscape among the Blackfeet. *Western Journal of Communication, 63,* 250–270.

Dubin, L. S. (1992). Foreword. In K. Moss & A. Scherer (Eds.), *The new beadwork* (pp. 1–10). New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Farr, W. E. (1984). *The reservation Blackfeet, 1882–1945.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Fleming, D. (1996). Can pictures be arguments? *Argumentation and Advocacy, 33,* 11–22.

Glassie, H. (1986). The idea of folk art. In J. M. Vlach & S. Bronner (Eds.), *Folk art and art worlds* (pp. 269–274). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Glassie, H. (1995). *The spirit of folk art.* New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Gump, J. O. (1997). A spirit of resistance: Sioux, Xhosa, and Maori responses to Western dominance, 1840–1920. *Pacific Historical Review, 66,* 21–52.

Harrod, H. L. (1971). *Mission among the Blackfeet.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Moeran, B. (1997). *Folk art potters of Japan: Beyond an anthropology of aesthetics.* Richmond, Surrey, Eng.: Curzon Press.
Moore, W. B. (1999). The intersection of folk and fine art. *Journal of Folklore Research, 36,* 71–82.
O'Shaughnessy, N. (2002). Selling terror: The visual rhetoric of Osama bin Laden. *Journal of Political Marketing, 1,* 83–93.
Scriver, B. (1990). *The Blackfeet: Artists of the northern plains.* Kansas City, MO: Lowell Press.
Toelken, B. (2003). The heritage arts imperative. *Journal of American Folklore, 116,* 196–205.
Wissler, C. (1927). *Indian beadwork.* New York: American Museum of Natural History.
Wissler, C., & Duvall, D. C. (1908). *Mythology of the Blackfoot Indians.* New York: American Museum of Natural History.